Politics of the Ego: Stirner's Critique of Liberalism

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Contents

One of the central problems in contemporary political theory is the question of whether or not liberalism is, or should remain, neutral with regard to normative conceptions of the good life. For liberal philosophers like Rawls, the principle of 'justice as fairness' refers not to any overarching moral assumption or universal conception of the good, but merely to a neutral framework that allows for competing conceptions of the good life. Neutral liberalism seeks to achieve a consensus about the conditions for a 'well-ordered society' while at the same time allowing for the plurality of identities and religious, philosophical and moral perspectives found in contemporary societies (see Rawls 1996: 35-40). For Rawls, in other words, neutral rights are given priority over value-laden conceptions of the good. Communitarians, on the other hand, have objected that this supposedly neutral notion of individual rights presupposes a specific type of subjectivity and series of conditions that make it possible. In other words, rights cannot be seen as abstract and neutral – they cannot be seen outside the specific forms of subjectivity and political associations that give rise to them. For instance, the autonomous, rights-bearing individual that liberalism bases itself on is only possible within a certain type of society and cannot be considered apart from this (see Taylor 1985: 309). According to some communitarians, then, we should reject the liberal valorisation of individual rights and return to the idea of a common good and universal normative values.

However, what if one were to suggest that the very opposition between liberalism and communitarianism is itself problematic and needs to be deconstructed? For instance, it is clear that the liberal notion of abstract rights is unsustainable without considering the social conditions and forms of subjectivity that make it possible. Liberalism presupposes certain forms of subjectivity – that of the autonomous, rational individual for instance – without acknowledging the often oppressive conditions under which this subjectivity is constituted. However, this does not necessarily mean that we should side with the communitarians and abandon the notion of individual rights and liberal institutions altogether. The fact that rights are the product of discourses, disciplinary practices or ideological mechanisms does not mean that we should entirely discount their political valency. It simply means that their status is always problematic, contingent and undecidable. I shall argue here that it is through a consideration of nineteenth-century thinker Max Stirner's critique of liberalism that we can approach the question of the limits of individual rights in a new way. Stirner developed a radical critique of liberalism based upon an interrogation of its essentialist premises and foundations. He explored the question of how and under what conditions the liberal subject is constituted, and what problems this presents for liberal theory. While liberalism was ostensibly a philosophy that liberated man from religious mystification and political absolutism, this was consistent, according to Stirner, with the subjection of the individual to new disciplinary and normalising technologies. Indeed, Stirner saw the abstract rational universalism and political neutrality of liberalism as merely a new form of religious conviction, a Christianity reinvented in terms of Enlightenment ideals. These ideals, moreover, masked a series strategies designed to exclude individual difference. For Stirner, then, the notion of individual rights was meaningless without considering the relations of power they were based in.

Humanism's 'Religious Insurrection'

As one of the lesser known of the Young Hegelian philosophers, Stirner's work has generally received little attention from contemporary critical theory. He is best known for the theoretical

controversy over his critique of idealism and his subsequent repudiation by Marx in The German Ideology. Indeed, some have suggested that Marx's so-called 'epistemological break' between his classical humanism and more mature economism, was inspired by Stirner's critique of the humanist philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, and that the relentless attack on Stirner in The German Ideology represented a kind of cathartic attempt by Marx to exorcise the spectre of humanism and idealism from his own thought (see Arvon 1978: 173-185). However, Stirner's critique of Feuerbachian humanism in The Ego and Its Own (published 1844) had more radical and far-reaching implications than this. It enabled a kind of 'epistemological break' within the Enlightenment itself, opening a theoretical space for an interrogation of the discourses of modernity – its essential identities and rational and moral categories. Stirner's critique of humanism has been crucial to the development of the post-Enlightenment tradition of political thought, and some have suggested that he may be seen as a precursor to contemporary 'poststructuralism' (see Koch 1997: 95-108).

There is indeed an extraordinary resonance between Stirner's thinking and that of later 'poststructuralists' such as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Lacan. But leaving this question aside for the moment, I shall explore the implications of Stirner's critique of Feuerbachian humanism for liberal political theory. In the Essence of Christianity, Ludwig Feuerbach applied the notion of alienation to religion. Religion was alienating, according to Feuerbach, because it meant that man abdicated his own qualities and powers by projecting them onto an abstract God beyond his grasp. In doing so, man displaces his essential self, leaving him alienated and debased: "Man gives up his personality… he denies human dignity, the human ego." (Feuerbach 1957: 27-28). So, for Feuerbach the predicates of God were really only the predicates of man as a species being. God was merely an illusory reification of man's humanity.

Feuerbach may be seen as embodying the Enlightenment humanist project of freeing man from the fetters of religious alienation and restoring man to his rightful place at the centre of the universe, making the human the divine, the finite the infinite. However, it is precisely this secular liberation of man that Stirner questions. Stirner argues that Feuerbach, in reversing the order of subject and predicate, has merely made man into God. In other words, rather than overthrowing the categories of religious authority and alienation, Feuerbach has only inverted them and placed man within them. Man becomes, in Feuerbach's eyes, the ultimate expression of these divine attributes. In this humanist dialectic, according to Stirner, man has overthrown God and captured for himself the category of the infinite, thus merely perpetuating, rather than destroying the religious illusion. Stirner accepts Feuerbach's critique of Christianity - that the infinite is an illusion, being merely the representation of human consciousness, and that the Christian religion is based on the divided, alienated self. However – and this is the crucial point - Stirner goes beyond this problematic by seeing human essence, the very essence that has become, for Feuerbach, alienated through religion, as an alienating abstraction itself. Like God, the essence of man becomes a superstitious ideal that oppresses the individual:

The supreme being is indeed the essence of man, but, just because it is his essence and not he himself, it remains quite immaterial whether we see it outside him and view it as 'God', or find it in him and call it 'Essence of man' or 'man'. I am neither God nor man, neither the supreme essence nor my essence, and therefore it is all one in the main whether I think of the essence as in me or outside me (Stirner 1995: 34).

