The Metaphysician of Syndicalism
Georges Sorel Beyond Myth and Violence

Edited by

Eric Brandom (Kansas State University)

and

Tommaso Giordani (Ca'Foscari University of Venice)

To Emma (1927-2024) and Iraide (1928-2025), who never quite understood what I did for a living, but were always impressed by the fact that I taught in English. *Tutto è compiuto.*

To Harriet and Vivian, with joy in your unknowable futures.

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Contributors

Tommaso Giordani
Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellow, Ca'Foscari University of Venice

Tommaso Giordani is an intellectual historian at Ca'Foscari University of Venice. Previously, he was a FIAS fellow at the *École Normale Supérieure de Lyon* and a post-doc at Tallinn University. He specializes in French and Italian intellectual life in the beginning of the 20th century. He has published articles relating to Sorel's pragmatism, transnational exchanges between French and Italian Marxists in the fin de siècle, and on Bergson and Sorel.

Eric Brandom
Visiting Assistant Professor and James Carey Research Fellow, Kansas State University

Eric Brandom is a Visiting Assistant Professor and James Carey Research Fellow in the History Department at Kansas State University. He is co-author with Tommaso Giordani of the translation and critical edition Georges Sorel's "Study on Vico" (Brill, 2020). In addition to several articles on Sorel, he has published on fin-de-siècle French liberalism and also on the poetry and political thought of Aimé Césaire.

Patrice Rolland †
Formerly Professor of Public Law at the Université Paris-Créteil

Patrice Rolland (1946-2022), was Emeritus Professor of Public Law at the University of Paris-Créteil. Jurist by profession, he researched and published a great deal in the history of political ideas. Aside from his ground-breaking research on Sorel and his conception of law, he worked on Benjamin Constant, Simone Weil, human rights, and the history of French *laicité.*

Alice Ingold
Directrice d'études, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

Alice Ingold is an environmental historian, *directrice d'études* (full professor) at the EHESS in Paris. She has worked extensively on rural commons in the 19th and 20th centuries in publications such as *Annales*, *French Historical Studies*, and *Società e Storia.* In connection to her work in environmental history, she has worked on Georges Sorel as a hydraulic engineer, shedding light for the first time on this period of Sorel's life and on its significance for the development of his intellectual trajectory.

Willy Gianinazzi
Retired, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

Willy Gianinazzi is a historian living in Paris. He has published extensively on Italian revolutionary syndicalism as well as *Naissance du mythe moderne: Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante* (Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2006), *Georges Sorel, philosophe de l'autonomie* (Arbre Bleu, 2022), and *André Gorz: A Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

Henry Mead
Worchester College, University of Oxford

Henry Mead is a tutor at Worcester College, Oxford. From 2018-2022 he worked with the European Research Council project *Between the Times* on the interwar "crisis of historicism" in Europe. He is the author of *T.E. Hulme and the Ideological Politics of Early Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2015), and co-editor of *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He has also published on modernism in relation to theology, politics, and the visual arts. He is currently researching the idea of fallenness in modern literature and preparing a volume for the Oxford edition of Wyndham Lewis's *Collected Works*.

Arturo Zoffmann Rodridguez
Research Fellow, New University of Lisbon

Arturo Zoffmann Rodriguez is a research fellow at the Institute of Contemporary History (New University of Lisbon), where he is the principal investigator of an ERC Starting Grant (STEXEU) that examines the history of states of exception in early twentieth-century Europe and their impact on the crisis of democracy. In 2020-21 he was a postdoctoral fellow at Mexico's UNAM. He defended his PhD thesis at the European University Institute in 2019.

Geoffrey Robinson
Senior Lecturer, Deakin University

Dr Geoffrey Robinson is Senior Lecturer in Politics at Deakin University, Geelong, Australia. He is a regular media commentator on Australian politics. His most recent book is ***The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Party*** *Intellectuals and the Liberal Party of Australia* (2025).

Kevin Duong
Associate Professor, University of Virginia, USA

Kevin Duong teaches political theory at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *The Virtues of Violence: Democracy Against Disintegration in Modern France*, as well as various articles on democratic theory, modern intellectual history, and the history of the left.

Introduction

by Eric Brandom and Tommaso Giordani

"Caratteristicamente lo storico lavora su molte testimonianze indirette: in questa situazione il documento eccezionale può risultare eccezionalmente 'normale', appunto perché rivelante."[1]

1. The methodological challenges of a legacy

In 1907, Jean Jaurès rose to the defence of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in the Chamber of Deputies.[2] At issue was the possibility that state employees might join this organization and be radicalized by it, perhaps even to the point of sabotage against the good functioning of the state. Jaurès, the great synthesizer of German socialism and French Republicanism, pointed out that not even Georges Sorel, "theorist, metaphysician, of syndicalism", supported sabotage. This, Jaurès went on, was because Sorel recognized that sabotage tended to degrade "that expert ability in the worker that is not only his precarious wealth of today, but also his title to sovereignty in the world of tomorrow (Applause from the extreme left)".[3] Sorel himself cited the reference only to dismiss it as "ironic,"[4] but Jaurès was right that for Sorel devotion to production — the technical aspects of which could never be disentangled from the political and moral ones — was the essential ground of any desirable socialist future. Today, however, Sorel is not remembered for the Marxism he developed in this direction, nor because he was a theorist of revolutionary syndicalism, nor even because of the support he voiced, late in his life, for Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution.

In 1909, the mass-circulation daily *Le Gaulois* published a profile of Sorel entitled "Aux armes, les bourgeois!".[5] Though the words were not Sorel's, this call for bourgeois mobilization encapsulates better than Jaurès' phrase what has become the dominant understanding of the historical significance of Sorel's work. It is true that Sorel did approve of violence, but in the context of a strike and, as he explained in the *Reflections on Violence,* approached in the light of a social myth. And yet, for many of Sorel's most influential readers, what he above all accomplished in his quest to defend class struggle against the blandishments of embourgeoisement and social peace was to transmute revolutionary energy into a valorization of struggle as such, including that of the bourgeoisie on its own behalf. In this way, a familiar story goes, he materially contributed to inventing fascism. As early as the 1910s, Sorel's name

[1] Edoardo Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale", *Quaderni Storici* 12, no. 35 (May-August 1977): 512.
[2] On Jean Jaurès, see Jean-Numa Ducange, *Jean Jaurès* (Perrin, 2024). In English, see Geoffrey Kurtz, *Jean Jaurès : The Inner Life of Social Democracy* (Penn State Press, 2014). And the classic Harvey Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).
[3] Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Chambre des députés, séance du May 11, 1907. 964. Available at https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6342693c/f1.item last accessed 18 September 2025.
[4] Georges Sorel [1908], *Reflections on Violence,* trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 44.
[5] G. de Maizière, "Aux armes les bourgeois: chez M. Georges Sorel", *Le Gaulois,* 11 January 1910, 1.

became a byword among younger intellectuals taken by the idea of action, of myth beyond intellection, of heroism – of anything, really, that might escape the stultifying and venal parliamentary politics of the Third Republic or of the larger bourgeois civilization of Europe. That Sorel had at one time been on the far left only added to the frisson of appropriation. Carl Schmitt could thus read Sorel with approval, and suggest that only a small adjustment was needed to change the central myth of the age from the general strike to the nation.[6]

This powerful image of Sorel as an avatar of refusal, of the rejection of liberal bourgeois civilization as such, emerged out of the pre-1914 anti-parliamentary ideological conjuncture, and is perhaps best crystalized in the parable that his old comrade Daniel Halévy entered into the historical record after the Second World War, in which representatives of both Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union inquired in the 1930s about keeping Sorel's grave in Tenay clean and respectable.[7] Sorel came to stand metonymically for the ideological confusion and extremism of the first part of the 20th century. A bourgeois intellectual committed to nothing so much as the destruction of bourgeois intellectuals and the civilization that made them possible, he was revolutionary socialist who moved to the right and then back to the left, in the eyes of some because of a personal idiosyncrasy and taste for incoherence, while in the eyes of others exemplifying the deeper affinities between Marxism and fascism.

How to reconcile these two figures? The theorist of the autonomy of the proletariat, convinced that in the technical prowess of the working class lay the socialist future, and the apostle of mobilization for its own sake who paved the way for fascism? One option would be to pitch the former, historical, Sorel against the latter Sorel – largely, though not entirely, invented by his readers. But this is not the approach chosen in this book. Rather than seeking to sweep away Sorel's messy legacy and replace it with a more univocal and historically grounded image of the French theorist, we recognize this legacy itself as a legitimate object of historical investigation. As we shall see in this introduction, scholars have done a great deal to recover the contextual, intentional meaning of Sorel's writings, and several chapters of this book contribute to this endeavour. This task remains essential. Yet, meaning is not fixed when the printer's ink dries**.** Readers use a given text in terms of their own projects, frames of reference, and anxieties. And subsequent events necessarily change the meaning of what has come before. We treat Sorel as a layered and plural historical object, one capable, as we shall see, of telling us a great deal about the contexts in which he explicitly and implicitly operated, but also of illuminating, through his contradictory legacy, important aspects of the world that took shape after his death.

This book is thus built around the idea of a connection between writer and readers, between creation and reception. The tension between the two, we argue, must be exploited productively by the historian, in order to capture the range of meanings and possibilities produced in the 20th century by the complex historical object that is Sorel. A reconstruction of Sorel's intentionality, pursued through tight contextualizations of his interventions is the bedrock that enables two further operations: first, an innovative reading of the many contexts he inhabited, and, second, a more solid understanding of subsequent readings and reinventions of his work. In this way, it is possible to move past too obviously ideological uses of Sorel and into reflexive historical

[6] Carl Schmitt [1923], *The crisis of parliamentary democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (MIT University Press, 1988), 65-76.
[7] Daniel Halévy, "Georges Sorel, Mussolini et Lénine", *Journal de Genève*, 13 December 1947, 3.

understanding. Thus approached, Sorel's work opens up new avenues of inquiry into 19th and 20th century history.

A little more must be said about the kind of contextualizations that this book undertakes. We do not insist on contextual reconstructions of Sorel's intentions for their own sake only, but also because they unlock unexpected pathways into the wider worlds that Sorel inhabited. For a long time, there has been an image of Sorel as an unclassifiable thinker, an "anomalous figure".[8] This characterization, however, only tells half of the truth, and not the most fertile one. It is true that often his writings displayed considerable originality and puzzled his readers, but the reverse is also true: this originality was constructed through a thick network of connections and interactions with the main ideas and thinkers of his time, in France and in Europe. Eccentricity, we believe, should not be treated as mere exception, as deviation from the norm, but rather as the occasion for the historian to arrive at a more complex understanding of what that norm was. The difficulty that scholars have found in labelling Sorel, the resistance he offers to being treated as a "case study", i.e. as an exemplification of a general tendency, should stimulate historians towards a rethinking not so much of Sorel, as of the norm(s) he lived in. Taking Sorel as, in this micro-historical sense, exceptional, is one way to pass from tightly contextual arguments to larger stakes. When the wider context is neither deduced from a pre-given theoretical framework nor inherited from an established narrative, but instead reconstructed on the basis of the study of the actions and interactions of discrete historical actors, innovative results follow. This type of interplay between the micro and the macro, in other words, has a power of rejuvenation and reinvention that escapes both narrowly contextual methods and wide narrative approaches.[9]

Readers should not expect from this book, thus, a new, comprehensive and coherent, reading of Sorel. This type of operation would, at any rate, be extremely difficult to achieve in the format of a collective volume. Rather, the book will contribute to **contribute to recovering some of Sorel's varied interventions on their own terms**, in their contexts of historical production. Second, to **grasp these interventions as the opportunities that they were for others to articulate their own political and philosophical positions**. Third, and finally, on the basis of this historically more capacious Sorel, we concentrate on the notion of **myth** from a more conceptual angle, highlighting the genesis and ramifications of this much misunderstood concept. Overall, the book aims at furnishing the reader with the tools not only to go beyond the received image of Sorel, not only to understand the genesis of this image, but also to **explore what one might do with Sorel in the present**, and how his arguments resonate in the current moment of turbulence in democratic society. This last task, however, can only be *enabled* by the historian, but must ultimately be performed by the reader.

2. Introducing Sorel: biography

[8] Isaiah Berlin [1971], "Georges Sorel" in Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current. Essays in the History of Ideas* ed. Henry Hardy (Viking Press, 1980), 296.
[9] See, Jacques Revel, "Micro-analyse et construction du social", in Jacques Revel (ed.), *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Gallimard, 1996), 15-36, especially 19-20.

It is necessary, however briefly, to introduce Sorel anew to the reader. The difficulty here lies in the fact that a large body of accumulated meanings stands between us and Sorel. If the aims of this book are be to accomplished, it is imperative that the reader is able, as much as possible, to look at Sorel with fresh eyes, without the mediation of a body of meanings that is as informative as it is misleading.

The first part of Sorel's life – dating from his birth in Cherbourg in 1847 until his retirement from public service in Perpignan in 1892 – constitutes an almost perfect biography of a French 19th century bourgeois. This point is worth emphasizing. A certain version of Sorel has been passed on to us by figures like Pierre Andreu – the first important biographer of Sorel just after the Second World War and a participant in the interwar non-conformist and then fascist circles. Andreu hinted at certain financial difficulties of the Sorel family which would have resulted in their being at the margins of their class. If Sorel's upbringing had happened in this atmosphere of an old, idealized bourgeoisie, marked by thrift and moral seriousness, brought low by the new commercial instabilities of the Second Empire, this only helped to explain Sorel as fundamentally ill at ease with the new, democratic bourgeoisie that was the protagonist of the Third Republic.[10] Yet the family managed to enrol not only Georges, but also both his brothers, Anatole and Ernest, in the *École Polytechnique*. This would have required significant investment. Unlike the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, the *EP* charged meaningful tuition and was a solidly upper bourgeois institution. Middle and lower layers of the bourgeoisie, schoolteachers' children for instance, were extremely rare.[11] The Sorels, then, were a provincial bourgeois family with substantial means, who understood clearly what paths existed into respectable state careers.

After one year of preparatory classes at the *Collège Rollin* in Paris, Sorel entered the *École Polytechnique* on his first attempt. He excelled there. In his first year, he was classified 5th out of 114 students, and he finished the two years as 10th out of 133.[12] This allowed him to move to the *Ponts et Chaussées*, a specialization school focussing on the construction of connective infrastructure: bridges, railways, roads, and waterways, both navigable and agrarian. Upon his graduation in 1869, he immediately began a career that would last over two decades in the service of the French state. This included postings in Corsica – where he spent the decisive years 1870 and 1871, marked by military defeat and regime collapse in France – and in various towns in southern France (Albi, Gap, and Draguignan). After three years in Mostaganem, in colonial Algeria, where he likely began working on irrigation canals, he arrived in 1880 in Perpignan, in the Roussillon, where he would remain for the next twelve years. [13]

In 1875, Sorel fell ill while traveling through Lyon. His nurse was a former silk-worker a few years his senior, Marie-Euphrasie David. Although he referred to her as his wife, the two never married, nor had children. The two would live together until her death in 1897. For most of the remainder of Sorel's life, he used black-bordered mourning paper for correspondence, and he would dedicate the *Reflections on Violence*, a book he describes as "tout inspiré par son esprit"

[10] Pierre Andreu, *Notre Maître, M. Sorel* (Paris: Grasset, 1953), 23-31.
[11] See Terry Shinn, *Savoir Scientifique et Pouvoir Social: L'École Polytechnique 1794-1914* (Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1980), 65-79.
[12] See "Classement de passage 1865/6", Archives de *l'École Polytechnique*, Fonds X2C/4 and "Classement de sortie 1866/7", Archives de *l'École Polytechnique*, Fonds X2C/5.
[13] For the clues about his work in Algeria, see Georges Sorel, "Note sur les bases des règlements d'arrosage", *Bulletin de La Société Agricole, Scientifique et Littéraire Des Pyrénées-Orientales* 32 (1891): 109 and 147.

to "la mémoire de la compagne de ma jeunesse".[14] The nature of this relationship has been more the object of speculation than anything else.[15] Did they never marry out of political conviction? Or was it Sorel's refusal to offend bourgeois propriety? However that may be, for much of his writing life Sorel lived with one of Marie's nephews and his family.

It is from his time as a civil engineer in Perpignan that we begin to have evidence of his intellectual production and even his life as a local notable. Path-breaking new research by Alice Ingold has shown that Sorel found himself in the midst of conflicts over the distribution of water.[16] These conflicts pitched older, large properties located in the valleys against newer, smaller holdings further uphill and upstream – properties created during the revolution, and often irrigated beginning in the Second Empire. As a professional, this is to say, Sorel was already called on to adjudicate between technical, historical, and political claims in the competing languages of technological progress and abundance, legal property rights, exploitation, and even the potential corruption of the state's administrative role by democratic interest group pressure. At the same time, it was in Perpignan that Sorel began habits of intellectual sociability that would remain with him for the rest of his life. He made connections to local societies of *érudits*, and published his first works: a local history of the French revolution – a copy of which he sent to the elderly Ernest Renan – a book of Biblical criticism, and a study on ancient Greece, as well as technical articles on physics and epistemology.[17]

In 1892, he retired and moved to Boulogne-sur-Seine (later renamed Boulogne-Billancourt), near Paris. He refused the customary fiction of going on indefinite leave, significantly reducing his income but also allowing him to write with a free hand.[18] That summer, he published a long essay on Proudhon, which displays an interest both in socialism and in social sciences, economics in particular. In May of 1893, he published a letter objecting to Gabriel Tarde's refusal to take Karl Marx seriously.[19] He was soon involved not only as a writer but also in editorial roles in the first journals attempting to develop an understanding of Marxism in France: the *Ère Nouvelle*, first, and then the *Devenir Social*.[20] As an editor, he established a network of correspondence with other Marxists, particularly in Germany and Italy. His days were spent attending lectures at the *Collège de France*, working at the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and visiting the offices of the various journals to which he became attached. On certain days of the week he might be found at Péguy's offices, at another those of the anarchist publisher Paul Delesalle. He wrote for socialist journals, but always also for non-socialist ones – the *Revue philosophique* for instance and later the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*. For a time

[14] Sorel [1908], *Reflections on Violence*, 2.
[15] For the best recent treatment of the issue, see Willy Gianinazzi, "Georges Sorel et Marie David, femme du people. Choix de classe et engagement socialiste", *Cahiers Jaurès* 247-248, no. 1 (2023): 31-43.
[16] See Ingold in this volume. And, for an earlier statement, Alice Ingold, "Penser à l'épreuve des conflits. Georges Sorel ingénieur hydraulique à Perpignan", *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 32 (2014): 11-52.
[17] Georges Sorel, "Les Girondins du Roussillon", *Bulletin de La Société Agricole, Scientifique et Littéraire Des Pyrénées-Orientales* 30 (1889): 142-224. Sorel sent an offprint copy to Ernest Renan, which is held in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (Renan Z 6933). Unfortunately the inscription is no longer legible.
[18] Willy Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne: Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889-1914* (Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2006), 26-7.
[19] Georges Sorel, "Science et socialisme", *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 35 (May 1893): 509-11.
[20] On the broader theme of French Marxism see Daniel Lindenberg, *Le marxisme introuvable* (Calmann-Lévy, 1975) and Jean-Numa Ducange and Antony Burlaud (eds), *Marx, a French Passion*, trans. David Broder (Brill, 2023).

he was involved with the *Ecole libre des sciences sociales*, an institution close in important ways to the university.[21] It is fair to describe Sorel in these years not just as a man of letters, but even to apply to him a label that was just beginning to be invented – he was an intellectual in the making. He spoke to a wider audience on the basis of a certain recognized expertise as an authority on Marxism and the workers' movement.

We cannot here attempt to trace the full development of Sorel's thinking, nor every important connection or influence. It can however be said that epistemological preoccupations were important to his engagement with Marxism. He saw in Marx and historical materialism more broadly the potential for a way out of the impasses of 19th century scientific thought. From 1893 until 1898, he developed a non-determinist Marxism capable of accounting for cultural phenomena. In this, he was greatly influenced by the Italian historicist tradition of Antonio Labriola and Benedetto Croce, and by his reading of Giambattista Vico.[22] It was on the basis of this Marxism that he penned the first proto-syndicalist text, the *Avenir socialiste des syndicats* – which, along with *Reflections*, would remain an important part of his theoretical legacy. He befriended Fernand Pelloutier, organizer of the *Bourses du travail* and an important early revolutionary syndicalist. But his reading and writing was never exclusively socialist. Among the lectures he attended regularly over a period of years at the *College de France* were those of legal historian Jacques Flach and, more famously, philosopher Henri Bergson. As Henry Mead's chapter below emphasizes, religion was also a sustained interest – from a very early letter in the 1870s to the Bishop of Orleans, Félix Dupanloup, to his enthusiasm for William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* near the end of his life.

The years of the Dreyfus affair and of its aftermath, between 1898 and 1902, were decisive, for they saw an unprecedented politicisation of and transformation in Sorel. And it is important that these same years were also a period of significant debate within Marxism – the revisionist crisis, in which Sorel participated, was at once a matter of theory and of politics. Theoretically, he sided with Bernstein against Labriola and others, aligning himself with revision rather than orthodoxy. Politically, however, he went in the direction of revolution and anti-parliamentarism, radically changing his own position. Until the early years of the 20th century, his attitude towards parliamentary democracy had not been hostile. Though he had perplexities, he had never expressed much sympathy for anti-parliamentary politics: he had been indifferent to *Boulangisme*, and in the late 1890s criticized the extreme left's choice to disengage from the "bourgeois" politics of the *affaire*. He rallied to the defence of the republic during these years, signing petitions and becoming involved in *dreyfusard* networks and initiatives. Although the precise chronology is hard to nail down, it is clear that the victory of the *dreyfusards* left him, like many others, dissatisfied, and determined his entrance into the anti-parliamentary camp. Between 1905 and 1908, he produced his main body of revolutionary syndicalist work: the *Reflections* across 1905-08, then the *Illusions of Progress*, and finally *Decomposition of Marxism* (this later text discussed in detail by Gianinazzi below). In these texts, he articulated the same syndicalism that he had articulated in 1898, but this time marked by a vocal and

[21] Cristophe Prochasson, "Sur l'environnement intellectuel de Georges Sorel: L'École Des Hautes Études Sociales (1899-1911)", *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 3 (1985): 16–38.

[22] See Tommaso Giordani, "Redefining Historical Materialism in the Peripheries of Marxism: Georges Sorel and Antonio Labriola between France, Italy, and Germany" in Marja Jalava, Stefan Nygård, and Johan Strang (eds), *Decentering European Intellectual Space* (Brill, 2018), 88-113 and Georges Sorel [1896], *Study on Vico*, ed. and trans. by Eric Brandom and Tommaso Giordani (Brill, 2020).

omnipresent anti-parliamentary tone, which often transcended politics and carried with it a broader ideological and cultural critique of democratic society.

A supporter of the idea of independence of unions from political parties, he saw the collapse of this political possibility almost as soon as he formulated it. In 1908, in the aftermath of the lethal repression of a strike in Draveil-Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, the syndicalist leadership of the CGT was imprisoned by Clemenceau, determining, ultimately, a reformist shift in the line of the main French trade union. For his part, Sorel worked in his own way "to ruin the prestige of bourgeois culture," in order to permit the full development of the principle of class struggle.[23] Driven by this imperative, he established a collaboration with the anti-parliamentary right, and defended the Church both against the secular republic and against the modernist tendencies within it. This post-*dreyfusard* disillusionment with liberal democracy was not exclusive to Sorel. His former friend Charles Péguy experienced it too, moving from a republican socialism to the Catholic, nationalist, right, animated by the same spirit of animosity towards the side he had once supported and now called with disdain the "parti intellectuel". When the war arrived in 1914, Sorel saw it for the unmitigated disaster it was. Unlike Péguy and many others, he couldn't muster any enthusiasm at all for the war. Discouraged by the behaviour of the country as a whole, and especially of those who he had regarded as independent thinkers he published virtually nothing for four years, feeling himself to be a man of the past.

The postwar years did see a burst of new activity, actuated perhaps by new political possibilities: a substantial philosophical book on pragmatism, many re-editions of his old work, including an important collection of essays titled *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, as well as a large volume of journalism for Italian papers, required by the precarity of his finances. Politically, he veered back to the left, vocally supporting Lenin and establishing contacts with the first communist journals in France. This support, however, bore the weight of his past. In part, he saw the Russian revolution as the realization of the syndicalist project that had failed in France. He saw, for example, "curious analogies" between his 1898 *Avenir socialiste des syndicats* and "certain details of Soviet legislation – probably without Lenin having imported anything".[24] In other part, however, this support of Lenin was animated by the hatred of "plutocratic democracies", and carried with it the tones and tropes of pre-war anti-parliamentarism.[25] For example, he was concerned by the role of Jews in the revolution, but reassured himself by saying that

> "I have difficulty believing that Jews have strong sympathies for the Bolsheviks, for the main motto of the Russian revolution is 'Death to intellectuals'; now, Jews are doctors, lawyers, engineers; they occupy all the positions where the Russian *intelligenz* became detestable to the people…"[26]

Sorel, who had written specifically against antisemitism at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, was by the end of his life repeating the antisemitic tropes that, ironically, would become the "myth

[23] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 33.
[24] Georges Sorel to Jean Bourdeau, 7 April 1919, in Michel Prat *et al* (eds), "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Jean Bourdeau. Deuxième partie (1913-1921)", *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 15 (1997): 193.
[25] Georges Sorel [1919], "In Defence of Lenin" in Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 292.
[26] Georges Sorel to Jean Bourdeau, 17 October 1918, in Prat *et al*, "Lettres de Sorel à Bourdeau. Deuxième partie", 189-90.

of Judeo-Bolshevism".[27] The opposition to democratic society and to European bourgeois civilisation, as we can see, had become deeply entrenched. It is not surprising that his last political engagement was the discovery of the anti-colonial struggle – a nascent form of opposition to a world he hoped to see in ruins. His last texts were in support of Egyptian independence. [28] He died, so to speak, together with the 19th century, in August 1922: a few weeks before the March on Rome, and a few months before the proclamation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

3. Introducing Sorel: Historiography

Even on the basis of this extremely summary biography, it is easy to see why the legacy he left was so plural. Indeed, just because it is so obviously difficult, the effort to find coherence and a single animating principle in Sorel's work, has been behind a number of important pieces of scholarship.[29] And yet, despite this, the coherence of the received historiographical wisdom on Sorel remains surprising to the point of suspicion: the Sorel that matters is the post-Dreyfus author of the *Reflections*, politically veering from left to right. And this is matched by a strong tendency to read him anachronistically, from the perspective of the interwar period. Put differently, he has been read more as an intellectual counterpart to people like Jacques Doriot – a political leader who passed in the 1930s from the Communist Party into fascism – than of his actual contemporaries such as Jaurès, Jules Guesde, or Alexandre Millerand. The process through which this plural legacy became a relatively coherent and citeable persona is addressed in section two, and more specifically in chapter five. Some discussion of the state of historiography on and around Sorel, however, is necessary to situate this book.

The story here has to begin in the 1980s, a time of historiographical rejuvenation in Europe. This was so in part for generational reasons and also, especially, because of the search, in France and in other European countries, for a different genealogy of the European left, less compromised by the record of an increasingly less credible Soviet Union. In this decade, in France, two different research programmes rediscovered Sorel. The first one was associated with the renewal of studies on European fascism, and is linked indissolubly with the Israeli historian of France, Zeev Sternhell.[30] Sternhell's portrait of Sorel is not particularly original, mainly rehashing an accumulation of tropes that had existed at least since the late 1920s. We hear the story of Sorel as a raging moralist and an irrationalist, entirely bent on the destruction of democratic society. For Sternhell, Sorel accomplished an idealist revision of Marxism that opened up the theoretical – and political – space required to turn Marxism into "a neutral weapon of war that could be used against the bourgeois order not only by the proletariat but by

[27] See Shlomo Sand, "Sorel, les Juifs et l'antisémitisme", *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 2 (1984): 7–36. On Judeo-Bolshevism see Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

[28] Jeremy Jennings, "Georges Sorel and Colonialism: The Case of Egypt", *History of Political Thought* 8, no. 2 (1987): 325–33; Georges Sorel, "Écrits sur l'indépendance de l'Égypte (1919-1920), ed. Michel Prat, *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 27 (2009): 165-97.

[29] Some foundational English-language monographs are James H. Meisel, *The Genesis of Georges Sorel* (Wahr Publishing, 1951); Irving Louis Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason. The Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (Humanities Press, 1961).

[30] For an overall portrait of Sternhell's work, see Tommaso Giordani, "Fascism as a recurring possibility: Zeev Sternhell, the anti-Enlightenment, and the intellectual history of European modernity", *History of European Ideas* 49, no. 5 (2022): 854-69.

society as a whole".[31] What was original and extremely fruitful in Sternhell's analysis was the broader story about the convergence of anti-democratic political cultures in the Third Republic, and his theory of fascist ideology as essentially a French invention, a synthesis of monarchism and syndicalism first reached already in the 1910s by the *Cercle Proudhon,* a group that was certainly inspired by Sorel.[32]

Roughly in the same years, we see in France a resurgence of studies on Sorel, largely under the patronage of Jacques Julliard. This took place in the context of a French and European search for alternative genealogies of the left, a reconsideration of the history of the left and of Marxism that did not take actually existing Communist parties as telos. [33] An international symposium on Sorel was held in 1982, and the following year the *Société d'Études Soreliennes* was established with its journal, the *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, later renamed *Mil Neuf Cent*.[34] Many historians – Michel Prat, Willy Gianinazzi, Madeleine Réberioux, and Shlomo Sand among them – participated in this enterprise, and what they sought to accomplish was essentially a work of rediscovery of Sorel. This obviously implied a focus on different materials than the usual sources like *Reflections on Violence* and *Illusions of Progress*. This group picked up the beginnings of scholarly apparatuses that had been developed in previous decades – for instance the partial bibliography of Sorel's writings that Paul Delesalle compiled – and carried them much further. Fundamental archival and philological work was at the heart of these projects, and important new texts were discovered and made available, especially in the *Cahiers Georges Sorel*.[35] What this kind of work was not able to achieve, however, was the integration of this new Sorel into a significant new synthesis of the period as a whole.

These two contemporaneous scholarly projects – Sternhell relaunching the established opinion on Sorel while people like Shlomo Sand revised it – were essentially opposed, and indeed clashed with one another. Traces of this conflict can be seen in book reviews and footnotes of the publications of the time.[36] It is worth underlining that the revisionist effort's success was

[31] Zeev Sternhell, Maia Asheri, and Mario Sznajder [1989], *The birth of fascist ideology. From cultural rebellion to political revolution*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton University Press: 1994), 37.

[32] The trilogy in which Sternhell developed his thesis is composed by *La droite révolutionnaire: les origines françaises du fascisme* (Seuil, 1978), *Ni droite ni gauche. L'idéologie fasciste en France* (Seuil, 1983), and, with Maia Asheri, and Mario Sznajder, *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste* (Fayard, 1989).

[33] Whereas Julliard's politics at the time were close to Michel Rocard and rivalled the project of Mitterand, both were instances of a socialist offensive on a European Communism weakened by the events of 1954 in Hungary and 1968, both in Prague and in Europe. For another example see the Italian socialists' attempt to retrieve Proudhon in their – failed – efforts to challenge the communist hegemony on the Italian left. Bettino Craxi [1978], *Il Vangelo Socialista*, ed. Giovanni Scirocco (Nino Aragno Editore, 2018).

[34] The proceedings of that symposium can be read in Jacques Julliard and Shlomo Sand (eds), *Georges Sorel en son temps* (Seuil, 1985). See also, from this period, Michel Charzat (ed.), *Cahiers de l'Herne: Georges Sorel* (Éditions de l'Herne, 1986).

[35] It is worth consulting the catalogue of the journal, available at https://www.persee.fr/collection/mcm , last accessed 23 September 2025. Typical of this way of proceeding was the work of American historian John L. Stanley who, besides writing a synthetic biography, contributed to many translations of Sorel's writings. It is worth noting that Stanley had begun working in this direction much before the French renaissance of Sorel studies in the 1980s. See Georges Sorel [1908], *The Illusions of Progress*, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (University of California Press, 1969); Georges Sorel, *From Georges Sorel. Essays in Socialism and Philosophy,* ed. John Stanley, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (Oxford University Press, 1976); Georges Sorel, *From Georges Sorel. Hermeneutics and the Sciences*, ed. John Stanley, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (Transaction Publishers, 1990).

[36] Thus, Sternhell questioned the originality of the perspectives presented in *Georges Sorel en son temps,* describing the publication as the work of "a clique with loyal followers", and not hiding his "irritation" at the

very partial: its superior philological accuracy was not an effective response to the sweep and larger explanatory ambition of Sternhell's narrative.[37] This choice for the micro over the macro had solid reasons and was almost unavoidable: only a very strong focus on the context of production of Sorel's works could challenge the many imprecisions which had accumulated in over half a century of reception. And, too, these historians were more concerned to reconstruct the French socialist tradition than they were to give an account of the crises of the European 20th century.

Though scholarship on Sorel has not stood still since 1990, we do witness a curious continuity, bordering a stalemate. The gap between specialist readings of Sorel and larger historiography of the Third Republic and modern Europe has remained. Significant work in French and also English has continued to appear.[38] Yet we have neither a new synthesis focused on Sorel, nor – and this perhaps is worse – a convincing integration of Sorel into a larger new treatment of the period. The great accomplishments of the scholarship of the 1980s ought to have made precisely this possible.

The present book intervenes at the point where the revisionists have accomplished a great deal of their work of research and publication of material. It tries, in part, to make the results of this overwhelmingly French-language body of work available to Anglophone readers. In other part, though it cannot produce that synthesis outlined just above, it seeks to break free of the shackles of received opinion in an innovative way. As explained initially, rather than countering an established narrative with precise contextualizations, it seeks to highlight the points where the established narrative breaks in the face of the historical material, in order to suggest not a new synthesis, but multiple possible avenues of revision, both of Sorel and of his many contexts. For a more detailed explanation of how this is accomplished, we turn to the final section of this introduction.

fact that "from what the contributors say, one would think that Sorelian studies had only just been invented". See Sternhell, Asheri, and Sznajder, *Birth of fascist ideology*, 263-4. For their part, Sternhell's theses were never welcomed in the *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, with John L. Stanley, in his review of Sternhell's book, speaking of the Israeli historian's "arbitrary method". See John Stanley, "Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, Maja Asheri, *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste*", *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 7 (1989): 213.

[37] Some synthetic biographies did come out of this historiographical current, but curiously more abroad than in France. See Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel. The Character and Development of his Thought* (Palgrave, 1985); John L. Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue. The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (University of California Press, 1981); Marco Gervasoni, *Georges Sorel. Una Biografia Intellettuale* (Unicopli, 1996). Though some proposed an overall interpretation of Sorel's work, most notably Gervasoni and Stanley, none of these works had, or rather aimed at having, a range and ambition comparable to those present in Sternhell's works.

[38] Without pretending to be complete, the following work suggests the diversity of approaches taken. Tudor Balinisteanu, "Spellbinding Stories. Gender Theory and Georges Sorel's Concept of Social Myth", *Critique* 42, no. 1 (2014): 107–26; Richard Boyd and Gianna Englert, "Georges Sorel's Tocqueville", *History of Political Thought* 45, no. 2 (2024): 347–71; Luke Collison, "Georges Sorel's Political Energy", *History of European Ideas* 47, no. 8 (2021): 1348–61; Willy Gianinazzi, *Georges Sorel philosophe de l'autonomie: suivi d'écrits marxistes et syndicalistes de Georges Sorel*, (Arbre Bleu, 2022); Peter Giraudo, "Against the Caesarist Crowd: Georges Sorel's Early Socialism during the Dreyfus Affair", *Modern Intellectual History*, forthcoming; Marina Simakova, "Syndicalist Marxism for Reactionary Times: Sorel's Revolutionary Politics of Production", *Stasis* 8, no. 2 (2019): 76-93; Justinien Tribillon, "Inventing 'Infrastructure': Tracing the Etymological Blueprint of an Omnipresent Sociotechnical Metaphor", *SocArXiv*, Center for Open Science, April 18, 2021, mx2u7. https://ideas.repec.org//p/osf/socarx/mx2u7.html.

4. Rationale and outline of chapters

Chapters in the first part of the book root aspects of Sorel's work in several historical contexts. In this section, the ambition is two-fold. The most obvious goal is a simple one of rectification –driving home the complexity and plurality of Sorel's work beyond the familiar but excessively unidimensional picture of Sorel that remains dominant. But there is a second, equally important goal: that of reimagining several of the contexts in which Sorel operated through a narrower focus on his interventions.

The initial essay by Patrice Rolland – the first of his writings to appear in English, here *in memoriam* – situates Sorel within a "syndical moment of legal thought". Though acknowledging that Sorel was not a systematic legal thinker, the essay emphasizes the centrality of law to Sorel's thinking about socialism. It casts him as part of a widespread effort to remake the fundamental categories of law in view of the existence of the *syndicats* and of other intermediary bodies. Legal individualism had to give way to collective bargaining, for instance, as part of a general re-evaluation of the relationship between state and individual. Here is a Sorel who stands in a tradition that goes forward to Georges Gurvitch's philosophy of law more than to Frantz Fanon's revolutionary violence.

Alice Ingold's chapter takes inspiration from Rolland's work, but draws on her own research into Sorel's career as a civil engineer. Scholars of Sorel had long believed that archival records for this part of Sorel's life had been lost in the Paris flood of 1910. This turned out to be an instance of Paris-centrism – copies of most of the relevant documents exist in the Roussillon provincial archives. These materials, together with Ingold's previous work on irrigation and civil engineering in this region, allow her to offer a startling new account of Sorel's syndicalism, one that begins not with Marxism, but with the practical dynamics and legal forms of rural irrigation syndicats, institutions with which Sorel spent the bulk of his career working. Longer histories of collective resource management – water especially – turn out to be central to Sorel's early thinking, and this background in rural social and economic life, in fact, never ceased to inform his work. Sorel the theorist of socialism emerged from the confrontation of the administrative state with rural practices of self-management. It is not only that Sorel can, according to Ingold, be read as an ecological thinker *avant la lettre*, but that the aim of his revolutionary syndicalism was always to think autonomy in the context of productive activity – within limits imposed by scarce natural resources.

Taken together, these two essays recast the inherited figure of Sorel, showing him to be a theorist of intermediary bodies as much as the familiar incendiary sectarian. Further, they do so by bringing to the fore his embeddedness in the key debates of the time.[39] Recapturing this embeddedness proves to be more fertile than insisting on the usual image of Sorel as an idiosyncratic exception, for this operation opens up the space for a broader rethinking of the political culture of the Third Republic. Rather than the familiar image of a regime under continuous assault from anti-parliamentary forces, whose political discussion revolved entirely around the legitimacy of parliamentary democracy, we get a glimpse into a different Third

[39] To mention but one example, Ingold's chapter illustrates how the corporatist option was a perspective that united thinkers normally thought of as antipodal, such as Sorel, on the one hand, and on the other impeccably republican figures like Durkheim or Bouglé.

Republic, marked much more by a discussion around the *forms* that democratic governance could or should take.[40] At stake in this debate was the fundamental unit of the democratic regime, that which is to be represented: the individual citizen, theorized by the French revolutionary tradition, or the intermediary body, a collective subject anchored in social and economic life? This alternative reading of the Third Republic embeds it, in turn, in a different story of 19th and, especially, 20th century politics, not one focussed on the opposition between democracy and tyranny, but one concerned with democracy's own development, with the process through which the promise of popular sovereignty was transformed into a concrete institutional system in France, and by extension in Europe – a narrative whose contours can only be hinted at from a distance here. [41]

The other two essays in the first section, by Willy Gianinazzi and Henry Mead, focus respectively on Sorel's revision of Marxism and on his long engagement with question of religion and belief. Eventually, Sorel became known as an unconventional, borderline heretical Marxist. But when he began reading Marx, these concepts made little sense, as Marxism was a theoretical novelty everywhere in Europe except Germany. Gianinazzi's essay takes us at the core of Sorel's engagement with Marx and Marxism. Beginning with the 1908 *Decomposition of Marxism*, Gianinazzi embeds this revisionism in the history of economic thought. The third volume of *Capital* appeared in the early 1890s and did not resolve standing questions in particular over value theory that it had been hoped it would – especially given the powerful new accounts on offer from the emerging school of marginalist economics. Gianinazzi takes seriously – as did Sorel – the weight of "bourgeois" economic science for Marxism already in this early moment. He traces the changes in Sorel's thinking through the crucial period of the revisionist crisis and into his attachment to revolutionary syndicalism and concludes by noting the continuing salience of bourgeois or liberal economics for Sorel and other theorists of revolutionary syndicalism such as Arturo Labriola and Enrico Leone.

Mead's essay on Sorel begins charting a vast terrain that remain largely unexplored, namely that of Sorel's writings on religion and theology. Sorel wrote extensively on this topic – his first published book was after all on the Bible – although, as Mead's essay shows, not in a uniform manner and from different perspectives. At first, he confronted the question of biblical criticism through the prism of his dissatisfaction with the dichotomy between faith and science. Mead shows how Sorel's engagement with this terrain comes from the perspective of the development of an epistemology of the social sciences capable of making sense of popular belief and popular imagination. In the 20th century, the question of religion became much more political, both for French society at large and for Sorel. After 1902, he began seeing Catholicism as an historical formation threatened, like the proletariat, by the advancement of bourgeois republicanism, and conducted his culture war against this ideology also through his

[40] For the classical picture of the Third Republic see Sternhell, *La droite revolutionnaire* and Michael Curtis, *Three Against the Third Republic: Sorel, Barrès and Maurras* (Princeton University Press, 1959).
[41] The argument for this different Third Republic is developed masterfully in Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable: histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Gallimard, 1998), 219-358. Also relevant are the debates examined by Julian Wright and H. S. Jones (eds), *Pluralism and the Idea of the Republic in France* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and Cécile Laborde, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France 1900-1925* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). Speaking more broadly, new work on French socialism can help in the attempt to the late 19th century invention of an institutionalized democracy in France. See, for example, Alexandra Paulin-Booth. *Time and Radical Politics in France: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (Manchester University Press, 2023) and Julian Wright, *Socialism and the Experience of Time: Idealism and the Present in Modern France*. (Oxford University Press, 2017).

writings on Church matters. Of particular interest here is a parallelism Mead identifies in Sorel's thinking between socialist parliamentarism and modernist theology, both shunned by him as forms of abdication to the Third Republic.

Both of these chapters do more than clarify Sorel's positions. Much like the first chapters, they open vistas on wider terrains of historical research. Gianinazzi's paper has the merit of bringing to light the richness of the theoretical debate on Marxism at the time of the Second International, especially its social scientific dimension, which explains the attraction of many intellectuals. This recuperation of pre-1917 Marxism has been ongoing for a while, and it helps in recapturing the complexity, and geographical articulation, of Marxist thought before Lenin, updating an older paradigm which saw the pre-1917 world as one in which "the Marxism which was exported was mainly the one elaborated by German social democracy".[42] Equally, Mead's chapter points to a large, and still incompletely accomplished, task: that of integrating the religious into intellectual and political histories of the period. Too often mistakenly treated as a remnant of the past, and thus simply ignored, the religious element of the period tends, when acknowledged, to be dealt with in specialist works.[43] This integration, pursued by Mead in his chapter, points to a different way of doing things.

The second part of this book turns to reception. The force of these chapters is greater in the light of the first section. Sorel's authorial intentions, after all, are essential to understanding the extent of the creative redescriptions that have accompanied his work at least since 1908, when the *Reflections on Violence* gave him suddenly a wider readership. Tommaso Giordani's chapter sets up a structure for the section. It shows how Sorel's syndicalism was, by some, rendered marginal almost immediately, in 1908, and an entirely new avenue of reception was developed which treated Sorel as a proxy for one's positioning *vis à vis* parliamentarism and the bourgeois civilization that had developed in the 19th century. Whether seen as a symbol of a radical break by avant-garde intellectuals before the Great War, as a prophet of collapse of a failed civilization in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, or as a progenitor of the post- and anti-democratic regimes of the interwar, for over a century Sorel's significance has been constructed in relation to the liberal-democratic political tradition much more than to socialism. Nearly always, this has been accomplished by seeing Sorel as essentially the other of, or at any rate outside of, this tradition. The extent to which this is the original creation of a number of

[42] Franco Andreucci, "La diffusione e la volgarizzazione del marxismo", in Eric Hobsbawm *et al* (eds), *Storia del marxismo. Il marxismo nell'età della Seconda Internazionale* (Einaudi, 1979), 24. On this rediscovery of pre-1917 Marxism and of its social scientific entanglements see, for example, Bertel Nygaard, *History and the Formation of Marxism* (Palgrave, 2022), or Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: "*What Is to Be Done?" *in Context* (Brill, 2005).

[43] Recent years have seen the development of a substantial new American scholarly literature on European Catholicism in the 20th century, from a political but especially an intellectual history direction, which models the kind of integration that is wanted for the earlier period. See Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy*, (Harvard University Press, 2019); Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe*, (Harvard University Press, 2019); James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church*, (Harvard University Press, 2018); Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics*, (Harvard University Press, 2021). For a more comprehensive analysis focusing on France, see see Bruno Dumons and Christian Sorrell (eds), *Le Catholicisme en chantiers. France XIXe-XXe siècles* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013).

European intellectuals is highlighted in the chapter, and is accompanied by a warning concerning contemporary views of Sorel, which for the most part are not much more than re-elaborations of the tropes of the 1910s and of the interwar period.

Arturo Rodriguez and Geoffrey Robinson's texts both confirm and offer important counterpoints to Giordani's narrative. Rodriguez deals with a topic neglected in Giordani's chapter, namely the left-wing reception of Sorel. Through a closely argued excavation of Sorel's place in debates within Spanish syndicalism in the first decades of the 20th century, Rodriguez shows Sorel's role as an intellectual and political mediator in the transition from anarchism to Bolshevism of a Spanish tradition of left wing politics. Sorel's influence was thus at its highest in the early 1920s when a largely Catalan segment of the union movement sought to move the whole in a more Bolshevik direction. Rodriguez' work demonstrates the value of attending carefully to debates within and between working class political formations. Robinson's chapter, on the other hand, shows the immensely productive nature of Sorel in the context of Cold War cultural politics. Robinson tells the story of Australian Sorelians, centring his account on the influential philosopher John Anderson and his students and followers, in particular Peter Coleman, Neil McInnes, and Eugene Kamenka. We have again to do with a movement from syndicalism and the working class, through academic or para-academic philosophy, and into the politics of the Cold War and affluent, consumer societies. The configuration of forces and tendencies in Australia is distinctive. More than elsewhere, Sorel's texts were drawn into debates between political as opposed to lifestyle activism, for instance, and the appeal of an ethic of producers proved more durable.

