

Introduction to *Max Stirner, Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*

John Henry Mackay

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At the beginning of the 1840s, in a wine bar in northern Friedrichstrasse in Berlin — it was opposite the present Zentralhotel and its proprietor was named Hippel — there gathered every evening a circle of men who called themselves “The Free”, or at least they were so-called by the public. It was named “The Free” because its members belonged to the extreme left in the intellectual and political movement of those days.

Whatever may have been fabricated about it, the circle never formed itself into an organization. It was and remained an informal society, to which everyone had entrance who was more or less dissatisfied with the prevailing conditions, was striving for its improvement, its reorganization, or even its overthrow — and, above all, did not shrink from any, however sharp word of criticism of it. Visitors came and went, came again, and stayed away. But the core of the remarkable society was almost unchanged for probably a decade, through 1848 and beyond, until it fell apart in the grim period of ever increasing reaction, to disintegrate finally under its pressure, which had become unbearable.

The principle representatives of this core were personalities, often and loudly named, whose courageous and relentless criticism of their times again and again drew the attention of the wide public to them. Above all there was their recognized head, Bruno Bauer, the Bible critic — who had lost his position as privatdocent — and restlessly active publicist. He was the opponent and “exposer” of Hegel, and the publisher-editor of the *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*, the camp of the entire young movement of “criticism” of the “masses”, under which catchword all endeavors inimical to the “intellect” were gradually combined. Beside him, but entirely under

his influence, stood his brother Edgar, though he was taken away from the circle by his sentence to several years in prison because of an all too sharp publication against church and state. A close friend of the two brothers, Ludwig Buhl, the translator of Louis Blanc and Casanova, even surpassed in viciousness the criticism of the Bauers. When from the row of names completely forgotten today are added those of the gymnasium teacher Koppen, the literary figure Friedrich Saß, and the newspaper writer Dr. Eduard Meyen – perhaps also the frequently mentioned Dr. Adolf Rutenberg and Arthur Müller, the editor of *Die ewige Lampe* – then the inner circle of The Free appears more or less complete. To its wider circle belonged, as was said, almost everyone who was carried away in that time, whose days were pregnant with hope, and who let themselves be swept along. Those names are far too many to be able to number even a few further ones here. Yet, let at least three of these visitors be recalled who honored the society with a fleeting visit, since their names resound to us: Georg Herwegh, Arnold Rüge, and Hoffmann von Fallersleben.

The tone of the circle was free, loud, and – in spite of the occasional presence of ladies – often cynical. Each expressed what he thought. The questions of the day, such as the socialist movement, which was still in its infancy, censorship, the student and religious movement, the Jewish question, and the question of women's rights – all gave inexhaustible matter for long conversations and heated debates, and always they found themselves in sharpest contrast to the ruling authorities. Here too the year 1848 threw its shadow ahead.

They smoked much, but drank only moderately. Hippel, the proprietor, served them on credit. When he sometimes did not, then it could happen that they went down Under den Linden to beg. When they were more by themselves, the evenings also often concluded with long pipes and a harmless game of cards.

A circle, always stimulating and of undoubted significance for the history of the pre- March period [leading up to the revolution of March 1848], it was attractive and yet also repulsive, according to the type and behavior of its visitors; and it is unforgettable through one man, who probably belonged to it from its very beginning, but certainly up to its end.

This one man was a slender, always carefully dressed man of middle height. His short, blond sideburns left his chin free; behind steel glasses calm and friendly blue eyes looked out on people and things; and a smile inclined to light irony tended to play around his fine mouth.

His conduct and his way of life were as simple and unobtrusive as his outward appearance. Almost without needs, also without that for a more intimate friendship, he kept himself with inner refinement in the background of the loud society and therefore remained mostly unnoticed on more strongly visited gatherings.

Because of his strikingly high forehead everyone called him Max Stirner [Stirn = forehead], and it was said that he was working on a thick book in which he planned to set down his “I”.

In reality his name was Johann Caspar Schmidt, and he was born on 25 October 1806 in Bayreuth, the son of the “wind instrument maker” Albert Christian Heinrich Schmidt and his wife Sophia Eleonora, née Reinlein. He lost his father early; after the remarriage of his mother to the pharmacist Ballerstedt he went to Kulm in West Prussia and from there returned again to Bayreuth, where he grew up in the home of his godfather Sticht and attended the famous gymnasium of his hometown — “an industrious and good schoolboy”. After finishing school he attended the universities of Erlangen, Königsberg, and Berlin — with a break of another one-year stay in Kulm. He then passed the teacher’s examination, which gave him a conditional *facultas docendi* [entitlement to teach], but did not help him to get a permanent position in a state school, so that now, after a short trial period in a Realschule [secondary school], he was from the beginning to the middle of the 1840s a teacher in a private educational institution for young ladies. Already married once and soon widowed, he married a second time Marie Dähnhardt, a wealthy young woman from Mecklenburg, who had come to Berlin “to enjoy life to the full” and who frequented *The Free*. Also frequently occupied with literary works, his principal collaboration was with the newly founded radical *Rheinische Zeitung*, for which, among other things, he wrote fundamental works on *Das unwahre Prinzip unserer Erziehung* [The false principle of our education] and *Kunst und Religion* [Art and religion], while secretly his life’s work grew and grew.

