

ON THE CHARACTER OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES

A black and white collage. At the top, the title 'ON THE CHARACTER OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES' is written in a bold, sans-serif font. Below the title is a large image of two hands shaking. The background of the entire image is a dense crowd of people, many wearing hats. In the lower foreground, there is a silhouette of a sphinx.

Excerpts from
The Unique
and its Property
by Max Stirner

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Who is this person that you call “all”?—It is “society”!—But then is it a bodily being?—We are its body!—You all? You all are not yourselves a body—you, mister, are certainly a bodily being; you too, madam, and you; but you all together are only bodies, not a body. Therefore, society would certainly have bodies at its service, but not any body of its own. Like the “nation” of the politicians, it will turn out to be nothing but a “spirit,” its body only a sham.

Our societies and states are without our making them, are combined without our combining, are predestined and exist, or have an independent existence of their own; are the imperishable established order against us egoists. Today’s global battle is, as they say, directed against the “established order.” Still people are in the habit of misunderstanding this, as if the present established order should only be exchanged for another, better established order. But war might rather be declared against the established order itself, i.e., the state (status), not a particular state, nor, for instance, only the current condition of the state; people aren’t aiming for another state (say, a “people’s state”), but at their association, their combination, this ever-fluid combination of all that exists.—A state exists even without my assistance: I am born and raised in it, placed under an obligation to it, and have to “pay homage” to it. It takes me up into its “favor,” and I live by its “grace.” So the independent existence of the state establishes my lack of independence; its “naturalness,” its organism, demands that my nature doesn’t grow freely, but is cut to fit it. So that it can develop naturally, it applies the shears of “civilization” to me; it gives me an education and culture suitable to it, not me, and teaches me, for example, to respect the law, to abstain from the violation of state property (i.e., private property), to revere a divine and earthly sovereignty, etc.; in short, it teaches me to—not be culpable, by which I mean to “sacrifice” my ownness to “sacredness” (everything possible is sacred; for example, property, the lives of others, etc.). This is the sort of civilization and culture the state is able to give me; it teaches me to be a “useful tool,” a “useful member of society.”

The principle of fortune or competition is certainly outdone by the principle of work. But at the same time the worker, in his awareness that the essential thing about him is “the worker,” keeps himself away from egoism and submits to the supremacy of a workers’ society, as the bourgeois citizen clung with devotion to the competition-state. The lovely dream of “social duty” is still being dreamed. People think again that society *gives* what we need, and we are therefore *obligated* to it, owe it everything. They still remain at the point of wanting to *serve* a “supreme giver of all good.” That society is no / at all, which could give, lend, or grant, but an instrument or means from which we might draw benefit; that we have no social obligations, but merely interests in pursuit of which society has to serve us; that we owe society no sacrifice, but if we sacrifice anything, sacrifice it to ourselves: the socialists don’t think about this, because they—as liberals—are trapped in the religious principle and zealously strive after—a sacred society, as the state was up to now.

Society, from which we have everything, is a new master, a new phantasm, a new “supreme being,” which “takes us into its service and duty”!

Political freedom means this: that the *polis*, the state, is free; religious freedom this: that religion is free, just as freedom of conscience indicates that conscience is free; thus, it does not mean that I am free from state, from religion, from conscience, or that I am *rid* of them. It does not mean *my* freedom, but the freedom of a power that rules and vanquishes me; it means that one of my *oppressors*, like state, religion, conscience, is free. State, religion, conscience, these oppressors, make me a slave, and *their* freedom is *my* slavery. That in this they necessarily follow the principle, “the end sanctifies the means,” goes without saying. If the welfare of the state is the end, then war is a sanctified means; if justice is the state’s end, murder is a sanctified means, and is called by its sacred name “execution”; the sacred state *makes sacred* everything that is useful to it.

Our weakness does not consist in this, that we are in conflict with others, but rather in this, that we are not fully so, i.e., that we are not entirely *divorced* from them, or that we are looking for “community,” a “bond,” that in community we have an ideal. One Faith, One God, One Ideal, One Hat for all! If all were brought under one hat, certainly no one would still have to remove his hat before another.

Liberalism appears to be the last attempt of the creation of the freedom of the people, a freedom of the community, of “society,” of the universal, of humanity, the dream of a humanity, a people, a community, a “society,” that has come of age.

