Book Reviews

Gareth Stedman Jones. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. 750. $35.00.

Karl Marx has been a lot of things to a lot of people. He has been an inspiration to hundreds of millions of people who have sought socialist revolution. He has also been an abomination to an equally large number of people who have feared revolution.

To multitudes of intellectuals, philosophers, social scientists, historians, and cultural critics, Marx has served as the ultimate modern thinker. "All that is solid melts into air," one of many memorable passages from the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* that Marx wrote with his longtime collaborator Friedrich Engels, might be the single best metaphor for the modern speed-up of cultural change. And yet to many more, Marx's theories about capitalism have seemed preposterous at best and dangerous at worst.

More than a man, Marx is a myth. This fact makes writing his biography a Herculean challenge. Grappling with Marx's complicated personal, political, and intellectual lives is difficult enough without also having to attend to his legend. Gareth Stedman Jones, Professor of History at the University of London, solves this dilemma in his new biography of Marx by placing Marx in his historical context and by militantly keeping him there. In the eyes of Stedman Jones, himself a recovering Marxist, Marx belongs in the past and nowhere else.

Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion is a formidable piece of scholarship precisely for its close attention to the specific context that made Marx. The Marx of twentieth-century lore is mostly set aside in this massive book, except in a few brief passages where Stedman Jones refutes widely held assumptions about Marx's ideas. Indeed, Stedman Jones is so intent on demystifying Marx that he refers to him as "Karl" throughout the book.

Many twentieth-century humans believed Marx's theory of capitalism was iron-clad: Capitalism was ineluctably conquering the world. And this was not necessarily a bad thing, since for Marx capitalism was both horrible and progressive. Even though capitalism ruined the lives of countless people caught in its destructive path, vanquishing older forms of human organization like feudalism was necessary because only capitalism was designed to give way to the higher order of Marx's imagination. Capitalism was a necessary evil because communism was baked into its cake. This was the Marxist revolutionary outline. But Stedman Jones argues in his revisionist account that this notion of capitalism and its demise owed more to how Engels presented Marx's ideas after his 1883 death. Stedman Jones posits that Marx, in contrast to Engels, had changed his mind.

By the 1870s Marx seems to have come to the belief that some pre-capitalistic societies, such as Russian communes, were potentially revolutionary and should be defended against capitalist onslaught. In other words, Marx had discarded the teleological notions about progressive development that had made him such a modernist. There was more than one path to a future classless society. But those twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century humans who came to Marx for the first time by reading the *Communist Manifesto*, one of the most widely read texts in human history—ranking alongside *The Bible* and Plato's *Republic*—never knew this Marx.

Stedman Jones makes clear that the construction of the mythical Marx began during Marx's lifetime. For most of his life Marx was not a famous person outside of a small group of radical German émigrés who left repressive Prussia after the failed 1848 revolutions. Even during the 1850s, when he wrote hundreds of articles about European politics for the *New York-Daily Tribune*, which had the largest circulation of any newspaper in the world, Marx was merely one of many writers among a robust transatlantic literary scene. It was not until the late 1860s and early 1870s that

Marx became a household name.

One of the most important events that put Marx on the map was the 1867 publication of his monumental book, *Capital*, which sold well by the standards of the time and made him something of a genius in the eyes of his fellow European radicals. But Marx only became famous beyond those relatively small circles when he became, according to Engels, "the best hated and most calumniated man of his time," a title that he wore as a badge of pride. In the eyes of bourgeois Europe, Marx supposedly masterminded both the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), a militant socialist group that was deemed threatening because it organized workers across national boundaries, and the 1871 Paris Commune, which frightened the leaders of the capitalist world on both sides of the Atlantic. As secretary of the IWA, Marx indeed played an important role in shaping its mission, but the First International, as it became known to history, was never as powerful as its enemies believed. And as for the Paris Commune, Marx had nothing to do with it, conspiracies notwithstanding.

Although Marx enjoyed fame—even infamy—Stedman Jones argues that such notoriety has misshaped how he has been remembered. Take the reception of *Capital* as a case study. *Capital* should have made Marx, in the words of Stedman Jones, "one of the principal—if unwitting—founders of a new and important area of historical inquiry, the systematic study of social and economic history" (430). This would have been a valuable legacy in and of itself. But *Capital* is better remembered for Marx's theory that capitalism generates profit and misery in mutually exclusive and unsustainable ways. *Capital* supposedly proved Marx's old maxim that capitalism digs its own grave. Stedman Jones, in contrast, contends that Marx failed to prove this theory because it is unprovable. The only grave Stedman Jones wants to dig is Marx's. Ultimately, Stedman Jones wrote a biography of Marx so that people will treat him as a historical figure, not a prophet.

Perhaps this is the only approach we should take when we

teach Marx. When we assign the *Communist Manifesto*, students should analyze it like any other primary source—students should think about it as a product of its historical context, no more, no less—in the same way that they might analyze, say, the Gettysburg Address.

But is this fair? If a text is inspirational as a living document that speaks to students in the here and now, should not we allow them to be moved by it? Is not this precisely what makes teaching and learning exciting?

I would pose these same questions to Stedman Jones. He has sought to bury Marx with history. Perhaps he will convince some people to think about Marx solely as a historical figure. But those who remain inspired by Marx—those who think we still have something to learn from Marx—will ignore the limits upon our imagination that such militant attention to context imposes. And that is okay.

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Antonio Sennis, ed. *Cathars in Question*. Woodbridge, U.K.: York Medieval Press, 2016. Pp. vii+332. $99.00.

Like many edited volumes, *Cathars in Question* began as a collection of conference papers, in this case from an April 2013 conference entitled "Catharism: Balkan Heresy or Construct of a Persecuting Society?" at the Warburg Institute. At that conference's—and this volume's—heart is a deceptively simple question: Can historians of the Middle Ages assert with confidence that there existed in the twelfth-century southern France a cohesive group—a "church"—of heretical Christians called "Cathars" led by heterodox clergy called "good men?" (1). Despite the availability of much evidence in Toulousan archives, Parisian libraries, and elsewhere, this has been a hotly contested problem among heresy specialists and medievalists in general