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Esprit de Corps

Georges Palante

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“Esprit de corps” is one of the most interesting of phenomena for any observer of contemporary life. In the midst of the disintegration of so many moral and social influences it has maintained a certain hold on people’s consciousness and manifests itself in important ways. We thought it useful to study esprit de corps in some of its principal manifestations. This small psychological inquiry will then lead us to a few considerations on the moral value of esprit de corps.

For greater precision it would be appropriate to distinguish two meanings of this expression, “esprit de corps”: a broad and a narrow sense. In a narrow sense esprit de corps is a spirit of solidarity animating all members of a same professional group. In a broader sense the expression esprit de corps designates the spirit of solidarity in general, not only in the professional group, but in all those social circles, whatever they might be (class, caste, sect, etc.), in which the individual feels himself to be more or less subordinated to the interests of the collectivity. It is in this sense that there exists a class spirit; for example, the bourgeois spirit which though difficult to precisely define nevertheless exists and shows itself to be no less combative whenever it’s a matter of defeating anti-bourgeois doctrines and ten-

dencies. It is also in this sense that Schopenhauer was able to speak of women's esprit de corps or the esprit de corps of married people, about which he made such interesting remarks in his "Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life." In this broad sense we could also speak of the esprit de corps among the inhabitants of a city, who in certain cases find themselves more or less the associates in a same commercial enterprise. Ibsen showed this esprit de corps in a masterly way in the small city in which he placed the scene in his "An Enemy of the People" where we see all the inhabitants agreeing to remain silent about a secret (the contamination of the waters) which if divulged would ruin the city's bathing establishments. The broad sense of the expression esprit de corps is manifestly nothing but the extension of the narrow or purely professional sense.

Professional solidarity is one of the most powerful social ties. But its action is most energetic in the so-called liberal professions (clergy, army, magistracy, the bar, various administrations). Workers belonging to the same trade, for example mechanics, carpenters, or foundry workers, do not manifest an esprit de corps as developed as that of the officer, the priest, or the functionaries in the various government offices. This is not to say that these workers are lacking in all corporate solidarity, since we know that in some countries the workers of a same craft are capable of uniting in trade unions and joining together to vigorously defend their interests against the bosses. But among workers this solidarity remains purely economic. It limits itself to defending the material interests of the trade union. Once this goal is achieved its action ceases: it isn't transformed into a coherent and systematic moral or social discipline that dominates and invades individual consciousnesses. Or if it acts in this sense it is solely in order to develop in the worker his consciousness of his rights as a "proletarian" in opposition to the antagonistic class, the bourgeois or capitalist class. Properly speaking, this is not esprit de corps in the narrow sense of that expression; instead it is class spirit.

But in the liberal professions things are different. Here esprit de corps arrogates to itself a moral sway over individual consciousness. Here the corporation imposes on and inculcates in its members, in a more or less conscious fashion, an intellectual and moral conformism and marks them with an indelible stamp. This stamp is well defined and varies from one group to another. The ways of thinking, feeling, and acting proper to a priest, an officer, an administrator and a functionary are all different. Here each body has its self-conscious interests, its defined and precise slogans that are imposed on the members of these groups. This energy particular to esprit de corps in the liberal professions can perhaps be explained in part by the fact that the priest, the magistrate, the soldier, and the functionary are generally subject to a powerful hierarchical organization whose effect is to singularly strengthen esprit de corps. It is clear that the more organized and hierarchical a social group the more narrow and energetic is the moral and social discipline it imposes on its members.

What are the principal characteristics of esprit de corps?

A 'corps' is a defined social group with its own interests, its own will to life and which seeks to defend itself against all exterior or interior causes of its destruction or diminution.

If we were to ask ourselves what are the goods for which a corps fights we would see that they are moral advantages: the good name of the corps, influence, consideration, credit. These moral advantages are doubtless nothing but the means for ensuring the material prosperity of the corps and its members. But the corps treats them as ends in themselves and in order to conquer and defend them deploys an energy, a fierceness, a combativeness that individual passions can only give a faint idea of.

A corps pursues these advantages by striving to suggest to those who are not part of this corps a high idea of its social utility and superiority. If need be it doesn't fear to exaggerate this value and importance, and since it isn't unaware of the power

of the imagination over man's credulity it willingly envelops itself in the decorum most likely to increase its respectability in the spirit of the crowd. Max Nordau, in his book "The Conventional Lies of our Civilization," studied the lies that the various organized social groups knowingly and deliberately maintain and that they consider among their conditions for existence (religious lies, aristocratic, political, economic lies, etc.). Mr. Nordau could have added to these corporate lies, which are often nothing but a combination and a synthesis of others. It is in this great general law of social insincerity that one must enter the special tactic by which a corps hides its defects, its weaknesses or its faults and strives to remain, in the eyes of the vulgar, in an attitude of uncontested superiority, of recognized infallibility and impeccability.

