

All things are Nothing to Me

Stirner's Communism

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Max Stirner is no historical materialist and yet here I am, writing a paper on Stirner's communism. What motivates this gesture? First of all, given that we are now at the end of history, it might do us some good to look at a few of the first ideas that pointed beyond it, from within. In the 1840's, Germany was teeming with theoretical critiques of modern bourgeois society, while France was burgeoning with practical revolts against it. It was Stirner's genius to attack the German theoretical critiques of society for being nothing but secularized, liberal forms of its development. And it was Marx's genius to locate and ground Stirner's critique within a historical field of social relations of production and class antagonisms.

Second, it's commonplace that Marx developed the "materialist conception of history" in *The German Ideology* around 1845. But how did he do so? Although he already had a developed philosophical account of alienation and private property, it wasn't until he responded to Stirner's 1844 *The Ego and its Own* [*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*] that the philosophical-political critique became thoroughly historical, bequeathing us with the horrible moniker under which we still gather today, "historical materialism." If the reading of Stirner gave humanity the weapon of historical materialist critique, then what else can it give us today? Is there a way to read Stirner afresh, as Engels first did when he wrote to Marx on Nov 19th 1844, that: "*Clearly Stirner is the most talented, independent and hard-working of the 'Free', but for all that he tumbles out of idealistic into materialistic abstraction and ends up in limbo.*" (Engels, 1982: 13)

What is this limbo that Stirner falls into? It is precisely the limbo between idealism and materialism, between heaven and earth/hell; Stirner's theory has finally escaped idealist presuppositions, but has not moved beyond idealist targets. In other

words, Stirner starts with real individuals, but seeks to move forward through confronting idealist fantasies, through acts of theoretical combat, of demystifying abstractions such as God, Man, State, Society, Morality, Justice, Labor, Equality, Freedom, Love, and Revolution. In one of his more spectacular moments, Stirner names the imperative of his egoism as “storming heaven” [*Himmelsstürmen*] which can only be finished with the “real, complete downfall of heaven.” Even Satan was too narrow, for he focused solely on Earth. This technique he eventually calls, desecration.

Engels again: “This egoism is taken to such a pitch, it is so absurd and at the same time so self-aware, that it cannot maintain itself even for an instant in its one-sidedness, but must immediately change into communism. In the first place it’s a simple matter to prove to Stirner that his egoistic man is bound to become communist out of sheer egoism. That’s the way to answer the fellow.” (1982: 12)

And so the response to Stirner, the majority of the manuscript of *The German Ideology* is an attempt to prove that egoism must immediately “change into communism”, that “egoistic man” is bound to become “communist” out of egoism alone. But not only this. Engels: “*But we must also adopt such truth as there is in the principle. And it is certainly true that we must first make a cause our own, egoistic cause, before we can do anything to further it – and hence that in this sense, irrespective of any eventual material aspirations, we are communists out of egoism also...*” (1982: 12) Not only does egoism lead to communism, but egoism is the *first cause of communism*, its ground and foundation, that “irrespective of any material aspirations” makes us communists. Again from Engels: “*We must take our departure from the Ego, the empirical, flesh-and-blood individual.*” (1982:12)

This is what reading Stirner did to Engels. To Marx we’re not so sure, since the letter in which he described his initial reaction has been lost. Whatever it made him feel at first, it eventually provoked a lengthy 400 page vitriolic response. I can go on about the monumental importance that reading Stirner was for Nietzsche, Emma Goldman, Jules Bonnot, Renzo Novatore, Carl Schmitt, Gustav Landauer, Victor Serge, Marcel Duchamp, and the Situationist International, but I won’t. I recommend you all to follow through on it for yourselves. If nothing else, reading Stirner has historically been a source of reawakening the spirit of revolt that animates communist and anarchist critique, a source grounded not in any social cause or political ideal, but first of all in one’s relationship to their own life.

