

Max Stirner, a durable dissident—in a nutshell

How Marx and Nietzsche suppressed their colleague Max Stirner and why he has intellectually survived them

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Max Stirner? The philosophizing petit bourgeois to whom Karl Marx had given the brush-off? The anarchist, egoist, nihilist, the crude precursor of Nietzsche? Yes, he. Having a very bad reputation in the world of philosophy, he is mentioned at most in passing, but even now he possesses that intellectual dynamite which a famous successor claimed to have provided.

The mere mention of Stirner's name evokes catchy sayings such as, "I am unique," "Nothing is more to me than Myself," "All things are nothing to Me," which cause him to appear the epitome of the uninhibited egoist or naïve solipsist or... — No, he has not been forgotten. His book, »Der Einzige und sein Eigentum« (1844) — he wrote only this one — can be found even today in "Reclam's Universalbibliothek" [in English: »The Ego and His/Its Own«, 1907...1995], as it were, as the classical author of egotism. Yet this does not mean that anyone today considers him to be of current interest.

My thesis, on the other hand, states that his time has only now arrived. The meaning of this declaration is probably best conveyed through the story of the impact of his book, which was strangely clandestine particularly throughout its momentous passages, and is still barely known. The account also makes it understandable that Stirner's specific central idea did not really become relevant for the times until more than one and a half centuries later and why this should be so.

Stirner composed his book »Der Einzige und sein Eigentum« in the context of **Left Hegelianism** in the eighteen-forties. Excepting its beginnings as a criticism of the Bible, this philosophical school of thought tried for the first time in Germany to develop a **consistently Enlightenment atheist theory** ("true"/"pure" criticism) and practice ("philosophy of action"). Its leading theorists were **Ludwig Feuerbach** and **Bruno Bauer**, while **Arnold Ruge** and **Moses Hess** made names for themselves practically and politically as fighters for the causes of democracy and social justice.

Max Stirner was initially a rather inconspicuous figure in the group surrounding Bruno Bauer. The **scathing criticism of the entire Left Hegelian thought** he presented in his

»**Der Einzige...**« consequently came as a surprise to all. Unlike the numerous opponents of the post-Hegelian New Enlightenment, Stirner criticized Feuerbach's and Bauer's philosophies not on account of the two ex-theologians' atheism but rather due to their lack of intellectual consistency. They had indeed managed to emancipate themselves from Hegel's all-integrating system, but they did not really succeed in abandoning the "magic circle of Christianity." Stirner's derisive conclusion: "Our atheists are pious people."

The targets of the criticism themselves recognized that Stirner had resolutely continued along their path, the path of criticism. They even went so far as to admire Stirner's audacity, although shrinking back from its result, which, in their eyes, was a moral nihilism.

Privately fascinated — Stirner was "the most ingenious and freest writer I've ever met," wrote Feuerbach to his brother; Ruge, Engels, and others spontaneously proved themselves to be similarly impressed — and publicly rejecting, aloof, or silent, this intellectual avant-garde reacted ambivalently and cunningly to the most daring of their colleagues. No one wanted to follow **Stirner's step beyond the New Enlightenment**. His "nihilism" simply could not be the result of enlightened thought. Greatly alarmed, all were blind to the fact that Stirner had already opened up ways "beyond nihilism."

The automatic rejection of Stirner's line of thought is also characteristic for the bulk of the subsequent story of the **re(pulsion and de)ception** of »Der Einzige und sein Eigentum«. However, the book was initially forgotten for half a century. Only in the eighteen-nineties did Stirner's ideas experience a renaissance that continued into the next century. However, he always stood in Nietzsche's shadow, whose style and rhetoric ("God is dead," "I, the first immoralist", ...) fascinated the entire world.

