'Stirner's Radical Atheism and the Critique of Political Theology'

Abstract When Carl Schmitt declared in *Politische Theologie* (1922) that 'All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts…', one could be forgiven for thinking he was directly invoking Max Stirner, who, in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* (1845) launched a devastating assault on the religious categories that haunted modern thought and politics. While Schmitt and Stirner are approaching the question from opposed perspectives, they are nevertheless engaged in an investigation of the relationship between theology and politics. My paper will show how Stirner's unmasking of the Christianizing impulse behind modern secular humanism – particularly that of Ludwig Feuerbach – and his critique of liberalism, leads us to a radically atheistic politics in which the sovereignty of the state and its accompanying figure of the liberal individual, are deconstructed. Central here is the notion of the insurrection as a revolt against 'fixed ideas' and their hold over us.

In his *Politische Theologie* (1922) Carl Schmitt declared that 'All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts'; 'not only', he goes on to add, 'because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state -, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts'.[1] They key example he gives is that of the exception in jurisprudence, which he says bears the same structure as the miracle in theology. The ability to declare a state of exception and to suspend the normal constitutional order, as the defining prerogative and expression of sovereignty, is akin to the act of God which transcends the earthly order. The very notion of sovereignty itself derives from God – sovereignty is absolute and onto-theological - and, even in democratic theory, God's transcendence is embodied in the exceptionality of the lawgiver who founds the political order insofar as he is not part of it. So, for Schmitt, and contrary to liberal constitutionalists and legal theorists like Hans Kelsen, who try to secularise the political order and suppress the exceptional moment of sovereignty, a theological dimension still haunts the structures of the modern state. Just as the legal order is based ultimately on the sovereign moment of exception which guarantees its survival, so the modern liberal and secular state will never be able to shrug off the theological remnant that remains its secret core. And the 'miracle' of the sovereign decision which Schmitt longed for, ultimately revealed itself in the exceptionality of the National Socialist state which he allied himself with.

In this paper, I want to explore the problem of political theology from a different and opposed perspective. If Schmitt seeks to reveal the theological structure of modern politics in order to welcome the return of the miracle of the sovereign decision and the absolutist state, I want to find ways of exorcising this spirit forever. For Jacob Taubes, the problem of political theology is a problem of power. He says: 'Only when the universal principle of power is overruled will the unity of theology and political theory be superseded. A critique of the theological element in political theory rests ultimately on a critique of the principle of power itself.'[2] However, I would say that a critique of the

[1] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty,* trans., George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 36.
[2] Jacob Taubes, 'Theology and Political Theory', *From Cult to Culture: fragments toward a critique of historical reason,* ed., C. E Fonrobert et al., Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2010, p. 232.

absolutist element of political theory also depends on dispelling the theological spectres that animate it. Yet, this should not be taken as a simple affirmation and extension of the liberal project of secularisation. Things are not quite so simple, and here I think Schmitt is absolutely right to point to naivety and hypocrisy of liberal theory in imagining that it can secularise politics and suppress the absolutist state through legal frameworks and constitutions; as Schmitt shows, the survival of any constitutional order presupposes precisely the exceptional moment of sovereignty that it seeks to restrict – and thus we remain caught in the trap of sovereign power. Indeed, we could say that liberalism is, in essence, a politics of sovereignty in which the formalisation and regularisation of state power through legal and democratic mechanisms and constitutional frameworks legitimises this power all the more effectively by disguising its absolutism.

To derail the politico-theological machine more radical strategies are called for, and it is here that anarchism emerges as possible alternative. It is interesting that Schmitt, speaking through the arch-conservative figures on Bonald, Joseph de Maistre and Donoso Cortes, recognises that his true ideological enemies are not the liberals – whom he sees as interminable equivocators and deliberators – but, rather, the anarchists, particularly the nineteenth-century revolutionary anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin. These figures represent, along with the left Hegelians, the radical and absolute rejection of both God and state, which was why they were so feared, and yet, strangely respected by conservatives and counter-revolutionaries: 'That extremist cast of mind explains why he [Cortes] was contemptuous of the liberals while he respected atheist-anarchist socialism as his deadly foe and endowed it with a diabolical stature. In Proudhon he claimed to see a demon.'[3] Yet, Bakunin exceeded even Proudhon's radicalism and atheism, openly declaring himself on the side of Satan in an eternal rebellion against God, and asserting the naturalness and immanence of life in excess of the theological stamp of morality and the political stamp of the state. Indeed, as Leo Strauss[4] points out, Schmitt's reclamation of political theology in modernity can be seen as a direct response to the challenge posed by Bakunin, whose polemic, 'God and the State', still constitutes one of the fiercest assaults on the twin religions both Christianity and statism.[5] While the reintroduction into political theory of the very old debate about political theology[6] is usually attributed to Schmitt, it could be argued that his reanimation this concept was itself an attempt to defend sovereignty against the threat of revolutionary anarchism. Perhaps, in other words, the problem of political theology in modernity emerges with the anarchist insurrection against the onto-theological structure of the modern state.

However, while the revolutionary anarchism of the nineteenth century might appear as most forthright and radical reversal in modernity of the politico-theological paradigm, this insurrection is in turn founded upon a naturalistic conception of life, life as embodying an intrinsic goodness, rationality and capacity for self-regulation – a

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[3] Schmitt, *Political Theology,* p. 63.

[4] See Leo Strauss, 'What is Political Theology?' in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 77-87.

