

The Redemption of Saint Max: Stirner's Critique of Marx

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When the founders of the Humanist Union invited me to become a member, I replied that “I might possibly be willing to join if your club had been called an inhuman union, but I could not join one that calls itself ‘humanist.’”

Adorno¹

In 1844, Johann Kaspar Schmidt, under the pen name “Max Stirner”, published a blistering critique of contemporary German philosophy, politics, and society called *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* [*The Unique and Its Property*].² Although Engels praised the book in private letters to Marx upon its arrival, a year and a half later he and Marx went to work demolishing every sentence in a 350-page unpublished manuscript called *Saint Max*, eventually edited and compiled a century later into the centerpiece of the *German Ideology*.³ *Saint Max*—perhaps the most bombastic, literary, philosophical, polemical text that Marx ever wrote—is rarely read and almost never commented upon, a fact I hope to rectify here.⁴

In this paper, I will reconstruct a key debate between Marx and Stirner that occurred from 1843 to 1846 in four texts: Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, Stirner's *The Unique and its Property*,

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 169.

² The two translations I will use, with my own corrections, are Max Stirner, *The Ego and its Own* [EO] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1844] 1995), and Max Stirner, *The Unique and its Property* [UP] (Baltimore: Underworld Amusements, [1844] 2017). The former will be cited as EO, the latter as UP. For the German, I use Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum* (Freiburg/ München: Verlag Karl Alber, [1844], 2016).

³ For Marx's writings, including the so-called *German Ideology*, I use the Marx-Engels-Collected Works, cited by volume and page number. *The German Ideology* is MECW 5: 19-539.

⁴ An exception is the fantastic book by Ulrich Pagel, *Der Einzige und die Deutsche Ideologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), perhaps the only book-length reflection on *Saint Max* to date. Pagel's focus is on the role of enlightenment thinking in Stirner and Marx, and does not touch upon my concerns here.

Marx's *Saint Max*, and Stirner's *Stirner's Critics*. In *The Unique and its Property*, Stirner singles-out Marx's use of the phrase "real species-being" [*wirkliches Gattungswesen*] in the *Jewish Question* as a form of ideological sleight of hand. For Stirner, there is no normative content to the concept of the human being or human species beyond its use in categorizing individuals according to arbitrary social criteria and excluding those who do not fit. The injunction to be a real human being presupposes the possibility of failing to be a human being. Stirner brashly accepts this fate and declares himself *inhuman*, or rather, an un-man, *Unmensch*.

What is the *Unmensch*? "It is a human being who does not correspond to the *concept* human being, as the inhuman is something human that does not fit the *concept* of the human."⁵ Stirner's *Unmensch* names that part of oneself that always fails to live up to the category of human being, the gap between one's singular identity as an I and one's generic-identity as a species. The un-human is not something other than human, but a relation to one's humanness that rejects its meaning as relevant to one's own self-identity. Stirner calls out the exclusionary and particularist criteria attached to the universal concept of the human being—i.e., the good, righteous, liberal European citizen—and denies it. Why become a real species-being when our real species denies my being? Why become a human being when being human feels so alien to me?

In the manuscript known as *Saint Max*, Marx directly responds to Stirner's critique of his concept of species-being, as well as to Stirner's proposed counter-category of the un-man or inhuman being. In this paper, I will show how Stirner's critique of the concept of the human being was not only correct, but that Marx agreed with it, and furthermore, that he integrated it into his own conception of communism and what it means to be human and inhuman.⁶

⁵ EO 159/UP 190.

⁶ This paper thus continues the line of thought begun in the conclusion to my 2018 book on Max Stirner, in which I read Stirner and Marx together: Jacob Blumenfeld, *All Things are Nothing to Me: The Unique Philosophy of Max Stirner* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2018), 132-148.

Marx 1843: Zur Judenfrage

In 1843, Karl Marx published *Zur Judenfrage*, a critique of Bruno Bauer's critique of Jewish emancipation. In this text, Marx utilizes a concept that Feuerbach inherited from Hegel, the concept of *species-being* or *Gattungswesen*.⁷ Marx uses this idea as a positive counter-concept to the pseudo-ideal of the alienated subject divided between their political and social being, between their universal status as an abstract citizen and their particular role as an economic agent. For Marx, "political democracy is Christian" since,

in it man, not merely one man but everyman, ranks as *sovereign*, as the highest being, but it is man in his uncivilized, unsocial form, man in his fortuitous existence, man just as he is, man as he has been corrupted by the whole organization of our society, who has lost himself, been alienated, and handed over to the rule of inhuman conditions and elements – in short, man who is not yet a *real species-being*.⁸

For Marx, only when "an individual human being has become a *species-being* in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation...will human emancipation have been accomplished."⁹ In other words, the division between political and social man, expressed in our distinct roles as citizens and workers, allows for particular forms of emancipation from particular kinds of domination, but the very form of emancipation itself reproduces the alienation inherent to the division of human beings into abstract political figures and concrete economic agents with their distinct spheres, roles, and norms. Human emancipation would overcome this distinction and allow

⁷ For a more complex understanding of this category, see Karen Ng "Humanism: A Defense", *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Spring 2021, 145-163; and Thomas Khurana, "Genus-Being: On Marx's Dialectical Naturalism" in: Luca Corti and Johannes-Georg Schüle (eds.), *Nature and Naturalism in Classical German Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 246-278. To understand the roots of Marx's category of species-being in Hegel's concept of life, see Karen Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁸ Marx, "On the Jewish Question" [1844], MECW 3: 159.

⁹ MECW 3: 168.

for man to become a species-being at home in the world, at home in society, and not dirempted from its economic and social metabolism with the world. It is precisely this call to become a real species-being, to live up to the ideal of being a truly *human* being, that Stirner sharply criticizes in turn.

Stirner 1844: Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum

Max Stirner's bombastic attack on the sacred ideals of Western civilization spares no one. *The Unique and its Property* is a shooting gallery of fixed ideas and metaphysical dogmas at large. Whether God or state, morality or justice, freedom or right—no ideal, no cause, no concept shall be allowed to ignore the real, living creature that I am. Stirner's trick is to show how certain ideas, relations and institutions become separated from those who produce them, and misrecognized as fixed and frozen autonomous spheres with as much reality as individuals themselves.¹⁰ In short, Stirner describes how subjects become dominated by their own creations—as thoughts, ideals, values, ends, or goals. In this process, we lose our power to determine ourselves, and become mere reflections of the pseudo-reality posited as our ideal selves, which in fact always serves some other particular end, be it political, economic, religious or social. Stirner's task is thus a) critical—to reveal and criticize the dominant ideas of the society that dominates us, b) practical—to empower us to reappropriate our own productions as our property, and c) philosophical—to highlight the gaps between subject, concept and object, the moments of non-identity that are not to be denied or repressed but liberated as the negative core of that which we are—unique, creative nothings. One could define this as freedom, autonomy, self-determination—but Stirner calls it *ownness*, the power to produce, consume and discard our own properties, identities and lives as our own. Positively employing words like *egoism*, *property*, *owner*, and *ownness*, all the while emphasizing

