

Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx. Greatness and Illusion* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), pp. xvii + 768.

=====

1

The evidence of my bookshelves suggests that it is remarkably difficult to write a good biography of Karl Marx. Perhaps especially one which seeks to do justice to the writings as well as the life, which stands a chance of appealing to a wide audience, and from which specialists might also learn. The many current obstacles here include: that significant new material emerges only infrequently; that the numerous competing volumes leave little space to say anything new, at least without going seriously astray; and that this is a subject area in which it is really hard to mould opinion, in which everyone can appear to have already made up their minds.

Yet Gareth Stedman Jones has done that difficult thing. Since I venture some non-trivial criticism below, I want to stress here that *Karl Marx. Greatness and Illusion* is a very good biography, containing some excellent scholarship, and possessing many virtues. Indeed, I offer those critical observations only because this is a work which merits the kind of respect implied by serious critical engagement. A complete list of the book's positive qualities would include: (a) its reliable historical treatment of many of the political events which shaped Marx's life, and which often form the subject matter of his writings; (b) that the author is mercifully restrained about psychologising; we don't get too much speculation about Marx's character and what is said is largely sensible (he was, for instance, thin-skinned, strong-willed, and loved his family); (c) that the biography is evenly structured chronologically, largely avoiding the common *overemphasis* on Marx's earlier years; (d) that, relatedly, it offers a welcome discussion of Marx's last decade, covering his late interests in pre-history, and in the peripheral and non-Western parts of the developing world economy; (e) that Stedman Jones shows sound judgment in drawing on some good modern scholarship (including, but not limited to, the work of Christine Lattek, Miles Taylor, Doug Moggach, and Keith Tribe); (f) that the author resists some interpretative commonplaces; for example, declining to dismiss Marx's lengthy (1860) polemic against Carl Vogt as purely émigré bickering, or his *New York Tribune* journalism as merely income-generating; and (g) that the biography makes good use of the correspondence *from* other authors *to* Marx, including that contained in the new and ongoing *Gesamtausgabe* (although there still remains more to be drawn from this important edition, and perhaps especially from its *Exzerpte, Notizen, und Marginalien* volumes). The biography is also well-written, although I never warmed to the author's stylistic device of referring to Marx throughout as 'Karl'.

2

As well as liking those, and other, features of the book, I am sympathetic towards its framing device: namely, that in order to recover the authentic Marx – if we allow that

shorthand – we have to reach back to the nineteenth century. And that we have to do that because so much of our received picture of Marx is an inaccurate and later creation.

That inaccurate and later creation is said to portray Marx as the founder of scientific socialism, the Darwin of the human sciences, and a theorist predicting the inevitability of both the global triumph, and eventual breakdown, of capitalism. We are told that this familiar picture is mainly a twentieth-century construction, which bears ‘only an incidental resemblance to the Marx who lived in the nineteenth’ (595). ‘Mainly’ since Friedrich Engels and the leaders of what we might call ‘Second International Marxism’ also carry some responsibility for its emergence. (There was also a more limited, and less successful, subsequent attempt to present Marx’s *character* in a more favourable light, but Stedman Jones focusses on the theoretical rather than the personal rewriting of history, and I follow him here.)

Note that the authorial ambition ‘to put Marx back in his nineteenth-century surroundings, before all these posthumous elaborations of his ... achievements were constructed’, might be put in the service of a variety of ends (5). In this context, I read Stedman Jones as being slightly more generous than, say, Jonathan Sperber, whose own recent Marx biography – *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York, 2013) – shares something of the same ambition. Stedman Jones is *more generous* in that he treats Marx’s ideas at somewhat greater length, he doesn’t simply assume that those ideas are of limited contemporary interest, and he strives to offer a balanced verdict on Marx’s achievements and failings. However, Stedman Jones is only *slightly* more generous, in that his final overall verdict – however cautiously expressed and ostensibly balanced – is also predominately negative. There are achievements, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, in the round, Stedman Jones finds rather more ‘illusion’ than ‘greatness’.

