

## On the ‘epistemological break’

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**This is a chapter that forms part of a larger whole, originally written in French. The quotations refer to French sources, with some exceptions.**

It was with what the Marxist intellectuals of the 1970s considered to be the residues of bourgeois ideology that the mature Marx was to break away, by developing a science that was to account history and its logic at a structural level. Althusser sees in Marx’s work an effort to found a scientific theory of history, free of all the humanist presuppositions that make positive knowledge of the social world and its revolutionary transformation impossible.<sup>1</sup> For Althusser, Marx’s work is divided into two periods, that of the young Marx imbued with Feuerbachian humanism, and that of the mature Marx who founded a scientific theory of history. I shall try to show that, *on this precise point*, Althusser’s point of view accords well with anarchist thought.

For Poulantzas, the “original problematic” of Marxism, which consists of a “break with the problematic of Marx’s early works”, is to be found in *The German Ideology*. Clearly Poulantzas is telling us (in his own way) that this is where Marx became a Marxist:

“We will not, therefore, take into consideration what are commonly called Marx’s early works, except by way of critical comparison, that is to say above all as a point of reference for detecting the ideological ‘survivals’ of the early problematic in the mature works.”<sup>2</sup>

In short, since the “early works are mainly concerned with political theory”, care must be taken not to integrate them into a “Marxist” analysis of the political.<sup>3</sup>

While Miliband starts from the *Communist Manifesto* as the basis for his reflection on Marx and the State, it is *Capital* which, for Poulantzas, is “the major theoretical work of Marxism,”<sup>4</sup> but he concludes that Marxism is

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1 See Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, Maspero, 1965, reprinted in *La Découverte*, 1986, p. 236.

2 *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*, Maspéro, p. 17

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

deficient. According to Poulantzas, Marx's work and that of the "classics of Marxism" only potentially, implicitly, contains the concepts needed to construct a theory of the capitalist state.

What can we learn from *Capital* as regards the study of politics, asks the Greek philosopher? The work contains a reflection on the capitalist mode of production with the economic aspect having "in addition to its role as the ultimate determinant, the dominant role".

The other instances - the ideological, the political - are present, "but in a sort of hollow way, that is to say through their effects in the economic region": "This implicit presence of the political in *Capital* will be very useful to us, but cannot take us very far." The problem is to know which texts can be considered "political". Moreover, the problem in designating *Capital* as the theoretical pivot of Marxism lies in the fact that it is an unfinished work which contains no theory of social classes or the state:

"The known discrepancy between what Marx intended in *Capital* and what he achieved before his death leaves a text full of gaps, omissions and declared intentions that are never realised in practice. Marxist philosophers, especially Althusserian structuralists, are therefore faced with the task not only of clarifying the existing text, but also of *completing it*."<sup>5</sup>

Engels, Lenin and Gramsci completed this work, says Poulantzas, although they did not tackle the question of politics and state as systematically as Marx did the question of economics in *Capital*. In short, Poulantzas criticises these authors for not having written *the political equivalent of Capital*:

"As for the texts of the classics of Marxism, from the point of view of their treatment as information concerning the capitalist state in particular, it has also been necessary to complete them and subject them to particular critical work. Given the non-systematic nature of these texts, the information they contain sometimes appears partial, or even inaccurate, in the light of the historical and political information currently available."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to *Capital*, Poulantzas designates, among the texts selected for re-examination, "a series of texts that deal, partially or entirely, with the object of political science in its abstract-formal form – either the State in general, or class struggle in general, or the capitalist State in general": *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx's *Civil War in France*; Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, Gramsci's *Notes on Machiavelli*.

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5 Clyde Barrow, "The Marx Problem in Marxian State Theory", *Science & Society* Vol. 64, No. 1 (Spring, 2000).

6 *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales, op. cit.*, p.16.

