Alastair Davidson

Marxism and Anarchism

EARLY IN THE 1840s Karl Marx used to frequent Hippel's Winecellar in Berlin and engage in long stein-in-hand conversations with the Bauer brothers, and other members of the Hegelian Left. Engels has left us a pencil sketch of one evening meeting, when the high priest of the Left Hegelians, Arnold Ruge, was treated to the disrespect which characterised the noisy group of "Freemen". Sitting slightly apart, in the nonchalant pose of one who is au-dessus de la melee,* was a teacher from Madame Gropius' academy for young ladies, Johann Caspar Schmidt, who wrote under the pen-name of Max Stirner. Stirner's essay on education was published by Marx in Rheinische Zeitung, after Marx became editor of that paper in 1842. In time, Marx tired of the public boorishness and larrikinism of the Freemen and finally broke with them in 1842. Among the sort of activities which he found particularly irritating was the clowning of Bruno Bauer at Stirner's wedding to Marie Dahnhardt. Though today it seems trivial, Bauer shocked the bourgeoisie by making mock of the wedding by substituting copper rings from his purse for the wedding ring.

Stirner, who appears to have lived a double life, partly the teacher of genteel ladies, and partly the wild young free man, finally rebelled against the complications of the bourgeois side of his life by publishing in 1844, his only significant book, The Ego and its Own, which professed to tell proletarians how they could liberate themselves. It so outraged bourgeois opinion that he was dismissed from his post and entered a decline, which was to

* Standing apart from the battle.

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see him separated from his wife, penniless, jailed for debt and forgotten. It was easy to see how the good burghers of Berlin were horrified by Stirner's mammoth work. It rejected completely every value, every social goal, every obligation, every concept. It was a tirade against and rejection of what was socially imposed in favour of an extreme individualism. Stirner started from a particular idea of man's development.

From the moment when he catches sight of the light of the world man seeks to find out himself and get hold of himself out of its confusion, in which he with everything else, is tossed about in motley mixture.

But everything that comes in contact with the child defends itself in turn against his attacks, and asserts its own persistence.

Accordingly, because each thing cares for itself and at the same time comes into constant collision with other things, the combat of self assertion is unavoidable.

... The victor becomes the lord, the vanquished one the subject: the former exercises supremacy and the "rights of supremacy", the latter fulfils in awe and deference the "duties of a subject".

... they watch for each others' weaknesses — children for those of their parents and parents for those of their children . . .

Back of the rod mightier than it stands our obduracy, our obdurate courage . . . And what is our trickery, shrewdness, courage, obduracy? What else but mind (geist).

Mind, Stirner goes on, is the individual's youthful first self discovery, the discovery of the spooks, or powers above. This discovery leaves the world of rules discredited, something which the youth sees from a "heavenly standpoint" from the standpoint of his own conscience: For inculcated rules he substitutes the rules of conscience. But now he is fettered by his own conscience and the struggle between the ego and the general interest begins again.

We "run after our thoughts" now, and follow their commands just as we followed parental human ones. Our course of action is determined by our thoughts (ideas, conception, faith) as it is in childhood by the commands of our parents.

But is Stirner's solution to find the most appropriate system of balance between social and the individual, to maximise the combined interest? No, it is to reject all the guides.

Do truth, freedom, humanity, justice, desire anything else than that you grow enthusiastic and serve them ... God and mankind have concerned themselves for nothing, for nothing but themselves ... Away then with every concern that is not altogether my concern! You think at least that the "good cause" must be my concern? What's good, what's bad? ... My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is mine, and it is not a general one, but is — unique as I am unique.

He preached that nothing sacred existed. Men who disagreed had wheels in their heads, were haunted, the victims of a fixed
idea, “an idea that has subjected man to itself” Pour epater le bourgeois* he gives this example:

Take notice how a “moral man” behaves, who today often thinks he is through with God and throws off Christianity as a bygone thing. If you ask him whether he ever doubted that the copulation of brother and sister is incest, that monogamy is the truth of marriage, that filial piety is a sacred duty, then a moral shudder will come over him at the thought of being allowed to touch his sister as wife also. And whence this shudder? Because he believes in those commandments.