Stirner means that by seeking the sacred in 'human essence', by positing an essential man and attributing to him certain qualities that had hitherto been attributed to God, Feuerbach has

merely reintroduced religious alienation. Here Stirner breaks with the discourse of humanism by introducing a radical division between man and the individual. Man has replaced God as the new ideal abstraction - an abstraction that now alienates and denies the individual. By making such characteristics and qualities essential to man, Feuerbach has alienated those in whom these qualities are not found. In humanism, man becomes like God, and just as man was debased under God, so the individual is debased beneath this perfect being, man. For Stirner, man is just as oppressive, if not more so, than God: "'Man' is the God of today, and fear of man has taken the place of the old fear of God." (Stirner 1995: 165). Humanism may be seen as a new secular religion based on human essence. Just like the concept of God, the concept of essence is radically external to the individual. It constitutes a new kind of religious illusion that is just as oppressive and alienating. This is why Stirner sees Enlightenment humanism, with its rational and moral discourses that were supposed to free people from religious mystification and idealism, as merely Christianity reinvented: "The human religion is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion" (Stirner 1995: 158).

The problem with humanism, for Stirner, was its universal assumptions about human essence. The concept of man had become an abstract generality, a sacred essence that confronted the individual with a norm that he was supposed to venerate and live up to. Man was supposed to live inside every individual and yet exceed him as the highest ideal to be aspired to:

Man reaches beyond every individual man, and yet – though he be 'his essence' – is not in fact his essence (which would rather be as single as he the individual himself), but a general and 'higher', yes, for atheists, 'the highest essence' (Stirner 1995: 38).

Man is a universal abstraction that claims to 'speak for' or represent the individual. This apparition of God/man, the spectre of humanism, Stirner argues, haunts our thinking. It becomes the basis for a spectral ideological world which takes its absolute authority from human essence and traps us within its rigid paradigms. "Man," declares Stirner, "your head is haunted… You imagine great things, and depict to yourself a whole world of gods that has an existence for you, a spirit-realm to which you suppose yourself to be called, an ideal that beckons to you." (Stirner 1995: 43). The modern consciousness is haunted by a legion of apparitions or 'spooks', as Stirner calls them. The individual is plagued by 'fixed ideas' – abstract concepts and generalities like morality, rationality and human essence. These ideas have become absolute, assuming an almost religious sacredness in our modern secular society. The world has been freed from the obfuscation of Christianity, only to be plunged into a new darkness.

The Dialectics of Liberalism

Through this critique of Feuerbach, Stirner has turned humanism back upon itself, introducing a radical break within the Enlightenment tradition. Humanism is seen as a discourse which, while it claims to free man, actually introduces new forms of subjugation and alienation, devouring the individual in its abstract generalities and universal ideals. The political expression of this new domination, for Stirner, is liberalism. Liberalism is a secular politics for a secular age, a political counterpart to the epistemology of the Enlightenment - basing itself on reason and law rather than absolutism and tyranny. However, for Stirner, liberalism has a Janus face[1]– its liberation

[1] John Gray also unmasks the other side or face of liberalism. In The Two Faces of Liberalism he shows that there is a central and unresolved antagonism between two dimensions of liberalism – the first being that which

of man from oppression and tyranny is concomitant with its domination of the individual. In a counter-dialectic Stirner shows the way in which liberalism develops through a series of political permutations, and culminates in both the final liberation of man and the complete subjection of the individual.

The dialectic begins with the emergence of 'political liberalism' – which, according to Stirner, is synonymous with the development of the modern state. After the fall of the ancien régime a new locus of sovereignty has emerged – the democratic republican state. This is a distinctly modern form of rule, based on the notion of neutrality and institutional transparency. The rule of the liberal state superseded the political absolutism and obscurantism associated with the old feudal order. In the place of the antiquated system of hierarchy and privilege, political liberalism established itself on the principle of a formal equality of rights – equality before the law, for example, and equal and unmediated access to political institutions. Political liberalism may be seen, in this sense, as the logical political counterpart to the Enlightenment – it is founded on the presupposition of a rational, autonomous and rights-bearing bourgeois subject, one who has been liberated from the shackles of aristocratic privilege and may now express this freedom in the public sphere.

However, Stirner detects several problems with political liberalism. Firstly, the notion of formal equality of political rights does not recognise, and indeed reduces individual difference. This is not to say that Stirner sees anything wrong with equality as such – what he is criticising is the way that, through the logic of political liberalism, the individual is reduced to a commonality of rights that is sanctioned by the state. The 'equality of rights' means only that "the state has no regard for my person, that to it I, like every other, am only a man…" Stirner 1995: 93). In other words, what Stirner objects to is the way that the state, through the doctrine of equality of rights, reduces all individual difference to a general, anonymous political identity in which his individuality is swallowed up.

Moreover, this notion of political rights is limited – it is granted to the individual by the state and is therefore formal and empty. Rather than giving the individual autonomy from the political authority of the state, as conventional accounts of liberalism claim, it merely gives the individual unmediated access to the state (or rather the state to the individual) thus allowing him to be more effectively dominated. In other words, political liberalism may be seen as a logic which regulates the individual's relationship with the state, cutting out the complex intricacies of feudal relationships – tithes, guilds, communes and so on – and allowing a more direct and absolute connection with the state. While this ostensibly frees the individual from arbitrary rule, it also removes the obstacles and plural arrangements that hitherto stood between political power and the individual, thus shutting down the autonomous spaces upon which political life did not intrude. Political liberalism is not too pluralistic, but rather not pluralistic enough.

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sees liberal toleration as a pursuit of a universal rational consensus and an ideal form of life; the second being that which acknowledges the impossibility of achieving this consensus, seeking instead to reconcile the conflict between competing and plural ways of life without privileging one above the others (see Gray 2000: 1). The first face Gray regards as potentially dominating as it seeks a universal ideal which would lead to a denial of difference and plurality. Stirner's critique, in a similar way, points to the potential for domination in liberalism's universalising tendencies and essentialist presuppositions that are derived from the Enlightenment. Perhaps, as I shall propose later, Stirner's thinking - like that of Gray's - may be seen as implying a form of liberalism or 'post-liberalism' that recognises plurality, and does not attempt to subsume different identities and values under a universal standpoint.

