



## And I and I and I and I: the very current cult of self in the face of our model of leadership

Earth Thought Notebooks

le Chef d'escadrons Gaspard LANCRENON

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Valeurs de l'Armée de Terre

**Our Army has a habit of repeating that it is a reflection of society. If it is for the best, is it prepared to take on what, for its current command model, could mean the worst as well, namely the importance of the individual at the expense of the group? For the author, it is up to us as military personnel to maintain the right level of social relations and to identify the appropriate command model.**

**Fith the importance of the individual at the expense of the group in our society, the Army must be careful to maintain the right balance between outdated collectivism and a self-cult contrary to its fundamental human principles. This balance lies in participatory individualism.**

I am a Frenchman under forty years old. Daily on Twitter, my commentary on current events seems indispensable to me. I publish my selfies because my own lens - photographic - is now turned towards me. I respond with conviction to the microwalks: I believe that my opinion is worthy of that of the leaders. Then I replace my earpieces, which allow me to isolate myself in so-called "public transport".

I am a Frenchman under forty years of age, and I am therefore likely to join the army as a soldier, non-commissioned officer or officer. Will I, should I keep my habits there?

Many sociologists and philosophers have highlighted and analysed the part played by the individual over the community in Western societies in recent decades. While some see the emergence of a sought-after and assumed individualism (Gilles Lipovetsky[1]), others denounce a tendency towards narcissism and self-worship (Christopher Lasch[2]). Now, this dynamic appears at first glance to be quite opposed to the values taught in our CFIM[3] and schools of formation: esprit de corps, transmission, obedience. The style of command in the Army could then be confronted with the reality of a society with visibly inverted human relations (from altruism to selfishness). It is now necessary to reflect on this and to formulate an appropriate policy.

## **De the importance of human relations in the army**

There are certain fields of our Army that are evolving, in phase with society, towards a great individualization of functions, towards an empowerment of the soldier. The importance of special forces in the doctrine of the use of forces coincides with their increasing attractiveness to young recruits, non-commissioned officers and officers: the "modern" character of troops with more emphasis on individual qualities. This partly explains the current high selection rate for their recruitment[4].

4] However, the army as a whole remains the "army of manpower" in terms of management, i.e. the "army of men". Its effectiveness therefore lies above all in the art of commanding them, of "arranging" them, of "combining" them. It is not a question of managing a sum of individuals but, whatever its size, of commanding a unit. The term is evocative of the cohesion that must reign there. The role of the leader has always been essential to foster this esprit de corps (behind him, or against him...). It becomes all the more important when this impulse is not natural, for subordinates who have often not known any form of community life before their commitment.

This role is not denied in our modern army, because altruism, mutual aid and cohesion remain irreplaceable. Looking at the photos of the 1914 and 2015 assaults, we see a mass and a group of individuals respectively. But the confidence in one's neighbour is still perceptible. Today, as in the past, cohesion is indispensable to a group entering a building in local combat, or to the crew of a tank. Likewise, mutual aid is imperative for soldiers who have lost one of their own in Afghanistan or Mali. Finally, altruism is essential for these soldiers who protect their fellow citizens during Vigipirate or Sentinel operations. Although the individual is gaining prominence in the army as well as in society, there is still no room for withdrawal into oneself and the strength of the group is still the law.

## **Un cult of the potentially destructive self**

And yet, the quintessence of this collective spirit lived on. Collectivism is an outdated ideal. It has been dead for too long in our society to hope to restore it in our armies. Its last glaring traces date back to the First World War in France. The pacifism of the inter-war period, the comfort of the Trente Glorieuses and then the destructive spirit of May 68 have buried it forever. This collectivism went hand in hand with the pitched battles and the charges launched. But these modes of action have disappeared, and everything seems to fit harmoniously into recent developments: the appearance of individualism has fortunately coincided with the need for tactical initiative down to the lowest level (down to the concept of the "strategic corporal" [5]). In other words, the growing place of the individual in society goes hand in hand with the increased responsibility of each soldier, and these two trends feed off each other.

If it therefore does not seem opportune to fight against individualism in our army, we must nevertheless guard against the excess that it can engender, that of the cult of the self, of narcissism. Narcissism is indeed antinomic to the fundamental qualities necessary for military efficiency. First of all, it represents an obstacle to the transmission, pledge of the capitalization of experience, whose role in the difficult art of warfare is well known.