A people cannot be free except at the expense of the individual; because the individual is not the main point of this freedom, but rather the people. The freer the people, the more bound the individual; the people of Athens, precisely at its freest time, created ostracism, banished atheists, poisoned the most honest thinker.

The breaking up of *society* is *intercourse* or *associating*. Of course, a society arises from associating, but only as a fixed idea arises from a thought, namely in this way: the energy of the thought, thinking itself, this ceaseless taking back of all solidified thoughts, vanishes from the thought. If an association has crystallized into a society, it has ceased to be a coalition, because coalition is a ceaseless associating with each other; it has become a condition of being associated, come to a standstill, degenerated into a fixity; it is—*dead* as associating, it is the corpse of the association or the coalition, it is—society, community.

Indeed, a society to which I adhere takes many a freedom away from me, but grants me other freedoms in return; there’s also nothing to say if I myself deprive myself of this or that freedom (for example, by any contract). However, I want to jealously hold on to my ownness. Every community has the inclination, stronger or weaker according to the fullness of its power, to become an *authority* to its members and to set *limits* for them: it demands, and must demand, a “limited subject’s understanding”; it demands that those who belong to it subject themselves to it, be its “subjects”; it exists only through *subjection*. In this, a certain tolerance doesn’t need to be excluded; on the contrary, the society will welcome improvements, corrections, and reprimands, insofar as these are calculated for its benefit; but the reprimands must be “well-intentioned” and are not allowed to be “rude and disrespectful”; in other words, one must leave the substance of society intact and hold it sacred. Society demands that those who belong to it don’t go *beyond it* and rise up, but rather remain “within the bounds of legality,” i.e., allow themselves only as much as society and its law allows them.

Individuals are only members of the family in the full sense when they make the survival of the family their task; only as conservatives do they keep away from doubting their basis, the family. One thing must be firm and sacred for every family member, namely the family itself, or, more eloquently, family piety. That the family must survive remains an unassailable truth for its member, so long as he remains free from egoism that is hostile to the family. In a word: If the family is sacred, then nobody who belongs to it can renounce it; otherwise, he becomes a “criminal” against the family; he should never pursue an interest hostile to the family, e.g., enter into a misalliance. One who does this has “dishonored the family,” “brought it to shame,” etc

Now, if the egoistic desire in an individual doesn’t have enough force, then he submits and enters into a marriage which suits family requirements, takes a profession which harmonizes with its position, and the like; in short, he “does the family honor.”

However, if the egoistic blood flows with enough fire through his veins, he prefers to become a

“criminal” against the family and evade its laws.

It makes a difference whether my freedom or my ownness gets limited by a society. If only the former is the case, it is a *coalition*, an agreement, an association; but if it threatens ownness with ruin, it is a *power for itself a power over me*, a thing inaccessible to me, which I can indeed admire, worship, honor, respect, but cannot conquer and consume, and I cannot do this because I *am resigned*. It exists through my *resignation*, my *self-denial*, my faint-heartedness, called— **humility**. My humility makes society’s courage, my submission gives it its power to rule. But with respect to *freedom*, state and associating are subject to no essential difference. The latter can arise or persist without freedom being limited in all sorts of ways just as little as the state tolerates unmeasured freedom. Limitation of freedom is inevitable everywhere, because one can’t get *rid* of everything; one can’t fly like a bird merely because he would like to fly this way, since he won’t get free of his own weight; one can’t live under water, like a fish, for any length of time he may like, because he can’t do without air and get free of this indispensable need; and so on. As religion, and most resolutely Christianity, torments human beings with the demand to realize the unnatural and the nonsensical, so it is to be regarded as the authentic consequence of that religious extravagance and exuberance that finally *freedom itself, absolute freedom*, was elevated to an ideal, and so the nonsense of the impossible had to glaringly come to light. —But the association will offer both a greater level of freedom, and, in particular, may be considered as “a new freedom,” because through it one escapes constraints typical of state and social life; but still it will contain enough unfreedom and compulsoriness. Because its purpose is not simply—freedom, which on the contrary it sacrifices to ownness, but only *ownness*. In this respect, the distinction between state and associating is great enough. The former is an enemy and murderer of *ownness*, the latter its son and assistant; the former is a spirit that wants to be worshiped in spirit and in truth, the latter my act, my product; the state is the lord of my mind, who demands faith and dictates articles of faith to me, the articles of faith of legality; it exerts moral influence, dominates my mind, drives away my *I* to set itself in its place as “my true *I*”—in short, the state is *sacred*, and as opposed to me, the individual human being, it is the true human being, the spirit, the ghost; but the association is my own creation, my creature, not sacred, not a spiritual power over my mind, any more than any association of whatever sort. As I don’t like being a slave to my maxims, but rather expose them to my continual criticism without *any guarantee*, and admit no surety of their persistence, so even less will I commit myself to the association for my future and pledge my soul to it, as they say is done with the devil, and is actually the case with the state and all spiritual authority; but I am and remain *more* to myself than state, church, God, and the like; consequently infinitely more than the association too.

