

PIERRE-JOSEPH PROUDHON MAX STIRNER

GENT14: The Age of Progress
Monterey Peninsula College
Dr. Stephanie Spoto

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865)



Proudhon and his children by Gustave Courbet, 1865

- Born in Besançon, France
- French political thinker
- Founder of mutualist philosophy and first to declare himself an “anarchist”
- One of anarchism’s more influential theorists
- After the Revolution of 1848
 - After this began to refer to himself as a federalist, rather than an anarchist

Early work and encounters with Marx

- Worked in printing → taught himself Latin in order to print books in that language
- “Property is theft!” → from first significant work *What is Property? Or, an Inquiry into the Principle and Right of Government* (1840)
- Book brought the attention of the French authorities and Karl Marx
- Marx began correspondence with Stirner, and the two began to influence each other’s ideas
- Stirner and Marx met while Marx was exiled there
- Proudhon: *The System of Economic Contradictions, or The Philosophy of Poverty*
- Marx’s response: *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847)
- International Working Men’s Association → now split between Marxists and anarchists



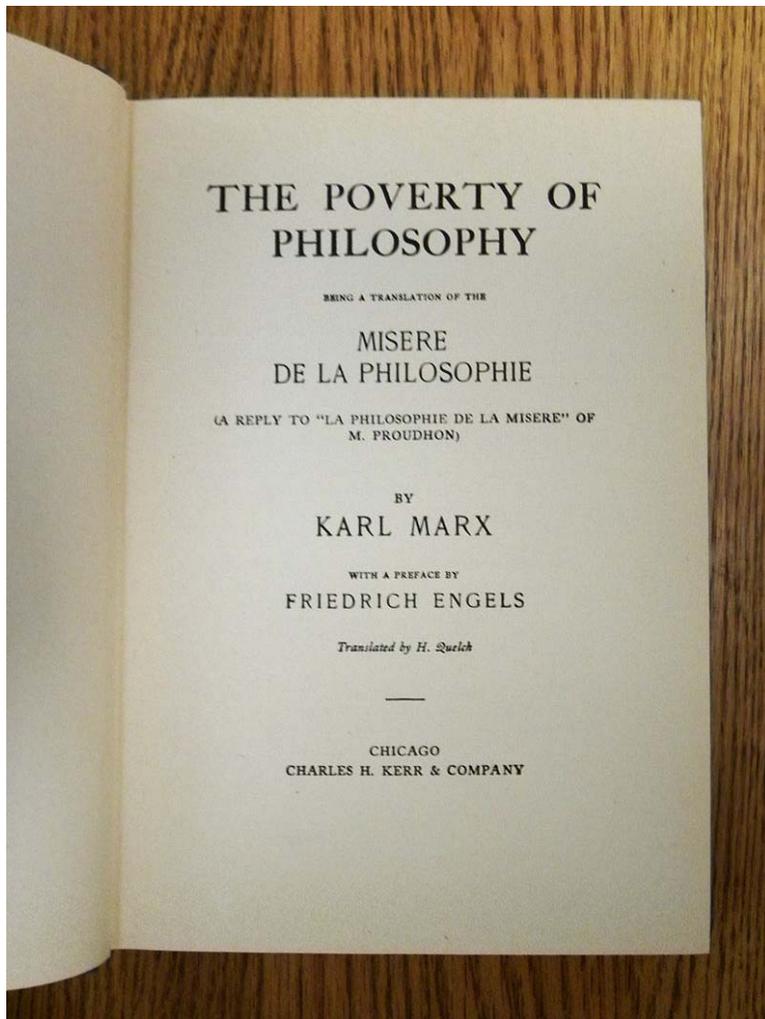
The Philosophy of Poverty

The ideas of Proudhon

- Focus on the relationship between the individual and the state → had belief in orderly society and world, but believed that the state represented illegitimate concentration of violence (made impossible a just society)
 - Later (1919), Max Weber would develop this to create a definition of the state still used by critical theorists
- Rather than political class action, Proudhon focused on economic action as the pathway for working class salvation → avoiding and delegitimizing politics was connected with the ultimate goal of the negation of the state and its supporting political apparatus
- Proudhon: future stateless society not preordained by laws of history (teleology/*telos*, compare with Marx and Hegel) → Had to be a conscious creation by the morally awakened people
- **Working class morality:** honesty, decency, self-respect, individual responsibility
- **Industrialist/capitalist morality:** incapable of developing morality --> act of labor ennobling but the act of exploitation (supported by state/political violence) was inherently corrupting

The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to *the Philosophy of Poverty* by M. Proudhon