Narcissus, turned towards himself alone and towards the present moment, loses the notion of inscribing his action in history, in tradition; he ignores continuity and, in the navel of the world, sees himself as the owner of a torch of which he is the simple depository. The cult of the self also prevents all transcendence, the transcendence that gives heart and justifies the action of the fighter devoted to a higher cause. Is it God? Is it the flag? Is it more modestly the pennant of his unit? Narcissus does not see which symbol could supplant his person. Finally and above all, mad individualism makes the bed of the "loneliness of the troop" [6], and initiates a "withdrawal into the private" [7]. Don't we already witness this extreme when a leader "doesn't dare to disturb" the families of his subordinates - whether or not they are in the family - when they're in the company of a group of people? or when we see in OPEX the progressive death of the people, wakes or card parties for the benefit of intimate Skype evenings?

The solution could lie in the consolidation of the model of participatory individualism, which combines autonomy with the acute awareness of belonging to a group. Unlike a collectivist system, individuals are not interchangeable. And unlike an "irresponsible individualist" system [8], each individual is mobilized for the other. Individualism is not in fact bad in itself. It is the culmination of the work of liberation of the individual, or even the resistance that the individual conscience (the free spirit) can put up against conformism [9]. g] While narcissism is exclusive love of self, individualism is self-esteem. Individualism thus presents a double interest: while emancipating each individual, it does not constitute any obstacle to the free and consensual social contract. To soften its commonly pejorative aspect, it can be called "participatory individualism".

## La necessary adaptation of the style of command

This positive form of individualism should be kept as a treasure, because the natural slope will lead to narcissism if we are not careful. Several tools of leadership can be proposed for this purpose.

- Maintain a taste for competition

Christopher Lasch [10] sees one of the reasons for the rise of narcissism in the decline of sportsmanship (abolition of competition, end of grades in school, end of rankings). This societal evolution aims at masking differences. However, cohesion is not indifferenciation. Competition, in several fields, highlights the complementarity of the members of a body. Indifference [11] makes the other another self. "The lesson of history is not that Narcissus fell in love with himself but that, unable to recognize his own reflection, he did not possess the concept of the difference between himself and his environment. This taste for sporting challenge, ranking and competition, remains in our Army. Let's keep it, and for that, let's just resist the current trend, which is not so simple.

- Epinal's image, or the return of the hero

Is the cult of the person able to diminish the narcissistic threat? Yes, because it transfers the admiration to another person. It is thus regrettable that the 11th Parachute <sup>Brigade</sup>, which planned to give its CIMIC, when it was created, the name of General Bigeard, was given this soulless acronym. The young people involved would have seen condensed in one person the commitments and sacrifices that the trade would require of them. But this

person must also embody altruistic values. For our army, all that remains is to choose its heroes carefully. And in the face of the narcissistic threat, it is the one who ostensibly offers his or her life for a cause that is beyond him or her - a sacrifice that does not necessarily involve death - who must be set as a model. Here again, the example of "Bruno" [13] is evocative.

- The end of "self-examination"

There is a tendency in our society to pay obsessive attention to one's own health, both physical and psychological (electronic bracelets measuring calories expended and minutes of sleep, democratization of psychoanalysis, etc.). Is health the best that can be wished for a soldier? Should we therefore stop singing the "Para Prayer"? So, the question is sensitive, but we mustn't refrain from asking it: isn't the increase in cases of PTSD [14] partly a military reflection of this tendency to self-examination? And, therefore, is it not a sign of a move away from the fundamental values previously conveyed by our army? "It is in simple comforts such as work, love, family life, independent of our desires and yet responding to our needs, that we can exchange a devastating emotional conflict for ordinary misfortune" [15]. We can, without betraying Lasch's thought, add esprit de corps to these "simple comforts". Let us tear the soldier away from this self-analytical tendency acquired in spite of himself in society, let us invite him first and foremost to compassionate concern for his brothers in arms. With this apparently simplistic recipe - faced with a problem that is indeed complex - he may perhaps be able to hope for the slightest evil, that of "ordinary misfortune", preferable to "devastating emotional conflict".

- "Authority must be a beacon, not a landmark." (Bossuet)

This idea has been accepted in our military for a long time, but while some "military thinkers" have been reminding us of this regularly (the social role of the officer of Lyautey, the friendly obedience of General Frère, the "love" of General Bonnemaïson [16]), it is because it is not so natural. It is a question here once again of voluntarily embracing the positive curve of individualism, by abandoning definitively the collectivist style of command (where authority, considered as naturally acquired by the leader, engenders passive obedience) in favour of an individual approach (active obedience of consensual adherence). To caricature, "stupid and disciplined" obedience no longer has its place among a troop that benefits from being "intelligently disciplined". Concretely and on a day-to-day basis, this shift, already well underway with professionalization, can be accentuated by making our soldiers more responsible down to the lowest echelon.

