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Herr Helms and Herr Stirner

A Critique of Hans G. Helms “The Ideology of the
Anonymous Society”

Kurt Zube

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At first one thinks that Helms is joking when he unmasks Stirner as the ideologist of the middle class who strongly influenced its consciousness in the first thirty years of this century, promoted the craze for voluntary political self-interdiction, and proved himself a forerunner of fascism. Then one thinks he intends to follow the recipe of the Abbe Galiani who, by means of grossly absurd theses against that which he attacks, in reality seeks to win the reader over to it. But it soon turns out that Helms’ grotesque theses are in fact meant in dead-earnest and are the painful cry of a Marxist ideologist whose sacred feelings are injured. Indeed, Helms cannot do anything else but pull Stirner down to his own level and show as an ideologist the anti-ideologist *par excellence*—the great annihilator of trite talk.

One could leave the whole thing alone with Lichtenberg’s dictum: “When a book and a head collide and it sounds hollow, then the book doesn’t need to be blamed for it.” Or, even more fitting, perhaps, for the undying work of Stirner, Lichtenberg’s other dic-

tum: “This book is a mirror. When a monkey looks in, no apostle looks out.”

But one result of Helms’ assiduous work deserves honest admiration. This is his 105 page appendix, which includes not only a well-nigh complete bibliography of the various German and foreign-language editions of Stirner’s work, but a really impressive listing of writings about Stirner, including many newspaper items. In addition to this, there is a really extensive bibliography of anarchist literature and the free economy teachings of Silvio Gesell. The interested reader will find true gems in this, many them out of print or remaining unknown. For the sake of the bibliography Helms’ book deserves to be most warmly recommended.

The rest of the book is unfortunate—despite many citations not only from Stirner, but also from secondary literature—because of the downright foolish way in which Helms turns completely upside down in his mind that which is torn out of context. In addition to which, there are often other unfair suppositions and aspersions in the manner of “revolver journalism.”

A relatively harmless example: Helms cites Stirner’s rediscoverer and biographer, John Henry Mackay (who was not, as he asserts, an “early expressionist writer”) who found out that Stirner’s chief work, *The Ego and His Own*, had been immediately seized in Leipzig, its place of publication, only to be released a few days later by the Ministry of the Interior, because it was “too absurd” to be dangerous. Mackay remarked: “While the most harmless scribbling was put under observation and banned, the most radical and most ‘dangerous’ of that or any time was allowed to go from hand to hand—at that time and still today.” Helms writes: “peevisish about such insolent attacks upon his idol, he (Mackay) raged against the censor and the world. How little it soothes his wounded pride as an evil ‘revoluzzer’ that only a little, peripheral and half-hearted persecution is substantiated.”

And in response to Mackay’s assertion that “in Prussia, so also in Mecklenburg-Schwerin, the ‘Ego’ was, moreover, forbid-

The spook of fascism was the real descendant of the ghost that Marx had described in the Communist Manifesto, for it arose directly from the theory of the class struggle. To investigate this, for which purpose he would have to have laid aside his blinkers, would have been a more significant task for the author than his awkward fishing for Stirner as the agent of capitalism’s connection with fascism—a fiction not made any more productive by his setting up as witnesses several “Stirnerites” who had misunderstood Stirner in the same way as he himself had.

However, he has, and one can call this the irony of the story, performed a dubious service for his cause, for most of those who will read his book, namely, his communist partisans, will only become incurably infected with the Stirner bacillus, as he is himself. Let us wait for the incubation period to pass. Helms has, already, founded a Stirner Archive in a meritorious manner.

first time, unmasked every authoritarian ideology and declared himself in opposition, while Marx only announced a new ideology of authority as he saddled the proletariat with the alleged “mission” of the bourgeoisie and made himself Pope of the new religion.

The ersatz religion of fascism is made according to the same recipe and the competition between it and communism is therefore embittered in the same way as that within the communist priesthood, in which the struggle of the “right-believers” and the “deviators” is carried on with fascist methods and the unrestrained calumny of communist tactics.

Helms betrays his communistic training in the accusations he makes against those who do not believe in the communist ideology. Against Mackay, the biographer of Stirner, who was regarded as a model of propriety by all who knew him, Helms asserts: “I suspected, moreover, that Mackay has either falsified or suppressed material that did not suit his conception.” Yet he himself declares that the Mackay Stirner Collection, the fruit of a 30 year enthusiasm, which includes 1100 volumes and over 300 handwritten pieces, is to be found in the Marxist-Leninist Institute in Moscow! Verification, therefore, would have been easy. Other Stirnerians, like the free economist Hans Timm, with his Waraaktion, he represents, against better knowledge, as swindlers.