3

Karl Marx. Greatness and Illusion ranges from his childhood and youth in Rhenish Prussia to the very last years of ill health, through the three exiles – in Paris, Brussels, and London – that structure Marx’s life and work. The book acknowledges some of the complexity of his intellectual evolution, but also provides a narrative to make sense of Marx’s considerable output. Stedman Jones offers us a story of economic and political failure; in his account of both threads in Marx’s work there is a striving for balance, accompanied by a predominately negative verdict on Marx’s achievement.

The economic dimension of Marx’s biography is presented as a story of hubris. Marx seemingly defied the gods by seeking to provide a full and satisfactory account of ‘the laws of motion’ of the capitalist mode of production. However, we are told that, in reality, Marx ‘produced a definitive picture neither of the beginning of the capitalist mode of production, nor of its putative end’, and he similarly failed to produce ‘an immanent critique of political economy as a whole’ (429-30). The overwhelming and seemingly inevitable failure of this wider project is put at the centre of the biography, and its subject’s tragedy is to find himself the prisoner of expectations that he himself

helped to generate. Everything else, it appears, is delayed or contaminated by Marx's inability to finish *Capital* (the second and third volumes of which were, of course, posthumously constructed – in ways we are still trying to understand – by Engels).

There are, Stedman Jones maintains, other flaws in Marx's economic writings: the 'often misleading or distorted' readings of mainstream political economists (233); a reliance on a misunderstanding of Ricardo's labour theory of value; a one-sided focus on production; and so on. But the failure to complete *Capital* puts all these in the shade. It is portrayed less as the contingent result of ill-health and old age, than the predictable consequence of a certain kind of grand theoretical project. Stedman Jones repeatedly suggests that the failure to finish *Capital* was more probably the cause of Marx's ill health, than vice versa (419, 434, 537, 583).

Now this is not to say that Stedman Jones finds no successes in Marx's economic work, but they appear much more limited. He considers that some of Marx's specific criticisms – his attack on the idea of a 'wages fund', for instance – hit home. There are also some rhetorically powerful indictments of working conditions and child labour. And there is credit for being the 'first', in the *Manifesto*, to evoke and appreciate the staggering productivity, and restlessness, of the emerging capitalist economy. Perhaps revealingly, Marx's greatest success here is identified as an 'unwitting' one; namely, that he helped to found 'the systematic study of social and economic history' (430). We are reassured that the historical part of *Capital* – and especially the wealth of government reports, statistics, and press reportage, that Marx utilised – 'remains impressive' (428).

The political dimension of this biography is harder to summarise, but Stedman Jones detects a failure of nerve, or at least a missed opportunity. Marx is portrayed as nearly, but not quite, managing to effect the political transition from membership of revolutionary sects (such as the Communist League) to proponent of social democracy. Stedman Jones effectively endorses some rather familiar criticisms of Marx's political strategy as undemocratic and authoritarian, albeit that this characterisation is now elaborated in an understated way, as threads which Marx could never quite bring himself to abandon. Much, of course, depends on whether we accept this identification of Marx with illiberal political tendencies.

Stedman Jones offers a lengthy account of Marx's wider political failings, including some familiar staples of the more hostile Marx literature. In 1848, while purporting to sympathise with them, Marx refused 'to listen to the discourse of workers themselves' (312). More generally, he failed to appreciate the political determinants of class and class struggle, and to understand that 'the character of politics in this period was not simply an expression of the nature of class' (311). He is said to have held a conception of history which refused 'to accord independent space' to political concerns (341). His conception of the post-revolutionary polity 'was open to an authoritarian interpretation' (528). And so on.

