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Introduction to the 2001 Edition of the Italian Version of Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*

Massimo Passamani

2001

*I am not in solidarity with the men's misery, but with
the vigor with which they refuse to put up with it.*

–Andre Breton

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In books, each person finds what he or she seeks. No text demonstrates this better than *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum* (translated into English as *The Ego and Its Own*, but more accurately, *The Unique One and Its Property*). Since its appearance, hundreds of essays dedicated to this “notorious” book, as Friedrich Lange called it, have told of a Stirner who was the father of individualism, Nietzsche’s herald, the precursor of existentialist themes, the forerunner of fascist and nazi regimes, a petite-bourgeois in anarchist guise, a hegelian sui generis, Sade’s blood brother, the skeptic with the wicked smile, a modern sophist, a hiker despite

himself in the great march of historical materialism, and so on with the partisan and academic vivisections. Stirner is an author who lends himself well to graduate theses and paid dissertations, if for no other reason than that he wrote very little (and there is very little worth saving in the substantial bibliography about him). A few insipid lines in philosophy textbooks and various operations of the thought police warning his readers—for the most part, through these methods, along with expurgated and poor translations, the attempt has been made to disarm Stirner's raging theory.

Der Einzige was a book as iron curtain during the time when two forms of capitalism were contending on the world scene; and it continues to attract publishing houses with the most varied owners at a time when the latest brand of ideology is called "the death of ideology". Yesterday, one could find in these pages, which came out of the smoke of a pub on Friedrichstrasse in Berlin in 1844, a scoffing and pointed critique of the "socialist" new man, this being to edify through the everyday methods of forced labor and police terror and the weekend methods of internationalist parades and the rhetoric of the cooks for the powerful. Today, one finds in these same pages—ruminated over among the tankards of a circle of the Free, in the shadow of Hippel, the innkeeper—a lucid ferocity against democracy and humanism, attacked even in their most extreme versions. And still.

Stirner's radical atheism—which, along with God, also demolishes the State, and which unmasks every form of alienation as sacred—has, nonetheless, been used by conservatives in their refusal of progressivist ideals ("the conclusion of Enlightenment philosophy is the defense of crime, look at Stirner) and by marxists in their hunt for "petite-bourgeois disguised as revolutionaries" with the cry of "cherchez l'anarchiste!" At one time there were even those who, feeling as if they were already public ministers in the court of History, tried to show, dates in hand, that every publication of Der Einzige corresponded with plans for counter-revolution

in Europe. Today, there are those who put the “rights of the individual” in the service of the market to justify exploitation once again. What these employees of opposed rackets didn’t and don’t want to see is that the authentic places in which to look for the expression of Stirnerian thought are the barricades of the revolutionary festival, or the walls of whichever May; in short, there where the ethic and practice of sacrifice have ended along with all rights over individuals; there where the conditions are created for the most radical manifestation of egoism: “the sweet forgetfulness of oneself”, in other words, the overabundance of life that wants a world to which to give the gift of one’s excesses.

We truly hold to ourselves when we refuse any external and imposed cause and when we stop calculating ourselves: is there any more subversive discourse in a world dominated by authority and the market? Today, the “individual” is a lump produced by the disciplinary–political, economic and psychological–practices of society, a subject of the state and capital. Defending this “individual” means defending this world.

Not so for the unique one of whom Stirner speaks. Uniqueness can only be affirmed on the ruins of the state and of every society that subordinates singular individuals to the extorted and overturned product of their relationships. What are money, merchandise and hierarchy if not sacred powers that continue to be revered because they prevent us from seeing who created them? Economy is a vast liturgy that puts faithful carriers of merchandise, not unique individuals, in relationship. In this sense, today Stirner’s critique would not go unnoticed, but would rather be clarified (with regard to money and value, and with regard to the social foundations of individual autonomy). All that is not our property is our enemy—so Stirner said. All that we don’t live directly—thoughts, actions and relationships—gets transformed into ideology, sacrifice, exploitation. The authenticity of life is revolt, insurrection, a ceaseless rising up of singular individuals against the heaven of their creations that have become autonomous and hostile. If revolt gives

us ownership of ourselves, we are self-owners above all when we can appropriate others as unique ones, not as objects. But in this society, where individuals are held together in their isolation, all that is left to us is to “do wrong or to suffer it”, to exploit or be exploited. So mutuality, which tolerates neither privileges nor rights, presupposes “a vast operation of urgent demolition” (Georges Darien). And still.