In order to maintain this attitude the corps demands that all its members "conduct themselves properly." It wants its members to be irreproachable externally and to decently play their role in the social theatre.

Competition is the great law that dominates the evolution of societies; it also dominates the life of constituted corps. Each corps has its caste pride and its special point of honor vis-à-vis the others. It wants to maintain its respectability intact and not fall from its rank in the greater organism that the various corps form in uniting. We can observe a muted rivalry among the various constituted corps, which is translated into public life and even into private relations. M. Anatole France depicts this rivalry humorously in the short story entitled "Un Substitut," which he attributes to M. Bergeret in "L'Orme du Mail."

This rivalry forces the corps to jealously watch over its caste honor and to exercise strict control over the conduct of its members. Woe on he who, through word or act, appears to compromise the honor of the corps. He should expect neither pity nor justice from his peers. He is condemned without appeal.

When it's possible, the scapegoat is sacrificed in an official execution. In the contrary case he is silently eliminated by

ble.” It results from this law of progressive differentiation that the freedom of the individual – and consequently his value and moral capacity – are in direct ratio with the number and extent of the social circles in which he participates. The moral ideal is not to subordinate the individual to the moral conformism of a group, but to remove him from the herd spirit, to permit him to deploy himself in a multi-faceted activity. The individual, while he is in a certain sense a tissue of general properties, can be regarded as the point of interference of a more or less considerable number of social circles whose moral influences reverberate within him. The individual is a harmonious and living monad whose vital and harmonious law is to maintain himself in a state of equilibrium in the midst of a system of interfering social forces. It is in this free and progressive flourishing of individuality that the true moral ideal resides. There is no other. For, whatever we say or do, the individual remains the living source of energy and the measure of the ideal.

We have arrived at the conclusion that corporative morality, the very form of the herd spirit, is a regressive form of morality. Many complain, following in the footsteps of M. Barrès, that we are rootless. MM. Durkheim and Durkheim invite us to take root in the soil of the professional corporation. We ask if this isn't too narrow a terrain for plants that want free air, light, and the broad horizons of a human morality to take root.

more or less hypocritical proceedings that denote a Machiavelianism in the corps that is more conscious than is commonly believed. In this the corps obeys the vital instinct of all societies. M. Maurice Barrès said: “In the same way that a barnyard falls upon a sick chicken to kill or expel it, each group tends to reject its weakest members.” The weak, those incapable of pushing themselves ahead in the world, the evil extras of the social comedy constitute for the corps a dead weight that slows it down and which it seeks to rid itself of: and so the corps vilifies and humiliates them. It strives to create around them what Guyau calls an atmosphere of intolerability.

The corps pursues this policy of elimination against its weak members with a disdain of the individual and a lack of scruples that often, it must be said, justifies Daudet's line that “constituted corps are cowards.”

In order to better ensure its policy of domination esprit de corps tends as much as possible to expand its sphere of influence. Essentially, it is an invader. It doesn't limit itself to controlling the professional existence of its members, but it often interferes in the domain of their private life. A contemporary novelist, M. Verniolle, has wittily described this characteristic of the esprit de corps in a very suggestive story called “Par la Voie Hierarchique.” In this story the author shows us a high school teacher (the true type of a personality invaded by the corps) who appeals to the administrative hierarchy and corporate influences to resolve his domestic difficulties. And in fact we see the esprit de corps, in the form of the headmaster and his colleagues, intervene in a domestic situation with a clumsiness only equalled by its incompetence. M. Verniolle has also cleverly noted in another story titled “Pasteurs d'Ames” this other trait of the esprit de corps: the hostility against the members of the corps who in one way or another seem not to fit in with the corporation. We should recall the hostility of the young and dashing Professor Brissart – the true type of what Thackeray called the university snob – against an old and not

very decorative colleague who, because of his careless way of dressing, stands out from a corps of which the young snob considers himself the most beautiful ornament.

In a general way, the corporation tends to take the life of the individual under its control. Let us recall the narrow moral discipline to which the corporations of the Middle Ages submitted the private lives of their members.