Marx's merits here are fewer and less stressed. However, aspects of what Stedman Jones sees as Marx's evolving political strategy are welcomed. By the 1860s, especially

when thinking of Britain, Marx rejects both the later Marxist idea of ‘the leading role of the revolutionary party’, and the strategy of a ‘violent overthrow of capitalism’ (466). The seizure of state power is replaced, in Stedman Jones’s summary, by ‘a social democratic process propelled by “pressure from without”’ (468). However, even here, and especially when thinking of the continent, Marx finds it hard to abandon completely the strategy of revolutionary sects, and wholly embrace the construction of a credible electoral programme for ‘a mass-based parliamentary social-democratic party’ (556).

4

Having introduced Stedman Jones’s biography of Marx, and sketched its framing device and central narrative threads, I venture some more critical observations. I have substantive and methodological worries about the book, and begin with the former. The two broad categories of *substantive* criticism that I raise here concern, first, the contemporary relevance of Marx’s ideas, and, second, the relation between those ideas and liberalism.

This is not, of course, to say that there are no other substantive worries. Indeed, as I read the biography I found myself disagreeing with numerous interpretative claims made by the author, but in many of these cases I felt that the relevant scholarly disagreement raised no wider worry about the overall merits of the book. I will give two quick examples here, which happen to be taken from the early 1840s. First, Stedman Jones does not make enough of the basic political difference in Marx’s dispute with Bruno Bauer; namely that Marx was in favour, and Bauer against, Jewish emancipation. Second, Stedman Jones overstates Marx’s distance from Engels’s early suggestion that the ‘self-love’ of Max Stirner might take a communist form; not least, something like that suggestion reappears in Marx’s subsequent view that proletarians bring about a communist society primarily because it is in their material interests, and not because it is a morally superior social order. Now on these, and other, miscellaneous interpretative issues, I obviously think you should conclude that I am right and Stedman Jones is wrong, but nothing much need follow for your overall judgement of the biography. However, such wider consequences would seem to follow from the two broader sets of substantive critical observations that I now turn to.

The first group of such substantive issues revolve around some of Marx’s ideas which are often used to support claims about his continuing critical relevance. The examples that I give here involve ideology, alienation, and exploitation. In these particular cases – or, at least, the two that get more discussion – the relevant ideas tend to be situated as marginal parts of Marx’s failed critique of political economy, and any wider critical potential goes largely unremarked. The result is that these and other potential components of Marx’s critical inheritance get downplayed, and whether Stedman Jones considers these ideas to have any continuing critical relevance is left unclear.

Take Marx’s pejorative conception of ideology, which, very roughly, maintains that certain false and misleading ideas gain predominance in class-divided societies because they work to the advantage of the economically dominant class (perhaps by

obscuring, or justifying, or reconciling non-ruling classes to, the flaws of that society). Yet ideology doesn't appear in the index to the present book, and I could find only two passing mentions of the word (other than in the title of *The German Ideology*). Now, of course, the author might hold that Marx doesn't actually have a coherent and plausible account of ideology, but that would still be good to know, especially given the emphasis that the concept receives in the hands of others.

Alienation, in contrast, gets mentioned much more often, and Stedman Jones rightly recognises that its appearance is not restricted to Marx's earlier writings. However, his subsequent discussion tends to assimilate the concept to the early stages of the failed critique of political economy through the idea of 'the fetishism of commodities'. There is little sense of Marx's account of alienation, or the account of human flourishing on which – I would maintain – it depends, having any wider critical purchase on contemporary economic and political arrangements.

Exploitation receives something of the same treatment. It is discussed as part of the critique of political economy, and its wider critical purchase is dismissed. Thus exploitation is associated with the labour theory of value, and the idea of an 'unpaid transfer', but there is little exploration of the normative commitments that would seem to underlie Marx's account. We are told that the idea of exploitation makes better sense of a feudal than a commercial society, and that insurrectionary sentiments – not only in 1848 but in subsequent Western European history – are to do with 'exclusion and lack of recognition rather than exploitation' (313). Marx is said to have failed to grasp that fact as securely as assorted contemporary Chartists and republicans had done (311).

To summarise this first group of concerns: some of Marx's most interesting and influential critical and normative ideas are neglected here, and I regret that. I wanted to know more about whether Stedman Jones considers Marx's ideas to have any continuing critical relevance, and in what that continuing relevance might consist.