The idiosyncrasy of this critique may be due to the fact that Stirner has in mind here the Hegelian conception of the universal state which would overcome the particularistic self-interestedness and egoism of civil society (Gesellschaft). It is precisely this self-interestedness that Stirner wants to protect as the basis for individual difference, and he sees the liberal state, despite its claim to be the embodiment of liberation, to be an institution that intrudes upon this individuality. Therefore, just as Marx contended that religious liberty meant only that religion was free to further alienate the individual in civil society, so Stirner claims that political liberty means only that the state is free to further dominate the individual:

> 'Political liberty', what are we to understand by that? Perhaps the individual's independence from the state and its laws? No; on the contrary, the individuals subjection in the state and to the state's laws. But why liberty? Because one is no longer separated from the state by intermediaries, but stands in direct and immediate relation to it; because one is a – citizen… (Stirner 1995: 96).

This question of citizenship brings us to the further problem. For Stirner, the discourse of political liberalism constitutes a certain form of subjectivity – that of the bourgeois citizen - that the individual is forced to conform to. Citizenship is a mode of subjectivity based on unquestioned obedience and devotion to the modern state. In order for the individual to attain the rights and privileges of citizenship he must conform to certain norms – the bourgeois values of industry and responsibility, for example. Behind the visage of political liberalism, then, there is a whole series of normalising strategies and disciplinary techniques designed to subjectify the individual, to turn him into the 'good citizen of the state'. The individual finds himself subordinated to a rational and moral order in which certain modes of subjectivity are constructed as essential and enlightened, and from which any dissent results in marginalisation. In this way, the category of bourgeois citizenship creates a series of excluded identities. The proletariat, for Stirner, refers to those who do not or cannot live up to bourgeois norms – the vagabonds, prostitutes, vagrants, ruined gamblers, paupers – those with "nothing to lose" (Stirner 1995: 102). This subaltern identity constitutes the excluded other of the liberal bourgeois citizen – and also its dangerous supplement. Moreover, there exists a class of labourers who remain excluded and exploited under the liberal bourgeois order, and who have but to seize control of their own labour to overthrow this system of relations (Stirner 1995: 105). Despite this reference to the radical potential of the industrial working class, however, Stirner's diagnosis of modern liberal society is clearly different from Marx's. Stirner focuses on the relations of exclusion rather than economic exploitation, although this is part of it. That is why, for Stirner, the proletariat refers to a position of absolute subalternity – to those who have no place in society, who are radically excluded from all notions of citizenship, even from relations of labour and exchange. This would be the class that Marx rather dismissively termed lumpenproletariat.

The problem with political liberalism, according to Stirner, is the rational and moral absolutism that accompanies it, and the way that this denies individual difference and establishes universal norms that exclude certain identities. Stirner describes liberals as zealots, and liberalism as a new secular, rational religion – a religion in which the modern state has taken the place of God, and in which rational laws have become as fundamental, absolute and oppressive as Christian edicts. Indeed, it is precisely through the liberal discourse of universal rights and freedoms that the individual is increasingly dominated and subjected to alienating norms.

This domination is intensified, Stirner argues, in the second articulation of liberalism – which he calls 'social liberalism'. Whereas in the discourse of political liberalism, equality was restricted to the formal level of political and legal rights, social liberals demand that the principle of equality be extended to the social and economic domain – people must be equal economically and socially as well as politically. This can only be achieved through the abolition of private property, which is seen as an alienating and de-personalising relation. Instead, property is to be owned by society as a whole and distributed equally. Where the individual once worked for himself, he must now work for the benefit of the whole of society. It is only through a sacrifice of the individual ego for society, according to social liberals, that humanity can liberate itself and develop fully.

However, Stirner detects behind this talk of social liberation a further denial of the individual and an intensification of oppression. While social liberals - or socialists as they may be understood in this analysis - claim to be fighting for equality, what they really find intolerable, according to Stirner, is individual egoism: "We want to make egoists impossible! We want to make them all 'ragamuffins [Lumpen]'; all of us must have nothing, that 'all may have'" (Stirner 1995: 105). In other words, behind this discourse of social and economic equality for all, there is a pernicious and hidden resentment of individual difference. Stirner argues that, despite its restrictions, political liberalism still allowed certain limited spaces for individuality – in private property, for instance, which socialists now want to do away with. In doing so, they would be abolishing one of the few remaining places of individual autonomy. Social equality and commonality are thus a more effective means of limiting individual autonomy. Therefore, society becomes the new locus of sovereignty and domination, rather than the liberal state. Once again the individual is alienated by an abstract generality, according to Stirner. Society has become the new ideological spectre that subordinates the individual, and constitutes him as a particular identity. Like the liberal state, the idea of society is seen as sacred and universal, demanding of the individual the same self-sacrifice and unquestioned obedience.

However the inexorable dialectic of liberalism continues – and now even the idea of society is seen as not universal enough. Because social liberalism is based on labour, it is seen as still caught within the paradigm of materialism and, therefore, egoism. The labourer in socialist society is still working for himself, even though his labour is regulated by the social whole. Humanity must instead strive for a more ideal, abstract and universal goal. Here, according to Stirner, the third and final dimension of liberalism emerges – 'humane liberalism'. Humane liberalism is the last stage in the dialectic of liberalism – the final reconciliation of humanity with itself. Where the previous two stages of liberalism still maintained a distance between humanity and its goal through a devotion to external ideas – the state and society – humane liberalism claims to finally unite us with our ultimate goal – humanity itself. In other words, the internal ideal of man and the essence of humanity are what people should strive for. To this end, every kind of particularity and difference must be overcome for the greater glory of humanity. Individual difference is simply abolished through the call to identify the essence of man and humanity within everyone: "Cast from you everything peculiar, criticize it away. Be not a Jew, not a Christian, but be a human being, nothing but a human being. Assert you humanity against every restrictive specification" (Stirner 1995: 114). For humane liberals, this ideal of universal humanity, in which individual differences have been transcended, is the final goal of man – the state of perfection and harmony in which man has been finally liberated from the external objective world.

