

Stirner, the individual & anarchism

**Max Stirner "The Ego and It's Own" (Rebel Press London 1993, available from
Freedom press in London)**

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Contents

What were his ideas?	3
Egoism in Practise	5
What is his relevance today?	6

Max Stirner is a relatively obscure figure in anarchist and left wing thought. He has influenced many who regard themselves as anarcho-individualists such as the Americans, Lysander Spooner and Benjamin Tucker and modern polemicists such as Bob Black. He also has some following among anarcho-communists, notably in Glasgow where a Stirnerist tradition has persisted to this day. Stirner was an egoist who railed against all doctrines and beliefs which demanded a subordination of the individual will to their leadership. So you might ask why I should be interested in trying to outline some of his ideas in the magazine of an organisation committed to a collective anarcho-communist vision of society? I would say for two reasons.

Firstly Stirner's ideas are the perfect corrective to those expounded by authoritarian socialists. Indeed, they came to realise this very quickly and condemned Stirner almost from day one. Marx and Engels devoted a whole 300-page book to denouncing his ideas – “The German Ideology” published in 1846. The semi hysterical and personal nature of the criticisms tell us just how worried they were. They condemned him as “*the emptiest, shallowest brain among the philosophers*” whose “*whole activity is limited to trying a few, hackneyed, casuistical tricks on the world handed down to him by philosophical tradition.*” This effort alone surely alerts us that the fact that he might be saying something interesting! Stirner's absolute contempt for those who would be masters allowed him to clearly and accurately predict the disaster that happened when socialist ideas were elevated to the level of a state religion:

“Society, from which we have everything, is a new master, a new spook, a new ‘supreme being’ which ‘takes us into its service and allegiance.’”

There's a second and deeper relevance to his thinking though. All anarchists strive to maximise individual liberty. In the Workers Solidarity Movement our aim is to maximise individual freedom through collective means. But in order to do this it is important that people are committed to the ideas of collectively organising with others. This is an idea that is common to anarchists and many others on the left. However much less time is devoted, even by anarchists, to thinking about what it would actually mean to live in an anarchist society. Freedom cannot be handed out. It is only meaningful to people who really desire it and that means strong individuals knowing what they want. What does it mean to be free or as Stirner puts it “self owned”? Unless we really appreciate what this means and how valuable it is then we might as well give up and let the state and the capitalists do our thinking for us!

What were his ideas?

Surely if socialism is anything it is the opposite of selfishness and egoism. In fact opponents often argue that, while the ideas of socialism and anarchism are attractive, human greed makes it unrealisable in practice. We are told that it's the “natural” greedy condition of humanity that makes socialism an impossible dream. Yet what if it was all turned on its head? What if socialism sprung firstly from a greedy snatching at life's possibilities to turn them to personal advantage? What if it was our own individual greed and egoism that pulled us out of capitalism and into a new world? The great are only great because we are on our knees; what happens if we all get up? This is the paradox suggested by Stirner in “The Ego and Its Own”

Max Stirner (real name Caspar Schmidt) was a member of a small group of left leaning German intellectuals styling themselves “the free” and including Marx and Engels. Stirner wrote many es-

says, compiled and edited “a history of reaction” and translated works by Adam Smith. However this book is his only completed original work. Before I launch into some of the ideas contained in the book, it is only fair to warn anyone who does get their hands on it that it is not an easy read. In fact it is very badly written and I can only pity the translator. Firstly Stirner can sarcastically quote summaries of other people’s ideas as if he agreed with them and then suddenly switch to his own views. Secondly there is a high level of abstraction in the book with often the same word such as “man” being used to mean very different things within the same paragraph. That having been said a patient reading will give many rewards!

The book is a searing attack on all abstract belief systems, starting and working out from religious ideas to encompass all political beliefs as being religious in nature. The first paragraph sets the tone, with Stirner sarcastically putting forward what he sees as the enemy’s line:

“What is not supposed to be my concern, first and foremost, the good cause, then God’s cause, the cause of mankind, of truth, of freedom, of humanity, of justice, further, the cause of my people, my prince, my fatherland. Finally even the cause of mind and a thousand other causes. Only my cause is never to be my concern “shame on the egoist who thinks only of himself.”

He starts with religion. He believes that the concept of spiritual man first emerged among the Greeks and then was reinforced with Christianity. The idea of spiritual man is that man’s earthly concerns take second place. The thesis is first sold of a spiritual and ideal person beyond the present ordinary earthly person. In contemplation of this idealised spirit that dwells in everyone (in the sense that they are supposed to be “God’s image”) all immediate bodily concerns fall away. The Christian aims to do away with “the vanity” of the present world and “renounce” their immediate life in favour of a future paradise.

He goes on to the first philosophers to question religious beliefs – they continued to accept the spiritual world as the important one. Descartes declares, “*I think therefore I am*” not I eat therefore I am or I have a smoke therefore I am! People are defined by their thinking which is abstract and spiritual in the general sense (you could argue that thinking does draw a considerable amount from real experience but he doesn’t go into this). So spiritual things outside the actual real experienced life of the person were still elevated above and alienated from their day to day lives.

Stirner’s most original idea, to my mind, is to show how secular liberals and socialists, in aiming to do away with God and spirituality, just erected a new edifice onto which day to day concerns could be sacrificed. This edifice was “man” (apologies but I have to stick to his wording – presumably he meant this to mean both sexes).