¹⁰ I lay this out in detail in part II of Blumenfeld, *All Things are Nothing to Me* (2018).

the absolute importance of the I, one may be forgiven for thinking Stirner presents a defense of modern private property rights and liberal capitalist individualism. On the contrary, his book delivers a radical critique of the pseudo-individualism of bourgeois society and its sacred rights of property. Since his text is still very much unknown or misread, allow me to reproduce the structure below:

- All Things are Nothing to Me
 - First Part: Human
 - I – A Human Life
 - II – Humans of Old and New
 - 1 – The Ancients
 - 2 – The Moderns
 - §1 – The Spirit
 - §2 – The Possessed
 - §3 – The Hierarchy
 - 3 – The Free
 - §1 – Political Liberalism
 - §2 – Social Liberalism
 - §3 – Humane Liberalism
 - Postscript
 - Second Part: I
 - I – Ownness
 - II – The Owner
 - 1 – My Power
 - 2 – My Intercourse
 - 3 – My Self-Enjoyment
 - III – The Unique One

The layout of the book shows the general structure of Stirner’s argument, whose first half criticizes the normative concept of the human being and its rule in a variety of domains including psychology, history, religion, law, philosophy, and politics, and whose second half develops a positive theory of the kind of being that displaces the rule of “man”, not in order to rule in its place, but in order to not be ruled: the finite, singular I that I am, in my powers, my relations, and my pleasures. To describe that which I am, to make the “I” an object of reflection, leads to all sorts of

paradoxes into which Stirner does not wish to enter.¹¹ That is why his “I” is not an absolute foundation or principle, as it is for Fichte, but more a phenomenological code-word for describing the experience of consuming the fire of life as it burns up. More Bergsonian than Cartesian, more Spinozist than Kantian, Stirner names this non-principle the *Einzig*, the singularity of a subjectivity with a hole in its center that expands and contracts in relation to its power to identify with, control, and let go of its properties, that is, those internal and external characteristics that define and determine its identity at any one point. A more Hegelian word for this I is simply *negativity*. Against the abstract ideal of the human being, Stirner posits the concrete reality of the un-human being, that is, the reality of not living up to the alien ideal of humanity. The *unmensch* or un-man is less a principle than a provocation whose only function is to disclose the ineliminable gap between the particularity of subjectivity and the generality of normativity.

Stirner against Marx

In the epigraph to part II of *Der Einzige*, prefacing his positive theory of the subject, Stirner sets down his negative task of destruction:

At the entrance of the modern era stands the ‘God-man.’ Will only the God in the God-man evaporate at its exit, and can the God-man really die if only the God in him dies? ... God has had to make way but not for us, rather for—humanity. How can you believe the God-man has died before the man in him, as well as the God, has died?¹²

Stirner’s radical question concerning the death of God is not the Nietzschean one about the absence of meaning that follows, but rather the more critical one about the immediate replacement of one absolute with another. To Stirner, even the most radical critics of his day, *including Marx*, fall prey

¹¹ On the problem of trying to name that which “names don’t name”, see Max Stirner, *Stirner’s Critics* (Oakland, LBC Books, [1845] 2012), 54-57. For the German, I use *Max Stirner: Parerga, Kritiken, Repliken* (Nürnberg: LSR-Verlag, 1986).

¹² EO 139/UP 169.

to this illusion of liberation that has come with the downfall of religious authority, only to return with the rise of secular humanism. While Stirner spends many pages criticizing Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer on this point, he also quotes Marx without naming him, in perhaps the first citation of Marx in print:

Now, after liberalism has proclaimed the human being, one can declare that with this it has only carried out the final consequence of Christianity, and that in truth Christianity originally set itself no other task than to realize the ‘human being;’ the ‘true human being’ ... To identify me now entirely with the human being, the demand has been invented, and stated, that I must become a ‘real species being’.¹³

This is of course Marx’s demand, which Stirner interprets as liberalism carrying out Christianity’s final consequence. Perhaps it was this double insult that goaded Marx into writing his gnawed diatribe against Saint Max. Stirner’s critique of liberalism as a “human religion”—exemplified in the injunction to become a “true human being” or a “real species-being”—is first and foremost a critique of alienation, of turning what’s “mine” into something alien, and setting it against me as higher than me, as my “vocation”.¹⁴ For Stirner, Marx’s new universal, whether we call it species-being, human being, or human emancipation, is always something separate from *me*, that is, the living, finite I with its own needs, interests, joys, and desires. Instead of replacing a “bad” essence with a “good” one, what would it mean to start from ourselves and our own needs?

The Un-Human (Unmensch, Unmenschliche)

¹³ EO 158-9/UP 188-9.

¹⁴ “The human *religion* is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion. For liberalism is a religion because it separates my essence from me and sets it above me, because it exalts ‘the human being’ to the same extent as any other religion does its God or idol, because it makes what is mine into something otherworldly, because in general it makes some of what is mine, out of my qualities and my property, something alien - namely, an ‘essence’; in short, because it sets me beneath the human, and thereby creates for me a ‘vocation’.” EO 158/UP 188.

So if we are not to take ourselves as merely the vessel that realizes our essence as “human beings”, then what are we to ourselves? Here, in his characteristic style of appropriating insults as his own property and inverting their moral valence, Stirner says he is more like an *Unmensch*, an un-human being, a word which can also mean *monster*. What is the un-human?

It is a human being who does not correspond to the concept human being, as the inhuman is something human that does not fit the concept of the human. Logic calls this a ‘nonsensical judgment.’ ... Human beings have pronounced this ‘nonsensical judgment’ through a long series of centuries! Indeed, what is still more, in this long time there were only—*un-men*. Which individuals would have corresponded to its concept? Christianity knows only one human being, and this one—Christ—is straight away again an un-human in the reverse sense, namely, a superhuman human being, a ‘God.’¹⁵

This judgement of the human being that does not correspond to the concept of human being only appears “non-sensical” from the standpoint of the human being as a fixed category into which all individuals must conform in order to be recognized as such. For Stirner, *no* actual human beings live up to this normative ideal, and thus all human beings constantly fail to be who they are supposed to be. There is only figure—Christ—who exemplifies the ideal of the human being, and that individual, tellingly, is not a human being. To make the inversion more explicit, Stirner concludes: “Only the un-human is an *actual* human”.¹⁶ This dialectical sentence is key to understanding Marx’s later critique of Stirner, which accuses him of misunderstanding the fundamental principles of logic and language, which operates in universals. For now, one should notice that Stirner uses the concept of the human and the unhuman *together*, that the un-human is the human, the human un-human. In a sense, this is not a replacement of one category by the other, but an attempt to reveal the gap within each category, to show how the non-fulfilment of a normative ideal is not exceptional but itself universal. The point is not to reject universals as such,

¹⁵ EO 159/UP 190.

