

On Palante

Michel Onfray

1990

A philosopher is dead when he is no longer read. Some, then, know the strange fortune of death while still alive. Others suffer through periods of purgatory more or less long, during which their books sleep on shelves, covered in dust and desolation. In order to awaken them from this slumber an inspired hand is needed that will bring the ideas back to life, make the words dance and once again give intuitions their shine of yesteryear. But forgotten ideas don't always deserve this: if some would gain by dying the day of their birth since they are old from the time of their conception, others are of a marvelous actuality; they are what Nietzsche calls the untimely — the always current because never fashionable. Palante has known the solitude of libraries and booksellers. He has caused happiness in those curious for singular, original, lost texts. It has been possible to find here or there the old editions with the green cover of the publisher Felix Alcan and then discover a text that breaks with the current university philosophy. Far from neo-Kantianism, that antiquity forever re-actualised, and the futilities of a philosophy even more obsolete than that of the preceding century, Palante manifests the permanence of a claim, a sensibility as he termed it, which makes the individual the center of his concerns.

That his books were written in the first two decades of this century is of almost no importance. Neither history nor the real can modify the content of the Palantian word, for it is of a perpetual actuality, stating, in the first place, that there exists a radical antimony between the individual and society, and then choosing the camp of the monad against the herd — against the multicolored cow, Nietzsche would have said. And finally, it knows that the combat is of unequal proportions, for the social always has the means of inflecting, if not defeating, individualist flights. No matter. Palante knows that the combat is hopeless, but heroism means fighting for the causes we know to be just even if we know the results in advance. Palante's individualism is invigorating: it has nothing to do with today's egoism, which revels in a vulgar, low rent hedonism : consumerism, the hideous word we now use. While the egoist sees nothing but himself, the individualist sees nothing but individuals like himself, isolated, lost, bearers of an obvious vacuity regarding the world. Palante calls for the rebellion of the individual against herd tyrannies and institutions — these machines destined for the production of the identical, of the one-dimensional man who doesn't much care for guerrilla fighters. We can understand why the university wants nothing to do with Palante.

Palante for his part wouldn't have wanted to be feted by the university, and the rediscovery of his work is fortunately occurring on a different path. The republishing of his books is not being

carried out for mercantile ends. It's not being accompanied by the austerity of eulogists who love to fall upon an opus like anatomists on a corpse. Palante has been dusted off by people who love him because they find in his writings an eternal pertinence, and because they know that it is better to have teacher of life rather than one more commentator, however brilliant he might be. In the cohort of philosophers we can distinguish those who experience their thought and reflect upon their experiences from others who just bend over paper. Palante took care to put his existence in alignment with his philosophy, and from this angle the result is less important than the determination of the project's.

The colloquium was not an end, but a desire for genealogy, a birth date, a beginning. It displeases the prigs of the university — who at times loudly and clearly brandish their diplomas as guarantees of a pertinent exegesis — to say that it is absolutely sterile to ask whether Palante was a philosopher or not, if he thinks or not, if he read correctly this or that philosopher of the classical repertory or not. Nor is it any more important to know if he read the complete works of some Sorbonnard scholar or the pamphlet of a trench worker of the concept. And in fact some worthy representatives of the institution thought it correct to put Palante on trial, suspected of dilettantism. Schopenhauer said all that need be said on the subject of professors. Those who have again allowed Palante to speak are singular beings who appreciate the freedom of his word and spirit, his independent speech. Not caring to measure the works of the philosopher by the measure of official or institutional criteria, conscious despite it all of the imperfections that can be found here or there in the complete works, the lovers of Palante have preferred to linger over the positive rather than privileging that which is subject to criticism. In this spirit, there cannot be a caste, a group constituted around the works of Palante, but simply — and to quote an author he admired — an association of egoists such as that which Stirner envisioned, a contractual, passing alliance, revocable at any moment, between individuals who share, the time of a colloquium, the same aspiration to rub their ideas against those of a singular author. And so there won't be a Society of the Friends of Georges Palante! Let us leave this to the lovers of societies and herds à la Panurge who gather together in order to compensate for a singular lack of strength...

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