The final two chapters focus on myth and, though both are rooted in historical research, attempt to recapture the possibilities inherent in Sorel's thought with the present in view. Brandom's chapter argues that myth emerged for Sorel specifically in contradistinction to utopia, and that by following the critiques Sorel undertook of the latter, we can better understand the stakes of the former. If contemporary utopianism remains hollow, too haunted by dystopia and too easily coopted, perhaps this is because it has not contended with the critique Sorel undertook in the early years of the 20th century. Duong's chapter begins with myth as Sorel articulated it in the *Reflections on Violence,* and looks to the uses made of it in the wide-ranging debates around myth in the 1930s, especially but not exclusively in the surrealist circles around Georges Bataille and André Breton. Myth was an idiom in which to enact individual freedom within collective action – one that never simply refused scientific modernity, but organized itself to some degree around escaping capture by such rationalizing force. Both these chapters accept Sorel's radicalism and the essentially revolutionary goals of his writing, in particular the difficult conceptualization of collective action without domination.

5.Conclusion

Like most of the readers of this book, Sorel lived in an era of crisis of parliamentary and liberal democracy. It would be easy to suggest that herein lies his relevance to the present. It is hard to deny the resonance that Sorel's tirades against the Third Republic and "bourgeois culture" have in the present. The escalation from a declaration of autonomy of the working class from its political representatives to the world-historical condemnation of parliamentary democracy as a failed system, born out of an unredeemable culture that corrupts everything it touches, is striking, and in some respects recalls not a few 21st century trajectories. True, there was always more than this going on in Sorel's work. The vision of the autonomy of the producers that he

had formulated in the first part of his writing career always remained alive for him. And yet, between these two Sorels, the one that can be imagined in the present, even after all the necessary work of historical situation, is the first one. Whereas visions of productive autonomy have faded from the horizon of historical possibility, the critique and then repudiation of parliamentarism and the liberal order, its replacement through violence justified by myth, has not.

One is not born, but becomes, a fascist. And Sorel, who can only be said to have become one posthumously, became so as a result of his honourable engagement in the major political battle of his time, the Dreyfus affair. It was in the attempt to recognize and articulate an egalitarian and emancipatory politics that he came to reject so aggressively everything then implied by participation in democracy. In some respects his trajectory is not so unusual. Charles Péguy, too, moved from a militant defence of republican liberties to an obscene nationalism. In 1913 – just a few years after Jaurès' defence of the CGT with which this introduction began – Péguy declared that in times of war, "there is only one politics, that of the National Convention" and that this amounted to "Jaurès on a tumbril" – on the way to the guillotine – "and the noise of drums to drown that loud voice".[44] Far from a Habermasian sphere of rational exchange, democratic public life at times may appear to be better described as a space where, to use the words of an anti-democrat of Sorel's time, "it is not about knowing whose reasons are better, but if a certain philosophical and political personnel will have the better of us"[45] – drums over voice indeed. That Sorel played his role in such a radicalization of French intellectual and political life is hardly to be denied, nor can the parallels with anti-intellectual radicalization in our own time be missed. Surely the spectacle of one democratic public sphere disassembling itself may offer lessons to another?

And yet, caution is necessary. Surely the construction of democracy is, of all things, least amenable to teleological analysis. If we do not wish to excuse or simply condemn Sorel and his failures, and all the more so those of his time, but to learn from them, we should attend more carefully to the object on its own terms. Indeed, the entire methodological strategy of this book, in fact, throws up defensive lines against such easy comparison. To contextualize Sorel means to reconstruct the complexity and plurality of his concerns. Does this establish a safe historical distance between him and us? As context is not an alibi for historical actors, so too the act of contextualization must not be thought to exculpate the historian – but rigorously pursued it should be a check on both desire and anxiety. To explore Sorel's reception is to examine the interaction between a body of work and the interpretations of readers as, itself, a historical object. It is to highlight how continuities between past and present have been established many times, and that these imagined continuities have eventually proven, on inspection, shaky and problematic – and yet they remain the unavoidable material on which future interpretations build. Above all, to frame Sorel's exceptionality as a vantage point from which to rethink the worlds he inhabited is an invitation to question the established narratives about the period, opening up space for new historical work, not just about Sorel.

Given such labour of reconstruction, it is possible to ask the question of Sorel's present relevance in a way that maintains a sense of historicity, that takes the full measure of rupture

[44] Charles Péguy, "L'Argent suite", *Cahier de la Quinzaine* 14, no. 9 (1913): 127.
[45] Charles Maurras, *L'Action française et la religion catholique* (Nouvelle Libraire Nationale, 1913), 3. The original pun in French reads as follows: "Il s'agit de savoir non pas qui a raison, mais si un certain personnel politique et philosophique aura raison de nous, s'il aura, comme on dit familièrement, *notre peau*".

and continuity, of similarity and difference, between the present and the historical object at stake. In a way, this is all the historian can do – demand that the question of significance and relevance to the present be asked less wrongly. And as historians, all we can do is equip the reader with the tools required to pose this question well. But to answer it is the task of the reader, of the citizen, who alone bears the responsibility of how to deal with their present.

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Sorel and the "syndical moment" of legal thought[1]

by Patrice Rolland †
Formerly Professor of Public Law at the Université Paris-Créteil
Translated by Eric Brandom with the assistance of Tommaso Giordani

1. Introduction. The "syndical moment" of legal thought

It would be wrong to call Sorel a theorist of law, although his conception of it was elevated and coherent. Since his thinking on this subject was not systematic, seeking to isolate any influence he had would be unproductive. He mobilized his idea of law above all in the context of revolutionary syndicalism. On this terrain it is possible to study convergences between his thinking and that of jurists, sociologists, or philosophers of law or politics. The hypothesis put forward here of a "syndical moment" in legal thought is not motivated exclusively by the effects of the rise of syndicalism and the emergence of social legislation in France at the turn of the century. The aim here is not to account for the history of labour legislation and the ways in which jurists have treated it. The question is more ideological and political. The goal is to track conceptually how certain jurists and philosophers sought to rethink the sources of law in light of the existence of syndicats and of syndicalist ideological projects, especially those of the new CGT, of Fernand Pelloutier, Victor Griffuelhes, or even Léon Jouhaux. Georges Sorel, certainly, but also in the same moment Maxime Leroy, and later on Georges Gurvitch, sought to theorize the tendencies that they believed they could observe in this syndicalism in the form of theories of juridical pluralism and social law.[2] These theories have, at the least, in common a desire to contest the state's monopoly on law.

Sorel was neither a theorist nor a practitioner of law. His thinking was nourished by reading (Jhering and his *Struggle for Law* seems to have played an important role) and assiduous attendance at Jacques Flach's lectures at the Collège de France. Rather than a reflection on law in the strict sense, we have to do here with a political philosophy concerning law and its mode of production in a given society. This philosophy explicitly broke with the parliamentary Republic and with the representative democracy that was triumphant in 1900. Syndicalism appeared to Sorel as the one social force that could remain totally external to the new dominant republican political culture.

The revolutionary syndicalism of the CGT and of Pelloutier allowed Sorel to think his way to a rupture with the republican culture to which Jaurès' socialism in part rallied at the moment of the Dreyfus Affair. For Sorel, the rejection of democracy was the refusal of the Republic's "Jacobin", statist, natural law, and "legicentric" culture. Among the peculiarities of Sorel's critique is that he saw Republican political culture as an anti-legal one. Syndicalism, in contrast, seemed to him the salvation of law as such in democratic society. Sorel understood working

[1] This is an authorized translation of Patrice Rolland, "Sorel et le 'moment syndical' de la pensée du droit", in Carlos Miguel Herrera (ed.), *Georges Sorel et le droit* (Kimé, 2004), 55-81.

[2] Sorel reviewed Leroy's *Le Droit civil et le droit nouveau* in the *Revue générale de bibliographie française* 2, n° 10 (April 1904): 172. He noted that the publisher aimed to propagandize for state socialism. Sorel did not explain how, for Leroy, socialism influenced contemporary transformations in the law: "The new legal thinking seems to me to come to very little in the end, and the solidity of the Napoleonic project is remarkable in a century when everything seems to be dissolving".

class and syndical culture as a rare opportunity for real legal culture. To syndicalism, he assigned the mission of saving law.
This connection between the questions of law and of syndicalism thus expresses an original political project distinct from and against other republican or socialist ones. Against a strongly Blanquist project of political revolution, Sorel emphasized the meaning of law and institutions that reject a revolution made in a "juridical night".[3] Against a political socialism suspected of hierarchical Saint-Simonian tendencies, he valued the sense of worker autonomy in the production of law. To the republican rights of man preaching social peace, he opposed the sense of struggle and of self-affirmation in conflict and the plurality of legal systems.

This vision of socialism as a "syndical society" suggests a particular idea of the role of law in the evolution of society and of the way in which law is produced. On these two points, Sorel broke profoundly with the republic and with democratic socialism. He wanted to understand legality as against democratic politics.[4] Two major axes of rupture took shape regarding the production of law in a modern democratic society. First, Sorel affirmed worker autonomy through the particularities of a workers' right that opposed the rights of man. Second, worker tradition became the real source of right, against law as an expression of the general will or of democratic sovereignty.

2.Worker autonomy against the rights of man

Sorel spoke rarely and only in a negative way about the rights of man, which had become one of the symbols of the Republic. Yet for him this did not mean rejecting the rights and liberties that were typically attached to this ideology. He aimed rather at the ideology of natural, idealist, and ahistorical rights that Jean Jaurès in particular invoked at the time of the Dreyfus Affair in order to valorize his socialism as juridical.[5] For Sorel, this philosophy of natural right had been established by the bourgeoisie against the Old Regime.[6] Out of it came Jacobinism and the Terror, but also the evangelists of social peace. From his "syndical" point of view, Sorel had two principal reasons to reject the ideology of the rights of man and natural law.

2.1 The rights of man do not permit the emancipation of the proletariat.

In denouncing the theory of the rights of man, Sorel did not ignore the right to liberties. He simply did not connect the two as they have implicitly been connected since the Second World War. The rights of man as he understood them represented a false idea of human autonomy and in particular of proletarian autonomy. This critique touched bourgeois reformism of both republican and parliamentary socialist varieties.

Sorel wanted to liberate worker and syndical activity from the straitjacket of natural law and natural rights ideology, against which his "new rights [*droit nouveau*]" theory was directly aimed. Jaurès was wrong to believe that it was enough to invoke the rights of man to render his socialism juridical and thus superior to Marxism. Invoking the 1789 Declaration of the Rights

[3] Georges Sorel, "Avertissement pour la troisième édition", in *Introduction à l'économie moderne,* 2nd ed. (Marcel Rivière, 1922), vi
[4] Similar tendencies in other jurists are discussed in Jacques Le Goff, "Les juristes de gauche et le droit social dans les années 1880-1920" in Carlos Miguel Herrera (ed.), *Les Juristes face au politique. Le droit, la gauche, la doctrine sous la IIIe République* (Kimé, 2003), 13-33.
[5] Georges Sorel [1910], "Mes raisons du syndicalisme", in Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat,* 2nd ed. (Marcel Rivière, 1921), 272-273.
[6] Georges Sorel, "L'éthique du socialisme", in *Morale sociale. Leçons professées au Collège Libre des Sciences Sociales* (Alcan, 1899), 134.

of Man amounted to "claiming for the proletarian as much happiness as a bourgeois of 1789 might have hoped to achieve. This so-called juridical socialism amounts to no more than a philanthropic redistribution of national wealth".[7] Sorel appreciated Marx's denigration of all such democratic sophisms. Liberal legality recognized only the isolated worker. It was unable to recognize and sanction the spirit of collectivity that is to be found, for example, in a strike. "For the union member, these claims are false; the group of workers form a body, everyone's interests are united".[8] The workings of consumer cooperatives exhibit all the vices of the deception that is democracy. It pretends, as in democracy, that the members manage their own local interests themselves.[9] Bernstein had noted that consumer cooperatives were democratic, while production cooperatives were oligarchic: "When they succeed, it is because they have eliminated what is worthless and have constituted from amongst themselves a group of people able to direct business *as owners".*[10] In this way, Sorel was able to argue that workers' organizations had essentially nothing to expect from democracy, from its political culture, or from the juridical principles attached to it. True cooperatives had to obey a different law, as it happened a law that ordained the superiority of an elite leadership. Neither natural law nor democratic principles were universal, and Marx provided the critique of natural law by historical law. Natural law was purely negative and belonged to bourgeois emancipation. Historical law "principally under the influence of Marx, draws its principles from the study of social conditions produced by industrial development".[11] The weakness of natural law was to want to impose universal principles on experience. Its pretentions to elevated morality were false.[12]

Sorel thus argued that there existed worker practices antithetical to the rights of man. The rupture could be seen on two levels. Syndicalism must refuse both social peace and the peaceful resolution of labour disputes. Drawing for support on Jhering's ideas, Sorel attacked the pretentions of "the professionals of social science". Administrative decision making was in a certain sense the most peaceful system, and arbitration between conflicting interests was only a caricature of justice.[13] From the point of view of justice and law, it would be pointless to mask confrontation and conflict. Law after all is profoundly connected to conflict, it is born in and through conflict. To prevent the emergence of conflict, therefore, would be to prevent the emergence of law. Evidently there were men for whom the idea of revolution had juridical connotations quite unfamiliar to the inventors of the methods of social pacification. It is enough to compare Le Play to Proudhon, who constantly sought the genesis of law.[14] In the 19th century many liberals as well as social reformers argued that war was not a normal condition for civilized peoples. Against this view, Sorel pointed to the difference between class war and war between States. The latter are typically engaged in to assure a balance of power; the proletariat, on the other hand, pursues the complete overthrow of its adversaries. Strikes can therefore not lead to real social peace. The idea that unions [*syndicats*] will become prudent relies on the hypothesis that they will become very large and like states. [15]
The other way to protect the proletariat against the obligation to social peace is to struggle against those who want to load the working class with social duties rather than allow it to affirm its rights. Here Sorel opposed Proudhon to Saint-Simon and Le Play. Sorel's reaction was

[7] Sorel, "Mes raisons", in *Matériaux*, 272.
[8] Georges Sorel [1898], "L'avenir socialiste des syndicats", in Sorel, *Matériaux*, 102.
[9] Georges Sorel, Introduction à l'économie moderne, 174 and 179.
[10] Ibid., 174.
[11] Sorel, "Éthique du socialisme", 134.
[12] Sorel, Introduction à l'économie moderne, 332.
[13] Georges Sorel, "Qu'est-ce qu'un syndicat?", *Pages libres,* n° 116 (21 March 1903), 250.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Georges Sorel [1905], "Préface de 1905 à l'Avenir socialiste des syndicats", in Sorel, *Matériaux*, 68-69.

provoked by the social protection laws voted in parliament and so desired by both the radicals and social Catholics. Socialism, Sorel objects, in associating itself with such policies, is just following the old utopians: it depends on the good will of bourgeois opinion or the enlightenment of capitalists.[16] Sorel recalls the formula that had allowed him to take the measure of this opposition: "Several years ago, I proposed to determine the general character of these two great transformations by means of a precept that could be applied equally to the hypotheses I have made on syndicalism. I said that, in these three cases, we pass from a system of duties to a system of rights".[17] He was thus led to emphasize what he called violence and what would be better called the sense of confrontation and of conflict:

> "The explanations given above on the role of war in the formation of law allows the hope that the organization of combat, dear to present-day syndicalism, could induce the beginning of a new juridical system. While the solidarists seek to jumble everything up, violence tends to separate, and we have seen that law is regarded as being all the more perfect when the schisms established between the subjects of the law are deepened". [18]

Sorel even defended the syndical practices seen especially during strikes, and was led to justify a right to constrain on the part of syndicats that would not be recognized under the paradigm of the rights of man.[19] The connection between syndicalism, struggle, and the emergence of new legal rights appears forcefully here. For Sorel, the general strike marked the end of the era of politicians' revolutions and hierarchies dominating the proletariat. And this could be seen as a rupture within political and juridical culture: "This formula [the general strike] contains nothing of the rights of man, absolute justice, political constitutions and parliaments".[20] Sorel gives the pointedly derisive name "anarchist madness" to the cultural rupture undertaken by the proletariat and recognizable in revolutionary syndicalism. This madness breaks with "everything that had interested the old liberals: the eloquence of tribunes, the manipulation of public opinion, political party dealmaking".[21]

Sorel turns his back on a whole classical culture of the public sphere, an attitude to which one must connect his valorization of professional life. Recognition of a right to constraint on the part of the syndicat within a strike is perhaps the most revelatory instance of the birth of a new legal order. In fact, he calls into question the fundamental rights characteristic of the culture of the rights of man (individual freedom to work, freedom of opinion right to associate or not, etc) and the fundamental principles of democracy (majoritarianism, freedom to vote, the secret ballot, etc). All this is a manifestation of the proletarian struggle against democratic absorption: "it would not be impossible for socialism to disappear through a *deepening of democracy*, if revolutionary syndicalism were not there to oppose social peace".[22] It is thus possible to justify actions on the part of syndicats that would otherwise be contestable. Sorel does so in the name of the "superior capacity of the *syndiqués*". This capacity is essentially of a moral order: they have given their time and money without any hope of personal advantage: "Thus they acquire

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[16] Ibid., 72-73.
[17] Georges Sorel [1908], *The illusions of progress,* trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (University of California Press, 1969), 175.
[18] Ibid., 175-6.
[19] The European Court of Human Rights, in its August 13, 1981 judgment in *Young, James and Webster*, condemned the long standing English practice of the so-called closed shop clause.
[20] Sorel, "Préface de 1905", in Sorel, *Matériaux*, 59.
[21] Ibid., 60.
[22] Ibid., 74.

the incontestable right to the government of their group".[23] In other words, these are men and organizations that have acquired the right to suspend the purely democratic functioning of their group. Seen from the outside, this is called "the tyranny of the syndicats".[24] Sorel follows Paul de Rousiers in speaking about the practices of English unions, which try to exclude non-members from large worksites and which make their own selection of workers. This right to constraint that Sorel wants to see confirmed for the syndicats is all the more plausible in his eyes because one exists already in bourgeois law, in which a majority in the owners' syndical associations can constrain the minority[25]:

> "Important practical consequences follow from this theory of constraint, which are in perfect agreement with the way in which strikers think; in examining these consequences, we obtain an experimental proof of the exactness of the translations that we propose of the strike into juridical language".[26]

There is thus an opposition between the right to constraint in a strike and the right freely to conclude hiring contracts. Sorel proposes a remarkable transaction here. It must be admitted that "comrades' justice" has the right to sanction, in the form of a boycott, turncoats, spies, and provocateurs. There is therefore a real "right to private police" issuing from this "real right to constraint". And "courts ought only to be able to assess if comrades' justice has exceeded the limits that ought to have been placed on it by a sound interpretation of the facts".[27] A sort of juridical pluralism follows from this. Groups or institutions enjoy, like Churches or religions, a freedom of internal organization that extends to lawmaking, with which the State has no business. The State intervenes *post hoc*, to verify whether a group or institution has committed an abuse of rights. Sorel wanted thus to see the idea of workers' right to coalition recognized: the strike has no meaning without a constraint to preventing the employment of other workers. Following Proudhon, Sorel noted that the strike demanded unanimity from the workers but that this "might be entirely voluntary or imposed by the collectivity".[28]

2.2 Syndicalism must seek out a struggle for the law

If there was for Sorel one way of distinguishing between revolutionary syndicalism and "political revolution", it was certainly in the role played by the struggle for the law. Worker autonomy is made in and through the law. The syndicat must not be reduced to a simple "resistance society" : "that would be to prevent the elaboration, in conformity to its own way of living, of the new principles of its law; it is, in a word, to refuse it [the proletariat] the possibility of becoming a class *for itself".*[29] The workers would never be able to rise to the level of consciousness of the existence of their class if they remained under the tutelage of demagogues: "for the proletariat to acquire the idea of its revolutionary mission, it must possess the ambition to create a juridical system for itself".[30] The revolution consists in replacing one juridical system with another.

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[23] Ibid.,117.
[24] Expression cited by Sorel in ibid., 116.
[25] Sorel was able to observe this practice in his professional life as a hydraulic engineer in Roussillon, where he spent most of his career as a civil servant.
[26] Georges Sorel [1914], "Grèves et droit au travail" in Sorel, *Matériaux*, 408.
[27] Ibid., 409. Sorel takes up here Proudhon's ideas about private justice and vigilantes charged with repairing the failures of the State's justice.
[28] Ibid., 406.
[29] Sorel, "Avenir socialiste", in *Matériaux,* 110. See also page 101.
[30] Sorel, "Grèves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 407. See also Georges Sorel [1908], "The decomposition of Marxism", trans. Irving Louis Horowitz, in Horowitz, *Radicalism and the revolt against reason. The social*

The class struggle thus became for Sorel the alpha and the omega of socialism. The syndicat was the instrument of this social war of the proletariat against the captains of industry.[31] Nonetheless, the goal of this class struggle was the formation of new law : "Marx's thinking is in no doubt here : the transformation must take place through an interior mechanism ; it is within the proletariat, with its own resources, that the new legal order must be created".[32] This new law develops amidst innumerable difficulties and struggles, as the example of trade-unionism shows, despite the opportunities offered by the political conditions in England.[33] Syndicalism must not shy away from the fight and must not give itself over to social pacification if it wants to elaborate new law, because war plays an important role in the emergence of the law. Certainly, for Sorel, it is not to be understood in the same way as in the past: "Our century has gone much further; it has begun to transform the notion of revolt, making of it a *collective struggle for the conquest of rights*".[34]

The syndicats have an essential role in this work, informing the syndicalist understanding of politics and marking out the proper function of syndicats in relation to parties in a democratic system. It must not depend on an elite from outside the working class because such an elite can never contribute to the proletariat becoming a class for itself. In a foreword written in July 1914, Sorel evoked with nostalgia the dream he had had of a socialism entirely given over to syndicalism. In specifying precisely where he had been disappointed, he expressed the heart of his Marxism:

> "Many young people believed that there existed somewhere a heroic proletariat, creator of a new system of values, called to found very soon, on the ruins of capitalist society, a civilization of producers; in fact the German worker is becoming more tractable, he is enrolling himself under the banner of democracy and, rather than sacrificing everything for the class struggle he is, like the bourgeois, busying himself with the general interests of his country".[35]

In 1919, Sorel looked to the successful operation of the soviets for salvation for the proletariat.

The place of the law and of the elaboration of new law as a mark of proletarian emancipation was such that it became in practice the only goal of syndical activity. So, at a moment in 1900 when he still believed in democracy, Sorel thought that:

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theories of Georges Sorel (Routledge, 2009), 241, where Sorel draws from Marx the idea that "without a juridical constitution it cannot be said that a class is fully developed".

[31] Sorel, "Préface de 1905", in *Matériaux*, 67.

[32] Sorel, "Avenir socialiste", in *Matériaux*, 101. Sorel nonetheless notes that Marx was not sufficiently attentive to "relations that exist between the development of class struggles and the genesis of new legal orders". (Georges Sorel [1921], "Exégèses Proudhoniennes", in Sorel, *Matériaux,* 424). In October 1919, Sorel's judgement had been yet more severe, "Marx never had a particularly strong feeling for the role that law plays in the development of civilizations". (Sorel, "Avertissement pour la troisième édition", vi). He had an explanation for this lack of attention toward law: in Marx and Engels' time, natural law held too great a place in juridical theory. See Georges Sorel, "Le prétendu 'socialisme juridique'", *Le Mouvement socialiste*, n° 185 (April 1907): 343.

[33] Sorel, "Avenir socialiste", in *Matériaux*, 105.

[34] Georges Sorel, "La science et la morale", in Questions de morale. Leçons professées au Collège Libre des Sciences Sociales (Alcan, 1900), p. 24.

[35] Georges Sorel [1914], "Avant-propos", in Sorel, *Matériaux,* 4. In 1919 he seems to find some new optimism: "It is not perhaps above the capacities of the powerful and organized syndicats of Germany to prevent the proletariat from totally abandoning its historical mission, which is to produce new juridical conceptions fully belonging to themselves". See Sorel, "Avertissement pour la troisième édition", vi.

> "if … the moral education of the working classes through personal experience and in view of *self-governement* [english original] is the great modern social problem, we must place our confidence in the modest institutions organized by the workers, institutions that do not aim to overthrow everything, but which are able to change the tendency of general opinions and which can, *if we know how to use them*, teach us to govern ourselves and make us worthy of freedom [*liberté*]".[36]

Combining this absolute priority on a new law derived from the customs and habits of workers on the one hand, with on the other scorn for Parliament, for the political class, for legislative activity as a source of voluntarist and democratic law, one understands how Sorel could refuse the conquest of power as a democratic poison to alienate the working class. A Saint-Simonian and Proudhonian equivocation regarding politics is notable here. In his own way, Sorel defends the seriousness of professional life against the futility and corruption of politics. He was critical of mandatory arbitration in labour conflicts because he saw there a risk of "the development of democratic corruption". Specifically, "we would have an *industrial democracy* (in the labour boards [*conseils du travail*]), exploited by politicians in every respect the same as those who exploit public services…All such legislation rests on the hypothesis that the introduction of parliamentary habits into the domain of production can rid it of violence just as violence has disappeared from the political world; but revolutionary syndicalism seems quite capable of preventing 'positive' men from living at the expense of production".[37]

If the primordial aim of syndicalism is to sustain the juridical consciousness of the proletariat in order to produce new juridical conceptions, and if this function is connected to its disinterest in the conquest of power or exercising legislative power in democracy, the necessary consequence is accepting the coexistence of two legal and institutional systems in the same society. This double system clearly illustrates worker separatism and its limits, of which Sorel was quite aware:

> "While ideas about natural right are widespread, this kind of law is understood as a way to eliminate social conflicts…With historical right all these illusions disappear; two juridical systems can coexist at the same time and each can have its justification, just as many different juridical systems have arisen over the course of history. It is even plausible that progress in instruction, by making familiarity with juridical thinking more widespread, may work to sharpen the sentiment of class struggle".[38]

Sorel analyzed precisely the way in which such coexistence of juridical systems was established in practice in light of the Dreyfus Affair. The working class undertook two kinds of "radically distinct" activities: now taking a normal role and creating institutions compatible with the bourgeois order; or now seeming to hurtle toward the catastrophic overthrow of capitalism. The right to constraint and to work that Sorel had analyzed as legal rights proper to the working class cannot be integrated by legal doctrine into the systems of positive right with which it concerns itself. In as much as this is a new law proper to the proletariat, "the right to work and the right to constraint…have the peculiarity that they find application not in the

[36] Georges Sorel, "Les facteurs moraux de l'évolution", *in Questions de morale,*100.
[37] Georges Sorel, "E. d'Eichthal, La Liberté individuelle du travail et les menaces du législateur", *Le Mouvement socialiste* 23, n° 198 (15 May 1908): 386.
[38] Sorel, "Le prétendu 'socialisme juridique'", 343. See also Sorel, *Illusions of progress*, 71.

regular operations of economic life, but only in the hours of revolutionary crisis".[39] Sorel insisted at length that professors of law ought not attempt an impossible conciliation of these two systems in their theories of the strike. They ought, on the contrary, to understand that industrial conflicts are the meeting of two irreconcilable social classes.[40]

However, in practice confrontations are rare and take place only in exceptional circumstances, so the idea of two parallel and contradictory systems coexisting needs to be clarified. For Sorel, only a historical conception of law allows us to understand such coexistence of two systems, as this has indeed taken place in the historical past. This suggests first of all something about Sorel's understanding of the revolutionary process. He was a reformist if revolution means transforming society from above. Yet one can call him revolutionary if what matters is the overthrowing of juridical ideas and the sentiment of law in a class and in a society. Sorel here is only re-iterating implicitly the old debate between "social revolution" and "political revolution". Once again he shows himself to be spontaneously Proudhonian. We find, indeed, that he is trying to think at once a complete transformation in social relations and their juridical translation, and a gradual method of transforming society, since he throws out bourgeois "force" with its train of terror and repression. It may nonetheless be asked if this historical idea of law and its development does not close Sorel in a logical trap. The arrival of new law is thought *ex post*; is Sorel not condemned therefore to minimize in practice conflicts and violence in the ordinary sense of the term because he sees now only the juridical doctrines that have triumphed and not these that have vanished? Does the historical perspective not smooth over legal conflicts a little too much, and render them too abstract, once history has been written?

3.Worker tradition against the law, expression of the general will?

To ask after the sources of law as such is to reflect on the desirability of different political systems. Proudhon already had contested the monopoly over laws. He looked for a solution in the direction of the contract, and a generalization of contractual procedures. However, taking up the ideas of the historical school, he turned eventually toward tradition.[41] Sorel, even as he avoided generalizations, would also become interested in worker tradition.[42] Wanting, from a political point of view, the emancipation of the proletariat, he was led to look for a kind of law [*droit*] that emerged directly from society, or better even from the working class. He seems not to have been directly inspired by Proudhon in this, although he appreciated the importance the latter gave to law. This lack of direct inspiration only highlights the existence of a political tradition that gives to the sources of law a political meaning and a role in the emancipation of the proletariat.

Syndicalism was marginalized in parliamentary democracy not only because the latter was bourgeois and hierarchical, but because syndicalism had to seek to produce its own law alongside and against the dominant legal order. Sorel explained this by pointing to syndicalism as the privileged location of the birth of juridical consciousness in the proletariat that is at the same time close to the workshop: "Social ideas appear only when the worker turns back on himself in order to judge the relationships that are realized in the workshop: in this way the juridical consciousness of the people is filled with ideas that are closely connected to the

[39] Sorel, "Grèves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 410.
[40] Ibid., 411-13.
[41] On this topic, see Anne-Sophie Chambost, *Proudhon et la norme. Pensée juridique d'un anarchiste* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004), especially 133ff. and 171-84.
[42] He seems to have been interested in this very early, from *L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats* in 1898 and in Georges Sorel, "Les aspects juridiques du socialisme", *Revue socialiste* 32, (October and November 1900):385-414 and 531-2. in 1900. Maxime Leroy's *La Coutume ouvrière*, appeared in 1913.

constitution of classes".[43] The educational mission assigned to syndicalism was at the level of this task.[44] In Sorel's eyes syndicalism was destined to save law against "the detestable traditions" of juridical socialism or "the abominations of political socialism" because it refused any kind of transaction with the State, the bourgeois world, or the intellectuals.[45] Thus Sorel's interest in worker practices and tradition manifested an anti-statism and a concern for the autonomy of the working class. He championed therefore what seems to him to be the real meaning of the term "labour law [*droit ouvrier*]": not social legislation concerning workers, but "the practices that form themselves within the body of the workers".[46]

3.1 Rejecting democratic legal culture

Is it possible to replace the democratic and parliamentary system with a "syndicalist" system? This is what Sorel was trying to think through. He sought, at the beginning of the century, after the triumph of the "dreyfusards", to grasp this rejection of republican and parliamentary culture through the opposition of the juridical and the political, and through the attempt to find a source of law independent of the State. This new legal order would be social because it would spring from the depths of society. Sorel thus found a way to think social revolution without the necessity of conquering power and making a political revolution. In *la Révolution dreyfusienne*, he interpreted the victory of the Dreyfusards in precisely this light: as a conquest of power and of its benefits. He saw in that event only a political revolution, which is to say the substitution of an elite by another. A social revolution, that is a real revolution, could not have the same shape. The whole thrust of his thinking around syndicalism was to prevent it from throwing itself into political games and to preserve its capacity to make this real social revolution thanks to its capacity to think and to make a new legal order.[47]

A fundamental antinomy therefore existed between on the one side Pelloutier's syndicalism and on the other the State, as well as juridical or political socialism. Not forgetting that France believed in the necessity of central authorities, Sorel insisted that the proletariat had to develop differently than the bourgeoisie. One cannot arrive at anarchy if one begins by reproducing the old centralizing organization. People must not be locked into institutions copied from the bourgeoisie if they are to be educated into a new way of living. Intellectual unity must not be allowed to lead to the state-mandated unity of socialism as well.[48] Indeed, the reason why Sorel is so severe with the school of "juridical socialism" is because of its statism. This is socialism in "pursuit of the force provided by the State", and proletarians ought not give themselves new masters who simply want to imitate the old royalty.[49] In contrast, revolutionary syndicalism will save law because it remains outside the detestable traditions that juridical socialism wishes to preserve. No conciliation with the State, bourgeois ideas, or the intellectuals is thinkable.

[43] Georges Sorel [1901], "Préface pour Gatti", in Sorel, *Matériaux*, 204.
[44] Ibid., 223. Sorel draws here on Proudhon, who argued in *De la capacité* that collective struggles between workers and masters had a significance above increasing salaries: "La réalisation du droit dans le corps social" (quoted in ibid., 224).
[45] Sorel, "Le prétendu 'socialisme juridique'", 336.
[46] Sorel, "Préface de 1905", in *Matériaux*, 73 note 1.
[47] For example: "Naturally, the situation appeared in a different light when electoral success led socialist leaders to realize that the possession of power, even if it is only minimal, offers great advantages… The concept of the State which has replaced the original Marxian formulation was made on purely material grounds: the organization of socialist workers into a political party". Marxism had thus turned its back on its earlier rejection of Blanquism: "It is no longer a question of directing the people but of leading the producers to think for themselves, without the help of a bourgeois tradition" (Sorel, "Decomposition of Marxism", 243).
[48] Georges Sorel [1902], "Préface", in Fernand Pelloutier, *Histoire des Bourses du travail* (A. Costes, 1921), 54-6.
[49] Sorel, "Le prétendu 'socialisme juridique'", 336.

The opposition between political socialism and revolutionary syndicalism is absolute: official socialists "speak of breaking up everything, but they attack the men in power rather than power itself; they hope to possess the force of the State".[50] Sorel indeed tried hard to articulate a new political culture around a certain idea of right. It can be described in terms of two great confrontations.

First is the confrontation between pragmatism and idealism. The latter is the great vice of bourgeois democracy. Idealism dispenses with direct observation of the real and its arbitrary political programs come from its profound ignorance of reality. Pragmatism, on the contrary, is characteristic of syndicalism. Pragmatism manifests itself especially in the sense of right of which the proletariat is the real bearer in modern society. For Sorel, the opposition between idealism and pragmatism precisely duplicates that between politics and syndicalism. Juridical culture matters to Sorel as a bulwark against the ravages of idealism and utopia in social organization. Rupture with republican culture and political socialism is pushed here very far. Sorel's standing argument is that the Terror under the Revolution was the fruit of Jacobin idealism. Idealism gives rise to social hate, while "hate finds much less on which to feed in historical law than in natural law".[51] As long as the conflict is juridical, it has to do with things and not with people or what they want. In the *Reflections*, Sorel opposed bourgeois force to proletarian violence. Historical law differs in that it "takes, on the contrary, as a fundamental and explicit working assumption, the existence of an institution whose value has been pragmatically demonstrated. It asks itself if it would not be good to generalize the application of the principles that the mind discovers in this experiment. It works by drawing always on the economy".[52] Practice is the real test of ideas in contact with economic life.[53] The juridical spirit, under the influence of practice, eliminates the "unlimited confidence in the *magical power of force*".[54]

Socialism, in 1900 as before 1848, must pass "from a mixture of vague hypotheses to the reasoned elaboration of principles, from sentimental demands to reform projects, from the 'emotional night' to the clarity of juridical discussion".[55] Sorel was sympathetic to the development of an author like Merlino who, beginning from abstract ideas about anarchy "was [later] determined by juridical considerations". The reason for this is that "the jurist cannot content himself with theories" and "feels the need for a practical application for any discourse".[56] Sorel presents the general direction of his pragmatism: "ideological constructions are necessary, but they are also the most frequent cause of our errors. One must therefore reject anything that is not the product of reflection on institutions, on practices and empirical rules that have acquired well-determined forms in practice".[57] He therefore takes sides against idealism. Reformers work only according to an abstract logic that jurisprudence and jurists will then correct.[58] And neither jurists nor moralists can establish the principle of future society: "this principle can be clearly conceived and usefully introduced into juridical logic only when present-day society will have vanished and given its place to a new kind of organization".[59]

[50] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 107.
[51] Sorel, "Éthique du socialisme", 144.
[52] Sorel, Introduction à l'économie moderne, 332.
[53] Sorel, "Avenir socialiste, in *Matériaux*, 111-12.
[54] Sorel, "Les aspects juridiques du socialisme", 392.
[55] Ibid., 393.
[56] Georges Sorel [1899], "Préface pour Colajanni", in Sorel, *Matériaux*, 192, note 1.
[57] Sorel, Introduction à l'économie moderne, 390.
[58] Ibid., 100-1.
[59] Ibid., 391.

Sorel concludes from this that idealism produces only falsehood and deceit. Thus to educate the will and submit man to pragmatism, civil law is much better than public law.

Secondly, most striking in terms of the political and juridical culture of the democratic republic, Sorel rejected the political and juridical voluntarism best represented by the parliamentary legislator. Sorel contested certain of the ideological foundations of democracy. The general will is a fiction: "No one has ever tried to justify the singular paradox according to which the vote of a *chaotic majority* brings to light what Rousseau calls the *general will* that cannot be wrong".[60] Law cannot therefore draw from it the *aura* that it possesses in the republican tradition: parliamentary will is a pure will, that of a majority in a given Parliament. If this will has no generality nor any capacity to express a higher will of the whole, worker separatism is legitimized and justified. Sorel can then assign to syndicalism the search for *self-government* [English in original] against representative democracy. Worker tradition can become an autonomous source of law, and can realize this autonomy within a representative democracy. This explains Sorel's refusal of any mediation, particularly that of the State. It is a mistake on the part of the workers to believe that it is more to their advantage to address public power than to discuss their economic interests directly with the bosses. Syndicalism ought to drop such impulses and Sorel was afraid that the workers would give themselves over to demagogues who promised to take from the "rich" and give to the "poor".[61]

Sorel defined the class struggle as a struggle over law. He specified that "each of the systems is characterized by *the political idea that each class has of the role of law* and by the general appearance of the economy of the country that results from this idea".[62] We will better understand the stakes of worker tradition for Sorel if we begin by considering his critique of legislation in democracy, which is motived by both political and technical considerations. Analyzing the genesis of right [*droit*], Sorel noted that new laws are never in practice what they have been projected to be. Legislators sometimes complain about the deforming work of jurisprudence, but Sorel suggested that this work often only mitigates inconveniences that jurists had themselves earlier pointed out. "While those agitating for reform have infinite confidence in legislative formulae, jurists hold the texts themselves to be of little importance next to practice. However, practice depends on so many causes that legislation may finally accomplish something quite different from what it had intended. They know that what matters most in legislation is not the rule, but the use that one makes of it in order to satisfy the feeling of legality".[63]

In Sorel's eyes there was a real powerlessness to legislation: law really only springs from the depths of society. This opposition between jurists and reformers introduces the question of will into the genesis of law. Materialism, in the form of the historical study of law, properly speaking minimizes not so much human will as that of the legislator. We have here really a confrontation between a political will formalized in the election of representatives, and a social will that emerges at least as much in practices and traditions manifesting the juridical sentiments of a class, of a people, or of a society which are rationalized in jurisprudence. Politically, Sorel criticizes the contradiction of socialists who await the development of social legislation in the same way as the much-derided old utopians: this amounts to asking the enemy class itself for protection and hoping that it will fulfill its social duty.[64] For Sorel, right is

[60] Sorel, "Avenir socialiste", in *Matériaux*, 118.
[61] Sorel, "Préface pour Gatti", in *Matériaux*, 226.
[62] Sorel, "Éthique du socialisme", 142-3.
[63] Sorel, Introduction à l'économie moderne, 101.
[64] Sorel, "Préface de 1905", in *Matériaux*, 72-73.

different from democratic legislation, but is powerless to oppose such legislation within democracy.[65]

The power of the United States Supreme Court seems to him to result from exceptional circumstances that are particular to that country; it would be unthinkable in France. In speaking of the "decrees of democracy", compared to regulatory or council decrees, he emphasizes the purely voluntarist aspect of normative decision in the Republic, as opposed to the idea of a law that arises from the experiences with which it is constantly confronted and which are the object of constant adaptation by the judge, rather than the legislator.[66] In denouncing "the law-making mania of our parliaments", Sorel adds that laws modifying legal codes or touching moral interests such as religious liberty or popular instruction ought to be voted by a majority of two thirds, "but democracy will never consent to attenuate its dictatorship in this way".[67] Thus, legislative power is like a dictatorship because it is only the arbitrary decision of a will that is separate from a society of which it can never be representative.

Similar to Proudhon, Sorel mounted a refusal of the political, the original expression of which is to be found in Saint-Simon: the workshop will replace the government. Implicit in Sorel's writing is an enduring desire to free both the economy and law from politics. There are many references to this pejorative conception of politics as wasteful, useless, and corrupt. He said explicitly that the partisans of the general strike want to get rid of all the forms of political life practiced by the old liberalism: the eloquence of tribunes, management of public opinion, dealings between parties, and so on. He committed himself really to the complete disappearance of public space in favor of "society organized according to framework of production".[68] If Sorel hated the hierarchical and authoritarian aspects of Saint-Simonianism, he nonetheless conserved its prioritization of production and producers. Serious work takes place in that domain because only there does man confront the real. The syndicalist idea leads to seeing society from an economic point of view: "everything ought to follow from the framework of a workshop that is conducted with order, without lost time and without capriciousness".[69] For Sorel, socialism should aspire to transfer "the regime of the workshop" into society. Here worker habits and traditions take on their full importance as possible elements of social regulation through law emerging directly from society without the mediation of a legislator, although with that of a judge.

This why Sorel says that syndicats acting as "social authorities" must prove their "juridical capacity".[70] Sorel's exaltation of law as such is thus directly related to his devalorization of politics. He tends to substitute juridical mediation for traditional, legislative, and parliamentary mediation. Does Sorel accept clearly and fully the consequences the reduction of the State that he demands? Indeed, he manages, through what he calls the materialist conception of history, to imagine the fading away of politics. "Organizations designed for resistance will have finally enlarged to such a degree their field of action as to have absorbed almost the whole of political life".[71] Syndicalism does not want to conquer bourgeois positions. Rather, it struggles "to

[65] Georges Sorel [1914], "Le caractère religieux du socialisme", in Sorel, *Matériaux*, 362.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Georges Sorel [1914], "L'organisation de la démocratie", in Sorel, *Matériaux,* 384-5, note 3.
[68] Sorel, "Préface de 1905", in *Matériaux,* 60.
[69] Ibid., 70.
[70] Sorel, "Avenir socialiste", in *Matériaux*, 120.
[71] Ibid., 123.

empty the bourgeois political organism of all life and to transfer anything of use they might have contained into a proletarian political organism".[72]

In Sorel's eyes all this marks the end of parliamentary and "jacobin" democracy. He defends "social authorities" against democratic authorities. The vow adopted at the congress of Romilly in 1893 had not been understood: "it tended to render legal what has become the practice of the English syndicats : it established the principles of government by selected professional groups, which is to say the new political principle of the proletariat".[73] The purely ideal and utopian equality of democracy must be differentiated from just and real organized equality. In a note, Sorel specifies that "the syndicats appear here as analogous to the *social authorities* who exercise control over the normal conditions of labour".[74] The democratic fiction of government by the citizenry must be rejected in favor of a new mode and new selection criteria. The old groups were above all political and sought the conquest of power. The new ones are professional: "their basis is the mode of production of material life and they have in view industrial interests. They are therefore capable, according to the principles of historical materialism, of supporting a socialist structure".[75]

Syndicalism and a new legal order are the form that Sorel gives to the old opposition between social and political revolution. The revolution is not a scene from the Apocalypse but is simply the replacement of an older legal order with a new one. There is no "juridical night" because new categories take the place of old ones. The revolution is first of all the production by the working class of juridical ideas that are its own and are not imposed on it by either bourgeois capitalists or by socialist intellectuals. Sorel follows here the Proudhonian tradition both in its "political capacity of the working classes" and its separatist and worker autonomy dimensions. At the beginning of the 20th century Sorel is, in certain respects, the exemplary anti-Lenin.

4.Worker tradition as source of law

One must straightaway emphasize the paradox latent in Sorel's work: putting tradition – the generally conservative method vaunted by Hume, Burke, Savigny, or Hayek – in the service of social revolution. Manifestly influenced on this point by Savigny, he wanted to make room for the "juridical consciousness of the people". He expressed himself quite clearly on the theories of the historical school and on what he retained of them.[76] Owed to them, he said, was a critique of those who saw law as issuing from the "infinite wisdom of modern legislators" and as being "the expression of will enlightened by philosophy". For Savigny, "the juridical conscience of the people replaced universal reason". Customary right possessed for him a certain superiority as an expression of juridical instincts. In view especially of Jhering's critiques, Sorel held that the "spontaneous formation of law" was manifest above all in commercial law. Yet historical doctrine hardly seemed satisfactory in seeking to understand the future. Sorel concluded indeed that "Savigny changed the spirit of history by introducing this new method", but that "inextricable difficulties occur when progress and evolution are mixed". One must not, in pursuing the history of law, define juridical conscience as a force obeying a law. Rather he arrived at the following definition: "juridical conscience is an image destined to embrace all of the conditions under which is made the acceptance (or the refusal) of a new system of

[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 120.
[74] Ibid., 120, note 2.
[75] Ibid., 119.
[76] See Sorel, *Illusions of progress,* 131-7. In order to understand clearly the notion of historical law that Sorel opposed to natural law, evidently this critical reading of Savigny must be combined with one of Marx.

relations".[77] Sorel cites the example of the resistance of the peasants of the Midi to the Civil Code.

To uncover worker tradition, Sorel begins with fact, i.e. with worker's practices. But these do not constitute law immediately and of themselves. The syndicat, but also the judge, plays an essential part in the passage from practice to law.