According to Stirner, liberals, humanists, communists, anarchists and so forth have just replaced God with man. So some ideal future vision is expounded for humanity as a whole to move towards. Where you are at present is not nearly as important as what you might one day become. They are interested in man in the abstract not the actual lives of individual persons. This leads to an interesting statement of what psychologists today sometimes call “deferred gratification” – you are always trying to reach some ideal version of yourself:

“Therefore over each minute of your existence, a fresh minute of the future beckons to you, and, developing yourself, you get away ‘from yourself.’”

In other words you are something to be reached. An ideal version of yourself is held over you as a target to aim for. You never really start from yourself because you're always trying to reach it. You are alienated from yourself!

OK perhaps now it is becoming apparent just how abstract some of the ideas are! But there are immediate practical implications. If you sketch an ideal of what we must become you can also impose restrictions on us. If everyone obeys the law out of respect then you need very few cops. Ideas are internalised and self-discipline turns out good citizens. Now there is always some abstract morality, some party line that has to be guiltily adhered to.

From an early age concepts of property, sin and guilt are drummed in to us through family, church, school, media and politicians. These set the limits for what you can and can't do. The ideas – or “spooks” as Stirner terms them of morality, respect for private property etc keep people in line. You could live in poverty from birth but, as he puts it, “*You must not pick up a pin unless you have got leave to do so.*”

These ideas are programmed in and even respected and encouraged by those aiming to change society. Once they are accepted and internalised people obey the rules not because they are forced to but because they think it is right and proper to do so: “*Every Prussian carries his gendarme in his breast*”

Egoism in Practise

Stirner's critique is far reaching but what does he offer as a solution and how can it be realised given that the ideas seem to rule out getting involved in any collective struggle towards an abstract idea of how things should be done!

First of all he dismisses all talk of freedom. Stirner views the concept of freedom as a dangerous “spook”. It implies absence of want (freedom from something) rather than confers any particular benefit. It's a negative definition and easy for anyone to use as a platform from which to sell their ideas. Instead he calls for people to become “*self owned.*” This means simply to put yourself at the centre of things and then to make as much of the world as possible your property. So you own the ideas and belief systems rather than vice versa and everything is analysed according to how useful it is to you. Of course, as he makes clear, you first of all have to know who you are as separated out from the ideas or passions which may be in charge at any given moment. In an idea, which was later, to be pinched by Nietzsche (“Beyond Good and Evil”) among others he proclaims:

*“Away with every concern that is not altogether my concern? What's good, what's bad?
Why, I myself am my concern and I am neither good nor bad. Neither has any meaning
for me”*

What sort of society would this lead to? Though very much an individualist Stirner gives us a few glimpses of what he terms his “Union of Egoists”. The union is a voluntary structure formed by its members in their own immediate interests. This is a union of self-confessed selfish people, which they leave as soon as their interests are not being delivered. Stirner has more faith in this system than in any state or political party. In the final analysis he says: “*I would rather be referred to men's selfishness than their kindness.*” Of course he would not favour any form of collective action to realise this society. The only route he comes up with is the rather worrying “*war of*

all against all". He calls for an insurrection of all individuals aiming not to overthrow existing institutions but to move beyond them in some vague way.

What is his relevance today?

Many would agree that Stirner had some interesting ideas and could see him as something of a figure for individualists or even libertarian free marketeers. Does Stirner have relevance to anarcho communists though? As mentioned earlier I think he has.

Firstly, of course, he serves as a continuous warning against lefties, nationalists, religious fanatics and anyone who lets abstract ideas run away with them. As long as groups exist with abstract schemes to "liberate" or "free" "suffering and oppressed" humanity there will be new states, new rules:

"The hierarchy lasts as long as the parsons, that is, theologians, philosophers, statesmen, philistines, liberals, schoolmasters, servants, parents, children, married couples, Proudhon, George Sand, Bluntschi and others have the floor, the hierarchy will endure"

Secondly he locates the urge to rebel — the need to rebel — within people's real and actual conditions of life. One of the points he constantly hammers home is that the rich are rich because the poor do not see clearly their own self-interests. People who voluntarily submit to oppression lose the right to complain. Anyway if they only complain or use abstract concepts of rights and freedoms to be handed to them by their masters they will be ignored. People have to rise up to realise their own self-interests — *"To what property am I entitled? To every property to which I empower myself."* If you feel you are under valued you must raise your price!

Finally the concept of the individual is central to anarchist beliefs. We (unlike Stirner) wish to maximise individual freedom through collective means. However the role of the individual in revolution is not greatly explored. The final version of an anarchist society should, I think, look very like Stirner's Union of Egoists — with people freely associating in pursuit of their own interests (OK these might be long term rather than immediate). Unless it is built by *"self owned"* people then it can easily be defeated or driven in a Statist direction. People who have really found themselves and know they are fighting for themselves don't give in too easily. A stateless society can only be built by people who see it as being in their own real interests. As Stirner puts it:

"The impudent lads will no longer let anything be whined and chattered into them by you, and will have no sympathy for all the follies for which you have been raving and drivelling since the memory of man began... If you command them, 'bend before the Most High' they will answer. If he wants to bend us, let him come himself and do it; we, at least, will not bend of our own accord."

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