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The Life of the Dead: Karl Marx in Context

Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion. By Gareth Stedman Jones (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2016) 750 pp. \$35.00

“The Marx constructed in the twentieth century bore only an incidental resemblance to the Marx who lived in the nineteenth” (595). So concludes Stedman Jones’ monumental new biography of Karl Marx. In part, he is making a specific point, familiar to those who followed the debates among Marxists of the 1960s through 1980s: Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, and others constructed the Marxism of the Second International, a closed doctrine of social development that could not encompass Marx’s own intellectual surprises. Stedman Jones is also making an argument about intellectual history, which he conceptualizes as the careful contextualization of ideas. Patterns of radical thinking, the content of radical movements, and the events of radical politics dominate his account of Marx’s intellectual development rather than, for example, the social structure and cultural norms of the educated bourgeoisie stressed in Sperber’s recent biography.¹

Such a project poses significant challenges, since Marx’s work was resolutely interdisciplinary. *Capital*, for example, draws from law, philosophy, political theory, and economics. To frame Marx’s economic or political thought properly means to understand the disciplines within which, and to which, he was responding; it requires deep interdisciplinary knowledge, as well as an ability to discern what is new, what is old, and what is simply inaccurate from a particular intellectual perspective. Stedman Jones approaches Marx not just as a historian of political thought but also as someone well versed in both political-science and economic theory.

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1 Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life* (New York, 2013).

Stedman Jones seeks to do full justice to Marx with respect to his philosophical, political, and economic contemporaries. He brings out both those aspects of Marx rooted in—and, indeed, limited to—the nineteenth century and those that seem out of line or askew in their intellectual context. In spite of his concluding passage, the book, perhaps unwittingly, indicates moments when Marx steps out of his nineteenth-century context to inform later radical discourse. To develop these moments further, however, would have required a different kind of encounter with Marxist economics, sociology, political theory, or law of the present day. Although at several points, most notably in his discussion of value theory in economics, Stedman Jones starts along this road, such is not his primary objective.

PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION Stedman Jones writes, with a moralizing tone, of Marx’s “solipsistic self-absorption” as he entered the heady world of the Berlin academy (58). Marx was not simply absorbing Georg W. F. Hegel and neo-Hegelianism; he was carrying forward the love of ancient Greece that had seized much of the German intellectual world in the early nineteenth century, including some of Marx’s teachers at the *Gymnasium*. Marx’s dissertation defended Epicurus against Democritus. Both of these philosophers were materialists, but Epicurus stressed the role of self-directed activity, not just determinism. This defense of self-determination dovetailed with notions of self-consciousness coming from radical interpreters of neo-Hegelianism, from Eduard Gans to Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach. As Stedman Jones notes, the Paris manuscripts of 1844 pulsate with Feuerbachian motifs—the ways in which human constructs like God, the state, and religion become abstractions, standing above and apart from humanity. But these motifs did not disappear in 1845/6, supposedly extinguished in the cluster of works later termed “The German Ideology.” As Stedman Jones shows, they reappeared throughout Marx’s life. The radical, idealist gesture of reclaiming abstractions, of bringing humanity to self-consciousness, was a consistent part of the late Marx.

Other biographers who were committed to the notion of a scientific Marxism, from Engels to Althusser, have stressed Marx’s break with idealism and humanism.² “The German Ideology,”

2 Louis Althusser (trans. Ben Brewster), *For Marx* (London, 1985).

which Stedman Jones rightly identifies with a compendium of early works edited by David Riazanov during the first decade of the Russian Revolution, has served as the key evidence to support this shift. Its different parts were not written solely by Marx and were not designed to be published together. “The German Ideology” became a building block of false official understandings of Marx. That said, the different parts of the compilation fit together intellectually, and probably deserved more attention. The “Theses on Feuerbach,” for example, stressed both historical determination and the situated freedom of individuals; the criticism of utopian socialism rejected unsituated conceptions of revolutionary action. Revolution had to emerge from an immanent process—thus the “enthusiasm bordering on euphoria” of Marx and his circle after the Silesian weavers’ uprising of 1844, which seemed to reveal an emergent source of radical change within the existing system (162). This search for immanent potential could also explain Marx’s strange infatuation with Russian peasant collectivism at the end of his life, a moment that Stedman Jones contextualizes particularly well.