¹⁶ EO 159/UP 190.

that would be impossible, but to relate to them in a way that is one's own, free. When being human becomes a chain on our necks, then maybe it is better to be unhuman. But the opposite can also be true.

The Human Being

Stirner introduces the un-human, *der Unmensch*, as the real human being I am, not the concept of the human being I am not. But what is Stirner's concept of the human? Stirner's first definition of the human is simply classificatory, completely devoid of any ethical determinations:

I am human, just like the earth is a planet. As ridiculous as it would be to set the earth the task of being a 'correct' star, it is just as ridiculous to burden me with the calling to be a 'correct' human being.¹⁷

If this is all the human being is, just the bare name of a species, then it is of course absurd to judge or condemn any individual member of the species for not being a "good" expression of its kind. For Stirner, even if we have criteria for distinguishing between good or bad cases of individuals as members of kinds, that remains at the level of scientific abstraction, of theory, and not practical guidance, or ethics.¹⁸ To translate a species determination into an ethical imperative is to make a category mistake. Here, Stirner begins to develop a critique of moralized species thinking *from the inside*, that is, from the first-person perspective of the I, irrespective of its relation to the kind of which it is a part:¹⁹

¹⁷ EO 163/UP 194-5.

¹⁸ For an Aristotelian defense of ethical judgements about natural kinds like "human beings", see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); and Matthew Congdon, *Moral Articulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

¹⁹ On thinking ethics *from within* a specific life-form, see Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (New York: Verso, 2007); J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); J.M. Bernstein, *Torture and Dignity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Whether these non-traditional ethical perspectives can be harmonized with Stirner is yet to be seen.

*The human being is only an ideal, the species only something thought. To be a human being does not mean fulfilling the ideal of the human being, but rather to present oneself, the individual. It is not how I realize the generally human that needs to be my task, but how I satisfy myself. I am my species, am without norm, without law, without model.*²⁰

One can read this in two ways: either Stirner misunderstands the classificatory system of genus and species, for it is impossible to both *be* one's species and yet have no model or law of the species; or, Stirner fully understands the relation between species and individual, and yet rejects any conclusions that would follow from this classification for how to live one's life. To be a subject for Stirner, and not just a generic member of a natural species called homo sapiens, is to have the capacity to reflect upon one's *own* needs and ends, even if they run counter to the demands and instincts of the species at large to which one belongs.²¹ If being human means anything, it means we can reject what it means to be human.

Stirner's Critics, 1845

Immediately after publishing *Der Einzige*, a wave of rejoinders to Stirner's text started coming in: from Szeliga, Feuerbach, and Hess. In 1845, Stirner responded to these attacks, adding, in third person, his own replies to the criticisms of *Der Einzige* in a book called *Stirner's Critics*. One interesting line of response that Stirner repeatedly returns to in this text concerns his concepts of the human and un-human. These passages are crucial for understanding Stirner's ideas about the human being from *Der Einzige*, which are sometimes so polemical that it makes it hard to distill the conceptual points at their core. In the following, I will add four more claims to Stirner's critical

²⁰ EO 163/UP 195.

²¹ For an interesting exploration of point, see John McDowell's example of the rational wolf in "Two Sorts of Naturalism" from John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 167-197.

dialectic of the human and un-human, in order to qualify and deepen his earlier statements on their relation: first, there is no privileging of the human or the unhuman in Stirner's account; second, both (Christian) religion and (critical) philosophy understand that human beings are actually un-human beings, but they fail to make the right judgment based on this; third, you or I as singular subjects are neither human nor un-human, but both and neither; fourth, the point is not to criticize the human using the category of the un-human or to criticize the un-human through the category of the human, but to use and criticize both for ourselves.

1) First, there is no privileging of the human or the unhuman in Stirner's account. Both are worthy of the same criticism, depending on one's context. Stirner makes this point through a series of comments that emphasize a) the indeterminacy of one's status as a unique I as opposed to the determinacy of one's status as a human being, b) the reversibility of the critique of the human being from the perspective of the un-human, while not changing the content of critique itself, and c) the identity of the two concepts in the end, such that the critique of one is the critique of the other, and the only reason to criticize one and not the other is due to the circumstances at hand. The circumstances mean the specific social and political context in which either concept plays a function role in repressing one's self-empowerment. Stirner writes:

The 'human being,' as a concept or an attribute, does not exhaust *you*, because it has a conceptual content of its own, because it says *what* is human and *what* a human being is, i.e., because it is capable of being defined so that *you* can remain completely out of play. Of course, *you as a human being* still have your part in the conceptual content of the human being, but you do not have it *as you*. The unique, however, has no content; it is indeterminacy in itself; only *through you* does it acquire content and determination. There is no conceptual development of the unique, one cannot build a philosophical system with it as a 'principle,' the way one can with being, with thought, with the I. Rather it puts an end *to all conceptual development*.²²

²² Max Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, 55-6

If the “human being” as a concept or attribute does not exhaust me, and if there is no conceptual content to the “the unique”, then it is tempting to think that the un-human can function as the name of a new subjectivity beyond the human. For Stirner, that is just as wrong:

As it seems, Stirner’s book is written against *the human being*. He has drawn the harshest judgments for this, as for the word ‘egoist,’ and has aroused the most stubborn prejudices. Yes, the book actually is written against *the human being*, and yet Stirner could have gone after the same target without offending people so severely if he had reversed the subject and said that he wrote against the un-human. But then he would have been at fault if someone misunderstood him in the opposite, namely, sentimental way, and placed him on the list of those who raise their voice for the ‘true human being.’ But Stirner says: the human being is the un-human being; what the one is, the other is; what is said against the one, is said against the other.²³

In other words, the conceptual content of the category of the human being can be so determined that it excludes me, and thus I am justified in rejecting it, and claiming the un-human for what I really am; but the unhuman is also another category with its own conceptual content, one that can also be defined in a way that excludes, me so I cannot make that a new principle; in the end then, the critique of the human is not really about the human per se, but about its function or role in determining me, limiting me, dominating me. It is that which is criticized in the critique of the (un)human, not the (un)classification itself.

2) Second, even (Christian) religion and (critical) philosophy understand that all human beings are actually un-human beings, but neither religion nor philosophy takes the next step, which would be in this case to affirm the reality of the un-human against the ideality of the human. Instead, both choose the “concept” over the reality, the true human being over the sinner, the egoist, the un-human. This shows that Stirner is not simply positing the un-human as his own concept, but rather developing it immanently from within the dominant ethical systems of his day, religion and

²³ Max Stirner, *Stirner’s Critics*, 73-4.

philosophy, whose highest and opposed forms are theological Christianity and atheistic humanism, both of which agree that whatever it is I am is not what I should be:

The fact that every actual human being, measured by the concept of human being, is an un-human being, was expressed by religion with the claim that all human beings 'are sinners'; today the sinner is called an egoist. And what has one decided in consequence of this judgment? To redeem the sinner, to overcome egoism, to find and realize the true human being. One rejected the individual, i.e., the unique, in favor of the concept; another rejected the un-human being in favor of the human being, and did not recognize that the un-human is the true and only possible reality of the human.²⁴

Interestingly, Stirner identifies egoism as the secularization of original sin, which is simply a perverted way of recognizing and then denying human finitude. Egoism thus does not denote selfishness or greed, but the affirmation and joy of human finitude, which is, in itself, liberating.