As far as Stirner was concerned the criminal and the honest man were both on the same level, theoretically speaking, as both were the victims of ideas. The major task he posed himself was to rid people of all commitments to any principle because through such commitments they became slaves, even to notions like freedom. A man is free from what he is rid of, owner of what he controls or has in his power. Egoism is what is correct — but not the old egoism of bourgeois self aggrandisement — rather a new transcendent egoism.

From this premise flowed Stirner’s more practical proposals. He rejected the notion of social laws, and called all States despotisms, claiming that it was meaningless to distinguish between how authority was exercised — by the collectivity or limited numbers of individuals. All States were orders of dependence whose purpose was to tame and subordinate the individuals. Parties were of the same order as they too wanted a state.

On the other hand, property was in accord with egoism and acceptable, for it “was nothing but what is in my power” and man was entitled to whatever property he could “empower” himself of. All attempts to enact rational laws about property had “put out from the bay of love into a desolate sea of regulations”. Even Socialism and Communism could not be excepted from this and revolution could never be more than “a working forth of me out of the establishment”.

Karl Marx was in Paris when this book was published and he had already broken with and started to evolve his own thoughts, partly in critiques of the ideas of his erstwhile boon companions, the Freemen (in the Holy Family and earlier writings). If we are to accept his own account of his intellectual development, as expounded in the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy written in 1859, he had reached the second stage in the development of his thought when he turned to an examination of Stirner’s new book. He wrote:

when in the spring of 1845 (Engels) also settled in Brussels, we resolved to work out in common the opposition of our view to the ideological view

* To outrage the bourgeois.
of German philosophy, in fact, to settle accounts with our erstwhile philo-
osophical conscience.

The resolve was carried out in the form of a criticism of post-
Hegelian philosophy through which work they achieved self-
clarification. The first of the volumes included an enormously
profound and lengthy attack of Saint Max (Stirner)'s new book.

There is little doubt that this German Ideology is a key work
in the development of marxist thought and that the section on the
Leipzig Council dealing with Bauer and Stirner is the most important
part of it although it is often left out of contemporary editions of the
German Ideology, despite Marx's indication that it was dedicated
to criticising Feuerbach, Bauer and Stirner. Naturally the attack
was in the terms of the positions which Marx and Engels had
already evolved, and whose broad lines were laid down in the
first section of the book which dealt with Feuerbach. How we
should understand the first part of the book is to a considerable
extent indicated in the second. We are not, therefore, overstating
when we affirm that marxism was partly worked out in a critique
of Stirner.

Before proceeding to the substance of Marx's critique, it is
important to note his approach, as the technique of reading (what
the critique is looking for) is closely connected with the substance
of his position and itself throws light on the specific difference
of his position. Marx makes a Hegelian reading of Stirner, that
is, he looks for the inner essential unity of the author's approach
to discover what the implicit position of the work is. He does
not accept explicit position. In contemporary jargon: he acts
(reads) as if the theory of the writer is in his practice and has
to be produced by the reader. So, on one level Marx makes a
philosophical reading of Stirner: he comes at his subject in the
manner one would expect of a disciple of Hegel.

But, he also goes beyond the conventional style of looking
beyond the appearances to the essence and this explains why
the whole of the German Ideology is a critique of German philo-
sophers (Stirner's book itself is markedly Hegelian in its under-
standing of History). Where Hegelians, and philosophers generally,
tend to think of understanding as something in the head, a function
of the mind, and tend therefore to vex themselves with solving
problems which are not real problems, Marx had already decided,
as his practice reveals, that even understanding is socially based
and that the locus and stature of particular facts (ideas or not)
can only be determined by reference to the real world (i.e. by
stepping outside the world of philosophy into that of history)
(this is one dimension of the "empiricism" in the Economic and
Philosophical Manuscripts, which he had written about a year before.)