However, this final stage in man's liberation is also the final and complete abolition of the individual ego. For Stirner, as we have seen, there is nothing essential about humanity or mankind

– they are nothing but ideological apparitions that tie the individual to external, alien commonalities. There is no essence of humanity residing in each individual which he must realise fully, as the discourse of humanism would have it. Rather, human essence is something radically alien and external to the individual. Therefore, Stirner sees the proclaimed liberation of humanity as the culmination of the progressive subordination and alienation of the individual. In other words, it is precisely through the humanist drive to overcome alienation that the alienation of the concrete individual is finally accomplished. Humane liberalism, for Stirner, is only the political expression of this final abdication of the individual ego. We have seen the way in which the various forms of liberalism progressively limited the spaces for individual autonomy. Once private property was abolished, egoism took refuge in individual thoughts and opinions. Now, however, even this has been denied under humane liberalism – individual opinions have now been taken over by general human opinion (Stirner 1995: 116). Moreover, humane liberalism attempts to abolish all forms of particularity and difference. Ethnic, national, religious differences – indeed anything that would allow some form of separateness or uniqueness - must all melt into a universal humanity. Thus, we see in humane liberalism the complete domination of the general over the particular. The exemplary figure of disgust for the humane liberal, according to Stirner, is the whore, who, because she " 'turns her body into a money-getting machine'" defiles her own humanity (Stirner 1995: 113). In this way, humane liberalism, despite, or rather because of, its proclaimed universality and inclusiveness, produces a series of excluded, marginalised identities.

Indeed, it is precisely through these excluded identities that the liberal subject constitutes its own universality. As Stirner shows, the figure of man central to humanism and liberalism, is always haunted by an other – the un-man or Unmensch. The un-man is that part of the individual that is leftover from the dialectical process, and which cannot be incorporated into the general identity of humanity: "Liberalism as a whole has a deadly enemy, an invincible opposite…by the side of man stands the un-man, the individual, the egoist." (Stirner 1995: 125). Perhaps the un-man can be understood in the psychoanalytic terms as the Lacanian real – the irreducible remainder that cannot be integrated into the Symbolic Order. Therefore, there is point at which the universalising dialectic of liberalism fails to fully incorporate difference – and difference remains, even if in the spectral form of the un-man, as a radical excess which escapes its logic.

This critique of the dialectic as being hostile to difference is a theme familiar to poststructuralist thinkers. Gilles Deleuze, for instance, explores Nietzsche's thinking in terms of a rejection of the Hegelian dialectic. According to Deleuze, Nietzsche shows that the oppositions central to the structure of the dialectic – thesis and antithesis – are only superficial, and mask its misunderstanding of difference and its attempt to reconcile it with the logic of the Same. Deleuze, moreover, sees Stirner as one of the 'avatars of the dialectic', as "the dialectician who reveals nihilism as the truth of the dialectic." (Deleuze 1992: 161). Stirner's critique of liberalism would seem to support this. As I have argued, Stirner uses the dialectical structure precisely to undermine the dialectic itself, and to expose as its culmination, not the triumph of freedom or rationality, but rather the universalisation of alienation and mystification. The truth of this supremely rational process is the spectre of man and human essence, the supreme illusion. The dialectic of liberalism, as we have seen, has revealed itself in the domination of the individual and the exclusion of difference. The oppositions between the different articulations of liberalism – political, social and humane – were simply stages in the revelation of a new meaning, a new logic of domination. What Stirner has done is shown the way in which liberalism emerges and articulates itself as part of a dialectical process, which has as its aim the denial of difference and singularity.

Disciplinary Liberalism

Stirner therefore goes beyond conventional accounts of liberalism in seeing it, not as a particular political system or set of institutions, but rather as a certain 'technology' that runs through different political symbolisations and instantiates itself in different ways. It might be understood as a disciplinary technology - because it involves a mediation between the individual and the norms and institutions that constitute him as a subject. Liberalism is therefore the political articulation of the idea of human essence, and may be seen as a strategy of constituting the individual in conformity with this essence - as a subject of external norms, ideological mechanisms and political institutions. This is a strategy that runs through different political arrangements and is progressively intensified. Thus, we see that in political liberalism, which is ostensibly a discourse of rights that guarantees the individual freedom from political oppression, the individual is constituted as a subject of the state. In the discourse of social liberalism, the individual is tied to external collective arrangements through a subjection to the idea of society. Humane liberalism, as we have seen, completes this subjection through a normalisation of the individual according to the ideal of mankind. Liberalism may be understood, then, as a progressive 'taming' of the individual – a restriction of his difference and singularity - by constructing him as a subject of various institutions and norms. The state, for example, "exerts itself to tame the desirous man; in other words, it seeks to direct his desire to it alone, and to content that desire with what it offers." (Stirner 1995: 276). In other words, liberalism does not operate through simple overt repression – its mechanism is much more subtle. Rather, it operates by constructing the individual around a certain subjectivity which actively desires its own domination. It may be argued here that Stirner has uncovered, more than a century before Foucault and Deleuze, a post-'juridical', post-repressive paradigm of power that operates through self-subjection.[2] In any case, it is clear that Stirner's diagnosis of liberalism as a normalising, disciplinary technology has fundamental implications not only for contemporary understandings of liberalism, but also for conceptualisations of power and ideology in political theory. Stirner has unmasked the disavowed underside of liberalism – behind the language of rights, freedoms and universal ideals, there is a covert network of disciplinary technologies and normalising practices designed to regulate the individual.

Rationality may be seen as one of these liberal disciplinary technologies. Stirner argues that liberalism is the attempt to impose a universal rational order on the world: " 'Liberalism is nothing else than the knowledge of reason, applied to our existing relations.' Its aim is a 'rational order', a 'moral behaviour'… But, if reason rules, then the person succumbs." (Stirner 1995: 96). However, Stirner is not necessarily opposed to rationality itself, but rather its status as a universal and absolute discourse. Rational truth is always removed from the grasp of the individual and held over him tyrannically, thus creating an external alienating ideal that one is expected to conform to. Rational truth has no real meaning beyond individual perspectives. According to Stirner, we should no longer be awed by the transcendental claims of truth and morality – they are merely discourses based often on the meanest of motives, in particular the desire for power and domination. This is also the case with morality, which is another essentialist 'fixed idea' whose purpose is to force a certain code of norms and behaviours upon the individual. Morality is merely the leftover of Christianity, only in a new liberal secular disguise. Stirner exposes the will to power, the cruelty and domination behind moral ideas: "Moral influence takes its start

[2] For instance, Gilles Deleuze argues that desire desires its own repression (see Deleuze & Parnet 1987: 133).

where humiliation begins; yes, it is nothing else than this humiliation itself, the breaking and bending of the temper (Mutes) down to humility (Demut)." (Stirner 1995: 75). The zeal for morality and rationality is a sickness endemic to liberal societies, according to Stirner. Moral ideals rule over the modern secular conscience in the way that religion once did, denying the sensuous freedom of the individual and inculcating a sense of guilt and self-denial.