3) Third, you and I are neither human nor un-human but both, and neither. What can this mean? First of all, it means that being un-human only appears through the category of the human, for this is only the negative gap that arises in the human as its lack, as that which is non-identical to its concept. For Stirner, only by being recognized as a human, and thus, recognized as lacking the qualities of being a *true* human, can one affirm one's status as an un-human against it, as how one really is, and not as how is supposed to be. Affirming oneself as an un-human being is thus a completion of the human, even a transcendence of it, for in affirming one's humanness as an unhuman, one dissolves the antinomy between the two, and loses any distinction between human and unhuman. At this vanishing point, *der Einzige*, the unique or the singular, appears:

The human being is real and actual in the un-human being; every un-human is—a human. But you are an un-human only as the reality of the human, an un-human being only in comparison to the *concept of human being*. You are an un-human, and this is why you are completely human, a real and actual human being, a complete human being. But you are even *more* than a complete human being, you are an individual, a *unique* human being. Human being and un-human being, these

²⁴ Max Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, 74.

contrasts from the religious world, lose their divine and diabolical, and thus their sacred and absolute, meaning, in you, the *unique*.²⁵

Stirner's switch from his more common third and first person here to second person shows that he is not a solipsist, but describing a common condition across the boundaries of time and space, between writer and reader, thus between desiring intelligences, or what Hegel might call, subjects.

4) Finally, in a reflection about his own purpose for writing about the un-human, Stirner says that the point is not to merely criticize the human being using the category of the un-human or to criticize the un-human using the category of the human, but to use and criticize both for one's own needs. He explains, in the third person, *who* is he writing for, which in turn clarifies his own dialectical method:

While Stirner writes against the human being, at the same time and in the same breath, he writes against the un-human being, as opposed to the human being; but he does not write against the human being who is an un-human being or the un-human being who is a human being—i.e., he writes for the utterly common unique [*den ganz gemeinen Einzigen*], who is a complete human being for himself anyhow, because he is an un-human being.²⁶

The “utterly common unique”, for whom Stirner writes, is itself an utterly paradoxical formulation, an oxymoron of opposed concepts—*common* and *unique*—jammed together, and then further complicated: for in virtue of being un-human, the utterly common unique is a complete or perfect [*vollkommener*] human being. This leaves us with an antinomy:

Thesis: Stirner is writing against the human being, who is actually an un-human being.

Antithesis: Stirner is writing against the un-human being, who is actually a human being.

²⁵ Max Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, 74-5.

²⁶ Max Stirner, *Stirner's Critics*, 75.

To resolve this antinomy, one only needs to interpret the thesis as correct whenever the “human being” functions as a dominant normative category against which real individuals are shown to be lacking, and the antithesis as correct in conditions where the “un-human being” is privileged as the complete truth of who one is and can be. Both thesis and antithesis can be adopted depending on the power matrix in which such statements gain their force and validity. Stirner thus writes *for* or *against* neither, rather, he writes only for the “utterly common unique”, the common bearer of the categories of the human/unhuman who singularly must decide how to appropriate such properties for themselves.

Marx and Engels 1845-46, Saint Max

Even before Stirner’s book was officially published, Friedrich Engels borrowed a copy from Moses Hess in late 1844, read it and, though he disagreed with Stirner’s motivation, loved it. In his November 19th, 1844 letter to Marx, he praised the book in particular for its ruthless defense of egoism, which should be the true basis for any communism worthy of its name:

This egoism is taken to such a pitch, it is so absurd and at the same time so self-aware, that it cannot maintain itself even for an instant in its one-sidedness, but must immediately change into communism. In the first place it’s a simple matter to prove to Stirner that his egoistic man is bound to become communist out of sheer egoism...

But we must also adopt such truth as there is in the principle. And it is certainly true that we must first make a cause our own, egoistic cause, before we can do anything to further it – and hence that in this sense, irrespective of any eventual material aspirations, we are communists out of egoism also, and it is out of egoism that we wish to be *human beings*, not mere individuals.²⁷

²⁷ Friedrich Engels, “Engels to Marx: 19 November 1844,” MECW 38: 11-12.

Interesting to note here is that Engels adopts Stirner's egoism as the non-material basis which underlies the communist aspiration to be a *human being*. In a sense, Engels appropriates Stirner for himself and his own visions. Marx, however, was not of the same opinion. We do not have the letter he wrote back to Engels, but we know that it was scathing. Marx was so disturbed by Stirner's arguments, both in *The Unique* and in *Stirner's Critics*, that he felt compelled to write a line-by-line critique of both of Stirner's books. Stirner *shook* him.²⁸ Whether it was that sentence criticizing Marx's use of the concept "species-being" or something much deeper, we know that Marx and Engels made it their task to finally rid themselves of any young Hegelian baggage by submitting Stirner's book to ruthless criticism. It is my claim, however, that in doing so, Marx in fact adopted and developed many of Stirner's formal and substantive claims about individuals, needs, egoism, communism, property and power. What I will focus on below is specifically the concepts of the human and un-human, and how Marx rethought them following Stirner's criticisms.

This manuscript, called *Saint Max*, was never published, but it was re-discovered, re-edited and finally published nearly a century later in a "book" called *The German Ideology*, three quarters of which is on Stirner. Most people who come across this "book" never see any of that, but rather just an abridged version with mashed-up texts in a chapter named "Feuerbach". It should be stated clearly: *The German Ideology* is not a real book.²⁹ For one recent scholar, it should more accurately be called the "Brussels Manuscripts".³⁰ Interestingly enough, even the so-called

²⁸ See Tom Whyman, "Egoism and Class Consciousness, or: Why Marx and Engels Wrote So Much About Stirner" in: *Hegel Bulletin*, Volume 44, Issue 3, December 2023, 422 – 445.

²⁹ See Sarah Johnson, "Farewell to The German Ideology", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 83, Number 1, January 2022, 143-170; Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank, *A Political History of the Editions of Marx and Engels's "German Ideology Manuscripts"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). The scholarly edition of the German Ideology manuscripts in the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe [MEGA] is labelled as: MEGA² I/5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017). See especially the editors' introduction to the MEGA² I/5 (725-799), which confirms that: a) the German Ideology is not a book, b) the central focus of the existing manuscripts is on Max Stirner, c) Stirner's critique of Bauer and Feuerbach was decisive for Marx.

³⁰ Sarah Johnson, "Farewell", 169.

Feuerbach chapter, with the most-well known quotes on historical materialism, property, communism, needs, competition, and so on, are actually mangled sections from the *Saint Max* manuscript, which is massive and all over the place. In short, it is really hard to say anything about these texts beyond the fact that they were written in 1845-46, mostly by Marx, some by Engels, mostly focused on Max Stirner's work, along with some references to Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Grün, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Étienne Cabet and Georg Kuhlmann. Selections from the chapters on Bauer, Beck and Grün were published in the 1840s, but nothing else was released until Eduard Bernstein published sections of *Saint Max* in 1903-4.