Briefly his position was that the more you knew, the more you could understand. In the previous years he had sometimes worked three days and nights without end, building up a huge and catholic knowledge of facts. It was this catholicity which distinguished his intellectual methods and reading technique from these men he was criticising. He used his much vaster knowledge in all fields to show the inadequacy of Stirner, whom he dubbed a philistine, whose ideas were, as he vulgarly and eruditely put, *entre ambas posaderas* (between the buttocks). We may note as an aside that this indicated that Marx already detested the klugscheisse (clever shits) of the world, who believed that "correctness" was shown through cleverer argumentation. What we must note here is that while seeking for the essence of Stirner's position to discover its inconsistencies, Marx did not make an immanent critique, a critique of Stirner in Stirner's terms: he also changed the language or terms of disproof, shifting them out of the conventions of philosophical discourse as practised then and now, onto a new level. Just what this new level was I leave aside for the moment. In sum, in the technique of reading and criticism we can already see Marx's theory at work, and even the abuse is germane to it.

The second section of the *German Ideology* is an almost page by page refutation of Stirner and cannot be understood unless The Ego and its Own is read with it. The critique takes place on many levels, but its central point is this: Stirner never made his point about how men could liberate themselves because he never got beyond an ideological view of history and men, that is, his presuppositions were without adequate empirical foundation. He therefore constructed an account of history and man which never existed, and from which it was easy for his egoist to escape, because he was escaping from nothing.

Marx points out that from the beginning Stirner's description assumes that the child seeks after the essence of things, becomes a "metaphysician", who works out his destiny by the adaption of his attitudes to life. "He takes the world as his conception of the world" and it is related in its entirety to him, by him. Thus Stirner regards the various stages of life only as the "self-discoveries" of the individual, and these "self-discoveries" are always reduced to a definite relation of consciousness. "Thus the variousness of consciousness is here the life of the individual". So in Stirner the speculative idea is made the driving force of history, and the thinker creates himself out of nothing material.
To this idea Marx counters that in the "development of a property something is created out of something". Far from it being true that "out of nothing" I make myself, for example, a "speaker", the nothing which forms the basis here is a very manifold something — the real individual, his speech organs, a definite stage of historical development, an existing language and dialects, ears capable of hearing and a human environment from which it is possible to hear something, etc., etc. If Stirner had looked at the history of the Middle Ages he would have observed that far from Christianity having a history of its own, which changed itself, "wholly empirical causes in no way dependent on any influence of the religious spirit" brought about changes in its "history". So it is with all his categories — Stirner does not look outside them to discover their genesis: they are self generating.

In fact this adds up to the dominance of the speculative philosophers in history — since history takes place in the head — their superior awareness makes history:

Saint Max's adoption of Hegel's world domination of the philosophers and his transformation of it into a hierarchy are due to an uncritical credulity of the saint and to a "holy" or unholy ignorance which is content with "seeing through" history . . . without troubling to "know" many "things" about it.

It is therefore because his approach is a-historical, or ideological, that he arrives at his understanding — in which philosophers rule the world and all history is merely a transcendence of earlier philosophy.

How had he got to this position where men were merely the victims of their ideas, and self-liberation was merely awareness of this fact and its discard? It was, writes Marx, because of German historical development, which had a completely petty-bourgeois character. In Germany, because the French revolution had never been real (but merely an ideal) the bourgeoisie had never noticed the connection between ideas and values (ideology) and real interests and therefore never looked beyond the slogans to the reality. The German context explained why Stirner misunderstood communism, which he can only identify with utopianism: the search for the Holy or Right society (a fetter) rather than the correcting of a malfunctioning machine by men for themselves.

If Stirner had not taken as his starting point Man (philosopher's concept) but the study of 'men" (as materialists do) he would have descended from the realm of speculation into the realm of reality from what people imagine they are to what they actually are, from what they imagine about themselves to how they act and are bound to act in definite circumstances. He should have realised that individuals have always started out from themselves, and could not do otherwise, and that therefore
both the aspects he noted are aspects of the personal development of individuals; both are equally engendered by the empirical conditions of life, both are only expressions of one and the same personal development of people and are therefore only in seeming contradiction to each other.

... (liberation is a question of the materially determined destruction of the preceding materially determined mode of life of individuals.