Which takes us to the second group of substantive issues, involving what we might cautiously call Marx's relation to liberalism. Cautiously since, as Stedman Jones suggests, 'liberalism' is still emerging in this period, slowly separating out from 'republicanism' and 'socialism'. My worry here is that this appreciation of complexity – apparent in Stedman Jones' historical concern about the coherence and content of 'liberalism' in this period – is not always extended to Marx's own ideas.

In particular, Marx often appears here as a simple and straightforward opponent of liberal values and commitments. There are many possible examples, including the discussion of political representation, censorship, and free speech, where I felt that there was insufficient recognition that 'political emancipation' for Marx is indeed a form of emancipation (if not the best that humankind can do). However, here I focus on Stedman Jones's treatment of rights, modern individuality, and moral individualism.

Marx's attitude towards rights is not treated extensively, but his enduring 'distaste' for 'the idea of rights' is said to appear first in the early writings, and to be expressed

subsequently as a dismissal of ‘a “bourgeois” phenomenon’ (135). As I have argued elsewhere, the familiar suggestion that Marx rejects the idea of rights tends to fall foul of two lines of reasoning.¹ In the first place, the critical reach of Marx’s negative comments are much less than is usually thought. He is typically criticising historically specific rights claims (such as ‘the rights of man’ proclaimed in the French Revolution), not for their form but rather their content (the particular values and interests that are being protected and promoted by the relevant claims). In the second place, if we look at the pattern of inference of Marx’s language, he frequently adopts forms of argument that are coextensive with the assertion of rights claims. Not least, he affirms certain views about the moral standing of individuals (for instance, their having a moral value which is not dependent on contingent facts, such as their being valued by anyone), and which establishes certain constraints on how they can be treated (for instance, that it is morally impermissible to treat people as if they were things). Stedman Jones notes that, in *Capital*, Marx welcomes ‘the modest Magna Carta of a legally limited working day’, but we might find that less surprising on my account of Marx’s relation to rights than on Stedman Jones’s own reading (468).

Marx’s attitude towards what we might call modern individuality – that is, a kind of personhood whose emergence is often said to be a recent historical achievement – also forms part of this nexus of issues. Stedman Jones identifies various positive associations of individuality, including links with individual judgment, moral subjectivity, and the pursuit of personal goals (see 114). In stark contrast, Marx is said to equate modern individuality with the self-seeking atomistic member of civil society. Indeed, Marx is said to exhibit, in his early writings and elsewhere, an ‘inability – or refusal – to think of individuality except as an alienation from social being’ (135). Now this strikes me as potentially misleading. Marx *does* think that individuality *appears* first in the form of alienation, but insists both that even in its alienated form there is a kind of positive achievement, and that overcoming alienation does not involve the end of individuality. To take these two points in turn. The positive achievement here is that modern individuals are liberated from ‘engulfment’, that they now experience (in Jerry Cohen’s phrase) ‘the freedom of detachment’.² Where feudal subjects were wholly merged with their social conditions, their modern counterparts now stand apart from them, experiencing them (in the first instance) as a constraint on their own goals and ambitions. Modern individuals are consequently, of course, estranged, but now at least they have *their own* goals and ambitions. (As Marx observes in the *Manifesto*, individuals do not have to wait for communist society in order to escape the ‘rural idiocy’ associated with feudalism.) Moreover, for Marx, that estrangement is itself eventually overcome, not when individuality is subsumed back into some kind of brute communal belonging, but only when both community and individuality are given space to flourish. We might have lots of questions to put to such a picture, but it confirms that Marx does not equate individuality with its alienated forms.

¹ David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx. German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 150-163.

² G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom. Themes from Marx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 187.