If the authentic worker law is formed in the body of the workers, it is right to assign the greatest importance to the habits of the workers themselves. Because these habits develop in the workshop on the basis of worker reflection on their own practices, the juridical ideas that derive from the organization of the workers will vary from country to country as do the juridico-economic conditions of the people at any given moment.[78] These habits express the separation of classes: "the ideas that the English workers have of their own rights are, in large measure, based on the practice of long apprenticeships that have led the skilled workers to think of themselves as separate from the rest of the workers".[79] Sorel has no hesitation about identifying an elitist process at work in this selection of practices leading to a new legality. Sorel takes many examples of practices from the English or American working class. He finds in England "a whole new system of laws" in what he calls the collective labour market, an ensemble of rules that constraint an employer to re-hire strikers and to not take on *blacklegs*. Sorel points to a transaction of this kind in Limoges in 1894.[80] The notion of legal domicile is another essential element in the formation of the English spirit: the trade unions have demanded that workers not be brought from elsewhere to work. Emerging here is a kind of right to work attached to a dwelling place.[81] From this Sorel draws the following lesson: "used to considering themselves as the only ones who could be called to serve the complex machines that exist in their place of residence, English workers came to consider themselves as having over these machines a sort of *jus in re aliena* and among them a feeling of fellowship has developed that one only rarely finds elsewhere. Without this juridical notion I do not believe trade-unionism would be possible".[82]

For Sorel, practices do not make law by themselves. Worker legality results from a whole process, of which the syndicat, but also the judge, is the privileged instrument. It must be emphasized that for Sorel custom does not emerge with the force of law directly from its social milieu. The judge's sanction is fundamental and what Sorel calls custom or tradition is not separate from a body of case law. Judicial intervention replaces the *opinio juris sive necessitatis* of traditional theory of custom. Sorel in this way avoids the problem of knowing how custom acquires juridical status.[83] Tradition, for Sorel, is not some kind of medieval reminiscence.

The syndicat participates first of all in a selection of practices established in workshops. There are bad ones, such as the disproportion of sanctions for tardiness. To escape them, the syndicat gives the conflict a juridical aspect, which is to say that rather than allowing conflict to appear simply as the confrontation of two wills it is made, in a formula dear to Sorel, to concern "things subject to rules".[84] Sorel draws from this a more general conclusion :

[77] Ibid., p. 131-5.
[78] Sorel, "Préface pour Gatti", in *Matériaux*, 211. Sorel shows how the practices of American workers are incomprehensible in Europe, and cannot be transposed there. (ibid., 216).
[79] Ibid., 208.
[80] Sorel, "Avenir socialiste", in *Matériaux*, 104-5.
[81] Sorel, "Préface pour Gatti", in *Matériaux*, 209.
[82] Ibid., 209-10.
[83] On this point there are significant differences with Proudhon. See Chambost, *Proudhon et la norme*, 175ff.
[84] Georges Sorel [1896], "Sur les usages des fabriques", in Sorel, *Matériaux*, 166.

> "…it is evidently in the *good practices* of the workshop that we find the source from which future law will spring; socialism inherits not only the machinery that will have been created by capitalism and the science that comes out of this technical development, but also the cooperative processes that will have been constituted over the long term in factories in order to make the best possible use of man's time, force, and attention".[85]

Law appears in this selection as the work of reason. For Sorel juridical form and the work of reason were profoundly connected. Marx, in trying to clarify the ideas of English popular conscience, raised them to a higher level and in this way gave them "a juridical aspect".[86] Sorel arrived at his analysis of the conditions of formation of law quite early: "Law is not a spontaneous product of human consciousness; it is, like science, the product of a long mental evolution, which passes from primitive forms marked by instinct to higher forms that are directed by intelligence. Law is the result of philosophical thought concerning itself with traditions, just as science is the result of this thought seeking to pass from empiricism to laws".[87] Syndicalism here plays an essential role in this climb toward reason. After having recognized a transformation of the notion of revolt, Sorel continues:

> "we see forming before our eyes increasingly many institutions founded on this transformation. Our best social observers…show us…how labour syndicats work to bring into being a new kind of law through the formation of the collective contract. The cry of the weak, when isolated, remains instinctive, undetermined, lacking any juridical aspect; but if there is a permanent association that takes up the task of gathering together these complaints, of transforming them into reasoned demands according to principles, of pursuing the reform of certain *bad practices* and of creating new rules, then particularity fades, revolts die out, and law [*droit*] begins to appear".[88]

Sorel was so interested in this process of the formation of law [*droit*] on the basis of labour practices and traditions that he tried to grasp it with as much precision as possible, for instance in the unfolding crisis provoked by a strike and in the way it could have juridical effects.[89] He noted that bankruptcy gave a juridical existence to the general assembly of debtors: catastrophe transformed the occult association into an explicit one. The same phenomenon could be seen at work in strikes. The Court of Cassation sees a violation of contract in the coordinated work-stoppage. The workers, on the other hand, maintain that they remain attached to the work. For Sorel the facts correspond better to the proletarian claim. These men name representatives to discuss working conditions; the general assembly of strikers approves the agreement reached between its representatives and the bosses and clearly the tribunal obliges the boss to respect the agreement reached with an authority that, in the eyes of the court, should not exist. "There again crisis has transformed an occult association into an explicit one".[90] In the same way, Sorel saw a real "right to work" appear in the fact that strikers reclaimed the right to be employed or re-employed in the factory to the exclusion of newcomers.

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[85] Sorel, "Préface de 1905", in *Matériaux*, 70.
[86] Sorel, "Préface pour Gatti", in *Matériaux*, 207.
[87] Sorel, "Les aspects juridiques du socialisme", 390.
[88] Sorel, "La science et la morale", 24-5.
[89] Sorel, "Grèves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 400ff.
[90] Ibid., 401.

> "At issue here is not some vague demand analogous to the one made in 1848 by workers who had lost their normal occupation in the national crisis; the claim here is to a well-determined right that is exercised in the workshop and which the strikers have contributed to making; it is really a *jus in re aliena* whose object is perfectly determined: the privilege on the part of the strikers to work above that of newcomers".[91]

The consequence of this manner of formation of a new order of law on the basis of worker practices and traditions is to bring to light the competition of two sources of law and their coexistence. Sorel was always eager to remind readers that the social revolution would not be a scene from the apocalypse. It would take place through the development of this new law that will progressively replace the old law. The new social order and the moral forces of the future form within capitalist society. "Before these moral forces have achieved a certain maturity, when they remain still indistinct, we appear to live still according to the rules of the past; but in pushing these rules to the limit, in employing them in new and unexpected ways, they are used up and ruined bit by bit".[92] Sorel saw in this process one of the historical laws most essential to Marx's materialism: "The former juridical relations, before they disappear for a long time regulate new ways of living". [93] This juridical work in society is therefore, at least at the beginning and for a certain time, largely subterranean and invisible to the public. The transformation of law [*droit*] is quietly wedded to that of society. The forms within which it is prepared or effected are not limiting and may hide developments for a long time. Sorel argued, this is to say, that even non-socialist cooperatives are forms that could be filled with other content.

From this it results that legal rules belonging to antagonistic and antinomic systems coexist. Sorel explicitly assumes it. He believed first of all, at least around 1900, that in a democracy not everything is determined by class interest and that the proletariat can mobilize itself for general interests (freedoms, foreign affairs, anticlericalism) independent of its own. In practice, the proletariat undertakes two radically distinct types of activity: at certain moments it may take a normal place in the modern world and create institutions compatible with the bourgeois order; or it may seem to aim exclusively at the destruction of capitalism.[94] The juridical system cannot fail to be complex. It is not only the product of rules enunciated by competent authorities, of commentaries on doctrine or jurisprudence. All around the law strictly understood there is a large zone that is much better understood by the general public. Sorel speaks of a "twilight of law" which puts pressure on jurists to modify their feelings: "It is there that one encounters the rights whose codification is impossible, but which one needs to understand in order to make sense out of the movement of society".[95]

5. Conclusion

Three elements together form a system for Sorel: a vision of history, the determination of its modalities, and the social group bearing this history. A historical pragmatism inspired by Marx provides the meaning of this history. Law, above all in the techniques of tradition and jurisprudence, forms its modalities. Syndicalism – with its sense of group autonomy, its refusal of political power, and its proximity to economic reality – names the social group carrying this

[91] Ibid., 405.
[92] Sorel, "Avenir socialiste", in *Matériaux*, 112.
[93] Ibid., 112-13, note 1.
[94] Sorel, "Gréves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 410-11.
[95] Ibid., 396.

history forward. Such is the significance of the "syndical moment" of Sorel's thought. Law plays in it an essential part and not only in providing the technical mechanisms of this history. The form commands the substance. To select tradition as a "social" form for the source of law and of justiciability has political consequences. Sorel's profound mistrust toward the State may spring from classical liberal sources just as much as from Proudhon, who on this point must recognize his debt to Saint-Simon. In Sorel's ideological syndicalism, a taste for economic reality against the ideological chatter of the 'intellectuals' converges with a pragmatism mistrustful of voluntarism, and also with an appreciation for law as an element of self-affirmation and of recognition of the other that avoids mimetic violence. This moment in Sorel's thought did not last very long, but it was happy for him because full of hope. It was the only time when he was able to feel that he had successfully synthesized and fixed in an identifiable and active historical force all the analyses and diverse thoughts he had been long accumulating.

Sorel was not a systematic thinker, as he himself admitted. This is all the more so in the case of law. He cannot be made into a thinker of juridical pluralism or of "social law". He was nonetheless part of a moment in which, for political and ideological reasons, different thinkers, jurists, philosophers and sociologists explored this possibility. Together they participated in a "syndical moment" in legal thinking.

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Socialism in the Fields
Sorel's syndical thought in a rural perspective

By Alice Ingold (EHESS)
translated by Eric Brandom

> "Agricultural association is association par excellence, realizing the idea most completely. The most perfect society is not, indeed, that which unites men, but that which puts men's individual wills in the background in order to bring to the forefront the common interests that exist between real assets: failure to understand this simple truth has often led the theorists of cooperation into philanthropic nonsense. Rural associations become singularly important for socialists from the moment they come to understand that all social change supposes the elaboration of new associational forms and the juridical education of the people […]
>
> It is in the countryside much more than in the city that socialists ought to seek out examples to clarify the idea of association… Italy has possessed, for centuries, large associations for drainage, defense, and irrigation… It might be asked if rural northern Italy is not the promised land of modern socialism in the same way as industrial Germany".
>
> *Georges Sorel*, 1902[1]

1. Introduction

It may be surprising to read Georges Sorel write that "agricultural association is association par excellence, realizing the idea most completely" and describe rural Italy as "a promised land of modern socialism in the same way as industrial Germany". In the dedication of one of his last books, towards the end of his life, Sorel had, after all, called himself "a disinterested servant of the proletariat". It is however through the prism of the rural that I will here reconsider Georges Sorel's syndicalism.

Scholars have generally accepted a biographical rupture dividing Sorel's life into two parts. In 1892, he resigned from his post in the administration of the *Ponts et Chaussées*. At the age of 45, he began a new phase as an eclectic reader and prolific writer. He quickly took an active role in the very first French Marxist journals and in the critical introduction of Marx's writings in France and Italy. In the remaining years of his life, he produced a series of articles and books that constitute a multiform body of work, dense and unsystematic enough to resist any imposition of unity. Retirement in 1892, thus, marked a major reorientation of his life: an engineer with no academic pedigree embarked into an unexpected intellectual career of exceptional longevity. Despite some scholarly attention to his biography, the first forty-five years of Sorel's life, especially his professional life, have remained obscure. Specialists have thought that no archive existed that would allow access to these years, and thus only Sorel the writer after 1892 has been examined. His emergence as a major interpreter of Marxism appears,

[1] Georges Sorel [1902], "Préface pour Gatti", in Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (Marcel Rivière, 1919), 231 and 233-34. All translations from sources not available in English are the translator's own.

from this perspective, sudden and unprepared. The irruption of a former engineer into the world of socialism thus tends to be presented as a sudden switch or even a conversion.

Yet archival sources for Sorel's years as a professional engineer do exist, and I undertake the following analysis in light of totally new work in them. I first turn to how I discovered these archives, which allow us to see Sorel as a producer of sources. This provides an opportunity to reflect on several methodological questions. We can return to the classic problem of the connections between life and work, but also interrogate the contours of an *oeuvre*: what conditions allow us to place within it technical writings that are strongly shaped by administrative practices? I propose replacing sharply periodizing approaches to his life and work with an analysis of successive *restructurations* of his thought across multiple careers[2]. Next, I analyze the way Sorel's thinking around *syndicats* and his imperative to think autonomy were irrigated by his experience as an engineer in a rural context confronted with the reality of rural *syndicats*. Until my work, this has remained a historiographical blind spot.[3]

A preliminary remark: when Sorel mobilized, in his writings, the rural syndical associations that he had known as an engineer, it was not to take them automatically as prototypes of the "complete association". It would also be a misunderstanding to believe that Sorel saw in them the model of a rural republic. Such syndical associations were not an example, but an experiment in the Deweyan sense of the term: Sorel found these rural syndical associations *good to think with.* Frequenting these rural *syndicats,* observing their transformations and conflicts - which he had to solve - led him to formulate a series of questions that came to structure his ideas about syndical autonomy. The way in which he would articulate law, economics, and autonomy in his critical economic writings, too, was shaped by his rural experience.

His involvement with rural *syndicats* enabled Sorel to formulate a series of questions, which are as follows and which I will expand on in this text. What conditions allow one to think the autonomy of labor itself, an *autonomy* that would allow the workers to free themselves from any exterior will and to shrug off the interference of any "thinking class", even a socialist one? [4] How could an "inner principle" of labor lead the workers to rely on themselves, allowing them to develop a "*juridical sentiment*"? [5] How to think "real cooperation" anchored in things, different from the "spirit of association" founded on sentiments? In his pioneering analysis of the "right to work", Sorel explicitly compared workers to the tenants of rural syndical associations. How could the workers develop a "real right" to the tools of their labor, and not only, as Emmanuel Lévy put it, a "collective credit right (*droit de créance*)" of labor over capital"? [6] Thanks to the experience of the strike, Sorel argued, workers are no longer "like

[2] Jean-Claude Chamboredon [1984], *Emile Durkheim. Le social objet de science. Du moral au politique?* (Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2017).

[3] On the history of rural *syndicats,* I refer to Alice Ingold, "Désenclaver l'histoire des Communs de l'histoire de l'État des Modernes. Associations syndicales de propriétaires entre 'droit social' et 'domestication administrative'", *Revue du MAUSS* 61, no. 1 (2023): 273-89 as well as to the manuscript of my *Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches*: *L'écologie politique de Georges Sorel. La conflictualité rurale aux sources du socialisme. Jalons pour une histoire des associations syndicales hydrauliques après 1789* (École Normale Supérieure, 2024). This work is in the process of being published.

[4] Georges Sorel [1908], *Reflections on Violence,* trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 155-6.

[5] Georges Sorel [1903], *Introduction à l'économie moderne* (Marcel Rivière, 1922), 144 and 71.

[6] Georges Sorel, "Le prétendu socialisme juridique", *Le Mouvement socialiste* 185 (April 1907): 321-48, reprinted in Carlos Miguel Herrera (ed.), *Par le droit, au-delà du droit. Textes sur le socialisme juridique* (Kimé, 2003), 211.

dealers in labor power, as Marx thought them", but much rather "tenants having the right to remain attached to their labor which is their property".[7] In these arguments, we see Sorel's attempt to place the social question on a different terrain than that of good will or social duties. Following Proudhon, Sorel thought socialism not as a struggle for power, nor even as a struggle over appropriation, but as a struggle for law: a liberatory struggle for recognition and for a new law.

My goal in this chapter is to reestablish the genesis of Sorel's economic thinking on the basis of the work he did as an engineer - his engineer's expertise in dealing with concrete rural syndical associations has been as much a theoretical challenge as it has been a practical problem to be solved. This re-reading examines all of Sorel's economic texts, which remain among the least studied parts of his corpus, including not only his many articles on cooperation, strikes, and syndicalism but also his two larger studies: the 1903 *Introduction à l'économie moderne* and the 1907 *Insegnamenti sociali dell'economia contemporanea.*

Sorel's idea of proletarian self-government sprang in part from reflection on the realities of agricultural *syndicats*. This particular theorization of syndicalism allowed him to articulate difficult questions about the relationships between state and society. Sorel anticipated what Patrice Rolland has called a "syndical moment of legal thought", in which jurists, philosophers, and sociologists sought to grasp how law expressed itself from within the interstices of society itself, in the phenomena of *syndicats* and new forms of association. [8] This was in sharp contrast with the revolutionary tradition of 1789, which, with its anti-associationist laws, sought to ban any form of institutions mediating between individual and state. In this syndicalist legal thought were joined both a critique of the individualist anthropology of the Civil Code and a doubt over the omnipotence of law, which is to say of the legicentrism issuing from the Revolution of 1789. Critique of individualism had driven a great many authors - Saint-Simon, Marx, Comte to a rejection of law. Charles Fourier and Louis Blanc went as far as arguing that law could only ever be individualist. In this socialist tradition, Sorel, with his refusal to reject the notion of law, stands as an exception. It is from this perspective that he developed a critique of Marx. Claiming the heritage of Proudhon, Sorel attacked the idea that the state had a monopoly on *pronouncing law* and insisted, instead, on society's capacity for legal production. This emphasis on the juridical creativity of society would develop more fully in the 20th century. In 1932, Georges Gurvitch offered a systematic analysis of it as *juridical pluralism.*[9] This recognition of society's capacity to generate laws offers a way out of liberal individualism that differs from those previously favored, namely universalism or collectivism.

When there has been interest in non-statist sources of law, attention has rested on social practices and, particularly, on labor relations. But only working class life and mutualism have received the attention of jurists, philosophers, and social scientists. Sorel's case allows us to focus on a unique trajectory, which restitutes to the countryside its place in this process. My work thus seeks to sketch out the *rural seedbed* of this syndical moment of legal thought.

I will show, first of all, how Sorel proposed to conceptualize the intermediary realms between State and individual, by combining in an original way the organization of labor with a

[7] Georges Sorel, "Les grèves. Les théories contrariées par les faits", *La science sociale* 30 (October 1900): 311-32 and (November 1900): 436.

[8] Patrice Rolland, "Sorel et le 'moment syndical' de la pensée du droit", in Carlos Miguel Herrera (ed.), *Georges Sorel et le droit* (Kimé, 2004), 55-81 and in this book, 27-45.

[9] Georges Gurvitch [1932], *L'idée du droit social. Notion et système du droit social. Histoire doctrinale depuis le 17e siècle jusqu'à la fin du 19e siècle* (Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1972).

territorial-spatial dimension that had been set aside as a thing of the past. I then show that this attention to the social production of law is associated with a critique of the state. This is a refutation of any antinomy that might be posed between law and anarchy. Law is not reducible to statist legislation, as Anne-Sophie Chambost has demonstrated in her work dedicated to the place of law in Proudhon's work.[10] Sorel's originality lay in basing his analysis of civil society and intermediary bodies on the rural.

The rural world was rarely seen as a place where trade unionism developed before the beginning of the 20th century. It was even considered resistant to any form of modern collective action. At the time, rural forms of civil society association were dismissed as archaisms: "survivals of old oppressive associations" having little to do with "modern associations founded on the freedom" and "will" of the individual.[11] Sorel opposed these progressivist and teleological narratives with *old* and *new pluralism*: he saw in the agricultural syndical phenomena that he had become familiar with as an engineer the emergence of a productive *milieu* in which the "*common enterprise*" took precedence over individual decisions.[12] Detailed analysis of this rural associative reality refuted teleological readings according to which constraint and freedom, or collective and individual choice, were simply opposed. It was in his pioneering analysis of the "right to work" that Sorel drew the most explicit parallels between the situation of rural *syndicats* and those of the working class. The absorption of the worker into his work allows Sorel to describe what he calls a return into the self-enabling the emergence of a "juridical sentiment" forming the basis of working class autonomy.[13]

Finally, I show how his professional experience allowed Sorel to develop an analysis that was not typical in the socialist field of his time. Far from heavy industry and "the idealized economy of cotton", [14] agriculture was, in Sorel's eyes, the model for a "concrete economy" [15] and a sociology that would degenerate into a "social physics", [16] i.e. suffer from determinist and intellectualist errors. Counter to the reabsorption of the social question into the worker question, Sorel showed that the study of agriculture offers us concepts to grasp the materiality and plurality of the social while preserving the indetermination of the historical process.

2. The two lives of Georges Sorel

My scholarly interest in Sorel has followed the opposite path than that of researchers who specialize in intellectual debate around 1900. While they observe Sorel from the moment in which he begins to publish in philosophical journals, my interest was drawn first to the social thought deployed in the reports he wrote as a professional engineer. Thus I approach Sorel not as an exegete of his written work seeking to understand the first, earlier and unknown, part of his life, but as a historian who wants to know what the revolutionary thinker owes to the engineer confronted with modes of conflict specific to the rural world.

Sorel's biography must not be reduced to his bibliography. Attention to Sorel's professional life demonstrates this. The mere existence of almost 23 years of professional activity poses questions. All those who have commented on his written work have, implicitly or explicitly,

[10] Anne-Sophie Chambost, *Proudhon et la norme. Pensée juridique d'un anarchiste* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004).
[11] Eugène Fournière, *L'individu, l'association et l'État* (Felix Alcan, 1907), 46 and 47.
[12] Georges Sorel, "Grèves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 408.
[13] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 71.
[14] Ibid., 33.
[15] Ibid., 37.
[16] Ibid., 33.

left this period out. When they have been interested in Sorel's first articles from the 1880s– while he was still an engineer within the *Ponts et Chaussées* – they have retained only those that appeared in the *Revue Philosophique*, or have at best taken into consideration those that show Sorel's connections to history - especially the history of the French Revolution - as evidence of the engineer's connection to politics.[17] His "technical" or professional writings, however, which, after all, are the beginnings of his intellectual work, have been left completely unaddressed.

2.1 Portrait of Sorel as a producer of sources

Yet Sorel himself, rightly understood, did not establish any sharp discontinuity between his technical production as an engineer and the social analysis formulated in his later work. When he affirmed that "for twenty years I strove to free myself from what I retained of my education", he was referring above all to his education and schooling.[18] Indeed, in his earliest socialist writings as well as in his later work, not only did he not mark a clean break between the two periods of his life, but, instead, he continued to cite analyses that took his work as an engineer as a starting point. Sorel repeatedly referred to the one substantial technical article of his engineering career, which appeared in 1891, and often pointed to conclusions drawn from his own experiences as an engineer.[19] It is true that he was not very loud about it, and still less did he make the connection in a methodical way. Whether this was because of the natural hesitancy of the autodidact, or out of concern that such arguments would distract from careful reading of his work, it is hard to say.

I encountered Sorel in the course of my work on the history of the state and resource management in the 19th century, during which I read the hundreds of reports that Sorel composed during his more than twenty years at *Ponts et Chaussées*. In fact, Sorel the engineer left many sources. To what extent these writings, constrained by technical and administrative contexts, illuminate his later work?

2.2 Sorel, engineer as investigator of the social

Sorel's reports have a constrained and calibrated format. They participate in established administrative procedures: investigations of public utility, regulation of waters, and so on. To what degree can one hear Sorel's voice in them? In other words, what distinguishes Sorel's report from the hundreds written by other *Ponts et Chaussées* engineers I have examined?

Sorel's work does not fit the usual image of the work done by engineers in the *Ponts et Chaussées*, who calculate, design, project, and evaluate public works.[20] Seeing Sorel as a producer of sources, instead, allows us to grasp his own agency and the (re)framing operations he undertook in his reports. His role often involved framing proposals even in situations of significant conflict over the collective organization of labor and land. In these settings, he was not satisfied to intervene merely by evaluating a technical project or proposition. Rather, he sought to grasp conflictual situations in such a way as to account for their ramifications across

[17] In 1953, Pierre Andreu had declared that Sorel's early life was made of years of "obscure life, on which scarce documents throw only intermittent and fragile light" (Pierre Andreu, *Notre maître, M. Sorel* (Grasset, 1953), 13). It is worth also checking Alice Ingold, "Penser à l'épreuve des conflits", *Mil Neuf Cent* 32 (2014): 11-52, and Willy Gianinazzi, "De l'ingénieur au penseur social", *Mil Neuf Cent* 32 (2014): 7-10.

[18] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence,* 5.

[19] Georges Sorel, "Notes sur les bases des règlements d'arrosage", *Bulletin de la Société agricole, scientifique et littéraire des Pyrénées orientales* 32 (1891): 103-88.

[20] See Ingold, "Penser à l'épreuve des conflits".

multiple social arenas: the administrative sphere, but also tribunals and appeals courts, learned societies, local political and economic circles, without forgetting the entrepreneurial and financial networks supporting public works that operated on a national, and sometimes international, level. In his reports, Sorel strove to render the historical density of conflicts, marking out the territorial extent of the problems presented to him. He integrated historical, juridical, and sociological perspectives. Sorel's reports produced meaning well beyond the expectations of the administrative genre of the inquiry. They exceeded the expectations of the technical staff as well as the prefectural and central administrations that oversaw it. Sorel developed in his reports an awareness of the conflicts of which he took charge that was at once sociological, historical, and juridical. His reports were *inquiries* in the sense John Dewey would give to the term, reconfiguring the problem situation itself, its perimeter, the actors involved, its temporal trajectory.[21] Moreover - and I will return later to this point - the hydraulic sector in the Alps and the Pyrenees, in which Sorel worked for more than fifteen years, put him in a highly strategic position to grasp the emerging tensions between the juridical and the administrative aspects of state activity.

Sorel's reports show a remarkable freedom of analysis and of formulation, *vis-à-vis* both the *Ponts et Chaussées* and its supervisors in the prefecture. In fact, Sorel developed a comprehensive view of the situation by examining different factors. He studied the manner in which the state and its administration intervened in the management of shared waterways in conflict with judicial authority. He analyzed the problematic political place of local communities' modes of self-management within the new architecture of an administrative state that denied society any capacity of collective self-management except through the category of the public. He interrogated the ecological and economic modifications of social and technical mechanisms that riparian communities had managed to put in place. No utopianism of the kind so roundly mocked by Marx is to be found in Sorel in this period. This is because what we may anachronistically call Sorel's political ecology was first of all *critical* and *pragmatic*.

Examining Sorel as an engineer convinced me that it was not only through *practice* that his thought took shape, but through the *trial* of situations in which his expertise was called upon to make decisions in order to resolve problems. Differently put, to borrow from Marx's famous formula about being obliged to put the Hegelian dialectic on its feet, with Sorel it is a question not only of quitting the workshop in order to put one's feet in the mud of the fields and agricultural canals, but above all to show how the real rights (*jus in re*) attached to working the land made it possible to radically reformulate the social question beyond the *solidariste* ideology of the Third Republic.[22] Without minimizing the intellectual fuel that Sorel's readings provided him, I show how his original thinking was above all – and first – forged in the analysis and resolution of problems that were irreducibly both practical and cognitive. His inquiries as an engineer were set in motion not by attempts at understanding, but with the aim of resolving concrete problems. The engineer encountered conflicts that had no easy solutions, still less irenic ones. Sorel was thus led to proposals that would reconcile different practical and cognitive perspectives on complex and sedimented situations. As a result, the quality and the success of his inquiries and his proposals depended on his capacity to convincingly articulate these conflicts fully in their historical, social, juridical, institutional, economic, and technical-scientific dimensions.

[21] John Dewey, *The Theory of Inquiry* (Henry Holt and Company, 1938).
[22] Marie-Claude Blais, *La solidarité. Histoire d'une idée* (Gallimard, 2007); Serge Audier, *La pensée solidariste. Aux sources du modèle social républicain* (PUF, 2010).

Periodization has been an important tool for taking stock of Sorel's work. He himself saw that he was no systematizer, preferring to follow his questions, take them up and deepen them, recognizing his own contradictions and lack of order. He claimed he had a horror of becoming the leader of a school, rather counting himself among those that "are content to work in order to submit their reflections to a few studious people whilst others prefer to address the great mass of busy humanity".[23] He saw in this a blessing. It was a "real disaster [for Marx] to have been transformed into the leader of a sect by his young enthusiasts; he would have produced much more useful work had he not become the slave of the Marxists". Whereas "disciples expect their masters to close the era of doubt by providing definitive solutions", Sorel demanded his freedom to open new questions and to not always have an answer, to dwell in uncertainty and to not propose the "ready-made" or *prêt-à-penser*.[24] As for my own inquiry, I choose to avoid periodization, an approach that tends to break Sorel's itinerary into moments that are not merely distinct, but often heterogenous or even dissonant. The aim is to understand what kind of interactions allow social analysis to form: in what sort of dialogue with social and political reality can an author elaborate a body of thought? But also: how does such thinking change? From this perspective my central question will be understanding how Sorel passed from rural problems to those of the working class.

3.Rural roots of Sorel's "syndical moment of legal thought"

Sorel belongs to what Patrice Rolland has called the "syndical moment of legal thought", the intellectual and juridical conjuncture in the Third Republic during which jurists and philosophers "sought to rethink the sources of law in light of the existence of syndicats".[25] The phenomenon of the *syndicats* and other new forms of association catalyzed a new kind of law, an alternative to the state-centrism that issued from the French Revolution. Renewed analysis of the *syndicats* went hand in hand with critique of the state's juridical monism.

Among socialists, Sorel has been known for his precocious attention to syndicats. Beginning in the 1898-1903 period, he published a series of texts containing pioneering analyses of the phenomenon. Sorel's interest in *syndicats*, he wrote, "at first passed unnoticed". In 1908, a decade after the publication of a major text on the subject (*L'avenir socialiste des syndicats*), Sorel claimed that "syndicalism did not yet exist" in 1898.[26] A further ten years later, in 1920, he boasted of the fact that what he had written on *syndicats* in 1898 had "entered into common knowledge".[27] In the space of twenty years, in short, syndical questions had acquired a central place in public debate, and the strike had become "the central social fact of the worker's movement".[28] Sorel's original thinking around the *syndicats* in the 1890s, thus, anticipated in several ways the analyses that would find their full expression only in the 1910s and 20s.

[23] Sorel, *Reflections*, 6.
[24] Ibid., 7 and 5.
[25] See Rolland, "Sorel et le 'moment syndical' de la pensée du droit", in Herrera (ed.), *Sorel et le droit*, 55 and in this book, 27.
[26] Both citations are in Georges Sorel to Giuseppe Prezzolini, 14 June 1908, in Somalvico, Bruno (ed.), "Lettere di Georges Sorel a Giuseppe Prezzolini (1908-1910)", in Diana Rüesch and Bruno Somalvico (eds.), *La Voce e l'Europa. Il movimento fiorentino de La Voce : dall'identità culturale italiana all'identità culturale europea* (Presidenza del Consiglo dei ministri, Dipartimento per l'informazione e l'editoria, 1995), 581. The letter is cited in Shlomo Sand, *L'illusion du politique. Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900* (La Découverte, 1985), 196.
[27] Georges Sorel to Jean Bourdeau, 13 March 1920, in Willy Gianinazzi, Marie-Laurence Netter, Michel Prat and Patrice Rolland (eds), "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Jean Bourdeau. 2e partie: 1913-1921", *Mil neuf cent* 15 (1997): 197.
[28] Claude Didry, *Naissance de la convention collective. Débats juridiques et luttes sociales en France au début du 20e siècle* (Éditions de l'EHESS, 2002), 225.

Specialists explain this interest in syndicalism in terms of events of the late 1890s. They date Sorel's attachment to syndicalism from 1898, three years after the creation of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), and before the *Bourses du Travail* had joined this movement.[29] According to them, Sorel's inspiration emerged from this key moment in the history of the worker's movement, as well as from the influence of the Leplaysian sociologist Paul de Rousiers and his 1897 *Le Trade-unionisme en Angleterre*. And yet, in the very text brought forward to anchor this chronology – the abovementioned 1898 *L'avenir socialiste des syndicats* – Sorel himself refers to his own experience of rural syndicalism as an engineer going back to the 1870s-1880s and combines it with analyses of the working class syndicalism. Moreover, as early as 1895, Sorel noted in a book review: "I have first-hand experience of many syndicats, and I know how difficult it is to make them run properly". [30]

My archival investigations have led me to identify several chronologies in the elaboration of Sorel's ideas about syndicalism. If the immediate occasion of his writings was indeed the relevance of the worker's movement of the 1890s, of its strikes and of its congresses, Sorel's views on syndicalism rested also on other sources and other conflicts. Crucially, they drew on earlier experiences, and were the result of his years of work at *Ponts et Chaussées*, during which he found himself confronted by specific syndical and associational forms in a rural milieu, forms whose complex structures he examined in his reports. Several strata surface at once in Sorel's writings, without covering one another over. Alongside the analysis of working class syndicalism there is the *rural element* of his analysis of syndicalism that my archival work has made visible. Sorel's examination – attentive yet still critical – of these rural collective organizations and of their evolution under the Third Republic inspired some of the most vigorous and original aspects of his later syndicalism.

3.1"Association par excellence": forgotten rural syndical associations

Sorel's reports allow us to illuminate a forgotten side of the history of syndicalism, the rural one. Agricultural syndicalism is usually described as beginning in the 1880s, with the first *syndicats* bringing farmers together under centralized collective purchasing groups, along the lines of consumers' cooperatives. And yet, nearly two decades before the law of 21 March 1884 authorizing professional *syndicats*, a law passed 21 June 1865 encouraged the creation of "syndical associations" in the rural world. This law is often forgotten in the history of syndicalism and association, and suggests we need to look back further.

Historically, the situation of hydraulic infrastructure (canals, dikes, levees), waterways, and wetlands, had given rise to collective organizations bringing together those who used them, called *tenanciers* or *communiers* in French. Although for revolutionaries such organizations certainly fell into the categories of "privilege" or of "corporations" that ought to be eliminated, the state allowed these bodies to remain in place after the Allarde and Le Chapelier laws of 1791.[31] It was, however, only the law of 21 June 1865 that would finally create a framework within which these organizations could function and new ones could be legally established. In this category, then, one could find organizations dating back to the *ancien régime*, but also

[29] See Sand, *L'illusion du politique,* 196-209 and Carlos Miguel Herrera, "Constellations juridiques du Sorélisme", in Herrera (ed.), *Georges Sorel et le droit*, 129-66.

[30] Georges Sorel, "Compte-rendu de C.R. Geblesco, La propriété rurale à Rome, en France et en Roumanie, avec une introduction sur l'évolution de la société et de la propriété en général 1895", *Le Devenir social* 5 (August 1895): 496.

[31] On the ambivalent legacy of these laws and their qualification as the "major mistake of the Revolution" in the second half of the 19th century, see note 57.

structures created between the Revolution and 1865, as well as new syndical associations which united proprietors in order to support new economic enterprises. The administration supported these associations: it encouraged owners to solidarize themselves *beyond the contract*, allowing a majority to constrain a minority in order to promote the development of new hydraulic infrastructure.[32]

These syndical associations, some of which were centuries old, formed in order to take charge of the management of infrastructure, to share resources, and to resolve conflicts either amongst members or with the authorities. Strong tendencies to self-administration distinguished such associations, tendencies noted and confirmed in the 1865 law. These included deliberative forms of collective action, representative practices by the members who elected *syndics*, as well as regulatory and normative power held by participants. Even though they have been recognized as the distant ancestors of agricultural syndicalism, these associations have long remained beyond the purview of general histories of cooperation and syndicalism. In France – as in Italy where there were analogous rural structures (*consorzii*) – these syndical associations have also not been the object of any general history until recently.[33]

In the *Basses-Alpes*, where Sorel was posted between 1873 and 1876, there were more than 400 such associations.[34] In the department of the Pyrénées Orientales, where Sorel held his last post from 1879 to 1892, there were about 300 such hydraulic syndical associations.[35] In both of these two piedmont departments, *syndicats* outnumbered towns [communes]. In the *Basses-Alpes*, most such *syndicats* were relatively small, controlling a few hectares or dozens of hectares. In the *Pyrénées Orientales*, several of them were centuries old and quite powerful, bringing together large and small proprietors and controlling thousands of hectares, indeed the most fertile and productive lands in the department. Sorel, as an engineer, had to confront a number of conflicts, which had to do both with the multiplication of these associations and with their transformations under the Third Republic, during which, crucially, their politicization brought with it the risk of undermining their economic ends in Sorel's eyes.

[32] Ingold, "Désenclaver l'histoire des Communs de l'histoire de l'État des Modernes" ; Alice Ingold, "Terres et eaux entre coutume, police et droit au XIXème siècle. Solidarisme écologique ou solidarités matérielles?", *Tracés* 33 (2017): 97-126; Alice Ingold "Des communautés inscrites dans les choses. Les associations syndicales agricoles en France au XIXème siècle" in S. Bargaoui et *al* (eds), *Appartenance locale et propriété au nord et au sud de la Méditerranée* (Institut de recherches et d'études sur les mondes arabes et musulmans, 2015), https://books.openedition.org/iremam/3476, last accessed 15 September 2025.

[33] See note above, and Ingold, *L'écologie politique de Georges Sorel*.

[34] The vast majority of these associations go back to the *Ancien régime*, but the prefectoral administration made every effort to bring these social structures under its purview, even before the law of 1865, either to organize and "solidarize" the waterway areas or to spur the creation of new canals. On this associational complexity, on the tension between concrete forms of solidarity of real law (or *jus in re*) and the solidaristic system set in place by the state, as well as for the first analyses of Sorel's syndical thought in a rural context, see Ingold, "Terres et eaux entre coutume, police et droit au XIXème siècle".

[35] In at least two of his reports in 1887 and 1889, Sorel shows the extraordinary diversity and heterogeneity of an associational landscape that vastly exceeds the terms of the legislation: associations that qualified as such under the law of 1865 were a tiny minority in the *Pyrénées Orientales* (24 out of 305 in the department). The vast majority of these collective organisations are ancient institutions "*operating according to customs* [*fonctionnant selon les usages*]". See Sorel's report, 23 October 1889, in Archives Nationales, F10, 3529. There is no space here to examine Sorel's pathbreaking analyses of customs [*coutumes*] as a source of law, anticipating Maxime Leroy's famous work: Maxime Leroy, *La coutume ouvrière* (Giard et Brière, 1913). The concrete experience of these collective rural associations, the examination of their juridical power, allowed the engineer Sorel to avoid an idealized vision of the customary. On this customary source of law and on the heterogeneity of associational rural landscape, which belies any clear and frank opposition between *old pluralism* and *modern pluralism*, See Ingold, *Écologie politique de Georges Sorel*.

Some scholars have proposed that we should look to the fields for the conditions of democratic life without a master. Such is the hypothesis formulated by Joëlle Zask, who rejects the "assertion of antagonism between peasants and democracy".[36] She extracts the peasant from the "dustbin of history", to borrow Trotsky's expression from 1917, by locating the democratic experience within small scale agriculture. Subsistence agriculture, at the scale of a plot of land, would be the place of a democratic experience, of an art of association, while industrial agriculture is a movement of dispossession. Sorel recognized that socialism would be easy to imagine in an egalitarian rural republic: "Nothing is easier therefore than to imagine a peasant republic, egalitarian and almost completely without political hierarchy. But given the existence of large-scale industry nothing is more difficult to understand than socialism".[37] Perhaps surprisingly, Sorel does not see these collective organizations as "ancient rural democracies".[38] It is rather a much more complex social, economic, and juridical reality that Sorel describes in these irrigation *syndicats* – also a more socially differentiated one.

These *syndicats,* to start with, anchor a very productive economy – to which I will return regarding the category of *intensive agriculture* as Sorel defines it – and allow Sorel to rethink the "quasi-contract" of social solidarity theorized by republican statesmen such as Léon Bourgeois.[39] They form a non-egalitarian and strongly hierarchical world, even if they follow political rules according to which every voice can be heard through *deliberative* mechanisms. It is a mistake to see in these *syndicats* forms emerging from and dealing with a subsistence economy: irrigation *syndicats* had been the privileged method for developing an *intensive* agriculture, based on the intensive use of water, land, fertilizer, and labor! One must not project into the past the image of egalitarian societies of small landholders, often constructed retrospectively, at the end of a process that saw the traditional landholding elites pushed back by new republican elites relying on the law of numbers in an alliance with the smallholders. Sorel observed, not without criticism, precisely this evolution under the Third Republic. He emphasized the risks run by an *economic* system that is corrupted by democratic suffrage mechanisms that no longer have any connection to economic interests.[40] Sorel's immersion in rural societies, within which he was called upon to clarify conflicts in order to resolve them, led the engineer to develop an analysis of these collectives that was in no sense irenic.

3.2 A critique of the administrative state beyond the liberalism/statism dichotomy

Trained as a state engineer and participating in this vast distributed administration of the *Ponts et Chaussées* in the provinces, even as he fulfilled the function of direct technical advisor to the prefect, Sorel undertook a ferocious critique of the policies pursued in the prefectures since the 1850s.[41] He denounced in particular the "canal fever" that characterized the early decades of the Third Republic in particular to respond to the very serious agricultural crisis following

[36] Joëlle Zask, *La démocratie aux champs. Du jardin d'Eden aux jardins partagés, comment l'agriculture cultive les valeurs démocratiques* (La Découverte, 2016), 235.
[37] Georges Sorel, *Insegnamenti sociali dell'economia contemporanea. Degenerazione capitalista e degenerazione socialista* (Remo Sandron, 1907), 31.
[38] Georges Sorel [1914], "L'organisation de la démocratie", in Sorel, *Matériaux,* 393.
[39] Léon Bourgeois [1896], *Solidarité* (Armand Colin, 1912), 53.
[40] On Sorel's analyses around the tensions between economic organization and democratic formalism, see Ingold, *L'écologie politique de Georges Sorel*.
[41] The engineer assigned by *Ponts et Chaussées* to a given *département* was sometimes called "technical under-prefect [sous-préfet technique]" to the prefect.

the destruction of vineyards by phylloxera[42]. This policy, in continuity with that of the Second Empire, tended over the long term to over-equip the area and to encourage the fantasy of generalized irrigation for the whole territory based on the promises of future abundance. Sorel criticized a social model that encouraged landowners and entrepreneurs to carry out a "complete" exploitation of their waterways, considered as a method for agricultural and industrial modernization without taking into account the reality of earlier management, the materiality of the terrain, or the limits of the resource.

And yet Sorel's critique did not stop with a state that made itself the "regulator and master of [economic] life".[43] The engineer's attention rested rather on different facets of the state, precisely on the tension between the judicial authority that defends "rights acquired" through the law (which he calls *droit tout fait*) and the administrative authority that promotes "new productive forces" (which he calls "opportunity").[44] It was in working through the conflicts he was employed to resolve that Sorel's awareness of this tension between these two faces of the state sharpened. In fact, as a hydraulic engineer, he intervened in one of the most significantly conflictual sectors of the 19th century, which is to say one of the sectors in which conflicts over competence between the administrative and the judicial authorities were expressed in a most marked fashion.

As an engineer at the service of the prefect, Sorel intervened in the regulation of waterways outside the public domain. For more than a century, such waterways had been a matter functioning without any precise legal framework: the regulatory power of the prefect was not clearly established in any law until the first national law on waters of August 8, 1898. On the basis of consolidated practices and administrative habits, the powers of the administration to police these waterways was understood to be extensive. This administrative regulation, however, would at time be challenged in court, the final result being an important role for jurisprudence over the question. Overall, this sector was clear evidence of the weakness of the revolutionary vision of a world governed only by laws crafted in parliament: it affirmed, instead, a discretionary power of the administration, which became the real body tasked with institutionalising civil society and its associations. In this context, the administration affirmed its regulatory power, and this regulatory power shed its role as mere instrument of the law in order to claim for itself a space for autonomous action. State intervention in a vast economic sector, which technically ought to have been left to private law, took place through administrative regulation. As an engineer, Sorel was very directly involved in these debates. He was in the thick of it in a sector in which state administrative intervention was directly contested from below, by civil society actors, through legal means.[45] Our engineer showed himself attentive here to "the voice of the defeated" of the new administrative order, a voice

[42] The national fight against phylloxera led to the creation of numerous new canals designed to flood the vineyards in order to suffocate the parasite, but in reality, these 'phylloxera canals' turned out to be nothing more than irrigation canals, built with government subsidies or even directly by government engineers: Alice Ingold, "Les canaux de la République ou les illusions de l'abondance. Infrastructures et dépendance à l'irrigation", *Carnets du Paysage* 42 (2023): 51-65.

[43] Georges Sorel [1898], "L'avenir socialiste des syndicats", in Sorel, *Matériaux,* 85.

[44] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 102-3.

[45] On this peculiar field of "eaux courantes" (waterways outside of the public domain), caught in the middle between administrative authority and the judicial authority of the state, see Alice Ingold, "Commons and environmental regulation in history: the water commons beyond property and sovereignty", *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 19, no. 2 (2018): 425-56; Alice Ingold, "Naturalizing the commons or historicizing the state? Commons, archives, and the uses of history in the nineteenth century", *Quaderni Storici* 164, no. 2 (2020): 569-89; Alice Ingold, "Gouverner les eaux courantes en France au XIXème siècle. Administration, droits et savoirs", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 66, no. 1 (January-March 2011): 69-104.

that underlined productive limits against the infinite extension of production, the voice of those who, in short, confronted the administration's imaginary of abundance.[46]

In this sense, Sorel's critique goes well beyond the classic liberal objection to state hypertrophy. It exceeds the simple opposition between liberalism and statism. It rests, rather, on a careful analysis of the separation between justice and administration within the state. Sorel laid the foundations for a critique of the broadly shared *statist consensus* so characteristic of the 19th century, a consensus that made the history of the state coextensive with that of administration, performing an *administrative colonization* of the history of the state and wrongly projecting the state's administrative vocation into the past.

4. *Syndicats* inscribed in the land?

On the threshold of the 20th century, there were principally two ways to think about the intermediaries between the individual and the state that bound society together. The first saw these intermediaries as basically territorial in form. The second looked rather to professional groups, that is, sought mediation through economic organization and the division of labor. Sorel's proposal for making sense of these intermediate orders between individual and state was unusual. Rural syndical associations were territorial associations, but territorial associations for production. In this sense they combined land and labor, territory and economic organization. I want to emphasize here the originality of Sorel's thinking when he grants a role both to residence and to territory in the *syndicat*.