Some thinkers, to be certain, perceived that Stirner, although officially considered a narrow-minded forerunner of Nietzsche, was the more radical of the two philosophers. Yet they were the ones who neglected to come to a public confrontation with Stirner. **Edmund Husserl** once warned a small audience about the "seducing power" of »Der Einzige« — but never mentioned it in his writing. **Carl Schmitt** was as a young man deeply moved by the book — and maintained his silence about it until "haunted" again by Stirner while in the misery and loneliness of a prison cell (1947). **Max Adler**, Austromarxist theorist, privately wrestled his whole life with the ideas in Stirner's »Der Einzige.« **Georg Simmel** instinctively avoided Stirner's "peculiar brand of individualism." **Rudolf Steiner**, originally an engaged, enlightened journalist, was spontaneously inspired by Stirner; however, he soon believed Stirner was leading him "to the edge of an abyss" and converted to theosophy. Lastly, the anarchists on whom Stirner is often pushed as a precursor either kept a silent distance (for example, **Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin**) or had a lasting ambivalent relationship to him (**Landauer**).

Prominent philosophers of our time voice a shudder of their own when confronting the principal idea in »Der Einzige,« which they conceive as being unfathomably demonic. **Leszek Kołakowski** said that Stirner, next to whom "even Nietzsche seems weak and inconsequent," is indeed irrefutable; nevertheless, he must be banished at any cost, because he destroys "the only tool that enables us to make ethical values our own: tradition." Stirner's aim of "destruction of alienation, i.e. the return to authenticity would be nothing but the destruction of culture, a return to an animal state ... to a pre-human condition." **Hans Heinz Holz** warned that "Stirner's egoism, were it to become actualized, would lead to the self-destruction of the human race."

Similar apocalyptic fears might have driven **Jürgen Habermas** in his younger years to condemn the "absurdity of Stirner's fury" with furious words — and since that time never to mention

Stirner again, even in texts about Left Hegelianism. **Theodor Adorno**, who saw himself driven back at the end of his philosophical career to the — pre-Stirnerian — “standpoint of Left Hegelianism,” once cryptically remarked that Stirner was the only one who really “let the cat out of the bag,” but in no way referred to him in any of his works. For his part, **Peter Sloterdijk** took note of none of this, only shaking his head at the idea that the “brilliant” Marx had “grown angry in many hundreds of pages about those, after all, simple thoughts of Stirner.”

Karl Marx: like Nietzsche’s, his reaction to Stirner deserves to be emphasized here, owing to its era-forming impact. Marx believed as late as the summer of 1844 that Feuerbach was “the only one who had achieved a true theoretical revolution.” The appearance of »Der Einzige« in October, 1844, shook this outlook to the core, because Marx very clearly experienced the depth and implications of Stirner’s criticism. While others, including Engels, initially admired Stirner, Marx saw from the beginning in him an enemy who needed to be annihilated.

Marx had originally planned to write a review of »Der Einzige.« However, he soon forsook this plan, instead choosing first to wait for the reactions of the others (Feuerbach, Bauer). In his polemic work, »The Holy Family. Against Bruno Bauer and Company« (March, 1845), Stirner was simply left out. In September, 1845, Feuerbach’s criticism of »Der Einzige« appeared — and at the same time, Stirner’s brilliant reply to it. Now Marx felt personally provoked to intervene. He interrupted important, previously commissioned works in order to storm upon »Der Einzige.« His criticism of Stirner, »Sankt Max,« which was full of invectives directed at the “flimsiest skull among the philosophers,” turned out to be even longer than »Der Einzige« itself. Yet after the completion of the manuscript, Marx must have wavered again in his choice of tactics, as the criticism of Stirner remained in the end unprinted.

The outcome of his privately led dispute with Stirner manifested itself in the form of Marx at last turning away from Feuerbach and designing a philosophy that, unlike Feuerbach’s, should be immune to a Stirnerian criticism: the so-called historical materialism. Yet Marx seemed at that time to have considered his new theory as being only a provisional arrangement, because he left it in the drawer along with »Sankt Max.« Desiring in any case to avoid a public discussion with Stirner, he threw himself instead into political life, into feuds with Proudhon, Lassalle, Bakunin, and others. **In the end, he was successful in fully suppressing the “Stirner” problem — both in the psychological sense as well as in that of the history of theories.**

The historical aftermath of Marx’s pioneering achievements in the area of repression becomes clear when one investigates how Marxist researchers of all lines of thought later looked at Stirner and assessed his influence on Marx. In an astonishingly unanimous way, they accepted without criticism the representation which Engels had given in 1888 in his popular book, »Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy.« Engels mentions Stirner in the book only casually as a “curiosity” in the “process of disintegration of the Hegel school of thought” and celebrates Feuerbach as the thinker who had superseded it.

