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Individualism

Georges Palante

June 15, 1911

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As is the case elsewhere, the tendency to underestimate the individual has made itself felt in the intellectual field. Solitary thought – invention – has been depreciated to the profit of collective thought – imitation – preached under the eternal word of solidarity. The horror of the previously untried, of intellectual and esthetic originality, is a characteristic trait of Latin races. We love regimented thought, conformist and decent meditations. A German writer, Laura Marholm, accurately analyzed this contemporary tendency: “Intellectual cowardice is a universal trait. No one dares make a decisive statement concerning his milieu. No one any longer allows himself an original thought. Original thought only dares present itself when it is supported by a group: it has to have gathered together several adherents in order to dare show itself. You must be one of many before daring to speak. This is an indication of universal democratization, a democratization that is still at its beginnings, and is characterized by a reaction against international capital, which until now has had at its disposal all the means of military and legislative defense. No one dares to rely on himself alone. An idea that contravenes received ideas almost never manages to make itself known.

The propagation of an antipathetic idea is circumscribed and hindered by a thousand anonymous censors, among which the official censorship of the state has only a minor role.”

The result of this tendency is that we no longer exist and think for ourselves. We think according to hearsay and slogans.

It is especially from the moral point of view that the crushing of personal egoism by group egoism is intolerable. We too well know the pettiness of the group spirit, the gregarious coalitions engaged, more than anything, in fighting against superior individualities, the solidarity in irresponsibility, all these forms of diminished humanity.

It is the same with perfect solidarity as it is with absolute justice, absolute altruism, absolute monism. These are abstract principles untranslatable in real terms. Each man has his special conception of solidarity, justice, his way to interpret the *fas* and the *nefas* in keeping with his coterie, class, etc. interests.

“As soon as an idea is set loose,” said Remy de Gourmont, “if we thus set it nakedly in circulation in its trip across the world it joins all kinds of parasitic vegetation. Sometimes the original organism disappears, entirely devoured by the egoistic colonies that develop there. An amusing example of these deviations in thought was given by the corporation of house painters at the ceremony called ‘The Triumph of the Republic.’ The workers carried around a banner where their demands for justice were summed up in this cry: ‘Down with ripolin!’ You must know that ripolin is a prepared paint that anyone can spread across woodwork. We can thus understand the sincerity of this wish and its ingenuity. Ripolin here represents injustice and oppression; it’s the enemy, the devil. We all have our own ripolin and we color according to our needs the abstract ideas that, without this, would be of no personal use to us.”

The ideal is soiled in contact with reality:

Pearl before falling, and mire after.