[5] Bakunin points to the theological structure of the state, and the way that political authority ultimately derives from religious authority: 'Slaves of God, men must also be slaves of the Church and State, in so far as the State is consecrated by the Church.' 'God and the State' [1871] http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/godstate/

[6] For instance, EH Kantorowicz traces the origins of the modern concept of sovereignty and the territorial state to the idea of the corpus mysticum or mystical body of the church as it evolved during the Middle Ages. See *The King's Two Bodies: a study in mediaeval political theology,* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, [1997] c1957.

immanent vitality in relation to which the state is seen as unnecessary and parasitical. In Schmitt's characterisation of Bakunin's thinking, he says:

> Bakunin's intellectual significance rests, nevertheless, on his conception of life, which on the basis of its natural rightness produces the correct forms by itself from itself… All moral valuations lead to theology and to an authority that artificially imposes an alien or extrinsic "ought" on the natural and intrinsic truth and beauty of human life.[7]

According to Schmitt, Bakunin's notion of right emerges neither from the politico-legal order nor a theologically-derived morality, but from life itself, life in its immanence; and it is on this basis that arises anarchism's absolute antithesis towards the sovereign decision. Yet, for Schmitt, this leads anarchism into another theology, a sort of anti-theological theology: 'This radical antithesis forces him [the anarchist] to decide against the decision and this results in the odd paradox whereby Bakunin, the greatest anarchist of the nineteenth century, had to become the theologian of the antitheological and in practice the dictator of an antidictatorship.'[8] For Schmitt, then, anarchism – in its absolutist rejection of absolutism – remains somehow caught, despite itself, within the politico-theological paradigm; its rejection of the sovereign decision at the same time mirrors the very gesture of sovereignty.

In the starkness of this claim, Schmitt points to a certain paradox at the heart of revolutionary political thought of the nineteenth century – not only in anarchism but also Marxism: in their attempt to eliminate all transcendental categories and replace them with an immanent conception of life, or with a materialist analysis of history and society, these revolutionary theories remain trapped within a theological position; in formulating a political opposition to politics, they are forced to repeat the decisionism of sovereignty. Moreover, in seeking to substitute Man for God, as the Left Hegelians like Feuerbach tried to do, radical humanist philosophies reinvented the same transcendental categories. This was precisely the view of the German thinker, Max Stirner, a key member of the Young Hegelian circle, and it is to his radical critique of the atheist humanism of Feuerbach that I will now turn. While Stirner is often positioned in the anarchist canon as an individualist anarchist, his demolition of the key categories of humanist thought not only goes beyond and indeed radicalises the terms of anarchist theory itself, but provides us with way out of the politico-theological trap that we have not yet managed to escape. In unmasking the religiosity and idealism that so much of our political thinking and so many of our political practices remain mired in, and in proposing alternative theoretical strategies, Stirner shows how the politico-theological machine might be derailed.[9]

Humanism's 'Religious Insurrection'

As one of the lesser known of the Young Hegelian philosophers, Stirner's work has generally received little attention from contemporary critical theory. He is best known for

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[7] Schmitt, *Political Theology,* p. 64.

[8] Schmitt, *Political Theology,* p. 66.

[9] Indeed, curiously, Schmitt himself, in his reflections on his experience of incarceration in an Allied military prison after WWII, recognised the importance and richness of Stirner's thinking: 'In the history of the spirit there are some uranium mines. I would put among them the Presocratics, some Church Fathers and some writings of the period before 1848. Poor Max fits it perfectly.' Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus,* Koln: Greven Verlag, 1950, p. 80. I rely for the translation on Riccardo Baldissone, and I am grateful to him for drawing my attention to this wonderful quote.

the theoretical controversy over his critique of idealism and his subsequent repudiation by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* – a dispute that I will turn to later in the paper.[10] However, Stirner's critique of Feuerbachian humanism in *The Ego and Its Own* (*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum,* 1844) had more radical and far-reaching implications than this. It enabled a kind of 'epistemological break' within modernity, opening up a theoretical space for a critical interrogation of the rational, moral and political categories of secular humanism. Central to Stirner's intervention is a questioning of the secularisation thesis: rather than modernity and the Enlightenment ushering in an experience of the world free from religious illusions, we remain utterly haunted by religious belief, which now takes the ideological form of secular humanism. Stirner, in other words, affirms and extends Schmitt's diagnosis of the theological categories of modernity: secular discourses and categories like humanity, rationality and liberalism are still enthralled to theology and are infected by religious idealism. In the wake of the death of God, we believe like never before.

In fellow Young Hegelian Ludwig Feuerbach's attempt to displace Christianity from the centre of experience and to replace God with Man, Stirner perceived not an insurrection against theology so much as a *theological insurrection* that merely substituted one form of religious alienation and idealism for another. In the *Essence of Christianity,* Feuerbach claimed that Christianity and the idea of God led to human alienation because it meant that man abdicated his own qualities and powers – like goodness, love and so on – projecting them on to an abstract figure of God, thus creating the illusion of an omnipotent, all-loving Being before whom he must prostrate himself: 'Thus in religion man denies his reason... his own knowledge, his own thoughts, that he may place them in God. Man gives up his personality... he denies human dignity, the human ego'.[11] For Feuerbach, the predicates of God were really only the predicates of man as a species being. God was an illusion or a *hypostatization* of man. While man should be the single criterion for truth, love and virtue, these characteristics are now the property of an abstract being who becomes the sole criterion for them.