In a world dominated by misery and brutalization, Stirner mockingly tells us that we are already perfect. He doesn't rally us for any mission. He doesn't want to make us become men (the human man, this moralistic tautology about which party programs, financial prospects and penal codes regurgitate). He tells us to enjoy ourselves, here and now. In other words—each person finds what he is looking for in books—, being industrial managers, merchants, professors, journalists or “individualist anarchists” with hot feet and money in the bank? This too, if we aren't capable of wanting anything else and as long as this society will allow us to do it. Each one is worthy of his own egoism.

But can one truly defend her “perfection” in the office, the factory or the school? Doesn't this perfection need to destroy all that denies it? to give itself its own time and its own space? In a society based on the production of merchandise and of ourselves as merchandise, how do we go about not producing? Producing (prisons or cars, rights or false critiques, resignation or alternative markets), isn't it perhaps a mission that makes us all religious? Here it is then that the critique of religion should open the poetry of “I am already perfect” as life. Not producing (our slavery) means attacking everything that forces us to do so. Keeping a look out for who forces us and how, keeping a look out for where to find accomplices. Then, inevitably, the question comes up, are our accomplices the individuals, or rather a few individuals?

Despite all the accommodating readings, Stirner's discourse is a class discourse. Insofar as he speaks to us of the French revolution or the workers of his time, he is referring to enraged workers,

The enemy is not the ideals that illuminate possibilities never realized and cause one to prefer every risk to the daily prison of a social life sentence. The enemy is false consciousness that disguises motives and takes guilty pleasure. Power is nothing but the socialization of this false consciousness, the source of all uniformity. Quite rightly, Hitler could affirm this terrible banality: “Why should we socialize the banks and factories? Let’s socialize the people.” And what is socialized up to now if not slavery and suffering? Suffering-with is the only condition that society, between dictatorship and democracy, has reproduced and continually reproduces. Against this continuity of death, delighting-with still remains the only subversive project, which a unique conspiracy has saved from the smoke of Hippel’s tavern.

As to Stirner, he never renounced his mocking laughter, not even in prison, where he ended up twice for debt. The timid Schmidt didn’t have any self-pity for socializing in the community of misery.

May separation be pushed to the extreme until it is overturned in union.

Massimo Passamani, Paris, November 1998

to proletarians, when he brings his union of egoists down into the reality of social conflict. Not to disciplined laborers respectful of property, but to all the misfits, the “intellectual vagabonds”, the riff-raff for whom bourgeois morality led Marx and the metaphysicians of revolutionary science to feel contempt. For centuries, exploiters have spread their ideology of sacrifice and rancorous moaning. Stirner’s appeal is to force. No right can give the exploited what they don’t have the might to seize. Misery is not abolished either through proclamations or through laws. “The poor are to blame for there being rich men” [Stirner,pg. 279]. For those with no use for the rhetoric of humanitarians, who would like the exploited to remain so in order to be able to defend them as such, this is the point of departure. Exploitation will exist until the exploited oppose the right of the exploiter with a might: the egoism of the exploited. Several years later, Bakunin will say that to the power of the state and the capitalists it is necessary to oppose neither a set of rules nor decrees, but rather, the revolutionary deed. One can decree that God doesn’t exist and that no one has the right to govern another; but the need for God, which is a social need, is not legally abolished. Nor is the right of governors, if they will take it, as long as the governed have not created, in practice, relationships that are free of command. Stirner saw clearly that the ideology and morality of the ruling class formed a material force against the egoism of the ruled, a material force that has had in parties and labor unions—as unions of renouncers—its irreplaceable allies. Reformism is merely the slave’s form of egoism, since the interests that it defends are those imposed by capital, just as the expectation of the Great Day is merely the secular form of the hope for paradise. What some expected from—positive or natural—rights, some others demand of History, perhaps in the form of a clever and untiring mole. But political and legal battles are always the affairs of the few who represent others, just as the unavoidable destinies of history, the final crisis of capitalism, the transition to communism, etc., always need scientific interpreters. Rights and determinist ideologies, two

myths against the lucidity of intelligence and the passions, two myths against individual autonomy.

Capital took any global vision the exploited had of their activity away from them—wage specialization, this totalitarianism of the fragment, is the real origin of passivity—, while reformists managed powerlessness in the name of the party, a transcendent “all” behind which the interests of the few were hidden. And in the name of class, how many myths? No class autonomy without individual autonomy, this is Stirner’s lesson. If the life of each one of us is the concrete experience of social war, i.e., of the conflict between freedom and oppression, then a revolution that is not the generalized occasion of individual revolt against the ruling conditions of existence will always be a reform of the existent. Resolute or submissive, generous or calculating, in our pleasures and dissatisfactions we experience the conflict between revolution and counterrevolution. In creative impulses and in relationships that live on by themselves, in the certainty of felt intuitions as in the thoughts in which habit talks to itself, the authenticity of a subversive project is measured. If someone is freed, he will never be a free man, but rather a freed man, i.e., a redeemed slave. This is why anyone who speaks of freeing others is a future master. This is why the best thing that we can do for others is to free ourselves, in the meantime creating the conditions in which we can mutually enjoy the liberation of others: the conditions of rupture. This society is the order, the scheme, of mutual renunciation. The “union of egoists”—this conscious association of autonomous individuals, this connection that doesn’t exist beyond the duration of the will of its participants—can only be union in revolt.

