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Gareth Stedman Jones. *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 278 pp. $19.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13172-8.

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The Political Origins of the Social Question

An End to Poverty? was published in advance of Gareth Stedman Jones's keynote address to the 2004 Anglo-American Conference on "Wealth and Poverty" held at the London Institute for Historical Research. The book is less a monograph than an extended essay that expands on methodological and political concerns that Stedman Jones has explored in a number of well-known books and essays, especially in his *Languages of Class* (1983). Despite its essayist quality, the book aims to overturn the social narrative of the industrial revolution and the attendant accounts of the modern social movement grounded in the analytic category of "class."

The intellectual fulcrums of Stedman Jones's modest proposal are two individuals who figure prominently in any history of the later Enlightenment and the age of revolutions, but whose appearance in the present context is at first rather surprising: Marquis Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet and Thomas Paine. Stedman Jones's attention was attracted to Condorcet and Paine by their relatively unknown proposals for the elimination of poverty. At the heart of the book is his claim that these programs were inspired less by what might be termed a precocious, Enlightenment understanding of the *social* problem of industry and urbanism than by a specifically *political* concern to create the foundations of a modern republican alternative to monarchy and aristocracy. In Stedman Jones's view, these republican proposals to end poverty represent the lost possibility of a social democracy not paralyzed by the antinomy of free market and collectivism. The dramatic narrative of the book is structured around the articulation of this alternative modernity, providing an account of both the reasons this path was not taken and the consequences of this decision, as well as further reflections on the contemporary significance of these republican proposals.

Condorcet's thinking on the topic of inequality focused on the existential uncertainties of the poor, and his proposals centered on mutual insurance against this risk and the need for universal education. For his part, Paine sought to replace the poor rates with a system of pensions to be funded by the tax revenue that was largely responsible for the impoverishment of the laboring classes but that was at present wasted on war, corruption, and luxury by the monarchical state. According to

Stedman Jones, this republican synthesis was made possible by three intellectual developments. The first was the recognition–and to my mind this is one of the more important insights of the book–that poverty could no longer be seen as a divinely ordained and unalterable part of the human condition (p. 10) and the consequent deployment of statistical thinking to insure the solvency of these insurance programs. The second was an optimistic reading of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), one that stressed the emancipatory potential of commercial society and the importance of both sociability and productive investment in providing the moral basis and material foundations for such a society. The third catalytic factor came from the intellectual and political challenges emanating from the revolutions in the Americas and France. "The first attempt to plan a world without poverty took shape," Stedman Jones concludes, "not as a response to the problems of industry, but as part of an ambition to transplant the conditions of success of the young American republic to European soil" (p. 62).

But if the revolution gave birth to this republican vision, the reaction so thoroughly discredited this tradition that it remained obscured for the next two centuries. In an outstanding chapter on the reaction in Britain, Stedman Jones sketches the political reaction against revolution and republicanism in the 1790s and then shows how the evangelical emphasis on original sin and Malthus's emphasis on both the sloth of the laboring classes (rather than their industry) and biology's tyranny over (enlightened) self-interest entered into an unholy alliance that overturned the belief in human perfectibility, the operative assumption in the work of Condorcet and Paine. In this way, classical political economy was born as the science of a commercial society based on the assumption of man's *im*perfectability.

Although classical political economy has long claimed to be the only legitimate heir to Smithian economics, one of Stedman Jones's primary aims in this work is to recover from the enormous condescension of posterity the utopian potential of the republican reading of Smith by Condorcet and Paine and to historicize the claims of market ideologues, both past and present. In the work of Condorcet and Paine, the terms "industriousness" and "industry" had played a central role in defining the productive center that could hold commercial society together against the centrifugal pull of sloth and luxury. However, the next two chapters use the work of Jean-Baptiste Say to show how the individual threads that comprised this complex unity of meaning were gradually pulled apart, leaving the slothful "dangerous classes" standing in stark discursive opposition to a bourgeoisie that could now appropriate for its exclusive use all of the positive connotations associated with concepts that "had originally been designed as the binding ethos of a modern republic" (p. 161). However, this conflict was dampened well into the 1800s in both Britain and France. In both countries, the positionality of the middle classes was defined not only by their self-profiling in relation to the laboring classes, but also by their continuing political struggle against monarchy and a bellicose, aristocratic society with the high taxation, privileges, and monopolies this entailed.

It was not, Stedman Jones concludes, until the 1880s that this labile situation was resolved. Alfred Toynbee's suggestion in his *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England* (1884) that England's greatness was the result of an industrial and commercial upheaval driven by market freedoms (and all of the forces unleashed thereby), rather than political struggle, reflected, Stedman Jones argues, this change in middle-class consciousness. This concept, in turn, gave rise to a new master narrative of modern English history grounded in a "social" explanation of class and class antagonisms. Glossing his own account of Chartism, Stedman Jones concludes that "[b]y diverting attention from the political reaction to the Revolution and resituating a period of trauma in a purely industrial or agrarian setting, the peculiarities of the British monarchical and constitutional system came to belong to the natural and the taken-for-granted" (p. 233).

By denaturalizing the political structures of the monarchy and making visible the political constellation that gave birth to the master discipline of political economy and the narrative of social class that it authorized, Stedman Jones hopes to recover the republicanism of Condorcet and Paine as the basis for social democratic politics in the present. Such a claim does more than merely push back the historical origins of social democracy by a good half-century. More importantly, it aims to lay the foundation for a socially minded republicanism that would no longer be held hostage to what Stedman Jones argues in this volume is a derivative (rather than primal) and debilitating antinomy between laissez-faire politics and its socialist *DoppelgÃ¤nger*. This vision of a more inclusive notion of citizenship is an appealing one that ought to serve, at least in part, as an antidote to the siren calls of neo-liberalism. But translating this ideal into policy and political engagement will be no less a challenge today than it was in the simpler world of the late Enlightenment.

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