Feuerbach might be seen as embodying the humanist project of freeing man from religious obfuscation and alienation, and restoring him to his rightful place at the centre of the universe, making *the human the divine, the finite the infinite*. However, it is precisely this secular emancipation that Stirner questions. Stirner argues that Feuerbach, in reversing the order of subject and predicate, has merely made Man into God. Rather than overthrowing the categories of religious authority and alienation – the religious place of power - Feuerbach has only inverted the terms and placed the figure of Man within it, thus embarking on a chain of substitutions, Man for God, morality and rationality for theology, human essence for spirit. The problem is that when God becomes Man, Man himself becomes God, capturing – rather than destroying – the category of the infinite. Man becomes the ultimate religious illusion and an expression of a new kind of divine power. While Stirner accepts Feuerbach's critique of Christianity - that the infinite is an illusion, being merely the representation of human consciousness, and that the Christian religion is based on the divided, alienated self – he regards Feuerbach's secular

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[10] Indeed, some have suggested that Marx's so-called 'epistemological break' between his classical humanism and more mature economism, was inspired by Stirner's critique of the humanist philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, and that the relentless attack on Stirner in *The German Ideology* represented a kind of cathartic attempt by Marx to exorcise the spectre of humanism and idealism from his own thought. See Henri Arvon, 'Concerning Marx's "epistemological break"'. *The Philosophical Forum,* 3 (1978): 173-185.

[11] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity.* Harper: New York, 1957, pp. 27-28

emancipation as incomplete and as leading us back into the trap of religious belief. In modernity, we come to believe in Man and Humanity in the same way as we believed in God; humanism is simply a new form of religious faith. Stirner regards human essence - the very essence that Feuerbach sees as being alienated through religion - as itself an alienating abstraction. Like God, the essence of man becomes a superstitious ideal that oppresses the individual:

> The supreme being is indeed the essence of man, but, just because it is his *essence* and not he himself, it remains quite immaterial whether we see it outside him and view it as 'God', or find it in him and call it 'Essence of man' or 'man'. I am neither God nor *man*, neither the supreme essence nor my essence, and therefore it is all one in the main whether I think of the essence as in me or outside me.[12]

So, in seeking to find the sacred in 'human essence', Feuerbach has merely reintroduced religious obfuscation and alienation. We are now subordinated to and prostrated before this universal and absolute figure of Man, this perfect being, whose attributes we now seek to embody in ourselves. Just as man was debased under God, so the individual is debased beneath this perfect, sacred being, Man: 'Feuerbach thinks that if he humanises the divine, he has found truth. No, if God has given us pain, "man" is capable of pinching us still more torturingly.'[13] For Stirner, then, man is just as oppressive, if not more so, than God: '"Man' is the God of today, and fear of man has taken the place of the old fear of God.'[14] Humanism may be seen, then, as a new secular religion based on human essence, which is now a sacred category that is alien to us who must nevertheless aspire to it and seek it within ourselves. That is why Stirner says: 'The human *religion* is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion'.[15]

'Es Spukt'

Man and Humanity are, for Stirner, universal abstractions that claim to 'speak for' the individual. This apparition of God/Man haunts our thinking. It becomes the basis for a spectral ideological world of what Stirner calls 'fixed ideas' or 'spooks' to which we are enthralled: 'Man,' declares Stirner, 'your head is haunted… You imagine great things, and depict to yourself a whole world of gods that has an existence for you, a spirit-realm to which you suppose yourself to be called, an ideal that beckons to you.'[16] The modern consciousness is plagued by a legion of apparitions, religiously-inspired ideas, now in a humanist guise, like morality, humanity, truth, and society. These ideas have become absolute and universal, assuming a religious sacredness in our secular modernity. Our universe is alive with ghosts and spectres: 'Yes, the whole world is haunted! Only *is* haunted? Indeed, it itself "walks", it is uncanny through and through, it is the wandering seeming-body of a spirit, it is a spook.'[17] The whole world has become a ghost. Stirner continues:

> Look out near or far, a ghostly world surrounds you everywhere, you are always having 'apparitions' or visions. Everything that appears to you is only the

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12 Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own,* trans. Steven Byington, ed., David Leopold. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 34.
13 Stirner, *The Ego*, p. 156.
14 Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 165.
15 Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 158.
16 Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 43.
17 Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 36

> phantasm of an indwelling spirit, is a ghostly "apparition"; the world to you is only a "world of appearances", behind which the spirit walks.[18]

In seeking meaning, essence, or *spirit*, everywhere – whether it be the essence of humanity or even the Spirit of History, and here Stirner is as much engaged in thinking against Hegel as he is Feuerbach, we only make the world more opaque and estranged to us. Stirner thus embarks on a ghost hunt for these spectres of idealism, seeking to purge them from our midst.

Liberalism's politico-theological machine

Stirner has shown us that our secular modernity is haunted by a religious remnant that has not yet been exorcised, and that our thinking is still conditioned by the structure of religious authority, even if we have formally declared ourselves atheists and secularists. And indeed, the widely remarked 'return to religion' globally in recent decades only seems to confirm Stirner's challenge to the secularisation thesis.[19] Moreover, Stirner, like Schmitt, shows us that liberalism, as the political form of our secular modernity, has not solved the problem of political theology; indeed, liberalism remains profoundly theological. Liberalism might be seen as the political expression of modern humanism, and, in Stirner's view, it is haunted by the same religiously-inspired idealism. Indeed, liberalism, for Stirner, is more than simply a particular political ideology based on certain principles like constitutionalism, rights and individual freedom. Rather, in a similar way to Agamben's genealogy of liberal economic theory – which he traces back to Christian *oikonomia* [20] - Stirner sees liberalism as a politico-theological machine which unfolds in different forms and according to different rationalities, but which - in a reversal of the Hegelian dialectic - culminates not in the freedom, but in the sacrifice and immolation of the individual. In Stirner's analysis, liberalism can take a number of forms – political, social and humane - each succeeding the other in an imagined process of human emancipation, and yet each coinciding with a further subordination of the individual ego to the theological apparatus of humanism.