Third, does the movement from left Hegelians through Stirner to Marx mimic the structure of bland critique implicit in the left today? The young Hegelians, the “Free”, criticized bourgeois society for not living up to its ideal of *man*, of failing to bring justice, equality, freedom, blah blah blah to all who live within the modern state. They criticized governments, advocated for “social justice”, wrote in newspapers and signed petitions. Are they not the cell form of the modern activist of today,

the liberal/socialist/democrat/critic who endlessly searches for the latest ideal to foreground the hypocrisy of the state? They both advocate for “people power”, for self-managed “free states”, for the triumph of a secular humanity against the backwardness of religion. Against this, Stirner attacks the foundations upon which such critiques stand, that is, the ideas of Man, State, Law, Justice, and Equality, Society and Freedom, arguing that all such values or ideas are *spooks* or abstractions that obfuscate one’s own real condition, turning the ideal itself into the foundation of the material. Stirner’s anti-moral, anti-libertarian, anti-statist, anti-work critique ends up in a call for *insurrection* against revolution, for whereas “the Revolution aimed at new *arrangements*; insurrection leads us no longer to *let* ourselves be arranged.” (Stirner, 1995: p. 279) Is this not the original form of the contemporary insurrectionary critique of liberal/socialist activism? Does not the razor of insurrection cut through the crap of abstractions that litter the field of possibilities for the future, possibilities such as “participatory economics,” “socialism for the 21st century,” “democracy-to-come,” “self-management”, “eco-socialism” etc.? Stirner sees no hope outside the negation of the present, the rendering of all things into nothing to me, the dissolution of the world as such. Only by patiently attending to each particular abstraction, and pulling at its roots, can something like a future be possible. For Stirner, all metaphysical roots lead back to the hyper-abstractions of God or State, Politics or Theology, or rather, to the original indistinction between the two. If anything remains separate from individuals, as Marx says, then alienation has not been overcome, and communism is still not achieved.

With the critical critics demolished, with the Left revealed as to its true function, what is left to be done? Marx’s project in the mid 1840’s is not to abandon Stirner’s intervention and return to the pre-Stirnerian critiques of young Hegelians, but rather to materially ground the cause of the abstractions that Stirner fights against. One by one, Marx is able to locate the material, social relations that give birth to dominant abstractions of the day. Stirner’s project is to trace modern liberal ideas to their dependence on God or State, and then to desecrate them completely, advocating for crime, the inhuman, and secession. Marx, on the other hand, situates Stirner’s critique of everything within the orbit of private property or what eventually becomes the concept of *capital*. God and State, Equality and Freedom are all generated historically by the material relations amongst humans in capitalist society. For Marx, these ideal abstractions come from the real abstraction of capital, the alienated form of human activity in the modern exchange society of commodity production which submits all content of human action to the form of labor directed towards value. Marx, in the *German Ideology*, paints Stirner as both a modern Don Quixote and a new Paul, a knight errant and a militant apostle against the old Gods, who however doesn’t necessarily confront the material relations upon which such Gods are maintained. Stirner’s unique individual, the

Einzig, the ego who is able to fully develop their capacities, is only possible to Marx in fully developed communism, in which material relations are sutured to individual power, and not to the drive for valorization. Stirner's egoism is Marx's communism seen from the first person singular perspective. It is not the negation of the individual, but its realization. In response to Stirner in the *German Ideology* Marx writes (and notice the focus on individuals and individuality):

We have already shown above that the abolition of a state of affairs in which relations become independent of *individuals*, in which *individuality* is subservient to chance and the personal relations of *individuals* are subordinated to general class relations, etc. — that the abolition of this state of affairs is determined in the final analysis by the abolition of division of labour . . .

Within communist society, the only society in which the genuine and free development of *individuals* ceases to be a mere phrase, this development is determined precisely by the connection of individuals, a connection which consists partly in the economic prerequisites and partly in the necessary solidarity of the free development of all, and, finally, in the universal character of the activity of individuals on the basis of the existing productive forces. (Marx and Engels, 1975: 438, 439. Emphasis mine)

Marx also ties Stirner's critique to the proletarian struggles that are already occurring in Western Europe. For Marx, criticism doesn't need to *represent* such struggles, but rather only *express* their target in the fullest way possible. This target, which Stirner theoretically clears the ground for, is capital, and the proletarian insurrections of the 1840's are all implicitly if not explicitly in line against it.

Is there a Marx of today, a critique which locates the insurrectionary response to the left in a global field of antagonism against the target of capital? I don't think so, but I guess that's why we're here now. Perhaps this is the need, to connect proletarian revolt to their object in a manner which explains the dynamics of capital and self, property and its negation.

