

Preface to “Georges Palante: The Individualist Sensibility”

Michel Onfray

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Almost all of Palante’s works were translated into Italian before knowing the good fortune of being reissued. The publishing house, located in Milan, had undertaken the translations on the word of certain critics who had said Palante was an anarchist. To be convinced of the contrary it would have been enough to carefully read the article entitled “Anarchism and Individualism,” in which Palante speaks of all that separates him from anarchist optimism and revolutionary teleology. It must nevertheless be said that though not an anarchist in the Bakunin sense, Palante is nevertheless a libertarian, something he never denied. The critic Camille Pitollet, author of the only serious biography of Palante, though it’s only a few pages long, began an epistolary relationship with the philosopher from Saint-Brieuc in order to ask him to clarify his position on the question of anarchism. Here is Palante’s response: “When they say that I am not only a revolutionary, but that I am the revolution personified I have to say that the terms ‘revolutionary’ and ‘revolution’ are inadequate. It’s ‘rebel’ and ‘revolt’ that should have been written. Revolt is individual or individualist. Revolution is a collective thing, implying a collective ideal, to which I don’t rally. In the same way, if when they say that I believe in ‘anarchist illuminism’ they mean that I will rally to the conventional anarchist ideal then that’s inexact. Finally, and above all, I am not an anarchist. Anarchism implies a social affinityism that is far from my way of thinking. I am an individualist, i.e., a social pessimist, a rebel, partisan of the maximum (moral) isolation of the individual, passionate friend of an attitude of distrust and contempt towards all that is social — institutions, morals, ideas, etc. That is, I admit no collective credo, like anarchism.” Duly noted. The anarchist, insofar as he believes in communism,

in the effectiveness of the revolution and egalitarianism, sacrifices to social optimism, while Palante prefers individualism, revolt, and the manifest differences between singularities. All the power of what he calls his “social atheism” can be found concentrated in this refusal of an idyllic future.

For all that, Palante doesn’t retreat before the placing of an equal sign between the individualist and the libertarian. Referring to the dictionary allows us to define the libertarian as he who “doesn’t admit and doesn’t recognize any limitation to individual freedom in social and political matters.” The source of this perpetual rebellion is to be found in the intimate makeup of the being, in what Palante felicitously calls “the sensibility,” the emotive and singular structure of a consciousness that is often wounded, and almost always hypersensitive.

In his combat for the individual Palante prefers Max Stirner to Frederick Nietzsche. There is much to be said about the strange relationship between the latter two thinkers and the obvious likeness between the two sensibilities. In “The Individualist Sensibility” Stirner is presented as a more effective arm for serving the cause of uniqueness than is Nietzsche, whose prophetic tone, not to mention his project for civilization, Palante condemns. Palante says of the author of “The Ego and His Own:” “His icy words seize souls with a shiver entirely different from that, fiery and radiant, of Nietzsche. Nietzsche remains an impenitent, imperious, violent idealist. He idealized superior humanity. Stirner represent the most complete dis-idealization of nature and life, the most radical philosophy of disenchantment that has appeared since Ecclesiastes.” Palante ceases to be Nietzschean when for the author of “The Gay Science” it is a matter of promoting a civilization of a new type. But it is worth noting that the so often condemned “prophetism” of Nietzsche, not to mention his status as founder of a new religion, if not of a new Gospel, constitutes a misunderstanding of Nietzsche’s powerful use of irony — which Palante nevertheless analyzed. “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” in its composition, its tone and its parodic content, exists only to mock religion on its own terrain. No book was ever such a burst of laughter, and Palante doesn’t understand this. He, who read German and skillfully translated from that language, completely missed the humor, the irony and the cynicism of that great work.

Palante is quite capable of making the categories of his method of social psychology function so as to take account of irony, but he remains unmoved before ironic gestures or superficial works. Who more than Nietzsche was as lucid as this? Elsewhere he says that it is “essentially an aesthetic attitude.” Here too, who other than Nietzsche can claim credit for this concern for the confusion between the ethical and the aesthetic? Finally, to finish with this subject, he says: “in our era of extreme social and moral dogmatism, of evangelism and moralism in all their forms, irony plays a role as a useful counterweight.”

Palante's text reveals his ignorance of Nietzsche's ironic and aesthetic dimensions. Thus he writes: "According to Nietzsche no animal gesture equals in vulgarity human laughter." To be sure, at the time of "Human, All Too Human" Nietzsche did indeed write this, but this means ignoring the place left for laughter, dance, and lightness in his subsequent philosophy, there, precisely, in which it would be wrong to perceive his prophetism and religiosity.

The same goes for Palante's analysis of friendship: we see him working to theoretically circumscribe the notion and its effects without realizing that here again he is reflecting upon himself. Incapable of irony, he studies it. Impossible friend, he writes on the subject. Of course, per Nietzsche, he knows that friendship is an elective and aristocratic sentiment that leads to the overwhelming of the self and the realization of the personality with more intensity or form. With Jules de Gaultier, with Louis Guilloux he had relations that could have lasted until his death. It required all the ardor in giving failure every chance of which Palante was capable for this sentiment to remain a dead letter and pure object of analysis. It's enough to make you believe that he only thought clearly about his weak points and his incapacities.

Because he wasn't able to handle as he should irony or friendship Palante suffered persecution and solitude, contempt and isolation. When we read his invitation to put in place a philosophy of contempt or friendship we uncover, behind the words and as if as in faint echo on the written page, an unhappy, torn consciousness, a hypersensitive, bruised being who, with his wounds, was able to construct a few books in which are repeated, like a musical theme that lends itself to infinite variations, pain transformed into ideas — a sensibility.

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