Domination is fed by all our smothered passions, all the citadels of illusion built on the sense of guilt and the social sham of personality (persona, in Latin, means mask). Ideology always colonizes the space of ideas and desires that we aren’t able to live. Every appeal to passivity, every practice that integrates the morality of compulsion, is a service rendered to power. If real force is

speaks of an elsewhere that is wordless, because the content of a theory is the life of the one who expresses it.

But he doesn’t deny the importance of ideas, just as he doesn’t overlook the development that allowed human beings to achieve the capacity not to be total slaves to their passions. On the contrary, in responding to his critics, he will go so far as to say that he is not against communism nor the self-sacrificial spirit, if these are one’s own cause, in other words, egoistic. I would add that even myths, with their allusive force and their poetic tension, are not always tools of domination (i.e., representations that unite the interests of the exploited and those of the exploiters by disguising them). They can also be collective stories of individual desires. What makes the difference is the practical and psychological significance. What logical reality has there ever been behind Bakunin’s Slavs or Coeurderoy’s Cossacks? Or behind the “heavenly carnality” of the partisans of the Free Spirit? And yet, they were real with that unique reality that is truly revolutionary, i.e., authentically experience. They were real in spite of rational and historical objectivity and in spite of those who pass themselves off as their guarantors. Real as the haze that assumed the semblance of a General Ludd during the assaults against machines by early English workers. Real, in short, because they were complicit with revolt and freedom.

Der Einzige has also certainly been a myth, which has had more stories told about it than it has had readers, influencing attitudes more than intelligence. And yet, many comrades who have read it or “listened” amidst the noise and fashions of an epoch, did not find in it a stupid exaltation of violence, nor a defense for inaction and isolation, nor even the pitfalls of the Hegelian dialectic from which Stirner never completely freed himself. These comrades have found a vigor there that has made kings and heads of state throughout the world tremble, by arming rebel hands; that has clashed face-to-face with fascism, with stalinism and with all republics. And this myth, this story, continues to speak to me.

showing itself to be the most faithful handmaiden of power. If the thought-already-thought turns against desires in the same way that dead labor turns against the living, accumulation is, in both cases, the domination of the past over the present. Critique cannot separate the two aspects, so much the more since social struggle continually confirms the link between ideology and ossified activity. A fixed idea is born from a thought in the same way that a party is formed from a union—Stirner declares form on side. The leaders of parties (or any hierarchical organization) are the holders and guardians of fixed ideas, i.e., of ideology, precisely because they govern over the passivity of those who submit to them. The experts, in whose power Bakunin saw the origin of every bureaucracy, are the divinities of our time. “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (The Communist Manifesto).

But there is more. The totality of the body that affirms its uniqueness is increasingly the inevitable course of the social war, as the entry of capital into the human organism through biotechnology reveals in a totalitarian way. Now that individuals are disappearing as such, modeled in the image of the economic and administrative Machine, Stirner’s fury no longer grants historical distance. Individual autonomy is united to the capacity of the species itself, both threatened by the identical project of domestication and death. Critical intelligence and the integrity of the body will be reborn together, or not at all.

In *Der Einzige*, there is also reflection on language. Stirner writes for nearly four hundred pages about something—uniqueness—that cannot be said. With a witticism that is not at all paradoxical, he will later state that he wasn’t speaking, but merely showing. Language—like the thought that nourishes it—exists due to concepts, which cannot express, in their universality, the existence of singular individuals, the latter being unique in all its moment, irreducibly particular, and so unspeakable. So Stirner

self-possession, any force subordinated to—and authority is always such—is merely the back side of alienation. On that back side, one will always find the need to compete, whereas the—precise, carnal—feeling of uniqueness has no need for competition because it accepts no measure outside itself. It is equality in flattening that creates false rivalry. Therefore, the suppression of social classes does not tend toward this type of equality, but rather to the emerging of the only conflict that is authentic, because it is no longer mediated: the play of uniqueness. In this sense, Stirner’s discourse is a class discourse that avoids proletarian messianism. The exploited are not the carriers of any mission, just as the work that they are forced to do is not the source of any virtue. Put simply, they are against society to the extent to which they realize their own interest, that of negating themselves as exploited, in other words, of creating relations free of hierarchy. Their interest (their being-among) is the solidarity that doesn’t give a damn at all for the laws established by the masters. Their consciousness (their knowing-with) is revolt. Obedience and religious waiting, on the contrary, are the mechanisms of capital, its merchandise par excellence.