Political liberalism, according to Stirner's analysis, emerges with the development of the modern state. After the fall of the ancien régime, a new locus of sovereignty comes into being, exemplified by the secular republican state. However, Stirner perceives behind the edifice of the liberal bourgeois state a hidden religiosity, a theological politics that enshrines an idealised absolutism and transcendentalism in secular, rational clothing. For instance, the notion of formal equality of rights does not recognise individual difference and singularity, but rather swallows it up into an imaginary totality – the body politic or state. There is nothing wrong with equality as such, for Stirner; it is just that in its embodiment in the liberal state, the individual is reduced to a fictional commonality which takes an institutionalised form. The 'equality of rights' means only that 'the state has no regard for my person, that to it I, like every other, am only a man…'.[21] Rights are granted, through the state, to man – to this abstract spectre – rather than to the individual. Stirner reveals the ultimate meaninglessness of the idea of rights, which, like

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[18] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 36.

[19] See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion,* ed., Gil Anidjar, New York and London: Routledge, 2002; W. E. Connolly ed., *Capitalism and Christianity, American style,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2008; Hent de Vries, ed., *Political Theologies: public religions in a post-secular world,* New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.

[20] See Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: for a theological genealogy of economy and government* / (Homo Sacer II, 2), trans., Lorenzo Chiesa, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.

[21] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 93.

freedom, are in reality based on power and can be easily violated or removed by governments, thus seeming to foreshadow Schmitt's thesis about the sovereign state of exception.

Moreover, rather than giving the individual autonomy from the state, as conventional accounts of liberalism claim, it actually *binds* the individual to the state through the idea of citizenship. Political liberalism may be seen as a logic which regulates the individual's relationship with the state, cutting out the complex intricacies of feudal relationships – tithes, guilds, communes and so on – and allowing a more direct and absolute connection with the state. Under liberalism, all individuals become, as Stirner puts it, political Protestants, who enter into an immediate and intimate relationship with their new God, the state.[22] While political liberalism ostensibly frees the individual from certain forms of arbitrary rule, it also removes the obstacles and plural arrangements that hitherto stood between him and the sovereign, thus shutting down the autonomous spaces upon which the state did not intrude. Therefore, just as Marx contended that religious liberty meant only that religion was free to further alienate the individual in civil society, so Stirner argues that political liberty means only that the state is free to further dominate the individual:

> Political liberty means that the polis, the state is free; freedom of religion that religion is free, as freedom of conscience signifies that conscience is free; not therefore that I am free of the state, from religion, from conscience, or that I am *rid* of them. It does not mean my liberty, but the liberty of a power that rules and subjugates me.[23]

Political liberalism constitutes a certain form of subjectivity – that of the bourgeois citizen - which the individual is required to conform to. Citizenship is a mode of subjectivity based on obedience and devotion to the modern state. In order for the individual to attain the rights and privileges of citizenship, he or she must conform to certain norms – the bourgeois values of industry, responsibility, obedience to the law, and so on. Behind the edifice of political liberalism, then, there is a whole series of what can be seen as normalising strategies and disciplinary techniques, which, in a Foucauldian manner, are aimed at subjectifying the individual. The individual finds himself subordinated to a rational and moral order in which certain modes of subjectivity are constructed as essential and enlightened, and from which any dissent results in marginalisation. The existence of an underclass with no place in society – what Stirner calls the proletariat - is the dangerous, unruly excess produced by this form of liberal subjectification.[24]

The second articulation of liberalism – 'social liberalism', or as we might understand it, socialism – produces a new kind of normalisation. Whereas in the discourse of political liberalism, equality was restricted to the formal level of political and legal rights, socialists demand that the principle of equality be extended to the social and economic domain. This can only be achieved through the abolition of private property, which is seen as an alienating and de-personalising relation. Instead, property is to be owned collectively by society and distributed equally. Where the individual once worked for himself, he must

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[22] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 94.
[23] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 96.
[24] It is important to note that Stirner's notion of the proletariat includes not only the industrial working class, but also paupers and vagrants – or what Marx would refer to as the 'lumpenproletariat'. See *The Ego,* pp. 102-4.

now work for the benefit of the whole of society. It is only through a sacrifice of the individual ego to society, according to social liberals, that humanity can liberate itself and develop fully.

However, behind this discourse of social emancipation and equality lies a resentment of difference and particularity and a further denial of individual autonomy. What social liberals find intolerable, according to Stirner, is individual egoism: 'We want to make egoists impossible!... all of us must have nothing, that "all may have"'.[25] What little space for autonomy there was left under political liberalism – in the notion of property, for instance, and here Stirner means property in its broadest sense as self-ownership rather than material possessions – is done away with under social liberalism in the name of social equality and commonality. The individual is sacrificed to the concept of 'society', which is a general religious abstraction, a spook, a *corpus mysticum* or mystical body:

> Who is this person that you call "all"? – It is "society"! – But is it corporeal, then? – *We* are its body! – You? Why, you are not a body yourselves – you, sir, are corporeal to be sure, you too, and you, but you all together are only bodies, not a body. Accordingly the united society may indeed have bodies at its service, but no one body of its own. Like the "nation" of the politicians, it will turn out to be nothing but a "spirit", its body only semblance.[26]

What Stirner finds intolerable about socialism is the way it incorporates individuals into an abstract, spectral body (with liberalism it was the state, and with socialism it is society) that takes on a life of its own beyond the individual. Here he is particularly critical of Weitling's idea of communism, which, for Stirner, involves the absolute sacrifice of the individual to the image of society: 'Communism rightly revolts against the pressure that I experience from individual proprietors; but still more horrible is the might that it puts into the hands of the collectivity.'[27]