This disposition brings to the entire corps a narrow and petty curiosity applied to all that individuals do. A corporation resembles in this a gossipy small town. Look at our administration and its functionaries. In this regard they are like so many small towns spread across space and disseminated across the entire extent of the French territory. If one of its even slightly well-known members commits some clumsy act or if something of interest occurs then immediately, from Nancy to Bayonne and from Dunkirk to Nice, news is spread around the entire corps, in the exact same way that the gossip of the day goes from salon to salon among the good women of a small town.

These remarks on the actions of esprit de corps permit us to see in it a particularly energetic manifestation of what Schopenhauer calls the will to life. Like all organized societies a corps is the human will to life condensed and taken to a degree of intensity that individual egoism can never reach. Let us add that this collective will to life is very different from that which acts on a crowd, which is an essentially unstable and transitory group. The corps has all those things that are lacking in a crowd: its hierarchy, its point of honor, its defined prejudices, its accepted and imposed morality. Thus the corps, in its judgments of things and men, has a stubbornness which the crowd, unstable and varying, is not susceptible to to the same degree. Look at the crowd: led astray, momentarily criminal, it can change its mind a minute later and change its decision. A corps considers itself and wants to be seen as infallible. Another difference between a crowd and a corps: in general a crowd is more impartial than a corps in its apprecia-

discipline. It holds him by what we can call, borrowing an expression from the socialist vocabulary: "the belly question."

Another question that is posed is that of knowing whether or not affiliation with a corporate group would be a real remedy to "anomy" and if it would bring an end to social discontent. "Yes, perhaps," we could say, if the kind of distributive justice which M. Durkheim speaks or were exactly applied. But this is a utopian desideratum, at least in those corporations where the labor furnished cannot be precisely measured, as is the case with manual labor. Stuart Mill said that from the top to the bottom of the social ladders remuneration is in inverse ratio to the labor furnished. There is doubtless some exaggeration in this way of seeing things, but it is confirmed in those professional groups where the nature of the services rendered prevents material measurement and permits esprit de corps to deploy its oppressive influence on individual merit.

This is not all. To seek the individual's moral criterion in the corporation would mean going against the march of evolution, which increasingly multiplies social circles around the individual. This consequently permits him to simultaneously take part in a greater number of diverse and independent societies that offer to his sensibility, his intelligence, and his activity an ever richer and more various nourishment. "History multiplies the number of social religious, intellectual, and commercial circles to which individuals belong and raises their personality only through the increasing implication of these circles. Consequently, their (the individual's) obligation is no longer relatively simple, clear, and unilateral, as was the case when the individual was one with society. The increasing differentiation of social elements, the corresponding differentiation of psychological elements in the consciousness, all the laws of the parallel development of societies and individuals, seem to augment rather than to diminish the number and importance of moral conflicts. At the same time that history increases the number of the objects of morality, it renders the subjects more apprecia-

For his part M. Durkehim sees in a corps a useful intermediary between the individual and the state. The state, he says, is a social entity, too abstract and too distant from the individual. The individual will attach himself more easily to an ideal nearer at hand and more practical. According to him this is the ideal that the professional group presents. M. Durkheim sees in corporations the great remedy to what he calls social anomie: "The principal role of corporations," he says, "in the future as in the past, will be to regulate social functions and especially economic functions, and consequently to extract them from the state of disorganization in which they are currently found. Whenever envy will be excited to such an extent that it knows no limits it will be up to the corporation to fix the portion which should equitably devolve to each of the cooperators. Superior to its members, it will have all the authority needed to demand from them those sacrifices and concessions that are indispensable and to impose a rule on them. We don't see in what other milieu this law of distributive justice, so urgent, can be elaborated, nor by what organ it could be applied."

MM. Benoist and Walras, for their part, develop the advantages of a political organization by corporations. We can thus see that the system is complete: corporate politics is connected to a professional morality.

We will not discuss here the question of corporative politics. We will content ourselves with presenting a few observations on corporative morality as they result from our analysis of *esprit de corps*.

According to us the individual cannot ask from the corporate group his law and his moral criteria. In our eyes the value of the individual's moral activity is in direct relationship with the freedom of which he disposes. The corporate group dominates the individual through interests too immediate and too material for this liberty not to be hindered. It can, in fact, suppress the means of existence for an individual refractory to its moral

tion of the merit of individuals. "In a corps of functionaries," says Simmel, "jealously often takes from talent the influence it should have, while a crowd, renouncing all personal judgment, easily follows a leader of genius."

