

Books

The value of Karl Marx's 19th century thinking in today's world

While Marxism has been redefined for every era, a new history examines the ideas and climate that shaped its founder



Sculptor Fritz Cremer working on a bust of Karl Marx in 1953 © BPK/Max Ittenbach

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Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion, by Gareth Stedman Jones, Allen Lane, RRP£25.95 / Harvard University Press, RRP\$35, 768 pages

One of the most remarkable scholarly undertakings of the past century, the publication of the collected works of Karl Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels, started in the British Library before the first world war, when an émigré Russian Marxist scholar called David Riazanov began collecting some of Marx's journalistic articles.

But the project really got off the ground in 1920s Moscow in the Marx-Engels Institute that Riazanov founded, and, after a long interval, was resurrected in the 1970s by the East German and Soviet authorities. After 1989, it continued with funding from the government of the newly reunified Germany and is still ongoing: when it is finished, the full edition is likely to consist of more than a hundred volumes, including not only the authors' own writings and correspondence but letters to them, jottings and other miscellanea. It will dwarf the numerous other sets of their works, including the collected works in English, which runs to a mere 50 volumes or so.

By a striking coincidence, therefore, the demise of communism across Europe has taken place in the very era when the sources on Marx's life have proliferated. The result has been a gold-mine for historians and biographers and thus something of a golden age for students of Marx's life. The current choice of biographies available in English includes an impressively lively account by journalist Francis Wheen, and a superbly detailed study from historian Jonathan Sperber.

To these we can now add *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. Its author, the distinguished British historian Gareth Stedman Jones, says his aim is a simple one — “to put Marx back in his 19th-century surroundings” — and there is obviously much to be said for trying to strip away the myths from the man and his thought. Marx himself was aware that he was becoming an — ism. “If anything is certain,” he noted near the end of his life, “it is that I myself am not a Marxist.”

As it was, arguments over the nature of Marxism really got going after Marx's death in 1883 — although in the 20th century the rise of the USSR as a major world power, along with the global spread of communism during the cold war, vastly increased the stakes. Political fortunes for decades depended on how Marxism was defined and what it prescribed. Splits on the political left meant that anti-Bolshevik Marxists were pitted against pro-Bolshevik ones, new left against old left.

The original Marxism that Engels forged shortly after Marx's own death — with its emphasis on science and laws, its materialism and its claim that socialism could do for the understanding of human life what Darwin had achieved for animals — splintered and fractured amid debates on both sides of the Iron Curtain. These intellectual arguments were certainly not indifferent to the real Marx, and they often brought out new, previously under-appreciated works of his and so helped us appreciate the twists and turns in his thought. But they were mostly means to an end — the end, that is to say, of justifying a truer, better Marxism for a new set of believers.

Stedman Jones has been through some of these battles himself, albeit in the relatively bloodless settings of post-war England. Born in 1942, he belongs to that generation of mostly left-leaning scholars who revolutionised the study of history in the postwar era by making social and cultural history dominant where the study of diplomats, generals and constitutions had once prevailed.

At one point in this book, he praises Marx for being a pioneer in the realm of social history, which seems true enough, and important, if a slight comedown for some of the claims that have been made for him in the past. But it helps explain the connection to Stedman Jones himself, whose own speciality was the study of working-class life in Victorian London.

From the start, this expertise gives the author a unique vantage-point from which to evaluate the pretensions of socialism as a movement, the usefulness of class as a category of analysis and the importance of the ways workers actually expressed themselves in figuring out their collective impact on politics.

And because Marx spent so much of his life in London, it also gives Stedman Jones an ability — deployed to good effect in this book — not merely to show us the domestic life of the great intellectual in Kentish Town but, more importantly, Marx's sensitivity to the changing fortunes of the left in mid-Victorian Britain. He illustrates how this affected Marx's thought, complicated his completion of his life's study of contemporary capitalism and turned his attention slowly away from the annoyingly unrevolutionary industrial countries of western Europe on which he had once pinned his hopes, to Russia, eastern Europe, India and the colonial world.

Mid-19th-century German intellectuals were a bilious lot. Schopenhauer was notorious for his invective; Nietzsche too. Marx was not far behind. Russian literary critic Pavel Annenkov once witnessed the way Marx humiliated a rival communist in a meeting in 1846, interrupting him and bringing the session to a close in a fury, “slamming his fist down on the table so hard that the lamp on the table reverberated and tottered, and jumping up from his place, [he] said at the same time: ‘Ignorance has never yet helped anybody.’”

