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The Secular Priestly Spirit

Georges Palante

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This is what I call the remnants of the priestly spirit within our modern spirit, which thinks itself a- or anti-religious. But is “remnants” really the proper word? This word implies the idea of a sentiment in retreat, when in fact the priestly spirit is advancing. We would at least think this if we were to consider the expansion of the surface occupied by the priestly spirit. The priestly spirit was once the privilege of a caste; today it has spread, diffused, been diluted in our ruling classes, in those intellectual, political, administrative elites that form our democratic aristocracy.

Examples of this spirit are easy to find in our language and mores. We can cite the rage to confer a sacred character on one’s profession, to turn it into a priesthood. Whenever you hear a gentleman apply this word to his profession or that of others you have before you a man more or less imbued with the priestly spirit. It is especially in regard to careers in education or the magistracy that priesthood is spoken of, but we can extend this word to all of civil service, to all hierarchies,

¹Stirner remarks that the word hierarchy means sacerdotal or sacred organization.

in conformity with the etymology of this last word¹. In this sense any functionary would be a priest or a semi-priest. We also speak of the priesthood of the lawyer or the doctor. When it's a question of a lawyer or doctor who is also a politician the priesthood is doubled, and is carried in a way to the second power.

Another remnant of the priestly spirit is the qualification of renegade that is used to insult the man who changes his opinion. The epithet of renegade has a religious origin, which doesn't prevent anti-clericals from using it like everyone else. We all know a gentleman who calls himself a free-thinker, who loudly proclaims the right for all to change, to evolve, etc. If need be he'll quote you the well-known verse: "The absurd man is he who never changes."

But if he were to learn of the about-face of one of his political friends, then he gets indignant and calls his former fellow-believer the harsh and feared epithet of "renegade." Why feared? Because we are imbued with the priestly spirit, because we all tremble before anathema and excommunication. And yet, if we admit freedom of thought, we must admit it in its entirety. There is no such thing as a renegade. Everyone is free at every instant to shake off yesterday's belief. But most people don't see things in this way. A party is a church, and it claims to hold its people under its power; it wants to prevent defections and schisms, and terrifies the potential renegade with the gesture of anathema.

Another clerical expression is the very word of secular that is used on all occasions. Secular morality! Secular consciousness! Secular beliefs! These expressions take us back to the times of the papal bull "*Clericis Laicos*," where clerics were opposed to the laity. This is a pure distillation of the Middle Ages. In a society where clerics no longer exist or count — at least intellectually — it can no longer be a question of secular ideas. A spirit indifferent to theological controversies will not attach an intellectually meaningful significance to this expression. One

and that it still has great influence at the beginning of ours. Lammenais deplored the indifference of his contemporaries on questions of religion. He was wrong. The nineteenth century was a century of faith: scientific faith, social faith, moral faith. There were cults for all kinds of things: cult of the people (Michelet, Quinet), cult of the hero (Carlyle), cult of the woman, cult of the family, cult of science, of progress, humanity, great principles, etc... — above all cult of the word, which remains the master of the world.

It's not that the spirit that it is antithesis of the priestly spirit — the spirit of disbelief, of irony and disrespect, the spirit of skepticism and immorality — has lacked for representatives. It has given life to vigorous, profound, and subtle works. It was incarnated in the anti-sacerdotal verve of a Stirner, in the diatribes of a Nietzsche against the “traffickers of the ideal,” in the lucid and disdainful immorality of a Stendhal, in the smiling irony of an Anatole France. But this spirit has no hold on the credulous mass; it hasn't penetrated the bourgeois soul or the popular soul, over which the might of the respectful and pontifical spirit have maintained all their power. What makes for the force of the secular priestly spirit is that it escapes from ridicule. It escapes ridicule because it is generalized. What is more, it isn't very apparent; the secular priest goes unnoticed, having no special costume. The raillery of Voltaire, so fearful to the priests of his time would be disarmed against those of ours. The secular priest is legion: this is what renders him intangible.

Perhaps this shouldn't be regretted. Perhaps the priestly spirit is tied to the most essential conditions of human society. Perhaps man is a religious animal, just as he is a social animal. In any event, the secular priestly spirit gives no appearance of disappearing. It doesn't lack for believers to honor it, nor pontiffs to cultivate it.

would have to be pontiff, to want to oppose one church to another.