Stedman Jones’ discussion of Marx’s “Greek” moment—that is, Marx’s obsession with the utopian image of an undifferentiated realm of self-determination exemplified by the Greek polis—is particularly strong. A lost manuscript by Marx about Christian art, of all things, serves as a starting point for Stedman Jones’ theme. Using Rose’s important work, he reconstructs the missing essay and suggests the manner in which the aesthetic image of a whole society, a society where work and religion and politics are not clearly differentiated, runs throughout Marx’s work.³ This aesthetic motif, connecting Marx with both the radical Jacobins and the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, also sheds light on Marx’s few descriptions of the post-revolutionary world in *Capital*, and it points forward to his reception by radical thinkers in the twentieth century, a point missing in this biography. It also helps to explain Marx’s spectacular association of socialism with “atheism.” Stedman Jones notes how French socialist traditions were thoroughly soaked in Christianity, how they expressed themselves in catechisms, in the form of new churches, and through preachers and holy men and women. By contrast, Marx’s socialism rejected Christianity, which he associated with the private conservatism oriented toward the

3 Margaret Rose, *Marx’s Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (New York, 1984).

personal salvation espoused by contemporary pietism—characteristics alien to his ideal of the polis.

Marx's Hellenism was more than a yearning to re-establish a lost moment, it coincided with a radical modernism that negated the past. He described with respect the destructive impact of capitalism on traditional society, and he imagined the revolutionary party as a radical force destroying illusions even further: "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future," he thunders in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Proletarian revolutions "engage in perpetual self-criticism, always stopping in their own tracks" to engage in self-criticism; they cease to yearn for a mythicized past.⁴ But as Stedman Jones observes, Marx's references to "the Party" became increasingly illusory or even delusional, as his "party" dwindled to an ever-smaller number of supporters during the 1850s. The modernist moment was, however, more than delusion. It reveals the tensions, even the paradoxes, in Marx's own thought, between his yearning for an imagined polis and his affirmation of the dynamic change that he associated with capitalism and what would follow.

Stedman Jones' big point nonetheless holds: Neither the Hellenizing Marx nor the modernist Marx are at home in the broader worlds of positivistic theories of evolution and materialistic determinism of the 1850s and 1860s or in the official Marxism of the late nineteenth century. Not that Marx was free from these tendencies. As Stedman Jones shows, Marx's notion of *revolution* seemed to shift during the 1860s, from "event" to "process," as he was writing the final version of *Capital*; certain passages in *Capital* suggest a unified evolutionary theory of human development (467–468). But when revolutionary events reappeared, as in 1871, Marx returned to his modernist-and-yet-Hellenizing conception of historical breaks.

Marx was decidedly a thinker of the early nineteenth century, but his early, nineteenth-century thought came back to inspire immanent critiques of state socialism in the twentieth century. For instance, Marcuse's 1931 reading of the 1844 Paris manuscripts reopened the radical project of liberating labor; Bloch, Dunayevskaya, and many others deployed Marx's situated idealism and Hellenistic utopia against the repressive machinery of state socialism during the

4 Marx (ed. Terrell Carver), *Later Political Writings* (New York, 1996), 34–35.

1950s and 1960s.⁵ Clearly, Marx's philosophy of revolution could function outside its nineteenth-century context.