However, the infernal theological machine of liberalism continues, and now even the idea of society is said to not be universal enough. Because social liberalism was based on labour, it is seen as still caught within the paradigm of materialism and, therefore, egoism. The labourer in socialist society is still working for him-/herself, even though his labour is regulated by the social whole. Humanity must instead strive for a more perfect, ideal and universal goal. Here, according to Stirner, the third and final stage of liberalism arises – 'humane liberalism', in which humanity is finally reconciled with itself. Where the previous two stages of liberalism still maintained a distance between humanity and its goal through a devotion to an external religious idea – the state and society – humane liberalism claims to finally unite us with our ultimate goal, humanity itself. In other words, the *internal* ideal of man and the essence of humanity are what people should strive for. To this end, every particularity and difference must be overcome for the greater glory of humanity. Individual difference is simply transcended through the desire to identify the essence of man and humanity within everyone: 'Cast from you everything peculiar, criticize it away. Be not a Jew, not a Christian, but be a human being, nothing but a human being. Assert your humanity against every restrictive specification.'[28]

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[25] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 105.
[26] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 105.
[27] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 228.
[28] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 114.

However, this final stage in humanity's emancipation is also the final and complete abolition of the individual ego. For Stirner, as we have seen, there is nothing essential about humanity or mankind – they are ideological apparitions that absorb the individual within external generalities. There is no transcendental essence of humanity residing in each individual which he or she must realise fully, as the discourse of humanism would have it. Rather, human essence is simply a spectral alienation of the individual ego. Therefore, Stirner sees the proclaimed liberation of Man as the culmination of the progressive subordination and alienation of the individual. In other words, it is through the humanist drive to overcome alienation that the alienation of the individual ego is finally accomplished. Even the last refuge of autonomy – the individual's own thoughts and opinions – has been abolished: 'egostic' and particular perspectives have now been taken over completely by *general human opinion*. All traces of difference and particularity have been transcended, and anything that would allow some form of separateness, singularity or uniqueness recedes into a universal humanity. Thus, we see in humane liberalism the complete domination of the general over the particular.

The theology of state sovereignty

Stirner's counter-narrative – or perhaps what we might call genealogy – of the story of human emancipation unmasks, as we have seen, the theological mechanism at work in the secular political discourses and rationalities that we are familiar with, and which claim to endow us with ever greater forms of freedom and equality. Central here is the institution of the state itself, which, as we have seen, emerges as genuinely sovereign – once freed from its feudal intricacies and freed, supposedly, from its religious roots – in modern liberalism. So far from liberalism being a politics that curbs and constrains state power, it is the ultimate consecration of sovereignty within the state. When the state frees itself, formally speaking, from the constraints of religion, it inaugurates the religion of the state: 'The thought of the state passed into all hearts and awakened enthusiasm; to serve it, this mundane god, became the new divine service and worship.'[29] The theological dimension of statism is perceived by Stirner in several ways. Firstly, as the completion of religious domination in the form of the universal secular and constitutional state: 'The constitutional king is the truly Christian king, the genuine, consistent carrying-out of the Christian principle... It is the completed Christian state-life; a spiritualized life.'[30] Also, Stirner is interested in the way in which the religion of the state becomes internalised within the individual through moral categories. Obedience to the state and its laws is a moral injunction; we come to love and serve the state: 'One must deserve well of the state, that is of the principle of the state, its moral spirit.'[31] The state is seen as having a moral essence, and thus service to the state becomes the highest moral principle.

Furthermore, and perhaps most controversially, the state itself is seen as a spook, an imaginary totality, whose sovereignty over us depends only on our obedience, our voluntary servitude, our denial of our own power:

> The state is not thinkable without lordship (*Herrschaft*) and servitude (*Knechtschaft*) (subjection) …He who, to hold his own, must count on the absence of will in others is a thing made by these others, as a master is a thing made by the servant. If submissiveness ceased, it would be all over with lordship.[32]

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[29] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 91.
[30] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 98.
[31] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 95.
[32] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 174-5.

The power of the state is dependent on the abdication of the individual's free will and self-mastery. We *allow* the state to dominate us. Therefore, all that needs to happen for the state to be overthrown is the reclaiming or reassertion of this will by individuals: 'The *own will* of me is the state's destroyer.'[33] What must be confronted, then, according to Stirner, is not so much the state itself, but self-subjection or voluntary servitude – the condition of submissiveness which makes the state possible. Despite Marx and Engels' infamous attack on 'Saint Max' in *The German Ideology,* where they accuse him of idealism and of ignoring the reality of the state and the materiality of the economic relations which give rise to it – something that I will address below - what Stirner reveals to us is the spectral, ideological dimension that sustains 'real' material relations and institutions. To say that the state is an idea – or better, the embodiment of a misdirected desire – is not to deny its reality, but to highlight the subjective attachment that we have to state power, an attachment that sustains the state's power in the real. And so the sovereignty of the *idea* of the state – as an all-powerful totality - is something that must be dislodged from our minds first, before it can be dislodged in the real; or rather these can be seen as two sides of the same process.

'Saint Max'

There is little doubt that Stirner's thinking had a profound and dramatic effect on Marx.[34] If it can be argued that there is an 'epistemological break' in Marx's thought between his early humanism and his more mature materialism and turn to political economy, the encounter with Stirner and his critique of humanist theology would have been the decisive factor. It forced Marx to take account of the idealism within his own notions of human essence and 'species being' which he derived, to a large extent, from Feuerbach. Indeed, Stirner's work inspired criticism of Marx's latent humanism from many quarters. Arnold Ruge and Gustav Julius, for instance, who were both influenced by Stirner, accused Marx of being indebted to the same Feuerbachian humanism and idealism that Stirner had linked to religious alienation. Following Stirner's critique of socialism, Julius saw the socialist as a modern day version of the Christian possessed by a religious fervour.[35] Marx was quite clearly dismayed by Stirner's suggestion that communism was tainted with the same idealism as Christianity and infused with superstitious ideas like morality and justice. And perhaps it is the impact on Marx of the encounter with Stirner that accounts for the relentless, vitriolic and sardonic assault on Stirner to which the largest part of *The German Ideology* is devoted. This polemic against the alleged 'idealist' tendencies in German philosophy may be seen as a cathartic attempt by Marx to tarnish Stirner with the same brush that he himself had been tarnished with - that of idealism - while, at the same time, trying to exorcise this spectre from his own thought.

