

Great Anarchists

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GREAT ANARCHISTS

These short introductions delve into the anarchist canon to recover some of the distinctive ideas that historical anarchists advanced to address problems relevant to their circumstances. Although these contexts were special, many of the issues the anarchists wrestled with still plague our lives. Anarchists developed a body of writing about power, domination, injustice and exploitation, education, prisons and a lot more besides. Honing in on different facets of the anarchist canon is not just an interesting archaeological exercise. The persistence, development and adaptation of anarchist traditions depends on our surveying the historical landscape of ideas and drawing on the resources it contains. The theoretical toolbox that this small assortment of anarchists helped to construct is there to use, amend and adapt.

Agitate, Educate, Organise!



MAX STIRNER

Born Johann Kaspar Schmidt in Beyreuth in 1806, Stirner is one of the most controversial anarchists, by turns celebrated as the seminal anarchist theorist and marginalised as a political philosopher only tangentially related to the anarchist movement. The nineteenth-century commentator E.V. Zenker billed Stirner as the German Proudhon, one of the movement's two intellectual forerunners; Paul Eltzbacher listed him as one of the seven exponents of anarchist philosophy. His reputation has fared less well over time and recently anarchist-communists have rejected him from anarchism's history.

Stirner's rise from obscurity helps explain the controversy he stirs. His book *The Ego and Its Own*, published in 1844, was well reviewed, attracted considerable criticism and was banned

by government censors in 1845 – yet for thirty-odd years it remained largely ignored. Stirner had laid the groundwork for his later notoriety as a member of the Young Hegelians, the philosophical circle that met in Berlin in the 1840s, where he became acquainted with Marx and Engels. Engels had regarded Stirner as a friend and Marx was sufficiently impressed in 1842 to publish two of Stirner's essays: *The False Principle of Our Education and Art and Religion*. Yet, working as a pair, Marx and Engels trashed Stirner's work. Perhaps also regarding him as a rival, they painted him as a hopelessly abstract, confused, bourgeois individualist, spitefully nicknaming him Saint Max.

What remains of their substantial critique of *The Ego and Its Own* takes up the best part of the *German Ideology*, a manuscript produced in 1845 but not published until 1932. A vulgarised version of their critique was popularised in the 1890s just at the point that Stirner's ideas were being revived by the anti-communist anarchists Benjamin Tucker and, most importantly, John Henry Mackay. In 1895, the Marxist founder of the Russian Social Democratic Movement Georgi

Plekhanov rehashed Marx and Engles' appraisal, this time stressing Stirner's affinity – as translator of Adam Smith and J. B. Say – with classical liberal political economy. Indeed, forging a link between egoism and laissez faire liberalism, Plekhanov praised Stirner as the “most consequent of anarchists” in order to damn all anarchists as irrevocably individualist. To make matters worse, Stirner was embraced at around the same time by ultra-conservatives who gravitated towards Cosima Wagner, the composer's anti-Semitic second wife and purveyor of German cultural and racial superiority. The idea that Stirner had anticipated Nietzsche's *Übermensch* was quickly established (though there is scant evidence to suggest that Nietzsche had read Stirner). The effect was twofold: as well as adding an aristocratic lustre to the interpretation of the egoist and superman, it enabled writers in the post-war period to paint anarchism as a totalitarian, illiberal ideology. Anti-anarchist historians fascinated by the esteem that Proudhon enjoyed with proto-fascists in early twentieth-century France could now play with another intellectual lineage to build a bridge from anarchism to fascism.

Learning to love Stirner is not an uncomplicated task. With constant repetition, the assertion that egoism underpins anarchism has stuck, at least partially. Stirner's derision of Proudhon's declaration "property is theft" as priestly moralising hardly helps would-be friends rebut claims of his petite bourgeois inclinations. It's not surprising, then, that swathes of anarchist communists have preferred to accept the Marxist critique and remove Stirner from anarchism's history than mount a counter-attack or defence. Stirner's most vocal anarchist advocates have barely eased his rehabilitation. In the work of his followers, Stirner variously emerges as a neo-Hobbesian, hyper-liberal or joyful hedonist. In the first he appears as a proponent of the view that humans are, or should be, self-directed because life is necessarily a struggle between individuals for domination. In the second, he is an advocate of autonomy and endless pluralism. In the third, he champions the prohibition of prohibitions.