- Giving meaning to action

Finally, and in order to implement this accountability, the chief must continually explain the rationale for their actions to subordinates. In today's world, you don't buy in if you don't understand - whether you regret it or not, "because that's the way it is" is no longer a sufficient argument - and you turn in on yourself if you don't buy in. In order for individualism not to become a substitute for selfishness, the soldier must be aware that he or she belongs to a whole. They must understand that the order they carry out is part of a general plan, but above all they must realize that their individual action will have repercussions on that general plan. In short, he must feel useful and responsible. Thus the hussars of the Grande Armée, who often acted in small autonomous detachments (the

squads had only five horsemen), were aware that each one was essential to a gigantic manoeuvre. To take a more current illustration, the mechanic puts all the more heart into the work if he understood that without his action, the platoon would not leave. This type of situation flatters individualism while arousing altruism. It is the best combination.

The style of command in the Army should not try to go against the changes in our society. It must, however, guard against extreme tendencies to withdraw into itself if it wants to remain effective in an army whose key to success, in the neighbourhood as well as in combat, remains the effective combination of its men. It is in a form of individualism, the result of a social struggle for autonomy, that he will find the remedies for the cult of the self. This participative individualism blends naturally with developments in military art, while keeping alive the esprit de corps necessary for the conduct of war.

Then it will be time to tackle the next challenge, because once the safeguards against narcissism have been put in place, our army will already have to consider another threat coming from the society from which it comes from: the rise of communitarianism.

1) Gilles Lipovetsky (1944-) is a French philosopher and sociologist who observes that our society leaves as much room for "irresponsible individualism". (selfishness) as well as to "responsible individualism" (the rise of voluntary work, associative involvement...). He is the author of "The Era of Emptiness, Essays on Contemporary Individualism" Paris, Gallimard, 1983; reprinted. 1989, "NRF Essais".

<sup>[2]</sup> Christopher Lasch (1932-1994), an American historian and sociologist, has endeavoured to show how his narcissism is proof of the fragility of modern man. He is the author of "The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations" 1979; translated by Flammarion, Champs in 2006, "The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Declining Expectations».

3) Initial Training Centre for Non-Commissioned Members.

4) Recruitment, however, should not be misunderstood: while individual qualities are assessed, the candidates' ability to put them to work for the group is also sought.

5) On this subject, read General Hubin's analysis of the breakdown of the command system down to the lowest level, resulting from technological progress. Guy Hubin, "Tactical perspectives", Economica, 2000.

6) Reference to the "solitude of the crowd" by David Riesman (1909-2002), an American sociologist, who underlined the antagonism between the protective aspect of the crowd, of the resemblance, and the solitude of the individual in our contemporary society. "The Lonely Crowd", Yale University Press 1950.

<sup>[7]</sup> Richard Sennett (1943-), an American sociologist, highlighted the growing cult of the private sphere in his work. "The Tyrannies of Intimacy" («The Fall of Public Man»), Seuil, 1979.

8) In the words of G Lipovetsky, see note 1.

9) According to Nietzsche: "The principle 'the good of the majority comes before the good of the individual' suffices to make humanity retreat step by step to the lowest animality. For it is the opposite (individuals are worth more than the mass) that has raised it". In "Human, too human».

10) In "The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations." 1979; translated by Flammarion, Champs in 2006, "The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations».

11) Indifference is treated by Alain Finkelkraut as being the illusion, the "dogma of the day: the equality of everything with everything". Le Figaro, interview with V Trémolet de Villers, 13/10/2014.

[12] C. Lasch, *ibid*.

13) Radio call sign and nickname of General Bigeard.

14] Posttraumatic stress disorder: post-traumatic stress disorder; severe anxiety disorder that manifests itself following an experience lived as traumatic with a confrontation with ideas of death.

[15] C. Lasch, *ibid.*

16] In "You, this future officer", *Économica*, 2010.

Squadron Leader Gaspard LANCRENON is a Saint-Cyr citizen of the "General Béthouart" class (2000-2003). He served in the 1<sup>st</sup> regiment of parachute hussars in Tarbes for eight years, successively holding the positions of platoon leader, deputy officer then unit commander. He was posted to the Land Operational Staff in Lille in 2012 as a dealing officer in the planning office, then as a section chief in the command centre, a position he currently holds.

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