He was, wrote Annenkov — who was not used to such behaviour from his Russian radical friends — “the embodiment of a democratic dictator”. It is worth bearing in mind that this was at a time when Marx was almost entirely unknown, as he was for most of his life, the scheming leader of a small group of self-professed communists, living in a world of impoverished émigrés.

For sheer bad-temperedness, there are few works to set alongside his fiery essay “The Great Men of the Emigration”, unpublished in his lifetime, in which Marx tore with furious gusto into those much better-known figureheads of radical European internationalism — men such as Giuseppe Mazzini — who had also settled in London.

Marx was not a worker, like Wilhelm Weitling, the man he had humiliated, but as his put-down suggested, it was clarity and rigour of thought that he believed were needed most. *Greatness and Illusion* is superb on the ideas that shaped Marx and that he responded to. It shows that he was the product of a post-Napoleonic generation of young Germans whose starting point was the historical reflections of Hegel. There was, in the early Marx, little or no sign of an interest in anything resembling political economy, still less materialism. Rather, he saw philosophy's task as emancipating man by helping shed light on the historical process itself through reason. Christianity was to be destroyed, but then in a sense reborn as “human self-consciousness” which Marx termed “the highest divinity”. Stedman Jones shows the importance of classics, metaphysics and the law in shaping Marx's philosophical approach — the social sciences would only attract his attention much later.

Unable to find an academic position, Marx earned his living as a journalist, and proved himself, as he would later demonstrate in running the First International, to be a formidable if unscrupulous organiser. But the authorities' highly effective repression cut the ground from under his feet and he was only 25 when he concluded that he would have to leave Germany.

At the same time he continued his voluminous reading, in particular of Ludwig Feuerbach, a critic of Hegel and the thinker who did most to point Marx towards the idea of man as an alienated being who thrived best as part of a larger collective. It was this conception that allowed Marx to imagine the future as one great human society, and to relegate to an entirely unimportant position the state itself, which had been so potent in Hegel's thought. One consequence of this downplaying of the state was that Marx developed his entire critique of capitalism with almost no reference to the role of the state: the upshot was that after 1917, when his Russian followers found themselves running the government of a very large country, they had a free hand to invent a role for the bureaucracy and ended up creating a polity in which the state played a greater role than ever before or since.

Would Marx have minded? Not necessarily. Stedman Jones shows that while Marx never paid much attention to the question of the state, in other respects his thought changed greatly over the decades. Having begun expecting almost instantaneous revolution, he adapted himself to the idea that the evolution of capitalist society would be relatively slow. In the 1840s he witnessed the suppression of revolutionary violence across Europe. He also met proletarians for the first time, in France, Belgium and later in London, where he worked closely with trade unionists in the 1860s. And he met the man who became his close friend, his backer and later the shaper of his legacy: Engels.

Engels was not only an industrialist. He was an intellectual too, and it was one of his early articles on political economy that directed Marx's attention towards the subject he would make his own. Marx's conception of critique as a humanist inquiry that would liberate mankind was now attached to the study of private property, the means of trade and exchange, the relationship between profit and value — in short, the science of political economy. If capitalism was dehumanising, communism's emancipatory promise hinged on the power of the critical philosophy that could come to its aid. Thanks to Engels, and some of his Russian intellectual successors, Marxian thought would be identified as a form of historical materialism; but as Stedman Jones elegantly demonstrates, this was not at all how Marx conceived of what he was doing.

Marx's writings combined forceful, dogmatic prose with diagnoses of the political and economic situation that were often flexible and ambivalent in their implications. He moved from anticipating the collapse of capitalism in an instantaneous revolutionary conflagration to seeing it as a slow and painstaking process; he moved from expecting western Europe to be the site of insurrection to appreciating the solidity of political institutions there and placing his hopes in the periphery of the capitalist world or in a global war. This combination of adaptability and assertiveness was not the least of his gifts to his successors in the USSR.

The question this book raises is what his value is for us today. The answer is not hard to find: Marx remains an outstanding model of how to stand outside capitalism and subject it to critique on the basis of something larger — the ability of a reigning economic system to serve human needs. Communism may have failed. But it can scarcely be said that contemporary capitalism — with its intensifying tendency to inequality, its propensity to crisis, its hollowing-out of political institutions and its casualisation of the labour force — has succeeded. So long as we persist in our tendency to hive off the study of economics from politics, philosophy and journalism, Marx will remain the outstanding example of how to overcome the fragmentation of modern social thought and think about the world as a whole for the sake of its betterment. And this book will be an admirable guide to how he did it.

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