The Politics of Ressentiment

This critique of morality and rationality has certain important parallels with Nietzsche. Nietzsche also talks about the way that moral and rational ideas dominate the modern consciousness and turn the individual against himself. Both Stirner and Nietzsche see liberalism as an inverted form of Christianity based on a resentment against difference and individuality. While my purpose here is not to engage in a comparison between Stirner and Nietzsche, I will explore certain connections between the two thinkers – particularly on the question of modern liberal subjectivity - that allow us to shed light on liberalism. It may be suggested that both thinkers engage in a counter-history or genealogy of modernity – in which its highest ideals are unmasked, exposing the will to power behind them.

For Stirner, as we have seen, liberalism is based on a notion of human essence that the individual is expected to conform to. Stirner's critique has been precisely to make problematic this idea of essence, to expose its ideological function and the relations of power that are instantiated through it. Thus, human essence can no longer be taken as an ontological certainty – rather its very status has become a political question. This has enormous implications for liberalism because, as Stirner has shown, liberalism is based upon an essentialist understanding of the individual – on the idea of a universal rational and moral subject. For Nietzsche, similarly, the idea of the essential human subject is problematic. Going against the Enlightenment humanist tradition, Nietzsche was suspicious of this all too confident modernist proclamation of the Death of God: "the tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men…" (Nietzsche 1974: 182). Even though we have killed God, we are not yet ready for this event – we are still trapped within the categories of metaphysics, in the religious mode of consciousness. God has simply been reinvented in Man – the dialectical reconciliation of Man and God that is found in Feuerbach and Hegel is only the high point of Christian nihilism and the triumph of reactive 'life-denying' forces. The human is merely a way of reproducing the divine. Like Stirner, then, Nietzsche sees humanism as only the last metamorphosis of Christianity. Morality is simply our inability to relinquish Christianity: "They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality." (Nietzsche 1990: 80).

This Christian consciousness, which has now permeated humanism, is infected with a certain moral sickness endemic to the modern condition – ressentiment. Ressentiment is life denying, according to Nietzsche, because it is the revenge and hatred of the weak and sick against the strong and healthy. Nietzsche traces the genealogy of ressentiment to what he calls the 'slave revolt' in morality. Previously, the values of good and bad were determined according to a natural hierarchy, in which good meant noble and highborn, as opposed to bad meaning low-placed and plebian. However, this noble system of values began to be undermined by a slave revolt in morality – the good began to be equated with the lowly and weak, and the bad with the strong and powerful (Nietzsche 1994: 19). This inversion introduced the pernicious spirit of revenge and

hatred into the creation of values. It was from this imperceptible, subterranean hatred that grew the values subsequently associated with the good – pity, altruism and meekness. Political values also grew from this poisonous root. The principles of equality and democracy arose out of the same spirit of revenge and hatred of the powerful. Nietzsche here shares Stirner's suspicion of equal rights and political theories based on this principle - including liberalism and socialism. Liberalism is seen, then, as a political articulation of Judeo-Christian ressentiment – of the will to power of the weak over the strong, of the desire to reduce everyone to their pitiable level.

I would argue that Nietzsche's diagnosis of ressentiment can inform the Stirnerian critique of liberalism that I am trying to develop. Leaving aside some of their political differences – for instance Stirner did not share Nietzsche's nostalgia for aristocracy and his valorization of hierarchy and inequality – both thinkers nevertheless engage in a similar critique of the leveling impulse and secular religiosity of modern political systems like liberalism. For both Stirner and Nietzsche, the problem with liberalism, and its various political offshoots, is that it denies individual difference and uniqueness by reducing everyone to the same formal level on the basis of an idealised and universal image of human essence.[3] The Feuerbachian image of a god-like man – imbued with rationality, goodness and humility – is for Nietzsche, as well as Stirner, an inverted image of the sacrifice of the individual on the humanist altar of equality, pity and self-mortification. Perhaps, in other words, we should look beyond the formal liberal principle of equal rights to see the spirit of ressentiment that infects its root – the will to power of the weak against the strong that lies beneath it. This ressentiment, Nietzsche shows, is hostile to difference – it is the attitude of denying what is life-affirming, saying 'no' to what is different, what is 'outside' or 'other'. The reactive stance is defined, then, by its inability to give value to anything except in opposition to something else. The weak, in other words, need the existence of this external enemy to identify themselves as 'good' (Nietzsche 1994: 21-22). The reactive attitude cannot understand difference except by incorporating it within its moral structures and defining it in oppositional terms. What is different to itself is necessarily bad, precisely because without this external other it could not define itself as good.

Perhaps we could understand liberalism in this sense – precisely as a political logic infected by a resentment of difference and individuality. For Stirner, individuals who deviate from the accepted moral and rational norms of liberalism – the lumpenproletariat, the prostitute, the vagrant, and so on – are excluded from the liberal polity. This may be seen in terms of an institutionalised attitude of ressentiment towards that which is different or other – that which does not conform to the ideal liberal subject. We have also seen the way in which, in liberal societies, the individual himself is split between an identification with liberal subjectivity, and a recognition of those elements of himself which do not or cannot conform to this ideal, and which are seen as pathological, inhuman and are often violently repressed. The individual is thus alienated and "terrified at himself" (Stirner 1995: 41). In this way ressentiment is turned against oneself and becomes a sickness. Stirner's un-man refers not only to differences outside the modern liberal subject, but to those within him as well. We can easily apply this argument to modern liberal societies, in which particular identities – such as the unemployed, drug addicts, the homeless, psychiatric patients, the illegal immigrants and welfare-dependents – are marginalized because

[3] John Gray also points to the potential for the diminution of difference as a consequence of liberal equality, particularly when it is articulated in terms of access to a universally established notion of the good life: "Ancient societies were more hospitable to difference than ours. This is partly because the idea of human equality was weak or absent. Modernity begins not with the recognition of difference but the demand for uniformity." (Gray 2000: 4).

they do not live up to the liberal ideal of the autonomous, independent, responsible, self-reliant subject. A whole series of punishments, disciplinary procedures and social sanctions are applied to those who fall behind – welfare breaches, prison sentences, fines, court injunctions, medicalisation, confinement in psychiatric wards or detention centres. William Connolly analyses this reactive intolerance of difference characteristic of today's liberal societies. By constructing the liberal subject as responsible and autonomous, liberalism inculcates a sense of rancor and guilt against the self where it fails to meet this standard, and which can only be alleviated by directing it outwards, so that it becomes a generalised resentment against those who are perceived as different: "Certain weakness is here transformed into merit, so that what the slave must be becomes the standard against which every difference is defined as a deviation to be punished, reformed or converted." (Connolly 1991: 79).