4.1 How Sorel articulated labor and territorial organization to theorize intermediary bodies

In the "Préface pour Gatti," finished in December 1901, Sorel drew on the model of the territorial hydraulic associations that he had known as an engineer in order to offer a theoretical account of his ideal association. He emphasized the importance of this "same place", of "unity of residence" that favored not only "a common and continuous use of collective things" but more generally a concern for the "management of collective possessions":

> "There is to be found in agriculture everything that gives force to association: those associated have common interests of a more concrete nature than those of the stockholder; this coalition of interests reveals itself in the daily course of economic life…they [associates] are all of the same place and one cannot insist too much on the importance of this consideration, for a unity of residence creates not only a common and continuous use of collective things, but in the countryside forces nearly everyone to interest themselves in the management of collective matters; – finally neighboring holdings all benefit together a great deal from the multiplicity of reciprocal land services; one sees this manifest to a high degree in irrigated countryside".[47]

Also in 1901, and also in December, Sorel composed a preface to Ferdinand Pelloutier's book on the *Bourses du travail*. There too he assigned a decisive role to the territorial dimension of such connections. Although focused on working class forms of syndicalism, Sorel took up in

[46] On the conflict between *abundance* - the principle grounding the action of the administrative branch of the state - and the awareness of ecological limits and *scarcity* - the basis for the intervention of the state's judicial authority - in the governance of waters, see Alice Ingold, "Expertise naturaliste, droit et histoire. Les savoirs du partage des eaux dans la France post-révolutionnaire", *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 48, no. 1 (2014): 29-45; Alice Ingold, "Commons and environmental regulation".

[47] Sorel [1902], "Préface pour Gatti", in *Matériaux*, 231-232.

identical terms his point about the centrality of "living in the same place" in order to structure syndical activity and to enable intermediary bodies to succeed. He even affirmed that these "local connections", anchored in a common territory, could take precedence over connections between industrial and professional sectors:

> "The organization of the Bourses du Travail has at bottom the existence of relations unfolding between workers belonging to diverse professions that arise from living in the same place. Not enough attention has always been given to the importance of local connections. No doubt scholars leave them aside because they are so easy to see. In most cases, the workers of one city have more interests in common with each other than do workers in the same profession who live in different cities".[48]

This centrality accorded to territory in theorizing syndical bonds contrasts strongly with republican thinking of the period. In fact, Sorel's analysis here stands out in the Republic, which de-emphasized the theme of territory. Although the demand for decentralization had been one of the Republicans' favored rallying cries during the period of opposition to the authoritarian Second Empire, once in power, the project of republican integration marked their abandonment of this theme.[49] For sociologists, territory and the tissue of connections knitted together by locale were essentially things of the past. As Durkheim put it, long historical development had led to the weakening of territorial bonds, which gave way to those forged by the division of labor.[50] The function of social *integration* had now devolved to professional groups. All of this highlights the originality of Sorel's position in placing *syndicats* – both rural and urban – at the intersection of the division of labor and *of territory*.

4.2 Real cooperation as opposed to the philanthropic spirit of association

This centrality of territory in Sorel's analysis allows him to place a particularly strong demarcation line, formulated in a number of texts, opposing what he calls "the spirit of association" to "real cooperation". He opposed associational forms in the manner of "philanthropists who pride themselves on their liberalism, professors in the faculty of law who have picked out from the utopian tradition its notion of association".[51] In particular, he mocked what he called the "spirit of association" dear to the era of 1848. This is to be understood as a kind of cooperation issuing from "an economy based on enthusiasm" but, for Sorel, contrary to the logic of true economic organization.[52] Putting himself in the same tradition, Sorel explained that "Proudhon was not at all an adversary of cooperatives, but rather only asked that they be organized according to principles other than sympathy, devotion, and so on".[53]

Such cooperation failed because it relied on the illusions conjured up by the will, by feelings of "sympathy, devotion" which did not prove very durable. Sorel's judgment relied on demonstrations of the *stability* of connections engaged upon in the economic organization of

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[48] Georges Sorel [1902], "Préface", in Fernand Pelloutier, *Histoire des Bourses du Travail* (Alfred Costes, 1921), 61-2.

[49] Stefano Mannoni, *Une et indivisible. Storia dell'accentramento amministrativo in Francia, vol. 2, Dalla contestazione al consolidamento* (Giuffrè, 1996).

[50] "It will be seen, indeed, how, as advances are made in history, the organization which has territorial groups as its base (village or city, district, province, etc.) steadily becomes effaced". Émile Durkheim [1902, 2nd ed.], *The division of labour in society,* trans. by George Simpson (The Free Press, 1960), 27.

[51] Georges Sorel, "Idées socialistes et faits économiques au XIXe siècle (2)", *La Revue socialiste* 35 (April 1902): 406.

[52] Sorel, "Idées socialistes (1)", *La Revue Socialiste* 35 (March 1902), 303.

[53] Ibid., 304-305.

the syndical hydraulic associations: stability that rested not on the precarious and mutable individual *will* of parties to the contract, and less still on cooperative sentiments. This stability, rather, anchored itself in the *purpose* of the collective organization itself and in how the means of production were rooted into the land. It is a particularity of rural syndical associations to anchor associational bonds in *things*. It is in acquiring an "associated" piece of land, one belonging to the syndical association, that a proprietor himself becomes a member of this syndical association and participates in its economic and political life. It is the plots of land themselves that are *participants* in these associations, the owners are merely in some sense transitory caretakers of an economic and technical system that precedes them and will continue after them. This is what leads Sorel to interrogate the place of *will* in rural syndical phenomena, without falling into the simple opposition between constraint and liberty.

This question of the place of individual will or choice was at the center of contemporaneous debates within the emerging social sciences around the relationship between *status* and *contract*.[54] Sorel pursued a critique of the social contract understood as an expression of the autonomy of the will and of individual liberty. The will or choice of men could not unite them in a durable way, such unions always turned out to be precarious and temporary compared to those based on economic organization: "Union between men is always precarious. It can be maintained (after the first days of enthusiasm) only by routine, indifference, submission, or by interest: and nowhere are interests combined so strongly and with such stability and clarity as they are in societies that have for their object the improvement of rural cultivation".[55] Against illusory (because temporary) associations between the wills of men, Sorel preferred the stability of an economic system founded on interests, whose juridical form culminated in "mutually dependent properties [services fonciers réciproques]" which is to say the easements of *jus in re* [les servitudes foncières de droit reel] characterizing the "irrigated countryside". [56] Here Sorel develops an original notion of social law which is neither a right of *coordination* of private interests (on the model of private law) nor a duty of *subordination* to the general interest (on the model of public law) – these being, according to Georges Gurvitch in *L'idée du droit social*, the only two possibilities accorded by legal individualism. Sorel offers an atypical analysis refuting teleological narratives that would pass unproblematically from the pluralism of the *ancien régime* to that of the 20th century, in part because he refuses to oppose freedom and coercion.

4.3 Syndicats and intermediary bodies in the socialization of rules

Sorel was unusual in having proposed already in the 1890s that *syndicats* could be sites for training in and interiorization of rules. Such proposals fit with those of Emile Durkheim on corporation.[57] Confronted by social atomization and the crisis of the integration of the

[54] Daniel Cefaï and Alain Mahé, "Échanges rituels de dons, obligation et contrat. Mauss, Davy, Maunier: trois perspectives de sociologie juridique", *L'Année sociologique* 48, no. 1 (1998): 209-28; Alain Mahé, *Les moments kabyles de l'anthropologie politique. République, droit et citoyenneté au village XIXe-XXIe siècle* (Bouchène, 2021).

[55] Sorel [1902], "Préface pour Gatti", 231.

[56] Ibid., 231-2.

[57] On Durkheim's corporatism : Mélanie Plouviez, "Le projet durkheimien de réforme corporative : droit professionnel et protection des travailleurs", *Les Etudes sociales* 157-158 (2013): 57-103. More broadly, on how corporatist ideas reconfigured the boundary between state and society and influenced many debates in the nascent social sciences – from the critique of revolutionary individualism to the establishment of the primacy of the social over the individual – see the entire special issue of the journal *Les Etudes sociales* 157-158 (2013) on *Les sciences sociales et la corporation (1850-1945)* edited by M. Plouviez. On intermediary bodies, see: Steven L. Kaplan and Philippe Minard (eds), *La France, malade du corporatisme ? xviii^e^-xx^e^ siècles* (Belin, 2004); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Modèle politique français. La société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours*

individual into society, Durkheim put forward the corporative idea, aimed at mitigating the effects of the disappearance of intermediary groups between individual and society. Within such corporations, rules for the organization of economic life and norms that could be shared by all might be worked out and internalized. Sorel's and Durkheim's ideas about corporations developed almost simultaneously, but, contrary to the story told after the fact by Marcel Mauss, independently from one another. Mauss, when he sat down in 1928 to prepare the posthumous publication of the course on socialism given by Durkheim at the faculty of law in Bordeaux in 1895-96, wanted specifically to deny the possibility of Sorelian sources for Durkheim's thinking. Mauss even reversed the situation, trying to suggest that Sorel owed a debt to Durkheim. Durkheim, Mauss wrote, had argued that

> "It is necessary to grant the professional group a portion of the ancient political and property rights which domestic groups had, if the individual is not to be alone in the face of the State and live in a kind of alternation between anarchy and servitude… the idea was so important that it impressed great minds. Thus Georges Sorel, penetrating if not erudite or fair, whom we knew since 1893, did not fail to use it in several articles in the *Devenir Social*. Later revolutionary syndicalism was in part affected by it".[58]

Yet, in reality, Sorel's cooperative thinking preceded that of Durkheim, and I show here that Sorel drew, in this matter, on rural sources.[59]

Sorel's analyses anticipated this vision of the *syndicat* as a site of socialization into rules, on the basis of his own rural experience. Sorel saw how, through the mechanisms of syndical irrigation associations, members of the associations were authors of their own rules. The model of these old mechanisms, which aggregated and digested knowledge and rules, provoked reflection on the collective power that a society might have over itself and its members. But the process did not operate smoothly by itself.

In his professional life as an engineer, Sorel confronted dysfunctions in these syndical structures, particularly when the deliberative and electoral practices that presided over their functioning were corrupted, rendering brittle the regulatory power of the syndical collectives over their members. In this context, Sorel interrogated the conditions under which collectives came to play a role in making socially accepted rules. The major social upheavals affecting the oldest collective mechanisms since the Revolution led Sorel to inquire after the social – and in some sense pre-political – conditions under which associations might continue to be sites for the *socialization* of common rules.[60]

5. Conditions for the autonomy of labor and juridical sentiment

5.1 *Solidarity in the land versus* solidarisme

Advocates of *solidarisme* in the Third Republic understood intermediate structures whose creation they encouraged (mutual aid societies, cooperative credit unions) as just so many fields

(Le Seuil, 2004); Alain Chatriot, "Les corps intermédiaires en République : un problème ou une solution pour l'État ? (France, xix^{e}-xx^{e} siècles)", *Histoire, économie & société* 35, no. 1 (2016): 36-44.

[58] Émile Durkheim [1928], *Socialism and Saint-Simon*, trans. Charlotte Sattler (Routledge, 2010), 2.

[59] "The corporatist idea is elaborated in Sorel, who does not derive it exclusively from Durkheim". Chamboredon, *Durkheim*, 52.

[60] For further development of this point, see Ingold, *L'écologie politique de Georges Sorel*, chapter on democratic formalism and economics.

within which bonds of solidarity could develop. For Sorel, this reasoning was nonsense, as it inverted the real relation between solidarity and economic activity. While certain people wanted to see, in the success of credit unions, "the *means* 'of developing bonds of solidarity between neighbors'", Sorel proposed studying the inverse process.[61] Economic bonds connecting neighbors to one another – that is to say, in the rural context, the juridical bonds uniting pieces of land – explained the success and the solidarity of these intermediate institutions, and not the reverse: "What one must say is quite the contrary: it is because there exist among neighbors relations proper to give rise to juridical solidarity, that the banks [credit unions] can rely upon the guarantees given to them and be sheltered [from risk]".[62] His caution against "popular credit unions which believe that they can base themselves on guarantees that are often called moral or of friendship" put Sorel in line with Proudhon's ideas, which had warned against any confusion between charity and law.[63] Sorel quotes Proudhon to that effect: "It is important that workers should be quite convinced where credit is concerned, more than in any other field, charity is one thing and law another, that a mutual society must not be confused with charitable one, that businesses are in no sense works of charity or philanthropy".[64]

Sorel's observations on surety bonds completed his analysis. These observations derived directly from his experience as engineer, during which he found himself confronted with politicians who had put pressure on municipal tax collectors to allow their electors to avoid repayment of debts.

> "The *Crédit foncier* [Land Bank] of France having often had difficulties getting paid by irrigation syndicats, demands that the communes in which these irrigation canals exist guarantee any lending to which they consent… the measure obliges politicians to put pressure on prefects to recover the syndical fees, which is done through the intermediary of the tax collector as direct contributions. If they did not fear losing their popularity by compromising the communes, politicians would then demand that prefects not recover these syndical taxes, in order to gain popularity with the syndics".[65]

For Sorel, the connection to production is what makes credit more solid in the countryside than in the city:

> "The peasant is extremely suspicious, very little disposed to allow himself to be taken in by the chatter of the idealists. Through his daily experience, he determines the additional profit that might come from improved farming tools or livestock. In the fields, credit is much less uncertain than it is in the city, much less likely to throw itself into 'sentimental affairs' because it is much more securely based on the development of productive forces that are well understood by everyone".[66]

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[61] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne,* 294. Sorel is citing Georges Bondel, *Etudes sur les populations rurales de l'Allemagne.* Emphasis mine.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 291.
[64] Pierre Joseph Proudhon, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, cited by Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 291.
[65] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 290, note 1.
[66] Ibid., 293-294.

5.2 Complete association in labor and juridical sentiment

These syndical associations are not simply the collective organization of the means of production, in which the infrastructure of the canal would play the role of a shared means. The interdependence between associates, or rather between parcels of land, creates a real productive *milieu*: collective organization is based on the participation of everyone in the life of the collective, through the elaboration of common rules, their imposition, and a system of sanctions among equals. A system in which each producer participates in decisions builds up the conditions of collective life without the intervention of any sort of will external to the producers themselves. Intensive use of the resource – water – implies strong coordination between associates, over time as well as space. This takes the form of the real legal dependencies [*servitudes foncières*] between parcels of land that so characterize "irrigated territories".[67] A relevant example is the organization of *tours d'eau,* thanks to which water circulates from one piece of land to another according to an order and a schedule fixed collectively, in an economic system that engages land over and above the will of its proprietors.

Three elements seem essential to me in order to grasp what the experience of rural *syndicats* allowed Sorel to think through. The first has to do with the place of will or choice in the economic system. If "complete rural societies" go further than the factory in Sorel's eyes, it is because men's wills become secondary. The agricultural association which realizes "the idea most completely" is not "that which unites men, but that which puts men's individual wills in the background in order to bring to the forefront the common interests that exist between real assets". [68] Much more, while the economic coherence of the industrial factory rests on an exterior will – that of the owner – "so that there is not an association", the agricultural *syndicat* – in the "complete rural societies" that Sorel knew as an engineer – is not directed by an exterior will.

> "We find in these complete rural societies something analogous to what occurs in the modern factory: 'In Manufacture the organization of the social labor-process is purely subjective; it is a combination of detail labourers; in its machinery system, Modern industry has a productive apparatus that is purely objective, in which the labourer becomes a mere appendage to an already existing material condition of production… the co-operative character of the labor-process is… a technical necessity dictated by the instrument of labor itself.' But in the factory everything depends on an external will, so that there is not an association, while in an irrigation syndicat there is no exterior will and all the particular wills are directly subordinate to the means of improving that is the aim of the syndicat… It is in this sort of production that the principle of association appears most fully".[69]

These rural syndical associations do not depend on an "exterior will" imposing itself on all. Rather, they organize themselves around a common goal shared by all the associates. More precisely, this common goal is inherent in the activity itself and in the management of the means of production (land and water). As Sorel writes, "the right to irrigation is, in some way, incorporated into the land".[70] In hydraulic syndical associations, we find a form that belongs to goods held in common. What makes them common is not a collective title to the various goods,

[67] Sorel [1902], "Préface à Gatti", 231-2.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 232-3. Sorel is quoting the 15th chapter of *Capital*. Karl Marx [1867], *Capital,* vol 1 (Progress Publishers, 1954), 364-5.
[70] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 108.

but their purpose. There is in these singular syndical associations a *real* obligation of purpose, or of affectation in a juridical sense: the lands are engaged in this economic system of irrigation, making it impossible for the associates to choose to remove themselves (short of selling their land). The purpose of the economic system takes priority over both the property regime of real estate and over the individual choices of the associates.

The second essential element to remember has to do precisely with this particular melding between purpose – or in Sorel's terms "common enterprise" – and individual property. Irrigation *syndicats* resemble cooperatives for production. Not, however, in the sense that members produce in common: the organization of labor is still attached to parcels of land held privately by the different members, who undertake their own farming as they see fit. When Sorel, in 1899, drew up a typology of different cooperative forms, he took these irrigation *syndicats* as a model to define an "individualist cooperation", which he also called "rotating possession": "common means of which rights-holders can make successive use: forest, pasture, irrigation canals, a kiln, and so on. The proper definition of such common means would be rotating possession".[71]

This is the sense in which Sorel's attachment to property must be understood. It leads him to identify what he calls "*concrete property*", whose "principle here is indeed interior", and which he distinguishes both from *abstract property* and from the *possession* dear to Proudhon:

> "Reflecting on the historical role played by property, and the place that it occupies in the philosophy of law, Proudhon came to think that possession was not sufficient. Alongside abstract property and the many varied forms of possession, one can imagine another type: it is what, according to the Roman legal scholars, had existed in ancient Rome, and it is what Le Play dreamed of seeing re-emerge in contemporary France. With the freehold [domaine aggloméré] on which a founding family of owner-cultivators lives, property draws itself, in some way, into itself, in order to acquire all its virtue and hold itself close around the family…Everything else is owed to the earth: the principle here is indeed interior. I think that we can give the name concrete property to this system, which has all the appearance of a living organism dominated by a principle interior to it".[72]

This "decisive role of the inner principle" allows Sorel to distinguish *property* (aimed at production) from *milieu* (aimed at exchange).[73] Sorel's stated objective is to free the milieu from "the domination of particular masters":

> "The contemporary spirit of property certainly not being that of the concentration of efforts toward an interior aim, the difference between production and milieu no longer appears with the same clarity as it did for Proudhon. One more reason to examine as closely as possible these differences and to show how, with *individualised production, there is an interest in freeing the milieu from the domination of particular masters*".[74]

Indeed, the absence of a principle exterior to production itself, which is characteristic of rural syndical structures, is precisely the foundation Sorel gives to the development of the worker's

[71] Georges Sorel, "Les divers types de sociétés coopératives", *La science sociale*, 28 (September 1899): 195.
[72] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 155-6.
[73] Ibid., 143 and 144.
[74] Ibid., 163.

juridical sentiment. The relationship to labor in which the worker himself has the capacity to judge his own work, just as would the owner, is what allows for the development of what Sorel calls a "popular juridical conscience": "The popular juridical conscience has as its economic basis an ensemble of conditions putting the worker in a position to regard himself as entrepreneur".[75]

This intimate relationship of the worker to his work, this "absorption of his whole personality into his labour"[76] is characteristic of the producer conscious of himself, analogous to what Sorel saw especially in the peasant: "The peasant turns all of his thoughts toward production and it can be said that he is, in some way, *absorbed in the land that he cultivates*".[77] Sorel has in mind a producer who would not be reduced to a mechanised man like those of the earlier industrial period: "About a century ago, questions of honor hardly came into large scale industry as it was developing; the manufacturing division of labor had transformed men into automatons".[78] It seemed to him that a new period was taking shape, revealing a similarity between workers in "the most highly developed workshops" and the peasant-proprietor of "intensive agriculture". It is through this interior relationship to work that one must understand Sorel's ideas on the "point of honor of the worker, that is the attention that he brings to his work".[79]

> "The good working order of the most highly developed workshops rests, today, on the active and intelligent collaboration of the worker who no longer considers himself as a mere hand performing gestures fixed in advance but as a producer taking an interest in the genuine success of the process. Thus it is that the most advanced industry reproduces phenomena analogous to those that can be seen in agriculture carried out by peasant-proprietors. This analogy is of enormous importance in improving socialist theories".[80]

Sorel uses the language of interiority, of the worker turning back to himself, in order to describe the "juridical sentiment" that he so wishes to see in the working class:

> "When the worker has thus turned back on himself to judge the essential relationships that form his mode of existence, the juridical sentiment begins to take shape… There is nothing more profound in a social economy than understanding of this popular juridical sentiment…; the juridical sentiment is all the more rigid the more men's lives are bound up in their work".[81]

The basis of autonomy, for Sorel, is laid in a reflexive movement in which the worker takes stock of himself. It has nothing to do with an "elite organized as a political party, which has adopted the mission of thinking for the unthinking masses and which imagines that because it allows the latter to enjoy the results of its superior enlightenment, it has done something

[75] Ibid., 95.
[76] Ibid., 66.
[77] Ibid., 67. This line of thinking, it may be incidentally remarked, runs counter to the Weberian paradigm according to which labor is to be discovered in the artisanry and in industry, even as it allows us also to reconsider what he writes on the irrationality or the power of the magical (as opposed to religious) nature of labor on the land.
[78] Ibid., 69.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., 70.
[81] Ibid., 71.

admirable", however socialist such a party may be.[82] This return to one's self through labor, this self-consciousness, is the basis of worker autonomy which "is made in and through the law".[83] The *syndicat*, thus, must have "the ambition to make for itself a juridical system".[84]

5.3 Rural Syndicats and the Right to Work

Inspired by the real right of tenants of hydraulic syndical associations over their collective organization of labor, Sorel described also the right that workers had over their work during strikes as a *real right* (or *jus in re*). This allowed him to conceptualize this right as collective rather than individual, and as a real right beyond the particular wills of those involved in the contract.

Rural syndical associations shaped Sorel's analyses of strikes as collective actions through which, in conflict, law emerged from non-law. The right to coalition had been recognized in 1864, yet the strike nonetheless involved a certain rupture of the labor contract: according to the owners, strikers were to be considered as having resigned, which would allow new workers to be hired. Against such ideas, Sorel developed beginning in 1900 the idea that workers retained a *right* to their labor which was not interrupted by the strike. For Sorel, the strike constituted a privileged location from which to observe labor relations – much like a limit case in law:

> "But how does it happen that the right to coalition would then be a real right? This is because workers believe themselves to have a cooperative right over the labor that takes place in the factory; this right is not suppressed by the fact of the strike; in their eyes there is no rupture in the labor contract, or better said the rupture has taken place only over the financial clauses connected to the contract, and has not touched the earlier and higher obligations, obligations that result from the workers' long-term participation in the industry".[85]

It is therefore not only that the strike allows the workers to experiment with an equivalence between their "right to work" and the "right to property" of the bourgeois classes, as Sorel affirmed in his 1919 republication of the *Introduction à l'économie moderne*: "Powerful juridical sentiments often manifest themselves over the course of strikes. What I call the right to work has a place equal in the proletarian consciousness to that held by the right to property in bourgeois consciousness".[86] In 1900, he had gone further, formulating this right to work as *real right* (*jus in re* as opposed to a *personal* right). He held that the right workers maintained over their work took the form of a "patrimony", on precisely the model of the right of "tenants", associates, over their irrigation system.

> "This work, considered from a cooperative point of view, is indeed a kind of property; The right that workers *believe* themselves to have from the law of 1884 to form corporations and to assure for themselves certain advantages, constitutes, in their eyes, a real right… Workers do not see themselves as selling labor power,

[82] Sorel, *Reflections*, 155-6.
[83] Rolland, "Sorel et le 'moment syndical'", in Herrera (ed.), *Sorel et le droit,* 62, and in this book, 31.
[84] Georges Sorel, "Grèves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 407. On Sorel's relationship to law, see the remarkable works by Patrice Rolland gathered in Patrice Rolland, *Georges Sorel. Le prolétariat dans la démocratie* (Kimé, 2024). See also Herrera, "Constellations juridiques du Sorélisme".
[85] Sorel [1900], "Les grèves. Les théories contrariées par les faits ", 435-6.
[86] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 95, note 1. The note in question is signaled by Sorel in his Foreword of 1919 as an addition to the 1903 original. See ibid., xiii.

> as Marx supposed, but as tenants having a right to remain attached to the work that is their patrimony. The strike cannot modify this state of things".[87]

Sorel anticipates the "collective rights" that would be analyzed by Emmanuel Lévy in 1903.[88] Indeed, in 1909, Lévy recognized his debt to Sorel, "who [in 1900] strongly suggested that a strike creates a new workers' psychology".[89] This was well before the collective conventions which, in 1919, recognized the capacity of a *de facto* group – and not only a *syndicat* – to become a producer of norms.

In 1914, in a text entitled "Strikes and the right to work", Sorel again took up the reflections begun in the 1900 article.[90] He envisioned a right to work whose contours he wished to establish so as to avoid falling under the critique that Proudhon had formulated just after 1848. Denouncing the gap between the emancipatory aspirations and the power of evocation contained in slogans from 1848 of the "right to…" and their (im)possible translation into legality, Proudhon had written in 1851: "the right to work, the right to life, the right to love, the right to happiness, all these formulas, able at a given moment to stir the masses", are nonetheless "entirely free from practical reason".[91] For Proudhon the impossibility of codifying these so-called rights cancelled their practical meaning. Sorel did not accept this assessment. For him, law was not exhausted by the usual triptych of legislation, doctrines, and jurisprudence. "Around what is strictly law", Sorel saw what he called "*the halo of law*", a space in which, from conflict, which is to say non-law, a new law can be born.[92] The right to work, as Sorel conceived and formulated it, fits into this movement: it comes into existence during conflicts and strikes.

In his critique of Anton Menger's juridical socialism, Sorel pointed to the error of having "limited questions of the right to work to the question of actions that individuals can bring against public authorities in order to procure their own livelihoods".[93] Sorel traced a clear distinction between *social legislation*, granted by the social state, and *proletarian legislation*. The right to work was not, in Sorel's eyes, first of all a right that would be claimed against the state.

In 1907, Sorel responded specifically to the arguments Lévy made in his 1903 *L'affirmation du droit collectif*. Lévy saw strikes as situations in which workers had "acquired a right, which was a collective claim on the part of labor against capital".[94] For Sorel, the argument would have been more solid if it had dealt not with *credit rights* (*droits de créance*) but with *real right*

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[87] Sorel goes on to say, in the notes, that "the stability of engagements, the heredity of functions and relations that are established between man and place, are the three great sources of this conception… I believe that it is only in a few passages from Proudhon that this theory has been sketched out". Sorel [1900], "Les grèves. Les théories contrariées par les faits ", 436.

[88] Emmanuel Lévy, *L'affirmation du droit collectif* (Société nouvelle de librairie et d'édition, 1903), 25-7.

[89] Emmanuel Lévy, *Capital et travail* (Libraire du parti socialiste, 1909), 21, note 1.

[90] The text appears in the *Matériaux d'une Théorie du Prolétariat,* which was published in 1919. However, the manuscript for the book had been completed in 1914, its publication delayed to 1919 because of the war. Hence the dating of the text.

[91] Proudhon, *Idée générale de la Révolution au XIXe siècle. Choix d'études sur la pratique révolutionnaire et industrielle* (Garnier frères, 1851), 5th study, §5, cited by Sorel [1914], "Grèves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 396.

[92] Sorel, "Grèves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 396.

[93] Georges Sorel, "Les aspects juridiques du socialisme", *Revue Socialiste* 32 (November 1900): 558-85, reprinted in Herrera (ed.), *Par le droit, au-delà du droit*, 91.

[94] Lévy, *L'affirmation du droit collectif*, 18.

(*jus in re*), thus allowing one to pose the social question on a juridical level, and not only on that of "good will":

> "Not being able to go into the details of this theory, I will limit myself to observing that it does not allow conclusions quite so clear as it would if the opposition [between capitalists and workers] had dealt with real rights. The idea of *credit* [*créance*] always leads us to commercial analogies… the result is that in presenting the social question in the form of a juridical problem dealing with money obligations, we give a weapon to those who would like to reduce things to a good will agreement".[95]

In 1919, Sorel confirmed this reading, distinguishing between real right and monetary claim, by indicating even more explicitly how the observation of the singular juridical system of the irrigation *syndicats* had led him to this understanding of the right to work as a *real* right. "We have already admitted that these people [strikers] have over the factory a *jus in re* [right to work] which makes them resemble the proprietors of rural holdings having a collective interest".[96] The significance of this observation must be weighed very carefully! We're dealing here not only with an analogy or a resemblance: the workers would have a right to the factory *like* tenants have one to the system of agricultural irrigation. Sorel goes on, "according to the theory of the right to work developed above, the workers, possessing a right over the factory, may be compared to proprietors whose holdings are involved in a collective endeavor; this common enterprise, during the strike, is to improve the living conditions of the workers".[97] It is the *common enterprise* that establishes the right that the tenants have over the system of irrigation and its conduct. A real right that transcends the particular wills of the co-associates, the larger aim of the economic system taking priority over the property regime and individual choice. In the same way, it is the strike that allows workers to constitute a *collectivity* interested in a common project and, this done, to claim a right over their factory, which is to say a right to work.

5.4 Suffrage versus popular legal action

In his position as engineer, Sorel, in order to analyze the conduct of hydraulic syndical associations, avoided the ideological opposition between autonomy and administrative tutelage. In his reports, starting from a technical and situated analysis, he developed a multi-level reflection on how difficult it was for tenants to effectively monitor their administrators within the *syndicats*. This prefigured his later critique – addressed also to Marx – of suffrage as a mode of democratic control. In so doing he opened a radical perspective on syndical "autonomy", which, according to him, "is in absolute contradiction with the democratic principle, which submits everything to the discretion of those who have been elected".[98]

In his last years at the *Ponts et Chaussées*, Sorel found himself directly confronted by confusions between administration and electoralism, as well as between economic and political principles. The engineer found himself charged with assuring the effective administration of the Bohère canal, yet politicians were putting pressure on the municipal tax collector to allow their political clientele, as well as themselves, to avoid paying re-imbursements for the debts of the *syndicat*. Everyone within the *syndicat* was counting on the Republic to pay for a canal

[95] Sorel, "Le prétendu socialisme juridique", reprinted in Herrera (ed.), *Par le droit, au-delà du droit*, 215-16.
[96] Sorel, "Grèves et droit au travail", in *Matériaux*, 408.
[97] Ibid, 406.
[98] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 247-8.

whose cost grew every year. During the summer of 1890, Sorel drew up a confidential report, one which would not pass through the office of the prefect. Evoking the permanent "municipal crisis" agitating the area's main city – "in each election, everyone has got to be satisfied" – he denounced a canal "built and administered for electoral purposes".[99] Among the notables who had not paid their contribution to the construction of the canal was the mayor of Prades, brother of the radical deputy who was at that time president of the general council of the *Pyrénées Orientales*.[100] It was in light of this bitter experience that Sorel undertook to correct and critique the error of Marx in believing in the capacity of suffrage to supervise the actions of the administration.

On the basis of this capacity for - or this refusal of - supervision by citizens, Sorel drew a dividing line between socialism and democracy. He opposed *democracy*, with its illusions about the capacity of elections to exert control over those elected, to *socialism*, which understood the functionary above all as "a representative charged with management":

> "The difference between democracy and socialism appears here in a particularly clear way. For democracy, the elected functionary must be controlled by the votes of the electors; for them, the only question there can be is to assess if the general and immediately obvious tendencies of the administration fit the sentiments that dominate opinion at the moment of the elections. The actions of the representatives submitted to an election are judged according to the reason of State: did they do their work well as a militant against the enemies of the party? Will their continued presence be favorable to the progress of the party? For socialism, there are no party sentiments and no reason of State. The functionary is a representative charged with management. At issue is knowing if he did a good job with this management and that question is no different from those that could be debated between a merchant and his representative. We leave idealism behind here and pass onto the terrain of production".[101]

Democracy rests on the political control of state action: periodic elections mark the moments when the ballot box controls, and at need punishes, functionaries. But Sorel denounces a *democracy* that judges its own actions in light of partisan sentiments (friend or enemy of the party). The Third Republic as he knew it saw itself "as being in a state of conflict with other constituted forces (Reaction, the Church, the major financial societies) and found it right to apply the same principles as had the royalty, nor did it any more admit the control of citizens".[102] On the contrary, Sorel thought socialism was able to allow citizens the possibility of popular actions in order to judge its own actions, on the basis of (good or bad) management rather than partisan logic.

> "It is through the organization of widely open popular legal actions that it is possible to hope to restrain abuses on the part of administrations. Everyone has got to be able to easily become familiar with the documents they need to see in order to make their claims. There must be courts independent enough to be able to pronounce against those elected by universal suffrage. Their judgements must be capable of execution, which is not the case in France, but which would be easy to achieve by according to courts the power of issuing injunctions with significant criminal

[99] "Personal and confidential report of the engineer Sorel", 20 August 1890, in Archives Nationales, F10, 3539.
[100] Ingold, "Penser à l'épreuve des conflits", 49-50.
[101] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 250-1.
[102] Ibid., 249.

sanctions including imprisonment".[103]

Against the faith that Marx (and the left more generally) had in elections as a source of authority, Sorel wanted to restore citizens' capacity for action, allowing real control through "widely open popular legal actions" and a justice whose independence he insisted upon, an independence sufficient to render the tribunals "able to pronounce against those elected by universal suffrage".

Sorel contested the application of political suffrage, and its egalitarian foundation, on the terrain of economic organization. Clearly, his reflections on financial securities drew on his professional experiences: both as an engineer under political pressures, and by observing syndical collectives, within which the question of how to control elected representatives (*syndics*) through a general assembly was also posed. I have shown how, for Sorel, rural syndical logics were corrupted when they came under the influence of the democratic rationale of suffrage rather than sticking to that of production. Democratic control, based on elections, is only a fiction as far as Sorel is concerned, one that relies on inaccurate opinion, on majority opinion, and not on the reality of production. Sorel looks, rather, to private law:[104] "In order for there to be effective control, administrative questions must be, to the greatest possible degree, placed on the terrain of private law, in such a way that any citizen could obtain the correction of any act against the laws, or damaging the interests of a locality".[105] What Sorel insisted upon was the capacity of those closely involved "to surveil the administrators of free foundations and associations".[106]

This was a question posed very explicitly in his professional dossiers. In his defense of the principle of administrative responsibility, in his critique of the slippages of the democratic majoritarian principle, Sorel took up the Proudhonian federative model. As Rolland wrote, this "aimed to reduce as much as possible the distance that separates the governed from the governors… without dreaming of an impossible direct democracy".[107] Thus for Sorel, "the principle of the majority holds only for small groups within which people can follow very closely the actions of their representatives".[108]

6. From the idealized economy of cotton to the concrete economy of agriculture

6.1 Against industrialist determinism

The vast majority of Sorel's socialist contemporaries undertook their economic and sociological analysis by focusing on large scale industry. The attention our engineer paid to the complexity of rural *syndicats* is what lies behind his unusual choice to begin with agriculture. This is the move that distinguishes his first book on economics, which remains among the least

[103] Ibid., 250.

[104] This role accorded to private law can be confronted with the "good law" ["bon droit"] of workers expelled [évincé] from labour law as analyzed by Alain Cottereau, "Droit et bon droit. Un droit des ouvriers instauré, puis évincé par le droit du travail (France, XIXe siècle)", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 6 (November-december 2002): 1521-57.

[105] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 250.

[106] Ibid., 252.

[107] Patrice Rolland, "Égalitarisme et autorités sociales : les paradoxes de Sorel sur l'égalité dans les sociétés démocratiques modernes", in Françoise Gerbod and Françoise Mélonio (eds), *L'égalité au tournant du siècle. Péguy et ses contemporains* (Honoré Champion, 1998), 119.

[108] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 248.

studied parts of his larger body of work.[109] *Introduction à l'économie moderne* appeared in 1903 and rests entirely on the conviction that "a good understanding of contemporary social problems requires that we begin our study with the rural economy".[110] In choosing to begin with the study of agriculture in order to grasp what he called the *concrete economy* as opposed to the *abstract economy,* Sorel stands apart from practically all his contemporaries, the socialist tradition, and even against Marx. The latter, Sorel wrote, "transport[ed] his reader to England" and had believed he had found in the cotton industry the necessary horizon of the economy of his time and of a progress that would be inescapable.[111] In this, Marx was like other commenters of the early part of the century who "thought that one had to take the cotton industry as a basis for the science [of social phenomena], because it appeared to be the most advanced, the most powerful, and the most capable of progress. It was believed that one could see it in a peculiar character that set it clearly apart from all former manufacture".[112] In refuting any presupposition of a single and inescapable horizon for everyone, Sorel developed a vigorous critique of a historical determinism that nonetheless had a long career ahead of it.

> "The abstract economy was thus given an experimental value that it did not have and which has given rise to many errors. It has often been believed that the observed differences between conclusions from theory and facts must diminish in the future and that the world was fated to resemble, ever more closely, this idealized economy of cotton. Certain socialists have fallen into this error more easily even than the economists, because they see the movement of society only from the point of view of the distant future; they believe themselves authorized to set aside differences that are judged to be only transitory; they have happened, more than once, to find themselves speaking about reality with a profound scorn and to treat the very phenomena that science has got to grasp as appearances that a refined spirit knows to set aside in order to attain the deep reality of things: this so-called deep reality seems to be interesting only for those who spent their time pondering the society of the future".[113]

Agriculture was not engaged in an evolutionary process mirroring that of industry, fated to give it modern forms, in a schema that would homogenize production, "which would assimilate all social phenomena to those evident in large scale industry".[114] Sorel opposed all progressivist schemas according to which agriculture would inevitably be obliged to "model itself on industry".[115] On the basis of such ideas, clearly, Sorel ought to find – or recover – his place in recent debates that explore the plurality of socialisms. He belongs to a chronology attentive to the "Proudhonian moment", one that does not neglect the period of the Restoration or the development of the *collective manufactures,* in contrast to the Durkheimian – but also Marxist – vision that associated the emergence of socialism only with the diffusion of large scale

[109] Beyond a short article by Thierry Paquot, "Les écrits économiques de Georges Sorel", in Jacques Julliard and Shlomo Sand (eds), *Georges Sorel en son temps* (Seuil, 1985), 203-23, see the analyses of Vincent Bourdeau, who offers a stimulating re-reading of *Introduction à l'économie moderne* by recasting the work in a Proudhonian moment of critique of political economy. See Vincent Bourdeau, "L'outil critique du droit. Proudhon, Sorel, et la redéfinition socialiste-républicaine de l'économie politique (1850-1914)", *Revue d'histoire de la pensée économique* 13, no. 1 (2022): 275-313.
[110] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 12.
[111] Ibid., 37.
[112] Ibid, 31.
[113] Ibid., 32-3.
[114] Ibid., 37.
[115] Ibid., 36.

industry.[116] It goes without saying that to reintegrate Sorel into these debates obliges also a reconsideration of the place of the State, too often seen as an end point in Durkheimian sociological-socialism.[117]

6.2 From social physics to sociology

Sorel felt that the complexity of the rural economy gave his work real value for elaborating a sociology that would not be reducible to a "social physics". Economists and socialist thinkers, who had both taken large scale industry as a social model, were thereby led to reduce workers to simple atoms, average men. In so doing, they transformed economic science into a "science of quantities of labor".

> "The social world thus takes on the appearance of the world of physics, within which it is not unreasonable to imagine the existence of laws just as certain as any natural laws. In idealizing large scale industry, one ends up with the notion of a social physics, and thinks that the science created in this way not only can clarify practice, but more that it must impose itself as any theory is imposed on application".[118]

Beginning with the experience of rural *syndicats* made such a perspective implausible. Sorel saw in rural life the seedbed of a *sociology* capable of accounting for the complexity of social configurations that are at once indeterminable and unrepeatable. Standing against the false image of a "homogeneity of production" assumed by large scale industry, agriculture could be a source of inspiration in making sense of complexity.[119] "In order to study the concrete economy, there is reason to proceed in a different way and to turn toward what is most complex, toward this agriculture that has been neglected for so long: the explanation of reality must be sought in what is itself full of variety".[120]

Thus, to the "idealized economy of cotton", Sorel opposed a "concrete economy" and a sociology founded on, and drawing from, the actual life of agricultural societies, capable of restoring the complexity of an uneven reality: that is, at once the *materiality* of this world, its *plurality,* and also its *historical indeterminism*. The worker called to develop his juridical

[116] On the collective manufacture: William H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France. The Language of Labor from Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge University Press, 1980); Alain Cottereau, "The fate of collective manufactures in the industrial world: the silk industries of Lyon and London, 1800-1850", in Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *World of possibilities: flexibility and mass production in western industrialization* (Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1997), 75-152. On the Proudhonian moment, Patrice Rolland, "La référence proudhonienne chez Georges Sorel", *Mil Neuf Cent* 7 (1989): 127-61; Patrice Rolland, "À propos de Proudhon: une querelle des influences", *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques* 2 (1995): 275-300; Anne-Sophie Chambost, "Déboulonner la statue de Proudhon?" in Patrick Charlot and Oscar Ferreira (eds), *Garantir les droits, protéger les libertés* (Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2022), 473-85; Andrea Lanza, "La République sociale. Le fait socialiste au-delà de l'étatisme et de l'anarchisme", *Incidences* 11 (Autumn 2015): 107-30; Samuel Hayat, "De l'anarchisme proudhonien au syndicalisme révolutionnaire: une transmission problématique", in Edouard Jourdain (ed.), *Proudhon et l'anarchie* (Publications de la Société P-J. Proudhon, 2012), 39-62; Samuel Hayat, "Pour le droit et contre le droit: les origines ouvrières de l'anarchisme proudhonien", in Anne-Sophie Chambost (ed.), *Proudhon, droit ou morale?* (Publications de la Société P-J. Proudhon, 2011), 150-65; Bourdeau, "L'outil critique du droit".

[117] Bruno Karsenti and Cyril Lemieux, *Socialisme et sociologie* (Éditions de l'EHESS, 2017).

[118] Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, 32-3.

[119] Ibid., 37.

[120] Ibid.

sentiment is not this "mechanized man", this "automaton" supposed by large scale industry, but rather a worker capable of judging his own work for himself, like an entrepreneur.[121]

Sorel developed a *critical political economy*, but also a *critical sociology*, not on the basis of large scale industry like most of his contemporaries, but beginning with agriculture. I have shown how his experience as a rural engineer was essential in allowing him to take this decisive step, which gives his ideas – developed in the crucible of conflicts, taking into account the complexity of the social and attentive to the plurality of historical trajectories – all the more interesting today.

6.3 From the opposition between intensive and extensive agriculture to the critique of the solidariste *quasi-contract*

Sorel does not idealize agricultural labor when he evokes the rural world. The distinctions he establishes deserve to be carefully examined, beginning with the deceptively familiar "intensive agriculture". Mechanization and chemistry – considered successively by his contemporaries as the two great motors of the transformation of agriculture – have to do with only one part of the agricultural economy. For Sorel, the extension of mechanization characterized above all "extensive agriculture" across large territories.[122] Contrasted with this is "intensive agriculture", which Sorel called also "biological industry", and which was applied to more restrained spaces.[123] What he had in mind here was the irrigated agriculture that he had known as an engineer. The engineer saw the Republic, following the policies of the Second Empire, attempt to reproduce this intensive agriculture on a large scale by multiplying canals, imagining that "irrigation is itself such a good thing that it is better to build canals even when the water may not be sufficient in summer and that it is barbarous to allow large volumes of water to be lost into the ocean during the spring". But this multiplication of canals gave rise only to an extensive agriculture, an agriculture using water in an intermittent way, in order to "grow a bad acidic harvest", quite different from intensive irrigated agriculture with its labor discipline.[124]

Sorel gave a central role to this distinction he drew between "extensive agriculture" and "intensive agriculture". Indeed, it was drawing on this opposition that he undertook his critique of the quasi-contract developed by the *solidaristes*. Léon Bourgeois, particularly, "had not sought out the economic basis of his doctrine" and therefore had not seen "the agronomical origin" of his own idea.[125]

In the system of "very intensive agriculture", whose model was given precisely by certain of the irrigated lands that Sorel had known as an engineer, could be observed "an immense accumulation of improvements that previous generations have made to the ground and that form a heritage that those in the present receive only under certain conditions. From this appear the fictions of debt contracted to the past, of a social quasi-contract".[126] Bourgeois held the quasi-contract to be a "contract retroactively consented to". It was a juridical fiction through which the *solidaristes* wanted to establish a legal "social duty", that would not only be "a pure obligation of conscience" but "an obligation based in law".[127] Sorel rejected this framing. In

[121] Ibid., 95.
[122] Ibid., 36, note 1.
[123] Ibid., 36.
[124] Both citations in Sorel, "Notes sur les bases", 146-7 and 161.
[125] Sorel, "Idées socialistes", 310.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Bourgeois, *Solidarité*, 65 and 87.

the system of intensive agriculture, this heritage that obliges the living has its basis not in the will or decision of those who undertake the contract, but in the *common enterprise*, that is to say in the economic destination of the system and its juridical affectation through real right or *jus in re*. It is a heritage that binds men above and beyond their will, with bonds sedimented into *things*. No one – as far as I know – has worked out the extraordinary theoretical implications of the perspective opened by Sorel, in particular regarding the distinction between *individual rights [droits personnels]* and *real rights* or *jus in re*.

Critical notes on Bourgeois and the quasi-contract are found dispersed throughout Sorel's writings, but it is especially in the *Insegnamenti sociali dell'economia contemporanea* (1907) that Sorel deploys most forcefully his critique of *solidarisme* and its philosophy of "social duty". This last, Sorel predicted, would open the way to state "interventionism", as Célestin Bouglé also emphasized in 1907.[128] Where the notion of social duty might open onto an infinity of material demands, Sorel sought to anchor struggle in law, which is to say in the realities of production, contrary to any illusion of abundance.[129]

My research on Sorel's career as an engineer suggests a different history of the social sciences, or better, the history of a different social science, drawing us away from academic spheres and into contact with a concrete and material reality. This work is one element of a larger research program in which I propose a reconsideration of *the rural* as the basis for the sciences of society as they were elaborated in the 19th century. Academic social sciences attached themselves to the remarkable objects that were urbanization and industrialization: they focused on the "social question". Such social science tends to superimpose onto this industrial and social crisis interpretations of it as a crisis of social integration during this key period in the Third Republic, a moment in which republican ideology gave to *solidarisme* a crucial role in social integration. On the contrary, only rare thinkers were attentive to the assistance provided by the rural economy in elaborating a sociology. And often they were actively marginalized, even systematically ideologically discredited in the academic history of the discipline, as was Le Play.

