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Stirner versus Proudhon

Maxime Leroy

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From the time of Louis-Philippe and of Napoleon III, it has not seemed possible that a mind could push the audacity of negation farther than Proudhon. He battled all parties, and all ideas with the same force: universal suffrage and the dogmas of the Church, God, property, authority, socialism and liberalism, and, a less pardonable crime, he treated men with more irreverence than books, ridiculing by terrible sarcasm the archbishop Mathieu, the socialist Louis Blanc, the orthodox economist Bastiat and the sinuous, ever-changing Prince-President. He summarized his audacities in short, blasphemous formulas: property is robbery; God is evil; Satan is good. One may recall his admirable lyric invocation to Satan, intelligence of the universe. He frightened, terrified. The pope excommunicated him, the tribunals condemned him, the priests denounced him as the Antichrist in the flesh, all opinion finally cast him as the fundamentally antisocial being. This small, spectacled man was, for thirty years, all disrespect and blasphemy. The civilized world ended at his books, like the ancient world at the columns of Hercules. Today it is necessary to change that geography. A keener negator, a more irreligious blasphemer, a more

voracious “ideophage” has been revealed to the public; here is Max Stirner, the author of *The Unique and its Property*.

Little known in Germany, Stirner¹ is in France much more a name than a doctrine. He is cited, however, and his book has had the honor of two translations. Mr. Basch has dedicated a large volume to him. If he is cited, and even studied, it seems that there is too much tendency to situate him outside of contemporary thought, to consider him as an eccentric, a case of morbid intellectualism. This is an inexact view, for Stirner is very much of his era; he is even one of those types which best represent it, as one of the promoters of the extension of the scientific method to morals. Let us recognize in him one of those who have participated in the formation of modern skepticism. It is in this sense that we must treat him.

* * *

Proudhon was indeed a skeptic, but he still believed, and believed too much; Stirner does not want to believe anything anymore. In that, he has gone beyond the author of *The Social Revolution*, who had, indeed, left something to demolish after him: Justice. “It is an enemy, an old enemy who has taken a new face.” It is that last authority, intact among the most non-religious and the most revolutionary of our contemporaries, that Stirner would attack. Proudhon thought he had given post-revolutionary civilization its specific and irrefutable philosophical formula. Stirner would take up arms against this optimism and against Proudhon, the most dangerous heir of the tradition, and all the more dangerous because he did not know it. But Stirner, in battling that terrible polemicist, continued his work, also unconscious his own traditional ties; he

¹ Max Stirner is the pseudonym of Bavarian teacher Jean-Gaspard Schmitt. He was born in 1806 at Bayreuth, future town of Wagner. A student of Hegel and Schleiermacher, he studied philosophy and theology; he sojourned successively at Berlin, at Erlangen, at Königsberg, at Kulm, and returned finally to Berlin. He became a teacher of young girls and died there in poverty in 1856.

followed him against the same enemies; he is of the Proudhonian line.

Proudhon provided a faith, and made himself its apostle; he went so far as to be martyred in its defense: the martyrdom of prison. He was, however, a skeptic, and of a skepticism, at base, very close to that of Stirner; the filiation lies there.

It is necessary, Proudhon wrote, in his most famous book,² it is necessary, while the multitude is on its knees, to uproot the honor of the old mysticism, to eradicate from the heart of man the remainder of the latria³ which, fostering superstition, destroys justice in it and perpetuates immorality.

In a prosopopoeia, an artifice with which he was familiar, Proudhon had already invoked irony, anticipating Stirner and our contemporary Anatole France. It forms the epilogue of the *Confessions of a Revolutionary*.

Irony, true liberty! It is you who deliver me from the ambition of power, the servitude of parties, from respect for the routine, from the pedantry of science, from the admiration of great personages, from the mystifications of politics, the fanaticism of the reformers, from the superstition of this great universe and from the adoration of myself.