Marx's attitude towards what I shall call moral individualism forms the last of this group of concerns. Stedman Jones suggests that Marx's 'distaste for any form of individualism' includes moral individualism (203). Marx seemingly holds that aggregate social entities rather than individuals are the bearers of ultimate value; witness his rather partial encounter with Kant, and, in particular, his supposed rejection of 'the Kantian conception of the individual' (203). Again, I think this is potentially misleading. Marx criticises capitalism for its negative impact on individual flourishing; the existing division of labour is attacked, amongst other failings, for frustrating 'the all-round development' of the individual – productivity expands rapidly but workers are increasingly chained to a narrow specialism, developing only a fragment of their many-sided potentials. And individual flourishing is at the heart of Marx's vision of communism. Despite his occasionally communitarian sounding language, and some debate about the precise mechanisms here, Marx assumes (as just noted) that the social structures of future communist society will reconcile individuality and community. Indeed, Marx is truly enthusiastic only about communal forms which allow individual flourishing; as the *German Ideology* manuscripts claim: 'the communists by no means want ... to do away with the "private individual" for the sake of the "general", selfless man'.

I would not want these three related examples – concerning rights, modern individuality, and moral individualism – to be misunderstood. The suggestion is not, for instance, that Marx is really a liberal, merely that his relation to liberalism is a complex and sometimes positive one. Not least, Marx's socialism can usefully be seen as, in part, embodying the view that certain 'liberal' ends are best secured by socialist means. And I wished for a clearer sense of this more complicated, positive, and interesting, story in Stedman Jones's book.

5

I turn now to three broadly *methodological* observations, concerning Stedman Jones's treatment of Marx's ideas, his discussion of Engels, and his evaluation of Marx's thought, respectively.

The first issue here concerns what might, to borrow a phrase, be called an asymmetry of scrupulousness. Stedman Jones deals with both the life and the work of its subject, but his treatment of Marx's ideas often seems less thorough and less subtle than his treatment of Marx's political context. Since this is a cumulative impression, it is hard to pick out a single example that captures it, but consider the following comparison. We are told that, in both the '1859 Preface' and the 'afterword' to the second German edition of *Capital*, Marx 'appeared to open himself up to a much more determinist view of man than had been evident before' (564). Now for all the characteristic caution here, this suggests a serious concern about Marx's understanding of the role of human agency dating from the 1860s. Yet the reader wanting more philosophical detail will be disappointed. There is no discussion of what a 'determinist view of man' might be; or what makes it a bad thing; or how determinism could be a scalar concept; or even (less philosophically) what explains its emergence at this point in Marx's intellectual development. In contrast, consider Stedman Jones's many helpful pages explaining the

political context of the Paris Commune, plausibly arguing that its existence is incomprehensible outside the experience of war and siege. Indeed, it is not, I think, an exaggeration to say that we are told more about the body count – the number of Communard deaths – than about Marx's increasingly determinist view of man. (It turns out that contemporary estimates of Communard deaths involved much exaggeration and guesswork, and more recent reassessments based on morgue records require the numbers to be scaled down considerably.) Just to be clear, I found that historical detail interesting and helpful. But this remains a book which often takes more care with the political context, than it does with the theoretical ideas, of its subject. Of course, it might be suggested that this asymmetry should be considered a description, rather than a criticism, of the book. Yet even on that account, potential readers would presumably still want to be made aware of this characteristic of the book. Moreover, I consider this hypothetical interpretative suggestion to be misplaced. Not least, it is hard to square with Stedman Jones's complaint, in the 'Acknowledgements', that competing, unidentified, 'scholarly biographers of Marx' have concentrated on the life rather than the work, and offered only 'descriptive accounts of Marx's theoretical writings' (xv). My critical point is that the implied authorial ambition here – namely, to engage with Marx's ideas in a sustained and serious manner – is not always satisfactorily realised in the book itself.

