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Domination and Alienation in Stirner and Debord

David S. D'Amato

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We have allowed the American ruling class[1] to abstract themselves almost entirely from their substantive political positions and practices. So deeply engrossed are we in their branding as products of consumption, in their spectacular representations, that we seem to have no capacity to grapple critically with the situation we find ourselves in. The moment calls for careful reengagement with French philosopher Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle*, as well as one of its most important, if unsung, precursors, German philosopher (perhaps anti-philosopher) Max Stirner's book *The Ego and Its Own*. These masterworks of critical theory, separated by more than one hundred years (Debord's book was first published in 1967, Stirner's in 1844), offer vital tools for helping us make sense of the present moment and for consciously cultivating an "ethos of non-domination."

[1] Though many of the arguments set out here apply no less to other groups of global elites, I have chosen to address the American ruling class, because it is the one of which I have the most intimate knowledge, and because the American ruling class most typifies and illustrates Debord's theory of the spectacle.

Debord is perhaps best known as among the principals of the Situationist International, a group and movement that emerged in the late 1950s out of several avant-garde artistic and social tendencies. The group's name implies the conscious creation of situations to free spaces of daily life from the alienation and falsity of the existing order, characterized by the spectacle as Debord describes it. (This emphasis on the deliberate recapture of autonomy in everyday life is also an echo of Stirner, as we shall see.) Debord offers a comprehensive update on the traditional Marxist theory of alienation, further developing and broadening the notion to describe "the world of the autonomous image." Here, alienation is not confined to productive and consumptive aspects of life, but is a pervasive fact of social reality, as he puts it, "a social relation among people, mediated by images." We are separated not only from active control over our own time and the products of our work, but from other people and our communities, culture, political participation, leisure and entertainment, and even from ourselves and our relationships with ourselves.

The Society of the Spectacle evinces a series of striking parallels with *The Ego and Its Own*, frequently cited as "the most revolutionary [book] ever written." Debord opens his book with a quote from Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), which is notable, among other reasons, because Stirner dedicates a large part of *The Ego and Its Own* to a critical analysis of Feuerbach's philosophy. In the passage quoted by Debord, Feuerbach is critical of the modern world's preference for illusion, favoring "the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality." Feuerbach argues that we should endeavor to uncover the true essences underneath mere symbols and representations. But for Stirner, Feuerbach thus holds onto the fundamental mistake of seeking out a fixed and grounded target that does not exist, only swapping the Christian god out for a new universal of human nature, identified with *Gattungswesen*(translating to "species-being" or "species-essence"). Stirner

with the world, and that a new set of tools is critically necessary for both analysis and action. Stirner's spooks and Debord's spectacle appear increasingly relevant and illuminative as ways to understand a world overwhelmed by a relentless cavalcade of digital content and captured by highly-mediated, globe-spanning government and corporate institutions. If, as Stirner and Debord suggest, we are participating in our own alienation and oppression, as passive consumers of hollow images and ideologies, then we have an opportunity to actively cast these asides both individually and collectively in the creation of spaces for autonomy and authenticity.

cannot hope to construct the framework for a new, liberatory political program before critically interrogating *the ways we construct ourselves* and our relationships with the ideological systems to which we subject ourselves.

Like Stirner's, Debord's relationship with anarchist ideas is a complicated one. In terms similar to those deployed in Stirner's general critique of ideology, Debord takes both Bakunin and Marx to task for "instituting themselves into ideological authorities." For Debord, the fundamental mistake of anarchism is its sense of immediacy (he acknowledges that this is also its strength), its departure from "the historical terrain" as a "merely ideological" insistence "that the adequate forms for this passage [from ideas and theory] to practice *have already been found and will never change*" (emphasis added). In arguing that anarchism has divorced itself from questions of historical development as a pure ideology that is contemptuous of method, Debord exhibits both similarities with and differences from Stirner. Certainly Stirner would have agreed with his critical appraisal of anarchism as a "simple, total conclusion," frozen in place and "considered in the absolute." Debord sees anarchists as articulating only a negative vision—no more state, no more class hierarchies—without presenting a positive vision or a roadmap that is sensitive to historical conditions and developments. But while Stirner would certainly reject, with Debord, an anarchism construed as a "definitive solution brought about by one single blow," he would not have shared Debord's assessment of the "individual caprice" arguably found in anarchist thought. For Stirner, there is much to recommend individual caprice, not only as a form of liberatory practice, but more importantly as a recognition of the individual's ownness against those who hope to impose religious obligations by reference to, for example, stages of historical development.

At this moment in history, it is clear that we have succumbed to a diminished capacity to engage with and interact

denies that there is a universal *Gattungswesen*to be accessed or retrieved, and claims that Feuerbach is actually constructing a new illusory device for the repressive subjectification of the individual.

