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'Esprit de Corps' and the French Revolutionary Crisis: a Prehistory of the Concept of Solidarity

The word solidarity is a borrowing from the French *solidarité*, which until the nineteenth century had the restricted legal meaning of a contractual obligation. I argue that in the pre-revolutionary decades, a newly born French lexeme was much closer to what solidarity would mean for modern societies, at least if we accept the agonistic context of most phenomena of solidarity: 'esprit de corps', taken from the military language and changed into a combat concept by the *Philosophes*. A 'corps' in French, among other definitions, is an organised group with its own cohesion, its own interests, and its instinct of preservation. In this article, I argue that the study of the birth of 'esprit de corps', and the French Revolution attempt to universalise the concept, can shed some light on later debates on democratic forms of solidarity. If solidarity is a form of esprit de corps, and because of the military origin of the latter, solidarity should be considered as a 'war machine', an agonistic union rather than an all-encompassing and vague ideal of global fraternity.

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Birth of 'esprit de corps'

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the compound 'esprit de corps' is primarily used in a military context to designate a cohesive and proud formation of soldiers. Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon, uses the expression in his *Mémoires* of the year 1717 (written after 1740)[1] to describe the relations between different corps of the army.[2] There are at least three interesting and important ideas in Saint-Simon's use. Firstly, esprit de corps is associated with the political idea of republican spirit. Secondly, esprit de corps is connected to honour and pride in combat: it is a feeling, an emotion, in a context of adversity. Thirdly, esprit de corps transforms humans into a beehive, a swarm, but does not seem to completely dissolve individualism because of the personal feeling of honour.

Before Saint-Simon, one of the first to display the military meaning of 'esprit de corps' in a widely read print was Germain-François Poullain de Saint-Foix (1698-1776). In 1732, he had been a musketeer of the French royal infantry and now served with the cavalry.[3] In his imitation of the *Persian Letters*,[4] we are told that the royal cavalry is not only grand, but also homogenous in the face of danger. Soldiers become one by sharing the same virtue, spirit and valiant behaviour. The solidarity of the corps is so strong that when the regiment is decimated, one can say, in a macabre bon mot, that it is *killed*, as if it were one person. 'Elle est tuée': a military unit, a company of men forms a feminine entity, grammatically, but also, perhaps, because of a more or less subconscious reference to the feminine soul of the group, its essence, its *âme*.

The association of ideas between an efficient collective morale and the French musketeers seems to have grown steadily from the creation of the *régiment* in 1622 to

Alexandre Dumas' revival of the myth. The latter would reinvent the motto 'All for one! One for all!' as a formula to summarize what the solidarity of esprit de corps was about.[5] The two exclamation marks suggest enthusiasm: esprit de corps meant not only a dynamic momentum that allowed each individual who is part of the corps to summon a courage that he would not be able to mobilise were he isolated, but also an sometimes uncritical élan in the execution of the most perilous orders. Two centuries later, the First World War commentators would remember that definition.

The metaphor of the body to express human cohesion

The widespread use of the metaphor of the body in the labour or political discourse of the *Ancien Régime* is another reason for the success of 'esprit de corps' in French eighteenth century language. The numerous working guilds were called *corps de métiers* or *corporations* and played a visible role in the structuration of society. Because esprit de corps became a political concept in the second half of the eighteenth century, as we will examine bellow, we cannot ignore the ubiquity of the political analogy of the body (*corps politique*)[6] in the western conceptual history since at least Plato, who already compared the city to a human body.[7] In Aristotle we find the idea that political groups precede their members ontologically or 'by nature', as the body exists before its parts.[8] The idea that an assembly of men can be one and have a unique voice is also to be found in the Old Testament: 'And all the people arose as one man.'[9] The New Testament is prolific in referring to what we conceive now as a metaphoric body.[10] In St. Augustine's *Expositions on the Psalms*, we read: 'O son of man; […] you are a man that has been placed in Christ's Body'.[11] This is said to be

true for all Christians, as they become one in Christ.[12] In twelfth century England, John of Salisbury is, in the book V of the *Policraticus*, one of the first Europeans to merge the analogy of the body politic and the Christian mystical body, both being supposedly animated by a divine spirit:[13] 'A commonwealth, according to Plutarch, is a certain body which is endowed with life by the benefit of divine favor, which acts at the prompting of the highest equity.'[14]

We could also illustrate the pregnancy of the analogy between body and society with Bacon, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, or Pascal:[15] the holist metaphor that identified a group of equal humans with a human body was in the eighteenth century a *lieu commun*, both 'borrowed from Catholicism'[16] and from Antiquity. This pre-history and polysemy of the signifier *corps* partly explains why esprit de corps easily shifted from designating the spirit of a military corps to referring to the soul of a society.