Thinkers like Stirner, Nietzsche and Connolly show that any analysis of liberalism must take into account the exclusion of difference at the base of its edifice of freedom and equal rights. Both Stirner and Nietzsche, in different ways, engage in a genealogy of the autonomous liberal subject – unmasking the way that he is constituted through strategies of domination, discipline and taming. Liberalism is based on the assumption of an essential human subject as the locus of rationality and natural rights. However this subject is shown to be the result of an ideological or discursive operation. Because this universalised abstraction is privileged over the concrete individual, there is no guarantee in liberalism for even the private space of individual autonomy that it purports to hold sacred (see Warren 1988: 215). This private space is merely the ideological supplement of liberalism, masking an unprecedented restriction of individuality and state domination.

Moreover, as Stirner shows, this domination is articulated in a new paradigm of power and is justified in terms of the 'health' of the subject. For instance, Stirner believes that the modern liberal-humanist treatment of crime as a disease to be cured is only the flip side of the old moral-religious prejudice:

> Curative means or healing is only the reverse side of punishment, the theory of cure runs parallel with the theory of punishment; if the latter sees in action a sin against right, the former takes it for a sin of the man against himself, as a decadence from his health (Stirner 1995: 213).

In other words, the moral hygiene of the subject becomes a new norm according to which transgressions are punished. This has obvious connections with Michel Foucault's formula of punishment and incarceration, in which the new fetters of 'reason' and 'humane punishment' take the place of the old moral prejudices. Foucault also exposed the disciplinary technologies and subjectifying norms that operated behind the veneer of liberalism. The prison system, for instance, and the strategies of power, knowledge and discipline that operate there, could be seen as the 'other side' of liberalism – behind the liberal institutions of formal rights, independent judiciaries and legal procedures there lies a whole network of normalising techniques that constitute the operation of an entirely different kind of power. Indeed, the function of liberalism is precisely to mask the nature of this disciplinary power within the outmoded language of sovereignty – the 'juridico-discursive' paradigm. What is really at issue for Foucault, as well as for Stirner, is the disciplinary and discursive conditions under which the subject of liberalism – the subject of formal rights and freedoms – has been constructed, and how this makes liberalism itself problematic.

As Foucault says, the autonomous rational subject that Enlightenment liberalism invites us to free "is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself." (Foucault 1991: 30).

Strategies of Resistance

However, in what ways can the individual resist the subjectifying power of liberalism? It is clear that one can no longer call upon the notion of a repressed human essence as the foundation for individual freedom. Stirner's critique has shown us that this Enlightenment notion of essence is precisely the problem – subjectification, in modern liberal societies, operates through this very idea of essence. It would seem that more radical strategies are called for. If human essence is what ties the individual to a certain identity, then he must free himself from this notion of essence altogether – he must become, in other words, non-essential. This is why Stirner calls for an 'insurrection' rather than a revolution. Revolution is based on the liberation of essential identities from external oppression, whereas insurrection is a process through which the individual frees himself from his own internal constraints of essence: "It is not a fight against the established; it is only a working forth of me out of the established." The insurrection does not aim at overthrowing liberal political institutions, but at the individual overthrowing the essential identity that ties him to these institutions. It starts "from men's discontent with themselves" (Stirner 1995: 279-280). Foucault also believes that political action must take the form a resistance against one's own fixed identity (Stirner 1995: 135).

This form of resistance suggests a new conceptualisation of individuality based on a reconfiguration of the self. For Stirner, the self may be seen as a constitutively open and contingent identity, rather than one that is complete. The individual ego is a creative nothingness, a radical emptiness which is up to the individual to define: "I do not presuppose myself, because I am every moment just positing or creating myself." (Stirner 1995: 135). The self, for Stirner, is a continuous, undefined process that eludes the imposition of fixed identities and essences.

Moreover, the assertion of the fundamental creativity and contingency of the self is part of a strategy of ownness or 'self-ownership'. Ownness is seen by Stirner as an alternative to the liberal notion of freedom. The problem with a freedom prescribed by formal rights and institutions is that it brings into play a series of universal norms and expectations that are themselves oppressive. The individual in contemporary liberal societies is expected to conform to a certain rational mode of freedom – to engage as a free and self-reliant agent in the marketplace, for instance. Of course, this freedom is always tempered by a notion of responsibility – so that a certain degree of freedom is allowed to some and not others, and is restricted only to particular spheres of life. Liberal freedom is based on a false universality and neutrality which masks its complicity with power. By contrast, ownness, on the other hand, is a freedom self-consciously based on power, and which does not try to hide its particularity. It is a form of freedom that is created by the individual himself and is based on his power alone: "My freedom only becomes complete when it is my – might; but by this I cease to be merely a free man, and become an own man." (Stirner 1995: 151). Moreover, ownness goes beyond the narrow negative sense of freedom in liberal discourse. Ownness is a positive freedom – a freedom to create new subjectivities and spaces of autonomy for the individual, beyond the narrow limits of liberalism. It increases the individual's power of self-determination by breaking away from essentialist identities and universal ideals. Ownness

may be seen, then, as a radical and highly individualistic form of freedom that goes beyond the formal confines set down for it by liberalism.