Marx's response to Proudhon



- 1846: Marx read Proudhon's *The Philosophy of Poverty* → wrote strong, negative response in a letter to one of his other correspondent's PV Annenkov
- January of next year began the book-length formal reply → went to press in 1847
- Written in French with the pun in the title to more closely strike its target
- The book was taken on by the Communist League (the political group around Marx) as a central part of their program (separated the league from Proudhon and anarchist followers)
- Wasn't published in German until 1885 (after Marx's death in 1883) and not in English until 1900

Some philosophical ideas

Anarchism

- *What Is Property?* (1840), defines anarchy as: "the absence of a master, of a sovereign"
 - ▣ "As man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy"
- "Confessions of a Revolutionary" (1849): "Whoever lays his hand on me to govern me is a usurper and tyrant, and I declare him my enemy".

Some philosophical ideas

Anarchism

The General Idea of Revolution (1851):

“To be GOVERNED is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so. To be GOVERNED is to be at every operation, at every transaction noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. It is, under pretext of public utility, and in the name of the general interest, to be place[d] under contribution, drilled, fleeced, exploited, monopolized, extorted from, squeezed, hoaxed, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, vilified, harassed, hunted down, abused, clubbed, disarmed, bound, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and to crown all, mocked, ridiculed, derided, outraged, dishonored. That is government; that is its justice; that is its morality.”

Max Stirner (Johann Kaspar Schmidt) (1806-1856)



Max Stirner as portrayed by
Friedrich Engels

- German philosopher
- Influencer/forerunner of existentialism, nihilism, postmodernism, and individualist anarchism
- Major work: *The Ego and Its Own* (1845)
 - ▣ Sometimes also *The Unique and Its Property*
- Member and frequent attendee of the Young Hegelians meetings
 - ▣ Didn't talk much → mainly listened

Stirner's philosophical ideas

Egoism

- Individuals impossible to complete understand → any concept of self will fail to adequately describe the nature of human experience
- Rejection of any devotion to or pursuit of "a great idea, a good cause, a doctrine, a system, a lofty calling" → no political calling
- Live one's own life without regard "how well or ill humanity may fare thereby"
- Only limitation: rights of the individual on their power to seek/obtain what she desires
- Social institutions (such as the state, property as right, natural rights) are mere mental "spooks"
- Stirner wanted to "abolish not only the state but also society as an institution responsible for its members".



Caricature of Max Stirner taken from a sketch by Friedrich Engels of the meetings of *Die Freien* (Young Hegelians)

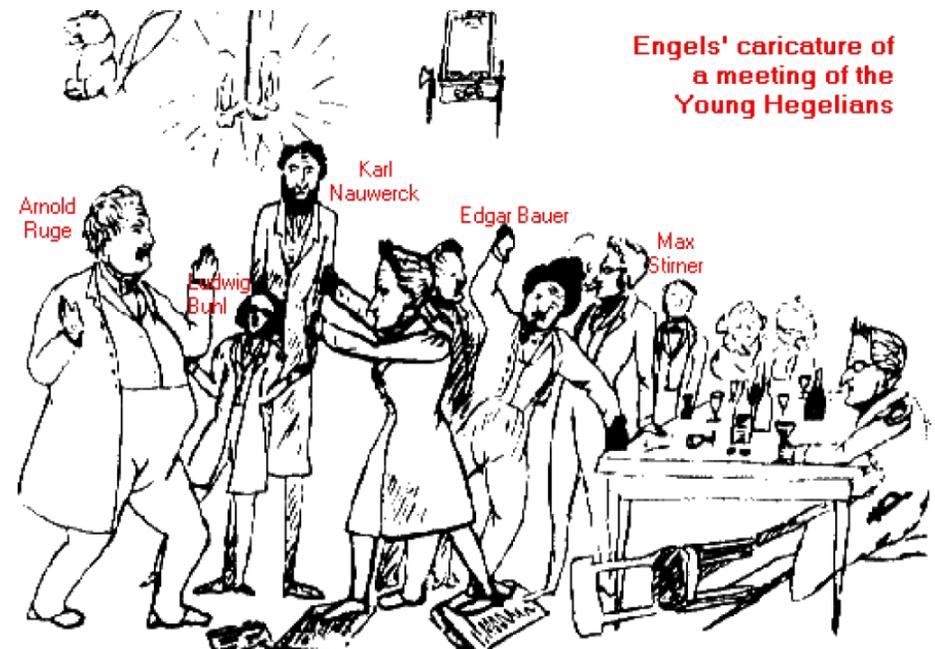
The Unwilling Egoist

- Self-interest is subjective → therefore it allows both selfishness and altruism
- Self-realization relies on desire to fulfill their egoism
 - **Unwilling egoist:** believe they are fulfilling a higher purpose or serving higher ideals (but only fulfilling own desires to be happy/secure) → being possessed by “empty ideas”
 - **Willing egoist:** a person able to freely choose actions → awareness of the fulfillment of their desires