Saint Max: Structure

The structure of the *Saint Max* manuscript is complex, convoluted, and confusing. Allow me to explain. First of all, this three-hundred page "text" is in fact Part III of the "Leipzig Council", a religious parody of Bauer and Stirner as church fathers, both of whose works were published in Leipzig (there is no Part I of this council). The *Saint Max* portion begins with a discussion not of *The Unique and its Own* from 1844, but of *Stirner's Critics* from 1845, that is, Stirner's response to three critics of his book: Szeliga, Feuerbach, Hess. Marx calls this text, in his religious mocking style, the "Apologetical Commentary". But before he can discuss this in detail, he says, he has to discuss the holy book itself: *Der Einzige*. He then follows the book structure (Man and I/Old and New Testament) using literary, religious, and historical allusions throughout. *Saint Max* employs many stylistically complex analogies, parodies and insults, with references to Cervantes, Luís de Camões, Calderon, Faust, the Bible, Shakespeare, Jacques le bonhomme, Schiller, and Heine.³¹ I will point out just two.

³¹ On Marx's style in general, see the fantastic Ludovico Silva, *Marx's Literary Style* (New York: Verso, [1971] 2023).

A first allusion structure is *religious*, taking place within the world of the Church Fathers, in which Stirner is mocked as a saint. The almost stupidly obvious joke here is that Stirner does not escape the religious logic that he ruthlessly criticizes, that he is still, at the end of day, fighting spirits and ghosts, dealing in a world of abstractions, fighting for his one true God—*das Ich*—against all others. According to Marx, Stirner sees all history as “religious production of fancies in the place of the real production of the means of subsistence and of life itself.”³² Marx’s over-reliance on this trope wears off quickly, and ends up being abandoned for another one. The second allusion structure is *literary*, taking place within the world of Don Quixote, in which Stirner is Sancho Panza, an ass-riding assistant to a fool fighting windmills. Again, the joke here is almost stupidly obvious. Unlike the *cabelloro de la Mancha*, Sancho Panza sees the windmills for what they really are, but for Marx, this is all he does—*perceive illusions*:

Sancho Panza achieves his heroic feats by *perceiving* the entire opposing host of thoughts in its nullity and vanity. All his great deed is confined to mere perception which in the end leaves everything existing as it was, changing only his conception, and that not even of things, but of philosophical phrases about things.³³

Stirner’s perceptual shift of our conceptions is thus twice removed from reality, according to Marx, changing neither reality nor how we think about reality, but only how we think about our thinking about reality. This meta-reflection on our conceptual activity strays too far away from what is actually the problem for Marx: our social relations of productions. Does this, however, accurately represent Stirner’s position? Yes and no. Stirner *is* primarily a critic of our forms of thinking and how we remain captured in patterns of thought far removed from our own needs and interests. Caught up in categories which structure our lives yet over which we have no control, Stirner brings a wrecking ball to clear the way forward. The goal though is not for individuals to think more

³² MECW 5: 56.

³³ MECW 5: 191-192.

clearly—it is to live better lives. In other words, the entire point of Stirner’s critical intervention is to allow individuals to finally relate to their material conditions as what they really are, historically specific forms of social domination structured by ideology, and not as what they are taken to be, transhistorical universal modes of being justified by the natural order of things. If this is true, then we can read Marx’s critique more symptomatically as a projection of his own worries concerning his own writing, which also focuses mainly on changing our perceptions about political economy. In other words, it is hard to see how Marx is doing anything different in his critique of political economy than changing how we think about our thinking about reality. If Marx’s epistemological critique of the categories of political economy can have material consequences, and it can, then we should not refuse the same possibility to Stirner.

Marx’s Main Critique of Stirner: The Struggle Against Predicates

For Marx, Stirner—like Feuerbach and Bauer before him—takes individuals to be dominated by predicates, categories or ideas (e.g. “the human being”), and that is why removing those ideas from our heads will liberate us from various forms of domination. But he never asks: “How did it come about that people ‘got’ these illusions ‘into their heads’?”³⁴ It was this question that motivated Marx (according to himself) to write two articles for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in 1843-4: “Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, and “On the Jewish Question”. Having said this, Marx then slightly acknowledges Stirner’s critique of his own words, but becomes very defensive in turn:

But since at that time this was done in philosophical phraseology, the traditionally occurring philosophical expressions such as ‘human essence’, ‘species’, etc., gave the German theoreticians the desired reason for misunderstanding the real trend of

³⁴ MECW 5: 236.

thought and believing that here again it was a question merely of giving a new turn to their worn-out theoretical garment.³⁵

On the one hand, Marx accepts Stirner's formal criticism of his use of "philosophical phraseology" like species-being and human essence as misguided philosophical expressions; but on the other hand, Marx rejects any substantive criticism of his position, chalking it up to misunderstanding the "real trend of thought" underlying his theoretical garment. Whereas Stirner seems to take issue with a concept, Marx takes issue with Stirner staying at the level of the concept. Marx's critique of Stirner then, which we also can read as a self-critique, focuses on the mistaken idea that ideas rule. According to Marx:

[Stirner] actually believes in the domination of the abstract ideas of ideology in the modern world; he believes that in his struggle against 'predicates', against concepts, he is no longer attacking an illusion, but the real forces that rule the world.³⁶

Rather, "one has to 'leave philosophy aside', one has to leap out of it and devote oneself like an ordinary man to the study of actuality", Marx notes, citing Hess's response to Stirner as well.³⁷

What is this "actuality" that Stirner cannot see? What are these "real forces" that rule the world?³⁸

The simple answer is: *production*. How human beings produce in different epochs is the core reality that structures the surrounding world of culture, ideas, and politics. At his most deterministic, Marx reduces any and every social, political and ideological conflict to a surface reaction of the deeper contradictions of the social relations of production. This is a strong overcorrection for what he sees as an overly idealist approach to grasping social relations, one that he will later qualify.

³⁵ MECW 5: 236.

³⁶ MECW 5: 237.

³⁷ MECW 5: 236

³⁸ One thinker who interrogates, or better, *chases* Marx precisely along these lines is Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), one of the only books to take Stirner seriously as a philosophical problem for Marx.

Stirner's critique of Marx is thus first answered by an invocation of actuality against philosophy: perhaps philosophy is not the right medium for the kind of criticism needed for emancipation. "Philosophy and the study of the actual world," Marx winks, "have the same relation to one another as onanism and sexual love."³⁹

Mensch/Unmensch

To truly appreciate the theoretical and methodological novelty involved in Marx's obsessive working-through of Stirner's text would require one to filter through every single criticism, every single joke, insult and parody that Marx made about Stirner, showing the intricate levels of reflection and self-reflection at hand, finding the diamonds of truth buried in the litany of invectives that compose *Saint Max* as a whole.⁴⁰ For now, I will limit myself to discussing Marx's explicit remarks on Stirner's counter-concept of *der Unmensch*, the un-human, in order to show how Marx ingests Stirner's spirit even while spitting out its shell.