Stirner’s intellectual courage is remarkable. With respect to the history of philosophy, this cockpit of courage has hosted very few. To appreciate this, it would be enough to read Stirner in constant reference to Socrates, an exercise, at the very least, instructive. With the exception of Nietzsche, who contracted more than a debt with the solitary of Bayreuth, Stirner is the only one to attack the Athenian as a fanatic of morality and a defender of law against the individual. All the others approve of the Socratic decision not to escape from prison, out of respect for the state, thus showing that the whole of philosophy is on the side of the hemlock.

But even revolutionaries, who wanted to make of their lives, as an uncontrollable of the Iron Column put it, “a beautiful work”, have very rarely achieved such audacity of thought. One needs to look for the best of their theory in their acts. Stirner, however, attacks all of the ideas of his time and treats those who pass for

the most radical as “pious atheists”. The only mention of Marx—regarding *On the Jewish Question* from 1844—, for example, is as harsh as it is pertinent: the marxian “generic essence of man” still betrays, in the manner of Feuerbach, its theological nature. (This doesn’t take away from the fact that, thanks to Stirner himself, *The German Ideology* will contain significant criticisms of *Der Einzige* particularly relating to money and the division of labor). Stirner attacks the morality of sacrifice (as inner priest and, at the same time, as the social mechanism for the suppression of class conflict), the state (in any form, including the “transitional” one—that never transits—toward communism), democracy (even direct), in no uncertain terms. But even more remarkable is what Stirner said about theory itself. One might expect the reverse side of the mediocrity of his life (teacher at a school for young women of good family, failed small business man¹, etc.) to be the attribution of a higher role to theory, and thus to those who possess it. Marx’s own revolutionary theory (with regards to the direction of the workers’ movement, for example) contains the “scientific” justification of the years that its author spent studying in the library of the British Museum. But it’s not like this for Stirner. He mocks the reign of separated thought as tyranny of the spirit, and of “scholars” as priests and police. One might say that the conviction shared by all the young Hegelians—and thus also by Stirner—was that philosophy, having now reached its completion, had merely to be realized. “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it,” would be the last of Marx’s theses on Feuerbach, as is well-known. *Der Einzige* in most parts reflects this persuasion of finding oneself at the dawning of a new era, on whose portals, Stirner imagines himself inscribing a new motto—“make value of yourself”—capable of definitively undermining the Delphic-Socratic motto (“Know thyself”). In 1873, Bakunin would

¹ A reference to Stirner’s attempt with some other “Young Hegelians” to start a cooperative milk-shop.

write: “During the last nine years more than enough ideas for the salvation of the world have been developed in the International (if the world can be saved by ideas) and I defy anyone to come up with a new one. This is the time not for ideas but for action, for deeds.” But in Stirner there is something else. His uncovering of the policing power of reason doesn’t favor emotionality and imagination, in accordance with the romantic model, nor merely praxis (perhaps, like Engels, asking the workers to become dialecticians). What emerges here is instead an “insurrectional bodily existence”. What Stirner sarcastically mocks is logical thought as such. “A jerk does me the service of the most anxious thinking, a stretching of the limbs shakes off the torment of thought, a leap upward hurls from my breast the nightmare of the religious world, a jubilant Hoopla throws off year-long burdens. But the monstrous significance of unthinking jubilation could not be recognized in the long night of thinking and believing.” “Only when the idea remains—idea, [...] is Christianity still extant.”² Passages like this can be tracked down by the dozens in *Der Einzige*. What is important, in my opinion, is to see how the critique of Christian thought and language is completely one with social critique. Thought, in fact, is made sacred when it gets away from the activity that gave it birth; in this sense, the tyranny of thought is the reflection of a society based on the division of labor., whose ideology is nothing but separated and accumulated thought. Just as reason, which should illuminate the passions, ends up burning them down (according to Leopardi’s remarkable intuition), in the same way cooperation, which should multiply individual might, becomes a dominating force when put in the service of any extorted activity. Technology, which has now reached a sacred uncontrollability, increased this forced cooperation by embodying specialized, and therefore coercive, knowledge,

² I am not sure why Passamani chooses to leave out this phrase: “as man or mankind is indeed a bodiless idea” since it would have further strengthened the point he is making, but I add it here for that reason.