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Nameless

An Egoist Critique of Identity

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Only when nothing is said about you and you are merely named, are you recognized as you. As soon as something is said about you, you are only recognized as that thing...

– Max Stirner

It's amusing how often people confuse identity with individuality. Identity traces back to a Latin word meaning "sameness." And sameness implies the existence of something with which I can be the same.

It is certainly possible to conceive of individuals as identical atoms bashing into each other—marxists like to assume that this is what individualists are talking about—but even atoms only become identical when you or I conceive of them as atoms, giving them an identity. Atomization is a process that has its basis in the denial of my unique individuality, and identification plays a part in this process.

Stirner referred to you and I, i.e., to any individual in the flesh at this moment, as "the unique" (der Einzige). In Stirner's Critics, he explains that this is merely a name, nothing more.

To speak, to write, he had to use a name. But, he wrote, “The unique ... has no content; it is indeterminacy in itself...” To give it content before I live it out in my world, before you live it out in your world, is to give it an identity, a sameness, to destroy it as unique. To give a conceptual content to the unique is to make it an absurdity.

But even as unique, I am forced to contend with identity. There are the banalities of having to identify myself, for example, when entering a tavern, or when cashing a check, or when stopped by the cops. In every one of these instances, someone has been delegated a certain legal authority to make sure that I am the same as something required by their rules. Am I the same as someone old enough to drink? Am I the same as the one authorized to cash the check? Am I the same as a person with no outstanding warrants? Each of these identities are concepts that I am supposed to live up to. And if I fail, I suffer the consequences. But, in fact, no one is ever the same as any of these things. Even if I can meet each of these challenges to get what I want (some drinks, some needed cash, some distance from the pigs), I am not any of those things. And those who impose these tests on me are my enemies in that they impose abstractions onto my unique self, forcing a conformity to their rules and to a social requirement for personal consistency. They seek to undermine my ownness and with it my uniqueness.

In addition, every ruling social order is set up only to process individuals in terms of categorical identities: race, gender, nationality, sexuality, etc. Though these are all fictions, they affect people physically and mentally. These categories have served as justifications for enslaving individuals, excluding individuals, placing restrictions on individuals, beating and killing individuals, etc, ad nauseum. It makes sense that those who have experienced abuse based on such categorical identities would unite to fight against this abuse and those who carried it out. What doesn't make sense to me is that most

of those who unite for this purpose don't base their unity on their shared desire to eradicate the abuse, but rather on the categorical identity that has served to justify this abuse. In other words, they choose to unite not as enemies of an order they aim to destroy, but as victims of an order from which they want recognition and justice. A social order can only recognize categories, not unique individuals. Justice can only deal with what can be measured and weighed, i.e., what can be compared and equated. Identity, sameness, belonging to a group, different ways of expressing the requirement for social recognition and justice. I, as an egoist aware of my uniqueness, respond differently, as an enemy, aiming to destroy categorical identity and those who benefit from it immediately as I experience them here and now. If I unite with others, they will be those whose aims and powers enhance my own. Not identity politics, but the destruction of identity and politics, in favor of myself and my associations. But I am not a moralist. I may well find uses for identity in some sense, even while recognizing that it is always a lie. In fact, I use identity whenever I say "I." In this word, I identify myself here and now, my immediate concrete self, with my concept of myself in the past. As unique (i.e., as I exist concretely here and now), I am not the same as that, but I choose to unite myself with that, even to the extent of identifying with it, because it gives me a significant power in relating to my world and in interacting with others, just as identifying others with the past forms of these others that I have encountered enhances that power. So here, identity can become my tool. However, here as well, I am not talking about categorical identity, but about personal identity, equations that I make for myself, knowing full well that they are nothing more than conceptual tools for my use, for enhancing my self-enjoyment. If I take them to be myself, I am deluding myself.

Recently, I have come across communiqués from individuals (apparently acting in small groups) who describe themselves as individualist-nihilists and egoist-nihilists, laying claim to var-

ious attacks against the ruling order. Anyone who rebels and attacks the ruler order for themselves is certainly my comrade. I feel a kinship with her even if I don't agree with all of his decisions about how he goes about her action. But I wonder why someone who's acting for himself, from his own life, feels the need to lay claim to her action at all, let alone by using a group name, creating a group identity. If I choose to attack the ruling order or to act against the law in any other way, this choice springs from the immediacy of my life here and now, and I owe no one an explanation. Nor do I need the inspiration of other actions to move me. It is my own life and my own opportunities that move me. It's true that a rebellious act may move the rebel with passion so she wants to express her rage and joy. Then he might write to claim his act, but there is no need to do so and a great deal of wisdom in not doing so. But what I question most in this is that individuals who claim an act in this way are taking on an identity. This is why they have to name themselves (and as beautiful and poetic as some of these names are, they remain labels for an identity). The signed communiqué replaces the immediate fleeting meaning of the action for the unique individuals who carried it out with a permanent meaning intended to explain the action to an audience. With permanent meanings come permanent identities and the unique individuals disappear into this crystallized form. A unique individual, acting for herself, is nameless. She is nameless, because her existence is too immediate and fleeting for any name that is not completely empty of meaning or thought to express him. If he chooses to act, it makes sense for him to act anonymously, without an identity. If she chooses to talk about her act, to make it a matter for conversation or debate, or to let others know that they are not alone in their rebellion, it makes sense for her to do this anonymously as well. It isn't difficult to figure out how. The individual, acting from his uniqueness, has no need to identify with his action, she was completely in that action at the moment that she did it. In any

case, the full implications of claiming one's acts should be a matter for ongoing debate without taking away from the solidarity and kinship one feels with those who in their rebellion make different choices.

Identity is about defining what you are. As I said, there are moments when playing with such definitions may make sense (or give pleasure). But these definitions, these identities can never be me. They can, however, become prisons locking me into the cell of a role or a set of roles. And if I am not to be a slave, I have to reject these roles, except as occasional masks I may don when it serves my interests. Of course, when I don't conform to roles, I become unpredictable, I become fleeting, I become unintelligible to the institutions and to those with institutional ways of viewing their worlds. Stirner says, in *Stirner's Critics*, that he "names the unique and says at the same time that 'names don't name it'..." Precisely as a unique individual I am nameless, precisely as such I have no identity. I am simply myself here and now.