The first mention of Stirner's concept of the un-human appears at the end of the "Old Testament", that is, the end of Marx's discussion of Part I of Stirner's *Der Einzige*, which immediately follows the discussion referenced above.⁴¹ Marx introduces the "un-human" as Stirner's main counter-concept to the human being, a counter-concept that Stirner develops in order to reveal the ideological problems with so-called modern "criticism" as it is expressed in

³⁹ MECW 5: 236

⁴⁰ For a few close readings of portions of *Saint Max*, see Ulrich Pagel, *Der Einzige und die Deutsche Ideologie*; Tom Whyman, *The German Ideology: A New Abridgement* (London: Repeater Book, 2022); Sarah Johnson, "The Early Life of Marx's 'Mode of Production'", *Modern Intellectual History*, Volume 18, Issue 2, June 2021, 349 – 378; Wolfgang Eßbach, "Max Stirner – Geburtshelfer und böse Fee an der Wiege des Marxismus (S. 101–438)" in: Harald Bluhm (ed.), *Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels: Die deutsche Ideologie* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010), 165-183. There is still no comprehensive work on *all* of Marx's "Saint Max" in relation to Stirner.

⁴¹ MECW 5: 239.

figures like Bruno Bauer and Marx himself.⁴² Marx discusses the section of Stirner's book in which Stirner directly criticizes Marx, but Marx does not directly cite Stirner's critique. It is not until two-hundred pages later in *Saint Max* that Marx comes to a full-fledged analysis of *der Unmensch*, in the religiously titled section "Solomon's Song of Songs or the Unique".⁴³ Why does Marx call it that? Throughout the text, Marx also calls Stirner "Solomon", for King Solomon (son of King David) was particularly wise, and Marx cannot but help but joke about Stirner's "wisdom". Solomon's song of songs is the name of a section of the Hebrew Bible composed of erotic love poems between a bride and bridegroom. Although it is composed of a dialogue between lovers, it has been read and used liturgically as an allegory representing the divine love between God and the people of Israel, or that between Christ and the Church. Since Marx adds "or the Unique", one can reasonably deduce that Marx is mocking Stirner's paean to the unique as his own erotic love song to the divine. But Marx's "Solomon's Song of Songs or the Unique" is even stranger than that, since it begins with a détourned version of a poem called *Lusíadas* by the famed Portuguese poet, Luís de Camões (1524-1580). Marx's version of the poem begins by demanding a heroic song from the nymphs of the Spree, Berlin's river, about a hero who will fight against "Substance and Man", who will found a new "Union" and be truly "Unique"—i.e., a song about Stirner.⁴⁴

Marx then "summarizes" Stirner's argument about the un-human being in a series of equations that are supposed to show the logical fallacies of Stirner's argument. The aim is to reveal how Stirner's conclusion ("only the unhuman being is the real human being") is a result of mere wordplay:

The concept 'human being' is not the real human being.

⁴² On Bruno Bauer, see Massimiliano Tomba, *Krise und Kritik bei Bruno Bauer. Kategorien des Politischen im nachhegelschen Denken* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005); and Zvi Rosen, *Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).

⁴³ MECW 5: 427-443.

⁴⁴ MECW 5: 428-9.

The concept ‘human being’ = *the* Human Being
The Human Being = not the real human being.
The real human = the non-human,
= the unhuman being.
‘Only the unhuman being is the real human being.’⁴⁵

Marx then quotes Stirner’s definition of the unhuman (“a human being who does not correspond to the concept human being”), and mocks it for being a “school-master’s fantasy”.⁴⁶ Rather than dealing with Stirner’s actual critique of the ideological content of categories like “human being”, and their role in perpetuating subtle forms of domination, Marx avoids the problem by playing word games, as if that was Stirner’s point.

Marx has two initial comments on Stirner’s human/unhuman distinction: first, he thinks Stirner is merely inventing a problem that does not exist (i.e., there is no one putting the idea of the ‘human’ into people’s heads, and so there is no need for anyone to free them); and second, Stirner does not get the difference between concept and existence, or between essence and appearance. For Marx, the idea that the concept of the human being can be disjointed from its existence is due not to faulty *statements* about human beings, but rather to the world in which human beings exist. Here, we finally come to the beginnings of an adequate response to Stirner’s initial critique of Marx. No longer satisfied with *ad hominens*, Marx finally comes to the substance of the matter: why is the human not always human? Marx thus admits a gap between human beings and their concept, or a non-identity between human beings and themselves. Let’s call it “Stirner’s gap”. But instead of looking for the source of Stirner’s gap in the alienated relation between individuals and their “property”, as Stirner does, Marx grounds it in the world of production.

Marx’s Theory of the Un-human

⁴⁵ MECW 5: 429.

⁴⁶ MECW 5: 429. For the Stirner quote, EO 158/ UP 190.

What is then Marx's own theory of the un-human?⁴⁷ There are four main points I will discuss: 1) Stirner's thesis that "the real human is not human" is actually not absurd but a true expression of the contradictory reality of bourgeois society; 2) Stirner's concept of the unhuman is a residue of a philosophy of history which defines the human being as the measure of freedom for each epoch, always being strived for, but never fully achieved; 3) The real logic of history is otherwise: the extent of freedom won by people relates directly to the existing productive forces, not to any measure of man. But these productive forces are not enough for all. A class division thus arises between those who monopolize the means of production for their own needs and everyone else, between humans and un-humans; 4) Marx defines the inhuman in two ways here: it is both the poverty of the excluded class and the narrow-mindedness of the excluding class. The inhuman and the human are both products of the same social relation. To be human corresponds to the positive capacity to satisfy one's needs in society, whereas to be inhuman or unhuman means both to lack that option and to actively negate the social relations that prevent it—*without changing the existing mode of production itself*. The unhuman is the negative byproduct of a class society unable to revolutionize itself.

1) Whereas initially Marx claimed that Stirner's thesis about the real human being not being really human was just wordplay, he now asserts that the statement is in fact true, as long as we translate it from an abstract proposition into a material contradiction:

The nonsensical judgment of the philosophers that the real human is not human is—in the sphere of abstraction—merely the most universal, all-embracing expression of the actually existing universal contradiction between the conditions and needs of human beings. The nonsensical form of the abstract proposition fully

⁴⁷ Marx uses the noun "the unhuman" (*der Unmensch*) and the substantivized adjective "the inhuman" (*das Unmenschliche*) interchangeably.

corresponds to the nonsensical character, carried to extreme lengths, of the relations of bourgeois society.⁴⁸

Stirner's gap, the "nonsensical judgment" that human beings and not really human, is here reformulated as a practical contradiction between (social) *conditions*, on the one hand, and (individual) *needs*, on the other. Stirner has thus managed to grasp in thought the truth of bourgeois society as an extremely antagonistic and contradictory ensemble of social relations, without even knowing it.