Amongst other Young Hegelians and 'ideologists' like Bruno Bauer, Marx and Engels accuse Stirner of the most absurd idealism - of ignoring the real material world and instead living in the world of abstractions and ideas. They caricature Stirner as 'Saint Max'

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[33] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 175.

[34] Despite their later repudiation of Stirner, Engels' initial reception of *The Ego and Its Own* was surprisingly positive. In a letter to Marx, he said: 'But that's precisely what makes the thing important, more important than Hess, for one, holds it to be. We must not simply cast it aside, but rather use it as the perfect expression of present-day folly and, *while inverting it*, continue to build on it. 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.' See *Letters of the Young Engels, 1838-1845*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976.

[35] RKW Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist Max Stirner.* Oxford University Press: London, 1971, p. 108

or 'Saint Sancho', figure who, like the knight in Don Quixote, fights imaginary battles with imaginary foes. Stirner is said to conjure up a netherworld of apparitions, like *essence*, *morality* and *man*, thus falling into the very idealist trap that he claims he is avoiding.[36] They claim that the notion of ego, or unique one (*der einzige*), which Stirner invokes as an alternative to man - and which I shall discuss later - is another one of Stirner's 'spooks'. In other words, according to Marx and Engels, so determined is Stirner to see spooks everywhere that he gets caught up in his own world of illusions, losing all sense of the real world. And it is the real world of material relations of production that Marx and Engels want to assert against these sorts of mystifications.

However, perhaps following, as Derrida would put it, the trail of Stirner's ghost hunt[37] - we can regard materialism itself as a rather spook-ridden category, and as having a theological dimension. Does it not, as Stirner would suggest, imply an inner rationality or spirit – an immanence that animates and guides it? Does materialism not embody the idea of a secret essence: the notion that, at the base of social and political relations, for instance, there is mode of production which bestows intelligibility upon them; or the idea that history itself is driven by the unfolding of a hidden logic; or that there is an immanent movement within life towards its own liberation? If we take Stirner's much more genealogical claim that there is no essence, no secret to social relations, that 'the essence of the world, is for him who looks to the bottom of it – emptiness',[38] then we begin to perceive the limits of the materialist analysis, in whose scientific pretensions we can perhaps detect another kind of metaphysics, another form of theology. As Derrida contends, in his deconstructive reading of Stirner and Marx, Marx cannot avoid spectrality and therefore theology; his notions of exchange value and commodity fetishism are haunted by a 'ghostly schema' which acts as a necessary supplement to their theorisation.[39] And it is the encounter with Stirner – his antagonist, uncanny double and fellow hunter of ghosts - which reveals this supersensible element in Marx's thinking.

Stirner's radical atheism: towards a non-haunted thought

However, this does not mean that – as Schmitt would claim – we are somehow trapped within a politico-theological framework. The exhaustion of the opposition between transcendentalism and materialism does not condemn us to a theological paradigm. I would argue that Stirner provides a possible way out of this impasse, and that his thinking involves not only an unmasking of the theological structures of modern thought, but a positive series of strategies for thinking and acting differently, strategies that suggest the possibility of a radical atheism that avoids the pitfalls of humanist theology. Stirner shows how we might think and act in non-haunted ways. I want to suggest that his thinking might be read as a form of ontological anarchism, or, as he would call it, *egoism*. Now, this term *ego, egoism – der einzige* – and its related notions of property – *eigentum* - do not translate easily. For Stirner, they refer to something like uniqueness, ownness or self-ownership; indeed, a more exact translation of Stirner's text would be 'The Unique One and his Property'. Such notions should be divested of the connotations of liberal bourgeois possessive individualism which they have often and unfairly associated with. Nor should Stirner's philosophy of egoism be confused with any sort of simplistic psychological egoism.

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36 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The German Ideology', *Collected Works*, vol. 5. Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1976, pp 158-159.

37 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*, trans., Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 2006.

38 Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 40.

39 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx,* pp. 188-9.

Der Einzige (the Unique One)

How should we understand Stirner's enigmatic figure of the ego or the unique one, which Marx regarded as the ultimate ghost but which, I would suggest, might be read in an entirely different way – as an alternative category of subjectivity to the theological figure of Man? The ego, for Stirner, is the only concrete reality in this haunted world of spectres and idealist formations; it is the only genuine point of departure for our experience of the world, and yet it is the element which is, in the theological machine of humanist liberalism, the thing that is most derided, scorned and feared. Stirner wants to in a sense reincorporate the spectral and abstracted world back into the ego, the all-consuming 'I'; he wants to bring the alien world – the experience of which is so disempowering – back within the grasp of the concrete individual who created it. However, the ego is not – like the category of the individual – a stable identity as this would become another universalisable category or 'fixed idea'. Unlike liberalism, which promulgates the universal idea of the individual with essential interests, Stirner's notion of the ego or unique one cannot be slotted into any category or general concept:

> I on my part start from a presupposition in presupposing myself; but my presupposition does not struggle for its perfection like "Man struggling for his perfection", but only serves me to enjoy it and consume it... I do not presuppose myself, because I am every moment just positing or creating myself.[40]

Indeed, we might think of the ego in terms of a singularity – without a fixed identity or borders – rather than the individual; perhaps something akin to Agamben's understanding of 'whatever singularities' that cannot be defined by an essence, stable identity or property and which exceed the categories of the particular and the universal, the individual and the community.[41] Indeed, the ego is not even a subject at all, but a void or emptiness which makes possible a constant flux and becoming which can never be expressed or exhausted within any particular concept or identity. Stirner says: 'no concept expresses me, nothing that is designated my essence exhausts me...'[42] He refers to the ego as the 'creative nothing'.[43] The ego is not so much a distinct subject but a deconstruction of all subjectivities.[44] We can understand the category of the ego or unique one as the attempt to formulate an alternative, non-theological place of subjectivity, detached from the Christian and humanist religions:

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[40] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 150.