By beginning with the rural world, Sorel marks out an unlikely path in the main current of reflection on the working class and the *syndicats* of the 19th and 20th centuries. Prioritizing the rural obliges one to confront the question of the relationship to the past – certainly an eminently conflictual political knot in the post-revolutionary period. In 1789, the new territorial juridical order had declared itself capable of cutting ties to the past regarding rights with the abolition of feudal rights, and the customs that organized relations with the natural world. It was in the rural world that this demand for a clean slate was most systematically contradicted. In the rural world, society cannot get around the materiality within which the past is inscribed. To reconsider the forgotten role of the rural in the constitution of the social sciences is to interrogate the manner in which the social sciences have, in various ways, conceived of the collective power that a society exerts over itself and its members, without necessarily going through the state.

[128] Célestin Bouglé *Le solidarisme* (Giard & Brière, 1907).

[129] Sorel points out the connection between the myth of abundance and the egalitarian project, revived by the Third Republic as it sought to establish itself in rural France: by combining individualism and egalitarianism, it gave rise to a headlong rush into a social project that refused to acknowledge its own conflicts or limitations. See Ingold, *L'écologie politique de Georges Sorel*.

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The "Marxism of Marx" according to Sorel

by Willy Gianinazzi
EHESS (retired)
Translated by Eric Brandom with the assistance of Tommaso Giordani

1. Introduction

After having published *The Trial of Socrates* in 1889, in which Pierre-Joseph Proudhon played a substantial part, Georges Sorel affirmed his knowledge of this precursor of anti-statist anarchism in a long 1892 article dedicated to him. In the last years of his life, Sorel wrote a good deal about Proudhon and even planned to write a whole book on him. Between these two chronological extremes, however, the capital reference that would mark Sorel's political thought was not the author of the *System of Economic Contradictions*, but his adversary, Karl Marx, whose prestige in the socialist movement was unequaled.

Even as it was discussed and critiqued among academics as an economic theory, Marxism was also valorized for its political content and starting from the 1880s became a revolutionary reference for the Guesdists – one of the socialist currents most firmly anchored in the working class, with whom Sorel was for a time in contact. In 1893, Sorel began his thinking around Marx with a profession of faith that was as much a pledge to socialism as it was a defense of the scientific character of Marxism.[1] He continued by collaborating closely with the first French Marxist journals: *Ère nouvelle* (1894), which sprang from the Parisian student milieu, *Jeunesse socialiste* (1895), a creation of Hubert Lagardelle, who was a Guesdist attentive to the role of the syndicats, and finally *Devenir social* (1895-97), which he founded together with "official" Marxists Paul Lafargue and Gabriel Deville. He thus played an important part in, as he said, "acclimatizing Marxism in France".[2] In a promotional letter announcing the launch of *Devenir social*, he clarified the project:

> "The goal of this publication is to make known in France (where they are more or less unknown) the ideas of German socialism or Marxism. The founders have appealed more to Italian contributors because they have been thought to have interests and practical perspectives more accessible to our Latin public than those of German contributors – even if they are not all so purely Marxist as the editors of *Neue Zeit* and *Vorwaerts*".[3]

He gave several of his most important essays to these journals, including "L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique", "La science dans l'éducation" and even his fundamental "Étude sur Vico". An autodidact of genius and resistant to easy commonplace ideas, the originality of Sorel's own thought emerged in his close engagement with writings by Henri Bergson, Émile Durkheim, Théodule Ribot, and Giambattista Vico. After having left *Devenir social* in 1897, signaling his rupture with a determinist Marxism to which he had not subscribed for some time,

[1] Georges Sorel, "Science et socialisme", *Revue philosophique* 35, (May 1893): 509-511.

[2] Georges Sorel, *Saggi di critica del marxismo* (Remo Sandron, 1903), 6. This role, studied in their time by Daniel Lindenberg – *Le marxisme introuvable* (Calmann-Lévy, 1975) – and Shlomo Sand – *L'illusion du politique. Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900* (La Découverte, 1985) – is astonishingly neglected by contemporary French historiography. See, for example, Jean-Numa Ducange and Antony Burlaud (eds), *Marx, une passion française* (La Découverte, 2018).

[3] Sorel to an unknown correspondent, 20 May 1895, private papers of Patrice Rolland. In another letter from the same period, written to Gabriel Deville on the 18 May 1895, Sorel promised to promote *La Jeunesse socialiste*. See Archives Nationales, Paris, Deville Papers, 51AP3, 2.

he joined the anarchist journal *Humanité nouvelle* (1898-1900) and encountered "proletarian socialism" through the anarchist union organizer Fernand Pelloutier. He continued his study of Marx with intense participation in the revisionist debate at the end of the century in which he took the side of Eduard Bernstein. This revisionist and reformist phase, overlapped also with his engagement as a Dreyfusard, can be said to have ended by 1901. It was followed by a period of political radicalization, which was expressed in his contributions to the Marxist journal *Études socialistes* (1903), and then to Lagardelle's *Mouvement socialiste* (1905-08), which became *de facto* the theoretical organ of revolutionary syndicalism in France.[4] A brochure entitled *The Decomposition of Marxism* followed in 1908.

Effectively a manifesto of Marxist revolutionary syndicalism, the text, remarkable in its concision and clarity, represented the apogee of Sorel's reflection on Marxism. There is thus no better way to begin to study Sorel's thought than by examining the theoretical antecedents that explain and clarify *The Decomposition of Marxism*.

The latter was in fact a more developed and finished version of a text entitled "The Evolution of Socialism" that Sorel prepared in 1907 for a collection of writings published in Moscow under the title *The Social Movement in Contemporary France.*[5] This chapter, together with other translations of his books – and with those of his Italian comrades Angelo Oliviero Olivetti, Enrico Leone, and Arturo Labriola – into Russian, contributed to the diffusion of revolutionary syndicalist ideas in Russia. The moment was well chosen. Left Bolsheviks Anatoly Lunacharsky and Alexander Bogdanov were just then looking to French and Italian revolutionary syndicalism for arguments in their battle against the Marxist orthodoxy of Georgi Plekhanov and Lenin.[6]

The title of the brochure immediately demands clarification. "The Decomposition of Marxism" may mean a work of deconstruction. Or perhaps it indicates the result of such work, a recognition of the supposedly dualist, syncretic, or even contradictory character of Marx's work and of that of his followers. At a second level, rarely explicit but also rarely absent, the expression takes on a negative meaning: that of chemical disaggregation or organic corruption. Although absent in Sorel, this ambivalence explains why the formula has had, in the past, a certain success in French writing around Marxism. And while it is often attributed to Sorel, he in fact did not invent it.

It was, rather, Charles Andler, a Germanist working at the École Normale at that time friendly with Sorel, and soon to be commentator and new translator of the *Communist Manifesto* in France, who first used the phrase as a title for his 1896-97 course at the *Collège Libre des Sciences Sociales.*[7] His intention was to use it as a title for a future work critical of Marxism.[8] In a letter to Benedetto Croce from August 7, 1897, Sorel worried that a real blow would be

[4] On this, see Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel: The Character and Developpment of his Thought* (Macmillan, 1985) and John L. Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (University of California Press, 1981).

[5] Leon Kozłowski (ed.), *Социальное движение в современной Франции*, (Dorovatovsky and Charushnikova, 1908).

[6] Jutta Scherrer, "Georges Sorel en Russie : le cas des bolcheviks de gauche" in Jacques Julliard and Shlomo Sand (eds), *Georges Sorel en son temps* (Éditions du Seuil, 1985), 371-394.

[7] Christophe Prochasson, "Sur la réception du marxisme en France. Le cas Andler (1890-1920)", *Revue de synthèse* 110, (January-March 1989): 85-108.

[8] Daniel Lindenberg, "Herr, Andler, Sorel. Trois intellectuels décomposent le marxisme", in Michel Charzat (ed.), *Georges Sorel* (L'Herne, 1986), 192-201.

struck against "historical materialism" by the publication of this "volume on the 'decomposition of Marxism'"[9] – which in the end never appeared.[10] Won over into the revisionist camp, Sorel continued to appreciate the rigor of Andler's antimarxist exegesis, from which he learned even as he disagreed with it. In 1908, he borrowed the expression "decomposition", consecrated by the professor at the *École normale*, to title his brochure, whose intention, paradoxically, was to denounce the bad divisions introduced by this operation of distinction.

Once stripped of its polemical overtones this formula, born in a context of crisis for Marxism, is perfectly suited to characterize what Marxism was at the time of the Second International. Therefore, it also sheds light on the singular "Marxism" of Sorel and on the current to which he referred, revolutionary syndicalism.

2. Revising Marxism

The starting point for this crisis was the great dismay provoked in 1894 by the publication of Volume III of Marx's *Capital*, edited by Engels, who gave it a puzzling gloss. The Marxian law of value, for Engels, was best expressed in the simple circulation of merchandise and "has general economic validity for a period lasting from the beginning of exchange, which transforms products into commodities, down to the 15th century of the present era".[11] Sorel asked "how can one make sense of the capitalist economy on the basis of a law that has not been applicable since the 15th century? What does Marx's theory mean?"[12]

All this did little to clarify a problem that Marx had set out to solve in his examination of the whole process of capitalist production: that of the transformation of value into price, on which determination of the rate of profit depended. This was an essential question for Marxists, because it allowed one to demonstrate the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which in itself was a structural indication of the coming exhaustion of capitalism. But the way the problem was posed was not without consequences.

It was not clear to contemporaries, Marxist or otherwise, that compared to Volume I of *Capital* – in which Marx had proposed the existence of substantive value issuing from abstract labour and the exploitative relations that led also to the fetishization of commodities and money – the method employed in Volume III did not implicitly reinstate Ricardo's point of view, through a conception of quantifiable value unfolding within commodities in their concrete phenomenal forms.[13] Thus it seemed that the process through which value transformed into price could be described positively and could correspond to facts observed on the surface of society. But it

[9] Georges Sorel to Benedetto Croce, 7 August 1897, in Georges Sorel, "Lettere di Georges Sorel a B. Croce", *La Critica* 25 (1927): 48.

[10] Andler published fragments of his own *Decomposition of Marxism* in the *Revue Socialiste* between November 1913 and February 1914. See Charles Andler, "Friedrich Engels. Fragments d'une étude sur la decomposition du marxisme", *La Revue Socialiste* (15 November 1913): 385-97; (15 December 1913): 481-51; (15 January 1914): 54-76; (15 February 1914): 147-68.

[11] First published in *Die Neue Zeit* in 1895, then added as a supplement to the English language editions of the third volume of Capital, this note by Engels was read by Sorel in its French translation in the *Devenir Social* in November 1895. See Friedrich Engels, "Complément et supplément au IIIème livre du Capital", *Le Devenir Social* 1, (8 November 1895):710-28.

[12] Georges Sorel, "Sur la théorie marxiste de la valeur", *Journal des économistes* 30, (May 1897): 223.

[13] On the "Ricardism" of Volume III of *Capital*, see Gilles Dostaler, *Marx, la valeur et l'économie politique*, (Anthropos, 1978).

had to be admitted that Marx's demonstration, meandering through a thicket of complex and not always convincing econometric mediations, did not lead to an empirically verifiable solution.

Such a conclusion was particularly striking in a scientific and academic context in which the Marginalist Revolution was becoming increasingly hegemonic. Several economists had undertaken and developed this perspective in Europe, including Stanley Jevons in Great Britain, Carl Menger and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk in Austria, and Léon Walras and Vilfredo Pareto in Lausanne. In taking its distance from the classical Ricardian theory of the primacy of labour in value – and therefore all the more from Marxism – this neo-classical orientation explained prices by taking into account use value as well as the psychology of the consumer. Since, according to this theory, the market governed the economy, only an analytic theory of exchange could adequately understand it. On this basis and with the empirical ambitions essential to marginalism, Böhm-Bawerk focused on the Marxist problem of transformation of value into prices, and it was easy for him to lament that in Marx "there was a contradiction between system and fact which hardly seemed to admit of a satisfactory explanation".[14]

The Marxist theory of the era, forgetting what Marx owed to the Hegelian dialectic, had not developed sufficient philosophical autonomy to escape from the dominant heuristic methods – derived from positivism, Lorianism, and from French neo-Kantianism – which suppressed the distinction between essence and phenomenon.[15] In this context, which can loosely speaking be called positivist, it seemed evident to all that Marxism's scientificity would be established on that same terrain, i.e. as a pure economic theory applied to exchange and abstracting away the social relations of production, rather than as a "critique of political economy" on the basis of precisely these relations, as Marx had in fact understood it.[16] Having erased the *essence* contained in the capitalist labour process (labour value), the *phenomenon* incarnated by exchange (price and competition) had to be sufficient to explain the economy and the formation of the average rate of profit.

Even Marxists like Karl Kautsky shared this economist presupposition. They defended the claim that implausibilities connected to the rate of profit and its imbalance between sectors did not invalidate the Marxist solution to the problem of transformation of value into prices as long as, like Marx had done in his calculus, one posited the macroeconomic equivalence between the sum of values and the sum of the prices of production.[17] In reconciling Marx's theory with the presuppositions of neo-classicism, Kautsky wanted to save "Marxist economics" because he remained convinced that "there is not one value according to Marx and [one according to] Jevons [a founder of marginalism]…but only one commodity value" which "is a concrete fact" observed before them.[18]

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[14] Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk [1896], "Karl Marx and the Close of His System", in Paul Sweezy (ed.), *Karl Marx and the Close of His System and Böhm-Bawerk's Criticism of Marx* (Augustus M. Kelley, 1949), 4.

[15] Achille Loria (1857-1943) was an italian economist that had influenced many Italian Marxist economists of the time.

[16] Lucio Colletti, "Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International", in Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society*, trans. John Merrington and Judith White (Monthly Review Press, 1974), 45-108; Roberto Racinaro, *La crisi del marxismo nella revisione di fine secolo* (De Donato, 1978); Gilles Dostaler, *Valeur et prix. Histoire d'un débat* (Maspero/Presses Universitaires de Grenoble/Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1978).

[17] Dostaler, *Valeur et prix*, 39, 107.

[18] Karl Kautsky, *Bernstein und das sozialdemokratische Programm: Eine Antikritik* (Dietz, 1899), 36.

Antonio Labriola was one of the few Marxists at the time who rejected this line of reasoning. Formed in the tradition of the Hegelian school of Naples, this philosopher remarked, in a collection of writings framed as letters to Sorel, that "the guiding thread of the inquiry is the dialectical method" and that the contradictions noted between the general presentation of value in Volume I and the analysis of the whole of the process in Volume III "are actual antithetical conditions found in capitalist production itself. When expressed in the shape of formula these phenomena appear to the thinking mind as contradictions".[19] He added that "Marx was not exactly a model of what one might call classic diction…But his illustrations, while often bizarre, are never whimsical or facetious, and they always say something profoundly realistic".[20]

Eduard Bernstein, who was at the center of the crisis upsetting the Marxist certitudes of German Social Democracy at the end of the century and who provoked Kautsky's reply above, thought just the opposite.[21] The labour theory of value certainly had a historical basis, but it was built on such abstractions that, in the final analysis, he thought, value lost all concrete signification and was only a "purely mental construct", "an intellectual formula or a scientific hypothesis".[22] It was correct, therefore, if not to eliminate it at least to pass over it in silence in favor of marginal utility theory, whose abstractions were better able to explain exchange without doing violence to reality.

Bernstein united two tendencies. On one side, a reformist impulse already manifest in his anti-Blanquist writings from 1895-96, which hewed to Engels' late writings. On the other, a dread of collectivist dictatorship.[23] Given such motives, from the inconsistencies of Marxism Bernstein drew conclusions about both the dynamic of capitalism and socialist politics. Pragmatic and opposed to the Marxist theory of collapse, his conclusions did not fail to draw Sorel's attention.

Sorel had, after all, arrived at similar results himself. Target of Labriola's fire in the above-mentioned book, he was influenced by the revisionist interpretations of Saverio Merlino and Benedetto Croce. He had turned to Volume III, which he could not read in German but about which he gathered various commentaries. It seemed to him difficult to see how "the rate of surplus value is the same in all industries, even though they do not all employ the same proportions of variable capital" but he believed that it was not "necessary to dwell too long over these difficulties, because Marx was not trying to describe reality, he only sought to construct 'the metaphysics of average profit'".[24] By constructing "metaphysical abstractions" which nonetheless "were not arbitrary", Marx did not want to explain every detail but rather to

[19] Antonio Labriola [1899], *Socialism and Philosophy* (Telos Press, 1980), 73-74 (translation modified).
[20] Ibid., 170.
[21] See Henry Tudor and J. M. Tudor (eds), *Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate 1896-1898* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Emmanuel Jousse, *Réviser le marxisme? D'Édouard Bernstein à Albert Thomas, 1896-1914* (L'Harmattan, 2007).
[22] Eduard Bernstein [1899], *The Preconditions of Socialism*, trans. Henry Tudor (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 48, see also 51.
[23] On this fear, see ibid., 205. Bernstein confessed it also to Sorel, both in a letter from 1898 and when they met in Paris in 1909. See Michel Prat, "Une lettre d'Eduard Bernstein à Sorel", *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 1, (1983), 132, and Sorel to Hubert Lagardelle, 22 February 1909, Archives of the Istituto Livio Saranz, Trieste, Italy.
[24] Georges Sorel, "Nuovi contributi alla teoria marxista del valore", *Giornale degli economisti* 17, (July 1898): 27.

understand what was most *historically* characteristic in capitalism.[25] He did so on the basis of the harsh social conditions of his time, which were defined by class divisions and by keeping the proletariat at the level of simple subsistence – hence a labour power that could be calculated from a stable standard of living that, forcing things a little, recalled Ferdinand Lassalle's iron law of wages. Clearly Sorel implicitly took up Engels' program of the *historical reconstruction* of Marx's categories rather than the Marxist *logico-inductive* method, which from the concrete historical phenomena of exchange rises to the determinate abstraction of value, to the very basis of capitalism (the writing of Volume III on the commercial realization of profit predates the clarification in Volume I of the transformation of money into capital). The result of this reflection flows naturally from its source: given that the analyses in *Capital* deal with the past, they are in no position to help grasp contemporary economic problems, which are better met with the theories of the marginalists.

The revision of Marxism also took place within a social and economic context in full transformation. The second industrial revolution did not prevent short crises, which provoked concentration in different industries. This would certainly be a corroboration of Marx's predictions. However, one of the most significant economic facts of the era with which the Marxist vulgate had to contend pointed in quite another direction. It concerned a substantial redistribution of income and the appearance of middle classes that favored a rise in salaries, the growth of the number of functionaries and an increase in the number of stockholders. Faced with these transformations, which accompanied the beginnings of a long period of capitalist expansion starting in 1895, Kautsky and Paul Lafargue did not believe it was necessary to modify Marxist doctrine and retreated to an optimistic fatalism regarding the decisive role of economic processes in leading to socialism, which for them remained certain because theoretically predictable. Sorel, on the contrary, following Bernstein, was confirmed in his restriction of Marxism. He saw evidence neither of concentration of wealth, nor of the relative pauperization that Marx's account of the logic of capitalist processes predicted, nor of the premises of a systemic collapse that were nonetheless deduced by epigones such as Heinrich Cunow or Rosa Luxemburg.

3.The decomposition of Marxism

From Sorel's correspondence with Bernstein, we know that the first sought "from the beginning to set up a common 'revisionist' front against orthodox Marxism" and that he made himself "with an energy worthy of a militant, Bernstein's agent and confidant in Paris".[26] But were the political solutions proposed by these two heterodox thinkers really identical?

In his own work of decomposition, Bernstein set out to distinguish Marxism from the workers' movement, or theory from practice, in order not to subordinate working class activism to an inflexible strategy centered on a final goal. Sorel, who for a time imagined that working class reformism was possible under a democratic regime, also wanted the "movement" to have priority over the "goal". But he was wrong to think that Bernstein's rejection of traditional Marxist revolutionary theory might be matched with a disavowal of parliamentary politics as an activity apart from working class life. Nor did he see that Bernstein's emphasis on the economic organization of the workers' movement concerned the sphere of consumption

[25] Ibid., 21-22. See also Ch. Avril [Georges Sorel], "La legge di bronzo dei salarii e i marxisti", *Rivista critica del socialismo* (August 1899): 720-33.

[26] Michel Prat, "Sorel et Bernstein. Histoire d'une alliance", in Prat, "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Eduard Bernstein (1898-1902)", *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 11, (1993): 143, 149.

(purchasing cooperatives) more than that of production (syndicats) – the basis, for Sorel, of "the future of socialism".

Less of an iconoclast than Bernstein, Sorel thought that it was not necessary to reject Marx's entire theoretical contribution. Instead, one must distinguish between the master and the Marxists in order to return to Marx's spirit. Again contrary to Bernstein, he saw differences between Marx's own writings and the adjustments Engels had made. The two interpreters agreed however, as did in general the partisans of revision, that there was an incompatibility between the scientific evidence and Marx's economic theory. For Engels' literary executor, this implied a fundamental devaluation of Marxism. Sorel did not agree—he refused to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

By holding an interpretation of Marx that openly broke with the scientism characteristic of the Marxism of the Second International, Sorel was potentially opening up new paths, capable of relaunching the revolutionary action of workers' organization. His reflection pointed towards a poetics of Marxism. Introducing his 1901 *Saggi di critica del marxismo* – an Italian-language collection of his revisionist writings published in various European journals between 1898 and 1901 – Sorel argued that there was no system in Marx's work.[27] Marx, for Sorel, conceived "philosophical work as a means of shedding light on certain questions" that escaped empirical observation and that demanded to be treated in an abstract manner, so that "the meaning of fundamental notions" might emerge. It will be in vain, thus, that one would look to *Capital* to find "an economic theory analogous to those that we find in the books of economics professors". At times, one would think, continued Sorel, that Marx "was closer to Plato than to modern thinkers". But in his method of analysis – which consists in extracting from notions tested in practice their logical and historical meaning, so that contradictions may emerge – he drew inspiration from Hegel, without however falling into an excessively systematic way of thinking. In fact, "one must not look for a doctrine [in Marx], but more for the explanation of practical life". After all, continued Sorel, what matters in a philosophy is often that which makes it interesting from the perspective of practical life in a given epoch: "Philosophy does not belong to the realm of knowledge, but to that of active life: having penetrated a system means having learnt to use it well". Thus, these practical philosophies, to which Marxism belongs, "are not science, but are made to allow the incessant and infinitely varied action that corresponds to the needs of life". Their goal is to produce "social poems" that empower popular movements. The dogmatic side consequently is interesting only as the expression of "myths destined to make understood that which can only be exposed in a figurative manner". It must be admitted that "if Marxism has had such a large influence on popular masses, this is due above all to the attractiveness of its myths". This, concluded Sorel, is not without danger, as the development of Marxism in Germany shows, for the time always comes when myths end up being explained by a theology.[28] The crisis of Marxism, illustrated in the *Bernsteindebatte*, has its origin here. It's demand is to seek Marx beyond dogmas.

This rescuing of Marx by seeing him as a theorist of action rather than as a critic of capitalist economy is striking not so much for its anticipation of the theory of myth – at this stage not quite yet explicitly claimed by Sorel, at least not as much as it will be in the *Reflections on Violence* and in the *Decomposition of Marxism* – as for the pragmatist epistemology it reveals. This

[27] Three chapters of this book are translated in English in John L. Stanley (ed. and trans.), *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy* (Transaction Books, 1987), 111-175.
[28] All quotes from this section are from Sorel, *Saggi di critica del marxismo*, 5-19.

explains how easily Sorel could embrace William James' philosophy when he discovered it in 1908, to the point of endorsing it in his philosophical work *The Utility of Pragmatism* from 1921.[29]

4. The purification of Marxism

In a 1904 letter of support to revolutionary socialists in Italy, Sorel did penance, recognizing that his earlier reformism had been in error. He advised now a return to the "rigorous principles of Marx". And he clarified the meaning of these principles: "without a clear understanding of the absolute separation of classes, socialism is abandoned and no decisive progress in the organization of the proletariat is to be expected".[30] In 1905, it was clear to him that "revolutionary syndicalism actualizes, at the present time, the really true part of Marxism…that is, that the class struggle is the alpha and the omega of socialism".[31] In 1906, in an article written for his Italian comrades, he offered a frank interpretation of the fusion between French reformists and revolutionaries within the unified Socialist Party as the result of their incorporation into the particularly and functionally bourgeois institutional structure of public administration and politics, with state power as their only aim. At that point the "new school", incarnated in revolutionary syndicalism that organized workers exclusively on the terrain of production, was alone in representing "all socialism".[32]

As for the myth of the general strike, which Sorel described in the 1908 *Reflections on Violence*, its purpose was to renew, in the minds of the proletarians engaged in social struggle, the possibility of the collapse (or "catastrophe") of capitalism as a galvanizing horizon of expectations. In another book, finished in 1905, Sorel offered this specification:

> "It is important to know whether the spirit of class struggle can be maintained when the expectation of a proximate revolution has been lost […]. This difficulty can only be resolved by means of the theory of social myths […]. The catastrophe may not ever happen, but it is a myth which expresses with perfect clarity the principle of the separation of classes […]. Even though they have tried to express this catastrophe under the form of the general strike; even though they have reinforced the power of action of the myth – it does not change. The notion of the general strike, so strongly rejected by so many Marxists, should be received enthusiastically by them, because it translates the catastrophic idea in a perfect way and corresponds closely to the emancipation of the workers through their own action".[33]

All these claims, which amount to adhesion to a rapidly developing revolutionary syndicalism,[34] demanded a rectification of the judgment Sorel had earlier passed on Bernstein. *The Decomposition of Marxism* shows this readjustment. Recalling the dualism that Bernstein believed he found in Marx, between a *constructive economic* tradition, which passed out of

[29] Tommaso Giordani, "Introduction au pragmatisme de Sorel", *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 32, (2014): 93-110.
[30] Georges Sorel, Letter to *Avanguardia Socialista*, in *Avanguardia socialista*, 7-8 April 1904.
[31] Georges Sorel [1919], *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, (Slatkine, 1981), 67.
[32] Georges Sorel, "Sindacalismo e democrazia", *L'Azione*, 26 December 1906.
[33] Georges Sorel [1907], *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics*, trans. John L. Stanley (Transaction Books, 1984), 170-171.
[34] Marco Gervasoni, "L'invention du syndicalisme révolutionnaire en France (1903-1907)", *Mil neuf cent* 24, (2006): 57-71. For a broader overview, see Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective* (Scolar Press, 1990).

utopianism and into trade unionism, and *destructive political* tradition, which passed from Jacobinism to Blanquism, Sorel remarked that the actual practices inherited from these two traditions in the end had the same effect. Trade unionism – which in its British or German form amounts to a reformism – works for economic progress that will lead to social peace. The revolutionary party – whether German or French Social Democracy – works for the establishment of a popular state to promote social legislation and arbitration. Both encourage the embourgeoisification of the proletariat and its integration into an institutional system that is still founded on hierarchy and the separation of political leadership from the base, irrespective of whether this leadership is fully bourgeois or composed of bureaucrats and intellectuals.

It was thus for Sorel a question of rescuing the core "Marxism of Marx" through a process of "purification" from the bad interpretations that had developed around it.[35] In a book published in Italy, and translated immediately into Russian – but not in French – the *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics*, which we have already cited, Sorel developed in detail the analysis that he would later condense into *The Decomposition of Marxism*.

To begin with, he argued in these two books, it had to be recognized that any kind of utopian fantasy or reformist organization of the society to come around statist or collectivist projects was incompatible with the position taken by Marx himself, who had always refused to predict the precise forms that a free organization of society would take in the future. And the same was true for the transition to socialism, Marx having limited himself to describing the "revolution in mythical form" and to speaking "of an ideal overthrow which is described imaginatively".[36] Further, it had to be recognized that Marx preferred class spirit – economic – to party spirit – political – because it was on the terrain of production that workers would get their technical and moral education, and prepare their emancipation. While the author of *Capital* had already marked the progress constituted by the organization of labour in his own time in comparison to earlier modes of production, Sorel invoked contemporary advances to show that in industrial organization there were productive, technical, and scientific capacities on which socialism would draw in order to assure production among free men. On the other hand, the emergence of cartels and trusts supported by finance – which Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding at the same moment called the tip of the spear of modern capitalism – seemed to Sorel comparable to outmoded feudal and aristocratic tendencies, and went against "the true tendencies of capitalism".[37] In 1920, Sorel would reiterate the same analysis in reply to Kautsky.[38] For Sorel, the *laissez-faire* of the "Manchesterian economy" – which for him had much in common with the economic premises of Marx – served as a model because in assuring the unhindered distribution of income according to the play of supply and demand, it at the same time assured the operation of class struggle.[39] From which we can see that Sorel had not forgotten the lessons of the liberal economists including Édouard Laboulaye, Jean-Gustave Courcelle-Seneuil, and Gustave de Molinari that he learned in his youth and pursued through his eclectic readings.

5. Marxism and pure economics

[35] Georges Sorel [1910], *The Decomposition of Marxism*, trans. Irving Louis Horowitz, in Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason: The Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (Routledge, 2009), 218 and 249.
[36] Ibid., 248.
[37] Sorel, *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics*, 271. On German cartels and American trusts, see the third section of the book.
[38] Georges Sorel [1921], *The Illusions of Progress*, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (University of California Press, 1972), 200-207.
[39] Sorel, *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics*, 234; Sorel, *The Decomposition of Marxism*, 240.

Far from being a return to the revolutionary Marxism of an earlier Social Democracy, Sorel's Marxism was the affirmation of a left revisionism which, as we have seen, left intact the dichotomy between Marx's revolutionary theory and (bourgeois) economic theory. The latter was thus exempt from Marx's critique. One can also conclude that Sorel had tried to define at once a Marxism of class struggle and a socialism of a liberal type that, alongside collectivized sectors of the economy, would allow the continued existence of the market and private property.

This way of thinking was less singular than one might think. It was typical in fact of Revolutionary Syndicalist thinking, which had its best theoreticians and economists in Italy.[40] One of them, Arturo Labriola, had himself insisted on the necessity of the distinction between *economic theory* and *revolutionary spirit* in his 1908 *Marx nell'economia e come teorico del socialismo* [Marx as an Economist and Socialist]. Another, Enrico Leone, in writings published in his journal, *Il Divenire sociale* (1905-1908), , had urged juxtaposing the two strategies, each appropriate in its own domain. On the one hand "pure economics" – illustrated notably by the Lausanne school – which explained the ideal-type *functioning* of capitalism. On the other the Marxist critique of the economy – enlightened by the recent publication of Volume IV of *Capital* containing Marx's anti-Ricardian notes in theories of surplus value – which explained the hidden and mystified *foundation* of capitalism.[41] Distinguishing himself among other revisionists by his conviction that the scientific study of the economy would demonstrate the ineluctable arrival of socialism, which he understood following Marx as the free association of producers, Leone relied for this understanding on what he called, following Pareto, "hedonistic economics", which is to say the Lausanne school[42]. In a rather idiosyncratically "socialist" way that sought to liberate use value and rehabilitate subjective agonism, he understood hedonistic economics as a theory of general equilibrium and perfect competition: it would allow the realization, for each individual, of "maximum subjective utility" and, for the collectivity, "the greatest social utility". This result would be obtained through class struggle between labour and capital which, consisting in a fight over surplus production, would ultimately annihilate profit and the system that depended on it. In this way, like Sorel and conforming to the political current to which both belonged, he reconciled class struggle and economic liberalism.

[40] Paolo Favilli, *The History of Italian Marxism: From its Origins to the Great War*, trans. David Broder (Brill, 2016), 338-425; Willy Gianinazzi, *Intellettuali in bilico. "Pagine libere" e i sindacalisti rivoluzionari prima del fascismo*, (Unicopli, 1996), 173-187.

[41] Willy Gianinazzi, "'Crise du marxisme' et 'retour à Marx' chez Enrico Leone (1899-1908)", *Ricerche storiche* 15, no. 2 (May-August 1985): 335-372.

[42] See Enrico Leone, "Léon Walras und die hedonistich-matematische 'Schule von Lausanne'", *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 32, no. 1 (1911) : 36-71 ; Enrico Leone, *Il principio dell'equilibrio economico* (Ettore Croce, 1911).

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"Pascal has vanquished Descartes": Sorel and the Religious

by Henry Mead
Worcester College, University of Oxford

1. Introduction

On the publication of *Reflections of Violence* in 1908, Georges Sorel earned an international reputation as a revolutionary syndicalist, a prophet of class war. Yet in the same period, he attracted interest and admiration from Catholic observers. In November 1909, Abbé Ernest Dimnet, a priest and teacher at the *Collège Stanislas* in Paris, wrote a long profile of Sorel for the American journal *The Forum*, noting that Sorel represented a new heartfelt spirit of energy in France. "The style is delightfully refreshing", he noted, describing Sorel as a "powerful thinker". Summarising his subject's make-up, Dimnet wrote:

> "[Sorel] has undoubtedly been deeply influenced by M. Bergson's philosophy insomuch as it is a continual snub to intellectual arrogance and a warning against the confusion of evolution with progress. He keenly enjoys Renan's intelligence and his submission to the realities of history; the sense of mystery so habitual to Pascal, and his fearless critical attitude, endear the *Pensées* to him, and the Catholicism permeating the book seems to give him no offence... Clearly the Christian solution, rightly propounded, would appeal to him much more than intellectual subtleties. But it should be worded in the language of Newman – whom he seems to have read pretty extensively – and not in that of the clerical newspapers".[1]

Dimnet concludes that "the reintroduction of morals into the metaphysics of labour is a wonderful change for the better".[2] This chapter asks not only why an Catholic clergyman would so admire Sorel, but why Sorel as a theorist of proletarian revolution would have shown such sustained interest in Catholicism – writing on biblical criticism, the moral condition of the Church, and its role in French society? How should we understand Sorel's engagement with faith, with non-rational belief, and with the symbolic world of religion?[3]

One answer, long influential, comes from Zeev Sternhell's reading of Sorel as a herald of anti-rationalism – an intellectual ancestor of fascism.[4] In this view, Sorel's fierce hostility to Enlightenment values explains his affinity with Catholics opposing republican anti-clericalism. But this interpretation has been reappraised. Recent scholarship has emphasized that Sorel carefully developed a conceptual system rooted in Marx yet crucially revised through the

[1] Ernest Dimnet, "A French Defence of Violence," *The Forum* 42 (Nov. 1909), 413. Right-wing Catholic newspapers had published articles on Sorel as early as 1905. For example, René de Marans: "La grève générale et les deux socialismes", *L'Association catholique* 59 (1905): 315-24; and "Les 'Réflexions sur la violence' de M. Georges Sorel", *L'Association catholique* 62 (1906): 533-9.
[2] Dimnet, "A French Defence of Violence", 415.
[3] As Michel Prat has noted, "entire sections of Sorel's work, starting with his writings on religious questions, still await in-depth research". "Éditer les œuvres de Georges Sorel: mission impossible?" *Mil neuf cent* 40 (2022): 161. All translations from French sources are the author's, unless otherwise indicated.
[4] See Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1995), 68–81; Zeev Sternhell, Maia Asheri, and Mario Sznajder, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology. From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton University Press, 1994), 36–91.

epistemology of Giambattista Vico.[5] The question now is whether this Vico-based framework – historicist, constructivist, and grounded in human creativity – excludes or in fact supports a renewed consideration of faith as a political category in Sorel's work.[6]

This chapter argues that it does. The religious and the miraculous, far from being marginal or inconsistent with Sorel's method, are essential elements of his theory of the popular imagination. Faith, understood not as dogma but as disciplined moral conviction, plays a key role in his attempt to build a social science capable of explaining superstructure, ideology, and collective will. Sorel's interest in myth and belief is not a retreat from reason but a response to its limits – a way of theorizing agency, decision, and symbolic cohesion beyond purely structural or rationalist accounts.

To make this case, the chapter works toward a balanced inclusion of faith in Sorel's thought, without falling back into Sternhell's anti-rationalist position. Central to this approach is the figure of Pascal, who provides Sorel with a model for combining scientific method with a recognition of a space of experience beyond analysis – what Pascal called "the reasons of the heart".[7] In Sorel's hands, this points to a treatment of faith not as a vitalist, immanent spirituality, but as a commitment necessitated by human unknowing. A discontinuity between scientific system and values grants a space for agency, in a commitment to shared doctrine, whether religious or political. Thus Sorel's Marxism re-introduces a concern for the superstructural, for a space of public imagination as important as the economic base. His theory of myth-making, like its Christian antecedent, sustains collective action and resists rationalist abstraction.

The chapter proceeds in six stages. First, it examines Sorel's early writings on biblical miracle and heroic morality. Second, it explores the apparent suspension of these themes during his Marxist phase and the foundations of his methodological revisionism, and it traces how Vico's epistemology allowed Sorel to reintroduce questions of religion and belief into his political theory. Third, it pauses to stress the rupture of the Dreyfus Affair and the polarisation of French culture. Fourth, it examines Sorel's renewed interventions in theology and Church-state relations between 1902 and 1905 when Sorel turned his attention to religion again with commentaries on Catholic thought and the modernist controversy. Fifth, it focuses on the central texts of 1907–1908, *Reflections on Violence* and *Illusions of Progress*, tracing how Sorel's critique of secular reason set Pascal against Descartes, adding Newman to the mix. In its last stage, it considers how these ideas shaped his nationalist writing of 1910-1914. A short conclusion then summarises his attitudes to religion over his career and sketches some outlines of his various legacies.

2. Early Studies

Sorel's earliest writings reveal a nuanced relationship between scientific reasoning and faith. Sorel, a product of the *École Polytechnique*, sought to reconcile his scientific training with a

[5] Eric Brandom and Tommaso Giordani, "Introduction: Georges Sorel's *Study on Vico* in French and European Context", in Georges Sorel, *Study on Vico*, ed. and trans. by Eric Brandom and Tommaso Giordani (Brill, 2020), 1-48.

[6] There have been earlier approaches to this question; see Jeremy Jennings, "Sorel, Vico, and Marx", in Giorgio Tagliacozzo (ed.), *Vico and Marx. Affinities and Contrasts* (Humanities Press, 1983), 326-41.

[7] "Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point". Pensée 423. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (Penguin, 1995), 121. All translations from the *Pensées* are from this edition. For valuable details on Sorel's private and public remarks on Pascal, see Christophe Prochasson, "Georges Sorel et Pascal," *Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* 28–29 (April 2002): 84–92.

belief in human creativity and ethical vigour. This duality shaped his intellectual career – his concern with the tension between structure and agency; and his adaptation of social science methodology to legitimise studies often dismissed by orthodox Marxism as "superstructural" – in religion, morality, myth.

Influences from his personal life were relevant for this perspective. Sorel's biographer Pierre Andreu and later critics have highlighted the influence of Sorel's common-law wife, Marie-Euphrasie David.[8] Through David, he absorbed the rural Catholic piety of southern France, fostering his appreciation for the moral force of belief. His dedication of *Reflections on Violence* to David, "inspired by her spirit", highlights the importance of this legacy.[9] As H. Stuart Hughes observed, Sorel's thought was shaped by the tension between two identities: "By training and profession he was an engineer; by temperament he was a moralist".[10] This dynamic tension between technical rigour and ethical concern defined Sorel's approach to knowledge and laid the groundwork for his exploration of the symbolic and imaginative life of societies.

This concern is already evident in *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible* (1889), where Sorel responded critically to contemporary biblical criticism. He opposed the efforts of liberal theologians and rationalist historians who attempted to reduce Christianity to historical fact. Against such reductionism, Sorel defended the essential place of the miraculous in religious belief. The ambition to eliminate miracle from religious thought, he argued, betrayed a positivist hubris that ignored the human need for symbols, myths, and forms of non-rational conviction, and thus failed, on scientific grounds, in its explanation of human behaviour. As Sorel put it, "all religion is founded on a spontaneous metaphysical creation, a revelation".[11] This was not an expression of religious faith, but a sociological insight concerning the psychological conditions of belief.

A similar resistance to positivism drives Sorel's second major work of 1889, *Le Procès de Socrate*, which offers a critique of Socratic abstraction and a defence of the moral integrity of pre-Socratic Greek culture.[12] From these early works onwards, we see Pierre Joseph Proudhon's influence on Sorel's idea of heroic morality. For Sorel, Proudhon represented a model of pre-rational, religiously inflected ethics: one rooted in the dignity of labour, self-discipline, and moral decision.

The values around which Sorel gravitates in these early works – heroism, sacrifice, miracle, and moral energy – would not disappear with his later Marxism. Instead, they would be transformed and re-integrated through his evolving epistemological framework. Even at this stage, Sorel's thought displays a nascent epistemological pluralism: the conviction that there are distinct forms of knowledge, and that the symbolic, imaginative, and ethical dimensions of life cannot be captured by deductive science alone. This epistemological pluralism, later reinforced by Vico and Pascal, first emerges here, in Sorel's defence of the religious and heroic as central components of social meaning.

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[8] See Pierre Andreu, *Notre Maître M. Sorel* (Grasset, 1953), 39; John L. Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue* (University of California Press, 1981), 4-5; Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of his Thought* (Macmillan, 1985), 16.

[9] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence,* trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.

[10] H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (Vintage, 1961), 169.

[11] Georges Sorel, *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible* (Ghio, 1899), 1.

[12] Georges Sorel, *Le procès de Socrate* (Alcan, 1889).

3. Sorelian Revisionism

As Giordani and Brandom have argued, this dualism preceded and shaped Sorel's reading of Marx.[13] In other words, the evolution of Sorel's Marxism is best understood not as a break from his moral concerns but as a revisionist project shaped from the outset by epistemological dualism. Even his earliest Marxist writings reveal a consistent tension between determinism and agency, structure and belief. It is in a series of publications between 1892 and 1894 that this epistemological dualism receives its initial, naturally tentative, articulations. In his "Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon" (1892), he emphasized self-discipline and objective values, distinguishing between measurable economic science and a higher order of moral knowledge rooted in human needs.[14] Crucially, Proudhon is model for a dualism separating scientific values from religious ones was undergirded, in Sorel's eyes, with a sense of human limitation, of a fallenness – with echoes in Christian thought.[15]

To resolve the conflict between determinism and moral agency, Sorel formulated a dualistic epistemology grounded in a distinction between a deterministic world of nature, and a creative world of humanity. In "L'Ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique' (1894), he articulated the need for what he called *supports expressifs*: tools, conceptual schemes, human creations needed for engaging in science.[16] Those were proofs of human creativity, while at the same time allowing the scientist to construct the experimental conditions required for an engagement with the determinism of nature: "the science of nature is grounded in a materialist determinism, always realizable in the hands of the experimenter".[17] Though avoiding conventionalist understandings of science and believing in its capacity to make sense of a deterministic world in terms of strong causal relations, Sorel at the same time displayed a keen awareness of the limits of science, insisted on the importance of experimental, artificial conditions for its practice, and, above all, displayed continuous resistance to deterministic explanations of human behaviour. The distinction between natural determinism and social creativity – between *milieu naturel* and *milieu artificiel*, seemed to be able to square the circle.[18]

Between 1892 and 1902, Sorel treated the Church as largely irrelevant to historical progress or even as an impediment to it. In articles such as "Il vangelo, la Chiesa e il socialismo" (1899), and "Léon XIII" (1903) he dismissed Social Catholicism as doctrinally incoherent and politically compromised.[19] The Church's failure to confront industrial realities, and its alliances with Republicanism in the time of *ralliement*, failed to pique his interest in a major way. Yet the concern for morality lingered beneath the surface of his writing. In "La fin du paganisme"

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[13] Brandom and Giordani, "Introduction", 9.
[14] Georges Sorel, "Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon", *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 33 (June 1892): 622-68 and 34 (July 1892): 41-68.
[15] Sorel would later describe Proudhon as "worthy of taking up the question of evil where Pascal left it" in his preface to Édouard Berth's *Les méfaits des intellectuels* (Marcel Rivière, 1914), xxxvii.
[16] Georges Sorel, "L'Ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique", *L'Ère nouvelle* 1 (March 1894): 329-51, (April 1894): 461-82, (May 1894): 51-87, and (June 1894): 180-205; re-published as *D'Aristote à Marx*, ed. Édouard Berth (Marcel Rivière, 1935). Quotes from this text come from the 1935 re-edition.
[17] Georges Sorel, "La métaphysique évolutionniste de M. Brunetière", *Le Devenir Social* 1, no. 5 (September 1895): 580.
[18] Sorel [1894], *D'Aristote à Marx*, 264.
[19]Georges Sorel, "Il vangelo, la Chiesa e il socialismo", *Rivista critica del socialismo* 1, no. 4 (April 1899): 295-304 and no. 5 (May 1899): 385-94, reprinted in and reworked in Georges Sorel, *La Ruine du monde antique* (Jacques, 1902), 249-70; Georges Sorel, "Léon XIII", *Études socialistes* 1, no. 5 (September-October 1903): 257–82 and no. 6 (November-December 1903): 353–79. Similar sentiments are expressed in Georges Sorel, "M. Sabatier – L'Église et le travail manuel", *Le Devenir Social* 1, no. 5 (September 1895): 594-600 and Georges Sorel, "G. de Molinari – Science et religion", *Le Devenir Social* 1, no. 6 (October 1895): 677-84.