This representation, although in chronology and fact terribly false, quickly became the universally accepted one and remained as such even after Marx’s »Sankt Max« became well-known in 1903. Marx’s reactions to Stirner’s »Der Einzige« are indeed good and painstakingly referenced, but even today there are only exceptional authors (Henri Arvon, Wolfgang Essbach) who have made **Stirner’s decisive role in the formation of Marx’s conception of historical materialism** the theme of books — and who came to a half-hearted rehabilitation of Stirner in which Marx’s established superiority does not come into question. Yet even these works were **ignored for decades** and have only recently begun to be hesitatingly discussed in specialized circles.

Summary: Marx's primary repression of Stirner (understood psychologically as well as historically) was followed by a secondary repression. Marx researchers of all possible lines of thought, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, automatically ignored Marx's primary repression (lastly very impressively by Louis Althusser) and that way spared themselves the task of having to accomplish their own primary repression.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the second great "superseder" of Stirner, was born in the same year (even in the same month) in which Stirner's »Der Einzige« appeared. However, during Nietzsche's youth, the entire Left Hegelian school of thought was generally not taken seriously, instead termed the madness of some Vormärz outcast lecturers and riotous journalists. Annoyed by the "senility" of his fellow students, the young Nietzsche in contrast, in a letter extolled exactly those same eighteen-forties as being a "time full of intellectual spirit" in which he himself would gladly have been active. Thus, the direct contact with a veteran of Left Hegelian times was also a turning point for the future philosopher. **In October of 1865, Nietzsche had a long and intensive encounter with Eduard Mushacke, who in those days had belonged to the inner circle revolving around Bruno Bauer and had been friends with Stirner. The immediate result was a deep, intellectual crisis and a panicked "decision for philology and for Schopenhauer."**

Nietzsche had attempted with some success to obliterate the traces of this deciding intellectual turning point – which lends those remaining all the more weight.

Although in the case of Nietzsche the matters in all ways (even in the question of positive substantiation) were different than with Marx, there is a fundamental similarity to be established between the two regarding their development into thinkers of outstanding influence: confrontation with Stirner in their early years, (primary) repression, conception of a new philosophy that strengthens a prevailing incipiently ideological trend. This philosophy becomes attractive, because it snuffs out the dispute (demanded by Stirner) yet to come regarding the more profound problems of the modern age, of "man's departure from minority," while simultaneously suggesting a tangible and practical solution.

As with Marx, so it was with Nietzsche. **After the primary repression came the collective secondary repression** – through the Nietzsche researchers of all schools of thought. It expressed itself, however, in more flexible forms than in the Marx research. Comparisons were strongly drawn between Stirner's and Nietzsche's messages; some established that Stirner was a forerunner of Nietzsche, while others concurrently maintained that he was not. The question was raised whether Nietzsche had known »Der Einzige,« and it was both affirmed and denied. No conclusions were drawn from that ambiguity of answers.

The most extreme assertion was put forward by **Eduard von Hartmann**; Nietzsche was Stirner's plagiarist, he said. Any who had grasped Nietzsche's actual achievement chose to remain silent.