Secular holidays are also spoken of. Recently festivals of Love, Youth, Spring, Labor have been instituted, along with the appropriate program: reading of apposite verses by gentlemen in black suits, processions of young couples celebrating love, workers carrying their tools and celebrating labor, etc. At the heart of these secular ceremonies can easily be found a religious, a clerical concern: that of having men commune with the same idea, in a same faith. For anyone with a religious spirit a sentiment, joy, memory, or hope only have value on condition of being held in common, of being solemnized and consecrated by the group.

Another religious and evangelical expression is that of “going to the people,” so fashionable a few years ago among young Tolstoyans and adepts of PU's.²

Of the same order is the expression social obligation, especially when it's pronounced in a certain way and with a certain showy compunction. The group spirit in all its forms, *esprit de corps*, *esprit de chapelle* all easily take on a religious nuance. We heard a young engineer, freshly graduated from the Ecole Polytechnique speak with devotion of the Polytechnicians' *esprit de corps* as if it were a religion of initiates, unintelligible to the profane. This same sentiment was often expressed by soldiers at the time of the Dreyfus Affair.

If you will, none of this is either very serious or very profound. At the very most it's capable of annoying those horrified by the “religious nuance,” as Stendhal called it. The priestly spirit is only skin deep; it has lost in depth what it has gained in extent. It no longer has the depth of psychology, the shadowy will to power, the implacable perseverance in *ressentiment* that conferred a somber majesty on the sacerdotal soul of the past and that Nietzsche so potently describes in his “Genealogy of

²Popular Universities

Morals.” We are witnessing a bourgeoisification and a democratization of the priestly spirit: we see nothing but priests around us. But what humble, what modest pontiffs compared to those great ascetic figures who dedicated themselves to what Nietzsche called the “sacerdotal medication of humanity,” and who pursued a centuries old labor of total spiritual and temporal domination. The secular priestly spirit is the heir and the pale imitator of the other. It borrows from Catholicism its *mise en scene*, its impressive décor and even its sacred music, which have been widely used for Pantheonizations and other religio-secular ceremonies, such as the statufying of secular pontiffs, civil marriages decorated with secular and worldly pomp, etc. Let us see what it has retained of its psychology.

It should first be noted that the priestly spirit must be distinguished from the religious spirit. This is so true that at all times there has been a flourishing of the religious spirit that has nothing in common with the priestly spirit. This is mysticism, which is a kind of religious individualism.

The priestly spirit is the religious spirit socialized, clericalized. It’s the religious spirit in the hands of a clergy charged with officially representing it. Consequently, the priestly spirit is a caste spirit, or at the very least an *esprit de corps* with all the sentiments that are attached to it; a spirit of spiritual and temporal domination, or at the very least pride and vanity of caste or corps, a sentiment of moral and social superiority, of an authority to be exercised, of a certain decorum to be maintained, of certain rites to be observed. These sentiments, which are at their height in a clergy, can exist in a more or less diffused and attenuated state in the diverse corporations and social categories which, with whatever right, aspire to represent a moral idea, to fulfill an apostolate or a social mission, to posit themselves as models (honest men), to set the tone and the example, to imprint a moral direction on the rest of society: in short, to exercise a priesthood.

society, those two religions sacrosanct in the eyes of certain people.

These two religions are tabooist. They render taboo certain things, certain rites, certain persons, certain ideas. Thus, in a civil service office marriage renders you taboo. A married functionary, if he is caught doing wrong, is less severely penalized than another; for example, he won’t be transferred. The observance of the rites of high society also renders one taboo. The most important grade for a functionary is a grade given by society. A functionary whose dossier bears this note: “Excellent relations in town,” (which means he visits in the world of the civil servant) is taboo.

The follower of the religion of high society, like that of the religion of the state, is generally intolerant and vindictive. Don’t lay a finger on his idols. Don’t attack him, for through him you attack morality, society, and other respectable things. In all social categories we find these “pillars of society,” as Ibsen said, these moral Tartuffes:

“All the more dangerous, in their anger
Because they take up against you the arms we
revere
And their passion, for which we are grateful,
Assassinate you with sacred steel.”

The secular priestly spirit, in its different forms, spreads across our era that seriousness and boredom predicted by Stendhal and pointed out by him as the characteristic of the future bourgeoisocracy. Usually the secular priest has this “Geneva character” which Stendhal spoke of and which “calculates, and never laughs.” Stendhal consoled himself with the thought that if he had arrived fifty years later he would have had to live in the company of secular priests, of churchwardens of the puritan church.”