(1894), later revised as *La Ruine du monde antique* (1901), he blamed Rome's collapse on Christianity's destruction of sustaining fictions, signalling a preference for heroic paganism over the rationalized religion of modernity. Yet he regretted the loss of a certain attitude, rather than the arrival of monotheism: early Christianity, he suggested, shared that heroic quality also.[20]

A highly original Marxist thinker, during this period, Sorel never accepted a monistic or universalizing theory of truth. He remained resistant to any system that denied the role of human construction. Systems of thought, including religion, science, and politics, were, for Sorel, tools created by humans to navigate their world, not carriers of eternal truth. It was with the discovery of Giambattista Vico, a thinker quoted in a footnote to Marx's *Capital*, that this long-standing intuition could finally blossom. His 1896 "Étude sur Vico" marked a decisive moment: adopting Vico's principle of *verum ipsum factum*, Sorel gained access to a different understanding of science, one much more suited to the study of the non-deterministic human world. Rather than establishing strong causal relations on the model of natural science, social science had to understand how systems of human groups created the various artefacts – systems of knowledge, economic relations, laws, customs – that characterized the *milieu artificial*. The truth of a belief, in this model, lay not in its correspondence to an objective world but in its being evidence of human agency, whether collective or individual.[21]

Vico granted to Sorel the epistemological framework to re-articulate in a more thorough manner his old intuition about religious belief as a form of popular cognition. In his 1899 essay "Y a-t-il de l'utopie dans le marxisme", he endorsed this pragmatic view of belief. The value of Christianity, he argued, lay not in its truth claims but in its capacity to rejuvenate itself through renewed mysticism.[22] What mattered was not the principle believed, but the commitment it elicited.

Sorel's engagement with Marxism was therefore always filtered through this epistemological lens. As Giordani and Brandom have emphasized, Sorel's avowals of Marxist orthodoxy must be read in light of his conviction that philosophical, scientific, and religious systems were provisional, not absolute. His later term *cité savante* – introduced in *De l'utilité du pragmatisme* (1921) – captures this pluralist attitude: a society in which diverse worldviews operate as semi-autonomous, functionally valid constructs.[23]

In his phase, Sorel's interest in the Church exceeds the standard Marxist view. His criticism of modern Catholicism was not aimed at religion *per se*, but at its accommodation to the republican project. His engagement with religious ideas was more expansive than Marx's Feuerbachian dismissal of faith in his *Critique of the Philosophy of Right*, which appeared in French translation in *Le Mouvement Socialiste* in 1895 while Sorel was serving on its editorial board.[24]

[20] Georges Sorel, "La fin du paganisme", *L'Ère nouvelle* (Aug 1894): 338-64; (Sep 1894): 33-72; (Oct 1894): 170-99.
[21] Georges Sorel, "Étude sur Vico", *Le Devenir social* 2 (1896) 785-817, 906-41, and 1013-46; see also Giordani and Brandom, "Introduction".
[22] Georges Sorel, "Y a-t-il de l'utopie dans le marxisme?", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 7 (March 1899): 152-75.
[23] Georges Sorel, *De l'utilité du pragmatisme* (Marcel Rivière, 1921).
[24] Karl Marx, "Critique de la philosophie du droit de Hegel", *Le Devenir Social* 1 (1895): 501-15.

What emerges from this phase is not a break from Sorel's earlier interest in faith and moral structure, but a sophisticated reworking of it. Vico provided the epistemological frame. But in the key division between the chartable *milieu artificial* of the *homo faber*, and a zone of human unknowing, Pascal might well be seen as a precedent for a similar scheme in his account of "three orders" of knowledge, each of which should be dealt with by appropriate faculties. Pascal develops the idea from a division between mathematical orders[25]and applies it to larger realms of body, mind, and heart (or *chair*, *esprit*, and *charité*): these "are three orders differing in kind…The greatness of wisdom… is not visible to carnal or intellectual people".[26] The comparison is approximate, but Sorel's separation of artificial and natural *milieus* resonates with Pascal's limitation on the category of "mind", which provides reliable maps for human utility; but could not pretend to grasp the true nature of higher values.[27] Indeed, Sorel links Vico's argument to Pascal's famous rejection of Cartesian deduction regarding the vacuum, an application of reason to a physical problem which should be treated by physical means.[28] Even as Sorel professed Marxist commitment, he was laying the groundwork for a future return to religion as a moral and imaginative system capable of sustaining agency.

4. Contextual Bridge: Rupture and Continuity

The years between 1902 and 1905 marked a significant shift in Georges Sorel's intellectual focus. After a decade in which religious questions had largely receded from his public writings, he returned with force to theological and ecclesiastical subjects, with numerous articles on Catholic thought, the Modernist challenge to dogma, and the problems of biblical criticism. This renewal of interest did not mark a conversion, nor did it signal a break from the epistemological commitments he had developed earlier. Rather, it revealed a new alignment

[25] The idea's origins are often traced to Pascal's "Summation of Numerical Powers", a text published as an addendum to *Le Traité du triangle arithmétique* in 1665 dealing with discontinuity in geometrical and arithmetical orders:"…eo posito principio, in continuâ quantitate, quotlibet quantitates cujusvis generis quantitati superioris generis additas nihil ei superaddere. Sic puncta lineis, lineae superficiebus, superficies solidis nihil adjiciunt: seu, ut numericis, in numerico tractatu, verbis utar, radices quadratis, quadrata cubis, cubi quadrato-quadratis, etc., nihil apponunt." The English translation runs as follows: "…having established this principle, in continual quantity, however many amounts of whatever kind were added to the quantity of a superior kind, nothing is added to that quantity. Thus, points add nothing to lines, lines to surfaces, surfaces to solids: or, to speak numerically in a treatise on numbers, roots add nothing to squares, squares to cubes, cubes to fourth powers, etc.". See Blaise Pascal, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Luc Estang (Éditions du Seuil, 1963), 94 (Henceforth *OC*). J.H. Broome argues that "it is partly from this analogy of mathematical orders of magnitude that Pascal will develop, eventually, his famous and central doctrine of the Three Orders". See J.H. Broome, *Pascal* (Edward Arnold, 1965), 56.

[26] Pensée 308, *OC* 540, trans. by A.J. Krailsheimer, *Pensées*, 95-7.

[27] The idea is primarily identified with pensée 308, cited above, and with the eighteenth of his *Lettres provinciales* which uses a threefold scheme of senses, reason, and faith in defence of Jansenism (*OC*, 466). Echoes have been seen in Pensées 5, 7 (*OC* 501), 808 (*OC* 603), 821 (*OC* 604), 933 (*OC* 624) and in discussions of realms of political power in his letter to Christine of Sweden (OC 279-80). For fuller discussions, see Broome, *Pascal*, 55-56, 102-6 and Janet Morgan, "Pascal's Three Orders", *Modern Language Review* 73, no. 4 (1978): 755-766.

[28] See Sorel, *Study on Vico*, 84 n. 93. Sorel writes that "Vico understands very well that geometry applies to particular questions of physics and founded on experimental laws can be of great help: he cites the example given by Galileo…Today, the mathematical physics created by Galileo and our great Pascal proceeds in the same way. The Jesuits seem still to want to persecute the latter. The new spirit prefers Descartes". Sorel then cites an insult to "the author of the *Provinciales*" in a recent *Revue de métaphysique* article defending Cartesian geometry from Pascalian attack. Paul Tannery, "Descartes physicien", *Revue de métaphysique et morale* 4, no. 4 (1896): 478–88. A politicised feud between Pascal and Descartes was at work in this intellectual debate; Tannery, Sorel's friend and fellow graduate of *École Polytechnique*, was a defender of the Cartesian tradition, while Sorel opposed it.

between those commitments and a changed political and cultural context – one that made religious discourse newly relevant to questions of collective belief, moral authority, and, above all, to the fiercely anti-republican politics that Sorel was developing.

To understand this shift, we must locate Sorel within a crisis point in the Third Republic. Born from the defeat and civil war of 1870, the Republic spent decades reconstructing its identity by refashioning the French past. Competing factions – Republican secularists, Catholic conservatives, monarchists, socialists – each laid claim to France's historical and philosophical legacy. Authors, texts, and traditions were reinterpreted and redeployed, often reductively, as cultural markers in an increasingly polarised narrative.[29]

From the 1870s onward, republican intellectuals promoted a national tradition rooted in rationalism. They traced a continuous line from Descartes through the Enlightenment to the Third Republic. This lineage invoked not only modern science and secular governance but also a vision of pre-Christian classicism, aligning French rationalism with the Mediterranean legacy of Greece and Rome. Against this, conservative thinkers constructed an alternative national tradition, rooted in faith, romanticism, and reaction. Their heroes were no longer Descartes or Voltaire but Pascal and de Maistre. If Republican rationalism invoked the "head", reaction, both Catholic and secular, tended to lay claim to the "heart".[30]

This binary – reason versus faith – was itself deeply rooted in the French Church's own intellectual traditions. Seventeenth-century Catholicism had seen a quarrel between the Jesuit and Jansenist schools. The former, heirs of the Counter-Reformation, emphasized rational method, doctrinal clarity, and intellectual discipline. Descartes' rationalism, shaped by his Jesuit education, was assimilated into Enlightenment thought. In contrast, another strong current in the French Church rejected rational self-sufficiency and insisted on the fallen condition of the human intellect. Despite the Vatican's condemnation of the Jansenist tradition, with which Blaise Pascal was closely associated, his work retained a compelling force for many Catholic readers. For Pascal, faith was not the conclusion of a syllogism but a leap – an act of commitment rooted in the heart. His emphasis on the heart over reason would later resonate with anti-positivist thinkers seeking a more existential grounding for faith.

This theological dichotomy would be recast in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a broader cultural polarity. Pascal and Descartes became ciphers for two Frances: one mystical, emotional, and traditional; the other scientific, rational, and secular. The Dreyfus Affair exposed and inflamed this divide. As Dreyfus's false conviction and the lies behind the affair came to light in 1898, France was once again split – not just politically, but epistemologically. The Army, Church, and conservatives aligned with one vision of national identity; the Republic, intellectuals, and secularists with another. The Affair produced a wave of antisemitism, intensified anti-clericalism, and led to sweeping Republican legislation that stripped the Church of property, power, and influence.

[29] Joseph Reinach characterized these opponents as "two mentalities; two Frances" in his *L'Histoire de l'Affaire*, Tome 3 (Fasquelle, 1903), 383. More recently, Robert Gildea describes how the Affair "divided the French into two irreconcilable camps" (*Children of the Revolution: The French, 1799–1914* (Penguin, 2009), 1).

[30] Clearly, these clean dualisms do not fully map out the complexity of the historical reality at hand. The most notable exception here is the *Action Française*, a fully reactionary, anti-parliamentary, and quasi-fascist party that nonetheless saw itself as anchored in traditions of French rationalism and blamed the "German" influence of Protestantism and romanticism for France's ills since 1789.

It was into this polarized and disoriented cultural landscape that Sorel re-entered religious debate. His interest was not doctrinal but methodological and political. What fascinated him was not merely how faith functioned within culture – not only as a private experience but as a symbolic and imaginative force with social efficacy. It was also a distinctively political attention that Sorel brought to his work on religious matters: much like the syndicalists, Catholics stood as enemies of the post-Dreyfus republic. As the conceptual battle between head and heart played out in newspapers, assemblies, and pulpits, Sorel saw an opportunity to reconceive the category of faith within his broader effort to build a social science of ideology and collective belief.

The Church's own manoeuvres during this period helped shape the debate. Under Leo XIII, Catholicism had sought to reconcile with modernity through three major strategies: first, the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), which endorsed Thomism as a rational theological system that could coexist with scientific inquiry; second, the political strategy of the *Ralliement* (from 1884), which attempted to align the Church with the Republic; and third, the social turn of *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which presented the Church as a defender of the labouring poor. These efforts were aimed at renewing the Church's moral authority without fully conceding to modern rationalism. Yet by the early 1900s, such strategies had largely failed in France. The polarisation around the Affair re-opened the antipathy between Church and Republic, not least in the anti-Dreyfusard interventions by bishops and clergy, and in the Assumptionist daily journal *La Croix*. All this did much to prompt the anti-clerical legislation of the Waldeck-Rousseau and Combes government. The Church was increasingly seen as morally compromised or politically obsolete.

In this setting, Sorel's return to religion was not an embrace of institutional Catholicism, but a reconsideration of its symbolic and moral structure. His essays from 1902 to 1905 see a surge of religious commentary – much written anonymously and only partially included in bibliographies of his work. Many pieces of this kind appeared as short reviews for the *Revue générale de critique et de bibliographie*, but he also published lengthier, signed essays like "La crise de la pensée catholique" (1902).[31] His concern with how the Church could renew its intellectual life in the face not only of hostile government, but also internal debate regarding historicist biblical criticism and the re-interpretation of doctrine in light of modern thought, was filtered by an obvious parallel with socialism. His tone was respectful but detached: he hoped for a renewal of Catholic thought, not because he believed its dogma as absolute truth, but because he saw in them a model of how collective conviction, once severed from rationalist pretensions, could be reactivated and, hopefully, mobilized politically against the Republic.

In the same period, crucially, the syndicalist movement had reached its peak in the face of Republican intransigence at labour demands. The socialists' own *ralliement* to the republic, betraying, in the eyes of the syndicalists, the workers' movement, prompted the anathematisation of the democratic process, and the recommendation of violent strikes, of refutations of parliamentary debate in favour of direct action. In this context, not just the republic as a regime, but the entire culture and ideology associated with it became object of critique and scorn. This created an awkward common ground with Catholicism and with the radical right, in which the Republic's secular spirit was equated, in classical anti-Semitic fashion, with the manipulative, calculative forces of international finance – deracinated, alien, intrusive into the earthly life of true French labourers.[32] In this hostility to the republic, a space

[31] Georges Sorel, "La crise de la pensée catholique", *Revue de métaphysique et morale* 10 (1902): 523–51

[32] This type of right-left alliance cemented by anti-Semitism had, of course, already occurred in the Third Republic, with *boulangisme*. But whereas Sorel stayed away from *boulangisme* in the 1880s, he participated in

was created for a romance of native French culture, capable of cementing a *rapprochement* between radical right and left. As we shall see, Sorel would, albeit briefly, occupy this space.

Sorel's re-engagement with faith during this phase is best described as a re-alignment, not a rupture. His earlier Marxist framework had already made room for religion as an important case in the study of systems of belief. The Dreyfus Affair and the broader cultural crisis simply reactivated those concerns, endowing them however with renewed political urgency. As a leading intellectual of the syndicalist movement, he attacked parliamentary democracy for its stifling embrace of socialists within a capitalist system. His writing built up a powerful theoretical case against the universalising, rationalist ideology that the Third Republic had championed. In doing so, he eventually arrived at an *antidreyfusard* rhetoric that defended the particular heritage of France, the local religious and ethnic culture in which its working associations were deeply embedded, against abstract standards of reason – principles which, on inspection, concealed corrupt plutocratic practices.

In light of these changes, Catholicism, in its struggle with modernity, returned as a valid subject of debate in Sorel's writing. Here it served as a real-world case study of how myth, dogma, and moral heroism might be mobilised not just within a secularised political culture, but politically against it. It is in this context that Sorel's later theories of myth and violence begin to take shape – not as irrational outbursts, but as disciplined responses to the failures of both positivism and institutional religion.

5. "Crisis", "Modernism", and Miracles

Against the backdrop of the Dreyfus crisis, Sorel returned in earnest to religious questions – not with the dismissive tone of orthodox Marxism, which at any rate was never his, but with a newly serious inquiry into faith, doctrine, and the intellectual fate of the Church. His writing of 1902-1907 marked a deepening of his Vico-inspired epistemology and a sharpening of his critique of both positivist reason and liberal theology. It is in this period, before *Reflections on Violence*, that Sorel began to frame religion as a model for understanding conviction, symbolic cohesion, and the moral basis of collective belief.

Sorel's long 1902 essay "La crise de la pensée catholique", was published not in a Marxist journal but in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* – a republican academic philosophy journal practicing a neo-Kantianism capable of a commitment both to science and to agency.[33] In this essay, Sorel strikes a markedly respectful tone: "I have striven, in this work, to say nothing which would be of the nature to hurt the faith of believers. I think that religious problems ought to be treated with great respect".[34] In asserting that "science offers no certain conclusion in an anti-Catholic direction", he publicly distanced himself from the reduction of religion to a superstructural irrelevance.[35]

this second wave of militant anti-republicanism. On *boulangisme*, see the classic Zeev Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire 1885-1914. Les origines françaises du fascisme* (Seuil, 1978), 33-76.

[33] On the *Revue de métaphysique et morale* see Stéphan Soulié, *Les philosophes en République: L'aventure intellectuelle de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale et de la Société française de Philosophie 1891-1914* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), and Eric Brandom, "Liberalism and Rationalism at the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1902-1903", *French Historical Studies* 39, no.4 (Oct 2016): 749-78.

[34] Sorel, "La crise de la pensée catholique", 524.

[35] Ibid.

The crisis Sorel identified was twofold: first, a historicizing theology that reduced faith to cultural development; and second, the effect of scientific reasoning that sought to naturalize or eliminate the miraculous. Against both, Sorel defended the role of mystery in religious life. As in his early *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible*, he again objected to rationalist biblical criticism and returned to the essential role of the miraculous in sustaining Christian belief.

In line with Vico and Pascal, Sorel presented an updated, more radical, version of his previous epistemological pluralism. He argued that one can "never equate the laws of nature to those of science, nor can we say that one of the realms imitates the other; these are two essentially distinct worlds. The determinism of nature, it follows, is more of a prejudice than a philosophical principle".[36] On this basis, he maintains: "There are no decisive arguments for or against the miracle; one accepts or rejects it on the basis of deep-seated conviction, over which science has no influence"[37] While this defuses the conflict between science and faith, it simultaneously undermines the rationalist apologetics inherited from 17th-century theology.

Sorel sees this shift not as a crisis of belief, but as an opportunity for intellectual realignment. He calls for Catholic philosophy to centre on the mystical: "Christian philosophy must henceforth consider the mystical as the principal basis of its speculations"[38]. At a key moment, he gestures, without naming him, to Bergson, suggesting that modern thought is turning toward "a metaphysics based on the study of the deep states of consciousness" , echoing Bergson's doctrine of the deep self, the *moi profond*.[39] Bergson's vitalism seemed to offer what Sorel believed Catholicism needed: a philosophical framework that privileged intuition and individual depth over mechanical logic.

Re-issued as a pamphlet a few months later, Sorel's essay was intended as a public statement of some weight. In 1904, Édouard Berth wrote an article of the same title in *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, re-stating and endorsing Sorel's idea that Bergson might help rejuvenate Catholic thought.[40] That exchange was part of a dialogue that culminated in Berth's *Les méfaits des intellectuels* (1914), accompanied by Sorel's preface, both invoking Pascal.[41]

In these years, Sorel also renewed his critique of the positivism of Ernest Renan. In the *Système historique de Renan* (1905–1906), Sorel returned once more to challenge the historicisation of Christian origins.[42] Although, as Dimnet noted, Sorel admired Renan's "intelligence and submission to the realities of history", he also accused him of evacuating the miraculous from Christian faith, reducing Jesus to a Judaic cultural figure and Christianity to social evolution.[43] Drawing on Vico, Sorel argued instead that early Christianity belonged to a world in which the miraculous was not a failure of rationality but a decisive mode of social experience. The historian's task, he suggested, must acknowledge its limits: one can record the past, but not exhaust its meaning. The "noyau fundamental" of Christian belief – its "legendary" core of miraculous experience – was obscured by the modern obsession with demystification.[44]

[36] Ibid., 535.
[37] Ibid., 537.
[38] Ibid., 550.
[39] Ibid., 534.
[40] Édouard Berth, "La crise de la pensée catholique", *Mouvement Socialiste*, 12 (1904): 193-4.
[41] Berth, *Méfaits des intellectuels,* especially i-xxxviii.
[42] Georges Sorel, *Le système historique de Renan* (Jacques, 1905-6).
[43] Dimnet, "A French Defence of Violence", 415.
[44] Sorel, *Système historique de Renan*, 76-8.

By 1907, Sorel's concern with the fate of belief had expanded beyond the Church, and the parallels with the challenges faced by the workers' movement became more explicit in his writing. In *"*Modernisme dans la religion et dans le socialisme*"*, he drew a provocative analogy between the immanentism of Catholic modernism and the compromises of socialist revisionism.[45] Both, he argued, had abandoned their foundational myths – Catholic modernists by surrendering dogma to modern philosophy, and revisionist socialists by diluting revolutionary energy in parliamentary compromise.[46] In both cases, commitment had been replaced by accommodation. In critiquing modernism as a dilution of doctrinal integrity, Sorel was also critiquing the socialist engagement with democracy.

Bergson, again, offered a potential way forward, for the Church as for socialists – but only if read properly. Citing Édouard Le Roy's *Dogme et Critique*, Sorel criticised the modernist dissolution of dogma into "a fairly vague" immanentism, noting that Le Roy "does not hide his sympathies for pantheism". [47] He distanced himself from thinkers who, like him, called for a theology of the "heart", but failed, in his view, to grasp the deeper political possibilities that such a theology might grant.

Le Roy, a colleague and advocate of Bergson, led the effort to connect the "new philosophy" to Catholic modernism.[48] Bergson acknowledged his roots in a French "spiritualist" tradition running from Maine de Biran to Emile Boutroux; this was also the lineage of Maurice Blondel's influential thesis *Action* (1893), a key text in the modernist controversy.[49] Although Blondel quibbled with Bergson's terms, defining his theory of an *élan éternel* against Bergson's *élan vital*, the conceptual echo is suggestive of their broader anti-positivist affinity.[50] Notably, Blondel distanced himself from Bergson by elevating Pascal, whom he cited frequently.[51] Against these readings of Bergson and Pascal, Sorel demurred. He cast and constructed these thinkers in a different light – as supporters of dogmatic renewal. In *"*Modernisme dans la religion et le socialisme", he made explicit his belief that the Church "could probably renew its philosophy by using principles introduced by Mr. Bergson", regretting that "no one [had] done what Saint Thomas had done for Aristotle and [adapted] the philosophy of Mr. Bergson to the dogmas".[52] Instead, "modernists have taken only from the books of their supposed master the least happy formulas and have seriously compromised the work of this great thinker in the eyes of serious people".[53]

Sorel thus recommended the application of Bergson to renew a commitment to Catholic doctrine, clearly echoing his own hoped for a return to the living core of Marxism in the realm

[45] Sorel, "Modernisme dans la religion et dans le socialisme", *Revue critique des idees et des livres* 2 (July-September 1908): 177-204.
[46] Ibid., 178.
[47] Ibid., 195. For the book, see Édouard Le Roy, *Dogme et critique* (Bloud, 1907).
[48] See Édouard Le Roy, *Une philosophie nouvelle. Henri Bergson* (Alcan, 1912). Dorothy Eastwood notes Le Roy's assimilation of Pascal to this tradition in *The Revival of Pascal* (Clarendon Press, 1936), 37-47.
[49] See Robert C. Grogin, *The Bergsonian Controversy in France* (University of Calgary Press, 1988), 12.
[50] See Maurice Blondel [1928], *L'Itinéraire philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 2nd ed. (Aubier-Montaigne, 1966), 23-25. See also Kathleen A. Mulhern, *Beyond the Contingent: Epistemological Authority, a Pascalian Revival, and the Religious Imagination in Third Republic France* (Pickwick, 2011), 117; Grogin, *Bergsonian Controversy*, 153, and Olivia Blanchette, "Translator's Preface" in Maurice Blondel [1893], *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Olivia Blanchette (University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), xi-xxvii.
[51] Grogin, *Bergsonian Controversy*, 152-154; See Eastwood, *The Revival of Pascal*, 89-117; Mulhern, *Beyond the Contingent*, 106-127.
[52] Sorel, "Modernisme dans la religion et dans le socialisme", 191.
[53] Ibid.

of socialism. If Bergson was read in this light, as Sorel argued he should be, his ideas were capable of re-vitalising Christian dogma, not dispensing with it. What was needed was not the liberal theologian's positivistic historicism, nor the immanentist's subjective feeling, but a return to conviction – faith understood as decision, not sentiment. Bergson, rightly directed, could help retrieve the vital sources of belief. Crucially, though unsurprisingly for readers of this chapter, the same rule applied to socialism. Revisionists had diluted the force of Marxist principles in their compromise with democracy, their hope for a progressive energy working through parliamentary debate. Socialists and Catholics equally could revive their doctrinal core with the vitality of myth.[54]

Thus, between 1902 and 1907, Sorel redefined the terms of his engagement with religion and linked it to his mythic view of class struggle. Not wishing to dismiss belief as illusion, he defended its epistemological, symbolic, and above all political necessity. His critique of liberal theology and scientific rationalism converged in a broader theory of myth, moral energy, and decision, required to break free from the deadening embrace of bourgeois civilization. He treated doctrine, in religion as in politics, not as a record of transcendent truth, but as a model of structured faith capable of resisting the moral entropy of the modern world. These themes would soon be given their most decisive form in *Reflections on Violence*.

6. Reflections and *Illusions:* 1907-1908

By 1907–1908, Sorel's major works *Reflections on Violence* and *The Illusions of Progress* displayed an increasingly sophisticated attempt to ground the political conviction needed to break free from the republican project in mythical belief, and to theorize that belief using, at times, theological categories. In his mobilization of Pascal to articulate this, Sorel was not alone. The early 20th-century revival of Pascal – stimulated by a new edition by Léon Bruschswicg and intensified by Catholic critiques of Cartesian rationalism – had cast Pascal as a touchstone for those resisting the ideology of progress and the hegemony of scientific positivism.[55]

In *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel first cites Pascal in his introductory "Letter to Daniel Halevy" to repudiate natural law and to cast doubt on the rationalism of his political opponents.[56] He highlights Pascal's confession that he once believed in an essential human justice, only to realize later that justice "exists only as God has willed to reveal it".[57] Though Pascal acknowledges "there are natural laws", he insists that "this good reason once corrupted, has corrupted all", and concludes: "*veri juris* – we have it no longer".[58] For Sorel, Pascal demonstrates that justice cannot be deduced from autonomous reason, and must instead be grounded in social custom – a position that undermines the 18th century project of building rational moral systems. A similar move, Sorel argues later, is also the basis for Pascal's attack

[54] Ibid, 189.
[55] *S*ee Eastwood, *The Revival of Pascal* and Mulhern, *Beyond the Contingent*. The opposition to Descartes was something of a fiction, as Jansenists, notably Arnaud, were indebted to Cartesian thought. As Hélène Bouchilloux notes in a recent essay, "Port-Royal is a nebula; and at the core of this nebula only Pascal offers a philosophy that confronts that of Descartes. The legend of a skeptical and fideist Pascal is forged early on, and it is consolidated in the academic lessons of Victor Cousin". ("Pascal and Port-Royal", in Steven Nadler, Tad M. Schmaltz, and Delphine Antoine-Mahut (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 583.
[56] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 15-17.
[57] Ibid., 15
[58] Ibid., 16. Sorel quotes Pascal's Pensée 86 (*OC* 510).

on Jesuit casuistry, notably in the writings of Antonio Escobar, whose moral reasoning was built on speculative logic divorced from tradition or lived experience.[59]

Sorel, in turn, draws a parallel between this Jesuit casuistry and the moral flexibility of parliamentary socialists, whose ethics, like Escobar's, serve the needs of power rather than principle.[60] He sees in both a rationalism disconnected from reality – an accommodating logic that corrodes belief. Yet Sorel also notes that Catholicism, far from fading, "recovered strength to an extraordinary degree" in the 19th century precisely because it "would abandon nothing", even intensifying its mysteries.[61] Thus, he notes, among "cultivated circles" disillusioned with university rationalism, Catholic obscurantism was now attractive as a bulwark against reductive abstraction – a position the critic Ferdinand Brunetière had taken, citing Pascal as a defender of mystery in his own day.[62]

This Pascalian influence was not new in Sorel's writing. His reviews for the *Revue générale* discussed numerous works on church history and theology, including studies of Tertullian, Pascal, and Newman.[63] In Sorel's 1908 books, Pascal becomes central. He appears not merely as a historical figure, but as a conceptual anchor: the representative of an anti-rational tradition capable of resisting positivism, liberal theology, and ultimately the Third Republic. For Sorel, Pascal's rejection of deductive reason as a basis for faith offered a compelling analogue to his own effort to re-found socialism on the grounds of myth, intuition, and moral decision.

As Dorothy Eastwood has shown, Pascal offered Catholic intellectuals a philosophic alternative to Bergsonian vitalism at the time of the modernist crisis.[64] Long viewed with suspicion due to his Jansenist affiliation, Pascal had by now become an exemplar of high French literature.[65] Though some modernist admirers were censured by the 1907 encyclical *Pascendi domini gregis*, Pascal himself proved resilient as a source for Catholic thinkers.[66] For

[59] Ibid., 69. Pascal satires Escobar's moral accommodations in the fifth and sixth of his *Provincial Letters* (*OC* 387-396). Sorel's argument taken from Pascal is in line with the position of his earlier *Procès de Socrate*, as noted by John Stanley, *Sociology of Virtue*, 41-42.

[60] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 69.

[61] Ibid., 135.

[62] Sorel cites Brunetière's essay on Pascal's anticartesian defence of Christian obscurity. See Ferdinand Brunetière, "Cartésiens et Jansénistes", *Revue des Deux Mondes* 3, no. 90 (November-December 1888): 396-435.

[63]Sand's bibliography records only some of Sorel's numerous, often pseudonymous *Revue générale* pieces on religion from 1903-1906. See for example the 'Philosophie' section of the *Revue générale* 2, nos. 17-18 (December 1904): 537-550. Here, nine out of 11 reviews were written by Sorel, either under his own name or as Jean David (David being the family name of his deceased partner), covering subjects from biblical authorship, the doctrines of the trinity and the eucharist, and St. Jean Damascene. The section ends with long reviews of books on St Ireneaus and Newman under Sorel's own name. Many further articles appear through the 1903-1906 numbers, mostly under Sorel's name but with many signed Jean David or Pierre Salley (Salley being his mother's maiden name).

[64] Eastwood, *The Revival of Pascal*, 142-45. On Catholic interest in Bergson, see Grogin, *The Bergsonian Controversy in France*, 139-74.

[65] For an account of the Pascalian revival initiated by Victor Cousin's discovery of the manuscript in 1842 and his call for a new edition, see Eastwood, *The Revival of Pascal*, 1-11.

[66] Eastwood, *The Revival of Pascal*, 143, and Mulhern, *Beyond the Contingent*, 188-200. See for example, Joseph Lataste's entry on Pascal in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1913. The author reproaches Pascal for "unjustly… attacking [the Society of Jesus] and for providing "weapons on the one hand to unbelievers and adversaries of the Church", but acknowledges the *Provinciales* as "the first prose masterpiece of the French language". The piece ends by registering the "innumerable works… devoted to Pascal in the second half of the nineteenth century… Poets, critics, roman-writers, theologians, philosophers have drawn their inspiration from him... As M. Bourget has said, he is not only one of the princes of style, but he represents the religious soul in its most tragic and terrified aspects. Moreover, the problems which he presents are precisely those which confront

those uneasy with the pantheistic implications of Bergson's metaphysics – especially his emphasis on immanence – Pascal provided a firmer doctrinal foundation. Where Bergson flirted with a modernist theology of flux, Pascal defended mystery and structure.

This concern with the limits of reason dominates *The Illusions of Progress*. The book opens with a meditation on the intellectual genealogy of modernity, drawing a sharp contrast between the legacies of Pascal and Descartes. For Sorel, Pascal embodies an intellectual caution that recognises the boundedness of mathematical reason and the irreducibility of moral truth. Cartesianism, by contrast, represents the illusion that reason can conquer all spheres of life. Building on studies by Brunetière, Sorel traces the Cartesian belief in progress through Condorcet and Enlightenment optimism, arguing that it culminated in the secular dogma of human perfectibility – an error that had led both socialism and Catholicism astray.[67]

Sorel draws heavily here on Brunetière's "Cartésiens et Jansénistes" among other essays in which the influential critic, on a pathway from Tainean positivism to Catholic conversion, explored Pascal's critique of the limits of reason.[68] This line of thought paved the way to the controversial 1895 article "Après un visite au Vatican", in which Brunetière announced the "bankruptcy of science", and called for a Catholic revival. The latter article's distinction between realms of knowledge – historical, scientific, and moral – echoes the *Pensées'* account of "different orders" of knowledge and repeats Pascal's censure of scientific over-reach: "Be silent, foolish reason!".[69] In *Illusions of Progress*, Sorel draws on Brunetière's critique of science, but he remains wary of the latter's Catholic commitment after 1895. In a pointed footnote, Sorel disavows Brunetière's "proclerical" phase, claiming to cite only those works composed before his overt return to the Church.[70] What Sorel admires is not Brunetière's piety, but his recognition of the crisis of rationalism – a view Sorel himself had already developed through Vico and Bergson.

Via Brunetière, Pascal becomes the intellectual fulcrum for Sorel's critique of progress. Against the Cartesian lineage that conflates scientific discovery with moral improvement, Sorel invokes a Pascalian awareness of human fallenness and epistemic limits: "We must understand that, in Pascal's eyes, the mathematical sciences form a very limited area in the whole field of knowledge and that one exposes oneself to an infinity of errors in trying to imitate mathematical reasoning in moral studies".[71] Like Pascal, he distinguishes between a "scientific use of reason" and "rationalism": "true science" versus a Cartesian "pseudo-physics suited only to the fashionable salons".[72] On the same logic, "the miracle strongly attracted… [Pascal's] imagination" because it represented the limits to reason, and therefore to "universal" proofs of

us nowadays". See Joseph Lataste, "Blaise Pascal", in Charles G. Herbermann *et al* (eds), *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 11 (Encyclopedia Press, 1913), 1342-6.

[67] Georges Sorel, *Les illusions du progrès* (Marcel Rivière, 1908), 15-64; *The Illusions of Progress*, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (University of California Press, 1969), 1-29.

[68] Ferdinand Brunetière, "Cartésiens et Jansénistes". Brunetière wrote several studies on Pascal: "Revue littéraire - Les Pensées de Pascal", *Revue des Deux Mondes* 3, no. 34 (July-August 1879): 933-45; "De quelques travaux sur Pascal" *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 3, no. 71 (September-October 1885): 194-212; and his introduction to Blaise Pascal, *Provinciales; lettres I, IV et XIII, publiées avec une introduction, des notes et un appendice* (Hachette, 1891), i-xxxi.

[69] Brunetière, Ferdinand, "Après un Visite au Vatican", *Revue des Deux Mondes* 4, no. 127 (January-February 1895):103-4.

[70] Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, 2, n.1.

[71] Ibid., 16.

[72] Ibid., 17.

human progress.[73] In view of these limits, Sorel cites Pascal's advice in his wager ("Follow the way of the believers, who begin by doing everything as if they believed").[74] These passages point the way to his theory of myth as basis for action, "secure from refutation".[75]

Alongside Pascal, Sorel increasingly cites John Henry Newman, an interest noted by Abbé Dimnet in his 1909 profile. As noted above, Sorel had reviewed studies of Newman by Georges Grappe and Henri Brémond in the *Revue générale* from 1903-1906 and his work is cited several times in *Reflections*.[76] Newman was a contested source among Catholics, invoked by both Modernists and the Vatican in the period. Interest grew as Newman's works found new readers in France, spurred by translations, scholarly studies, and by the general interest among Catholic modernists in theological renewal.[77] Crucially, in his *Grammar of Assent* (1870), Newman's idea of the "illative sense" – a faculty of moral certainty not reducible to logical demonstration – mirrored both Bergson's intuition and Pascal's theology of the heart.[78] Newman's motto on being made a Cardinal in 1879, "cor ad cor loquitur" ("heart speaks to heart"), captured a mode of religious knowledge that Sorel could mobilize in support of his theory of proletarian myth.

Yet, like Pascal, Newman offered more than inspiration. He provided a model for how dogma might evolve without dissolving – how belief might preserve its core through changing forms. This evolutionary metaphor was attractive to those, including Sorel, who wished to preserve a space for doctrinal conviction without falling into either rigid scholasticism or modernist immanentism.

Sorel draws on Newman to support his critique of rationalist abstraction, particularly in politics and ethics. He quotes with approval Newman's view that language should not compel assent through logic but rather "stimulate... a mode of thinking and trains of thought similar to our own, leading [others] to their own independent action, not by any syllogistic compulsion".[79] For Sorel, this aligns with his own theory of myth, which operates not through proofs but through imagination, conviction, and above all collective action. Newman's claim that "an intellectual school will always have something of an esoteric character" echoes Sorel's belief

[73] Ibid., 15.
[74] Quoted as Pensée 233 (Brunschswicg edition) in Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, 18. Pensée 418, *OC* 551; Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Krailsheimer, 124-25.
[75] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 30.
[76] Georges Sorel, "Grappe – Newman", *Revue générale de critique et bibliographie* 1, no. 1 (1903): 92; Georges Sorel, "Brémond – Newman (1)", *Revue générale de critique et bibliographie* 2, nos 17-18 (1904): 547-50; Georges Sorel, "Brémond – Newman (2)", *Revue générale de critique et bibliographie* 3, nos 27-28 (1905): 398-401; Georges Sorel, "Brémond – Newman (3)", *Revue générale de critique et bibliographie* 4, no. 32 (1906): 31-4; Georges Sorel, "Brémond – Newman (4)", *Revue générale de critique et bibliographie* 4, no. 41 (1906): 461-4. For the references in *Reflections* see Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 7, 8, 28, 133.
[77] French interest in Newman grew from the 1880s, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century. This period, for example, saw the publication of Lucie Félix-Faure's *Newman, sa vie et ses œuvres* (Perrin, 1901) and William Barry's *Newman* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1904), translated by Albert Clément as *Newman* (P. Lethielleux, 1905). Between 1904 and 1906, the modernist priest Henri Brémond published four books devoted to Newman: three comprising extracts from the cardinal's writings, with Brémond's introductions and commentary. *Newman I. Le Développement du dogme chrétien* (Bloud, 1904), *Newman II. Psychologie de la foi* (Bloud, 1905), *Newman III. La vie chrétienne* (Bloud, 1906) – and the fourth a biography, *Newman: Essai de biographie psychologique* (Bloud, 1906), all of which Sorel reviewed in the *Revue générale* (see note 76). For fuller details, see Keith Beaumont, "The Reception of Newman in France at the Time of the Modernist Crisis", in Frederick D. Aquino and Benjamin King (eds), *Receptions of Newman* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 156-176.
[78] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Longmans, Green and Co, 1870), 343-83. The French translation is John Henry Newman, *Grammaire de l'assentiment*, trans. Madame Gaston Paris (Bloud, 1907), 276-306.
[79] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 7, n.3.

that genuine belief systems cannot be reduced to formulas; instead, "their words become a sort of *tessera*, not expressing thought but symbolizing it".[80] In both thinkers, there is a shared sense that truth cannot be transmitted by rigid logic but must be grasped through symbolic, lived, and morally charged experience, individual or collective.

Sorel also sees in Newman an anticipation of the theory of myth in his account of how imagination motivates action. He cites Newman: "Assent, however strong, and accorded to images however vivid, is not therefore necessarily practical... What imagination does for us is to find a means of stimulating these motive powers".[81] Imagination does not cause action directly but works through "hope and fear, likes and dislikes, appetite, passion".[82] This insight supports Sorel's argument that myths – like the myth of the general strike – serve not to explain but to mobilize. Sorel highlights Newman's critique of scholastic logic, quoting his complaint that logicians transform "rivers, full, winding and beautiful, into navigable canals". For Sorel, as for Newman, such rationalism is a form of "small talk" – a degraded intellectual performance that substitutes technique for substance.[83] Both thinkers reject confidence in methodical reason and seek instead to integrate it with the power of deep, symbolic conviction formed in tradition and moral experience.

Importantly, Sorel's engagement with Pascal and Newman is never purely theological. He remains a non-believer, sceptical of claims to eternal truth. But he recognises in both thinkers a way of affirming belief as a human necessity – a morally serious, intellectually coherent, and socially consequential structure of conviction. His invocation of Pascal is not an act of piety, but of sociological clarity. As with Brunetière, he finds in these religious thinkers a recognition of something Marxism had often ignored: the moral architecture of belief, and its centrality to collective and institutional life.

Thus, in *Reflections* and *Illusions*, Sorel's theory of myth reaches its clearest articulation. Faith – understood not as metaphysical assent, but as a mode of disciplined commitment – becomes one of the possible models for political belief. Against positivism, but also against theological modernism, Sorel offers something akin to a Pascalian wager: belief without certainty, decision without proof, conviction without reduction. It is here that Sorel's politics become not just a theory of action, but a philosophy of the moral imagination.

7. Sorel's Nationalist Moment

By 1909, syndicalism was on the decline, decimated by Clemenceau's repressions.[84] Consequently, Sorel' involvement with the workers' movement cooled, and he began to explore new ideological terrain to express his opposition to the Third Republic. This period saw a striking convergence of his vision with themes drawn from Catholic revivalism and French nationalism, a development most clearly marked in his interactions with Charles Péguy and his collaboration with Édouard Berth.[85]

[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., 28 n. 37.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., 133, n.39.
[84] See Jacques Julliard, *Clemenceau, briseur de grèves. L'affaire de Draveil-Villeneuve-Saint-Georges (1908)* (R. Julliard, 1965).
[85] See Paul Mazgaj, *Action Française and Revolutionary Syndicalism* (North Carolina University Press, 1979) for a close study of the younger writers around Sorel who encouraged this synthesis.

As noted above, Sorel's work prompted commentaries from Catholic journals as early as 1905. In 1908, George Valois had suggested to Sorel and Berth in 1908 an alliance of workers and monarchists against republican democracy, though Sorel refused it at that time.[86] But the idea of this alliance kept emerging: Paul Bourget, a notorious conservative writer, wrote positively about Sorel in the preface to his play *La Barricade* (1910) and Charles Maurras, the leading political intellectual of the radical right of the period, drew links in his *Enquête sur la Monarchie* (1909) between his own Royalism and Sorel's anti-republicanism.[87]

These approaches were made by political thinkers hoping to benefit from the post-Dreyfus polarisation that aligned anti-republican forces of left and right. When Sorel finally went in that direction, he did so in with reference to religion and to myth. In 1910, Sorel published a polemical review of Péguy's *Le Mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc* in the Maurrasian newspaper *Action française*.[88] The piece represents a convergence of syndicalist, nationalist, and religious motifs. Joan of Arc – beatified in 1909 – was re-appropriated by both Catholic and nationalist writers as a symbol of redemptive suffering and moral clarity. Péguy's poem was not a nationalist tract, but its spiritual fervour and ethical seriousness resonated with readers yearning for renewal. Sorel responded to this vision with evident admiration. The figure of Joan, through whose discourses Peguy conveyed currents of local French piety and of Christian asceticism, exemplified the power of conviction – precisely the quality Sorel believed socialism and the Church alike had surrendered.

This was no isolated gesture. From 1910 onward, Sorel became involved, if often peripherally, in several ventures that sought to unite nationalist and Catholic sentiment with critiques of liberalism and modernity. He supported a group of younger writers, including Édouard Berth, Jean Variot, and Georges Valois, in planning a radical journal, *Cité française*. Though this failed to materialise, he became a sort of patron saint Valois's *Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon* (1912-14), and he helped Berth and Variot establish the journal *L'Indépendance*, which from 1910-1914 promoted Sorel's ideas, bringing together nationalism, syndicalism, and aesthetic theory.[89] While his direct engagement was intermittent, Sorel's writings during this phase – also in journals like *Voce* and *Action française* – suggest a real interest in the possibilities this ideological convergence offered.

Much of this period's significance is crystallised in Édouard Berth's *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels* (1914), a work that both exemplifies and extends Sorelian thinking. Sorel wrote the preface, dedicated to Pascal, and gave his blessing to Berth's conclusions – marking this as a moment of public endorsement. Sorel's "Preface" discusses many of the ideas in the body of the book. Crucially, Berth's final chapter, "La Victoire de Pascal", outlines a social vision that combines Pascalian anthropology with Proudhonian institutional theory. The result is a schema

[86] George Valois, "Enquête sur la monarchie et la classe ouvrière", *Revue critique des idées et des livres* 2, tome I, no. 2 (April-May-June 1908): 145-56. Available at https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5662470r/f150.item last accessed 17 September 2025. The article by Valois contains two letters written by Sorel. See also Yves Guchet, *Georges Valois. L'action française, le faisceau, la République syndicale* (Albatros, 1975), 66-71.
[87] Paul Bourget, "Préface", in Paul Bourget, *La Barricade - Chronique de 1910* (Libraire Plon, 1910), l-lix; Charles Maurras [1909], *Enquête sur la monarchie: suivie de Une campagne royaliste au Figaro et Si le coup de force est possible Éd. définitive, avec un discours préliminaire et un index des noms cités* (Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1925), 26.
[88] Georges Sorel, "Le réveil de l'âme française – Le mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc" *L'Action Française,*14 April 1910, 1-2.
[89] The *Cité française* plan failed in 1910 owing to a falling out between George Valois and George Variot. See Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Duke University Press, 1997), 4 and 65-110.

of plural power – state, Church, and syndicates – each sovereign in its domain, mutually correcting and limiting one another.[90]

Berth's synthesis opens by noting Proudhon's acceptance of property as a social *felix culpa* – a fallenness that prevents a central rationalisation of social organisation. At the essay's heart is its contrast of Descartes, standing for sterile reason, clarity, superficial optimism, salon rationalism; and Pascal, standing for tragic depth, religious intuition, mystical contradiction, heroic suffering. In Berth's eyes, Sorel's debt to Pascal is central: "Sorel rightly pointed out the Pascalian tendencies of the contemporary soul... 'Pascal', he once wrote, 'has vanquished Descartes'".[91] For Berth, this victory was realised through Bergson, whose intuitive method reflected the deeper spirit of Pascal's *Pensées*. The synthesis of these strands – a Pascalian moral order, a Proudhonian structure of social authority, and a Bergsonian epistemology – offered a cultural alternative to both positivism and secular liberalism. Catholicism, in this vision, sheds its worldly entanglements and returns to spiritual strength; the state, once bloated by centralisation, is "compressed and exalted", defined yet purified; syndicalism reclaims its ethical and economic autonomy, severing its ties to both state socialism and speculative capital.[92]

The synthesis is problematic. It seeks to align the "Victory of Pascal", with the Neo-Royalism of the *Action française* (an alignment Maurras, a proud Cartesian, would have rejected, and which Sorel had by 1914 put aside, seeing the clash of ideas). Berth's rhetoric is, typically, marked by anti-Semitism, and the Sorelianism he promoted clearly foreshadows, as Sternhell has shown, later fascism.[93] The corporatism Berth sketches is not one of monarchical or theocratic, centralised domination, but one of energetic equilibrium – God and man, Church and State, order and rebellion held in paradoxical harmony.