It appeared at the end of 1844 in the publishing house of Otto Wigand in Leipzig and carried the title *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* [The unique one and his property]. It caused a sensation, was forbidden in Saxony, and received detailed reviews, which its author himself sometimes answered just as thoroughly.

It doubtless originated from opposition to the views he encountered in his time and in the daily debates among *The Free*; whole sections are occupied with their refutation. In this sense it has also been called “the last branch of Hegelian philosophy”.

Very unjustly. For just as it goes far beyond the most radical views of his contemporaries, so too it creates at the same time the foundation for an entirely new *weltanschauung*, opposed to all those preceding it: that of conscious egoism (as the sole motivating force and guiding principle of all human actions).

Nothing more and nothing less is postulated with it than the sovereignty of the individual in the face of all attempts at his weakening and suppression: the spook and the loose screws in the human brain along with all external powers that want to subjugate this individual under the guise of “law”.

After the brief examination of a human life — the realistic child, the idealistic youth, and the man become egoist — and an intellectual historical look back at the ancients working toward conquering the world, and a similar one of the moderns — their obsession and their hierarchy (their rule of the intellect) — he settles with his own time, with *The Free*, and exposes their political liberalism as the state, which is based on the slavery of labor and is lost with labor's freedom; their social liberalism as the society with a new slavery (the "lumpen society of communism"); their humane liberalism with its concept of man. He does the last by showing that one cannot be less than a man (whereas they believed one cannot be more).

To the first, negative section, the criticism of man, he counters in the more positive second section his "I" and clears up first the falsely understood concept of freedom, which cannot be given, but must be taken. Then he describes the "unique one": his power with regard to the state and society, this power that laughs at law as a loose screw in the head; his intercourse with the world, which consists in his "using" it; and his self-enjoyment, which leads to uniqueness, to which the I as I develops.

The "unique one", however, no longer recognizes any law over himself, neither a divine nor a human. He sets his concern on himself alone and sets his uniqueness in opposition to every power.

Thus, in a language full of clarity and superiority, full of mockery and disdain, Max Stirner castigates the deeds of men, divests ideas of their sacredness, and shows them as "fixed ideas" in the great madhouse of the world: mankind and fatherland; God and State; virtue and morality; freedom and truth; right and duty. From now on one individual stands opposite another, without rights and without duties, and what alone still binds them to one another is the voluntarily concluded contract ("I will not deceive a confidence that I have voluntarily called forth").⁶ That such a work could not in its consequences be understood by his contemporaries may not be surprising. They were baffled and did not know what to do with it. Some took it to be a satire, others saw in it only a monstrous product of the devil, until its pages too were carried away by the storms of the coming years.

These storms did not completely split up the core of *The Free*, though they left only a few secondary members. Hippel had moved from Friedrichstrasse to Dorotheenstrasse and during the revolution his bar was a sort of headquarters for all kinds of leftist parties. After the reaction it became more and more quiet there and only the old friends still held together for a while. With them was Max Stirner.

He had given up his position in the school for young ladies before the publication of his book, and soon afterwards his relationship with Marie Dähnhardt was also dissolved by mutual agreement, after the fortune of the young wife was used up and various literary and other pursuits, among them a milk business, had gone wrong. She went at first to Australia, came to know need and misery, and then

went to London. There she died at an advanced age in 1902, completely in the arms of the “only true church”, embittered and no longer entirely lucid mentally.

Her husband continued to exist in his usual modest lifestyle — a good cigar was his only luxury. It was going badly for him too. He moved from one address to another and at times ran into extreme need, so that he twice came to know debtor’s prison. But then, protected from the worst through an agreement on the sale of his stepfather’s house in Kulm, he found two cheerful rooms and good care with a Madame Weiss in Philippstrasse. Death came to him quickly and unexpectedly. On 25 June 1856, at age 50, Max Stirner died of a nervous fever brought on by a carbuncle in his neck (and probably also as a result of wrong medical treatment).

Only a few old friends followed his coffin as he was buried on 28 June in the Sophienkirchhof. The heir of his meager belongings was his aged mother, who had suffered from an “idée fixe” for many years, certainly since 1835, and had been admitted to the Berlin Charité [the hospital associated with the university]. His book — and he with it — were already forgotten by then. The rebirth of both began only when, having read it and recognized its true significance, I began in 1889 my arduous researches into the forgotten life, researches that were rich in unexpected incidents and yet so infinitely interesting. I set down the results in my biography eight years later, having no hope of further discoveries. I must refer to it anyone who wishes to know more about the “unique one” than I am able to crowd into this brief introduction. Today the name Max Stirner is no longer unknown to any educated person. The houses where he was born and where he died, as well as his grave, all bear signs commemorating him, and his book, translated into all languages of the civilized world, stands there, “after a long night of thinking and believing”, at the beginning of a new and hopefully better time, illuminated by the glory of immortality.

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