In summary, we see that the secular priestly spirit has occupied a large place over the course of the nineteenth century,

ters, philosophy professors, and historians of the revolution — the more social conflicts will take on a character of pure struggle resembling that of armies on campaign. We cannot execrate enough those men who teach the people that they must execute I don't know what superlatively idealist mandate of a justice on the march towards the future. These men work at maintaining ideas on the state that provoked all the bloody scenes of 1793, while the notion of class struggle tends to purify the notion of violence.”¹⁰ This is not so certain. We fear that on this point M. Sorel is deluding himself. He takes examples from war stories to show that the morality of war exclude coldly cruel violence. This means forgetting that war has also had its fanatics and mystics. We should remember Moltke saluting the fall of Paris in 1793, “receptacle of all the vices of the universe.” The proletarian movement will obviously have, like all the others, its prophets and its fanatics.

It remains for us to say a word about the most vulgar, the worst, the crudest forms in which the secular priestly spirit garbs itself. These are those it wears among those people whose social situation or whose own stupidity give them the illusion of a superior dignity, respectability, and morality. We find here the tribe of honest men infatuated with the oral pose, pontificating philistines, functionaries crystallized in their vocation. Here of course, the secular priestly spirit is emptied of all its intellectual or ideal content. It is reduced to a flat phariseism, an idiotic fetishism and a tabooism. Here too examples abound. We know a functionary, a likable young man and not given to posing when we meet him in a café or at a club. But he visibly changes when he goes out to visit in company with his wife and his daughters. He puts on a special look, which he wears like a holy sacrament. We feel as if he were going to officiate as a priest of the religion of the family and the religion of high

¹⁰Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la Violence*, p. 81.

It should be added that the priestly spirit can be tied to the religious sentiment or be separate from it. In its superior forms it is vivified by a religious, or at least philosophical or moral belief. But at its lowest and poorest degree it tends to be emptied of all intellectual or ideal content, to be reduced to a simple external formalism, a pure phariseism. The secular priestly spirit, like the other, in this regard presents many degrees and nuances.

At its highest degree, as it is encountered among our intellectuals — philosophers, moralists, sociologists, professors of the spiritual life and of moral action — the secular priestly spirit can be found tied to a certain concept of philosophy understood as the servant of an ethical finalism and a secular moral faith.

Believe and make people believe, says M. Jules de Gaultier. This is the goal of the greatest number of philosophers, after and before “*The Critique of Pure Reason*.” Bacon stated that in his time they were taught in universities to believe, and this is still true in our time.

But it's not only in universities that these teachings are dispensed, it's in any book able to find a public. What men demand of philosophy is that it give them something to believe in, to give them a first principle to which they can affix their conduct, a goal which they can have the illusion of heading towards, since the number of spirits for whom the joy of understanding on its own suffices can only ever be insignificant and negligible.³

In this the secular priestly spirit makes itself the servant of an idea. Like the Catholic priestly spirit it presupposes a doctrinal credo, an ideology of which it is the guardian. The difference is that in one case the credo is revealed by God, while in the other it is revealed by reason. But the resemblances between the two ideologies are many. As was perfectly demon-

³Jules de Gaultier, *De Kant à Nietzsche*, p.178

strated by M. Jules de Gaultier the rationalist ideology is nothing but the prolongation of Christian ideology: it is a veritable secular religion. A Marxist writer, M. Edouard Berth brings the two ideologies together under the same sign of intellectual laziness and authoritarian routine, and opposes to them the fever of labor and innovation that agitates industrial circles. “Most men do not feel this need for the new that is felt by the industrialist; they prefer a nice routine where you can live peacefully, without cares, worries or effort. Intellectualist systems are appropriate for the mass of the lazy that are man. They form a kind of bureaucracy of the intellect where one is comfortably installed for the rest of one’s life, where you are comfortably seated so as to watch the immutable spectacle of things. The church is horrified by the thought of the new, and thus of freedom. This is the case as well, I repeat, for all forms of intellectualism, and in the modern world there are many varieties of this. Many people remain foreign to the practices of industry: the world, bureaucracy, the university, the so-called liberal professions constitute the social circles that industrial thought has as little penetrated as the Church⁴. The “countless varieties of intellectualism” more or less imbued with the secular priestly spirit hold the “factories where the ideal is produced.” They monopolize the individuals of respect; they produce ideological and phraseological values whose prices are established according to completely different laws than those of manufactured goods. It is thus not without reason that M. Berth compares the Catholic church and the modern secular churches, and he opposes to the dogmatic and routine priestly spirit the living, active, and ever new industrial spirit.