From the fact that a corps is essentially a collective will to life we can judge the qualities a corps demands of its members: it is those that are useful to the corps, and these alone. A corps doesn't ask its members for eminent individual qualities. It could care less about those rare and precious qualities that are subtlety of intelligence, strength and suppleness of the imagination, delicacy and tenderness of the soul. As we have said, what it demands of its members is a certain conduct, a certain perseverance in their docility towards the moral code of the corps. It is this perseverance in docility which – through I don't know what misunderstanding – is sometimes decorated with the title of character. By this latter word a corps does not at all mean initiative in decision making or daring in execution, nor any of the qualities of spontaneity and energy that make up a strong personality, but solely and exclusively a certain constancy in obedience to the rule. A corps has no particular esteem for what is called merit or talent; rather it is suspicious of them. *Esprit de corps* is a friend of that mediocrity favorable to perfect conformism. We can say about all constituted bodies what Renan says of the Seminary of Issy: "The first rule of the company is to abdicate all that can be called talent and originality in order to bend before the discipline of a mediocre community." Nowhere better than in a corps does the celebrated antithesis between talent and character appear which Heinrich Heine mocked with such exquisite irony in the foreword to "Atta Troll." We recall, and not without a smile, that good Swabian school of poetry – which possessed the *esprit de corps* to a high degree – which asked of its members not that they have talent, but that they be characters. It is the same in our constituted corps. A corps wants its members to be characters, that is, perfectly disciplined beings, wan and mediocre

actors who play their social role in this social theatre which Schopenhauer speaks of, where the police severely prohibit the actors to improvise.

And so in the corps the great lever for “arriving” is not merit, but mediocrity backed by family ties and camaraderie. But those individuals in those bodies that dispense advancement and sought after places don’t always practice nepotism for interested reasons: they are acting in good faith. They are sincerely persuaded, imbued as they are with esprit de corps, that nepotism and camaraderie are ties both respectable and useful to the cohesion of the corps. In rewarding merit alone they believe they are sacrificing to a dangerous individualism.

This disdain on the part of esprit de corps for personal qualities (intellectual or moral of the individual) are admirably explained in the final pages of a novel by M. Ferdinand Fabre, “L’Abbe Tigrane,” in which Cardinal Maffei explains to Abbe Ternisien the tactics of the Roman congregation.

It seems to us that these considerations sufficiently confirm the definition we gave above of esprit de corps. According to us esprit de corps is a collective egoism, uniquely concerned with collective ends and disdainful of the individual and individual qualities. Thus defined, esprit de corps presents an excellent illustration of what tends to be, according to the doctrine of Schopenhauer, pure will to life, separated from the intellect.

The preceding remarks also permit us to present a few considerations on the ethical value of the esprit de corps.

Certain contemporary sociologists and moralists have favorably judged the moral influence of esprit de corps. Some have even thought of investing it with a political mission by substituting for universal suffrage as it is practiced in our country a system of vote by corporations, each individual being obliged to vote for a representative chosen from among his peers or hierarchical chiefs from his corporation. We cite among the moralists who have recently insisted upon the value of esprit de corps MM. Dorner and Durkheim, who took the moral point

of view, and Messieurs Benoist and Walras, who have taken the political point of view.

M. Dorner sees in corporations a remedy for moral and social discontent. He finds in the subordination of the individual to the corporate group the pacifying of all internal and external troubles. “Each person must understand,” says M. Dorner, “that he can only occupy a determined place in the whole and he can’t surpass the limits imposed by his salary and his own faculties. The individual more easily acquires this conviction if he belongs to a corporation that determines in advance the general conditions of his economic and social life. The corporation holds before his eyes that alone which is possible, and keeps from his imagination the castles in the air (*Luftschlossern*) that make him discontented with the present. On the other hand, thanks to his application the individual learns the measure of his possible progress, and he participates in the collective intelligence of his associates (*Berufsgenossen*). Consequently, there results from all this a general tendency that aspires to establishing on the basis of what we already possess those improvements that are profitable to the individual as well as the whole, while allowing for progress within the limits of professional activity.”

It is of the highest moral interest that the individual be able to attach himself to a professional group, for this tie permits him to properly judge his personal faculties; and by its intermediary he can cultivate his intelligence, obtain a wider viewpoint on things, and can be encouraged by it to the great moral universal organism. Corporations are nothing but organs of this organism, and so they must for once and for all have their respective rights specified so that each can independently accomplish its tasks in its respective domains. Corporations must then be inspired by the interests of the organism of which they are the organ, they must forgo their rivalries in the pursuit of privileges and advantages in keeping with the consciousness their of their collaboration in a common task.”