There are also texts which, because of “the absence of systematic theoretical works in this field [...] focus at the same time, in the same discursive unexplained and non-analysed exposition, on abstract-formal objects, and belong to a conception of politics in general theory, and to a regional theory of politics in the capitalist mode of production.”<sup>7</sup>

However, these political works contain “even the most abstract concepts”, but “in a form which is not theoretically elaborated”, or only “in the state of elements”. Among these texts, he cites: Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and *Civil War in France*; Engels’s *Anti-Dühring*, Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, Gramsci’s *Notes on Machiavelli*.

Finally, there are “political texts properly speaking” which deal with specific historical social formations: France, Germany, England for Marx, Russia for Lenin, Italy for Gramsci, which include a “concrete analysis of a concrete situation”, which contain “even the most abstract concepts, but either in the ‘practical state’, i.e. in a form that is not theoretically elaborated, or in a more or less elaborated form but in the state of elements, i.e. inserted in a discursive order of exposition that is not, in the logical order of research, their own.”<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, the *Communist Manifesto*, which Miliband believes is the basis for the construction of a theory of the state, does not appear on Poulantzas’s list.

## Let’s take a look at Stirner

This epistemological break caused much ink to flow and divided Marxist intellectuals, providing fodder for polemics between supporters and opponents of the thesis. The issue at stake, vital for the emancipation of the proletariat (*sic*), was to know when Marx had really become a “Marxist”: before 1845 or after?

Why 1845? For Marxist writers, this is the date on which Marx published *The German Ideology*, a date which, for supporters of the ‘break’, would have marked Marx’s transition to true Marxism: it would have been the event that marked Marx’s transition from a ‘bourgeois’ approach to society to a ‘revolutionary’ one.

Without disputing the importance of the *Ideology* in the formation of Marx’s thought, the date 1845 represents something quite different: it is the publication of Stirner’s *The Ego and its Own*, the work that prompted him to renounce Feuerbach’s humanism.

*The German Ideology* is a posthumous work by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Joseph Weydemeyer, written between spring 1845 and the end of 1846, but which was not published until 1932. The book consists of two

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7 *Political power and social classes*, p.19

8 *Ibid.*

unequal parts, the first devoted to the authors' exposition of their theory of history, which came to be known as "historical materialism", even though the expression does not appear in the book and Marx never used it.

This book represents a decisive stage in the development of Marx and Engels' thought. It is a fairly voluminous book, of which a small part (the part most often published) is devoted to setting out the foundations of their materialist conception of history. Referring to this period, Engels declared in 1885 that Marx had already drawn "from these foundations a materialist theory of history which was completed in its main lines, and we set ourselves the task of elaborating in detail, and in the most diverse directions, our newly acquired way of seeing".<sup>9</sup> In truth, the presentation of the brand new materialist theory of history occupies only a small part of the book, three quarters of which is taken up by a polemic against Bruno Bauer and above all against Stirner, called "Saint Max" for the occasion.

This refutation, which was even longer than *The Ego and its Own*,<sup>10</sup> kept Marx busy for nine months, and for a year he was busy mobilising his friends and looking for a publisher. The stakes must have been high, because during this time Marx abandoned his economic work, which one might have thought was more urgent. In a letter to Leske in August 1846, he wrote: "I had temporarily interrupted my work on Economics. It seemed to me very important to publish first a polemical piece against German philosophy and German socialism, which follows on from it, before tackling positive developments." Later, he pretended not to be concerned about the books' publication. In 1859, he wrote: "Basically, we wanted to examine our philosophical conscience. [...] We had achieved our main aim: to understand ourselves. With good grace, we abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of mice."<sup>11</sup>

When Marxist historians of Marxism discuss *the German Ideology*, they generally simply mention the polemic against Stirner and Bruno Bauer, without bothering explain the content of this polemic or how it was a stage in the formation of Marx's thought. Emile Bottigelli puts it this way, referring to Stirner and Bauer:

"These writers exerted a certain influence on circles where Marx and Engels could make their voices heard. It was necessary that these intellectuals, whom the two founders of scientific socialism intended to convince of the truth of communism, should be removed from the ventures into

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9 Engels, Preface to *The German Ideology*.

