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## Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion

*Gareth Stedman Jones*

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# KARL MARX GREATNESS AND ILLUSION GARETH STEDMAN JONES

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**Gareth Stedman Jones : Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion:

100 of 100 people found the following review helpful. An immersive, profound study of Marx's intellectual developmentBy Nigel SeelEveryone has an agenda with Marx. The Second International under Kautsky used him to justify its minimal/maximal programmes of de facto collaboration with the bourgeois state. Lenin and Trotsky used him to demonstrate unavoidable, terminal contradictions within capitalism and the necessity of violent revolution.

Bourgeois writers distorted his words while left-liberals saw him as a much-maligned but benign genius, whose far-sighted humanity had been co-opted by extremists. Gareth Stedman Jones's response has been a deep, immersive dive into the history, politics and ideas which swirled around the contemporary Marx. For most of the book it seems that Jones along with the reader - has become an invisible member of that small group of friends, colleagues and acolytes of Karl as he lives his life from one month to the next responding to events. Jones appears to have read everything important in those debates and to be intimately acquainted with the detailed history of Western Europe and America during Marx's lifetime (1818-1883). The picture which emerges is much more realistic than the disengaged, omniscient oracle of legend. Marx starts as a classicist and aspiring poet with some legal training. Always political (the Young Hegelians), he is not at first interested in economics, much preferring philosophy, the subject of his PhD. In the 1840s he supports himself by radical journalism which was to remain his career through most of his life: it was not lucrative. *Capital* was written in the 1860s, in London. Jones describes the major innovations which Marx introduced specifically the clear distinctions between use-value and exchange-value, the concept of surplus value and the analysis of generalised commodity production as distinctive of capitalism. Here, the exploitative character of capitalism has been laid bare, while in the tendency of the average rate of profit to fall (through an ever-increasing level of automation - constant capital) a rationale was proposed for inherent limits of the capitalist mode of production. It was here, according to Jones, that Marx ran out of steam. Although he had a decade or more of life ahead of him he was unable to resolve a number of theoretical problems. How was the abstract concept of exchange-value translated into prices as seen in the shops and on the stock exchanges? How did capitalism interact with the pre-capitalist world as it expanded across the world - what was the nature of the dynamic and to what extent was imperialism forced by its very nature? How could we understand the distinctive incarnations of the capitalist state? Whenever Marx was under deadlines to write up his analysis of these issues, promised for the later volumes of *Capital*, ill-health seemed to intervene: liver problems, headaches and those famous carbuncles. Jones suggests this was not an accident. Marx was not incredibly famous during his lifetime. He was for periods notorious however - demonised by the press as a dangerous agitator in the aftermath of the Paris Commune of 1871. Meanwhile *Capital* volume one sold well enough (one wonders how much of it was read, however). His real fame came posthumously when his views, as packaged by Engels, became very convenient in a crude form - as a foundational vision for the influential German Social-Democratic Party (the Erfurt Programme). Things never looked back after that. Gareth Stedman Jones has written a stellar book here, the scholarship immense. The reader truly feels present in Marx's life and times. Jones shows how frequently Marx was wrong, tending to impose his ideas as a smothering straightjacket over the complexity and subtlety of political events. Yet he also showed more insight than many of his left-wing colleagues while his thinking was far deeper and more profound. We should also not forget that, in journalistic terms, he was a highly-talented writer. I have a small quibble: Jones has scrupulously adopted an observational tone, with only small amounts of critical commentary on the more theoretical issues. I would have welcomed a chapter, perhaps at the end, where the author could have summed up what he thought Marx's fundamental contributions had been - and more specifically, where he thought Marx had been intellectually defeated. Note: while this is an excellent book, it does presuppose the reader is actually interested in the intellectual debates and political disputes of mid-nineteenth century Europe. If you feel underwhelmed, for example, by the issues which so agitated the Young Hegelians, it's unlikely that you'll get past the early chapters.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. An intellectual biography that should have been more intellectual, less biography. By Josh. The greatest strength of this book is Stedman Jones's thorough understanding of the intellectual lay of the land including the variations between the intellectual landscapes in different Western European countries and how they changed over time. More than just being able to tell you which ideas influenced Marx, he tells you how Marx adopted them which ideas he adopted whole, which he adopted in an idiosyncratic fashion without fully understanding what they meant to their originators, which ideas he stubbornly clung to even when events seemed to disprove them, which ideas slowly changed in his mind over time. One outstanding example of this is his portrait of Marx, Arnold Ruge, and other German Hegelian confreres in Parisian exile. Stedman Jones says outright that they did not really understand the debates going on around them (coming from a Prussian context in which radical atheists warred against a conservative Christian monarch, they were ill-equipped to understand the Christian socialist labor movements they encountered in Paris) and thus adopted French radicals' class terminology (including familiar terms like proletariat) while still preserving an essentially German mindset. A more macro-level example is Stedman Jones's argument that Marx failed to grasp the importance of democratic politics and political participation in the age of mass media, deriding Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte as a farce instead of recognizing him as the exemplar of a new populist democratic form of politics. Stedman Jones is also prepared to criticize Marx's intellectual project in a substantive and rather deep-going way. He argues that Marx was unable to complete volumes two and three of *Capital* because of intellectual difficulties because he couldn't manage to make it coherent and convincing. The book is at its best as an analytical and critical intellectual biography when talking about the development of ideas, not people. The more conventional biographical information is present, and is occasionally well-done (especially when talking about Marx's youth) but other times it seems to be there purely out of obligation. The chronology can be a little confusing. In a given chapter, Stedman Jones may start out by giving a historical overview