What price then, Saint Max's notion of the fetters of fixed ideas and how men can liberate themselves through rejecting them? Stirner clearly regards man's self-liberation as the process of recognition by men of the successive "heavens" which have imprisoned them, from whose mortality they can now liberate themselves.

Marx replies that the egoists of Stirner only free themselves from their past as philosophers and not in reality. Fixed ideas survive as long as reality, material circumstances allow them to, and this goes for fixed ideas of German philosophers. In sum, as Marx points out, the examples of which teem in Stirner's book are rooted in the inmost method of exposition in which everything is a phenomenon of the essence and the essence is Man as unique, not real men making their history.

As Saint Sancho earlier made the thoughts of individuals into something existing independently, so here he separates the ideal reflection of real conflicts from these conflicts themselves and gives them independent existence. The real contradictions in which the individual finds himself are transformed into contradictions of the individual with his idea or, as Saint Sancho also expresses it more simply, into contradictions with the idea as such, with the Holy. Thus he manages to transform the real conflict, the original source of its ideal reflection into the consequence of this ideological appearance. Thus he arrives at the result that it is not a question of the practical abolition of the practical conflict, but only of renouncing of the idea of this conflict, a renunciation which he as a good moralist, insistently urges people to carry out.

It is clear that Marx not only disagreed with the views of Stirner, but that he also opposed them and regarded this opposition as crucial in his own intellectual development. The opposition was on philosophical grounds and was concerned with prime motor forces in history. Thus it concerned not what was peripheral to Marx's new theory of philosophy, but the central core. This is not to say that Marx had already worked out fully his own new theory of philosophy in the German Ideology, but that he was so much in disagreement with Stirner on fundamental issues that he was being forced by default to find his own alternative. Stirner and The Ego and its Own are, as Krimerman and Perry point out, among the patron saints and the Bibles (used advisedly) of the anarchist movement and so this disagreement shows an early disagreement between Marx and men who were later known as anarchists, discrediting the idea that the dispute between marxists
and anarchists is merely over practical matters like centralised control (authoritarianism), and the corresponding idea, sometimes bruited (e.g. by Guerin) that anarchism is merely marxist socialism without the central control. Marxism is an anti-anarchism, though Marx did not always assert that this or that thinker he was opposing was an anarchist.

What then, are the specific fundamental differences between marxism and anarchism at this stage of Marx's development? We can only answer in limited terms, since Marx had not fully elaborated his own point of view, but we can establish with considerable precision what he did not like about Stirner and the implications of the Stirnerian position. The last concern was again one of Marx's forte; he was capable of indicating where people would end by the logic of their position.

As Engels indicated in a letter to Marx, both Stirner and Marx and Engels started from an apparently similar presupposition: that antecedent to anything else there stood human beings. How they defined or understood the first factor (prime mover) in their philosophy was however, very different. For Stirner it was the abstracted concept "Man" and for Marx and Engels it was men as social-beings (that is not abstracted). Where Stirner thus started from a concept of human nature (the abstracted notion of man) as the centre of the world, Marx and Engels started from real empirical history.

The fundamental distinction between the early anarchist and Marx is thus not whether man makes the world (an absolute immanentism, inherited by both from Feuerbach), but just how we should understand this notion. Marx had already started to work out his position by 1845 but had not concluded it in any satisfactory fashion. But, starting from the view that all our "heavens" were produced on earth by men (being is the subject—thought the predicate, in Feuerbach's terms) he had looked to the real world of men "the empirical basis" as the starting point of any understanding. Since men were in society the starting point had always to be men as social beings — never capable of abstraction from one another or the social complexity, without losing meaning. But to think and pass judgements it was necessary to abstract (all Marx's works are abstractions — real life transformed into notions of the real life) and thus Marx had already suggested in the part of the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts on Estranged Labour that man was conscious life activity, or conscious productive life who in the process of making his social life (producing) estranged himself from himself and from his product and from his fellows — seeing other men as alien entities, against
him. He had lost sight of his quality as a social being through having subordinated his essential being to his means of existence. (The whole notion rests on the claim that men produce to fulfil their needs, and that there are ever-increasing artificial needs that they have to satisfy — though this claim is only spelt out in the German Ideology. In turn, the reduction of production to the fulfilment of needs is a product of the division of labour and the property system.)