The efforts of modern times aim to set up the ideal of the “free human being.” If one can find it, there’s a new—religion, because there’s a new ideal; there’s a new yearning, a new struggling, a new devotion, a new deity, a new contrition.

With the ideal of “absolute freedom,” someone’s up to the same tricks as with everything absolute, and according to Hess, for example, it’s supposed to “be realizable in the absolute human society.” Indeed, immediately afterward this realization is called a “calling”; just as he then defines freedom as “morality”: the kingdom of “justice” (i.e., equality) and “morality” (i.e., freedom) is supposed to begin.

Of course, absolute freedom of the press, like every absolute freedom, is absurd. The press can become free of a great many things, but always only from what I am also free from. If we free ourselves from the sacred, if we have become *unholy* and *lawless*, our words will also become so.

That a society, for example, state society, diminishes my *freedom* doesn't much appall me. I have to let my freedom be limited by all sorts of powers and by anyone who is stronger, indeed by every fellow-human being; and if I were the autocrat of all the R—, I would still not enjoy absolute freedom. But I will not let *ownness* be taken from me. However, society has its sights precisely on ownness, precisely this is supposed to be subjected to its power.

That society which communism wants to establish seems to be closest to the *coalition*. Because it is supposed to aim for the “well-being of all”—oh, yes, of all, cries Weitling countless times, of all! That actually looks as if no one had to miss out. But what then would this welfare be? Does everyone have one and the same well-being, are all equally well off with one and the same thing? If so, then it's about “true well-being.” With this, don't we come to the exact point where religion begins its tyranny? Christianity says, don't look on earthly baubles, but seek your true well-being, become—devout Christians; the Christian life is the true well-being. It is the true well-being of “all,” because it is the well-being of the human being as such (this phantasm). Now is the well-being of all still also supposed to be *your* and *my* well-being? But if you and I don't look upon that well-being as *our* well-being, will care then be taken for that in which *we* find well-being? On the contrary, society has decreed one welfare as the “true well-being,” and if this well-being is called, for example, enjoyment honestly worked for, but you would prefer enjoyable laziness, enjoyment without work, then society, which cares for the “well-being of all,” would wisely be on guard against caring for that by which you are well-off. In proclaiming the well-being of all, communism utterly obliterates the well-being of those who up to now lived on their pensions and probably found themselves better off in this than in Weitling's prospect of strict work hours. Therefore, Weitling asserts that the well-being of millions cannot exist with the well-being of thousands, and the latter will have to give up their special well-being “for the sake of the general well-being.” No, you don't call people to sacrifice their special well-being for the general, because you won't come through with this Christian demand; they will better understand the opposite exhortation to not let anyone snatch their *own* well-being from them, but to put it on a lasting foundation. They are then led of themselves to see that they provide best for their well-being when they *join together* with others for this purpose, i.e., “sacrifice a bit of their freedom”, but not to the well-being of others, but rather to their own. An appeal to the human being's self-sacrificing attitude and self-denying love should have finally lost its seductive glow when, after thousands of years of activity, it has left nothing behind but the— present-day misery. So why go on fruitlessly expecting self-sacrifice to bring us better times; why not rather hope for them from *usurpation*? Salvation no longer comes from the givers, the bestowers, the loving ones, but from the *takers*, the appropriators (usurpers), the owners. Communism and, consciously or unconsciously, egoism-cursing humanism still count on *love*.