My second methodological observation concerns the perennial and thorny issue of Engels. Now I appreciate: that the role of Engels is always a problem; that, since they have distinct intellectual trajectories and substantive views, it seems right to avoid a joint-biography (191); that there is much to be said for downplaying Engels's role (the characterisation of Engels, at one point, as 'a prolific and dependable friend' certainly situates us a long way from the familiar portrait of a unique intellectual partnership (288)); and that some of Stedman Jones's detailed discussion – unsurprisingly given his own earlier work – is genuinely insightful (his treatment of Owenite influences on Engels's early communism, for instance). Yet a nagging worry remains which I will try to articulate. I think there are two inadequate general accounts of Engels in the wider literature. The first effectively treats Marx and Engels as if they were a single person ('*Marx and Engels*') united in all of their views. The second treats Engels one-sidedly as the wholesale distorter and corruptor of Marx's ideas. The nagging worry is that, at times, Stedman Jones comes quite close to this latter, one-sidedly negative, account of Engels. We are told, for example, that in the final decade of his life 'Karl no longer talked much about his work to Engels', indeed that given his family's financial dependence on Engels it would have been 'increasingly difficult' for him to 'express disagreement' (565). How genuine, we are encouraged to wonder, is a friendship where dependency has led you to self-censor in this way? But the truth is that we really don't know how much they talked about ideas. It is true that once Engels retires and moves from Manchester to London there is less substantive correspondence – because they could now talk to each other directly – but their surviving letters still contain examples of disagreement, including some that Stedman Jones elsewhere acknowledges (their differing enthusiasm for Darwin for instance). We are also reminded that after Marx's death his daughter Laura removed correspondence that might be thought hurtful to Engels, but importantly we don't know precisely what or how much was removed. And we are also told that there is no reason to disbelieve

Hyndman's testimony that his own wife heard Marx's wife regret their dependency on Engels. No reason except perhaps that Hyndman is an unreliable source, whose hostility to Engels ('the Grand Llama of the Regent's Park Road') is well-established, and who was writing twenty-eight years after Marx's death. Stedman Jones remarks that 'Little evidence of the strains caused by this dependence has survived' (565), yet this is to presuppose what has not been proven. The implication is that there was such evidence, but that it has somehow gone missing in the meantime. In such formulations it seems to me that Stedman Jones has perhaps tacked rather too far in the direction of the Anti-Engels pole.

My third and final methodological observation concerns the balanced but largely negative evaluative verdict on Marx's work; more precisely, the basis for this verdict, the criteria according to which Marx's intellectual trajectory is being judged. As I made my way through the book, tracing the economic and political narratives discussed earlier, it struck me that Marx was often being graded according to how closely he approximated to an empirically conscientious social and economic historian, with a non-reductive view of politics, an interest in language, and some kind of broad social democratic sympathies. There are times in his life when Marx does especially badly by these criteria (around 1848 perhaps), and other times when he does a little better by them (in the 1860s for instance). To make the punchline explicit: I could not repress the growing suspicion that Marx was being graded according to how closely he approximated to Stedman Jones's current interests and world-view. Now perhaps that evaluative standard doesn't matter; certainly much of the history of ideas is written in this kind of mode. Yet I think some legitimate concerns might remain. *Historically* we might worry that this is to hold Marx to an alien standard. And *philosophically* we might want the implicit criteria here to be clarified and justified a little more explicitly.

6

Gareth Stedman Jones has a deserved reputation as a distinguished historian, and he has written a genuinely interesting and informative book, embodying much serious work and reflection. *Karl Marx. Greatness and Illusion* has many merits (some listed earlier), and I am sympathetic to its framing device, to the thought that the authentic Marx needs 'recovering' from the twentieth century. However, I have some continuing methodological worries about the (over)emphasis on political context, the treatment of Engels, and the basis for the author's evaluation of Marx's ideas. In addition, the book's narrative thread, and its wider treatment of Marx's ideas, is more negative than I think is justified. Some of those ideas – including ideology, alienation, and exploitation – deserve more discussion than they receive. And others – including some relating to Marx's critical engagement with liberalism – are portrayed as cruder and more open to easy objection than they are. In short, I remain convinced that Marx's ideas are more complex, interesting, and relevant, than is sometimes suggested in this biography.

David Leopold