EGOISM: THE ANARCHISTS' DILEMMA

Stirner's greatness comes from the dilemma he creates for anarchists broadly attracted by his commitment to 'ownness' – his refusal to suspend individual judgment and his positive endorsement that individuals discover themselves and recover their uniqueness. In *The Ego and Its Own*, ownness involves a rejection of political and moral obligations: individuals should do nothing other than follow their will. Thus Stirner exhorts individuals to become egoists – this is the only good he recognises. Each must understand that the promise of freedom through the realisation of rights in the liberal state is illusory; each must take possession of itself to avoid being trapped by instinctual desires and/or automatic compliance with social norms. In one of his more provocative moments, Stirner argued that the radical “moral man” who never doubted “that the copulation of brother and sister is incest, that monogamy is the truth of marriage, that filial piety is a sacred duty” and shuddered at the idea of “being allowed

to touch his sister as wife”, remained ensnared by inherited rules that were not of his own making. Stirner professed complete indifference to the moral standards enshrined in law or social practice. Accordingly he styled the egoist as one able to stand aloof from convention. “Entitled or unentitled – that does not concern me, if I am only *powerful*, I am of myself *empowered*, and need no other empowering or entitling.” While Kropotkin included Stirner in the anarchist family, he parted company with him on this point. Kropotkin believed that people should reflect on their moral codes. He endorsed the nihilist demand to scrutinise all values and the nihilists’ refusal to observe conventions. But he did not accept that it was possible for individuals to detach themselves from their social contexts as Stirner suggested and he believed that anarchists who attempted to do so were misguided.

The upside of Stirner’s defence of egoism is his exhilarating critique of the state and the idea of the common good. The downside is that to live as egoists, individuals must reject all obligations and commitments beyond the dedication to

egoism. The dilemma Stirner poses is about how far the anarchist rejection of political and moral obligations can and should be pushed.

HIERARCHY AND DOMINATION

Unlike the writers who dominated the Young Hegelians, Stirner was critical of the radical political project to reform the state along humanist lines. He identified this with the construction of the state and the idea of the nation and he argued that it would result in the replication of hierarchy and domination.

Stirner's critique extended from his scepticism about the emancipatory potential of political philosophy. The hope of philosophy was that the 'cultured' would be able to devise perfect social orders. Before the eighteenth century, it was self-consciously designed as an exercise in the mastery of the mind over matter by the cultured on behalf of the 'uncultured', this latter group being the "animal mass" that was incapable of thinking independently, and which fell into line

with the perfect orders the cultured invented. With Hegel, all this appeared to be changed. Philosophy obtained a new objectivity, uniting ideas with reality and overcoming the gap between ideal theory and material reality. For Stirner the change was deceptive. What happened was that philosophers got caught up in their own cleverness, and this rendered them insensible to the domination that mind now attained as the driver of social change. It appeared to the cultured that their favourite concepts were in fact real. Consequently, while the prospect of attaining perfection remained as compelling as ever, the mastery of mind was now concealed. "Hierarchy is the domination of thoughts, dominion of mind!" Stirner suggested that it reached unparalleled heights in the nineteenth century.

Humanism was the stuff of the philosophers' dreams. The same visions of the egalitarian community and brotherly love motivated political actors, too. Robespierre and St. Just, the leaders of the French revolution, dedicated themselves to the destruction of monarchical absolutism and the tyranny of the Catholic Church. Yet unable

to escape the domination of mind, they created a new holy order to replace it. This centred on the idea of man. Man was not a person but a “spook” or a concept of a person who exhibited particular virtues, adopted a fixed set of values, and unselfishly struggled for the attainment of the social conditions that would enable real human beings to thrive – thus bringing reality in line with the ideal. What was the result? Stirner’s pithy answer was: The Terror. “Because the revolutionary priests... served Man, they cut off the heads of men.”