If community is a need of the human being and he finds himself aided by it in his aims, then very quickly, because it has become his principle, it also prescribes its laws to him, the laws of—society. The principle of human beings raises itself to a sovereign power over them, becomes their highest essence, their God, and as such—lawgiver. Communism gives this principle the most rigorous consequence, and Christianity is the religion of society, because, as Feuerbach rightly says, although he doesn't mean it rightly, love is the essence of the human being, i.e., the essence of society or of societary (communistic) human beings. All religion is a cult of society, this principle by which the societary (cultivated) human being is dominated; and no god is exclusively the god of an *I*, but always a society's or community's god, whether it's of the society “family” (Lar, Penates) or of a “people” (“national god”) or of “all people” (“he is a father of all people”).

So a person has a chance of razing religion to the ground only when he makes *society* and all that flows from this principle obsolete. But this principle seeks to culminate in communism, since in it everything is to be *held in common*, for the establishment of—“equality.” If this “equality” is won,

“freedom” too is not lacking. But whose freedom? *Society’s!* Society is then all in all, and human beings are only “for each other.” It would be the glory of the love-state.

But I would rather have to rely on the selfishness of human beings than on their “acts of charity,” their mercy, their compassion, etc. The former calls for *mutuality* (as you to me, so I to you), does nothing “gratis,” and lets itself be won and—*purchased*. But with what shall I acquire charity? It’s a matter of luck whether I am dealing at the moment with a “loving” person. The loving one’s services can be gotten only by—*begging*, whether through my utterly lamentable appearance, my neediness, my misery, or my—*suffering*. What can I offer him for his assistance? Nothing! I have to accept it as—a *gift*. Love is *beyond payment*, or rather, love can most certainly be paid for, but only by loving back (“One good turn deserves another”). What wretchedness and beggarliness does it not take to accept gifts year after year without any favor in return, as such gifts are regularly collected, for example, from the poor day laborer? What can the receiver do for him and his donated pennies, in which his wealth consists? The day-laborer would truly have more enjoyment if the receiver with his laws, his institutions, etc., all of which the day laborer still has to pay for, did not exist at all. And yet, through it all, the poor wretch *loves* his master.

No, community, as the “goal” of history up to now, is impossible. Let us rather break with every hypocrisy of community and recognize that, if we are equal as human beings, we are simply not equal because we are not human beings. We are equal *only in thoughts*, only when “we” are thought, not as we actually and bodily are. I am I, and you are I, but I am not this thought-of *I*, but rather this *I* in which we are all equal is only *my thought*. I am human, and you are human, but “human” is only a thought, a generality; neither you nor I are speakable, we are *unutterable*, because only *thoughts* are speakable and exist in speaking.

Let’s therefore not strive for community, but for *one-sidedness*. Let’s not seek the broadest commune, “human society,” but rather let’s seek in others only means and organs that we use as our property! As we don’t see *our equals* in trees, in animals, so the assumption that others are our equals arises from a hypocrisy. No one is *my equal*, but I consider him, equally with all other beings, as my property. In opposition to this, one tells me that I should be a human being among “fellow human beings,” I should “respect” the fellow human being in them. No one is for me a person to be respected, not even the fellow human being, but rather solely an *object*, like other beings, for which I have or don’t have concern, an interesting or uninteresting object, a usable or unusable creature.

And if I can use him, I surely come to an understanding and reach an agreement with him, to strengthen *my power* through the agreement and to accomplish more through combined force than individual force could achieve. In this mutuality I see nothing at all beyond a multiplication of my strength, and I’ll keep at it only so long as it is *my* multiplied strength. But so it is an—association.

You bring all of your power, your ability, into the association, and *assert yourself, while* in society you are *employed* with your labor power; in the former you live egoistically, in the latter humanly, i.e., religiously, as a “member of this Lord’s body”; to the society, you owe what you have, and are obligated to it, are—possessed by “social obligations”; you use the association, and give it up undutifully and unfaithfully when you don’t see any more use for it. If the society is more than you, then to you it is above you; the association is only your tool or the sword with which you intensify and increase your natural force; the association is there for you and through you, while society, on the contrary, lays claim to you for itself and is still there without you; in short, society is *sacred*, the association your *own*; society consumes *you*, *you* consume the association.