[41] Agamben says, in terms that seem close to Stirner's: 'Whatever is the thing *with all its properties*, none of which, however, constitutes difference. In-difference with respect to properties is what individuates and disseminates singularities…'. [Italics in original] See: *The Coming Community,* trans., Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 18.9. This little remarked upon resonance between Stirner and Agamben has also been noticed by Banu Bargu. See 'Max Stirner, Postanarchy *avant la lettre'* in *How not to be Governed: Readings and Interpretations from a Critical Anarchist Left,* ed., Jimmy Casas Klausen and James Martel, Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2011, pp. 103-122.

[42] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 324.

[43] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 7.

[44] This point has been made persuasively by Widikund de Ridder. See 'Max Stirner: the end of philosophy and political subjectivity', *Max Stirner,* ed., Saul Newman. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 143-164.

> The divine is God's concern; the human "man's". My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is *mine* (*das Meinige*), and is not a general one, but is – *unique* (*einzige*), as I am unique.[45]

If the ego is in a sense indefinable, and certainly irreducible to the liberal figure of the 'possessive individual', what does Stirner mean when he talks about possession and property? In what alternative sense can this be understood? I have already suggested that property refers here not to material possessions, but rather to that which belongs to the unique one, that which is uniquely his or hers. This also means, paradoxically, an indifference to the idea of property as a stable external institution based on rights and law. Indeed, for Stirner, property is based on relations of power rather than being a moral or legal concept, and therefore the ego's property depends on what he or she has the power to gain. What Stirner wants to do here is to desacralize or profane property as an institution and even as a material possession; if property is respected and made sacred, then this, once again, implies an alienating power wielded over the unique one. Stirner is wary of the condition of 'possessedness', in which the ego becomes in a sense consumed by alien objects, by his desire for possessions. If this desire takes over the ego, if it results in a loss of power one has over oneself, then one no longer owns but is *owned* by the object; the alien object comes to have power over the ego. So the intensification of the ego's ownership of itself is concomitant with the absolute profanation of property as an external relation.

Does this egoistic philosophy and sense self-ownership – which superficially would seem to convey a radical and excessive individualism – conflict with the possibility of a collective politics? Stirner wants to purge politics of all the theological categories, like community, society, the state, rights, emancipation, and so on. As we have seen, these are so many Christianized spooks which inevitably result in the sacrifice of the unique one to some totality or sacred cause beyond his control. So, beyond these terms, how should politics be understood? At the outset, Stirner's alternative notion of the 'union of egoists' might appear paradoxical, absurd. He proposes the idea of associations of voluntary cooperation that individuals enter into purely for egoistic reasons, which they are entitled to leave when these associations no longer serve their interests, and which do not sacrifice or reduce the ego to an abstract cause. They are not stable, sovereign institutions like the state,[46] or even vanguard organisations like the party, but rather unstable, fluid sets of relations which emerge, mutate and dissolve rhizomatically. We might think of the union of egoists, then, as an experiment in autonomous modes of political action whose resistance to sovereign representation is designed to evade getting caught up once again in transcendental, theological categories. Here, again, the resonance with Agamben's notion of a 'whatever community' which is not mediated by any condition of belonging but rather by an 'inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence', is striking.[47] Perhaps we can also think about this paradoxical figure, the union of egoists, as an alternative way of approaching the impossible question of the individual and the community, and of encountering in a new – non-foundational and non-theological way – the contingency and openness of the political as such.[48]

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[45] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 7.
[46] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 161.
[47] See Agamben, *The Coming Community,* pp. 17-18.
[48] Stirner's attempt here might be likened to the project of contemporary thinkers like Nancy and Esposito, to formulate non-essential, non-representable forms of community. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* trans., et al., Peter Connor. Minneapolis, MN: University of

From freedom to ownness

A further politico-theological category that Stirner wants to remove is that of freedom. Freedom, particularly in liberal-humanist thought, is seen as a universal ideal to which we all aspire to, and yet Stirner sees it as an abstract, empty generality, and an illusory spook which alienates and disempowers us. Today more than ever, it seems that the language of freedom, as prescribed by liberalism, has reached a dead-end and is no longer politically useful. The exhaustion of this concept was something that Stirner observed long ago; 'being free' marked a deeper domination. Under liberalism, moreover, freedom is usually limited to a negative model, and this means that freedom is still defined and limited by the idea of what one is supposedly 'free from'. Even though Stirner wants to propose a new understanding of freedom that is perhaps closer to 'positive' freedom – in the sense of freedom as a capacity to do something – he would be equally wary of any attempt to construct a particular rational and moral ideal of freedom whose standard one would be expected – forced even - to live up to and reflect in one's thought and behaviour. Both conceptions of freedom, negative and positive, have been tarnished with humanist theology and its moral and rational injunctions. So the problem with freedom is that its proclaimed universality disguises a particular position of power – it is always someone's idea of freedom that is imposed coercively upon others: 'The craving for a *particular* freedom always includes the purpose of a new *domination*…'[49]

