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# An Immense, Reckless, Shameless, Conscienceless, Proud Crime

Stirner's Demolition of the Sacred

Wolfi Landstreicher

*"In crime the egoist has hitherto asserted himself and mocked at the sacred; the break with the sacred, or rather of the sacred, may become general. A revolution never returns, but an immense, reckless, shameless, conscienceless, proud—crime, doesn't it rumble in the distant thunder, and don't you see how the sky grows ominously silent and gloomy?" —Max Stirner*

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I am speaking in words of things that words can only point to. This is true, of course, whenever anyone talks about anything, but there are circumstances when the limits of language become more evident and explanation becomes more necessary, though it adds more words to the mix. Stirner used words in a sharp, pointed, direct way, but what he was doing was so outside of the dominant worldviews not only of his own time, but of ours as well, that he is frequently misunderstood. Because of the clarity of his language, it is hard for me not to

see this misunderstanding as intentional, as a choice. But I am speaking my language. Knowing its limits, knowing that it is the equivalent of a pointing finger, not an expression of the actual things to which it points, and knowing my desire to get something of use and significance across to you, I will strive for clarity and will offer explanations where I feel it is necessary.

What I intend to talk about is an aspect of Stirner's project that I consider essential to any genuinely *anarchist* endeavor, i.e., any endeavor consciously aimed at ending your and my enslavement to any master, to any authority<sup>1</sup>, any ideology, any allegedly higher power or force through which you and I may alienate our lives, our activities and our worlds. I am talking about Stirner's demolition of the sacred.

Of course, this aspect of Stirner's project cannot be separated from the whole, and I am not trying to make such a separation here. I am rather choosing this particular starting point to point to the whole project, because, starting here, I think I can show the usefulness of Stirner's project to anarchist efforts and offer a tool—or rather a full toolbox for those willing to explore it—for others to use in the battle against enslavement and alienation. We develop our most powerful tools and weapons when on the attack, and Stirner's attack on the sacred was devastating.

Stirner's project was not aimed at creating a future ideal society or world. He was talking about a way of encountering one's world *here and now*. It seems that none of Stirner's critics could see this aspect of what Stirner was doing, so that nearly every critique I have read has been petty and misdirected. Nearly all of them treat the unique and egoism, as Max Stirner talked about them, as definable goals to achieve and denigrate these supposed ideals. But the immanence that per-

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<sup>1</sup> I know there are those who will complain that this word is "too ambiguous," simply because it has several meanings, but unless you are an idiot either through genuine stupidity or through ideological blindness, you know what I mean...

meates Stirner's project was central to his demolition of the sacred. Any ideal future for which I may strive will tend to become a sacred thing standing above and against me, unless I have first grounded myself in the immediate grasping of my life as my own here and now. Only on this basis of immediate *ownness* can a future ideal, a dream of totally transformed social relationships, be *my* property as an expression of *my* desire. And this means that I begin here and now to live the world I desire as an expression of *myself* here and now, rather than waiting for the coming of some imagined paradise.

So what is the sacred? Stirner was very clear about this: the sacred is whatever has been made alien to you and me, placed above you and me as our master or owner. In other words any and all things, ideas, relationships, etc., by which you or I may be possessed. Thus, we create the sacred through processes of alienation (or estrangement) and reification<sup>2</sup>, which creates ideology—fixed ideas that *have* you or me. Put another way, the sacred is what is not your own or my own, but rather owns you or me.

What Stirner opposed to the sacred (and thus to alienation and reification) was *ownness*. We can also call *ownness* *self-ownership*, so long as we understand that this doesn't refer to a reified self to which you or I lay claim, but to you and me as each of us actually is here and now, each creating ourselves, our lives and our world as our own in the moment, not owned by anything outside of ourselves. In each moment, in whatever circumstance we may find ourselves, you and I are confronted with a choice: to be owned as slaves by external forces—the forces which constitute the sacred—or to own ourselves, that is to create and consume ourselves in each moment as we see fit, regardless of the conditions imposed upon us.

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<sup>2</sup> **Reification**—The treatment of abstractions (conceptions, relationships, activities) as if they had concrete existence and, thus, were themselves capable of acting upon the world and upon us.

When I reappropriate myself, I also reappropriate my world; I make it my *property*. Stirner's use of the term property puts off a good number of anarchists, and this is understandable. The economic conceptions of property that we know are very closely linked to the institutions of enslavement and exploitation. But throughout his writings, Stirner used this word to mean something far broader and deeper than its mere economic significance (though since he was talking about the here and now, he included this aspect in his broader, deeper meaning). If the sacred is what is made alien to me, then I demolish the sacred for myself when I reach out and take what has been made alien to me and make it *my own*, my *property*, and enjoy and consume it as my own—thus destroying it. The demolition of the sacred is, thus, the taking of property.

But to make this clear, it is useful to look more deeply at how Stirner used the word “property.” In his book, Stirner constructed the word “alienity” (*Fremdentum*) to use for the opposite of property (*Eigentum*). And in this, Stirner was saying that my property is simply *everything that has not been made alien to me* either by an external force beyond my power to overcome or by my own self-alienation. But Stirner understood very well that there is another sort of “property” within the social world that surrounds us, property that can never be yours or mine, and that is *sacred* property.