10 Franz Mehring, in his biography of Marx, writes: "Engels later said, from memory, that Stirner's criticism alone was no less lengthy than Stirner's book itself."

11 Marx, *Critique de l'économie politique*, La Pléiade, Économie, I, p. 275. In other translations, Marx wrote that they had wanted to "settle [their] accounts with [their] former philosophical conscience".

philosophical speculation in which Bauer and his friends were leading them.”<sup>12</sup>

That’s as much as we know, except that there’s no point in going into detail, since the thought of one is forgotten and that of the other is the subject of conversations between people who haven’t read him - a scientific attitude if ever there was one... We will therefore never know why Marx devoted so much effort to polemicising against an author who is no longer read.

Stirner’s critique of humanism was to bear fruit. Marx rejected those concepts whose idealism was too apparent: total man, real humanism, generic being. But he did not abandon the essence of Feuerbach’s approach. All he did was to transpose from philosophy to science what Feuerbach had transposed from theology to philosophy; on this point it could be said that Bakunin took up where Stirner left off, developing his critique of science as the new theology of the period. However, it would be simplistic to consider that this conflict is in any way an expression of the opposition between Marxism and anarchism.

Marx’s explanation that, in writing *The German Ideology*, he had wanted to “settle accounts with his previous philosophical conscience” has been taken up uncritically by almost all Marxist authors, who, moreover, have generally made no critical examination of Marx’s arguments against Stirner.

It is a curious settling of accounts with his philosophical conscience, in which the lowest polemical methods, bad faith and pettiness are more reminiscent of a personal settling of accounts, and in which the violence of the tone seems more like an attempt to exorcise his own previous positions. Marx’s “refutation” of Stirner consists of a number of vile personal attacks: “he got so drunk that he rolled under the table”,<sup>13</sup> Stirner married a “chaste seamstress”; he failed in the creamery trade;<sup>14</sup> he failed in his university career.<sup>15</sup> Marx even reveals the address of Stirner’s favourite café and the name of the library he frequents, all fascinating things in the refutation of a thinker’s ideas. In fact, Marx proceeds by exorcising his own positions and actions: the future author of *Capital* was himself sentenced at the age of 17 for drunkenness and rowdiness, and failed in his university ambitions.

Franz Mehring, the Marxist historian, seems a little disgusted when he mentions Marx’s book. It is, he says, an “ultra-polemic, even more prolix than the *Holy Family* in its most arid chapters, and oases are much rarer in this desert, if they are not completely lacking. When the dialectical penetration of

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12 Emile Bottigelli, *Genèse du socialisme scientifique*, Éditions sociales, pp. 169-170.

13 Marx, *German Ideology*, Éditions Sociales, p. 143.

14 *Ibid.* p. 394, note 1. Marx also refers to the “chaste seamstress” on pages 206 and 218.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 208, 404.

the authors does appear, it immediately degenerates into hair-splitting and quarrels over words, which are sometimes quite petty”.<sup>16</sup>

In short, Mehring says in elegant terms that *German Ideology* is even more of a pain in the ass than the *Holy Family*.

The “philosophical examination of conscience” advanced by Marx to explain the writing of *the German Ideology* is an *a posteriori* argument and makes no sense in view of the violently polemical character of the work. Stirner was not a minor figure in the Hegelian Left, and his writings were not confined to *The Ego and its Own*. The value of his work was recognised by everyone, even his opponents, except of course Marx, who never recognised the value of an opponent (and rarely recognised the value of anyone, for that matter). Stirner had written a review of Bauer’s *Trumpet of the Last Judgement* that had not gone unnoticed; articles by him, noticed by the intellectuals of the time, had been published in the *Rhenish Gazette* directed by Marx: “The False Principle of Our Education”, “Art and Religion”, “The Anticritic”, which had preceded *The Ego and its Own*. A little-known fact, he had also published a study on Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*, before Marx’s study of the *Holy Family*. So this is no stranger who develops a critique of the communist system as an avatar of religious alienation, and highlighting the flaw in that system.