With that said, I will now begin a brief introduction to Stirner's thought. First, through an analysis of the line in which he starts and ends his text, and second, with a discussion of his notion of ego, consumption and property.

Ich hab' Mein Sach' auf Nicht gestellt. All things are Nothing to Me. I have set my affair on nothing. I place my trust in Nothing. — That's how it begins, and follows,

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!*

.... and later....

I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything. (Stirner, 1995: p. 5)

We'll come back to this.

Stirner steals his first line "All Things Are Nothing to Me" from the first line of an 1806 poem by Goethe called VANITAS! VANITATUM VANITAS! It goes like this:

My trust in nothing now is placed/All things are Nothing to me
So in the world true joy I taste,

Then he who would be a comrade of mine
Must rattle his glass, and in chorus combine,
Over these dregs of wine.

I placed my trust in gold and wealth,
But then I lost all joy and health,
Both here and there the money roll'd,
And when I had it here, behold,
From there had fled the gold!

I placed my trust in women next,
But there in truth was sorely vex'd,

The False another portion sought,
The True with tediousness were fraught,
The Best could not be bought.

My trust in travels then I placed,
And left my native land in haste.

But not a single thing seem'd good,
The beds were bad, and strange the food,
And I not understood.

I placed my trust in rank and fame,
Another put me straight to shame,

And as I had been prominent,
All scowl'd upon me as I went,
I found not one content.

I placed my trust in war and fight,
We gain'd full many a triumph bright,
Into the foeman's land we cross'd,
We put our friends to equal cost,
And there a leg I lost.

My trust is placed in nothing now, / All things are nothing to me
At my command the world must bow,

And as we've ended feast and strain,
The cup we'll to the bottom drain;
No dregs must there remain!

As in Stirner, we find the hopelessness of searching for meaning outside oneself. Consuming life in numerous activities – money, sex, fame, travels, war – we find that only their nothingness reveals my self, a self not composed of such qualities but revealed in the particular negation of them. For Stirner, Goethe reveals the subject of the present, the man without qualities who can only become unique in the ways in which such qualities are overcome. And is this not the definition of the proletariat? But let's slowdown. Where does this title come from, VANITAS! VANITATUM VANITAS!?

Well, from Ecclesiastes chapter 1 verse 2, which Jerome's Latin renders as *Vanitas vanitatum dixit Ecclesiastes vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas*. A modern translation runs as *Vanity of vanities, said the Preacher: vanity of vanities, all is vanity*. Vanity here signifies a certain emptiness, meaningless, a transitory impermanence of all labor or activity under the sun, under God. The original Hebrew word for *vanitas* is *Hevel*, which means breath, or sometimes fog. *Hevel* is also the name of the first son in the Bible, Abel, the first worker, whose short life of labor is as meaningless as modern life under capital. However, in between the Hebrew and Latin, the Greek Septuagint translated *Hevel* as *ma-tai-o-tais*, "Devoid of truth, use-less" which comes from the verb *mä-sä'-o-māi*, which means "to chew, eat, devour."

Now this is interesting, for Stirner's main concept of action is *consumption*, by which he means the taking, seizing, and releasing of things from their sacred sphere to the sphere of *free use* and *abuse*. To consume is to use, and if the world is *vanity*, *hevel*, *masomai*, that is, empty, useless, already chewed up, then the task

is not to refill it with new abstractions, but to consume it anew, to masticate it ourselves. The world as we know it is dead, consumed labor, it is *nothing to me*. But this nothing is not a general or empty nothing, it is the particular nothing of capital which confronts the particular nothing of I. Retreating into qualities, identities, properties is not the way out, but rather only through the making of the world into my property, into something that I use and does not use me, is Stirner's communism possible.

In *Capital*, Marx describes the process by which the relations of persons assume the relations of things. Stirner's "all things are nothing to me" both captures this process of reification and articulates the means beyond it as well, a means which follows the path of alienation to its overcoming. To annihilate the world is *both* the project of capital, which annihilates the content of human activity and replaces it with the form-determined imperatives of value, *and* the project of communism, which annuls the thinglike quality of the world, and allows the nothingness of unique individual relations to create, use, consume and dissolve each other in union.