How closely Berth's programme represents Sorel's position is debatable. Antliff has shown in detail the anti-Semitic implications of his extensive work at *L'Indépendance*.[94] From 1913, his engagement with that journal grew intermittent and often indirect, primarily through protégés and correspondents. He withdrew from editorial roles and offered more guidance than content. Yet his preface to *Méfaits* signals a moment of assent – an indication that, at least on the eve of the First World War, he saw value in Berth's synthesis. His earlier emphasis on myth, agency, and moral discipline found new expression in this model of social authority.[95]

The legacy of this period is complex. After 1914, Sorel's interest shifted again – toward Leninism, and away from the nationalist-cultural ventures of Berth, Valois, and others. His name would later be invoked by fascists, but the lineage from his writings to fascist politics is neither direct nor unbroken. These later uses, by Mussolini, Valois, and others, are best understood as "Sorelianisms", divergent appropriations of a thinker whose work was always evolving. What might be posited, however, is that Catholicism at times offered a language for what Sorel believed modern politics had lost: seriousness, commitment, depth. The attractions of Catholicism in this period were not theological, but structural and cultural. In Pascal, Sorel saw a figure who had preserved the limits of reason, the rigour of conviction, and the necessity of moral authority. That this position overlapped with Catholic revivalist sentiment gave it

[90] Berth, *Méfaits des intellectuels*, 285-94.
[91] Ibid., 274. The citation comes from Georges Sorel, "Dio ritorna", *Il Resto del Carlino*, 13 October 1910.
[92] Ibid., 32.
[93] Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 86-91.
[94] Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism*, 65-110.
[95] Berth, *Méfaits des intellectuels*, 2-38.

cultural force, even if it also introduced tensions as Sorel worked in complex relation to the "two Frances" set against each other so virulently by the Dreyfus Affair.

8. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to map the category of faith in Georges Sorel's thought, while resisting the temptation to collapse it into the anti-rationalism often attributed to him – above all in the influential reading by Zeev Sternhell. Rather than locating faith in a realm of uncritical intuition or vitalist spontaneity, the piece shows how for Sorel faith is part of a sociological enquiry on the functioning of popular imagination, whose political potential he will latch on to in the last part of his writing career, having become a convinced anti-democrat. His early interest in miracles and biblical criticism – those primordial signals of mythic imagination – laid the groundwork for a mature vision of how collective belief systems operate. From this perspective, religion is not the enemy of reason but its boundary: a realm outside calculability, where the human will imposes form upon chaos.

As the crisis of the Dreyfus Affair deepened, Sorel moved towards increasingly radical anti-republican positions. It is in this period that he identified a structural parallel between Catholicism and socialism: both faced internal conflicts between orthodoxy and revisionism. In Catholic thought, this meant the pressure to reconcile dogma with modern philosophy, while in socialism, it meant the acceptance of the continuity between republicanism and socialism. Sorel rejected both trajectories. His vision involved, instead, a revolutionary return to an orthodoxy justified in terms of pragmatic collective action and belief. This framework allowed Sorel to look at Catholicism from a new perspective. While he stood apart from Catholicism as a commitment to belief, he acknowledged its pre-eminent role as a model of mythic structure within French cultural memory. It provided a shape for collective imagination, a logic of obedience and conviction whose value lay in its form, not its metaphysical content. Catholicism, for Sorel, was the clearest example of how belief – embedded in history and as such beyond determinist reason – could furnish the moral energy needed for political renewal.

The resonance of this thinking is most clearly traced in the work of Édouard Berth. In *Les méfaits des intellectuels*, Berth proposed a theory of plural institutions – Church, State, Syndicates – each confined to its own sphere, each governed by a Pascalian humility about the limits of human knowledge. Sorel's preface to that book signalled a moment of intellectual assent. Even as he maintained a distance from Maurras and the broader nationalist-Catholic current, Sorel recognised in Berth's synthesis a working model of how myth, faith, and institutional form might coexist.

The legacy of this intellectual moment is not a linear genealogy but a series of branching tributaries – what we might call Sorelianisms. One line ran through Berth's corporatism, an ideology that remains close to fascism, particularly in its warrior mentality and entrenched anti-Semitism. Another line urged the distribution of power; when Berth imagined syndicalism, Church, and State as mutually delimiting authorities, he was not far removed from a certain kind of pluralist Christian thinker who, resistant to centralised authority, advocated a similar theory of corporate society.[96]

Arguably a similar aversion to positivism, a limit to reason's claim, and a recognition of the realm of collective myth as a functional structure appear in less virulent forms of political

[96] See Mark Bevir (ed.), *Modern Pluralism: Anglo-American Debates Since 1880* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

pluralism. The discontinuities between realms of knowledge were for Pascal correlative to a discontinuity between realms of power, as he puts it in *Pensée* 933: "The carnal are rich men and kings. Their interest is in the body. Inquirers and scholars; their interest is in the mind. The wise; their interest is in what is right".[97] The notion of segregated realms among which human power is organised, subordinate to the unifying force of a higher social myth, has notable echoes in 20th century thought. T.S. Eliot significantly recommends Pascal's theory of discontinuities in his "Preface" to W.T. Trotter's translation in 1931, citing T.E. Hulme's discussion of it in his 1915 notebooks.[98] While the politics of these writers, like Sorel's, are tainted by a proximity to fascist contemporaries, it is worth noting that their aversion to an abstracting, centralised state had a family resemblance to their friends' and colleagues' in the British Guild Socialist tradition, for example, from around 1907 into the interwar years.[99] A separation of powers that rules worldly, intellectual, and spiritual zones to be discontinuous – a principle that seems to resist the dangerous muddling of politics and religion – bears some interest as a current moving not only through fascism but through forms of left-wing pluralism.[100]

Sorel, it must be clear, was not a believer. In his last major work, he insisted that Catholicism was very far away from his idea of knowledge, as it insisted that its doctrines are "independent from the course of history".[101] Not unlike Charles Maurras, whose instrumental attitude to faith resulted in the excommunication of the *Action Française* in 1927, Sorel rejected the substance but was attracted to the form. Certain types of Catholicism, like the myth of the general strike, operated not by correspondence with an independent reality, but by agency. Its power lay in its ability to impose meaning – not as illusion, but as structure. That structure – whether expressed in Catholic dogma, syndicalism, or national myth – was always a human construct. Its truth lay in its ability to shape, discipline, and orient. What survives of Sorel is not a doctrine, but a method: a way of thinking about belief as the architecture of agency, the grammar of the popular imagination. In this latter category, particularly, we might find Sorel's legacy for Marxist theory – in drawing our attention to the power of cultural activity, to a zone beyond the science of economics: that of the public imagination, in which dominant and emergent cultures vie, a space later explored by Gramsci and others. Sorel's legacy lies in his method of understanding belief as the architecture of agency and imagination. This study seeks to recover a politics rooted in limits rather than certainty, warning that all forms of power – scientific, political, or ecclesiastical – must acknowledge their inherent incompleteness.

[97] Pascal, Pensée 933 (*OC* 624), in English in Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Krailsheimer, 298.
[98] Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Introduction", in Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées,* trans. W. F. Trotter (E. P. Dutton, 1931), vii-xix; Thomas Ernest Hulme [1915-1916], "A Notebook", in T.E. Hulme, *Collected Writings*, ed. Karen Csengeri (Clarendon Press, 1994), 449.
[99] See Henry Mead, *T.E. Hulme and the Ideological Politics of Early Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2015); Roger Kojecky, *T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism* (Faber, 1971).
[100] See Marc Stears, "Guild socialism and ideological diversity on the British left, 1914-1926", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 3, no. 3 (1998): 289-306.
[101] Sorel, *Utilité du pragmatisme,* 174.

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The other of liberalism: three generations of readers of Sorel in 20th century Europe

By Tommaso Giordani
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

> "There is no way of telling what may yet become part of history. Perhaps the past is still essentially undiscovered! So many retroactive forces are still needed!"
>
> *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1882.[1]

> "…I do not understand how M. Sorel avoids seeing that his theory of myths is itself a myth; that the aspirations and impulses which his myth bodies forth will inevitably be reinterpreted by history."
>
> *Thomas Stearns Eliot*, 1914.[2]

1. Introduction

Some of the most interesting questions emerging from studies of reception concern the process through which commentary becomes historiography. How is a given thinker inscribed into an historical sequence? To what extent do narratives concerning the wider evolution of culture and politics condition which interpretations of an author's ideas will become historiographical commonplaces and which will be forgotten? To put it from the perspective of the historian: when do sources end and historiography begins?

This question is particularly relevant for the case of Georges Sorel. For a long time, there has been a significant discrepancy between the dominant image of the French thinker and what specialists wrote about him. If the standard portrait showed us an irrationalist, specialist studies have highlighted the depth of his engagement with Marxism and with contemporary social scientific thought.[3] To the Sorel chiefly concerned with an ethical rejuvenation against bourgeois decadence, specialists have opposed a thinker of autonomy or a sociologist of morals.[4] Though parts of this dominant image are vindicated by source material, the overall portrait remains incapable of dealing with fundamental aspects of Sorel's work. It thus becomes important to ask why this image has proven so resilient, considering that already in the 1950s scholars had shown many of its limitations.[5] This chapter seeks to answer this question by examining specific, though not exhaustive, 20th century readings of Sorel. It will show how

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Historia abscondita", *The Gay Science*, § 34 in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage books, 1974), 104.
[2] Thomas Stearns Eliot [1914], "The relationship between politics and metaphysics", address to the Harvard Philosophical Club, spring 1914, in Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition. Apprentice Years, 1905– 1918*, ed. Brooker, Jewel Spears and Schuchard, Ronald (John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 97.
[3] Shlomo Sand, *L'illusion du politique. Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900* (La Découverte, 1985) ; Eric Brandom and Tommaso Giordani, "Introduction : Georges Sorel's *Study on Vico* in French and European context", in Georges Sorel, *Study on Vico*, ed. and trans. by Eric Brandom and Tommaso Giordani (Brill, 2020), 1-48.
[4] Willy Gianinazzi, *Georges Sorel philosophe de l'autonomie* (Arbre Bleu, 2022); John L. Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue. The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (University of California Press, 1981).
[5] See for example Richard Humphrey, *Georges Sorel, Prophet Without Honor* (Octagon Books, 1951) and James Hans Meisel, *The Genesis of Georges Sorel* (Wahr Publishing, 1951).

this dominant image emerged gradually, combining interpretations and opinions developed by readers of Sorel from different periods and belonging to different generations.

The purpose of this selective study of reception is twofold. On the one hand, there is a critical ambition. Highlighting the similarities between given 20th century readings of Sorel and contemporary, non-specialist, scholarly opinion on him allows the chapter to show the dangers inherent in not distinguishing between contexts of production and contexts of reception, suggesting that the received image relies in an insufficiently critical way on the testimony of some of Sorel's readers. On the other hand, there is the larger ambition of offering an historical explanation for the resilience and rise to prominence of the standard interpretation. On this count, the chapter will argue that the dominant image has affirmed itself because it is an historicized interpretation of Sorel, i.e. because it embeds Sorel in a wider story about 20th century European politics. The ease with which the image of the anti-bourgeois prophet of violence connects with wider narratives of the European 20th century as an existential conflict between liberal democracy and its totalitarian enemies explains its success: it is a success based on the capacity to answer the question of Sorel's significance in the contemporary history of Europe. It is this view of the 20th century, both as a period of trauma and mass violence and as a battle for the survival of liberal democracy, which constitutes the solid ground upon which an otherwise shaky reading of Sorel rests and thrives. It is as liberal democracy's other that the Sorel we know today emerged. Framed in this way by different protagonists of the "Age of Extremes", he presently continues to be known in this way – a portrait which, while not being fully mistaken, remains very partial.

The approach chosen in this study of reception will focus more on temporal than on spatial aspects: it will concentrate, in other words, more on how different generations of European thinkers interpreted and historicized Sorel than on the peculiarities of how he was introduced to specific national spaces. Clearly, something is lost in this. The operations performed by transnational cultural brokers in introducing Sorel to their contexts will be marginal to my analysis, as will be broader lessons about specific cultural spaces that may always be drawn by studying the international circulation of ideas. And yet, only a generational approach can capture what is essential to the chapter, namely interactions between, on the one hand, broad visions of the European 20th century, and, on the other, interpretations of Sorel. To explore these interactions, it is essential to capture the large differences in historical experience that separate, say, someone born in 1872 from someone born in 1935. These differences determine, as we shall see, different historical visions, with consequences for the ways in which Sorel was historicized. Hence the necessity of a generational approach, capable of capturing shifts in historical visions in a more direct way than is possible with spatially-oriented approaches.

The chapter, thus, will show how the canonical image of Sorel emerged by combining perspectives which were originally separated, both generationally and politically, but which were held together by the fact they ultimately ended up sketching a coherent history of European political developments in the first half of the 20th century.

2. The professor of Youth (1908-1922)

> "M. Sorel est un jeune, envers et malgré tout, il est un professeur de Jeunesse"
>
> *René Johannet,* 1914[6]

[6] René Johannet [1914], "L'évolution de Georges Sorel" , in *Itinéraires d'intellectuels* (Nouvelle Libraire Nationale, 1921), 226. Unless otherwise indicated, all translation from sources in languages other than English are the author's.

In studies of reception, circulation matters more than quality or importance of the argument. The text with a small number of readers may be interesting, even decisive, to the biographer or to the student of a thinker's system, but is less important in the analysis of reception, where dealing with what was most read is inevitable. In the case of Sorel, notoriety came with the *Reflections on Violence*, a book published in various forms between 1905 and 1908, before appearing in what would become the canonical version, its 1908 edition for *Pages Libres*.[7] Whereas in the preceding years Sorel had remained a marginal figure – both in respect to the general public and, at large, in the world of culture – the *Reflections* made him a well-known intellectual. The book was a success: before his death in 1922, it went through five re-editions as well as translations in English, Italian, Russian, and Spanish.[8] In France and Italy, the *Reflections* turned Sorel into a public figure, giving him fame, authoritativeness, disciples, and a much augmented readership. In other parts of Europe, though less prominent, he became a relatively well-known name, associated with the revolutionary wing of the trade union movement. As early as 1906, he was being presented to the British public as "one of the ablest of the younger socialist writers in Europe", despite his fifty-nine years of age at the time.[9]

Here, already, we see the beginning of a process of resignification. This counterintuitive association of Sorel with youth is neither coincidental nor without significance. It recurs in different sources and points to a decisive aspect of his first reception, namely the association, both real and perceived, with a younger generation.[10] Before the 1908 *Pages Libres* edition, the *Reflections* had been published twice in Italian, once in French as articles in the *Mouvement Socialiste*, and had been translated in Russian.[11] Yet, the book remained what it was intended to be: a text for a socialist audience making an argument for syndicalism over parliamentarism. Any attention it garnered beyond socialist readers depended on the perceived relevance of syndicalism in a given context.

But the 1908 edition managed to pierce this socialist bubble. In part, this was due to the addition of new layers of writing which, exceeding the syndicalist kernel of the original argument, managed to conquer new publics.[12] In greater part, however, it was due to the fact that Sorel's tones in the book managed to articulate in gripping terms a desire for civilizational renewal that preoccupied many at the time, especially amongst the younger generation. Talk of bourgeois decadence and of a new proletarian civilisation on the horizon, alongside scathing critiques of the corrupting effects of electoral politics, though more marked in the 1908 edition, were already present in previous iterations of the book. However, it was a question of bringing these tones and these arguments to a public that was eager to consume them. This extremely successful editorial operation, turning a semi-obscure work of socialist strategy into an object

[7] For the editorial history of the book see Tommaso Giordani, *The Uncertainties of Action. Agency, Capitalism, and Class in the Thought of Georges Sorel* (European University Institute, 2015), 423.
[8] See Shlomo Sand, "Bibliographie des écrits de Sorel", in Jacques Julliard and Shlomo Sand (eds), *Georges Sorel en son temps* (Seuil, 1985), 449.
[9] "The Labour Crises in France", *The Speaker: The Liberal Review*, 28 April 1906, 85
[10] One of the easiest to miss and yet most revealing ways in which this aspect emerges is the vocabulary used by friends and followers to refer to him in public. Expressions like "our master", or "the Socrates of the Latin Quarter" betray the age gap between Sorel and his readers, and hint at a relation between writer and readers characterized by an interesting pedagogical dimension. See Pierre Andreu, *Notre Maître, M. Sorel* (Grasset, 1953) and Daniel Halévy, "Le Socrate du Quartier Latin", *Journal de Genève,* 4 December 1947, 1.
[11] The Italian version had first appeared as a series of articles in the *Divenire Sociale* and subsequently as Georges Sorel, *Lo Sciopero Generale e La Violenza*, trans. Salvatore Piroddi (Tipografia Industria e Lavoro, 1906). For the Russian translation, Georges Sorel, *Razmyshleniia o nasilii*, trans. V. M. Friche (Pol'za, 1907).
[12] See Tommaso Giordani, "On Sorel and Bergson: The Impact of Bergsonian Ideas on Sorel's Reflections on Violence", *Lo Sguardo. Rivista Di Filosofia* 26, no. 1, (2018): 163–81.

of mass cultural consumption, owed much to the input of a younger generation, and in particular to that of Daniel Halévy (1872-1962).

If we look at Sorel's networks during the period of his rise to prominence, roughly between 1905 and 1909, we see that they were dominated by younger figures. Beyond Halévy, we can point to people like Hubert Lagardelle (1874-1958), Édouard Berth (1875-1939), Charles Péguy (1873-1914), Charles Guieysse (1868-1920) or Maurice Kahn (1875-1928). These networks revolved around three publications: *Le Mouvement Socialiste, Cahiers de la Quinzaine,* and *Pages Libres*. Each in their own way, these periodicals were at the time spaces where left-leaning intellectuals of different sensitivities were rethinking their relationship to the Third Republic in the aftermath of a shared engagement in its defence during the Dreyfus Affair.[13] In 1909-1910, this rethinking of dreyfusism would bring Péguy, Halévy, and Sorel to each publish accounts of their disillusion with the cause of the Jewish captain and with liberal democracy more widely. As Péguy would put it, "republican mystique meant dying for the Republic, republican politics is living off it".[14] This disillusion with the politics of parliamentary democracy, felt most acutely by the generation which had come of political age during the *affaire*, is an important context in explaining the success of the 1908 version of the *Reflections* and, vicariously, the aspect of Sorel's popularity we are examining.

The intuition of rescuing the book from its socialist obscurity came to Daniel Halévy. Sorel's first reaction was to label the idea as "beyond all reality".[15] Operating with ease between small and largely overlapping intellectual and editorial networks, Halévy did not struggle excessively to arrange the publication with *Pages Libres*, especially given his willingness to contribute financially.[16] After minimal hesitation, the *Mouvement Socialiste* ceded its publication rights, Hubert Lagardelle writing that he was happy to do so as the new publication was "going to put Sorel's work in contact with an entirely different public from our usual one".[17] This awareness that the volume would be read by a different and bigger audience soon brought forward the

[13] With the partial exception of the *Mouvement Socialiste*, an oecumenical socialist publication with oscillating positions on the issue, both *Pages Libres* and *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* emerged from the experience of dreyfusism. Together with Sorel, most of the core editorial team of *Pages Libres* (Maurice Kahn, Charles Guieysse, and Daniel Halévy) had been engaged in the *Universités Populaires*, a broad-church progressive initiative for working class education developed in the highly polarized political climate of the *affaire* (see Sébastien Laurent, *Daniel Halévy. Du libéralisme au traditionalisme* (Grasset, 2001), 147-9). As for the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, dreyfusism had been an important ideological component from inception. See Géraldi Leroy, "Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine", *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 5 (1987) : 77-8.

[14] Charles Péguy, *Notre jeunesse* (Cahiers de la Quinzaine, 1910), 218. See also Georges Sorel, *La révolution dreyfusienne* (Marcel Rivière, 1909) and Daniel Halévy, *Apologie pour notre passé* (Cahiers de la Quinzaine, 1910).

[15] Georges Sorel to Daniel Halévy, 20 May 1907, in Michel Prat, "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Daniel Halévy, 1907-1920", *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 12, (1994): 156.

[16] Sébastien Laurent mentions two payments of 650 Francs made by Halévy and André Spire (*Halévy,* 167). However, an accounting sheet of the *Reflections* signed by Halévy in August 1909 refers to a sum of 896 Francs, paid by Halévy on the 30th of June 1908 and repaid back with interests by *Pages Libres* on the 5th of August 1909. See "Compte *Réflexions sur la Violence*", Bibliothèque Nationale de France, NAF28147, box 143.

[17] Hubert Lagardelle to Daniel Halévy, 13 June 1907, BNF, NAF28147, box 143. In exchange for these rights, the *Mouvement* obtained from Halévy a subscription, the promise of an article on Nietzsche (which never happened), and the hope that Halévy's many influential acquaintances could, in time, provide more subscriptions. See Lagardelle to Halévy, 27 July 1907, BNF, NAF28147, box 143, as well as Sorel to Halévy, 27 May 1907 and 7 June 1907, in Prat, "Lettres de Sorel à Halévy", 157-8. It should be added that – probably because of these financial and copyright issues – *Pages Libres*' initial reaction had been lukewarm. "Sorel….!" had written Maurice Kahn to Halévy "In principle I would like to, but there are important difficulties. I will start by reading the *Reflections on Violence*" (Maurice Kahn to Daniel Halévy, 6 May 1907, in BNF, NAF28147, box 143).

issue of introducing Sorel to his new public.[18] Thus was born the introductory "Letter to Daniel Halévy", a text whose importance for the reception of Sorel can hardly be underestimated and which would deserve a longer analysis than what can be offered in this chapter.

Written in constant dialogue with Halévy, the text is relevant not so much for the arguments presented by Sorel in defence of his ideas, but for his self-fashioning as the humble, inflexible, and uncorrupted outsider.[19] Uninterested in becoming the leader of the revolutionary proletariat, prevented by his unsystematic way of writing "from ever becoming the founder of a school", beyond the suspicion of wanting to establish an "intellectual industry" around his writings and live from the "exploitation of thought", Sorel presented himself to his readers as "a self-taught man exhibiting to other people the notebooks that have served for my own instruction".[20] In stark tones, he contrasted the functioning of intellectuals in liberal-democratic society with his own way of proceeding. Whereas the former are invariably moved by monetary or demagogic motives, Sorel's real interest lay in "liberating the spirit of invention in my readers", in awakening the "metaphysical fire" of autonomous thought buried under the ashes of received opinion.[21] Emerging from the abovementioned post-Dreyfus backlash, the relevance of this act of self-fashioning was that it created space for an engagement with Sorel that did not depend on the agreement with, or even discussion of, the syndicalist theses at the heart of the book. Syndicalism remained an important, if not the principal, avenue of reception of Sorel throughout Europe at least until 1914. But the uncompromising critique of intellectuals in liberal-democratic society, condemned to become manipulators of their public either by publishing markets or electoral necessities, struck a deeper and more transversal chord in his readers, creating a separate channel of reception and contributing to the emergence of the image of Sorel as the chastiser of an unredeemable liberal civilisation.

In some cases, these concerns were taken up by Sorel's peers. In January 1910, a play by Paul Bourget (1852-1935) – *La Barricade* – debuted in the Théâtre du Vaudeville in Paris. Written in explicit dialogue with the *Reflections*, the play sought, in the words of its author, to provide "an education through defence" to a decadent bourgeoisie.[22] On the one hand, this decadence was evident in the attraction for Christian or corporatist schemes for social peace.[23] On the other, it came from the bourgeoisie's own moral corruption: the bourgeois protagonist of the play, Breschard, appoints his 20 years old mistress as head of the workshop. The remedy for both was class struggle, which Bourget described as "one of these corrective phenomena typical of a healing nature: the energy deployed in its attack by one of the two contending classes creating in the other one a reawakening of energy".[24] What is noteworthy here is that Sorel should be evoked in connection to the wider issue of civilizational decay, an issue emerging from the sensation of being at the end of an historical sequence. But if Bourget looked at this transformation with worry and hoped that it could be reversed, Sorel's younger readers

[18] The idea of a "clarifying chapter" arose in discussion between Sorel and Halévy, with Sorel having the idea of writing it in the format of a fictional letter to the book's editor. See Sorel to Halévy, 27 May 1907, in Prat, "Lettres de Sorel à Halévy", 157.
[19] See Sorel's correspondence with Halévy from late June to December 1907 in Prat, "Lettres de Sorel à Halévy", 158-73.
[20] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7, 31, and 5.
[21] Ibid., 7.
[22] Paul Bourget, "Préface", in Bourget, *La Barricade - Chronique de 1910* (Libraire Plon, 1910), xlix. Sorel is cited many times in the preface and is explicitly brought up to support the ideas of the play.
[23] Ibid., xlv.
[24] Ibid., xlix-l.

were different. In them, we see not only a conviction about the inevitability of a large break, but also a great deal of enthusiasm about it.

An example is the Italian modernist cultural journalist Giuseppe Prezzolini (1882-1982). Prezzolini knew very well the range of Sorel's work, from its epistemological ambitions to the very precise brand of socialism it advocated. When in 1909 he dedicated an entire chapter to "notre maître Sorel", it was in a book entitled "Syndicalist theory", and contained discussions of Sorel's pragmatism, of his revision of Marxism, of the theory of the general strike, and so on.[25] And yet, the overall portrait developed by the Italian went in the direction of dismissing the contents of Sorel's work in order to focus on his true relevance, that of being amongst the "uomini che svegliano", an awakener of new energies. [26]

Prezzolini likened Sorel to figures like Herder or Carlyle: men capable of attracting great attention with their writings and yet, "when someone looks at their work to find out why it raises such passions, it is likely that they… will find no reality, but only shadows and ghosts".[27] Constantly chastising his weaknesses, Prezzolini insisted that Sorel's real importance lay in the energies he was capable of activating.[28] Figures like Sorel are "*exciters, awakeners, eye-openers*; and as such, dispensable. In them, there isn't the substance on which a century can live, merely the stimulant capable of resuscitating it from its lethargy".[29] It is worth making explicit how this reading presupposes a transition between two historical epochs and a future-oriented temporality to make sense. Though incapable of providing a programme or even ideas on which to build the new order, Sorel's importance consists exactly in opening up the space of possibility for transformation. In Prezzolini's flamboyant military analogies:

> "A romantic figure that of Sorel! In the army of science, he is an irregular, a volunteer, well-suited to suicidal missions. All armies have squadrons of fighters that are more excitable than strong, more enthusiastic than convinced of the worth of the cause. It is to them that dangerous missions are entrusted. Thanks to these missions, victory is reached, but a victory they are not destined to see. They happily accomplish their mission, unaware that they will become martyrs of an ideal that is of no use to them. In a normal battle they would not be very handy, likely they would panic; but in the ambush, in avant-garde combat, where life is easily lost, they have the courage of desperation"[30]

The presentation of Sorel as the harbinger of a new era comes, it should be underlined, at the expense of Sorel the syndicalist. Prezzolini's insistence on the lack of substance in Sorel's work points to this direction. More explicitly, in the quote above, key terms such as "victory" or "ideal", though not completely contentless, still imply larger but at the same time vaguer stakes than those associated with syndicalist politics.

More than a symbol of syndicalism or socialism, thus, for some younger *belle époque* intellectuals Sorel became the standard bearer of generational aspirations for a radical break

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[25] Giuseppe Prezzolini, *La Teoria Sindacalista* (Francesco Perrella Editore, 1909), 215-79.
[26] Ibid., 217. It is worth underlining that the term "svegliare" (the Italian translation of "éveiller") is a reference to Sorel's ambition, confessed in the "Letter to Halévy", of "éveiller parfois des vocations", "to awake a personal vocation" in Hulme's translation. See Sorel, *Reflections*, 7.
[27] Prezzolini, *Teoria Sindacalista*, 217-18.
[28] There was a level of personal acrimony between the two. In the *Illusions of Progress*, Sorel had been very critical of Italian pragmatists like Prezzolini, to the point of describing Prezzolini's *L'Arte di Persuadere* (Francesco Lumachi, 1907) as "Manuel de Menteurs", a manual for liars. See Georges Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Marcel Rivière, 1908), 276n.
[29] Prezzolini, *Teoria Sindacalista*, 220.
[30] Ibid., 227-8.

with the status quo. The content of the new order remained vague, and at any rate depended on the specific concerns of given readers. But Sorel managed to express their exhaustion with 19th century liberal Europe in a way that few others could. "He is representative of the present generation, sick with its own knowledge of history, with the dissolving outlines of liberal thought, with humanitarianism" wrote T.S. Eliot in his 1917 review of the *Reflections*.[31] Like Prezzolini had done, but more thoroughly, Eliot divorced Sorel from syndicalism, arguing that "the proletarian general strike is merely the instrument" through which Sorel pursues another, more decisive goal, namely the ruin of "middle-class democracy and middle-class socialism".[32] While the anti-democratic rhetoric and opposition to social democracy were, indeed, very much part of Sorel's stance, it is nonetheless very significant that the syndicalist perspective in the name of which this opposition to democracy was originally voiced should be relegated to such a secondary role. Replacing class conflict in Eliot's reading of Sorel was a crisis of European modernity expressed in the contrast between an optimistic, "romantic", democratic civilisation and its pessimist, "classical", and anti-democratic alternative. In this dichotomy, Sorel is presented unambiguously as displaying a "healthy" longing for the "pessimistic, classical view".[33]

This politicized reinvention of the aesthetic distinction between classical and romantic drew on important *Action Française* intellectuals such as Pierre Lasserre and, to a lesser extent, Charles Maurras.[34] Eliot, who was aware of these writers, had already used it in his Extension lectures on contemporary French literature in Yorkshire, in the autumn of 1916. Here, he had cast Sorel as an anti-romantic, a socialist expression of "a protest against all the conditions in art and society which seemed to be due to the Revolution".[35] But a bigger influence on Eliot than the French royalists had been Sorel's first translator into English, Thomas Ernest Hulme (1883-1917). In his preface to the English-language edition of the *Reflections,* Hulme had presented Sorel as an opponent of "democratic romanticism", and had insisted that Sorel's true significance lay less in his politics than in his ethical theories.[36]

By the time he published the preface, Hulme had been convinced for years that Sorel was essentially a moralist going against the grain of contemporary relativist ethics. In a letter to his associate C.K. Ogden from 1911, Hulme had confessed that he found "Sorel a great deal more interesting than Syndicalism" and that it was a "mistake to get at him merely as a writer on Socialism", suggesting that the real importance lay in Sorel's "general ethical criticism".[37] Consequently, in the preface to the *Reflections*, Hulme, anticipating Eliot, dismissed the relevance of syndicalism, arguing that class struggle was the "part of his thesis that is concerned with facts, and it would be impertinent on my behalf to offer any commentary on it".[38] He

[31] Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Review of Reflections on Violence", *The Monist* 27, (July 1917): 479.
[32] Ibid., 479 and 478.
[33] Ibid., 479.
[34] Pierre Lasserre, *Le Romantisme Français* (Mercure de France, 1907). On the broader distinction between classic and romantic, see Christopher Pendergast, *The classic. Sainte-Beuve and the nineteenth century culture wars* (Oxford University Press, 2008).
[35] *Syllabus of a Course of Six Lectures on Modern French Literature* (Frederick Hall, 1916), reproduced in Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 29.
[36] Thomas Ernest Hulme, "The Translator's Preface to Sorel's 'Reflections on Violence'", *The New Age*, 14 (October 1915): 570. Though the book would only be published in England in 1916, the first preface came out for the *New Age* a few months earlier. For the relationship between Eliot and Hulme, see Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel,* 52-69.
[37] T.E. Hulme to C.K. Ogden, 27 November 1911, McMaster University Library Archives, Ogden Papers, Box 108 F.2.
[38] Hulme, "Translator's Preface", 570.

insisted, instead, on Sorel's ethical views. Ascribing him to the classical, anti-romantic, camp, marked by a fixed vision of man as "by nature bad or limited", Hulme wrote:

> "From the pessimistic conception of man comes naturally the view that the transformation of society is an heroic task requiring heroic qualities… qualities which are not likely to flourish on the soil of a rational and sceptical ethic. At a given moment, qualities may be required which can spring only from something which from the narrowly rationalist position is irrational, something that is not *relative*, but absolute."[39]

Again, we witness an act of resignification in which a younger intellectual superimposes his concerns over those of Sorel's. It is easy to point out that Sorel did not hold a fixed anthropology, but on the contrary always remained committed to the idea of free human agency and, consequently, to the notion of human self-creation. It is equally easy to see that Sorel's critique of 19th century optimism, voiced most clearly in the "Letter to Halévy", is what Hulme is pointing at in his preface. The point, of course, is not to assess the philological correctness of Hulme's interpretation.[40] Instead, it is to point out how he, like Prezzolini, Eliot, or even Halévy, found Sorel relevant beyond his syndicalism, almost in spite of it.

What these examples show is that before the Great War Sorel became the representative of a group of European intellectuals born in the 1870s and the 1880s. Reading his work through the lenses of their fatigue with the established patterns of 19th century liberal society, these figures would establish Sorel's reputation not so much as a social thinker, a Marxist, or a syndicalist, but above all as an iconoclast. Latching on to parts of his work that did indeed go in this direction and ignoring other ones, they would turn him into a symbol of generational revolt, capable of being mobilized in support of very different projects of political, cultural, or ethical renewal, as long as these projects advocated a radical break with the – mostly liberal and increasingly democratic – present. What unites these readings is a shared temporality, i.e. their framing of European history as being on the brink of a large transformation. It is from this temporality that their insistence on a vague but decisive future, as well as their forceful, when not rage-filled, condemnation of the present both come. Though not exhaustive, or even dominant, this pattern of reception is important to us because it furnished an important element of the Sorelian legend: that of Sorel as the politically transversal revolutionary *casseur*.

3. The father of totalitarianism (1922-1945)

> "You've read – he asked me – the *Reflections on Violence*, haven't you? But you must re-read it, like I re-read it. It explains the forms and the ideas that animate contemporary social struggle, the action as well as the reaction, Bolshevism as well as fascism, Lenin as well as Mussolini."
>
> *Paul Bourget,* 1926.[41]

That the Great War would inaugurate a different period of European history is something of which Sorel seemed immediately convinced. Leaving Paris in autumn 1914, he shared with Benedetto Croce the feeling that "we enter an era more radically new than that of the [French]

[39] Ibid.

[40] For a more in depth treatment of Hulme and Sorel, see Tommaso Giordani and Henry Mead, "'The Regeneration of Society': Thomas Ernest Hulme and the Early British Reception of Georges Sorel", *Modern Intellectual History* 21, no. 1 (2024): 103–32.

[41] Albéric Cahuet, "Nos Actes Nous Suivent. Entretien Avec Paul Bourget", *L'Illustration* no. 4372, 18 December 1926, 685.

Revolution".[42] The Bolshevik revolution of 1917, which Sorel greeted with enthusiasm, and its victory in the Russian Civil War, as well as the gradual replacement of the Italian parliamentary regime with a fascist dictatorship in the period between 1922 and 1926 seemed to confirm his impressions of 1914. Somewhat symbolically, he died in August 1922, a few months before the March on Rome and the proclamation of the USSR.

In assessing how Sorel's work was read in the interwar period, the major point to stress is that the pattern of reception previously examined became dominant. As pointed out above, in the period before the war syndicalism remained the main framework within which Sorel was discussed throughout Europe. Figures like Eliot or Prezzolini, who read Sorel merely as a symbol of rupture with the bourgeois 19th century, were a minority until 1914. With the possible but still limited exception of France – where his short-lived association with the *Action Française* was a matter of common knowledge and where his writings on religion and epistemology were more well-known – Sorel remained above all a theorist of syndicalism and an advocate for workers' autonomy. This situation changed substantially after the end of the war and with the advent of Bolshevism. In the interwar, we see the affirmation of readings substantially akin to those of a T.E. Hulme or Paul Bourget at the expense of syndicalist interpretations. Sorel became an enemy of bourgeois civilisation much more than a syndicalist, a theorist of decadence and rebirth more than a Marxist. As we approach the Second World War, he started being seen as an anticipator and inspirer of the anti-democratic regimes of the period.

Many reasons explain the surge in popularity of these readings, the most obvious one being the gradual demise of syndicalism as a viable political movement. As the anti-statist vision of economic and political self-management appeared increasingly unrealistic, as some syndicalists threw their lot either with Italian fascism or with Soviet communism, it was only natural that the syndicalist core of Sorel's political thought should fade from memory. Throughout the twenties, individual figures such as Édouard Berth and small groups in publications like *Clarté* still attempted to keep Sorelian syndicalism alive, but their efforts were politically inconsequential.[43] Parallel to this demise of syndicalism, another important factor amplified this specific reception of Sorel. Before the war, the anti-bourgeois rhetoric which animated Sorel's syndicalist works had been the preserve of avant-garde intellectuals. But after four years of brutal fighting, this had become a collective emotion spanning virtually the entire continent. The idea that European liberalism represented a progressive movement in history had been shaken to the core, and the sense of civilizational failure which Sorel had voiced in the early years of the century had become widespread: "There died a myriad/ And of the best, among them/ for an old bitch gone in the teeth/ for a botched civilization".[44] In this context, it is unsurprising that readings of Sorel as the castigator of an irremediably compromised civilisation should flourish.

Thus, what we see for most of the interwar period is not substantially unlike what had already been articulated by *belle époque* avant-gardes, the only real difference being the mass reach of

[42] Georges Sorel to Benedetto Croce, 22 September 1914, in Georges Sorel, "Lettere di Georges Sorel a Benedetto Croce", *La Critica* 27 (1929): 51.
[43] See for example Édouard Berth, *Les Derniers Aspects Du Socialisme* (Marcel Rivière, 1923) and later, in a more academic tone, Édouard Berth, *Du "Capital" Aux "Réflexions Sur La Violence"* (Marcel Rivière, 1932). On *Clarté,* an heterodox communist publication emerging in the early 1920s, see especially the Sorelian phase between 1923 and 1925, particularly evident in the articles by Berth and Georges Michäel (real name André Varagnac). See Nicole Racine, "Une Revue d'intellectuels Communistes Dans Les Années Vingt : « Clarté » (1921-1928)", *Revue Française de Science Politique* 17, no. 3 (1967): 484–519.
[44] Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (The Ovid Press, 1920), 13.

these readings, their transformation from minority to majority ones.[45] We see a good example of this shift in two articles dedicated to Sorel in the days after his death by the Italian liberal newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*. The official obituary remains largely within the scope of the dominant *belle époque* reading of Sorel as the "philosopher of syndicalism".[46] Sorel is painted as a scholar, as an enemy of "parliamentary socialism" and as someone who "in his books, stuck to the purely Marxist doctrine of a great catastrophic revolution".[47] The syndicalist notion of a social rather than political revolution is explained as the main doctrinal difference with Marx, and a short mention is made of Sorel's association with a "young monarchical party".[48]

The next day, a very different article appeared, juxtaposing Sorel to Ercole Marelli, a self-made industrialist who had also died recently. Much more political in tone, the piece outlined two possibilities for the working class, Sorel and Marelli. Contrasting the revolutionary abstraction of Sorel with the productive achievements of Marelli, the article at the same time suggested that both were preferable to "professional revolutionaries, parasites of party contributions, salesmen of poisoned words", i.e. to parliamentary socialists.[49] Essentially a piece on the role of the working class in industrial society, it outlined either Sorelian struggle or self-enrichment in the style of Marelli as preferable to the democratic governance of industrial capitalism. As for Sorel, he was depicted as "a man who had a sense for the epic in social struggles, who grandiosely saw the end of the world of so-called bourgeois civilisation in a great cataclysm, in the same way as one can imagine, in a mythical past, the great deluge".[50] Endowed with an "Homeric" vision of violence and unwilling to provide any sort of blueprint for the re-organization of post-revolutionary society, Sorel is presented in a way that resembles more an apocalyptic prophet than a political thinker, more as the announcer of a great civilizational cataclysm than as a socialist writer: "in the dusk of his vision of collapse there is only a dark ocean of multitudes drunk with subversion".[51]

As stated above, despite the perhaps newly melodramatic tone, there is nothing substantially new in this reading of Sorel, nothing that had not been previously articulated by *belle époque* intellectuals. In both cases, Sorel fits a narrative of discontinuity in the story of European liberal civilisation. In both cases he is placed at the endpoint of an historical sequence begun with the French Revolution and he is cast as representing, or announcing, the perspective of a vaguely defined but imminent, and radically different, future. In both cases, parliamentarism is presented as the chief political form of this civilisation. During the early post-war period, in the context of a recovering Europe swept by revolutionary waves and veteran political violence, it was almost inevitable that the mood of civilizational crisis should flourish. Sorel himself contributed to it. In September 1919, he penned a final appendix to the *Reflections*, presenting the Russian revolution as a struggle between the new and the old order, between the Bolshevik "Rome of the proletariat" and the "new Carthages" opposing it.[52] In the tone of invective, he cursed the "plutocratic democracies that are starving Russia" and hoped to see, before his death, "the humiliation of the arrogant bourgeois democracies, today shamelessly triumphant".[53]

[45] There is a certain irony here as for most of these figures – especially for Halévy – the disdain for the rising democratic culture of the early 20th century had been a proud and self-conscious minoritarian posture. I owe this point to Eric Brandom.
[46] "La Morte Di Giorgio Sorel", *Il Corriere Della Sera*, 31 August 1922, 5.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] "La via e Il volo", *Il Corriere Della Sera*, 1 September 1922, 3.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Sorel, *Reflections*, 292.
[53] Ibid., p 292-93.

We start to see something new, in terms of reception, only in the second half of the 1920s, when Sorel begins to be cast as the forefather of both Bolshevik Russia and fascist Italy. As early as 1924, we read of him as both the inspirer of Mussolini – who is said to be an "attentive reader" of his work – and amongst the "favourite authors" of Lenin.[54] In 1926, the same journalist, in a long reportage on the "new Italy" of Mussolini, describes the Italian dictator as a "disciple of Georges Sorel, professing the violent overthrow of modern society".[55] Again, the reasons for this are many. A decisive one is that by the second half of the 20's fascist Italy and Soviet Russia had solidified into real political regimes. In the first half of the decade, these regimes were still mere potentialities, almost empty canvasses on which the political imagination of many could run loose. By the end of the decade, they were concrete political realities, both alternative to parliamentary liberalism, on whose significance it was compulsory to reflect.

Sorel's association with the "Rome of the proletariat", Soviet Russia, should not surprise us, given how enthusiastic he had been about Lenin and the Bolsheviks in his last writings. As for fascist Italy, the story is more complicated. First, it occurs with, in the background, the nationalist conversion of some Italian revolutionary syndicalists.[56] Not unlike their *belle époque* precursors of the *Cercle Proudhon*, figures like Edmondo Rossoni (1884-1965), Paolo Orano (1875-1945), or, in a later period, Arturo Labriola (1873-1959) incorporated nationalism in a syndicalist soil, replaced class with people or nation, and turned to fascism in the '20s. In the early '30s, Mussolini himself began to openly advertise his past affiliation with revolutionary syndicalism in general and with Sorel in particular. Here he is, in the article on "Fascism" in the 1932 *Enciclopedia Italiana*, co-written with Giovanni Gentile: "…in the great river of Fascism you can trace currents which had their source in Sorel, in Péguy, in the Lagardelle of the *Mouvement Socialiste*".[57] And in an interview in September of the same year for the French magazine *L'Illustration*, the Duce declared that "Georges Sorel has been my master. I judge, like him, that at a given moment violence is necessary. Violence is moral. However, it must not go beyond a certain measure".[58]

Of course, Sorel had had a reception on the right since 1910, after his short-lived association with the *Action Française*. Beyond the *Cercle Proudhon*, the literary critic René Johannet (1884-1972), also close to the Maurrassians, had written about him in 1914. "The Sorelian hero" he admonished "does not reside only in the people. He is wherever there is no cowardice, that is to say on all mountain tops and in every avant-garde. The *Action Française* did not get it wrong".[59] Despite this, by the time of his death, the royalists were not close to Sorel. In his obituary in the *Action Française,* while praising him for his anti-democratic stance, he was accused of having "lapsed into Bolshevism to the point of publishing a 'Defence of Lenin' just

[54] Ludovic Nadeau, "Les formes de l'autorité – trois régimes", *L'Illustration* no. 4232, 12 April 1924, 321.
[55] Ludovic Nadeau, "L'Italie Nouvelle (Part 4)", *L'Illustration* no. 4532, 31 July 1926, 102.
[56] On the creation of a nationalist subconscious amongst Italian revolutionary syndicalists see Willy Gianinazzi, *Intellettuali in Bilico. "Pagine Libere" e i Sindacalisti Rivoluzionari Prima Del Fascismo* (Unicopli, 1996). On syndicalism and fascism see David D. Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1979) as well as Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton University Press, 1996), especially 1–89. On the question of Mussolini and syndicalism, see Marco Gervasoni, "Mussolini: Un Sindacalista Rivoluzionario?", in Emilio Gentile and Spencer Di Scala (eds), *Mussolini Socialista* (Laterza, 2015), 73–98.
[57] Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini [1932], "Fascismo", in Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, vol. 14, available at https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fascismo_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/ , last accessed 17 September 2025.
[58] Émile Schreiber, "Entretien Avec Mussolini", *L'Illustration* no. 4672, 17 September 1932, 82.
[59] Johannet, "L'évolution de Georges Sorel", 215.

when developments made it impossible, if not ridiculous".[60] And yet, from the second half of the '20s, the reception on the right would be revived. It is in this context that, in 1935, Jean Variot (1881-1962) published his *Propos de Georges Sorel*, a book of memories about the syndicalist theorist. It is in this book that we find the only alleged opinion of Sorel on Mussolini. According to Variot, Sorel praised Mussolini for having "never believed in parliamentary socialism", before continuing thus: "he has an amazing understanding of the Italian mass and he has invented something which is not in my books: the union of the national and the social, a question which I have studied but never in any depth".[61] It is, however, legitimate to have doubts on the reliability of Variot, who was, with the help of his notes, publishing conversations that had occurred around 25 years earlier. In his preface to the book, Variot himself pleaded the "indulgence" of the reader who legitimately doubts the "authenticity" of these conversations.[62]

Thus, as we see, there was a substantial amount of work, on the fascist right, to reclaim Sorel during the interwar. This work was unmatched on the left. With the exception of Spain, the relevance of Sorel on the left faded during the period, mirroring the gradual demise of syndicalism.[63] It was, instead, liberals, democrats, and progressives who developed an analysis not completely unlike that of the fascist right. In 1927, Daniel Halévy, who at this point was an increasingly right-leaning republican, is in print describing Sorel as "the man who provided Lenin and Mussolini with ideas".[64] In 1936, the sociologist Marcel Mauss would write to fellow republican Elie Halévy (Daniel's brother) that the "doctrine of the [active] minority, doctrine of violence, and even corporatism have spread, under my eyes, from Sorel to Lenin and Mussolini".[65] Republican intellectuals such as Mauss or Elie Halévy had had a complex relationship with Sorel. On the one hand, they had welcomed him in institutions such as the *Société Française de Philosolphie* and published his work in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (*RMM*). On the other, they could not tolerate what they saw as his unhinged attacks on parliamentary democracy and on the Republic that Sorel became famous for after 1908. When he died, the *RMM* venomously closed his obituary describing Sorel as "an irate old man [who] looked, to the extreme right as well as to the extreme left, for all the means, even the most desperate, to end a degraded civilisation. He died, solitary and poor, as he had always lived".[66]

An interesting, and relatively early case of liberal analysis of Sorel as the father of totalitarianism comes from Pierre Lasserre in the mid '20s. By this time, Lasserre had long cut ties with the *Action Française*, has settled in an academic career, and had turned to liberalism in his politics. In the academic year 1926-1927, he gave a course on Sorel at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, and the next year he published his *Georges Sorel – théoricien de l'impérialisme*.[67] In the context of the beginning of scholarly work on Sorel, Lasserre's book placed Sorel between Nietzsche and Marx.[68] It argued that Sorel was influenced by both, and that the will to power and the class struggle merged in the syndicalist's thought: "he followed

[60] "Mort de Georges Sorel", *L'Action Française*, 31 August 1922, 2.
[61] Jean Variot, *Propos de Georges Sorel. Recueillis Par Jean Variot* (Gallimard, 1935), 56.
[62] Ibid., 7.
[63] See the chapter by Arturo Rodriguez in this volume.
[64] Jerome Taraud and Jean Taraud, *Pour Les Fidèles de Péguy* (L'Artisan du Livre, 1927), 35.
[65] Marcel Mauss to Elie Halévy, November 1936, in Elie Halévy, *L'Ère des Tyrannies* (Gallimard, 1938), 230.
[66] "Nécrologie - Georges Sorel (1847-1922)", *Supplement de La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 29 (October-December 1922): 2.
[67] "Histoire Sociale Des Doctrines Philosophiques", *Annuaires de l'École Pratique Des Hautes Études* (1927): 44-5; Pierre Lasserre, *Georges Sorel, Théoricien de l'impérialisme. Ses Idées, Son Action.* (L'Artisan du Livre, 1928).
[68] For another scholarly work on Sorel of the period see the economist Gaétan Pirou's *Georges Sorel (1847-1922)* (Marcel Rivière, 1927).