Interlude: what is the ideal size of a solidary group?

In 1732, in the military context, esprit de corps was a positive quality. This mutual integrity, stronger than the fear of death, was more likely to be felt on the battlefield, but in times of peace the elderly were believed to nurture it through storytelling, if and only if the members of the company were not renewed too often, in order for them to develop a mutual and persistent fellowship.[17] The spirited unity tarnished if the rotation in the recruitment and the retirement of the warriors was too frequent.

An echo of this last idea can be found in Diderot's *Rêve de d'Alembert*, a 1769 manuscript were the esprit de corps of religious orders is compared to a persistent

pattern, as in a swarm of bees.[18] For Diderot, what holds the group together is the memory of its identity, nourished by the information of those who have been in the group for a longer time. It is worthy of note that a number is indicated, albeit approximate: a hundred of well-informed members (as opposed to more or less one third of newcomers) seem to be needed to maintain the integrity of a group (bringing the total average number to something like 150). Of course we should not take this numeral indication too seriously, as it is not the main interest of Diderot in this text, but it is nevertheless an interesting clue: in that first half of the eighteenth century there existed in France two corps of Mousquetaires du Roi, officially counting 150 musketeers each.[19] Between 1622 and 1752, the average number of Mousquetaires by *régiment* oscillated between 100 and 200.[20]

Is 150 members then the ideal population for a particular group to feel a cohesive and self-aware esprit de corps? Yes, according to anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar: basing his argument on the size of the human neocortex and also on our social network practices, Dunbar recently stated that the ideal equilibrium size for a solidary social group might be indeed around 150 members.[21] This claim is of course controversial. Collective self-awareness is still in its infancy as a philosophical field of study, but one thing is certain: 150 humans are not enough to compose a nation. If micro-solidarities are the only viable forms of cohesive union, and if we want to create a solidary yet plural society, democracies should encourage small communities of interest rather than large religious groups.

Spreading of esprit de corps as a combat concept

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In the second half of the eighteenth century, 'esprit de corps' developed into a critical weapon, in the way Ian Hunter speaks of the notion of *secularization* as a 'combat concept'.[22] This extended and polemical use of 'esprit de corps' appeared in the original *Lettres Persanes* of 1721, in a fictional conversation between two ambitious Parisian snobs who wanted to gain a reputation of 'bel esprit' and be elected at the *Académie Française*: 'One can observe that in France, as soon as a man enters a society, he firstly gets in what is called the esprit de corps...' [23] Once an Academician, no more wit will be needed: the group solidarity will suffice (40 members since Richelieu).

A more political denotation blossomed in the first volumes of the *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, in three different articles published between 1751 and 1755, including an article segment entitled 'Caractère des sociétés ou corps particuliers'.[24] This text, written by d'Alembert, defines esprit de corps as the acquired character of a group, a micro- and even anti-nation, comparable to a graft implanted on a big trunk.[25] That graft could turn poisonous for the tree, as in the case of the Jesuits, whose esprit de corps was criticized by the *Philosophes* because it was supposed to represent the biased interests of the regular army of Rome. Yet, this very effective religious form of solidarity also fascinated the pre-revolutionaries, as we shall soon see.

D'Alembert believed with Montesquieu that an entire nation could manifest a personality, a soul, a form of supra-esprit de corps.[26] A strongly unified nation would need the natural glue, the sap of esprit de corps, in order to produce solidarity between its numerous citizens. In the second half of the eighteenth century, it became frequent in French publications to read the idea that patriotism and devotion to the nation were analogous to a healthier and grander form of esprit de corps, as if group pride could