So, for Stirner, to pose the question of freedom as a universal aspiration is always to pose the question of which particular order of power imposes this freedom, thereby inevitably limiting and constraining its radical possibilities. Therefore, freedom must be left to the unique one to determine for him- or herself. It should be seen as ongoing project of individual autonomy rather than a general political and social goal; freedom as a singular practice, unique to the individual, rather than a universally proclaimed ideal and aspiration. Freedom, in other words, must be divested of its abstractions and brought down to the level of the ego. This is why Stirner prefers the term 'ownness' to freedom, ownness implying self-ownership or self-mastery – in other words, a kind of autonomy, which means *more* than freedom because it is something that gives one the *freedom to be free*, the freedom to define one's own singular path of freedom: 'Ownness *created* a new *freedom*.'[50] Rather than conforming to a universal ideal, something which is so often accompanied with the most terrible forms of coercion, ownness is project of open-ended creation and invention, in which new forms of freedom can be experimented with. As Stirner says:

> My *own* I am at all times and under all circumstances, if I know how to have myself and do not throw myself away on others. To be free is something that I cannot truly *will*, because I cannot make it, cannot create it…[51]

Ownness is a way of restoring to the individual his or her capacity for freedom; of reminding the individual that he is already free in an ontological sense, rather than seeing freedom as a universal goal to be attained for humanity. If freedom is disempowering and illusory, ownness is a way of making freedom concrete and real, and, moreover, of revealing to the unique one what he had long forgotten – his own power: 'I am free from

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Minnesota Press, 1991; and Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: the origin and destiny of community,* trans., Timothy Campbell. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010.

[49] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 145.

[50] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 147.

[51] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 143.

what I am rid of, owner of what I have in my *power* or what I *control*.'[52] Ownness, then, might be seen as a form of non-theological freedom which implies a greater sense of autonomy and self-ownership: 'I am my own only when I am master of myself, instead of being mastered by either sensuality or by anything else (God, man, authority, law, state, church)'.[53]

From revolution to insurrection

In contesting the domination of the theological paradigm, we have to recognise the limits of a simple transgression of its authority. To transgress against God is only to reaffirm His authority as that which is worthy of transgression (Feuerbach's humanist transgression, as we have seen, only makes divine power more resplendent); to sin against morality only affirms the hold that the moral law has over us. That is why Stirner is wary of criminality as a strategy of transgression, as crime seems only to confirm the legitimacy of the law. The same problem is found with the idea of revolution as the project of positioning oneself against and overthrowing existing political and legal institutions, without exploring the hold that such institutions have over our consciousness. To this end, Stirner proposes an alternative figure of radical political action, what he calls the insurrection:

> Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. The former consists in an overturning of conditions, of the established condition or *status*, the state or society, and is accordingly a *political* or *social* act; the latter has indeed for its unavoidable consequence a transformation of circumstances, yet does not start from it but from men's discontent with themselves, is not an armed rising but a rising of individuals, a getting up without regard to the *arrangements* that spring from it. The Revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer to *let* ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on "institutions". It is not a fight against the established, since, if it prospers, the established collapses of itself; it is only a working forth of me out of the established.[54]

This is primarily an insurrection of the self, a subjective rebellion against prescribed identities and categories through which we are attached to power (he says it 'starts from men's discontent with themselves'). It is thus not directly aimed at destroying the state as a political institution, but at destroying the internalised theology which perpetuates this institution. It is an assertion of the power of singularities, a reclaiming of the self, through which the structure of power collapses of itself. The power of the state is merely an abstraction and abdication of our own power. Stirner's point is, rather, that if any sort of revolutionary action is not at the same time actively affirmed by singularities, if it is not made, as he puts it, 'my own cause', 'my own creation', then it risks becoming a sacred, abstracted Cause alien to the individual and to which the individual is ultimately sacrificed. So perhaps we can see the insurrection as a way of thinking about revolutionary action in non-theological ways, and in ways which do not merely reinvent the onto-theological category of power and sovereignty it sought to overthrow.

Conclusion: Thought from the Outside

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[52] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 143.
[53] Stirner, *The Ego,* p. 153.
[54] Stirner, *The Ego*, pp. 279-80.

Through these figures of the unique one, ownness and insurrection, I have tried to show how Stirner provides us with an alternative, non-theological language for subjectivity and politics. To simply reverse or invert the terms of the politico-theological paradigm, to assert Humanity in place of God, freedom against the state, immorality instead of morality, or to declare an allegiance to Satan – as Bakunin rhetorically did – is not enough, as this simply reaffirms the structure one opposes. Stirner therefore calls a halt to this chain of substitutions that only leaves us trapped in the same place of power. He even wants to go beyond criticism, a mode of thinking he regards as exhausted, experimenting instead with a form of anterior thinking, or thought from the outside – for instance with his notion of the Un-Man as the other of Man, and with his invoking of *thoughtlessness*:

> Criticism is the possessed man's fight against possession as such, against all possession: a fight which is founded in the consciousness that everywhere possession, or, as the critic calls it, a religious and theological attitude, is extant. He knows that people stand in a religious or believing attitude not only toward God, but toward other ideas as well, like right, the state, law; he recognizes possession in all places. So he wants to break up thought by thinking; but I say only thoughtlessness really saves me from thoughts. It is not thinking, but my thoughtlessness, or I the unthinkable, incomprehensible, that frees me from possession.[55]

Stirner invites us to encounter the very limits of thought, or rather to situate our thinking on a new, ontologically anarchic terrain. And perhaps it is to this terrain that we must go if we are to free ourselves, once and for all, from grasp of the politico-theological machine.

[55] Stirner, *The Ego,* pp. 132-3.