POLITICS AND REVOLUTION Stedman Jones is by no means forgiving in his treatment of Marx's political engagement and writing. Marx, he argues, fundamentally misunderstood the radicalism of the mid-nineteenth century. Seeking to compress politics into the category of class, rejecting movements for rights and political representation in line with his political model of undifferentiated self-rule in the polis, Marx failed to appreciate fully Chartism, French radicalism, or even the representation of the masses through German Social Democracy. In other words, he failed to understand that the "languages of class" were really about inclusion—an influential argument that Stedman Jones first offered three decades ago.⁶

Few can describe the complex political events of mid-century as well as Stedman Jones. His descriptions of the 1830 revolution in France, Chartism, the revolutions of 1848 in France and Germany, and the Paris Commune achieve a clarity not often found in the best general histories of the period. Again and again, Marx misses the point. He misses the localism of the German revolutions with his focus on German unity, hoping—in his political journalism of the 1850s—for war with Russia as a way to unify German protest, as though the French experience of 1792 could be replicated in a different time and place. For Stedman Jones, Marx's biggest failure in his political writings concerns France after 1848. Marx failed to see that for many people, including many workers, the workers' revolt during the June Days was chaotic violence against a democratic republic rather than that coherent act of a unified working class. Politics dropped out of Marx's account, replaced by an abstract and illusory image of struggle among classes and class fractions. Most importantly, Marx missed the importance of democratic inclusion to the story: "Karl misunderstood both the causes and remedies for this exceptional phase of political antagonism" (311).

5 Herbert Marcuse, "The Foundation of Historical Materialism" (1932), in *idem* (trans. Joris de Bres), *From Luther to Popper* (London, 1983), 1–48; Ernst Bloch (trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight), *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), I, 249–286; Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Marxist-Humanist Theory of State Capitalism* (Chicago, 1992).

6 Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (New York, 1984).

Indeed, Stedman Jones argues that Marx's most significant piece of political writing of the time, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, does not grasp the most salient piece of the story, "the emergence of a novel form of democratic politics resulting from the direct participation of 'the people' (or at least, adult males) in the electoral process" (335). Marx misrepresents the peasants, some of whom organized politically, and he uncritically replicates the prejudices of middle-class commentators with his description of the *Lumpenproletariat*. He did not see that Louis Napoleon (and later Otto von Bismarck) had produced a different kind of populist, charismatic, "representative" democracy. Marx was not a prophet so much as a contemporary observer unable to give up his class-based explanation of history even while a more complex reality was unfolding in front of him.

Notwithstanding Marx's illusions, however, more was at work in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* than Stedman Jones allows. In this essay, political representation assumed mythic qualities; it became a process in which a multitude of people projected their ideas of the nation onto one man during a moment of crisis, creating concrete presence out of abstract representation. Whatever the limitations of his story, Marx offered a theory that would, decades later, open the way for accounts of fascism (Gramsci) as well as the "subaltern" (Spivak), which were attempts to comprehend democratic inclusion in a new way.⁷

Accompanying these moments of insight are many moments of illusion in Marx's history, such as his account of the Paris Commune. Written for the General Council of the International Working Men's Association, it was in large part "imaginary"—not a description of what actually happened but an attempt to discover within the Commune an emergent world where the distinction between state and society was dissolving, bearing the traces of the idealized polis of Marx's youth (502, 506). *The Civil War in France* made Marx famous for the first time—and infamous as a defender of chaos. This fame helped to propel him and Engels to informal positions as chief thinkers of the nascent German Social Democratic Party. Once again, Marx missed the intent of this new,

7 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *idem* (ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), 271–313; Antonio Gramsci, "State and Civil Society," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York, 1971), 210–223.

mass party as an attempt to include workers in civil rights and representation, instead denouncing “the old democratic litany” of rights, voting, and the people’s state (556).

ECONOMICS AND REVOLUTION Marx’s major project from 1844 to the end of his life was to explain the place of labor in and against capitalism. Stedman Jones shows beautifully the Feuerbachian motifs swirling through the economic work, as the promethean force of human labor was transformed into a dead abstraction standing above the laborer, a vampire or a Frankenstein monster echoing the gothic literature of the nineteenth century. Stedman Jones astutely shows how Marx called upon “bourgeois” political economy to make his point: Every economic theorist from John Locke to Adam Smith and David Ricardo wrote about labor as the source of value while assuming private property that accumulated the surplus produced by labor. Marx’s lifelong project in economic history, *Capital*, was in part a work of intellectual history.