Philosophers, provided that they had had Enlightenment-related ambitions, were always dissidents in their time. Nevertheless, sooner or later, most posthumously, their teachings became integrated into the existing structure of the humanities. However, in the case of Stirner, the enlightened critic of Enlightenment, this has, contrary to superficial appearance, not yet occurred. Even in our time, which fancies itself to be postideological and actually considers intellectual

dissidence as being obsolete, **Stirner, in contrast to Marx and Nietzsche, has veritably remained a dissident — a durable dissident indeed.**

From this provocation arises the heuristic **usefulness of his »Der Einzige« for the present** — its topicality. Concerning ourselves with him and his impact can help us to **comprehend the strange decline which the Enlightenment project took in the last 150 years — and in this way perhaps to stimulate its resuscitation.**

Enlightenment — he who today wants to make this concept relevant for the times is almost inevitably seen as naïve and unknowing in the history of philosophy. After all, it is said, we have long since been enlightened and in particular about enlightenment. This notion belongs to a past era, and its dichotomy has been recognized for a long time; it has, on account of a seemingly optimistic but fundamentally false image of human nature, as action and reaction produced those deadly ideologies leading to the catastrophes of the twentieth century.

This historical lesson has been accepted by all those in the twentieth century who wanted to continue the Enlightenment project of the nineteenth, in the end even by those who founded a “critical theory of society” inspired by Marx and Freud in the nineteen-thirties. However, they tacitly abandoned it a few years later, conclusively stating that fatal “dialectics” are inherent in any enlightenment project.

The last subterranean ambitions of Enlightenment, which broke out for a short time around 1968, were quickly brought to an end by the **proclamation of postmodernism. Modernism, the Enlightenment project, discredited and antiquated, was now supposed to be formally dismissed once and for all.** The ultimate result of centuries of enlightenment stated: **we are enlightened in that we now know we are not able to be enlightened.** The New Man, whether according to Marx or to Nietzsche, never appeared; the Adam of old triumphs. Since that time, the call for a New Man has been scorned and even deemed as being highly dangerous.

As a matter of fact, any thought today of a resuscitation of the Enlightenment movement is nipped in the bud, because the main ideas of the last Enlightenment thinkers of mass appeal, Marx and Nietzsche, were thoroughly debased as a result of the historical experiences of the twentieth century. This bankruptcy of ideas also left those despairing who, in view of the omnipresent irrationalism, simply could not believe that the human race — and be it only humanity’s most advanced part — had already made the “departure from immaturity”; that the last word about the potentialities of human reason has already been spoken.

The bankruptcy of the until-now domineering Enlightenment ideas, however, opened up a chance as well. Now that the aura of Marx and Nietzsche has faded, it should be possible to go to the up to now largely avoided place in the history of philosophy, the place where the decline began — to the radical Enlightenment-based discussions of the Left Hegelians of the eighteenth-forties, from which first the ideas of Stirner emerged, and then, essentially as a reaction to them, the ideas of Marx and of Nietzsche.

Stirner criticized the radical Enlightenment thinkers of his time, because they had only “murdered God,” thus only disposing of the “other world outside us”; **because they,** the “pious atheists,” would nevertheless **have retained the basis of religious ethics, that “other world in us,”** and would have realized this only in a secular form. The true liberation of the

millennia-old chains is, however, accomplished only when this other world, too, no longer exists, opined Stirner.

With the phrase “other world in us,” Stirner meant precisely that psychic authority which Freud first introduced in 1923 under the appropriate name of “**superego.**” The superego comes into being in the individual as the essential result of enculturation of the child. It remains the refuge of value-based attitudes, which were brought about early in life in pre- and irrational ways and can be influenced later only in a very limited scope. **Although held by the individual as being the core of its autonomous Self, the superego is in fact the epitome of heteronomy.**

Stirner was of the opinion that the stage of development of humankind, which is characterized through behavioral regulation by means of the pre- and irrationally induced super-ego, would, as the outcome of the process of Enlightenment, merge into a new one, characterized by self-regulation, that is to say, by true autonomy of individuals.

Yet this thought, wherever it was perceived still produced intense defensive reactions — in Freud, as well, a man of the Enlightenment, who wanted to see the super-ego embedded in biology, eternally and irrevocably. **Freud** made psychoanalysis popular with the motto, “**Where id was, ego should be!**” (nota bene: an ego with a superego). The few psychoanalysts who tried to make the alternative “**Where super-ego was, ego should be!**” competitive were effortlessly neutralized. But that is another chapter about the absolutely non-dialectical self-paralysis of the Enlightenment in the 20th century.

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