In another chapter he bitterly turns against those of his Marxist fellow-believers who, like Max Adler, rightly said that Stirner’s teaching was “thoroughly democratic” and that “also all of Stirner’s ardour stands on the side of the proletariat.” Helms clings to the term “lumpenproletariat”—coined by Marx and meant to be insulting—that Stirner snatched when he recommended to the ‘lumps’ not to let themselves be oppressed any longer, but to become self-conscious and to struggle alongside of others for their freedom. Helms makes out that it was Stirner, not Marx, who was contemptuous of the individual proletarian and only granted him any value insofar as he let himself be moved as the willing object of his theory.

den even before Christmas and the ban was, as far as can be determined, never lifted again,” Helms writes in a really silly way, “One can well imagine how Mackay, this vested-pocket revolutionary, believing himself surrounded by spies, called at the Berlin magistrates’ office and was sorely disappointed by the portly government officials because they demonstrated complete political and legal disinterest in his hero. The ‘Ego’ has never been de facto persecuted in spite of the ban and even Mackay’s strong denunciation did not result in the desired status-symbol of an auto-da-fe.”

In another place, Helms comments on an illustration from a French individualist-anarchist paper: “The picture shows ‘what individualists want.’ Satisfied with themselves, they want to watch how the masses behave in the service of church, state, and capital. While some work, they want to ramble.” Actually the picture unequivocally shows the protest of the individual against the mass, and the text leaves no doubt that he by no means exhausts himself “watching and rambling.”

This, and even more absurd and malicious falsifications, result, however, not from the personal meanness of the author, but from such an unlimited prejudice, that it often misleads him to self-disclosures that are almost pitiful. Now and then he acts like a blubbing child who, against better judgement and aware of his defeat, reacts with a spiteful kick.

This happens with such illogical sullenness and emotion that Helms actually appears to be a Saul desperately defending himself against something which has already gripped him most profoundly. Thus, in spite of his intentions, the effect of the entire book on the half-way critical reader is just in the sense of the Abbe Galiani: where Helms means to refute or discourage he awakens interest and provokes thought—where he does not refute himself.

One can readily forgive Helms for the grotesque bowdlerizing of what Stirner said and meant, for Stirner had to explain himself with vague words in a confused world of conceptions and is not

always easy to understand nor always to be taken literally. He often makes merry over various ideologies and jeers at their representatives as he in good-natured mockery plays catch with their fixed ideas. For the completely humorless Helms, however, ideology is, because of the all powerfulness of its relation to production, a tenet of faith and a substitute for religion which he defends in a blind rage, reproaching Stirner for a serious lack of proletarian class-consciousness...

It would have been better if he could have explained how, according to the Marxist conception, it could come to the murders mentioned by Krushchev in his secret report for the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party and what are, in a state in which there is officially only one class, the “class-determined causes” for the Stalinist terror, the cult of personality and other “fascist” incivilities.

It was not Stirner, despite Engel’s accusation, who drank blood like water. Helms should explain why his political friends in Moscow have not realized their avowed ultimate goal of the disappearance of the State in a half-century of unlimited power and have, instead, developed a new ruling class. He does not understand that the spirit that *he* grasps, or means to grasp, in Stirner’s work is not Stirner’s spirit and that the latter has nothing to do with the former, which clings to slogans which were put into circulation by misapprehending Stirner’s interpreters.

The most popular misunderstanding of Stirner is that of his “egoism.” Stirner, however, unequivocally condemns “egoism” in the ordinary sense of the word, that is, ego-mania as a natural drive, as well as ego-delusion (ego-mania disguised as altruism or “idealism”). Nor is his work the revelation of a new ideology or an advice to others, but an assertion, a proclamation, a manifesto of an until then unheard of boldness. He spoke of his ego, *his* ego, which had delivered itself from all the bonds which those possessed by fixed ideas tried to put upon him. Stirner was also a realist who saw the conditions of power, not just the ratio of production, as

the reality. However, he did not bow before them, but rather tried to succeed against them. There are many places in his book (Helms also turns these upside down) where Stirner recommends for practical purposes the combined efforts of those who have achieved consciousness of their individuality and state of uniqueness. And he does this in an anarchist sense—refusing power over others and, at the same time, refusing to be dominated by others.

This is what is socially new about his work. That which is philosophically new is that he created no further ideology, but declared a practice. And he is not irrefutable simply because of that. One could even take him for a religious mystic, if it was not that with this conception one was bound to an obligatory system.

Stirner became conscious of his inner self, commented upon this and arrived at nearly the same kind of formulation used by Bô Yin Râ, who asserted that he possessed the most heart-felt recognition of eternal reality: each individuation is one-of-a-kind, a unique emanation of eternal being and life cut off from the rest. In the same way, one could put Stirner’s work in a nutshell even if Stirner had not preferred to make only a subjective statement, without setting up a system encompassing others. At various times in his work he leaves it to one’s discretion to follow his example. Poor old Helms, however, as a class-conscious atheist—according to Stirner a duped egoist—is never clear about the “circumstances of production,” which, in a hundred thousand years of human development, have played a role for only a relatively short period of time. Indeed, for much less time than the consciousness of the individual, and Helms brings the numerous mistakes and crazes of this consciousness against the heretic Stirner, who lacks respect for Helms’ idol.

Helms’ falsification of Stirner is like that of Marx who, in a good half of the first chapter of the Communist Manifesto, sings an enthusiastic song of praise for the historical mission of the bourgeoisie—explaining this to the convinced bourgeoisie. Helms understands as little as Marx that the circumstances of production are only a function of the situations of authority. Stirner, for the