It is only fair to recognize that the secular priestly spirit has evolved a bit in France in the last fifty years. We can distinguish two forms corresponding to two periods of official phi-

⁴Edouard berth, *Anarchisme individualiste et Marxisme orthodoxe. Mouvement Socialiste*. May Day 1905

powers fell the need to crown themselves with the halo of a moral idea, to set themselves up as the rulers of reason and truth. This dual aspiration is incarnated in the pedantocratic party that Charles Péguy called “the modern intellectual party,” and which he so vigorously and subtly described.

It is still incarnated (and in truth it’s all the same thing) in the modern religion of the state.

This religion is not new. It is a legacy of the *Ancien Régime* transmitted by the men of 1789, many of whom, as was said by M. Georges Sorel, were former men of the law, who had remained fanatics for legality and the state. Today, the idea of the state maintains all its prestige in intellectual circles where the secular priestly spirit reigns, notably among adepts of parliamentary socialism a la Jaurès. A few years ago the parliamentary debate on the monopoly over education set against each other professorial politicians, pure adepts of the statist pedantocracy, like MM. Jaurès and Lintilhac and the less sacerdotal politicians, more liberated from the pedantocratic ideology, like M. Clémenceau.⁹

The idea of the state is a demanding, jealous, and fearsome idol. Its high priests of 1793, Robespierre and Saint Just, believed themselves to be the executors of a metaphysical and moral mandate in service to which they deployed a terrible zeal. Their example verifies Stirner’s phrase: Moral faith is as fanatical as religious faith. The statist priestly spirit is naturally inclined to cruelty. When circumstances demand it it takes satisfaction in a cold, theoretical, implacable violence.

M. Georges Sorel believes that proletarian violence will not be as vindictive or cruel as Jacobin violence because it will be neither statist nor sacerdotal. “The more syndicalism develops by abandoning the old superstitions that come from the Ancien Régime and the church — through the channel of men of let-

moderne, p. 48.

⁹See Clémenceau, *Discours pour la Liberté*, Cahiers de la Quinzaine.

by Montaigne: “*Totus mundus exercet histrionem.*” the world is performing a play, the world is an actor.”⁷

The secular priestly spirit also hates precise spirits, like Stendhal, who aren’t fooled by the noble style and the eloquence of the pulpit.

Another trait common to the Catholic priestly spirit and the secular priestly spirit is the hatred and contempt of the individual as such. The most insightful analyst of the sacerdotal soul, Stirner, noted this. In the eyes of the priest the individual means egoism, means evil. The individual is that which is the most contemptible. It only becomes a little clean, a little presentable and a little interesting from the moment it becomes the servant of the moral, i.e., the priestly, idea. All our official and moralizing sociologists are at this point. All are tiny Brunetières, for whom individualism is the enemy. For them as well religion and sociology are synonymous. What sociology offers is, like religion, to unite souls (*religare*) to compose a great spiritual whole.

The secular priest considers himself a laborer in a disinterested task. Nothing selfish must be mixed in with his mission. He works for the pure idea; at least he claims so, and sometimes even believes it. Nietzsche noted devotion to truth among our free-thinkers and atheists, the final incarnation of the ascetic ideal.

Modern secular faith is not a dead faith, it’s a faith in action. Charles Péguy said: “The enrolling of young people is the oldest, the dearest ambition, the most secret ecclesiastical envy.”⁸ It’s that of the secular priest. He aspires to govern over consciences, to moral unity and works to realize this through the dual paths of pedagogy and politics.

It’s a well known law that all spiritual powers tend to be backed up by a temporal power, and that inversely all temporal

⁷Michelet, *Histoire de France*.

⁸Charles Péguy, *De La Situation faite au Parti intellectuel dans le Monde*

losophy on France. The secular church of Victor Cousin, dominated by the Greco-Latin literary tradition and by the Roman Catholic religious tradition, is very close to the Catholicism it wants to supplant. Like it, it is authoritarian and narrowly conservative concerning traditional institutions: religion, family, and property, imbued like it with that ecclesiastical prudence that makes social usefulness the criterion for all beliefs, that divides doctrines into harmful and healthy, and that refutes a philosophy based on its moral and social consequences, a type of refutation that Taine ridiculed in so amusing a fashion in his “*Philosophes Classiques en France.*” The new secular church, dominated by the Kantian Protestant and rationalist tradition, rejects the Catholic pragmatism of a Brunetière, extends its social ideal in the direction of socialism and humanitarianism, and tends towards a religion ever more intellectual, ever more abstract, and finally universal and human; a religion of reason, of science, of justice and of universal consciousness. Among its highest representatives it recalls the generous dreams that Renan symbolized in his “*Pretre de Nemi.*”

Another transformation: the ancient Catholic and ascetic ideal has evolved into a progressive ideal, optimistic, eudemonistic, and humanitarian, aspiring to universal happiness and secular paradise (humanity’s salvation through science, through reason.)