Engels himself almost succumbed, proposing to Marx that they revise their hypotheses and adopt Stirner’s basis demonstrating the necessity of communism through egoism: ‘it is out of egoism that we wish to be human beings, not mere individuals’, he writes. On 19 November 1844,<sup>17</sup> he wrote to his new friend a letter in which he informed him that Stirner, their former comrade from the Doktorklub, had just published a book that was causing quite a stir in the circle of young Hegelianists. “The noble Stirner”, writes Engels, is defined as ‘the most talented, independent and hard-working of the ‘Free’.”

Engels wanted to take the empirical man as the foundation of man: “We must take our departure from the Ego, the empirical, flesh-and-blood individual, if we are not, like Stirner, to remain stuck at this point but rather proceed to raise ourselves to ‘man’.” (p.12)

Marx’s response to this proposal from Engels has been lost, but we understand from a letter from Engels, dated 20 January 1845, that Marx was strongly opposed to this approach. Engels, embarrassed, admitted that he had got carried away: “As regards Stirner, I entirely agree with you. When I wrote to you, I was still too much under the immediate impression made upon me by

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16 Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx, the Story of his Life*, The University of Michigan Press, 1962, p. 110

edited by Gérard Bloch, published by Pie, p. 401 (Only the first volume was published by Pie. Its interest lies in the impressive apparatus of notes).

17 MECW, vol 38, p. 11 sq.

the book. Since I laid it aside and had time to think it over, I feel the same as you.”<sup>18</sup>

It is undoubtedly from this misstep by Engels that the two men’s violent opposition to Stirner dates, an opposition which resembles an exorcism rather than a refutation. Without Stirner’s critique, which had the effect of a “kick up the arse” on Marx (philosophically, of course), we don’t know what Marxism would have become. Probably a vague, insipid form of social criticism.

In July and August 1845, Marx spent a month and a half in England. With Engels he visited London and Manchester. He read a lot on economics: free trade, banking history, gold, prices, the law of population, etc. He discovered the reality of working-class life, in particular by visiting the slums. He did not yet consider questioning humanism as such, but to develop a ‘real’ humanism.

On his return to Brussels at the beginning of September, a few months after the publication of *The Ego and its Own*, he learnt of the publication in Leipzig, in the same collection, of a text by Bruno Bauer, *Characteristic of Feuerbach*, which is a response to *The Holy Family*, and in which Marx is called a dogmatist, and a text by Stirner, *The Anticritique*, a response to the *Last Philosophers* by Moses Hess, but also to Szeliga, in other words the elite of the Hegelian left. Marx, who no longer wanted to be called a “philosopher”, was accused of being one.

Stirner was a hit with the German intelligentsia and some left-wing Hegelians rallied to his point of view. For Marx, this was too much, so he set out to achieve three objectives:

- exonerate themselves and communism from the accusation of being a religious decoy;
- to distance himself from Feuerbach;
- discredit Stirner.

Until then, Marx had not grasped the importance of *The Ego and Its Own* and had only had vague plans for a refutation. He now realised that he could no longer avoid settling accounts – with Stirner, but also with himself.<sup>19</sup>

It has been said of Stirner that he was a man of one book. When *The Ego and its Own* appeared in 1845, it caused a sensation, but it was soon forgotten. The book came at the worst possible time; it was completely out of step with the problems of the time: young philosophers had outgrown the questions of philosophy and were asking themselves a question that Stirner completely ignored: how to take action. The famous phrase from Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845): “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, it is now important to transform it”, was a banality of the time and

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18 Engels to Marx. 20 January 1845, MECW 38, p.16.

19 The editions of *the German Ideology* available, particularly from social publishers, generally cut out the most voluminous polemical part of the work, giving the reader only the first part.

admirable only to those who were content to read only Marx. The idea had already been formulated in 1838 by Cieszkowski ("Social action and intervention will supplant true philosophy", *Prolegomena to Historiosophy*). Bakunin, for his part, had resolved the question for, since 1842, he had abandoned philosophy and committed himself to action.