And Proudhon continued, in a tender manner:

Sweet irony! You alone are pure, chaste and discrete. You give grace to beauty and seasoning to love; you inspire charity by tolerance; you dispel homicidal prejudice; you teach modesty to the woman, audacity to the

² *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, Vol. I.

³ *Latria* is “the worship given to god alone,” the “highest form of worship.”
— Translator.

warrior, prudence to the statesman... You make peace between brothers, you bring healing to the fanatic and the sectarian.

That prosopopoeia is Stirnerian by all the force of disrespect that animates it: these few lines contain virtually all the philosophy of the Unique.

But the faith prevails.

The criticism has scarcely indicated anything but Proudhon's negations. That is a grave error: Proudhon has a positive doctrine; Stirner saw it only too well. The quarrels of Stirner have helped us better discern all that was dogmatic in the work of that negator: he denounces in his turn the latria that remains in the mind of that enemy of the Church. "We call skeptics," said the author of the *Jardin d'Epicure*,⁴ "those who do not share our own illusions, without even concerning ourselves if they have others." It was precisely the case that Proudhon had other illusions than his adversaries.

If Proudhon vigorously combated the concepts of the Church and the School, he was very far from disbelief. That skeptic had a horror of pyrrhonism. He said, in fact:

In order to form a state, to give adhesion and stability to power, we require a political faith, without which the citizens, given over to the pure abstractions of individualism, could not, no matter what they do, be anything but an aggregation of incoherent existences.

We can already see if Proudhon left more to deny: he had abandoned the cathedral; Stirner wanted to demolish it.

Stirner was no less brutal than the author of the *Anti-Proudhon*;⁵ he took him by the throat and treated him as a dishonest man;

⁴ Anatole France.

⁵ Denis, de Chateaugiron, 1860.

of history, the expression of our needs and of our present interests. Stirner has given us here the most useful counsels: there is only to change its development, which truly is not solid. Let us be skeptics, without however becoming rascals, following the princes, such as the Florentine secretary and his Bavarian disciple irreverently conceive them, and let us understand our function in the social phenomenon.

Stirner has given us a rule that will be profitable: not to have sovereign ideas. His error was to believe it possible to dispose of the times and of civilization.

Proudhon, elsewhere, had treated Rousseau as a “Genevan charlatan.”

“Thus,” wrote the author of *The Unique*, “Proudhon has said insolently: ‘Man is made to live without religion, but the moral law is eternal and absolute, who would dare to attack morals?’” The teacher from Berlin dared.⁶ He was wrong to forget that Proudhon, despite his faith, had prepared the way for all his doubts.

Stirner, by still other points, strikes at Proudhon. Like him, he puts the individual will at the center of his philosophy; not without modification, for his will remains fiercely individual to himself: it will never be made to serve the reconstruction of society, as Proudhon did with Rousseau. Proudhon reproached Rousseau for having constructed society badly; Stirner reproaches Proudhon for not having destroyed it enough: this is where the differences begin.

Stirner separates himself from Proudhon, or better, surpasses him, when he considers morals as a purely superficial transformation of religion. It is to the democratic State, he thinks, what religion was to the autocratic State in times past. Its essence is the same, it is authoritarian, it is an intolerance, an unquestionable other; God is reincarnated in the popular imperative. It is the same tutelage: the moral laws command, they allow no discussion, they are absolute, they demand respect, arouse the apostolate, inspire fanaticism; one orthodoxy follows another orthodoxy; it is of orthodoxy in its narrow sense.

Even modified in a laic sense, morality is composed of “God-words,” truth, right, light, justice, which as soon as one dares touch them arouse a formidable clamor in all of society. The individual who questions them or just scoffs at them is called a profaner, accused of sacrilege, called in the current criminal terminology, utopian, revolutionary. What about it liberates us from religion?

⁶ *L'Unique et sa propriété*, translation of Henry Lasvionks (Ed. de la Revue Blanche).