In seeing the spectacle "[w]herever *representation* becomes independent," Debord's thinking echoes that of Stirner. Stirner's critique of the suite of ideological systems associated with modernity sets out a very similar attack on representations that become independent, taking on a power and volition of their own. For Stirner, our systems of thought have become "fixed ideas," abstract ideals that, though they are not the ultimate reality, come to be treated as sacred and thus to dominate us. We focus our attention on such abstractions to the detriment of our ability to confront reality—in its deeply contingent, irreducible nature. Stirner and Debord overlap significantly in their criticism of the ways we interact with images and narratives as a substitute for meaningful, authentic engagement with each other and for the development of functioning social institutions. Both Stirner and Debord address "the recruitment of desire toward the workings of power," concerned to point out the use and manipulation of manufactured, superficial substitutes for genuine desires. Our desires are redirected toward consumable commodities—commodities in both the physical sense and as collections of images and ideas that inform our perceptions and undergird the state and capitalist relations.

In addressing Debord's notion of the spectacle, it is important to consider at least two senses of distraction or the consumption of appearances—one sense in which our attention is pulled away from more socially important or consequential things—for example, the abstract notion of democracy—toward other, more superficial objects of attention or consumption, and another in which our focus is in fact directed as those more important things, but is mediated from them nonetheless due to our ways of formulating them. For example, what is being

addressed and contemplated as democracy today is in fact a series of slogans, performances, and totemic symbols standing in for democracy, heading off at the pass even the possibility of a coherent discourse about it. How can we talk about it other than nonsensically when "all gazing and all consciousness" is concentrated on accreted "diversions of the spectacle"? Ironically, our phones, devices ostensibly for communication, have preempted dialogue, cutting it off through a layered and recursively reflected series of images.

We can engage with the appearance of democracy, democracy as a symbolic gesture and an image, but not democracy as communities governing themselves directly and collectively. That is, we have democracy as a consumable commodity or brand name, but not as a lived relation between people. To call our current system of "democracy" highly mediated is an understatement. An infinitesimally small and shrinking group of people make the important decisions at the national level, particularly in the national security and foreign policy arena. We can analyze this by examining the several ways in which decision-making capacity is kept from the people: comparing the total number of people (at both the state and national levels) to the number of elected politicians who purport to represent them; analyzing the coercive social, economic, and legal power exercised by the leaders of the two major political parties within our electoral system; comparing the number of unelected officials that exercise real influence over policy making to the total population; evaluating the layers of mediation and separation—whereby voters choose between a narrow range of candidates who then appoint functionaries, who are influenced by corporations and their hired advocates and spokespeople. Tiered layers of intermediaries stand between the ordinary citizen and even the merest iota of real political power, as well-funded and organized corporate interests enjoy direct and privileged access to and apparently near-total control over politicians and bureaucrats at the highest levels. Given the vast

explicit call for collective revolutionary practice, Stirner sees this as another ideological project that subject the individual to domination and new despotisms. Stirner dismisses the idea of revolution, its aim "new *arrangements*," in favor of insurrection, growing out of "men's discontent with themselves," "a getting up, without regard to the arrangements that spring from it." Stirner has no interest in anarchism as a totalizing closed system whose boundaries are policed piously by a group with special access to a body of religious knowledge. His work implies a mode of political practice that much more honestly confronts the temporariness, locality, and contingency of social relations as well as their predicates, individuals' own self-constructions. Examining Stirner's idea of insurrection, Saul Newman describes it as "a process of separation and detachment, not from the real world, but from the world of illusions … ." If revolution contemplates changed conditions, prescribed and shepherded by those who know the straight and narrow path to a free and just society, insurrection is the individual's refusal to be a subject, the conscious reappropriation of autonomy against our own attachments to power. Stirner's insurrection is more akin to a "permanent revolution," but one that plays out as the individual's exorcism of their own attachments and concessions to power. Stirner understood that property "should not and cannot be abolished," but must instead be actively reclaimed, "torn from ghostly hands," in a rejection of the "erroneous consciousness, that I cannot entitle myself to as much as I require." This is not the homiletical message of one building a new system, reverent before some absolute standard of value. To Stirner, we are the first source of the power exercised over us, because it cannot exist without our acquiescence. We don't need to be freed by special, designated others—indeed they may not even exist. Stirner suggests that we can be fully aware and active in the fluid, creative processes that give rise to the identities we assume and to the social world itself. Stirner contends that we

as worthy of universal deference and worship, we subdue what is unique in us and in the world and become alienated from ourselves and each other. As a result, social ties become more and more attenuated, subordinated to reified illusions. Those at the top of hierarchical structures of power leverage our veneration of such illusions to subjugate and oppress us. Modern, apparently "liberal" institutions have no less given us inherently hierarchical and infantilizing "pastoral power," in which an initiated group arrogates the power to decide who is a sinner, with the sinner now affronting the religion of humanity. The modern state has reconstituted such pastoral power in therapeutic terms, the terms of helping or curing the derelict. Or as Stirner puts it:

Curative means or *healing* is only the reverse side of *punishment*, the *theory of cure* runs parallel with the *theory of punishment*; if the latter sees in an action a sin against right, the former takes it for a sin of the man *against himself*, as a falling away from his health.

