

On Marx and Engels' Non-Critique of Stirner

Alfredo M. Bonanno

If we stop to consider Stirner's "egoism" according to the marxist interpretation, even trying to set aside implausible positions, there would be nothing left for us to do but end with a strange ambivalence: on the one hand, an obtuse bourgeois thematic; and on the other hand, a proletarian thematic: egoism as opposed to associationism, conservatism and the destruction of the old society. In fact, Stirner's work can't fit into these categories. It is clearly not the project of a conservative who wants to safeguard the privileges of the ruling class, since this is not his conception of egoism; nor is he elaborating a plan for proletarian struggle. He is the destroyer of idols of every kind. And this thankless task has always been one of the most useful, and therefore one of the most badly viewed.

The first duty toward Stirner: incomprehension. Stirner writes: "Money rules the world' is the refrain of the bourgeois era. A destitute aristocrat and a destitute worker are both 'dead from hunger' and, therefore, insignificant in their political value: birth and labor count for nothing, but *money* gives *value*. The property-owner dominates, but the state raises up its 'slaves' from among the destitute, and it will give these slaves money (a wage) in conformity to their assignments in governing in its name.

"I receive everything from the state. Do I have anything without the *authorization of the state*? What I have without this, the state *takes away* as soon as it discovers that I lack 'legal title.' So, don't I have everything by its grace, by its authorization?

"Only on this, on *legal title*, does the bourgeoisie rest. The bourgeois citizen is what he is by state *protection*, by the state's grace. He would have to be afraid of losing everything if the power of the state is broken.

"But how do things stand for the one who has nothing to lose, for the proletarian? Since he has nothing to lose, he has no need of state protection for his 'nothing.' Indeed, he might gain if state protection were withdrawn from the protected.

"Therefore, the propertyless would see the state a protective power for property owners, which privileges them in every way while it simply—bleeds him dry. The state is one—the *bourgeois state*, it is the *status* of the bourgeoisie. It protects human beings, not according to their work, but according to their docility ('faithfulness to the law'), i.e., to the extent that they enjoy

and administer the rights granted to them by the state in conformity to the laws of the state.”¹ This shifts the basic appearance of Stirner’s discourse, i.e., the voluntaristic appearance and the consideration, which is not marginal, that workers are singular beings, individuals who, all together, form the proletarian class.

Finding the attack on the philosophical level difficult, the critique is launched on the level of the organization of concrete struggle, of the trade union type, of the difficulty of this type of organization (specifically in England between 1832 and 1842). The basic theme passes to the second level. Stirner wrote that workers were in a position to take power and manage it for themselves. This isn’t the metaphysics of history. It is a reflection on events, much more than the “real” philosophical reflections of a Hess². That there is no mention of the concrete problems of organization is not surprising, considering Stirner’s situation, his personal lack of preparation and the specific context of *The Unique and Its Own*.

When Stirner speaks of the need not to fall into the involuntary snare of Feuerbach, he intends to say that from the morality of unconscious individualism, a morality just as harmful as that of pseudo-humanitarianism, one must not fall into a new morality of a sort that is only apparently free, but that, at bottom, is tied in some way to “phantoms of the spirit.” The sole prospect of liberation is the one that derives from the logic of the individual, i.e., from the concrete logic of the individual “event”, the basic, unique event. If we don’t want to make everything go up in smoke, and then be forced to hastily fall back once again on “religious” myth—whether it be Rodolfo’s humanitarianism, Laplace’s determinism, Marx’s historical materialism—we have to avoid starting from collective events that refer back, for their intrinsic composition, to earlier events. Marx started from class struggle and then had to account for the relationship with nature, forgetting, in this way, the real lesson of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.

In conclusion, in their polemic against Stirner, Marx and Engels had no desire to understand their adversary, but only to better advance their own theses. The evidence for this is found in the fact that Marx and Engels considered *The German Ideology* a practice run and were not so dissatisfied, after all, to have left it to the “gnawing critique of mice.” This true essence of the marxist text should be kept in mind. If it is quite important for understanding the growth of Marx and Engels’ thought, as well as for an objective evaluation of their debts, its only importance in relation to Stirner is that it contributed to pulling his work out of oblivion, a work that opens paths never traveled, a work on which discredit is thrown with great ease and with the most absolute ignorance.

¹ Max Stirner, *The Unique and Its Own*. I have chosen to translate this quote directly out of the Italian, because the English translation loses and confuses the specific class references. The Italian translation is more true to the original German.

² Moses Hess, one of Stirner’s first critics, a socialist journalist, to whose criticisms Stirner responded in *Stirner’s Critics*.

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Translated by Wolfi Landstreicher [The following text is a translation of a brief passage from Alfredo Bonanno's book, *Max Stirner*, published by Edizione Anarchismo. It is a rough translation that I still need to polish up. I hope to eventually translate the entire book with a critical introduction.]

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