In his *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1969), Deleuze bestows high praise on Stirner for being the "dialectician who reveals nihilism as the truth of the dialectic." (Deleuze, 1983: p. 161) By becoming the *proprietor*, the owner, the ego consumes the dialectic itself into its own being, dissolving all ideas and objects into itself before they can escape again. This dissolution occurs in the ego, *as* the ego, for the ego too must be pure nothing so that it won't escape itself into something alienable. Deleuze writes: "The meaning of history and the dialectic together is not the realization of reason, freedom, or man as species, but nihilism, nothing but nihilism." (Deleuze, 1983: p. 161) If the dialectic is the correlate structure of the systematic logic of capital (a structure Marx outlines repeatedly in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*), then what Stirner reveals for Marx is the nothingness of capital, its own particular nihilism. (We could cite Walter Benjamin with a similar insight, but that would take us too far afield.)

The difficulty we are coming across is that the nothingness of the ego which Stirner describes as the condition of the unique can be seen from a Marxian perspective as either a description of the essence of capital *or* a description of the essence of the proletariat – the class which has no particular qualities, but only the generic form of labor-power. How is this possible? Well, is it not so different a structure than Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* or Marx's *Capital*? In the *Phenomenology*, the movement of Spirit can be seen either from the perspective of Substance or of Subject, and the "we" of the text is nothing but the mutual constitution of the two. In Marx's *Capital*, the structure of capitalism is seen from both the perspective of capital and labor, and capitalism is nothing but the mutually constitutive relation of the two. For Stirner, the movement is between the *ego* and its

own, or better yet, the *unique* and its *properties*. Communism or Egoism is not the privileging of one side over the other, but the abolition of the separation between the two from within the negative potential of one. Subject negates and realizes substance, the unique negates and realizes property, the proletariat negates and realizes capital.

Back to the text. This nothingness is not to be taken “in the sense of emptiness,” Stirner remarks in his opening, but rather in the sense of *that from which and into which creation creates*; in other words, presentation, appearance – labor. The name of this void from which our ‘subjectivity’ emerges is called *Ego* [*Ich*], or “I.” The ego is not the name of the identity of consciousness with itself in self-consciousness, but rather the name of an operation that traverses an abyss.

Stirner is struggling with conceptualizing the uniqueness of the nothing, its singularity. As the nothingness into which all else can be consumed and dissolved, the nothing *stands apart* in its nothingness. As Alain Badiou says of the *void*, it is different in its indifference. As Marx says of the proletariat, its unique secret is to be the universal negation of society, the “I am nothing but must be everything.”

Stirner writes: “When Fichte says, ‘the ego is all,’ this seems to harmonize perfectly with my thesis. But it is not that the ego *is* all, but the ego *destroys* all, and only the self-dissolving ego, the never-being ego, the— *finite* ego is really I. Fichte speaks of the ‘absolute’ ego, but I speak of me, the transitory ego.” (1995, p. 163) Stirner’s ego is always *in activity*, never a principle of justification or axiom of a system; it is not *one*, but rather only *named* as one by its uniqueness as such. By qualifying this account of the name ego/I, we come to a point at which we realize its purely *functional* character.

This is the fundamental ambiguity around which Stirner’s text revolves: what is the ego’s self-relation? In Marx’s terms, what is the proletariat’s relation to labor? At different points in the text, the ego *posits* itself, *dissolves* itself, *consumes* itself, *creates* itself, *destroys* itself, *enjoys* itself, *swallows* itself, *empowers* itself, *reveals* itself, *uses* itself, *abuses* itself, *owns* itself. What exactly is going on here? Is the ego really anything at all? Is it ‘acting’? Specifically, what does it mean to “consume oneself” and exist *only* in consuming, in which “consuming my presuppositions,” I am? It seems as though consumption means to continually recycle the creations or positions of myself *as* myself. To recycle them, is to abuse their purpose, destroy their independence, dissolve their substantiality, and (re)use them for something again, anything at all. This is the perpetual cycle of consumption and creation, the logic of use and abuse which Stirner will call *property* [*Eigentum*].

“What then is my property?” Stirner asks at one point. Answering himself, he says, “nothing but what is in my *power!* To what property am I entitled? To every property to which I – *empower myself* . . . I give myself the right of property in taking property to myself, or giving myself the proprietor’s *power*, full power, em-

powerment.”(1995, p. 227) Property is not itself the object which we own, although we speak of it that way. Property, more properly, is the quantity of *power* between the object or quality and myself. Property is *mine* insofar as power is mine.