Sacred property is all property that exists through the *sanction* of the state, the social order or any other institutional or imaginary higher power. Thus, it includes private and public property, and every form of collective, social and communal property *insofar as they are protected through the sanction of a higher power* against unsanctioned individual use. And sacred property is destroyed simply by “reaching out one's hand” and taking. As opposed to sacred property, one's own property is what one *takes* and *enjoys*, using it up. I am supposed to respect sacred property, but as (self-) owner, I show no respect.

immediately, destroying everything that prevents us from doing so. Each of us needs to make our lives, activities and worlds our own, against the world of the sacred.

Now, as I said above, Stirner offered no pictures of an ideal future. He was talking about confronting our worlds here and now. To criticize him because he talked of “property,” “money,” “exchange,”<sup>3</sup> and so on, without carefully examining how he talks about them in light of this immanence that is a requirement for a thorough demolition of the sacred, is to miss the point entirely. This is one of the reasons why Marx and Engel’s so-called critique of Stirner is worthless drivel. Property, as Stirner used the term, is completely opposed to the bourgeois and capitalist concept of property. But in the world he lived in, one had to face the bourgeois conception of property as it was materialized in social reality, and in the world you and I live in, we have to face the capitalist conception property as it is materialized in the world—in other words, *sacred* property, sanctioned property, property with the protection of the state and its police, but worse yet, all too often with the protection as well of your and my moral qualms, your and my consciences, the cops you and I have created within our own haunted heads.

Several times in his book, Stirner addressed himself to the condition of proletarians. And for those who still don’t get it, here his opposition between sacred and own property becomes very clear. Proletarians are *propertyless* within this society. As Stirner pointed out, communists do not want to put an end to this proletarian condition, but to universalize it. They claim that they will do this by abolishing property, but in fact they

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<sup>3</sup> In communist theory, the essence of economy lies in property and exchange. I think that this misses the point, because (as Stirner showed) “property” can take many, sometimes opposed, forms, and simply by conversing, we *exchange* words. What seems necessary for economy instead is a standardized system of value, that is a system of value in which you or I do not define how we value things for ourselves, but rather accept value as defined by a higher power, and then *measure* and *calculate* in terms of this imposed, *sacred* value rather than creating our own values. Thus, measure and calculation are the defining activities of economy, and they are *activities* we do, not things.

do it by establishing the *sacred* ownership of all property by whichever spook they prefer: society, humanity, “species being,”<sup>4</sup> the human community—though in practice it will always be the *state* in some form that owns it and bestows it since these spooks require an institutional structure to manage their property. Thus, the communists would leave proletarians precisely where they are now: propertyless and waiting for what the owner will bestow. Always waiting, always destitute. Stirner pointed out that it is not property as such, but its sacredness that needs to be destroyed. And each one of us can do this here and now. There are two things that prevent proletarians from taking what they desire. The first is a continued reverence for the *sacredness* of property. The socialists, who would grant ownership to society as opposed to you or I, continue to encourage this reverence. The communists, who would grant it to the species or the human community, continue to encourage this reverence. But ultimately, it is the individual proletarian himself who maintains this reverence by remaining a slave to the spooks in his head, to morality, to respect for abstract ownership, to society, to humanity. To rid herself of this reverence, she needs to become *her own* and devour these spooks.

Once the proletarian has become his own, he ceases to be propertyless, and he ceases to respect property. The only thing that continues to stand in her way from taking what she desires is the might, the power, of those who control property within this society. To the extent that he is able, he will reach out and take what he desires, and where her capabilities are less than her desires, she will seek to increase her own might. Stirner was quite clear that this is one of the uses for a union of egoists. If one person in an area claims all the land there as his property, others in the area can lament their condition, they

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<sup>4</sup> More accurately, species *essence*, since the German word *Gattungswesen* originates among Hegelians for whom the word *Wesen* general refers to a *metaphysical* essence. I consider the translation of this term as “species being” to be an attempt to hide its metaphysical nature.

can rise up individually and through crime (the desecration of the sacred) maintain some livelihood, or they can unite their forces (creating a union of egoists), rising up together to seize the land from the bastard. If successful, they can then decide with each other how they will deal with what is now each of their *own* property. But this has come about only because they have rejected the *sacredness* of property and don’t refrain from reaching out their hand to take what they desire, and expect the same from others.

Some (including Joseph Dejacque) have thought that a form of communism would be the inevitable outcome of egoism. I do not agree, because I see communism in practice as the administration of property supposedly owned by an abstract collective being rather than by any actual, living being. Thus, it still maintains the sacred, and the egoism involved is duped egoism—the egoism of one who is convinced that his interests are best carried out in service to a higher interest. However, the practice of ownness could easily come to appear like a kind of communism. If property is not sacred, if everything that I desire and have the capacity to grasp is mine, and if I prefer to have enjoyable and pleasant relations with those around me, then I may very well work out with them ways for dealing with what is my own and your own and his own and her own and so on, so that all the necessities, many of the niceties, and so on are readily and freely accessible to every individual who desires and can reach them. But there would be no abstract concept, no spook, assumed to stand above us as the real owner of it all, nor any administration to guaranty equitable relations or the maintenance of an ethic of “from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs.” It would not be communism but mutual ownness.

But this is not where I am now, nor where you are now (except perhaps among small groups of friends). We are confronting a world haunted by the sacred, and we each need to demolish this sacred and take back what is ours, in every moment,