Paradoxically, then, it may argued that Stirner's philosophy is an extreme form of liberalism, a kind of 'hyper-liberalism'.[4] Stirner has exposed the dark, oppressive underside of liberalism that palpitates behind its edifice of rights and freedoms: the mechanisms of normalisation and discipline that go into constituting the autonomous liberal subject; the will to power and the negation of difference at the base of its proclamations of freedom and tolerance. For Stirner, the problem with liberalism is not that it allows too much individual freedom and autonomy, but, on the contrary, that it does not allow enough. That is why the individual must go beyond the formal freedoms of liberalism and invent his own forms of autonomy. There is a sense in which Stirner sees individuality as a radical excess that can never be contained within the narrow individuated identities allowed under liberal subjectivity – something that spills over its edges and jeopardises its limits. In order to remain one step ahead of the subjectifying power of liberalism, the individual must continually 'consume' himself and invent himself anew (Stirner 1995: 150). In this way, Stirner uses the language of liberalism to interrogate its limits. For instance, he takes the concept of property and turns it against liberalism itself – why should property be restricted to what is allowed under the law? Rather, its only limit should be power – the individual's ability to seize as much as possible. Thus, the liberal institution of private property is made unstable precisely by expanding it beyond all legal and rational limits.

Of course, this notion of property could be seen as presenting a paradox in Stirner's thought. For instance, if Stirner dismisses the state or indeed any form of power beyond the individual, then how can there be any guarantee of protection of the individual's property? In other words, one could argue that without the state the idea of property is meaningless. Although Stirner claims that it is the responsibility of the individual egoist to protect his own property from the claims of others, one could easily envisage a descent into a Hobbesian 'state of nature' in which the status property itself becomes unstable. The only conclusion to be drawn here is that when Stirner talks about 'property' he is not really referring to material possessions, but rather to a notion of self-ownership and self-determinacy that goes beyond this – to everything that belongs to the individual and is within his power to determine. This concept of property would include material possessions in certain instances – for example, as we have seen, in political liberalism, private possessions provided a 'safe haven' for the individual from the incursions of the liberal state. However, at other times, Stirner sees material possessions as themselves enslaving the individual – when the individual lusts after material possessions he is once again placing himself under the power of an external abstract object and abdicating his freedom to it.[5] In other words, Stirner is only interested in material property in so far as it allows for the development of a much more profound and broader notion of personal self-ownership. As soon as material possessions come into conflict with self-ownership and autonomy they must be abolished. Perhaps, in this sense, we could see Stirner's concept of 'property' as pertaining to an open-ended project of individual autonomy, rather like Foucault's idea of 'care of the self' - which involve ethical strategies of self-mastery and self-constitution (see Foucault 1988). While Stirner's term

[4] I borrow this term from Ronald Beiner, 'Foucault's Hyper-liberalism' (1995: 349-370).

[5] Stirner: "yet he, for whom he seeks the lucre, is a slave of lucre, not raised above lucre; he is the one who belongs to lucre, the moneybag, not to himself; he is not his own." (1995: 266). It is worth noting that Stirner's term 'property' must be seen in its Hegelian sense - as that which becomes incorporated into the self so that it is no longer an alienating external object - rather than being derived from the language of laissez-faire liberalism.

'property' is perhaps somewhat cruder than the Foucauldian 'care of the self', both nevertheless point to some kind of ethics of individual autonomy and self-ownership, and an affirmation of difference and plurality. Perhaps it could be argued, then, that Stirner's most radical gesture is to actually take the message of liberalism – the valorisation of individual autonomy and freedom – seriously, pushing it to its furthest limits and thereby revealing the gap between this message and the reality of liberal politics.

Towards a Politics of 'Post-Liberalism'

Stirner's critique clearly poses problems for liberal political theory. By unmasking the disciplinary underside of liberalism – the oppressive normalising practices that go into constituting the neutral liberal subject – Stirner has exposed the problematic and paradoxical nature of liberal notions of freedom, individual rights and autonomy. It is not that liberalism cynically parades itself as a philosophy that guarantees individual freedom, while in actual practice denying it. Rather, it is that the liberal notions of rights and freedoms have their ontological and epistemological basis in a certain conceptualisation of the subject, derived from Enlightenment humanism and rationalism, which Stirner has shown to be an oppressive and alienating ideological construction. Freedom and autonomy are conditional upon the individual conforming to this abstract generality, therefore denying his difference and individuality. Those who do not or cannot live up to this ideal are excluded, marginalised and subjected to a whole series of regulatory, judicial, medical and disciplinary procedures which have as their aim the normalisation of the individual. Stirner may therefore be seen as a crucial link in a post-Enlightenment tradition of political thought, which questions the assumptions of liberalism, particularly the conditions under which the liberal subject is constituted.[6] However, I would argue that this interrogation of the limits of liberalism does not necessarily invalidate it. For Stirner, there is nothing necessarily wrong with liberal ideas of individual freedom and equality of rights themselves. The point is, however, that there is always another side to this discourse of rights. There is an oppressive dimension through which these rights are instantiated, yet which remains undisclosed and disavowed. The purpose of Stirner's critique has been to uncover the relations of power, discipline and exclusion through which liberal identities are constituted. Through a realisation of the power relations upon which they are based, liberal rights and freedoms would have to be seen as contingent. In other words, if it is the case - as Stirner's critique has shown it to be - that liberal rights and freedoms are founded not on some universal, essential subject, but on a series of arbitrary exclusions, discursive constructions and strategies of power, their status becomes undecidable rather than absolute. They would be open to a whole series of potentially different articulations beyond their classical liberal conceptualisation. For instance, why could one not simply extend the notion of rights and individual autonomy to include identities that are currently excluded by liberal regimes - and through this, make problematic the status of these regimes themselves? This was precisely what Foucault tried to do – in his advocacy of prisoners' rights, for instance, he was attempting to challenge the absolute status of the division between innocence and guilt and through this,

[6] Here Stirner's critique shares common ground with John Gray, who also argues that liberalism has embedded itself in the Enlightenment project rationalism and universalism, which can no longer be sustained today: "One might say that, with the transformation of liberalism into a tradition, the failure of the Enlightenment project is itself institutionalized." (see Gray 1995: 150).

the conditions under which people are incarcerated[7] A Stirnerian concept of rights might follow along similar lines. It would involve an expansion of liberal rights and freedoms to those who are marginalised in liberal societies – the 'lumpenproletariat', or more contemporary subaltern identities like illegal migrants, the homeless, the unemployed, and so on.