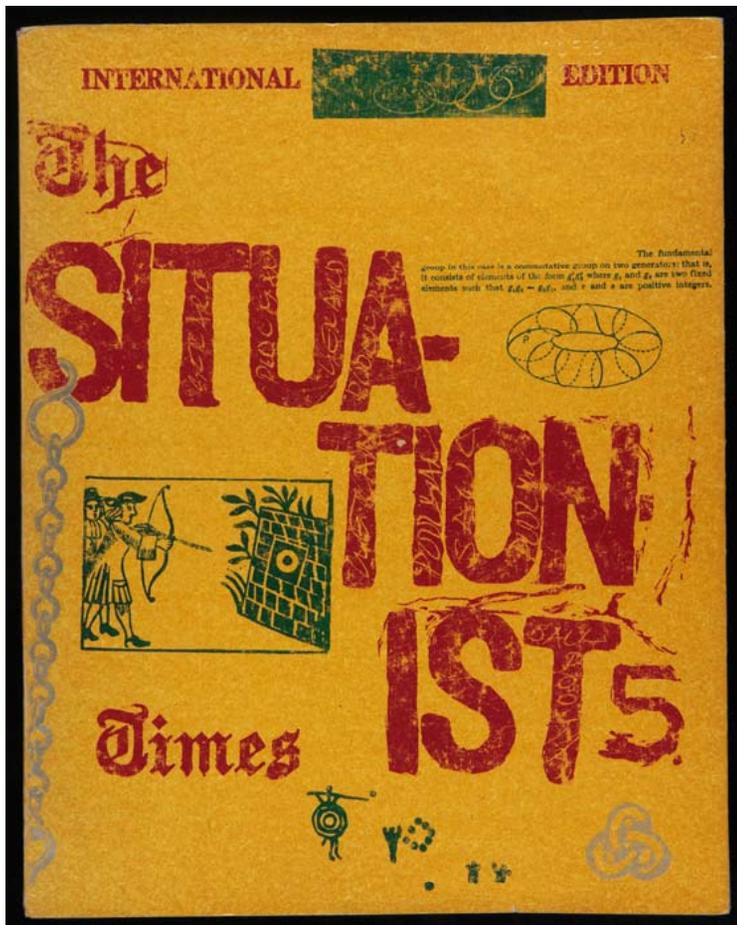
Sacred things exist only for the egoist who does not acknowledge himself, the involuntary egoist [...] in short, for the egoist who would like not to be an egoist, and abases himself (combats his egoism), but at the same time abases himself only for the sake of "being exalted", and therefore of gratifying his egoism. Because he would like to cease to be an egoist, he looks about in heaven and earth for higher beings to serve and sacrifice himself to; but, however much he shakes and disciplines himself, in the end he does all for his own sake [...] [on] this account I call him the involuntary egoist. [...] As you are each instant, you are your own creature in this very 'creature' you do not wish to lose yourself, the creator. You are yourself a higher being than you are, and surpass yourself. [...] [J]ust this, as an involuntary egoist, you fail to recognize; and therefore the 'higher essence' is to you – an alien essence. [...] Alienness is a criterion of the "sacred".

The influence of Hegel

- Scholar of Hegel, Lawrence Stepelevich: *The Ego and Its Own*, influenced by Hegel
 - Stirner's work should be understood as answering the question of the role of consciousness → Stirner demonstrates the consequences of the rediscovering of one's self-consciousness after self-determination as been realized
 - But has a very "un-Hegelian structure and tone"
- Douglas Moggach and Widukind De Ridder: though reader of Hegel, like his contemporaries, does not make him a Hegelian
- Stirner was in opposition with the Young Hegelians → actively ridiculed attempts to critique Hegel and the Enlightenment



Stirner in the 20th/21st centuries



- *The Ego and Its Own* attracted a lot of attention, but its notoriety had faded and it went out of print before Stirner's death.
- Became a foundational text for individualist anarchism
- Edmund Husserl (founder of school of phenomenology) once warned of the “seducing power” of *The Ego and Its Own*
- Few openly admit influence of Stirner
- Albert Camus writes a section of *The Rebel* based on Stirner (this section has been omitted from the majority of the English editions – including the Penguin)
- Also influential on Rudolf Steiner, Victor Serge, Carl Schmitt, and Jurgen Habermas
- *Soul of a Man Under Socialism*: has historians speculating that Oscar Wilde was familiar with Steiner
- The Situationist International, including Max Ernst and Raoul Vaneigem