Stirner called the institutional form that corresponded to this humanist ideal liberalism. It could take liberal, social and humane forms. In the first rights were equalised; the second abolished property ownership; and the third unified faith. In equating liberalism with ‘the State’, Stirner emphasised its stultifying uniformity. Whereas the state had once described a discrete group within the broader social unit, it now encapsulated the whole. Statists rejected factions, separate interests and difference. In the name of equality, they promoted the general over the particular

and the common good over the well-being of the minority or the individual. Citizens accepted the state's levelling, even though it was utterly demeaning. Stirner used 'equality of rights' as an example. This doctrine was passed off as a principle of fairness, but it actually indicated that "the State has no regard for my person, that to it I, like every other, am only a man, without having another significance that commands its deference". Whichever of the "innumerable multitude of rights" states conferred – the "right to lead a battalion", the "right to lecture at a university" – each award confirmed the State's total disregard for the special qualities that right-holders possessed, and reinforced compliance with the conditions attached to the occupation of roles.

Citizens were duty-bound to advance the State's interests as their own even at their physical and psychological cost. State law was in any case implemented by physical force, but because state violence was normalised and neutralised as righteous punishment, transgression was necessarily internalised by citizens as criminality.

The arch chicanery of the state was to advertise its guardianship of the very freedom it negated. Self-styled as the protector of liberties, the state became indispensable to humanity's flourishing. The inevitable upshot was that the state was compelled to prioritise its own interests over the citizenry. Political liberty was said to mean "*my* liberty" but translated into "the liberty of a power that rules and subjugates me". "State, religion, conscience" thus "make me a slave, and their liberty is my slavery." The state sanctified itself, following the principle of "the end hallows the means", and in this it was essentially Jesuitical, "moral". Stirner explained: "If the welfare of the State is the end, war is a hallowed means; if justice is the State's end, homicide is a hallowed means, and is called by its sacred name 'execution'; the sacred State hallows everything that is serviceable to it". Two maxims summed up his anarchist view: "Liberty of the people is not my liberty"; "Every State is a *despotism*".

PROMISING

Once asked how he reconciled his advocacy of Marxism-Leninism with the individualism of the Black Panthers, Eldridge Cleaver replied that all ideological systems were repressive and that “any constraint on our freedoms is not acceptable”. The sentiment resonates with Stirner’s egoism but it begs a question about the tools Stirner provided to support resistance or liberation.

Stirner’s politics was anti-revolutionary, and insurrectionary. Explaining the difference he defined revolution as the effort to bring new arrangements into being and insurrection as the struggle against arrangements. Insurrection “leads us no longer to let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves”. Christ was an insurrectionist. Preaching obedience and refusing to lead the Jews in revolt against their Roman masters, he created mayhem simply by attending to himself rather than to others and treading his own path “untroubled about and undisturbed” by the authorities. Christ was an “insurgent”, the “deadly enemy” and “real

annihilator”. Refusing to acknowledge the state’s claims, he constructed his own rules independently of it and so revealed its emptiness.

Stirner suggested that egoism was compatible with combined action and talked of “all slaves” attaining their freedom. He also imagined the “union of egos”. This coalition would take shape from the “incessant self-uniting” activity of egos, encouraging fluid, impermanent relationships within the body of dead society; however, while the egoist could take part in gatherings, social bonds were disallowed – egoism meant disregarding the interests of others. Here Stirner’s ideal diverged markedly from any traditional view of Christ’s mission: “What you have the *power* to be you have the *right* to. I derive all right and all warrant from me; I am entitled to everything that I have in my power”.

There was no love, for this entailed sacrifice and demanded ‘self-sacrifice’ in turn. Nor was community possible. This was a fiction or spook and Stirner insisted that it required egos to enter into relationships that were enslaving. Egoists should forego it, appropriate the state’s powers

and exercise them exclusively for their own satisfaction. Others were “only means and organs which we may use as our property!”. The fatally injured woman who strangled her child in order to die ‘satisfied’ was an exemplar. She did not let love – either for her child or the community it may have enriched – get the better of her will. Promising was likewise impossible. Were “I to be bound to-day and henceforth to my will of yesterday” my “will would... be *frozen*”. Promising made the ego “a bondman”, a “willer yesterday” and “to-day without a will: yesterday voluntary, to-day involuntary”. The road to freedom lay in “recognizing no *duty*, not *binding* myself nor letting myself be bound”.

Great Anarchists

**BY RUTH KINNA
& CLIFFORD HARPER**

1. Peter Kropotkin
2. Voltairine de Cleyre
3. Mikhail Bakunin
4. Louise Michel
5. Oscar Wilde
6. Max Stirner
7. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
8. Lucy Parsons
9. William Godwin
10. Errico Malatesta







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