be positively sublimated by nationalism. The following graphs, generated using the 'culturomics' tool,[27] show the relative evolution of the use of 'esprit de corps' in French publications between 1752 and 1789, in a blind and random digitised sample of 11,345 printed books or libelles of various genres.[28] The strong inflexion presented by the graph is unambiguous and, in the last decade before the revolution, exponential (which, if we accept the analogy, is typical of a virus growth).[29] To increase the robustness of this result I have run the same search on the same sample for the separated words 'esprit' and 'corps'. The fact that the independent use of these two words remains relatively constant over the same period of time is a strong validation of the pertinence of the result regarding 'esprit de corps'.
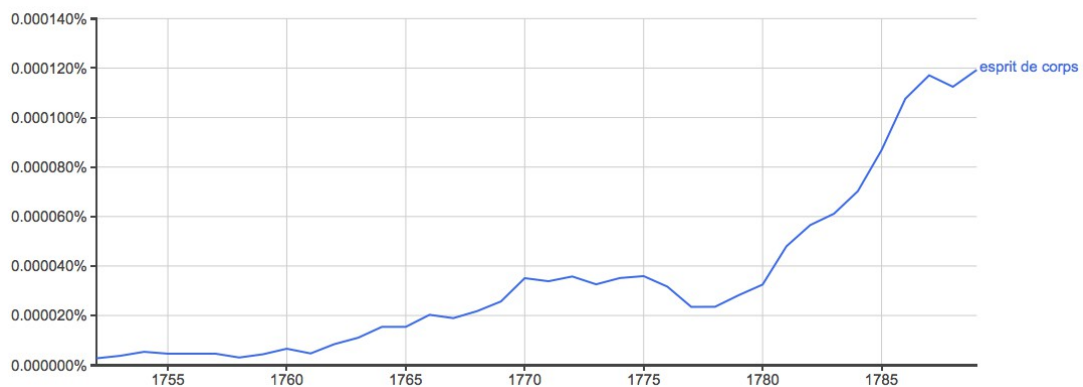
[graph I.1: evolution of the frequency of use of 'esprit de corps' in French publications between 1752 and 1789]

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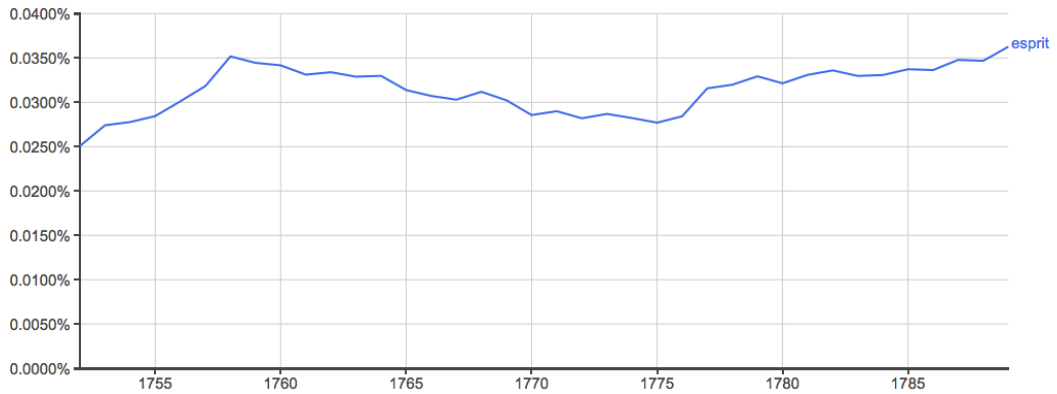
[graph I.2: evolution of the frequency of use of 'esprit' in French publications between 1752 and 1789]
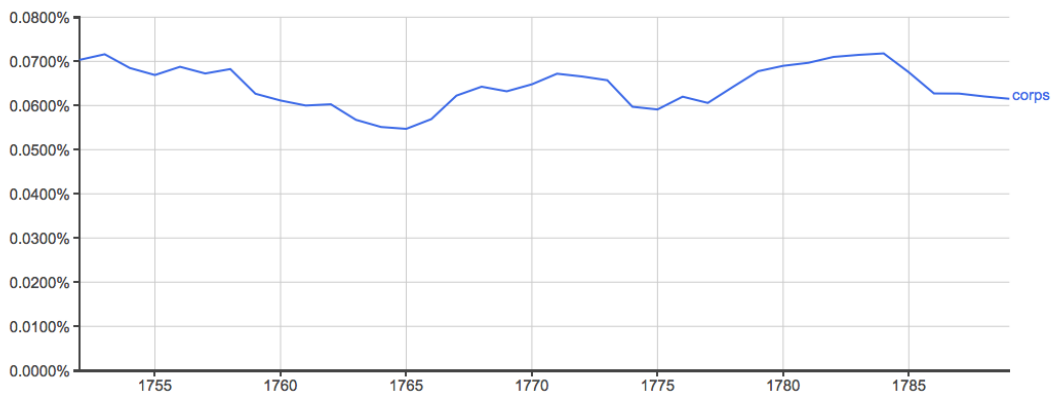
[graph I.3: evolution of the frequency of use of 'corps' in French publications between 1752 and 1789]

