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# Insurrection or Revolution?

The ethical politics of Stirner's egoism

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At a time when the grand narrative of Revolution that we inherited from modernity and the rationalist discourses of the Enlightenment has all but broken down, what alternatives are there for conceptualising radical transformation? Despite the lack of an organised revolutionary class or movement, the left is at the same time unable to think beyond the idea of revolutionary emancipation. This failure of the radical imagination is perhaps the reason for the political deadlock the left finds itself in today. Unable to effect any sort of meaningful change, the left instead fights 'culture wars' and engages in identity politics against a right that is much more adept at this game. The puritanical dogmatism and religious zeal with which the endless debates over gender identity, race, the inclusion of the marginalised and so on are conducted speaks to a certain exhaustion of the radical political horizon. To found one's politics on the recognition of identities, on the one hand, and the future promise of revolutionary salvation, on the other, is to fall into the trap of state power. The state is fetishized either as the entity that grants rights and legal status to minorities, *or* as the enemy that must be captured in order for freedom to be realised —

an illusion that has only led to the creation of new states and new forms of despotism, as the history of revolutions demonstrates.

Perhaps it is time to abandon the ‘spooks’ of identity and revolution and to think of subjectivity and politics in a different way. It is here that I suggest we turn to the nineteenth egoist anarchist philosopher Max Stirner. In *The Ego and Its Own* [*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*] published in 1844, Stirner proposed an alternative, ‘egoistic’ form of political action that he termed the ‘Insurrection’ or ‘Uprising’ [*Empörung*] and which he contrasted with Revolution. While the Revolution was a project aimed at the transformation of external social and political relations, the insurrection was a transformation of the *self*. It is a way for the individual to overcome his or her own voluntary obedience to, and identification with, authority. As such, it does not preclude broader social and political changes, but these are premised upon this initial act of self-liberation — a change in the way we relate to ourselves and to others. As Stirner says, the insurrection has as its unavoidable consequence the transformation of circumstances, ‘yet does not start from it but from men’s discontent with themselves’. The insurrection can therefore be seen as a form of radical self-emancipation. It is not guided or determined by revolutionary vanguards or parties, and it does not seek to capture and control state power. Rather, it is radically anti-institutional: ‘The Revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer to *let* ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on “institutions”’. The state is neither an instrument of social transformation, nor even the main obstacle to individual freedom. The insurrection refuses this sort of fetishization of state power. Rather, the individual egoist should affirm him- or herself over the state; he should no longer look to the state, either in veneration or in horror (which are two sides of the same coin), but only to himself.

This unusual idea of insurrection is a key part of Stirner’s philosophical and ethical project of egoism. For Stirner, in a world of ‘spooks’ or ideological abstractions and metaphysical ideals —

humanity, morality, freedom, rights, society, law and the state — which are a hangover from religion and yet which continue to haunt us, the ego is the only concrete reality, the only tangible thing. But what does Stirner actually mean by the ego? It is a mistake to simply conflate this with ‘the individual’, the figure of liberal and libertarian discourse, as so often commentaries on Stirner have done. The ego is a much more fluid concept that evades all such categorisations and ‘fixed ideas’. As a matter of fact, we could say that the ego is a kind of radical *non*-identity that cannot be pinned down to any form of subjectivity or determined by any essential characteristics. The ego is always changing, mutable, in flux — it is a *process* of self-becoming and self-creation rather than a stable identity. As Stirner says, ‘no concept expresses me, nothing that is designated my essence exhausts me; they are only names’. Indeed, rather than an identity at all, the ego is better thought of as a *singularity*. A more precise translation of the ego (der Einzige) in Stirner would be the ‘Unique One’. The subject is anarchic in an ontological sense — that is, without a stable foundation, pre-determined set of interests or rational *telos*. The self refuses any kind of ‘calling’ — whether that of freedom, morality, rationality, or even the recognition of his own ‘inner self’. This is why Stirner’s notion of egoism has no truck whatsoever with any kind of ‘identity politics’ — whether of majorities or minorities, whether of the included or the excluded — because the projection of an identity only confines the unique one to a pre-determined idea that imposes certain norms of behaviour and conduct, that requires living up to a certain ideal. Identity politics is the attempt to compress the unique one into fictional generalities that supposedly represent his essence but which only mutilate his difference.

Stirner’s entire political, ethical, and philosophical project is to free the unique one from obeisance to such abstractions. It is to encourage us to view the world, and ourselves, from our own perspective and to refuse to be enthralled to ‘fixed ideas’ and essentialist

concepts of all kinds, in other words, the ideas and ways of living that we have simply inherited from tradition. In adopting the alternative gaze of the Unique One, everything appears as radically undetermined. The world opens up to us. The self becomes a blank canvas waiting to be recreated.

This new way of approaching the world has important ethical and political consequences. If the world becomes contingent and open ended, this means that action can no longer be founded on absolute, universal moral and rational criteria; we come to recognise that these are just as illusory as the religious superstitions they replaced. However, in the absence of these predetermined coordinates, we are forced to make independent ethical decisions. If we no longer look to institutions like the state or to commonalities like the nation, we have the means of inventing our own autonomous forms of political organisation and community (Stirner's paradoxical notion of the 'union of egoists' is one such possibility). We now no longer associate with others out of obligation or compulsion, but because it brings us joy or enhances our sense of self. If we find the language of rights and even freedom now obscure and unsatisfactory, we can deploy an alternative language of 'ownness' which allows us to determine our own individual path of freedom, as unique as the one who treads it.

The insurrection should therefore be seen as a kind of political and ethical experimentation that proceeds from the self and its possibilities. It is an invitation to practice new forms of self-determined modes of interaction and association, new ways of being that are indifferent to power. Anarchists have provided many such examples of this, from everyday practices such as squatting to occupations of public places and the conscious creation of alternative communities. Central to such experiments is an insurrection in the present moment, in the *here and now*, rather than pinning ones hopes on the great revolutionary Event. Stirner teaches us that all politics is micro-politics, that social and political change starts with changing oneself and unbinding oneself from power and a transfor-

mation of one's ethical relations with others. As the German anarchist Gustav Landauer, very much inspired by Stirner, once put it, 'The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by people creating new social relationships, ie., by people relating to one another differently.'