The two currents we find in all religions, the rationalist and the mystical, can be found in this modern secular religion: a Renan represents scientific intellectualism; a Quinet, a Michelet, a Guyau, apostles of love, represent democratic and revolutionary mysticism.

We should add that the rationalist, scientific, and humanitarian faith can be more or less dogmatic. It is at its height of dogmatism in Renan in his “*L’Avenir de la Science,*” and in Guyau in his “*L’Irreligion de l’Avenir.*” In Renan’s latest books the rationalist and scientific faith is diminished by uncertainties, is attenuated with question marks: will humanity succeed?

Will it fail in its voyage towards the divine? Whatever the case, despite all nuances in thought, it can be said that Renan has remained faithful to the end to his scientific faith. In “L’Eau de Jouvence” the old Prospero, dying like Faust, weighed down with years and labor, symbolizes the ideal of science and strength that remain the culminating point of Renanian thought.

Whatever the school or nuances in thought, there is a second trait common to all the representatives of the modern secular religion: faith in the power of ideas. Every religious spirit is disposed to accord an enormous influence to transmitted faith, to a taught morality. All priests believe in the effectiveness of their preaching. The famous: “You are a goldsmith, Monsieur Josse,” finds here its application here. A comic example of this naïve faith can be found in Shaw’s play “Candida” in the person of Pastor Morrell. Unbeknownst to him, this pastor, a handsome and well-spoken man, inspires passion among many of his listeners. All of them, even the young woman who works as his typist, are in love with him. Because he is innocence itself Pastor Morell attributes to the virtue of the holy word the number of young women at his sermons and is struck dumb when his wife reveals to him the ill that has his fervent listeners in its grip:

CANDIDA: They’re all in love with you. And you are in love with preaching because you do it so beautifully. And you think it’s all enthusiasm for the kingdom of Heaven on earth; and so do they. You dear silly!

MORELL: Candida, what dreadful, what soul-destroying cynicism!

Our pseudo-priests, philosophers, professors of the spiritual life, moralists, sociologists, preachers of all kinds fall into the same illusion as Pastor Morell without, incidentally, always obtaining so flattering a success. All are flagrantly Platonists, believers in the idea and in love with their preaching. For them it is blasphemy to place in doubt the virtue of the idea, as sev-

eral hardly priestly great spirits have done, like Bayle or the Comte de Gobineau. Their teacher Renan himself scandalized more than one when he put in the mouth of his Prospero these slightly skeptical words:

“When I say these things I feel that none of my listeners will be so struck by my proofs that it will lead him to deprive himself of any sweet sensation. Without this I would have scruples about having been the cause that brave men would have diminished the total of joys they could have tasted because they took my reasoning too seriously.”⁵

This cult of the word is easily explained. As is proved by the example of Shaw’s pastor, the priestly spirit is generally associated with the oratory spirit, I mean the faculty to mouth philosophical commonplaces. The representative types: Victor Cousin and today M. Jaurès. M. Jaurès is the Victor Cousin of the socialist church. We can apply to him the ingenious comparison of Taine à propos of the Grand Pontiff of the eclectic school: “Like a colored powerful beacon which receives five or six lights and transmits its splendor. It makes shine on the philosophical horizon their slightly deviated rays.”⁶

The secular priestly spirit, like the Catholic priestly spirit, hates doubters, skeptics, and dilettantes. Victor Cousin cast his sacerdotal thunder against skepticism. Michelet doesn’t like Montaigne, casting him aside as unhealthy and debilitating. “As for me,” he says, “my profound literary admiration for that exquisite writer doesn’t prevent me from saying that I find in him, at every moment, a certain nauseating taste, as in a sick room, where the stale air is heavy with the sad perfumes of the pharmacy. The delicate, the disgusted, the tired (and all were) hold to Pindar’s phrase translated and commented on

⁵*L’Eau de Jouvence*, act III.

⁶Hyppolite Taine, *Les Philosophes Classiques en France au XIXème siècle*.