Morals is still a dogma, the most recent ritual of our credulity. "Moral faith is as fanatical as religious faith."⁷

Stirner shows us then, with intensity and anger, how the man is the thing, the slave of the good and the just that he wants to realize: "The moral man acts to serve an end or an idea, he makes himself the instrument of the idea of good, absolutely as the religious man boasts of being the instrument of God."⁸ And, always rich in metaphors, like his master, he compares in various places the man to one "possessed" and thus we are no less gullible than our grandmothers who devoutly go to Easter communion. The one who no longer believes in phantoms has only to be consistent, he must push farther in his disbelief to see that he does not hide any special being behind the scenes, no phantom, or, what amounts to the same thing, taking the word in its most naïve sense, *no spirit*.⁹ Stirner insists:

Truths, he writes again, are phrases, ways of speaking, words; brought into connection, or into an articulate series, they form logic, science, philosophy.¹⁰

He concludes finally that truth is the enemy of man:

As long as you believe in the truth, you do not believe in yourself, and you are a — *servant*, a — *religious man*. You alone are the truth, or rather, you are more than the truth, which is nothing at all before you.¹¹

Thus, the human will will only be liberated by skepticism. "Can I call myself free," concludes the contemptuous critic of Proudhon, "if some verbal powers as vain as idols still command me?"

⁷ P. 53.

⁸ P. 43.

⁹ P. 39; cf. P. 433.

¹⁰ P. 446.

¹¹ P. 453.

spring morning, seeks to understand and, in the multiplicity of beliefs that solicit his adhesion, remains neutral, indifferent or amused. The world goes on without him. Men are thus divided into two classes: the believers who act, the skeptics who do not act, the social believers, the antisocial skeptics. Tell me the degree of your faith and I will tell you the strength and utility of your action and even the degree of your humanity.

Far from that methodical disbelief is the resigned acceptance of a powerlessness to find the solution of the problem, quite the contrary, it signifies activity, joy; it is the movement of the sower who advances. The ancient skepticism was a cry of defeat; ours is a patient hope that the repeated defeats does not blunt.

Thanks to science, Stirner has been able to complete Descartes. The author of the *Discourse on Method* has posited doubt as the commencement of his method of arriving at the truth. It is for him a provisory practice which leads to the definitive affirmation. It would be necessary that doubt be a permanent method which would allow reaching simply provisional affirmations, contemporary truths, momentarily recognized, which would not be the enemies of the truths of tomorrow. Dogmatism is immanent in Cartesianism, doubt is secondary; science demands that doubt becomes, on the contrary, the essential fact; it will lead to no absolute, it will not permit even the hope of it.

That philosophy is not way to repeat the commandment of Tolstoy: do not resist evil, to constantly tender the face to other blows, to bend the back under the yoke, without revolt, without anger.

There is a very profound difference between the two theories. It is not at all resignation, but an attenuation of the brutality of the struggle that is waged. There is a new dialectic to establish. Tolstoy is content to take us back to the wisdom of a times which was ignorant of science. Let us not resign ourselves, certainly, ever; but in struggling, let us know very distinctly that we do not fight in the name of the truth, the right, the justice, but of a truth, a right, a justice that is perishable, full of error, which are only moments

Instead of definite, absolute beliefs, we would have, as Guyau has said, in his *Non-Religion of the Future*, provisional beliefs. Because I know that to act it is necessary to believe, to dogmatism *tout court* will be opposed transitory dogmatisms. We will still act in the name of our beliefs, but without impetuosity, without brutality. The human mind will be in perpetual movement, it will believe, as one goes from stage to stage, successively: its beliefs, offspring of its curiosity, would never become strong enough to kill that curiosity and close the world to it for the next stage. Man must be a skeptic: that is the lesson of the laboratory. Science is skeptical. Stirner would have been right on this point and he would have only given another form to the thought later formulated by Claude Bernard:

The theories are like the successive degrees that science mounts by broadening its horizons more and more. True progress is to change a theory in order to take one new ones that go father than the first one, until we find one that is based on a greater number of fact.¹⁴

And always thus.

