

INDIVIDUALISM-POLITICS-AND THE MODERN STATE



For Max Stirner the state is an enemy. In the state individuals must sacrifice their labour, body, and freedom to a collective called the state . The government needs money so it takes property and labour. It subordinates human beings to its will and crushes them if they resist. The state is, therefore, the enemy of all human beings.

Stirner claimed that this is the case even with the development of modern institutions and the emergence of democratic political practice. Thus when Stirner spoke of the liberal political tradition, he spoke with nothing but disdain.

The liberal revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not free the individual from the state but made the individual subservient to the state.

Citizenship is the value promoted in the state. The liberal

revolutions created the idea of the citizen and then subjected the people to it (p. 111). In what can be read as an attack on the organic description of the state presented by Hegel, Stirner argued that 'social liberalism' seeks to generate the idea that the state has a body, not the individual (p.128). That body must be nurtured with all doing their part to support it. What Stirner called 'humane liberalism' (more in the tradition of Kant) sought to obliterate the concept of self and replace it with a generalized concept, 'Man,' to which all would owe their allegiance in the modern state.

Both of these forms of liberalism create the dream of freedom, but the promise cannot be fulfilled. In fact, this freedom is not real, it lives in the realm of dreams (p.157). The real is what Stirner called 'ownness.' Ownness is personal and internal. It is not linked to the authority of the state. 'I am my own only when I am master of myself, instead of being mastered either by sensuality or by anything else (God, man, authority, law, State, Church) (p.169).'

Ownness cannot be achieved within the two modern political traditions (socialism and liberalism). They reject the idea that the individual is unique. For Stirner the unique character of each human being is undeniable and critically important. This conclusion stems from a resolute ontological position. Stirner means the 'individual' in the strictest sense of the word. Only the individual has real being. Only organisms think, feel pain, breath, live and procreate. Each is, therefore, a repository of unique experience and ideas. To subordinate this uniqueness to any concept of state, collective union, or society that would negate this ontological reality would be an affront to reason.

Even to say 'one' is unique because one is part of a unique

group is to return to the safety of the herd and to sacrifice ontological independence (p.138).

Stirner puts it very directly. 'Doubtless I have similarity with others, yet that holds good only for comparison or reflection; in fact I am incomparable, unique.

My flesh is not their flesh, my mind is not their mind' (p.138). Any structure of authority resting on a concept that seeks to make the individual subordinate to a concept or idea beyond this principle is the enemy.

Liberals do not see man, but only the concept 'Man' (p.173). They do not allow room for individuals. The individual man is refused, only the general human being is revered (p.205). The true individual must desecrate all that the state demands (p.184). Aware that the state has power, Stimer comments, 'It would be foolish to assert that there is no power above mine. Only the attitude that I take toward it will be quite another than that of the religious age: I shall be the enemy of every higher power' (p.184).

The current system of morality that informs state practices is groundless. The danger for the individual within this social, political, legal, and philosophic construction cannot be overstated. Once any authority has the power to determine the ideal to which life should be oriented the individual is in danger. Ideals get fixed within the laws, code, and practices of the state. Then ... 'the butchery goes on here in the name of the law, of the sovereign people, of God, etc!' (p.205).

Thus, it is impossible to separate Stirner's rejection of the

state's authority from his comments about what he calls the 'fixed idea.' The fixed idea is the basis of modern morality and legality (p.43). Applied in the law, the construction of fixed ideas creates the basis for creating the label 'criminal behaviour' by which the state can justify its existence (p.238).

Criticise the fixed idea and you will have to deal with a violent and dangerous public that lives by the herd instinct. 'Touch the fixed idea of such a fool, and you will at once have to guard your back against the lunatic's stealthy malice ... Every day now lays bare the cowardice and vindictiveness of these maniacs, and the stupid populace hurrahs for their crazy measures.' (p.43).

Stirner's criticism of the state was unwavering. He denied the concept of authority because he denies that the state can have any firm footing on which to pass judgement. It creates the illusion he called the fixed idea, but Stirner denies that the fixed idea is anything but a fraud. The state generates power and illusion.

It is, in reality, not constructed on the firm foundation of truth that it pretends.

What is unique about Stirner's work is that it does not conform to the normal strategy employed by the other anarchist writers of the period. Most anarchist writers of this period began with a construction of human nature and then proceeded deductively. While there is some disagreement over how benign these authors saw the human character? generally human nature

was presented in such a way that the state could be seen as unnecessary, irrelevant, and intrusive. (This positive characterisation of human nature is also perceived to be one of the major criticisms against anarchism.)

For example, in *Mutual Aid* Kropotkin asserts that, in contrast to Darwin, species that learn to cooperate are the most successful.

In modern society institutions have disrupted the natural condition of human being[^].[^] The same methodology is employed by Godwin and Proudhon⁶ Society is spontaneous and natural, and it is the formal institution of the state that prevents the natural condition from realising its potential. All of these conclusions, however, have their origins in a fixed view of human nature and human essence. Stirner rejects this strategy suggesting that it is not only flawed, but dangerous.