Therefore, by uncovering the discursive and arbitrary nature of liberal rights and freedoms, Stirner has opened these categories to the possibilities of a contingent expansion in content. They would become, in the manner suggested by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'empty signifiers' which would be open to different political articulations through the construction of 'chains of equivalence'.[8] An expansion of the liberal framework of rights and freedoms in this way would allow individuals to contest the oppressive disciplinary practices that they are subjected to. For Stirner, the problem is not the rights and freedoms themselves, but rather the discursive regime of essentialist humanism and Enlightenment rationalism that they are articulated in. Stirner's critique allows us to identify this essentialist paradigm, and thus disentangle these rights and freedoms from it. This would free liberal rights from their current epistemological limits and open them to different articulations, thereby allowing them to be used to interrogate the structures of power and practices of domination inherent in liberal capitalist societies. In this sense, through Stirner's critique of liberalism, we may be able to theorise a 'post-liberalism' – a liberalism which is not confined to essentialist identities and rational frameworks, but which rather refers to a political ethos of contestation with practices of domination.

Moreover, it would be an agonistic liberalism in the sense that it acknowledges and, indeed affirms, competing and different identities, perspectives and forms of life. Here a Stirnerian concept of 'post-liberalism' may be likened to John Gray's attempt to articulate a form of liberalism that was not based on the search for a rational consensus about the 'best life', but rather which recognised the incommensurability of different perspectives in modern society. Gray argues for an agonistic liberalism based on the notion of 'ethical contestability' (Gray 1995: 86). Like Stirner, he believes that the central problem of liberalism lies in its attempt to establish a universal epistemological standpoint – to find the best form of life, from which others can be judged. This tendency derives from liberalism's indebtedness to a defunct Enlightenment essentialism and rationalism, which is no longer sustainable in modern plural societies. In attempting to extricate liberalism from its anchoring in Enlightenment epistemologies and universal conceptions of the 'good life', Gray theorises a form of 'post-liberalism' – which would recognise the irreducibility of difference, and would concern itself only with establishing a modus vivendi between competing forms of life:

> In the form that we have inherited it, liberal toleration is an ideal of rational consensus. As heirs to that project, we need an ideal based not on a rational consensus on the best way of life …but instead on the truth that humans will always have reason to live differently (Gray 2000: 5).

[7] The ultimate purpose of the GIP (Information Group on Prisons) was "to question the social and moral distinction between the innocent and the guilty." (see Foucault 1977: 227).

[8] Laclau and Mouffe talk about the way that the liberal-democratic introduced a structural ambiguity and undecidability into political life, which allowed for a continual contestation over the meaning of rights and an infinite expansion of these rights and freedoms to other identities – to, for instance, women, blacks, ethnic and sexual minorities (see 2001: 176-186).

'Post-liberalism', then, would be a reconfiguration of liberalism on the basis of an acknowledgment of the plurality of existence and the singularity of personal freedom, rather than a universal human essence. As Gray says: "We do not pretend that our identities express the essence of the species; we recognize them to be products as much of chance as of choice." (Gray 2001: 270). In other words, post-liberalism would be based on the recognition of the contingency of identity, and the impossibility of inscribing this within a universal subjectivity. This would be precisely the kind of 'post-liberalism' that the implications of Stirner's critique would allow us to envisage - a politics of personal autonomy, central to which is an ongoing interrogation of the status of the individual and also, through this, an interrogation of the very limits of liberalism itself.

Of course, there are many aspects of Stirner's political philosophy that are highly problematic and which we should question. For instance, his extreme individualism and egoism, in which any kind of collective identity is seen as an oppressive burden, clearly makes it difficult to theorise a collective politics of emancipation.[9] It would appear that Stirner's politics would be limited to a nihilistic individual rebellion. However, what is important politically in Stirner's critique of liberalism is the way that it makes problematic essentialist identities and the ontological status of the subject. In this sense, his critique of essentialism could be used against a simplistic 'politics of difference', in which the rights of various minority groups are often asserted on the basis of a purely differential, particularized identity. This is the sort of pluralism that Stirner would see as endemic to liberal politics, and as a form of essentialism brought in through the back door. Instead of a pure politics of difference, perhaps Stirner's thinking may be seen in terms of a politics of singularity. Singularity may be conceptualised as a non-essential form of difference and individuality – one which is itself contingent and undecidable, and thus remains open to the multiple possibilities of the Same. The idea is not to valorise the individual as a stable, fixed identity of difference, as this would be another kind of essentialism that, in the end, is itself hostile to difference. Instead, Stirner's philosophy shows us the multiple possibilities of individuality – its very singular, contingent and unpredictable nature. On the basis of this principle of singularity, a post-liberal politics would seek to invent, multiply and expand spaces for individual autonomy and singularity that are often denied in modern liberal societies. A politics of 'post-liberalism' would seek to respect and encourage, rather than deny, in Nietzsche's words "the rich ambiguity of existence." (cited in Connolly 1991: 81).

Conclusion

Stirner's critique of liberalism is a crucial intervention in post-Enlightenment critical political theory. It has unmasked the oppressive conditions under which the liberal subject is constructed, thus revealing the deeply problematic and ambiguous status of the liberal discourse of individual freedom, rights and autonomy, and the resentment and intolerance of difference that often accompanies it. Moreover, it shows the way in which liberalism's claims to formal neutrality are belied by its anchoring in a particular epistemological foundation and an essentialist identity derived from Enlightenment rationalism. By revealing the arbitrary and discursive nature of liberal subjectivity, and the relations of power and exclusion that it is based on, one can perhaps disentangle these rights and freedoms from the essential identities, dialectical structures and rational

[9] Stirner does however talk about the possibilities of collective arrangements amongst egoists. See his discussion of the 'union' (1995: 161).

discourses that limit them. Stirner's critique, in other words, allows one to conceptualise these rights as contingent rather than absolute, thus opening them to a whole series of different political interpretations. Upon this basis, we may theorise a politics of 'post-liberalism', which would be characterised by a critical ethos of challenging relations of domination and multiplying the spaces for individual autonomy and difference.

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