Let us not think that the future man will believe as yesterday; his mentality will have complexities and delicacies which can seem contradictory to us today; he will believe and not believe at the same time. The spirit of a true *savant* can give us the intuition of the probable spirituality of the future. A character from *la Charpente*, Duhamel, represents, as a literary type, the man that we could dream of being. "The doubts that he had," writes J.-H. Rosny, "remained individual, not attaining the effort for the public good." The novelist had foreseen, himself, the mental type of the future.

That restores the skeptic, that the common wisdom considers as being necessarily dilettante; he looks, tastes the warmth of that

¹⁴ Claude Bernard, *Introduction a la medecine experimentale*, I, H.

Henceforth the question is not how one can acquire life, but how one can squander, enjoy it; not how one is to produce the true self in himself, but how one is to dissolve himself, to live himself out.¹²

Let us have no more hunger for the ideal, no more "spiritual distress," no more "temporal distress." No more ecstasy: Stirner makes us turn our eyes toward the earth; he shows us the vast world that is our, then casts us into it. But he immediately puts us on guard against the enthusiasm which watches the secular for a new terrestrial paradise. And here the author of "The Unique" notes the same transposition as in morals. once, it was a question of achieving the celestial homeland; today, the terrestrial homeland. The enemy has changed its face. It is still a collectivity which wants to oppress me, something outside of me that takes my liberty.

From concepts, still more concepts, one respect dispels another, authority renews itself insidiously, the forms of slavery are diversified and I remain eternally the fearful slave of the first disobedience. The world is peopled with *respectpersonen*; the Catholic saints took the place of the hamadryads and naiads of paganism, beside the springs and in the hollows of the ancient oaks. The companion of Bacchus is not dead, Pan survives, the "scoundrel" is resurrected:

I am Pan, I am all; Jupiter, on your knees!

What to do? If heaven and earth are shut. The individual should not preoccupy himself with the men who come after him, with the family, peoples, humanity, or philosophy; he should consider himself as unique, he is not the property, the dependence of a man, nor of an idea, nor of a political organization. He is himself his God, his State, his Family, his Humanity. No more duties, no more obligations: every obligation is a restriction on my liberty. Neither socialism, nor Proudhonian justice, nor Christian morals: absolute skepticism.

¹² P. 410.

Whether what I think and do is Christian, what do I care? Whether it is human, liberal, humane, whether nonhuman, illiberal, inhuman, what do I ask about that? If only it accomplishes what I want, if only I satisfy myself in it, then overlay it with predicates as you will; it is all alike to me.

And the obligation of mutual aid, he responds: I know of no obligation to love.

Stirner does not content himself with this formidable negation which makes the wisdom of the centuries tremble; he pushes further down the road that a Florentine publicist once opened for him. He doubtless followed it too far, for it also leads him to a breviary: the one that he offers us was written by Machiavelli. Machiavelli is the Rousseau of that other Proudhon.

Perhaps you recall some of the strong thoughts of that skillful man of State:

“The prince, obliged to act as a beast, will strive to be at once a fox and a lion: for, if he is only a lion, he will not see the snares; if he is only a fox, he will not defend himself against wolves; and he has an equal need to be a fox in order to see the snares, and a lion in order to terrify the wolves. Those who stick to being just lions are very clumsy.”

“A wise prince ought not to fulfill his promise when that accomplishment would be against his interests...: such is the precept to give.”

“You can see that those who knew best how to act the fox are those who have prospered most.”

“Let the prince think then only of preserving his life and his State: if he succeeds, all the means that he has

processions in corps, there the socialist Noels and Easters, the open-air preaching, the civic baptisms.