A spreading discourse against the artifices of small-scale esprit de corps of privileged societies was a performative necessity for the social creation of a solidary nation that was to be perceived as a natural order. The metaphor of the body was the cognitive link that allowed the naturalization of the idea of a collective unified will. Guillaume Grivel, a theoretician of Law and essayist, wrote in 1789 a typical article on esprit de corps in which he also advocates for a grander national esprit de corps:[30]

In the spirit of a *body*, all that contributes to reunion is useful, and all that leads to separation is harmful. […] All esprit de corps is precious, […] but […] it is infinitely important that the particular esprit de corps be subordinated to the national spirit, which is the common social spirit.[31]

This article summarized the French views on esprit de corps for the next two centuries: any active association of citizens should be subordinated to the State and it should work towards common justice and the general will. In the 1780s, France's ultimate necessity appeared to be union, or as l'abbé Sieyès famously put it, 'adunation.'[32] Nationalism supposed the dissolution of smaller and independent forms of solidarity. It was for example in the name of this becoming one that a friend of Sieyès, Le Chapelier, successfully fought for the abolition of labour corporations and companionships in 1791. Fraternity would be the name given to that ideal of exclusive national solidarity, once again illustrating the fascination of the revolutionaries for religious forms of solidarity.

Yet, there was a clear divide between those who called for a political national solidarity and those who wished for a universal humanistic solidarity. The 1789 *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* was the pinnacle of the hope that the republican adunation of France could be led both by nationalism and an extra-national ideal:

'Universalism, and never more so than its Enlightenment incarnation, was grounded in the belief that human nature, that is rational human nature, was a universal impervious to cultural and historical differences. Transcultural, transhistorical human

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nature was posited as identical, beyond particularisms. […] *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* […] articulated Frenchness onto universalism.'[33]

Are humanism and esprit de corps compatible?

The idea of a united 'corps social' and of the social nature of men is not an invention of the Enlightenment, but mostly a loan from the Christian dogma: 'This much is certain: at the beginning French universalism derives from its relationship to the Church; it is, as it were, borrowed from Catholicism (from the Greek *Katholikos*, "universal").'[34] One of the first authors to sense a discrepancy between cosmopolitism and patriotism was Rousseau. In the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, he certainly praised the 'grand cosmopolite souls',[35] and wrote that the love for humanity could inspire kindness, moderation, tolerance. But according to him cosmopolitism could not trigger courage, firmness or heroism, which are better energised by the love for the fatherland.[36] Rousseau did not think that the general will of a nation could or should be universalised, or that humanity could be a political concept. He was aware that politics are agonistic and plural while the religious ideal supposes the cessation of force use in a holistic system. Universality should be for Rousseau the prerogative of religions, which deal with 'men' rather than 'citizens': patriotism and humanity are incompatible forms of solidarity.[37] This seems to be a condemnation by anticipation of the 1789 French Declaration of Rights, applied uniformly to 'citizens' and to 'man'. Despite of Rousseau's warning, in its early stages, the Revolution discourse

was often enthusiastically cosmopolitan: 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity were to be France's gifts to the world.'[38]

Solidarity as a war machine

The passage from nationalism to universalism was, and still is today, one of the most difficult to jump over. In fact, there is not one form of solidarity, but four: the solidarity within intermediary groups (esprit de corps), the solidarity between citizens (civism), the solidarity between humans (humanism or weak cosmopolitism), and the solidarity between all forms of life (strong cosmopolitism). If we accept the hypothesis that 'esprit de corps' belongs to the genealogy of modern solidarity, and if we place ourselves in the context of modern democracies, then we should be aware that solidarity is a political and a combat concept, and that it pertains to what Chantal Mouffe calls 'agonistic pluralism'. In *The Democratic Paradox*, she writes: 'One of the keys of agonistic pluralism is that, far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence. Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order. Breaking with the symbolic representation of society as an organic body — which was characteristic of the holist mode of social organization — a democratic society acknowledges the pluralism of values, the "disenchantment of the word" diagnosed by Max Weber and the unavoidable conflicts that it entails.'[39] Solidarity is then considered as a combative tool between coexistent communities of interest or belief, and this is consistent with

Deleuze and Guattari's reinterpretation of esprit de corps as a 'war machine' against all forms of totalitarianism.[40]

There lies the paradox of esprit de corps and solidarity: they are forms of organisation that are meant to suppress antagonism within the group, but they do not suppress the general agony of social precedence, for better and worse.

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