Property is not a right, but an act of self-empowerment. It is always *self-empowering* because the power to appropriate is in *me*. I own my power as much as I own my property, but my power is a special property—it is the only one that is capable of *making property itself*. One can easily compare this with what Marx will call *labor-power*, that unique use-value whose use is in creating other use-values.

“Property,” Stirner writes, “is the expression for *unlimited dominion* over somewhat (thing, beast, man) which ‘I can judge and dispose of as seems good to me.’ According to Roman law, indeed. *‘jus utendi et abutendi re sua, quatenus juris ratio patitur’*, an exclusive and unlimited right; but property is conditioned by might.” (1995, p. 223) Instead of seeing property as something constrained “within the law,” he takes property *solely* as a relation of power *against the law*.

Property is simultaneously occupation, expropriation, and reappropriation; it is an activity, a deployment of force, and not a material good. “My property is not a thing, since this has an existence independent of me; only my might is my own. Not this tree, but my might or control over it, is what is mine.” (1995, p. 245)

Stirner’s point is that this expropriation is not merely a tactic to respond to the contemporary capitalist mode of production; rather, *expropriation is internal to the logic of property as such*. Property is always being-expropriated, and so the goal should not be to give it up to some other body, some “democratically run” proprietor, but rather for all to be given the chance to expropriate for themselves.

Property is a relation, a certain manifestation of force that binds an object to an owner without it in turn determining the owner himself. Since property is not guaranteed by any authority, it is ultimately precarious, continuously at risk of escape. Property can be lost in two ways: it can either be taken by another (by one’s power) or it can lose itself by transforming into something fixed, independent, solid, or sacred. If I don’t keep guard over myself, what I consider *mine* can become *other*, it can become my owner.

Stirner: “I want only to be careful to secure my property to myself; and, in order to secure it, I continually take it back into myself, annihilate it in every movement toward independence and swallow it before it can fix itself and become a ‘fixed idea’ or a ‘mania.’” (1995, p. 128) If property becomes a *mania*, then it controls me, it determines me; it is not mine, but I am its. To test whether one *has* property or whether property *has them* is then the test of its abuse, violation, destruction. To destroy property is to reveal who is the true owner of it. When workers go on strike and destroy their own tools, when youth riot, burn their own neighborhoods and loot their own stores, when students occupy their own universities and render them inoperative, it is an assertion of ownership over the property in question, an

assertion of power that validates the criteria of who and what rules. *If the thing cannot be nothing to me*, then it is not properly mine.

To make the world one's property cannot occur without the dissolution of the bourgeois state and civil society: Stirner: "We two, the state and I, are enemies. I, the egoist, have not at heart the welfare of this "human society," I sacrifice nothing to it, I only utilize it; but to be able to utilize it completely, I transform it rather into my property and my creature; that is, I annihilate it, and form in its place the *Union of Egos* [*Verein von Egoisten*]." (1995, p. 161) Stirner's communist union, or commune, is not guaranteed to last though, especially if its form of organization pre-determines its content. He goes on: "The dissolution of society is intercourse or union. . . [But] if a union has crystallized into a society, it has ceased to be a union [*vereingung*]; for a union is an incessant self-uniting; if it has become a unitedness, come to a standstill, degenerated into a fixity; it is —*dead* as union, it is the corpse of the union or the coalition, it is—society, community." (1995, p. 271)

When society or community becomes the privileged form of the individual's self-relation, then the task of the unique is to desecrate the community as much as possible. Yes, capital desecrates the world, wastes and squanders it. But the unique doesn't retreat in the face of this, rather they outdesecrate, outwaste, and outown capital. The communist subject that is produced in such activity is not some Nietzschean *ubermensch*, but what Stirner calls an *Unmensch*, an *un-man*, one who's being is indifferent to the formal structures which seek to capture it, classify it, identify it, work it.

To conclude, I'll leave you with Stirner's ethical problem: "the question runs not how one can acquire life, but how one can squander it, enjoy it; or, not how one is to produce the true self in himself, but how one is to dissolve himself, to live himself out." (1995, p. 284) This is still our question today.

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