Thus, naturally, we note how the most emancipatory ideas rapidly become instruments of oppression: how many men are dead in the factories, and down in the mines how many women and children irremediably weakened in the name of the principles of the Declaration of the rights of man, in the name of the liberty of commerce and industry! Christianity, a factor of emancipation, became Catholicism, the most frightening instrument of moral and economic oppression that the world has ever known. Wouldn't it be necessary to conclude that if man comes spontaneously to belief, to the absolute, and submits to the shepherd's crook, that it is not belief that it is necessary to preach: it is skepticism, it is doubt, it is the defiance of truth.

One could object, it is true, that the intolerance of the opposing parties has economic origins and that consequently no diffusion of the skeptical theory could prevent men from severely protecting the interests of their castes, their dogmatism being precisely the form of the attack and the resistance of their strength, of their force of domination.

One could respond as easily, it seems, that minds well penetrated, from infancy, with the principle of evolution would have less reluctance to accept social transformations which damage their individual interests, than men accustomed to consider institutions as eternal and unchangeable. Now, it is quite certain that all education, all morals, the academies, the salons, the churches, push us to belief, to dogmatism, to absolute conceptions. In this sense, Stirner is right. Only, if we no longer believe, will we still act?

But every action implies a prior affirmation, being itself an affirmation, to doubt and to act, aren't they exclusive, contradictory terms? But let one to observe well that it is not at all a question of no longer believing, but of the manner of believing. The Stirnerian still believes — at least in himself.

This, moreover, is the current theory of contemporary anarchists. “The most individualistic man is the man who is most interdependent,” wrote one of the principal editors of *Le Libertaire*. The publicists and jurists of the classical school no longer think otherwise; they no longer make an antagonistic distinction between liberty and association. The deepest and fairest thoughts on this new philosophy will be found in the admirable novel of J.-H. Rosny, *La Charpente*.

But the lesson in ideophagy of the philosopher Bavarian must not be lost despite that fundamental critique; it is full of sense; it will be the liberation of whomever will understand it. Redesigned, it is the best objection to the negative anti-dogmatism, which can no longer suffice.

We are idolaters, that is, we are *still* idolaters. Stirner properly combats that new faith. Ideas have replaced the idols of stone and wood. There is a change of materials, but they are neither less mad nor less inhuman. our secular beliefs remain religious at base: no doubt sufficiently corrects their intransigence. Everyone thinks they possess the truth; people are killed for secular ideas; modern men are little more than impious sextons. “Our atheists are pious men,” Stirner still says. We still don’t know how to doubt according to the scientific method; we give and retain at the same time, contrary to the old law school precept.

While it is natural that many opinions are born, that the differences between ideologies constantly become more marked with more abundant thought among men, this multiplication of ideas does not preserve us from the evils of the old belief. We still have the mindsets of Roman proprietors and catholic believers: absolutes collide with absolutes, and each carefully shuts the doors of his house. The old forms of brutality, of domination, are renewed. Formerly, at Montceau-les-Mines one saw the troupes of miners engaging in real religious rites: the new laic rites supplant the pomp of the Church. One demands other masters, other beliefs: here the

taken will be judged honorable and praised by everyone.”¹³

Stirner wants to extend the morality that Florentine secretary advocated for the sovereigns alone, to every individual in society: it is not Montesquieu, it is Machiavelli who seems to him to have “regained the titles of the human spirit.”

Thus, the ideophage counsels his “unique” to follow the maxims of the Prince in order to become skillful at giving and keeping, at being crafty, deceiving, lying, succeeding.

I evade the laws of a people, he says without artifice,
until I can gather my strength to overturn them.

He says further: Turn yourself to good account.

Guizot said in the same era: Improve yourself!

