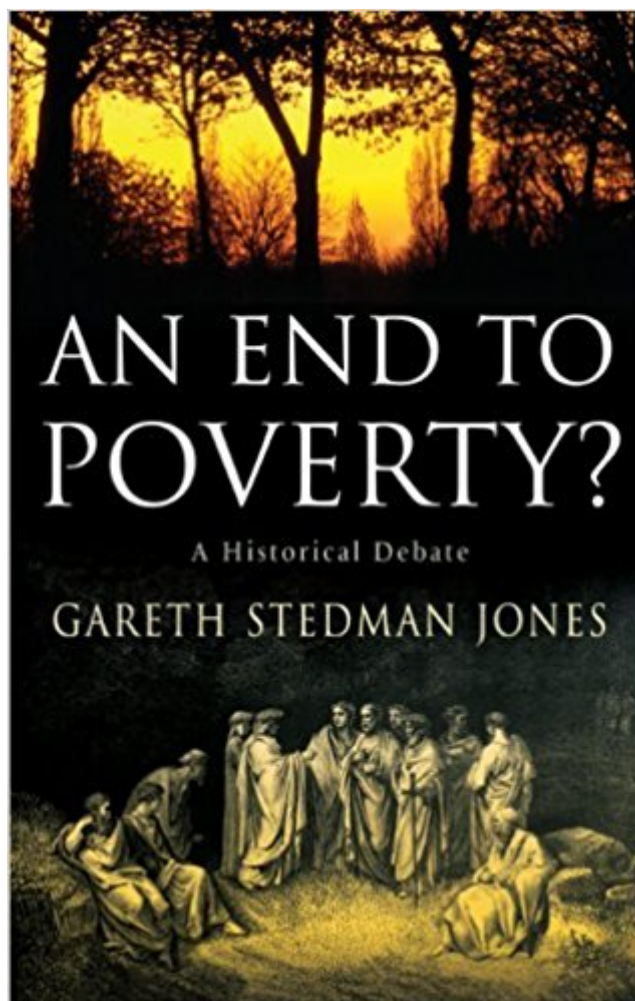


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An End To Poverty?: A Historical Debate



Synopsis

In the 1790s, for the first time, reformers proposed bringing poverty to an end. Inspired by scientific progress, the promise of an international economy, and the revolutions in France and the United States, political thinkers such as Thomas Paine and Antoine-Nicolas Condorcet argued that all citizens could be protected against the hazards of economic insecurity. In *An End to Poverty?* Gareth Stedman Jones revisits this founding moment in the history of social democracy and examines how it was derailed by conservative as well as leftist thinkers. By tracing the historical evolution of debates concerning poverty, Stedman Jones revives an important, but forgotten strain of progressive thought. He also demonstrates that current discussions about economic issues—downsizing, globalization, and financial regulation—were shaped by the ideological conflicts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Paine and Condorcet believed that republicanism combined with universal pensions, grants to support education, and other social programs could alleviate poverty. In tracing the inspiration for their beliefs, Stedman Jones locates an unlikely source—Adam Smith. Paine and Condorcet believed that Smith's vision of a dynamic commercial society laid the groundwork for creating economic security and a more equal society. But these early visions of social democracy were deemed too threatening to a Europe still reeling from the traumatic aftermath of the French Revolution and increasingly anxious about a changing global economy. Paine and Condorcet were demonized by Christian and conservative thinkers such as Burke and Malthus, who used Smith's ideas to support a harsher vision of society based on individualism and laissez-faire economics. Meanwhile, as the nineteenth century wore on, thinkers on the left developed more firmly anticapitalist views and criticized Paine and Condorcet for being too "bourgeois" in their thinking. Stedman Jones however, argues that contemporary social democracy should take up the mantle of these earlier thinkers, and he suggests that the elimination of poverty need not be a utopian dream but may once again be profitably made the subject of practical, political, and social-policy debates.

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Customer Reviews

Whether poverty is a social ill, an individual failing or an unavoidable byproduct of economic progress is a still-roiling controversy. This engaging study examines the unfolding of the debate in Europe from the late 18th century to the beginning of WWI. Cambridge University political scientist Jones grounds his treatment in the ideas of Adam Smith, whom he wishes to reclaim from free-market fundamentalists. Influenced by Smith's writings and emboldened by the French Revolution, Jones contends, visionaries Thomas Paine and Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet offered groundbreaking proposals for universal social insurance and public education that they felt would eradicate poverty and strengthen the equality and personal independence Smith's free, commercial society demanded. Reactionary opponents of social equality and liberal enthusiasts of industrial capitalism invoked Smith against such proposals, Jones observes. Malthusian theorists, for instance, argued that social insurance encouraged improvidence and overbreeding among the poor, and laissez-faire economists objected to efforts to shield workers from competition and mechanization as obstacles to progress and prosperity. In reconstructing this debate, the author hopes to furnish a respectable non-Marxist rationale for modern social democracy. Whether or not the hitherto obscure Paine/Condorcet tendency inspires present-day social democrats, Jones offers a lucid, erudite exploration of a fertile topic in European intellectual history. (Nov.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

An End to Poverty?... offers an excitingly redrawn map of intellectual history. It also makes a powerful case about our political present and future. (Stephen Howe *The Independent*) [An End to Poverty? is] a marvelous intellectual history of the debate over ending poverty, especially during the Enlightenment era of the 1790s. (Jeffrey Sachs *The End of Poverty*) [Stedman Jones] produces an argument that is not only powerful in its own right but should act as an inspiration and provocation to others. (*History Today*) Jones enables us to understand that... the Enlightenment produced one of

the truly radical inventions in the history of human thought. (Stein Ringen The Times Literary Supplement) Jones offers a lucid, erudite exploration of a fertile topic in European intellectual history. (Publishers Weekly) [A] well-written and intelligent book. (Peter Jelavich Journal of Interdisciplinary History)

It is very disappointing to see so little information provided by the publisher on this book, not even a table of contents. The time has come for to demand a higher standard of due diligence by publishers. For those who wish to immerse themselves on the pros and cons of the debate over poverty, this is an essential intellectual foundation to the current work by Jeffrey Sachs who is both the advisor to the Secretary General of the UN on the Millennium project, and the head of the Columbia Earth Institute. Thomas Jefferson said that "A Nation's best defense is an educated citizenry." He probably would have agreed to amend that to say an educated, healthy citizenry able to work. A historical appreciation of the phrase "pursuit of happiness" suggests that Jefferson actually meant, in lieu of selfish pleasure, the pursuit of self-actualization. This book completes a circle with C. K. Prahalad's *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits* (Wharton School Publishing Paperbacks) which suggests that there is a four trillion a year marketplace among the five billion poorest, and that unleashing their entrepreneurial initiative could save the world, and the definitive work by Jeffrey Sachs, on how can end poverty for \$70 per year per person.

I read this book after attending a lecture by Jones, and I can safely say it is an inspiration for anyone tired of the dry and superficial treatments of thinkers in this era. It is a good supplement to Gertrude Himmelfarb's *Idea of Poverty* simply because it takes seriously the proposals which Himmelfarb marginalizes as "utopian". Jones reexamines the legacy of Adam Smith in the context of the relatively recent controversy surrounding Smith's importance outside of the canon of classical political economics. The work examines the proposals of Condorcet and Paine as influenced by Smith, and concludes that their radical proposals were perhaps more mainstream and accepted at the time than previous historians thought. An entertaining read for anyone who wishes to grapple with the current problem of poverty in a historical light.

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