of an era; then, without sufficiently signaling it, he starts surveying the same era a second time from a different angle, with the result that the reader will suddenly be surprised by the same events happening twice or out of chronological order. At its most farcical this involves Marx's daughters reacting to their mother's death dozens of pages before it even occurs. The mix of intellectual history and biography is not always well done, and the structure of the book is a little odd and disjointed. In fact, I fear that GSJs framing of this book as a biography means that some of his most interesting arguments are never properly developed. In his prologue and epilogue, Stedman Jones explains some of his rationale for writing this biography. He explains that very, very quickly after Marx's death, August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, Engels, and other socialists of the turn of the century began, very intentionally, to create a mythos of Marx as a forbidding genius; at the same time, the doctrine known as Marxism began to be formalized in a way that emphasized certain of Marx's (and Engels's) ideas at the expense of others. Certain of Marx's ideas went down the memory hole in a very weird way. Thus Stedman Jones states his ambition to put Marx back in his nineteenth-century surroundings and recover a true account of Marx's intellectual development in order to correct a false, mythologized one. But that contrast is left implicit in 99 percent of this book. His project is an interesting one. In my opinion he should have made the stakes much clearer and pointed out much more clearly at which points of his book he was contradicting the received wisdom (of 19th- and 20th-century socialism, of Marxism-Leninism, of previous biographers). Instead this is an intellectual biography that is scrupulous about putting Marx in his context, but does not put itself in context. 4 of 10 people found the following review helpful. It was great but perhaps too much information. By Walter J. Gordon. It was great but perhaps too much information. I guess I would prefer a straight philosophical biography of ideas rather than mixed with his personal life.

As much a portrait of his time as a biography of the man, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* returns the author of *Das Kapital* to his nineteenth-century world, before twentieth-century inventions transformed him into Communism's patriarch and fierce lawgiver. Gareth Stedman Jones depicts an era dominated by extraordinary challenges and new notions about God, human capacities, empires, and political systems and, above all, the shape of the future. In the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo, a Europe-wide argument began about the industrial transformation of England, the Revolution in France, and the hopes and fears generated by these occurrences. Would the coming age belong to those enthralled by the revolutionary events and ideas that had brought this world into being, or would its inheritors be those who feared and loathed it? Stedman Jones gives weight not only to Marx's views but to the views of those with whom he contended. He shows that Marx was as buffeted as anyone else living through a period that both confirmed and confounded his interpretations and that ultimately left him with terrible intimations of failure. Karl Marx allows the reader to understand Marx's milieu and development, and makes sense of the devastating impact of new ways of seeing the world conjured up by Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Ricardo, Saint-Simon, and others. We come to understand how Marx transformed and adapted their philosophies into ideas that would have through twists and turns had an inconceivable to him overwhelming impact across the globe in the twentieth century.