Marx intended *Capital* to provide the key to modernity and the self-consciousness necessary for revolution. Marx and his entire family suffered for it throughout the 1850s and 1860s. Stedman Jones describes their poverty and illnesses in detail. The massive project led to new complexities. Marx’s 1840s assertions about the immiseration of the working class and the inevitable decline of the rate of profit acquired provisos; they became tendencies, not laws. When Engels and Kautsky, the “pope” of German Social Democracy, made them once more into iron laws, they also created the “Marx” of the twentieth century. Both sides, however, co-existed in Marx’s thinking—the tendency of capitalism to alienate and impoverish labor and destroy its own foundation and the presence of counter-tendencies. Try as he might, Stedman Jones cannot easily separate the economics of “Karl” and “Marx.” Indeed, serious economists outside of the Anglo-American world, like Streeck, return to these themes of Marxist economics—in undogmatic, creative ways—in their attempts to describe capital’s current crises and counter-tendencies.⁸ Stedman Jones seeks to delineate the nineteenth-century Karl from the old Marx, but current discussions have room for both.

8 Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London, 2014).

Stedman Jones has a deeper argument about Marx's economic work, that it was an "intellectual defeat," insofar as the attempt to build the edifice of *Capital* on the labor theory of value failed. Marx could not situate capitalism as a necessary moment in the grand, universal history of mankind or resolve the difference between price and value (as had Ricardo). In the first volume of *Capital*, he set that problem and other ones aside, treating the labor theory of value merely as a presupposition. But Stedman Jones, not unlike Cohen (on whose work from the 1980s he relies), is too quick to dismiss the theory.⁹ Marx's approach continues to inform, for example, Harvey's account of the current crisis, and Postone has given us an interesting philosophical reading of abstract labor, the key to the theory, as the essence of capitalist alienation.¹⁰

Much more interesting are Stedman Jones' discussions of the late Marx's alternative paths to socialism. In one of these paths, Marx posited capitalism as a necessary stage, the world moment that would eventually make way for a universal reclamation of humanity. In another, however, he viewed capitalism as a jolt, a break with the multiple "forms that precede capitalist production" (as stated in the *Grundrisse*). The tension becomes clear in the remarkable drafts of a letter to Vera Zasulich in early 1881, concerning the question of whether the Russian peasant commune could provide a means for resisting or even avoiding capitalism. In the final version of the letter, Marx restricted the claim of "historical inevitability" to the countries of Western Europe, whereas in the unsent drafts, he discussed collective forms of peasant ownership from the ancient world of *Germania* forward. The drafts reveal not only that Marx remained intellectually open even in his final, awful years, though still obsessed with revolution, but also that he was still prone to obscure and often outdated literature from decades before. Those historical works may have been outdated, but the search for forms of communal life that could de-couple from capitalism was just beginning.

9 Gerald A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom: Themes from Marx* (New York, 1988).

10 David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (London, 2014); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (New York, 1996).

Stedman Jones undersells his accomplishment by concluding his book with the distinction between the real “Karl” of the (early) nineteenth century and the constructed “Marx” of the twentieth. “Karl” is not reducible to his temporal context; he even rises up to provide ammunition against the later “Marx.” Stedman Jones did not set out to provide a history of Marxism, but given his juxtaposition of Marx and Marxism, such a history might have been useful, suggesting answers to a number of questions that the book raises: How could the Marx of the Paris Manuscripts return as the critic of state socialism? How could the Marx of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* return as a theorist of populism? And how could Marx return as a theorist of globalization and, most lately, of global economic crisis? Stedman Jones may have intended to produce a monumental biography that could serve as a heavy stone lying over the grave of a grand writer of the past. As an intellectual history, however, his book succeeds for three reasons: First, it provides a comprehensive understanding not only of Marx but also of his complex and contradictory intellectual and political context, with a level of detail and understanding that surpasses other works about Marx. Second, it provides a compelling account of the context in which Marx aspired to greatness and an honest account of the illusions that drove much of his work. Third, perhaps in spite of its author intent, it succeeds in showing how remarkably lively the dead can be.