There is all the wisdom of industrial competition. The work of egoism accomplished, Stirner raises, like the royal herald at Saint-Denis, the cry of deliverance and salvation: “The people is dead! *Bonjour moi!*”

* * *

The book of the “Unique” is a carnage of ideas, the most savage act of ideophagy that the world has ever known. It is a devastation that leaves nothing behind it. That intellectual would have turned his arms against himself; he cries “No more ideas! Nothing but instinctive desires pressing rudely towards bliss. Let us kill the mind in order to give ourselves up to the joy of living freely.”

We can mark here a bit of the work of disintegration of the Kantian absolute, still dear to the academics, worked at once by the professionals of philosophy, such as Bergson, and in certain popular milieus, by the dispersed sect of the Stirnerian ideophages. Kant

¹³ *Le Prince*, chap. XVIII.

had only partially liberated us by ridding us of the absolute of faith: he had given us the absolute of reason. He had transposed elements, he had substituted one collective imperative with another, despite all the appearances of a forthright individualism; something of the Church still clung to it. Today, others want to rid us of this last master and deliver man up to himself, unbridle and unsaddle him, launch him, finally free of all social harnessing, out of door into limitless fields. But will he have the fortune to break the back?

Stirner recalled more or less confusedly the revolutionary idolatry of the goddess Reason. It is against the new cult that he protested with vehemence, with contempt, and with cruelty. Science, in opposing itself to religion, had not eliminated its rival, it even took from it its apostolic tendencies; reason, like faith, tends to sovereignty, it considers itself universal and irresistible. In sum, Stirner had only seen in science sort of religion and in reason only the mother of another dogma: he heard the forming of new chains, and he was horrified. And me? he cried. His book is born of that horror, and, in fact, we feel a sort of suffocating anguish in the furious pages of the Unique. But the horror was too intense, pathological even, for it has led the author of the Unique to conclusions that science does not allow us to maintain.

What, then, is the “Unique”? The Papinians, according to Rabelais, already knew a personage by that name. Was this not the same one? It is precisely a question for a contemporary of Machiavelli:

Have you seen him, good passengers, have you seen him? — Who? asked Pantagruel. ... How, they said, gentlemen pilgrims don't you know the “Unique”? — Sirs, replied Epistemon, we do not understand those terms; but if you will be pleased to let us know who you mean, we will tell you the truth of the matter without any more ado. — We mean, said they, he that is. Did you ever see him? He that is, returned Pantagruel, ac-

cording to our theological doctrine, is God, who said to Moses, I am that I am. We never saw him, nor can he be beheld by mortal eyes.

The “Unique” of Stirner appears to greatly resemble that of the Papinians: *onques ne le vimes*. Stirnerism has not seen the necessity of making of man a social phenomenon. Stirner has believed too readily, following the philosophy of the eighteenth century, that the human will could be the mistress of life and subdue it as it pleases. We know today that it is as chimerical to wish to escape the determinism of ideas and of the economic structure as the determinism of the laws of nature. Man follows a path that he has not plotted; as the Saint-Simonians say, “he is the inevitable work of the vast phenomenon of which he is a part.” He cannot escape from social life; he is its prisoner. Prisoner of laws, of institutions, of needs, and of history. Where to go? To the stars! Or fall into a pit? “Man can no more escape the action of right, than he can escape his own shadow.” (Edmond Picard.)

The optimism of the men of the Revolution was not realized; man has not been able to free himself from what they called “arbitrariness” and the world has grown beyond their expectations.

An anarchist who has made some noise in the world has insisted on these social necessities. “Man,” he wrote in *God and the State*, becomes man and comes to consciousness, to the realization of his humanity only in society and only through the collective action of society as a whole... Apart from society, man would remain eternally a savage beast or a saint, which would mean pretty much the same thing... Liberty is not a matter of isolation, but of mutual reflection.”

Where Stirner sees the maximum of liberty, Kropotkin indicates the maximum of dependence: “I am myself only human and free to the extent that I recognize the liberty and humanity of all the men that surround them... A slave-master is not a man, but a master.”