A deeply original and illuminating account of Marx's journey through the intellectual history of the nineteenth century. Stedman Jones explores the friendships, affinities, rivalries and hatreds that shaped Marx's life with elegance and analytical brilliance. He anchors his narrative in a startlingly textured account of the society and politics of Marx's era. Most important of all, he brings to life the thoughts of a plethora of other writers, showing how Marx's engagements with the thoughts of others enabled him to navigate a course that often had little or nothing to do with the Marxism of the twentieth century. A profound reappraisal and a gripping read. (Christopher Clark, author of *The Sleepwalkers*) Stedman Jones has a deserved and longstanding international reputation as a highly distinguished modern historian. He has written a wonderful book faithful to the messy reality of Marx's life and intellectual evolution. (David Leopold, University of Oxford) It is the achievement of Stedman Jones's great biography that it weds sensitivity to Marx's singular individuality with deep understanding of the philosophical and political contributions that make this particular individual worthy of our attention and paints Marx's life and thought on a canvas that amounts to nothing less than a history of nineteenth-century Europe. (Warren Breckman, University of Pennsylvania) This is a masterly instance of intellectual biography, sure to be the standard work on the subject in any language. Stedman Jones is the only biographer or commentator who successfully explicates Marx's intense engagements with his political milieu. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* presents not just a rounded picture of his subject, but an intelligible one. (Terrell Carver, University of Bristol) [A] clear-eyed biography of the founding theorist of communism. In Jones's well-drawn portrait, Marx is an unappealing figure. Jones's criticism of Marx's philosophy is sharp but balanced. [He] clears up some of the mythology surrounding this controversial icon and his thinking. (Publishers Weekly 2016-08-26) [A] fine new biography [A] rich and subtle account. Stedman Jones's book is not a biography in the unbuttoned personal sense. It is more a *Life*-Times, in which Marx's physical and intellectual travels are recounted against a carefully inked-in historical background. Gareth Stedman Jones performs the delicate task of disassembling the doctrine without dismissing the thinker, cutting the wires that link the two with all the delicacy of a bomb disposal expert. It is a remarkable and irreplaceable achievement. (Ferdinand Mount *Times Literary Supplement* 2016-09-21) *Karl Marx:*

Greatness and Illusion, by the British historian Gareth Stedman Jones, has many virtues, among them a graceful style of narration that will guide even readers unfamiliar with 19th-century history through the periods political controversies. Stedman Jones has a keen grasp of intellectual history, and skillfully conveys the various themes in philosophy and economics from which Marx forged his own ideas. He has written the definitive biography of Marx for our time. (Peter E. Gordon New York Times Book 2016-10-23) Important [Stedman Jones] bring[s] exceptional learning to the business of rooting Marx in the intellectual and political life of nineteenth-century Europe. (Louis Menand New Yorker 2016-10-10) [Stedman Jones] writes quite well about the development of Marxs intellectual circle and outlook, but he also regularly reminds us of the little human details of the man Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion is ultimately, amazingly, a bright and readable biography. (Steve Donoghue Open Letters Monthly 2016-10-18) Stedman Jones makes Marx a man in his time, forever reading, revising, and yearning to puzzle out his emerging global present. Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion is a majestically important book about an intellectual struggling to make sense of a rapidly integrating world; it is also a fascinating portrait of that world seen through one minds eye. (Jeremy Adelman Public Books 2016-12-01) [Stedman Jones] analysis of Marxs economic and sociological diagnoses will prove enduring. Karl Marx situates Marx within his nineteenth-century context precisely in order to demonstrate the paradox of interpretative readings and misreadings which generated his global impact. (George Steiner Times Literary Supplement 2016-11-23) This outstanding work shows with remarkable clarity how Karl Marx developed his thought in response to that of his contemporaries The author links [the] fluctuations in Marxs writings to the dramatic changes that took place in Europe in the 19th century. One of the books great strengths is how well it portrays these changes. Another is how lucidly it covers Marxs struggles with those who were earlier his allies (particularly Mikhail Bakunin and Ferdinand Lassalle). (S. Bailey Choice 2017-03-01) One of the many virtues of Gareth Stedman Jones substantial new biography of Karl Marx is that it traces the ways in which the intense imaginings and flawed theorizing of one man including many ideas he himself discarded before his death came to play a major role in shaping the bloody 20th century. Mostly, it should be added, in ways Marx himself never dreamed of and would probably have found appalling [A] meticulously researched and highly evocative portrayal. (Aram Bakshian, Jr. Washington Times 2017-01-10) Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion looks to be the most substantial intellectual biography of its subject yet written. (Benjamin Kunkel The Nation 2017-02-27) About the Author Gareth Stedman Jones is Professor of the History of Ideas at Queen Mary University of London and Director of the Centre for History and Economics at the University of Cambridge.