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Max Stirner: the anarchist every ideologist loves to hate

Jason McQuinn

Max Stirner (pseudonym for an early European Anarchist and Johann Caspar Schmidt) is best known as a central figure in the dissolution of the post-Hegelian philosophical milieu during the years leading up to the Prussian Revolution (and wider revolutionary events) of 1848. Born in 1806, he went to universities in an education system dominated by Hegelianism, studying philosophy, philology and religion – at times in lectures from Hegel himself. After achieving only limited success in his university exams, Stirner taught at a girls' gymnasium¹ in Berlin by day while frequenting coffee houses and wine bars during his off hours. He began associating with die Freien,² often at Hippel's wine bar on Friedrichstrasse, where he developed friendships with some of the major members of this rebellious intellectual circle like Bruno Bauer, Friedrich Engels (with whom he became *dutzbruder*³), and Arnold Ruge.

¹ Roughly equivalent to a college prep school.

² "The Free," a group of free-wheeling Young Hegelians.

³ Someone familiar enough to be addressed by the informal "you" (du in German, combined with *bruder* [brother]).

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Stirner's notoriety is almost entirely due to his masterwork, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*.⁴ Although Stirner had written and published earlier essays and reviews, the appearance of this book in late 1844 came as a shock to both his comrades of die Freien and the larger liberal and radical socio cultural milieu in contemporary Prussia. Not only was his text far more radical than any other of the time (or, arguably, since), but it dealt devastating critical blows to Hegel's philosophical system, the humanism of Ludwig Feuerbach, the critical criticism of Bruno Bauer, the communism of Wilhelm Weitling, the mutualist-anarchism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and even the nascent Feuerbachian communism of Karl Marx. Following the immediate reactions to his text by Moses Hess, Feuerbach, and Bauer, Stirner published a reply titled *Re-censenten Stirners*⁵ to clarify their rather obvious misreadings. Engels' initial enthusiasm for Stirner's text was quashed by Marx's harsh discipline; soon after Marx recruited Engels to co-author a monumentally incoherent polemic in response which, unfortunately, Stirner was never able to see (and dispense with), not least due to the unpublishability of *Die Deutsche Ideologie*.⁶ Then, as quickly and surprisingly as his major work had appeared in 1844, it was overshadowed and almost forgotten during the uprisings and confrontations of the 1848 revolutions, and the Reaction which followed.

⁴ Literally, "The Unique One and Its Property," which is usually translated into English under the misleading title of *The Ego and Its Own*. The original title was *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*; the standard German spelling of the latter word has changed sometime around 1900 to "Eigentum." The publication date was 1845, but the book appeared some time in the summer of 1844, and had already been read by Engels before December of that year, when he wrote about it to Marx.

⁵ "Stirner's Critics"; this lucid (but usually ignored) defense appeared in *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift* in September, 1845.

⁶ After Marx became a god in the lands of gulags, commissars, and secret police *The German Ideology* finally appeared in print, but almost always with the nearly unreadable bulk of the book dealing with Stirner expurgated.

There had certainly been plenty of de facto anarchists before the European anarchist milieu began to arise at the end of the 1700s and the beginning of the 1800s — most notably throughout prehistory. Max Stirner was not only one of the first to elaborate a consistently anarchist theoretical orientation; he was also the most sophisticated and important anarchist critic of philosophy then and since. Nevertheless, his influence both within and without the anarchist milieu has always been extremely controversial. Stirner's descriptive, phenomenological egoism and absolute refusal of any and all forms of enslavement have been a perennial source of embarrassment for would-be anarchist moralists, ideologues, and politicians of all persuasions (especially leftists, but also including individualists and others). By clearly and openly acknowledging that every unique individual always makes her or his own decisions and cannot avoid the choices of self-possession or self-alienation and enslavement presented at each moment, Stirner scandalously exposes every attempt not only by reactionaries, but by self-proclaimed radicals and alleged anarchists to recuperate rebellion and channel it back into new forms of alienation and enslavement. In *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* Stirner has harsh criticisms of those who attempt to legislate slavery through the imposition of compulsory morality, ideologists who attempt to justify submission to the political state and capitalist economy (or equivalent institutional forms), and politicians who ride herd on the rabble in an attempt to keep everyone in line. Throughout their history, Marxist ideologists, militarists, and politicians have treated Stirner as the arch-anarchist. But even within the anarchist milieu, from Proudhon to Bakunin, from Kropotkin to Faure, from Maximoff to Arshinov, and especially amongst the rank-and-file ideologues of the anarcho-left throughout the twentieth century, the words of Max Stirner have been anathema — or worse!

Still, (and quite infuriatingly to anarcho-leftists) there has always been a minority of spirited radicals, including the undomesticated and undisciplined uncontrollables among the anarchists, who have heeded Stirner's warnings and criticisms, refusing to allow any words, doctrines, or institutions to dominate them. As Stirner proclaimed, "Nothing is more to me than myself!" This clearly implies that I am only free when I choose how to live my own life. Politicians, economists, ideologists, priests, philosophers, cops, and every other con artist with or without official papers, plans, and/or bombs and guns: get the fuck out of our lives! And that includes any fake anarchists who think they can pull the wool over our eyes!