Here, we can contrast the "vernacular order" to with "official order," where the former refers to the spontaneous, bottom-up ways in which people relate to each other and solve their problems without the oversight or intervention of ostensible experts. The official order is the one created and imposed by an authoritative class standing outside of local communities but in between their members. This class of experts is treated as a special priesthood possessed of unique knowledge of perfect ideals in specialized areas; we process our world not directly, but through thoughts, opinions, and expertise.

Similarities between their ideas notwithstanding, Stirner and Debord come to different conclusions about the best, most plausible path out of the mediation, alienation, and domination of modern society. Their ideas provide fertile ground for anarchists, and while anarchists have drawn on them, both offer trenchant criticisms of anarchism, Debord explicitly, Stirner by implication. Where Debord articulates an

distance between the American people and appreciable political power and influence, and the effective rule of a small minority, a much more accurate characterization of the United States' political system is as an oligarchy. The insulation of this small governing group from the people's will—that is, the anti-democratic character of the system—is indeed among the most salient defining qualities of American politics. Several important studies in recent years have underscored this fact (including a widely-read 2014 paper by Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page).

This bureaucratic, highly managed and mediated mode of democracy allows the semblance of political participation and efficacy without the reality. We pass our opinions into a fathomless stream of images, as isolated members of the "lonely crowds" Debord described. The independent representation of democracy in the United States and in the West more generally manifests as a fetishization of and fixation on voting; this voting and talking-about-voting spectacle has entrenched itself so deeply in the imagination that there is apparently little energy leftover to commit to building community or counter-institutions. This is the paradox of always-online participation in mass consumer society while feeling increasingly disconnected socially. We see this expressed in a worsening crisis of hopelessness and despair. We lack a grounded concept of democracy because our attention is focused on a simulacrum, where certain conspicuous symbols are interposed between us and democracy as a lived and embodied part of community life. In the passive, inattentive mode of engagement, decisions are made for us while we accept a version of political participation that finds us voting in rigged elections between nearly identical candidates. Cultivating the habit of challenging the assumptions underlying this approach—and so challenging the idea of democracy as merely a spectacular image—will be necessary to creating institutions that are genuinely responsive to community and

invested in human wellbeing. "The human built world is not built for humans," but for power, for the kinds of economic and technological optimization that allow us to deploy power over the world, and thus enable us to dominate and manipulate it and each other. These are very different goals from the intentional nurturing of societies that put human flourishing and wellbeing first. Anarchists reject the highly mediated political participation of representation by various groups, whether they purport to be parliaments or revolutionary vanguards. We don't want to be represented—our assumption and expectation is that each individual represents themself. Our demand is full, active control over our daily lives, in an active struggle against what Debord called the "unqualified" and "universal wrong" of "exclusion from life." We don't want stylized, institutionalized versions of equality, rights, and freedoms that are "in reality based on power and can be easily violated or removed by governments." Only witness how quickly and easily liberal governments today "transform seamlessly into post-liberal security regimes."

Both Debord and Stirner point out that we bear much of the responsibility for our own alienation and subjugation. It is not just that we are complicit in our own oppression; we actively uphold and perpetuate it by loudly trumpeting and recreating the ideological paradigms that make it possible. Debord beckons us to examine our internalization of the spectacle and our role in regenerating it. He sees us as dominating ourselves by tacitly accepting the false and mediated as real and immediate. Stirner's approach, while similar, presents a more fundamental challenge to the methods of philosophy and to the idea of collective, revolutionary efforts to overturn the existing order. Stirner sees fixed ideas (or "spooks") as "vestigial theological abstraction[s]," attempts to identify and freeze in place universal essences that exist nowhere. Important to underscore here is that Stirner's attack on the subject-object distinction is central to his entire philosophical (perhaps better understood

as anti-philosophical) project; he regards the distinction as another abstract fixed idea or that serves to alienate the individual by insisting that the object inhabits a reality separate from the subject—leading to the untenable situation in which the object assumes the primary position. As Widukind De Ridder explains, "My alienation (*Entfremdung*) of the object means that I am 'possessed' by it, that I do not own the object and thus myself, but that the object 'possesses' me."

We willingly give ourselves over to self-denial and domination, constituting our identities around metaphysical abstractions, captured by a religion of Man. Religious authority is no less potent in the modern age; it has been universalized and, in "taking on the guise of the rational and the secular," may even exercise more complete power and subjection. The debasement of the unique individual under the perfect ideals of humanism is no less complete and oppressive than it was under God. Stirner reframes liberalism, grounded in a carefully constructed and deeply ideological idea of Man, as entailing "a technology of normalization," which depends and must depend on our own self-condemnation and self-subjection. In Stirner's ideas, we find an account of the ideological technologies of normalization and discipline later associated with Foucault, but also present in various ways in Debord. Debord sees us as manipulated through the spectacle into an acceptance of "the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue," to the detriment of our understanding of concrete "relations among men and classes." Power relations are thus disguised. But where Debord's ideas are positioned within a framework of humanistic philosophy, Stirner regards this philosophy as inherently dangerous. For Stirner, fundamentally, "Essences are ideological constructions from which political oppression can be exercised." In positing certain concepts—humanity, the state, rationality, freedom, socialism, for example—as fixed and universal in appearance and application, and thus