At the time, Hegel's philosophy was considered to have reached the final stage of its evolution, and the problem now for the philosopher's disciples was rather to determine what form and content they were going to give to their action. The idea was in the air at the time, and Marx merely gave one formulation among others. But while the young Berlin intellectuals were wondering about *praxis*, a term that was to become fashionable, Stirner was still wondering about the Ego. History was to decide the issue: three years after the publication of *The Ego and its Own*, a revolution broke out that would set the whole of Europe ablaze, and from which Stirner would remain completely aloof. As for Marx, he put all his energy into promoting a bourgeois democratic revolution in Germany, tempering the ardour of the proletariat, dissolving its party – the League of Communists – in an attempt to awaken the class consciousness of the... bourgeoisie.<sup>20</sup> His positions during the 1848 revolution in Germany were sanctioned by the exclusion of Marx, who was exiled to London, from the first communist party in the history of the labour movement.

In 1844, therefore, Feuerbach was the mentor of Marx, Engels and Bakunin. For a short time, Marx spoke enthusiastically of the "great deeds" and "discoveries of the man who gave a philosophical foundation to socialism".

"The unity of man with man, which is based on the real differences between men, the concept of the human species brought down from the heaven of abstraction to the real earth, what is this but the concept of *society*!"<sup>21</sup>

## From humanism to materialism

Before 1845, humanism predominated in Marx's thinking, and he was enthusiastic about reading Feuerbach. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, for example, we read that "communism is not as such the goal of human development", meaning that the goal is Man. Marx, like the post-Hegelians, thought that philosophy was the truth of religion: it was religion realised; in this he remained a Feuerbachian. Didn't Feuerbach say in particular that "modern

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20 See Fernando Claudin, *Marx, Engels y la Revolución de 1848*, Biblioteca del pensamiento socialista, 1975.

21 Marx, Letter to Feuerbach, 11 August 1844.



philosophy grew out of theology - it is in itself nothing other than the resolution and transformation of theology into philosophy”<sup>22</sup>

This enthusiasm, manifest in the *1844 Manuscripts* and in the *Holy Family*, would provide Stirner with fodder for a fundamental critique in a *The Ego and its Own*, i.e. a year before Proudhon’s *System of Economic Contradictions* and Marx’s *The German Ideology*. In a very short space of time, then, Marx would twice find himself seriously challenged.

Thus, Stirner reproaches Feuerbach for not having destroyed the sacred, but only its “heavenly dwelling”, and “force it to move to us bag and baggage”.<sup>23</sup> Feuerbach built his system on a totally theological basis, says Stirner, who asserts that Feuerbach’s generic man is a new form of the divine and that he reproduces Christian morality.

This was a severe blow to the positions Marx was developing at the time. Stirner comments:

“With the strength of despair Feuerbach clutches at the total substance of Christianity, not to throw it away, no, to drag it to himself, to draw it, the long-yearned-for, ever-distant, out of its heaven with a last effort, and keep it by him forever. Is not that a clutch of the uttermost despair, a clutch for life or death, and is it not at the same time the Christian yearning and hungering for the other world?”<sup>24</sup>

At a time when Marx was trying to show that the suppression of philosophy was the realisation of philosophy, Stirner demonstrates that philosophy can only really develop to the end and be fulfilled as theology, the latter being the place of its last struggle. Feuerbach calls this God, who is spirit, “our essence”.

“Can we put up with this, that ‘our essence’ is brought into opposition to *us*, that we are split into an essential and an un-essential self? *Do* we not with that go back into the dreary misery of seeing ourselves banished out of ourselves?”<sup>25</sup>

According to Marx, the generic being of man, the generic man borrowed from Feuerbach provided a *philosophical foundation for communism*. It was a reality in the making, the realised essence of an alienated existence of man reconciled with the community. But Stirner shows that this generic man is only a *new form of the divine*, that it merely reproduces Christian morality. Philosophy, he says, is a lie: its role is socially religious.