2) Stirner does not grasp his own insight. He thinks human and inhuman are mere ideas whose presence or absence determines one's actually human or inhuman conditions. For Marx's Stirner:

one has only to get out of one's head the idea of the *human* in order to put an end to the actually existing conditions which are today called *inhuman*—whether this predicate 'inhuman' expresses the opinion of the individual in contradiction with his conditions or the opinion of the normal, ruling society about the abnormal, subjected class.⁴⁹

The word "inhuman" for Marx names both the judgement of an *individual* as incongruent with their material conditions (e.g., poor, oppressed, rabble, etc.) and the judgement of a *class* as subjugated by the ruling society (e.g. slave, serf, proletarian). Furthermore, according to Marx, Stirner understands the unhuman as merely the perpetual residue of a historical struggle to realize the concept of the human being, an ideal towards which individuals continually strive—and always fall short:

He imagines that human beings up to now have always formed a concept of the human, and then won freedom for themselves to the extent that was necessary to realise this concept; that the measure of freedom that they achieved was determined each time by their conception of the ideal of the human at the time; it was thus unavoidable that in each individual there remained a residue which did not

⁴⁸ MECW 5: 430.

⁴⁹ MECW 5: 431.

correspond to this ideal and, hence, since it was ‘inhuman’, was either not set free or only freed *malgré eux*.⁵⁰

Notably here, Marx reads Stirner’s account of the production of unhuman as a crypto-teleological story of human progress, one that is almost identical to the later “struggle for recognition” accounts of human progress, championed by Axel Honneth’s reading of the early Hegel.⁵¹ Against this, Marx proposes his own materialist account of history.

3) The actual development of history follows a different logic: the scope of freedom is determined by the existing productive forces, not by some evolving concept of the human being.

In reality, of course, what happened was that people won freedom for themselves each time to the extent that was dictated and permitted not by their ideal of man, but by the existing productive forces. All emancipation carried through hitherto has been based, however, on restricted productive forces.⁵²

All emancipation is restricted emancipation, Marx declares, until the productive forces are ripe enough for universal emancipation. Yet the actual forces of production are never geared towards universal satisfaction, and thus a class division arises between those who control the means of development—and are able to satisfy their needs—and those that do not. This division is endemic to any and every class society, until it is revolutionized:

The production which these productive forces could provide was insufficient for the whole of society and made development possible only if some persons satisfied their needs at the expense of others, and therefore some—the minority—obtained the monopoly of development, while others—the majority—owing to the constant struggle to satisfy their most essential needs, were for the time being (i.e., until the creation of new revolutionary productive forces) excluded from any development.⁵³

⁵⁰ MECW 5: 431.

⁵¹ See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

⁵² MECW 5: 431.

⁵³ MECW 5: 431-2.

This class division is the real source of the distinction between human and inhuman, a categorization that is not substantive but adjectival, merely describing how each class develops.

While the oppressed inhumanly survive, the ruling class inhumanly thrive:

Thus, society has hitherto always developed within the framework of an opposition—in antiquity the opposition between free men and slaves, in the Middle Ages that between nobility and serfs, in modern times that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This explains, on the one hand, the abnormal, ‘inhuman’ way in which the oppressed class satisfies its needs, and, on the other hand, the narrow limits within which intercourse, and with it the whole ruling class, develops.⁵⁴

4): Similar to Hegel’s dual definition of the rabble in the *Philosophy of Right*, Marx defines inhuman in two ways here: it is both the poverty of the excluded class and the narrow-mindedness of the excluding class.⁵⁵

Hence this restricted character of development consists not only in the exclusion of one class from development, but also in the narrow-mindedness of the excluding class, and the ‘inhuman’ is to be found also within the ruling class.⁵⁶

While inhuman and the human are results of the same social relations, the former is characterized by the *negative* aspect of rebellion (not revolution!) against the mode of production and its form of distribution. Here, Marx’s account makes contact with Stirner’s insurrectionist theory of the inhuman:

This so-called ‘inhuman’ is just as much a product of present-day relations as the ‘human’ is; it is their negative aspect, the rebellion—which is not based on any new revolutionary productive force—against the prevailing relations brought about by the existing productive forces, and against the way of satisfying needs that corresponds to these relations.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ MECW 5: 432.

⁵⁵ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1821] 1991), 266 [§244]; Frank Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (London: Continuum, 2011); Jacob Blumenfeld, *The Concept of Property in Kant, Fichte, and Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2024), Chapter Three.

⁵⁶ MECW 5: 432.

⁵⁷ MECW 5: 432. On Stirner’s conception of insurrection, see EO 280-1/UP 328-9. See also Blumenfeld, *All Things are Nothing to Me* (2018), 119-123.

Being human for Marx thus means being able to positively satisfy one's needs in a historically specific mode of production, and being inhuman means both lacking that capacity and actively trying to negate the social relations that prevent it—*without changing the existing mode of production itself*. To be inhuman is to be a rebel, to be a rebel is to be inhuman:

The positive expression 'human' corresponds to the definite relations predominant at a certain stage of production and to the way of satisfying needs determined by them, just as the negative expression 'inhuman' corresponds to the attempt to negate these predominant relations and the way of satisfying needs prevailing under them without changing the existing mode of production, an attempt that this stage of production daily engenders afresh.⁵⁸

As that last sentence makes clear, the inhuman is reproduced daily as a result of class society in the form of rebellious subjects who cannot but help challenge their conditions of domination—through insurrection, sabotage, uprising—even though they cannot abolish these conditions due to the 'restricted' stage of development. Marx thus replaces Stirner's idealist philosophy of history with his own materialist one, both of which rely on overcoming the duality of the human and inhuman as structuring principles of society.

Marx's materialist justification of the un-human:

Allow me to summarize Marx's materialist reinterpretation of Stirner's negative anthropology. First, all class societies are based on opposition, whether between free men and slave, serfs and noble, proletarians and bourgeoisie. Second, the human/unhuman is not a metaphysical distinction, but a class one. Human are those who can meet their needs "the normal way" in a particular class society; unhuman are those who cannot, due to the restricted character of productive relations. This means that those who are excluded from access to the means of subsistence are fated to appear as unhuman. But this is only one side of the unhuman. The negative side of the unhuman appears in

⁵⁸ MECW 5: 432.

the attempted negation of these relations and ways of meeting needs—without changing the existing conditions of production as such. This includes daily, individual forms of resistance against class oppression, but not collective transformation of production relations into something adequate for all. Furthermore, the existing mode of production itself recreates this mode of rebellion every day—a rebellion against suffering, indignity, and lack. Marx’s version of Stirner’s unhuman is thus something like Hobsbawm’s primitive rebel against inhuman conditions, reproduced daily until the productive forces are freed from their social fetters.⁵⁹

Max Stirner Redeemed

The redemption of Saint Max can be seen not only in Marx’s careful attempt to rethink the concept of the human following Stirner’s critique, and integrate the concept of the un-human into his philosophy of history, but even more so in Marx’s transformed idea of communism as development of social individuality. Stirner’s strong emphasis on the primacy of the individual and its development becomes permanently integrated into Marx’s conception of the content of communism. Here are four aspects of Marx’s Stirnerized communism: 1) Stirner’s aim of individual emancipation presupposes a common struggle; 2) communism is the all-round development of individuals through association; 3) communist society provides the economic prerequisites for a society of free individuals in connection with each other; 4) Stirner’s “unique” is thus a communist figure.