Taken in the large, without too much over marxologising, we can say that Karl Marx could not accept a notion of man except as a social being, whose fulfilment (re-entry into his essential being from his alienated state) could only come socially, with other men. In other words, men would liberate themselves with each other by making their happiness together. Responsible socialists (and I do not doubt that Marx moralised despite his affirmation to the contrary in the German Ideology) faced up to reality and tried to fix the “machine”, they did not try to stop the world and get out egotistically (drop out). Not only was this a sanguine proposal, it was also impossible.

What he objected to in Stirner is thus clear. Stirner, through his refusal to look beyond his concepts to the real world beyond, like his fellows* avoided the fact that Man was social man engaged in praxis, producing everything, even his concepts of himself in an everchanging fashion. Stirner refused to face up to the real world and its problems. This refusal was emotional and unconscious and to be explained by the German way in which he came at the problem of men’s liberation — a philosopher’s way. What should we understand by the philosopher’s way (as German Ideologist)? To answer this we must to some extent make an inferential reading of Marx in terms of the whole corpus of his work, which raises great methodological problems, which need to be defended at length but which are merely asserted here. By asserting as the prime mover a fixed concept of Man’s nature

* “Edgar Bauer had been brought before the Prussian courts for denouncing the Prussian State. After sentence had been pronounced, he was asked if he had anything else to say. He calmly replied that the decision was logically null and void. The existence of the State implied the existence of subjects. The state had no jurisdiction on any but its own subjects. But he, Edgar Bauer refused to recognise the State. It had no validity for him. The dialectic was perfect, but what it did not prove was that the State had no power over him. The iron bars and stone walls of his cell were proof of that power. It was rumoured, however, that Bauer convinced himself on the basis of his solipsism that this was a mistake, and that the prison-cells, bars and all — had been posited by his deeper self-consciousness.”

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to real history as the changing of the nature of men, Stirner was turning reality upside down, was abstracted. He was separating the idea from the reality and making it something over and against that object, and thus lapsing into a dualism which was no different from, and a lot worse than, Christianity.

The philosopher's way was that the way in which he established the adequacy of his own judgement about what Man was. As a philosopher he believed that his judgement could be tested in the then accepted terms of philosophical discourse, by other concepts, and thus its truth could be established without any real activity of men whose liberation it sought. This meant that he was making a judgement and then verifying it himself in the terms he chose.

The dangers of this were enormous. If Man's true nature was such and such, and the true path was such and such, and they could be established in advance finally in a book (the test of any proposition is theoretical, i.e. abstract, rather than in theory and practice, two united praxes) then the test of good or bad (beneficial/non-beneficial action) was in the book. If men did not subscribe to the "Book", then, of course, they were, as Stirner referred to them, "the stupid populace". Inevitably, men who think in Stirner's fashion are anti-democratic and elitist, believing that they have an intellectual key (a sum of knowledge) which is self-verifying. Marx was, of course, by this time proceeding rapidly to the implications of subject-object unity (his starting point) via real life, to the notion that judgements are not discovered to be true but are made true in revolutionary praxis by the people whose predicament they seek to describe, and they will only catch hold if they correspond with social reality. Liberation is not an intellectual act but a remaking of thought and historical matter. So the passionate "anti-intellectualism" which Woodcock says is characteristic of Stirner in fact cloaks an elitist position in which human beings are subordinated to doctrines — exactly the position which Stirner decried and which anarchists wish to avoid.

To conclude: already in 1845 Marx had decided that the basic philosophical position of anarchism, its absolute notion of Man as an egoist and an individual who was oppressed by social fetters (by rule and self rule), would lead it to an anti-democratic tyranny. A priori assertions to which reality must conform had no place in marxism. As Marx himself never stopped writing: we must not accept the self-conceptions of people which cloaks their reality: anarchists of Stirner's sort were in no sense democrats or socialists.