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22 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Manifestes philosophiques*, P.U.F. 1960, p. 155.

23 Max Stirner, *The Ego and its own*, Cambridge University Press, p. 34

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.* p. 34.

The situation was becoming worrying for Marx. In fact, Stirner was in the process of making a name for himself in German intellectual circles. After *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner published *The Anticritic*, in which he “ridiculed the arguments of the man Marx still considered to be his spokesman, but “he emerged stronger from a confrontation with three mediocre polemicists who nevertheless represented the elite of the German left”, writes Daniel Joubert.<sup>26</sup>

“Stirner’s influence continued to spread: certain left-wing Hegelians rallied and made it known in Germany and France that communism was a religious delusion. Henceforth, Marx was going to endeavour, without further ado, to exonerate himself by separating himself from Feuerbach and presenting Stirner as a puppet.”<sup>27</sup>

Stirner’s critique of Feuerbach was to bear fruit. Marx radically changed his approach to the problem of communism, but not before exorcising his youthful demons with a 300-page attack on Stirner in the *German Ideology*.

It would certainly be an exaggeration to say that Stirner is the source of the idea of ‘epistemological break’ which, according to Althusser, marks Marx’s transition from humanism to materialism: several thinkers can perfectly well reach the same results by different approaches. In the debate, or rather in the controversy over Marx’s famous ‘epistemological break’, Stirner’s name is never mentioned. It is true that for Marxists, any positive reference to an anarchist thinker or alleged anarchist is banned and considered to have no normative value (even though I do not consider Stirner to be an anarchist).

Yet Stirner was no stranger to the Marxist intellectuals of the 1970s. According to Wolfgang Eßbach, “Max Stirner is credited with being the first to make this turn, from idealism to materialism, in the context of the Young Hegelians. Marxists have consistently denied this to Stirner, attributing the materialist turn to Marx and, at most, a precursory role to Feuerbach.”<sup>28</sup>

Eßbach adds that “Louis Althusser highlighted in the 1960s an ‘epistemological break’ between the young Karl Marx, who was inspired by Feuerbach, and the mature Karl Marx.”<sup>29</sup>

“The young Marx was a humanist; the mature Marx was characterised by ‘anti-humanism’. Althusser has overlooked the fact that it was the reading of *The Ego and its Own* forced Marx

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26 “Karl Marx contre Max Stirner” in *Max Stirner*, Cahiers de philosophie - L’Âge d’homme, p. 188.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Wolfgang Eßbach, “Ein unentwegtes Skandalon. Max Stirners Kritik des Heiligen und die Phrase des Einzigen”, in *Max Stirner - L’unique et sa propriete Lectures critiques* (PDF) Ein unentwegtes Skandalon. Max Stirners Kritik des Heiligen und die Phrase des Einzigen | Wolfgang Essbach - Academia.edu

29 Louis Althusser: *Pour Marx*, Paris: Editions F. Maspero, 1965.

to reorient his entire thought, he may have read Henri Arvon's important pioneering study very early on."<sup>30</sup>

Stirner's influence on Marx did not go unnoticed by everyone, as Urs Lindner notes in a very euphemistic style: "The Stirnerian 'deconstruction' of Young Hegelianism left a lasting impression on Marx and put him in a position to react on the theoretical level, a reaction of which the laborious attempts of *The German Ideology* to produce a refutation of Stirner offer eloquent testimony"<sup>31</sup>

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30 Wolfgang Eßbach refers to Henri Arvon's book *Aux sources de l'existentialisme: Max Stirner*, Paris: Presses Univ. de France, 1954.

31 Urs Lindner, "Repenser la coupure épistémologique. lire Marx avec et contre Althusser", *Actuel Marx*, 2011/1, 49. <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-actuel-marx-2011-1-page-121?lang=fr>