Whoever sees something other than human beings in us, in him we will likewise not see a human being, but an inhuman monster, and will meet him as an inhuman monster; on the other hand,

whoever recognizes us as human beings and protects us against the danger of being treated inhumanly, we will honor as our true protector and patron.

So let's stick together and protect the human being in each other; then we find the necessary protection in our *sticking together*, and in ourselves, *the ones who stick together*, a community of those who know their human dignity and stick together as "human beings." Our sticking together is the *state*; we who stick together are the *nation*.

The word "*Gesellschaft*" (society) has its origins in the word "*Sal*" (hall, room). If many people are shut up in a room, the room causes them to be in society. They are in society and at most form a salon society, to speak in traditional salon clichés. When it comes to actual intercourse, this is to be regarded as independent of society; it may arise or be absent without altering the nature of what is called society. Those who are in the room are in society even as mute persons, or when they put each other off with mere words of courtesy. Intercourse is mutuality, it is the action, the *commercium* of individuals; society is only the commonality of the room, and even the statues in a museum room are in society, they are grouped. People customarily say: "they hold the room in common," but it's rather the case that the room holds us or has us in it. That's as far as the natural meaning of the word society goes. It comes out from this that society is not generated by me and you, but by a third factor which makes us both into associates, and that it is precisely this third factor that is the creative thing, the thing that establishes society.

It's very like a prison society or prison collective (those who enjoy the same prison). Here we get into a third factor even richer than the merely local one, the room, was. Prison no longer just means a space, but a space with express reference to its residents: it is indeed only a prison because it is intended for prisoners, without whom it would be a mere building. What gives a common stamp to the collectivity in it? Obviously, the prison, since they are prisoners only by means of the prison. So what determines the *way of life* of prison society? The prison! What determines their intercourse? Perhaps also the prison? Of course, they can only carry on intercourse as prisoners, i.e., only as far as prison laws allow it; but that *they themselves* hold intercourse, I with you, this the prison cannot bring about; on the contrary, it must take care to prevent such egoistic, purely personal intercourse (and only as such is it actual intercourse between you and me). That we collectively perform a task, operate a machine, set something in motion, a prison will provide well for this; but that I forget that I am a prisoner, and enter into intercourse with you who equally disregard it, that puts the prison at risk, and not only cannot be brought about by it, but furthermore must not be permitted. For this reason, the saintly and morally-minded French chamber decides to introduce solitary confinement, and other saints will do the same in order to cut off "demoralizing intercourse." Imprisonment is the established and—sacred condition against which no attempt to injure is allowed. The slightest challenge of this sort is punishable, like any rebellion against a sacred thing by which the human being is supposed to be inhibited and imprisoned.

Like the room, the prison forms a society, a collective, a community (e.g., a community of labor), but no *intercourse*, no mutuality, no *association*. On the contrary, every association in prison carries within itself the dangerous seed of a "plot," which could, under favorable circumstances, sprout and bear fruit.

But one doesn't usually enter the prison voluntarily, and seldom voluntarily remains in it, but rather nurtures the egoistic desire for liberty. Thus, it's more easily understood here that personal intercourse acts with hostility against prison society and tends towards the dissolution of this society, this common imprisonment.

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Protestantism has actually made the human being into a "secret police state." The spy and lookout, "conscience," monitors every movement of the mind, and every thought and action is a "matter of conscience," i.e., a police matter. The Protestant consists in this fragmentation of the human being into "natural desire" and "conscience" (inner populace and inner police). Biblical reason (in the place of the Catholic "Church reason") is considered sacred, and this feeling and consciousness that the biblical word is sacred is called—conscience. With this, then, sacredness gets "shoved into one's conscience." If one doesn't free himself from conscience, the consciousness of the sacred, he can indeed act unconscientiously, but never without conscience.

Suggested further reading: Max Stirners Political Spetrography by Fabián Ludueña, An Invitation to Desertion by Bellamy Fitzpatrick, Black Seed: A Journal of Indigenous Anarchy (blackseed.anarchyplanet.org), How the Stirner Eats Gods by Alejandro De Acosta

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