⁵⁹ Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959). For a reinterpretation and defense of this “primitive” figure as actually representative of the heterogenous proletariat in its formative period, see Patrick Eiden-Offe, *The Poetry of Class* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

1) First, Marx takes Stirner's political aim to be individual emancipation or the real liberation of individuals from domination, yet he thinks that Stirner stops his struggle too soon, mainly at the level of domination by categories, and not the level of real relations. To fight against such relations would require both a common struggle and a common world, one that takes the individual out of their isolation and into new relations with others:

If, however, Sancho were once to tackle the subject of 'becoming free' with the desire of freeing himself not merely from categories, but from actual fetters, then such liberation would presuppose a change common to him and to a large mass of other people, and would produce a change in the state of the world which again would be common to him and others.⁶⁰

Stirner, of course, does not care about such lofty aims or political causes, he does not even care about individuals as such, in some abstract sense. This is where Marx goes wrong in generalizing from Stirner's particular emphasis on "freeing myself" to a universal claim about "becoming free" as such. Now here is the fascinating part: Stirner himself does not need to generalize from the particular to the universal to come to similar conclusions as Marx. Rather, in his critique of the human/unhuman distinction, Stirner admits that he writes only for the "utterly common unique."

In perhaps his most Stirnerist statement about the task of communism as the liberation of individuals from the domination of material relations and their contingency, that is, from the mute compulsion of economic relations over individual life, Marx writes:

In the present epoch, the domination of material relations over individuals, and the suppression of individuality by contingency, has assumed its sharpest and most universal form, thereby setting existing individuals a very definite task. It has set them the task of replacing the domination of conditions and of contingency over individuals by the domination of individuals over contingency and conditions... This task, dictated by present-day relations, coincides with the task of organising society in a communist way.⁶¹

⁶⁰ MECW 5: 435.

⁶¹ MECW 5: 438.

Here, there appears to be no substantive difference between the empowerment of individuals over their conditions and the communist organization of society, that is, between Stirner and Marx.

2) Second, the goal of communism for Marx becomes the all-round development of *individuals* through *individual* abolition of private property which can only be achieved as an association of *individuals*:

We have further shown that private property can be abolished only on condition of an all-round development of individuals, precisely because the existing form of intercourse and the existing productive forces are all-embracing and only individuals that are developing in an all-round fashion can appropriate them, i.e., can turn them into free manifestations of their lives.

We have shown that at the present time individuals must abolish private property, because the productive forces and forms of intercourse have developed so far that, under the domination of private property, they have become destructive forces and because the contradiction between the classes has reached its extreme limit.

Finally, we have shown that the abolition of private property and of the division of labour is itself the association of individuals on the basis created by modern productive forces and world intercourse.⁶²

Individuals, individuals, individuals—whatever happened to the idea of Marx the collectivist? As one can see here, *only* individuals as shaped by the socialized development of productive forces can appropriate those forces as manifestations of their own lives since those individuals are themselves socialized expressions of those forces, limited by social relations of private property. Private property must be abolished not in order to bury the individual that it creates, but to empower the individual that is restricts. This individual only becomes what it is through the act of what Marx calls association [*Vereinigung*] or what Stirner calls union [*Verein*].

⁶² MECW 5: 439.

3) Third, Marx argues for a sort of communist individualism, in which the conditions for an individual's "genuine and free development" are *only* possible in a communist society through the "connection" [*Zusammenhang*] of individuals with one another. This connection is grounded in economic relations, developed through solidarity, and expressed in universal activity. Communism then becomes the production of social individuals:

Within communist society, the only society in which the genuine and free development of individuals ceases to be a mere phrase, this development is determined precisely by the connection of individuals, a connection which consists partly in the economic prerequisites and partly in the necessary solidarity of the free development of all, and, finally, in the universal character of the activity of individuals on the basis of the existing productive forces.⁶³

What distinguishes Marx here from Stirner is the historicization of the production of free individuals. For Marx, the change that the "indispensable communist revolution" brings will overturn whatever consciousness one has of our mutual relations, which means that no principle from today can guide the individuals of tomorrow—not that of Saint-Simon, Bauer, Feuerbach, or even Stirner.

We are, therefore, here concerned with individuals at a definite historical stage of development and by no means merely with individuals chosen at random, even disregarding the indispensable communist revolution, which itself is a general condition for their free development. The individuals' consciousness of their mutual relations will, of course, likewise be completely changed, and, therefore, will no more be the 'principle of love' or *dévoûment* than it will be egoism.⁶⁴

The irony is that Stirner would agree—egoism too is a fetter to be abandoned when it is no longer useful for one's own life.

⁶³ MECW 5: 439.

⁶⁴ MECW 5: 439.

4) Finally, instead of abandoning Stirner's category of the unique, Marx tries to save it by redeeming its materialist core.⁶⁵ What is uniqueness, *Einzigkeit*? It is not a liberal characteristic of the bourgeois individual, not an "embellishment of existing conditions, a little drop of comforting balm for the poor", but rather names "original development and individual behaviour."⁶⁶ In a sense, the "uniqueness" of the individual is indexed to the development of the forces of production: the more free time a society has, the more individual behavior is possible, the more singular one can become. Communism is nothing but the production of uniques.

Conclusion

After *Saint Max*, Marx and Engels criticize the "True Socialists" on Stirnerian grounds, for basing their views of socialism on ideological conceptions of the "human being".⁶⁷ We can thus see that not only did Stirner's critique become integrated in Marx and Engels new conception of communism as the all-round development of individuals, they also integrated it as a methodological strategy against other socialists who were stuck in pre-critical view of communism as motivated by anything other than egoism alone. Marx and Engels are thus the true inheritors of Stirner's unfinished project of critique.

To review the argument in short: Stirner criticizes Marx's concepts of "species-being" from *The Jewish Question* as ideological; Marx responds by criticizing Stirner's egoism as idealist; but in so doing, Marx adopts Stirner's critique of the concept of the human being, and adopts his concept of the un-man, incorporating it into his more negative, materialist anthropology. The human is rendered a historical category, always related to the un-human, mediated by their relation

⁶⁵ Marx also tries to rescue "Stirner's union of egos" as a kind of labor union (MECW 5: 440).

⁶⁶ MECW 5: 439.

⁶⁷ MECW 5: 455-539.

to the productive forces and the system of needs. This perspective opens up a new way of thinking about communism, one based in the material conditions for individual self-appropriation. In short, Saint Max is redeemed.

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