Marx and Nietzsche at the same time, and found between them… at least a negative conciliation".[69] By the end of the book, Lasserre left the scientific tone to speak with a more political voice. Examining Sorel's attacks on liberalism, he conceded that, at times, liberalism "deserves these insults", which however only apply to a liberalism "that has degenerated". [70] True liberalism, however, is far from spent. Separating "political" from "intellectual" liberalism, Lasserre argued that while the former is the "business of any nation", the latter "concerns humankind, in that it contributes to its highest development".[71] Against the criticisms of the various Marx, Nietzsche, and Sorel, true liberalism for Lasserre represented "a toil and a perpetual quest of the human spirit to make the civilisation of today flow, from all sources, into that of tomorrow" and was animated by an imperative "to enhance and raise Man".[72]

By the second half of the 1930s, the situation was the following. On the left, Sorel had largely faded from relevance. He was still read by fascists and liberals, two groups who, to an extent, shared a common reflection on him. For both, he was the pioneer of the new, post-democratic politics of the '20s and '30s. They held, to be sure, opposite judgements. For fascists, Sorel was a noble precursor of their movement, while for liberals like Elie Halévy he was the forerunner of an authoritarian tragedy. And yet, before the Second World War, both saw in Sorel the inspiration for fascist and communist movements of the period.

With these premises, it should not surprise us too much to see Sorel play a minor role in the first historical literature dedicated to the interwar period. Often written during World War II, this literature made some space to highlight Sorel's contribution to the rise of fascism and totalitarianism. Thus, Franz Neumann (1900-1954), in his 1942 *Behemoth*, pointed to Sorel, together with Corradini, as two progenitors of the "marriage of nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism".[73] In the association with authoritarian regimes, the image of Sorel came out slightly distorted. It is in this period that an interpretation of myth in particular, and of Sorelianism in general, as cynical political manipulation emerged. In his *Dual State,* Ernst Fraenkel (1898-1975) called him an advocate of "movement for its own sake", condemned to see political agency as "nothing more than acquiescence in the laws of social development".[74] In his 1944 *Roads to Serfdom,* Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) explicitly connected the Sorelian theory of myths to both ancient examples and current totalitarian practice:

> "The need for such official doctrines as an instrument of directing and rallying the efforts of the people has been clearly foreseen by the various theoreticians of the totalitarian system. Plato's 'noble lies' and Sorel's 'myths' serve the same purpose as the racial doctrine of the Nazis or the theory of the corporative state of Mussolini".[75]

During the interwar, thus, a new image of Sorel emerged, that of the precursor of anti-democratic regimes, more of the right than of the left. To the two previously available personas – the ardent revolutionary and the prophet of collapse – a third one was added from the mid-twenties onwards, that of Sorel as the theorist of mass political manipulation and the sinister anticipator of totalitarianism. The incoherence of this overall portrait – who would have Sorel

[69] Lasserre, *Georges Sorel*, 30.
[70] Ibid., 263.
[71] Ibid., 258.
[72] Ibid., 264.
[73] Franz Neumann [1942], *Behemoth. The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933-1944*, 2nd ed. (Harper & Row, 1966), 194.
[74] Ernst Fraenkel [1941], *The Dual State. A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship*, trans. Edward Shils (Octagon Books, 1969), 130.
[75] Friedrich Hayek [1944], *The Road to Serfdom* (Routledge, 2001), 161.

at the same time revolutionary, romantic conservative, and totalitarian – was resolved only in the second post-war.

4. The enemy of free society (1945-1989)

> "…*Reflections on Violence* discloses a morally and politically pernicious standpoint... Its republication in America… will have its justification if it makes us more aware of the many ways in which the present political attitudes and actions of those who place themselves on the side of the free society are corrupted by the apocalyptic view of history and society."
>
> *Edward A. Shils,* 1950.[76]

A Sorel who is at the same time a "professor of Youth" announcing an irrevocable future, an "irate old man" longing for civilizational collapse, and the theorist of mass authoritarian control may not be fully credible, but he does reflect the main collective experiences, as well as the concerns and projections, of European intellectuals from the 1890s to the 1940s. There is, of course, a unifying element to these three personas: opposition to liberal civilisation. During the *belle époque*, younger intellectuals tired with the bourgeois 19th century had seen the possibility of something different in Sorel. In the early interwar, a traumatized Europe had been drawn to Sorel as the figure who had prophesized its own collapse. And when concrete alternatives to liberal parliamentarism had emerged, Sorel had been associated with them. What we see in the period after 1945 is the unification of these three different personas under the shared rubric of anti-liberalism and opposition to democracy. As the period of history in which Sorel operated receded in the past, and Europe entered a new era, the various sediments from the first half of the 20th century could finally be synthesized to craft a coherent portrait of Sorel. This portrait, in turn, required a broader narrative of early 20th century European history as a struggle between liberal civilisation and its foes in order to make sense. To a substantial extent, the early 20th century debates about the limits and configurations of parliamentarism which had been essential to the development of Sorel's thought had been flattened onto this dichotomy.

It is at this point that geography and space become of some relevance to our analysis. The conditions for the achievement of this synthesis were very different in Europe and in the USA, even factoring in the large intellectual emigration from Europe to America. Whereas in the USA this synthesis was possible from the perspective of a victorious liberalism, things were more complex in Europe. The critique of bourgeois society and parliamentary politics had been European inventions, as had been the regimes that provided alternatives to the dreaded liberalism. Throughout the interwar, Sorel had been read mostly by those who shared these critiques and who sympathized with these regimes. Most of the intellectuals who, in the late '40s, still read and wanted to do something political with Sorel had been, if not outrightly compromised with defeated fascist regimes, at least associated with that form of right-wing critique of democracy. And so, we get two different shades of this synthesis. In Europe, Sorel was cast as a perceptive critic of liberal-democratic civilisation, illegitimately appropriated by fascists and communists who did not fully understand him. In the USA, he became what he has remained since: the other of liberalism, the paradigmatic example of all that can go wrong once one trespasses the limits of liberal politics.

[76] Edward A. Shils, "Georges Sorel: Introduction to the American Edition", in *Reflections on Violence* (Dover Publications, 1950), 25.

Right-leaning Sorelians in Europe tended to downplay, or at least recast, the association with totalitarianism while still presenting, in a muted tone, Sorel's objections to democratic modernity as the main point of interest. Beyond these objections, what is salient in these portraits is a recurring insistence on Sorel's intellectual and personal autonomy, making any appropriation of his thought, especially totalitarian ones, appear like something he would have disapproved of. In December 1947, for example, we find Daniel Halévy writing and giving conferences about Sorel in Switzerland. In the *Gazette De Lausanne*, he presented Sorel as an enemy of "bourgeois-parliamentary civilization" endowed with a brilliant, Socratic mind, but at the same time "individualist and irreducible", i.e. provided with intellectual autonomy and allergic to schools of thought.[77] The support for the Soviet Union is mentioned, but Sorel is excused as "he had no idea that from the sacrifice of these martyrs a new Mongol military empire would arise".[78] Continuing in the direction of anti-communism, in Geneva Halévy spoke of a French, non-communist, tradition of socialism, represented by Proudhon, Péguy, and, of course, Sorel, described in a review of the conference as a man "ill at ease with the rationalist optimism of his time".[79]

A week later, in the *Journal de Genève*, Halévy would first tell an anecdote about the Soviet and Italian ambassadors offering to finance renovations of Sorel's tomb in 1932.[80] This anecdote would travel through the decades and become an important note of colour of the Sorelian legend.[81] Halévy would expand on it in 1953, in his preface to the first biography of Sorel in Europe, Pierre Andreu's *Notre maître, M. Sorel.* Though retelling a story that creates a connection between Sorel and both fascism and Soviet communism, Halévy presents it as a misunderstanding or even a betrayal, on behalf of the ambassadors, of the anarchic and rebellious spirit of Sorelianism. He underlines with some insistence the hostility towards the initiative coming from the inner circle of Sorel's friends, quoting himself responding to the intermediary that "if there were something to do, we would take care of it, not Rome or Moscow", and portrays the family's refusal to go ahead with the renovations as something that Sorel, in virtue of his autonomy, would have approved of.[82]

The text illustrates well the difficulties of a right-wing historicization of Sorel in the Europe of the 1950s, torn between the desire to underline Sorel's influence as a critic of liberalism and the obligation of distancing him from the defeated regimes of the interwar.[83] The balance is reached by insisting on the autonomy and idiosyncratic nature of Sorel – Halévy describes him as a "enigma of the 20th century" as Proudhon had been for the 19th – and by presenting an

[77] Daniel Halévy, "Le Socrate Du Quartier Latin", *Gazette de Lausanne*, 4 December 1947, 1.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Bg, "M. Daniel Halévy Parle de Proudhon et Sorel", *Journal de Genève*, 6 December 1947, 6.
[80] Daniel Halévy, "Georges Sorel, Mussolini et Lénine", *Journal de Genève*, 13 December 1947, 3.
[81] The anecdote appears, credited to Halévy, in the first version of Isaiah Berlin's essay on Sorel and has, incredibly, been reprinted without any reference to Halévy as late as 2024, in the preface to a new Italian edition of the *Reflections*. See Isaiah Berlin, "Georges Sorel", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 31 December 1971, 1622; Fabio Martini, "Un Pensatore Tempestoso, i Suoi Lettori Italiani", in Georges Sorel, *Riflessioni Sulla Violenza*, trans. Roberto Vivarelli (Castelvecchi, 2024), 18.
[82] Daniel Halévy, "Préface", in Pierre Andreu, *Notre Maître, M. Sorel* (Bernard Grasset, 1953), 20.
[83] In the case of Halévy, who was 73 at the end of World War Two, there is something else, almost an unwillingness to move forward in history. From this perspective, Halévy protects the memory of Sorel as a mere testimony of another time, rather than historicizing it or putting it in the service of a forwards-looking political project. A few months after the tour of Switzerland, Halévy would publish his *Essay on the acceleration of history*, whose last chapter articulates, with a hint of autobiographical reflection, the almost tragic incapacity of contemporary humans to orient themselves in history after the Second World War. I owe this point to Eric Brandom. See Daniel Halévy, *Essai sur l'acceleration de l'histoire* (Éditions Self, 1948).

ambiguous view of his relationship to the anti-democratic regimes of the recent past.[84] Was Sorel their anticipator and inspirer? While conceding that "Rome and Moscow… had crushed those bourgeois liberal societies that Sorel had denounced", Halévy leaves the question of whether Sorel would have approved of those regimes a "fully open" one.[85] Similar considerations apply to Pierre Andreu (1909-1987). Younger than Halévy, though politically similar if not even more to the right, Andreu has an important place in the European reception of Sorel in virtue of the abovementioned book.[86] Though mostly a scholarly work, the book is still marked by a precise perspective linked to Andreu's biography. An unmistakeably political voice, similar to Halévy's, emerges on many occasions. The conclusion is worth quoting in full:

> "The example of Sorel, stubborn searcher for truth, is one of the highest that life and philosophy can offer to us. He sacrificed everything to his work and his research: first, bourgeois honours and security, then, revolutionary security. Despising schools and parties, he always fought as an independent lone combatant [franc-tireur indépendant]. His ambition was to awaken vocations, to rekindle the flame that slumbers in each of us. Stimulating the spirit of invention, awakening vocations, can seem like secondary needs to professional politicians, bankers, and clowns. Not to Sorel. And not to us. May we, always faithful to the best in his legacy, continue to prevent intelligence from fading from the world."[87]

In the reference to the importance of "awakening vocations", it is impossible not to recognize not only the references to the "Letter to Daniel Halévy", but also a striking similarity with Prezzolini's picture from 1909, where Sorel is shown as an intellectual adventurer rather than a systematic thinker, the only difference being that here this is presented more positively. Parallel to this ode to Sorel's intellectual autonomy, silently distancing him from Bolshevik and fascist appropriations, we have the muted but unmistakable critique of democratic society in the reference to "professional politicians, bankers, and clowns". What Andreu is suggesting here is that Sorel's real legacy consists in giving us a way out of the superficiality and stupidity of democratic society. In the aftermath of its near total defeat in 1945, all that the anti-democratic right could offer to the general public were subtleties of this kind. Anything more explicitly political would have been too much.

What we see at work in these interpretations is the attempt to preserve the kernel of anti-liberalism while at the same time distancing Sorel from the regimes that had emerged from this kernel. The considerable political difficulty of this operation, especially in the years following the defeat of the Axis powers, should be self-evident, and it is no surprise that these readings were ultimately mostly inconsequential. As suggested above, it is not even clear that we are even dealing with a political operation, i.e. with an attempt to revive, through a reading of Sorel, a critique of democratic society. At least in the case of Halévy, there is an aspect of pure testimony of the past.[88]

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[84] Halévy, "Préface", 18.
[85] Ibid.
[86] For Andreu's fascist militance in the interwar period, see Jacques Julliard, "Pierre Andreu", *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 5 (1987): 217.
[87] Andreu, *Notre maître*, 312.
[88] For an examination of temporal politics in *belle époque* France that includes discussions of Halévy see Alexandra Paulin-Booth, *Time and radical politics in France. From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (Manchester University Press, 2023).

A much more influential reading, because inscribed in a forwards-looking political project, was the one developed in the same years by some – again, not all – American intellectuals. In terms of content, it was not too dissimilar to Halévy's and Andreu's takes, as both found the essence of the Sorelian project to be opposition to democracy. The judgement and perspective, however, were opposite: following some of the early scholars of totalitarianism mentioned in the previous section, Americans saw Sorel as a precursor of the tragedies of the 20th century, and an example that beyond liberal-democracy lay only totalitarianism and war.[89] In the context of the early Cold War, Sorel, with his antidemocratic tones, his socialist language of revolution and his associations with Mussolini and Lenin, provided the perfect antithesis to everything that the victorious American superpower stood for.

The first American edition of the *Reflections* after the Second World War was published in 1950. In the introduction, Edward A. Shils outlined the first version of the reading of Sorel which is still dominant. What marked Sorel's outlook most profoundly, for Shils, was something he called the "separatist and apocalyptic" stances, marked by expectations of total transformation of society and by the refusal of any kind of reformism or compromise.[90] According to Shils, these stances are not merely tactical, but intrinsically valuable: Sorel saw "political separatism as the morally most appropriate form of social and political organization".[91] What Shils resuscitates here, as should be clear, is the *belle époque* image of Sorel as the announcer of a total transformation, the only difference with the avant-gardists of the beginning of the century being that this is presented not in a hopeful tone but as the mark of fanaticism: "Sorel's ethic is the ethic of the political sect living in the midst of a continuous crisis, with all the stress on purity and all the fear of contamination by the affairs of the world which mark the sect".[92]

Though nowadays shorn of Sorel's heroic morality, this "apocalyptic outsider's view of politics" has not disappeared for Shils.[93] Linked to "a set of moral postulates which are incompatible with a free and orderly society", it represents a present danger, being "more widespread now than ever before… in present-day official Communism, and in all of its variously controlled manifestations". [94] Conscious of the difficulty of pinning an image of frenzied messianism on post-war Stalinism, Shils shifts in his portrayal of Sorel to another interwar trope, that of the theorist of totalitarianism. Beyond being "a stern socialist moralist and an apocalyptic seer", Sorel is also part of "a group of political analysts whose realistic insight… has been thought by the easily disillusioned to demonstrate the impossibility of political democracy."[95] Linking him to Pareto and Michels, Shils presents Sorel' view of society as composed of a largely passive mass, requiring to be stirred into action by a conscious minority. Here lies the connection with communism: "Lenin… also saw society through these same three categories: a decadent elite, maintaining itself by coercion and fraud; the mass of ordinary wayward human beings interested in small, matter-of-fact benefits; and the

[89] Both Neumann and Fraenkel were émigrés to America, via the United Kingdom. For an article exploring in greater depth the American reception of Sorel, with greater insistence on the role of German intellectuals than has been possible in this chapter, see Eric Brandom, "Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism, and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock.", *History of Political Thought* 38, no. 4 (2017): 733–63.
[90] Shils, "Georges Sorel: Introduction to the American edition", 13.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., 15
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 16.

professional sectarian revolutionaries".[96] For Shils, what neither Sorel nor Lenin understand is the essence of the free society: "the zone of social life which exists between the extremes of coercion and manipulation on the one side, and the revolutionary conspiracy on the other".[97]

But Sorel is no mere Leninist for Shils. His attack on aspects of bourgeois civilisation such as its individualism and licentiousness, his critique of the culture of the 18th century *philosophes*, drawing from figures ranging from Tocqueville to Le Play, align him with another tradition of resistance to liberalism, that of the conservative or reactionary right. Hence appears the synthesis of right and left united in their onslaughts against the free society: "The Marxist critique, on its negative side, was compatible with these anti-liberal and conservative criticisms of bourgeois society and for Sorel formed a single entity".[98] Sorel's few months collaborating with loosely monarchist publications, clearly, are no accident from this perspective, no mere biographical detail but, instead, a significant event in the history of political ideas: they "revealed for the first time in the history of modern socialism, the large identities of these two major political movements which had been and unfortunately, still are thought to represent the two opposite ends of the political spectrum".[99] This early version of the horseshoe theory is what explains the last 50 years of European political history for Shils. The interwar emergence of fascist and communist regimes proves the importance of a figure like Sorel to understanding this history:

> "Both Fascism and Communism were separatists [i.e. preaching separation from mainstream society], they both believed in the need for internal purification and in the unreedemability of the outer world by the use of reason or through gradual modification. Both believed it could be saved only by conversion or conquest; both believed in the violent refusal to compromise and in the violent disruption of the institutions of compromise; both expected a total apocalyptic transformation and both proclaimed the guidance or manipulation of this transformation by an élite of consecrated warriors bound together in tense solidarity."[100]

Though drawing on certain aspects of the *Reflections*, this Sorelian-infused portrait of fascism and communism also draws on the interpretative tradition outlined in this chapter: it combines the messianic Sorel of the *belle époque* with the wrathful prophet of the early 20s, adding the manipulative and propaganda elements of the Sorel of the '30s at the end. As stated above, and as will be articulated in greater detail in the conclusion, there are strong historical reasons for the development of this interpretation in the USA in the immediate post-war. Though an element of Cold War anti-communism is present – and it partly explains the otherwise shaky lumping together of Sorel and Lenin – it would be a mistake to ground this interpretation in the narrow context of McCarthyism. The historical conditions for its development extend far beyond Cold War history to a broader process of historicization of the 20th century as the century in which the liberal democratic political form, through trials, tribulations, and struggles, ultimately emerged victorious. In 1950, no country could embrace this narrative of democratic

[96] Ibid., p 17-18. It is important to stress the difference between a Bolshevik avant-garde and a Sorelian élite. The idea of a class of people endowed with superior historical insight in virtue of their Marxist science of history is alien to the core of Sorel's reading of Marxism, as well as running counter his deepest political instincts. Revolutionary elites, for Sorel, emerge from the process of proletarian self-creation as an historical subject: they are fully proletarian and can only arise inside fully proletarian institutions. For an examination of Sorelian elitism along these lines, see Willy Gianinazzi, *Sorel, philosophe de l'autonomie,* 77-82.
[97] Shils, "Georges Sorel: Introduction to the American edition", 18.
[98] Ibid., 20.
[99] Ibid., 22.
[100] Ibid., 23.

triumph as convincingly as America. It is in the framework of this vision of the 20th century that the synthesis of the various interwar personas of Sorel was achieved and made coherent.

The power not only of this *Zeitgeist* of democratic triumph, but more widely of this historicization of the 20th century explains the strength, versatility, and, ultimately, the resilience up to the present of this interpretation of Sorel. When, in 1951, two books which challenged this interpretation came out, they failed to make a significant dent. [101] Together, these works emphasized Sorel's "liberal", anti-statist stance, problematized the "irrationalism" of his philosophical approach and even developed for the first time the crucial distinction between Sorel and Sorelianism. And yet, they were read within the bounds of the interpretation developed throughout the interwar and perfected by Shils. In a review of the first of these books, Sorel's project is described as a search for "indemonstrable values" which cannot yield much beyond making one appreciate "the value of conflict as an end in itself".[102] In a slightly surreal review of the second book, the reviewer concedes virtually every point developed by Meisel, only to conclude that Sorel's stance remains "revolutionary, increasingly authoritarian, and irrationalist".[103]

As new enemies of the "free society" emerged, the versatility of this interpretation was proven. In 1961 Irving Louis Horowitz produced another book on Sorel emphasizing the connection between an irrationalist philosophy and a political radicalism for its own sake. Sorel's thought, in this view is an "antiseptic to the infections caused by our inherited rational middle class civilization, but it is no less a poison which cures the infection by destroying the patient – civilization itself".[104] If in 1950 Shils had clearly in mind communism, and his preface was an attempt to link it to right wing contestations of democracy, Horowitz deployed a similar reading of Sorel to counter a different enemy, the student radicalism of the 1960s. In the 1968 preface of the second edition of the book, he draws a parallel between the two that closely resembles the structure of Shils' argument for the contemporary relevance of Sorelianism. In their insistence of the supremacy of will over "those objective forces that may exist in the world", in their "fanatical attempt to impose a new social order upon the world", as well as in their conviction that "therapy is more important than victory", Sorelianism and the New Left of the 1960s are at one.[105] Fascism and leftism are, once more, lumped together in a common opposition to the civilisation first developed in the French Third Republic and now embodied in the institutions of American democracy:

> "Fascism returns [sic] in the United States not as a right-wing ideology, but almost as a quasi-leftist ideology, an ironic outcome that Sorel anticipated in his own writings when he celebrated Mussolini and Lenin as if they were really two peas in one pod. A curious and bitter irony is that… the ideology of the Left and Right have partially coalesced into a general assault on the present moment in history. Activism itself has become a style which is ironically neutral and employable by Left and Right…. That the Left has partaken of this bitter feast is only a reflection of the

[101] Humphrey, *Georges Sorel: Prophet Without Honor* and Meisel, *The Genesis of Georges Sorel*.
[102] Arnaud B. Leavelle, "Georges Sorel, Prophet without Honor - The Genesis of Georges Sorel", *American Political Science Review* 47, no. 2 (June 1953): 545.
[103] Scott H. Lytle, "The Genesis of Georges Sorel by James H. Meisel", *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (March 1952): 153.
[104] Irving Louis Horowitz [1961], *Radicalism and the Revolt against Reason. The Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (Routledge, 2009), 195.
[105] Irving Louis Horowitz [1968], "Radicalism and the Revolt against Reason Then and Now", in ibid., p xix and xxii.

larger failure of American political culture to make a convincing case in the cynical world we inhabit."[106]

5. Conclusion. The intellectual history of liberal-democratic modernity

Many tropes make up the dominant interpretation of Sorel: a distrust for reason, a desire for a total regeneration of society coupled with a lust for the full destruction of the existing order, a fetish for conflict and violence seen as worthy in themselves rather than as part of a political strategy, and a tendency for totalitarian manipulation of the masses. What this chapter has shown is that these elements were developed in the *belle époque* and, to a greater extent, in the interwar. Much more than Sorel's concerns, they reflect the preoccupations, perspectives, and experiences of different generations of readers of Sorel. I have also shown that it was only after the Second World War that this interpretation started to coalesce and become historiographically significant. The reason for this is that only then it became possible to unite the historical experiences that had given rise to those different readings into a linear narrative concerning the trials of democracy in the 20th century. Of course, a relation to what, for lack of better words, we can call liberal civilisation was already present, implicitly or explicitly, in the readers of Sorel we have examined. But only after 1945 it was possible to connect the restlessness of *belle époque* avant-gardes to the sense of civilizational failure of the early 20s and to the anti-democratic regimes of the 1930s as episodes of a same historical sequence. Before 1945, very simply, the period did not exist: only after the defeat of fascism in the war it was possible to begin its historicization.

As stated in the previous section, the power of this interpretation far exceeds the context in which it was first synthesized, the American 1950s. Even though elements of the readings of Shils or Horowitz may seem to fit into the emerging category of "Cold War liberalism" – especially in their association of political transformation with frenzied messianism and in their constant reminder of the presence of a totalitarian threat – it would be a grave mistake to reduce this interpretation to a Cold War variant of liberalism for which "belief in an emancipated life was proto-totalitarian".[107] As we have shown, it was only the synthesis that occurred in the Cold War. The elements synthesized were developed during the *belle époque* and in the interwar period. Thus, insofar as this reading of Sorel can be said to participate in Cold War liberalism, it shows the limitations of the chronology implicit in such a category.[108] The dominant interpretation was, indeed, synthesized in the context of a transformation of liberalism, but one that embraced the entire first half of the 20th century rather than merely bursting into the scene during the Cold War. It cannot be explained solely in terms of the ideological necessities of an American superpower suddenly endowed of the role of defender of the free world. It relies on something which runs much deeper in the historical consciousness of Europe and America.

What unites the different readings of Sorel examined in this chapter is, I suggested, a relation to, in a narrow sense, the democratic and parliamentary political form, and in a wider sense to an entire civilisation – grounded in principles of freedom, rational discussion, and popular

[106] Ibid., p xxx-xxxi. Again, for a more developed treatment of Sorel's American reception and of the connection with the concerns raised by the student radicalism of the 1960s, see Brandom, "Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism, and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock."

[107] Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself. Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (Yale University Press, 2023), p 3–4.

[108] In other words, it shows the inadequacy of the categorization of a liberalism which may have emerged in the Cold War, but which brought with it the experience of the entire first half of the 20th century, and which thus requires an examination of the experiences and concerns of the entire 1890-1945 period in order to be understood.

sovereignty – emerging from the revolution of 1789 and gradually affirming itself over most of the European continent throughout the 19th century. The readings of Sorel examined here are, in an important sense, readings of the story of this civilisation in which the French syndicalist plays the role of outsider, alternative, other of liberalism. More precisely, they are articulations of a crisis of this civilizational project and, in that respect, they rely on a reading of the 20th century as the period in which the expectations of the 19th century were crushed.

The strength and resilience of these readings of Sorel, thus, rests on a view of the 20th century which is both deeper and broader, as the century of two world wars, of the Holocaust and of the Gulag, a century in which the promises of liberal modernity had to be reassessed, re-examined, and could not be taken for granted anymore. As Charles Maier argued, "whereas the nineteenth century served as the tablet on which historians… inscribed stories of progress, the twentieth century story emphasizes narratives of moral atrocity or moral struggle".[109] Only in the framework of this historicization does the dominant interpretation make sense. Despite its many shortcomings and anachronisms, it offers an answer to the question of Sorel's role in the European 20th century. This role is that of the other of liberalism, but it is also the role of the precursor of the tragedies of the 20th century – hence the recurring use of the term "prophet", a term whose meaning in Sorelian scholarship is not that of a person inspired by God, but of a forecaster, of one who sees and anticipates the future.

So deep this view of the past century runs in our historical consciousness that, to paraphrase Nietzsche, it exerts a retroactive force, and for its sake all of history is placed in the balance again.[110] If we look at two of the most accomplished historians who have worked on Sorel in the 20th century – Isaiah Berlin and Zeev Sternhell – we see that both place him in a narrative about not just the horrors of the European 20th century, but of European modernity *tout court*. There can be little doubt that the point of departure for both Berlin and Sternhell – Jewish intellectuals from central and eastern Europe – were the events of the first half of the 20th century. Bolshevism in the case of Berlin and fascism in the case of Sternhell, uprooted and remade the lives of these two figures. Both historians' trajectory is marked by an investigation of the two central cultures of European modernity, labelled Enlightenment and Romanticism by Berlin, and Enlightenment and Anti-Enlightenment by Sternhell. Even though they are opposite in their evaluation of the merits and dangers of these traditions, both read Sorel through the lenses of their broader histories of European modernity. For Berlin, Sorel is part of the romantic tradition and the portrait offered is, despite a number of critical remarks, ultimately positive. Sorel's credo that "man is a creator" is presented as a liberating vindication of human agency against the deadening and ultimately totalitarian rationalism of the Enlightenment.[111] For Sternhell, Sorel's insistence upon will places him, instead, at the heart of the "second modernity" of the Anti-Enlightenment, a tradition ultimately responsible for fascism and for the tragedies of the 20th century.[112] This is not the place to explore the parallels between Sternhell's and Berlin's historical visions and their relationship to the 20th century. It is only necessary to point out how their readings of Sorel rely on broader narratives of European modernity.

[109] Charles Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era", *American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (2000): 826.
[110] Nietzsche, "Historia abscondita", *The Gay Science*, § 34 in Nietzsche, *Gay Science,* 104.
[111] Isaiah Berlin [1978], "Georges Sorel", in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 2001), 298.
[112] Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

Taken in its narrower form, not as the story of European modernity, but merely as that of the tragic 20th century, the inadequacy of this periodization for understanding Sorel – who died in 1922, at the dawn of the "Age of Extremes" – is self-evident. It is obvious that he requires a longer 20th century, in which the period of his most intense activity, between 1890 and 1914, is seen on its own terms rather than through the distorting lenses of later developments. To read this work from the point of view of his younger readers generates anachronisms and misunderstandings, for the concerns that occasioned it are different from those that determined its subsequent reception. Even Sorel's critique of democracy and parliamentarism, a central element of his reception, appears distorted when read in this way: the anti-statist insistence on self-government which originally animated it was lost in the interwar, as the political space for such visions, whether syndicalist or liberal, shrunk. Thus the critique was resignified, as we have seen, in terms of an opposition between democracy and totalitarianism which was absent in the *belle époque*. And yet, despite its anachronistic overreliance on specific interwar readings of Sorel, the prevailing interpretation continues in its dominance for a simple reason: it historicizes Sorel within one of the most central paradigms we have to deal with this period, that of the short and tragic 20th century. No amount of contextual precision can overturn this, and a reading of Sorel capable of displacing the dominant interpretation will require a different historicization of the past century. In the absence of this, this chapter has hopefully shown not only that this interpretation is an invention of the interwar, but also that when it is mobilized, it is less to speak about Sorel and more to say something about the history of liberalism and democracy in the 20th century.

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Between Bakunin and Lenin: Georges Sorel and the Spanish communist-syndicalists, 1921-24

by Arturo Zoffmann Rodriguez
NOVA University, Lisbon

Revolutionary syndicalism emerged as a powerful trade union movement in Europe and the Americas in the years leading up to the First World War. Connected to new trade union movements such as the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI), the American Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and, most importantly, the French General Confederation of Labour (CGT), syndicalism preconized direct action, federalism, autonomy, and workers' unity. It singled out the trade unions as the building blocks of the classless, stateless society of the future and rejected political parties. Anti-capitalist theoreticians such as Hubert Lagardelle, Ferdinand Pelloutier, Émile Pouget, Christiaan Cornelissen, and, indeed, Georges Sorel, helped develop this new doctrine. They drew their cues from previous revolutionary traditions such as anarchism and Marxism.[1]

Syndicalism became popular in Spain in the 1900-10s. However, the country's working-class organizations never canonized Sorel. Local socialists, syndicalists, and anarchists were familiar with his work, and at times he exerted some influence in trade union milieus. The peak of his popularity in the country coincided with the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The trade unions belonging to the National Confederation of Labour (CNT), inspired by syndicalist and anarchist ideas, and those of the General Union of Workers (UGT), linked to the Marxist leaders of the Socialist Party (PSOE) were at the forefront of the unprecedented agitations that rocked the country in 1917-23. The Russian Revolution helped radicalize social struggles and electrified Spanish labour activists. Ideological cross-fertilization and the quest for new ideas accompanied this wave of class conflict. In this context, heterodox thinkers such as Sorel found a new audience.

Sorel shaped the politics of the communist-syndicalist tendency, which crystallized in the early 1920s. It operated mostly in Catalonia, Valencia, and eastern Aragon.[2] This group attempted to syncretize Bolshevism with the libertarian traditions of the Catalan workers' movement. In 1921-22, this faction briefly acquired ascendancy in the CNT and attempted to integrate it into the Communist International and its trade union apparatus, the Moscow-based Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). In the eyes of these militants, Sorel's theories of collective violence, the myth of the revolutionary strike, and his explicit support for Soviet Russia could serve as a bridge between Bakunin and Lenin. They believed Sorel could draw Spanish anarchists and syndicalists towards communism. By 1924, the members of this faction had lost most of their influence in the CNT. They joined the Spanish Communist Party and provided it with its first stable (though small) Catalan contingent. Thus culminated their transition to Marxism.

This chapter claims that Sorel's ideas and political authority facilitated the gravitation of a segment of Spanish (and especially Catalan) syndicalism towards the communist movement at a time of ideological fluidity for the radical left internationally. Yet Sorel's influence was not

[1] Wayne Thorpe, *The workers themselves Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913-1923* (International Institute of Social History, 1989), 14-21.
[2] On the regional dimension of the group, see Ferran Aisa, *El laberint roig: Víctor Colomer i Joaquim Maurín mestres i revolucionaris* (Pagès, 2005), 44-65.

lasting or profound. Paradoxically, his significance for these Spanish militants derived from the porousness and eclecticism of his ideas. Sorel's theories were malleable enough to overcome the divide between Bakunin and Lenin and thus expedite the syndicalists' transition to communism. His theory of collective violence was given a Leninist reading and used to convince anarchists and syndicalists of the need for a proletarian dictatorship. In fact, as early as 1921, the leading lights of this faction, Hilario Arlandis, Jesús Ibáñez, Andreu Nin, and, especially, Joaquín Maurín, consciously, and at times somewhat cynically, utilized Sorel as a bait to woo CNT militants towards communism.

This group has attracted considerable historiographic attention.[3] Yet this literature has ignored crucial Comintern sources lodged at the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History.[4] Moreover, most historians have skimmed over the group's Sorelian ideology. This is due to the transience and perceived superficiality of their romance with Sorel in the years 1921-24. However, their Sorelian ideology was important for their transition to communism and should be assessed in its own right.[5] This chapter excavates the theories of this faction using a variety of sources, including their press organs, memoirs from the protagonists, Spanish police reports, and Comintern sources. It will focus on the instrumentality of his ideas in a given historical context rather than on his generic influence. Therefore, the chapter pays detailed attention to the political battles of the epoch.

1.Sorel in Spain

Georges Sorel played a secondary role in the intellectual history of the Spanish labour movement in the early twentieth century. Socialists, syndicalists, and anarchists occasionally discussed his work. Yet he always played second fiddle to other foreign theoreticians. He was overshadowed by contemporary thinkers such as Piotr Kropotkin, Sébastian Faure, Errico Malatesta, and Elisée Réclus (among anarchists and syndicalists), or Karl Kautsky, Otto Bauer, Jules Guesde, and Jean Jaurès (among socialists).

The Spanish socialists, who dominated the labour movement in central and northern Spain, espoused a moderate, institutionalist, and somewhat mechanistic form of Marxism that jarred with Sorel's radical and voluntarist reading of Marx. He stressed spontaneous action and mass violence and combatted the phlegmatic Marxism of mainstream Social Democracy. Moreover, the Spanish socialists competed with the CNT syndicalists and polemicized intensely with them. Sorel's adherence to revolutionary syndicalism undermined his appeal in the Socialist Party. His "anti-political" ideas, they feared, played into the hands of the CNT anarchists and syndicalists. His obituary in the PSOE press organ, *El Socialista*, had a negative ring and dismissed Sorel's ideas as "frankly anti-Marxist".[6]

Conversely, Sorel's Marxism, though highly heterodox, drew away potential followers among Spanish anarchists and syndicalists. On the eve of the First World War, in countries such as France, Italy, and the United States, syndicalism developed its own personality as a political

[3] Among others, see José Domingo Dueñas Lorente, *Costismo y anarquismo en las letras aragonesas : el grupo de Talión (Samblancat, Alaiz, Acín, Bel, Maurín)* (Astra, 2000); Aisa, *El laberint;* Andy Durgan, *Comunismo, revolución y movimiento obrero en Catalunya 1920-1936: Los orígenes del POUM* (Laertes, 2016); Yveline Riottot, *Joaquín Maurín : de l'anarcho-syndicalisme au communisme* (L'Harmattan, 1997); Pelai Pagès, *Andreu Nin, una vida al servicio de la clase obrera* (Laertes, 2011).

[4] I have discussed this historiography in detail in: Arturo Zoffmann Rodriguez, "Esdevenint comunistes de partit: el grup *La Batalla* i els orígens del PCE a Catalunya", *Segle XX: Revista Catalana d'Història* 13 (2020): 7-32.

[5] Durgan, *Comunismo*, 21-39.

[6] "Muerte de Jorge Sorel", *El Socialista*, 2 September 1922. Unless otherwise indicated, all translation from sources in languages other than English are the author's.

doctrine. In Spain, however, syndicalism had a strong anarchist colouring from the outset and never acquired much consistency as an independent ideology.[7] The term syndicalism was very popular in the late 1910s, but it referred to the militant tactics espoused by the CNT rather than to a finished revolutionary theory. Syndicalism offered a roadmap for combative trade union organization, but anarchism provided the movement's moral bearings, its interpretation of history and society, and its understanding of revolution and of what came afterwards. Anarchists maintained robust affinity groups that coexisted with the trade unions. The CNT was arguably anarcho-syndicalist *avant la lettre*.[8] Spanish *cenetistas* (CNT militants) tended to lean on the anarchist canon rather than seek new doctrines. Salvador Seguí, one of the most important leaders of the CNT in the 1910s, famously noted that syndicalism was the "arm" of the organization, anarchism its "brain".[9] A dissident *cenetista* that was critical of the anarchists commented in 1922:

> "In Spain, the anarchists know nothing more than a few bad translations of Kropotkin, Malato, etc., and half a dozen pamphlets. They hardly know Bakunin. Pelloutier is only starting to be discussed now - and rather superficially at that. There is a lot of talk about federalism, but who, in Spain, is familiar with Proudhon? And Georges Sorel? And Lagardelle, Labriola, and Berth, who has ever studied them?"[10]

Spanish anarchists displayed little interest for Sorel's crypto-Marxist syndicalism. His first translator in Spain was an anarchist intellectual, Soledad Gustavo. She translated his *L'avenir socialiste des syndicats* for a commercial press. She shared the book's critique of the "pernicious influence" of socialist politicians, but admitted that she was not in "absolute ideological agreement with the author".[11] Her posthumous analysis of Sorel criticized Sorel's attempt to establish "a non-anarchist syndicalism".[12] The aforementioned Seguí dismissively defined the French thinker as a "corporatist and [a] reformist".[13]

The rigidity of the ideological divides between socialism and anarchism in Spain prior to 1917 arguably help explain Sorel's limited following in the country. His eclecticism and his syncretism of Marxism and anarchism were at odds with the clear-cut identities of the two major factions in organized labour. As historian Gerald Meaker observed, prior to the emergence of the communist-syndicalist tendency in the early 1920s only a handful of trade union militants in Spain had ever engaged with Sorel's work.[14]

2.The three Bolshevik years

The First World War and the Russian Revolution shook the traditional political divides and identities of the Spanish labour movement. Although Spain remained neutral throughout the conflagration, the socialist and the anarchist/syndicalist movement became polarized over the

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[7] Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis* (Ashgate, 2008), 71-72.
[8] José Álvarez Junco, *La ideología política del anarquismo español (1886-1910)* (XXI, 1976), 547-73.
[9] Salvador Seguí [1920], "Anarquismo y sindicalismo", in Salvador Seguí, *Artículos madrileños de Salvador Seguí* (Edicusa, 1976), 182.
[10] Andrés Nin, "La orientación del sindicalismo", *Lucha Social*, 5 August 1922, 2.
[11] Soledad Gustavo, "Prólogo", in Georges Sorel, *El porvenir de los sindicatos obreros*, trans. Soledad Gustavo (Sempere, 1900).
[12] Soledad Gustavo, "Sindicalismo y anarquía", *La Revista Blanca*, 15 June 1923.
[13] Salvador Seguí [1916], "Lo que debe ser el sindicalismo", *Lucha Obrera*, 18 December 1923. This article was originally written in 1916.
[14] Gerald Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left in Spain: 1914-1923* (Stanford University Press, 1974), 389.

question of the war, as some prominent militants backed the Allies while others denounced the imperialist character of the conflict. There was a pan-European rapprochement between socialist and anarchist/syndicalist internationalists.[15]

In 1917, the Russian Revolution provided a powerful stimulus to social conflict across Europe, not least in Spain, where the economic fallout of the war generated mass discontent. The years 1917-20, known as the *trienio bolchevista* (the three Bolshevik years) saw episodes of intense social warfare, including an unprecedented upswing in strike activity and several general strikes, peasant rebellions, food riots, and a wave of political violence. Labour unions basked under the sun of social agitation. The CNT in particular emerged as a mass force, claiming almost 800,000 members in late 1919.[16] Their breakneck growth was connected to the radicalizing influence of the Russian Revolution.

Despite their libertarian background, most *cenetistas* expressed enthusiastic support for Soviet Russia – more vehemently, in fact, than the Spanish socialists. This was not simply thoughtless euphoria. In December 1919, the CNT provisionally affiliated with the Communist International. It sent two delegations to Moscow, in summer 1920 and 1921. Spanish anarchists and syndicalists revised their ideas under the light of the Russian Revolution. Some came to accept aspects of Bolshevik ideology, including the dictatorship of the proletariat and the notion of a revolutionary vanguard.[17]

Ideological revisionism was especially intense among newcomers to the CNT, who were not as steeped in anarchist ideas as the movement's old guard. Young syndicalists were locked in violent struggle with the bosses and the state at a time of intense repression. They thus proved hospitable to the intransigent methods of the Bolsheviks. Anarchist hardliner Gaston Leval retrospectively described the situation: "the CNT was dominated by the immediate class struggle […]. It did not occupy itself with questions of theory or doctrine, and this […] attenuated the critical awareness of the militant masses towards Bolshevism".[18] Moreover, Spanish state repression tended to target established leaders and activists. Indeed, the first CNT delegate to Moscow, Ángel Pestaña, a veteran syndicalist that was lukewarm towards the Russian Revolution, was arrested upon his return to Spain from Russia in November 1920. The arrest of veteran *cenetistas* facilitated the rapid rise of younger militants up the ranks of the organization.

3.Andreu Nin and Joaquín Maurín

In 1921, a new generation of radicals was propelled to the leadership of the CNT: Andreu Nin became national secretary, while Joaquín Maurín entered the regional committee of its Catalan section, the strongest in Spain. Both men were still in their twenties. In many ways, Nin and Maurín were outsiders in the syndicalist movement. They had only joined the CNT in 1919 and 1920 respectively. Previously, they had cut their teeth in the left republican and federalist movement. Nin had also been a member of the Socialist Party. They were eclectics who read the likes of Herbert Spencer, Henrik Ibsen, Friedrich Nietzsche, Francesc Pi i Margall, and

[15] Carlos Forcadell, *Parlamentarismo y bolchevización: el movimiento obrero español, 1914-1918* (Crítica, 1978).
[16] Antonio Bar, *La CNT en los años rojos: del sinidicalismo revolucionario al anarcosindicalismo, 1910-1926* (Akal, 1981), 341, 773.
[17] Arturo Zoffmann Rodriguez, "An Uncanny Honeymoon: Spanish Anarchism and the Bolshevik Dictatorship of the Proletariat, 1917-22", *International Labor and Working Class History* 94, (2018): 5-26.
[18] International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, Gaston Leval Papers, "Mémoires", Gaston Leval, 73.

Mikhail Bakunin.[19] Moreover, Nin and Maurín were intellectuals (teachers by training) in an overwhelmingly proletarian milieu. They represented the leftward turn of a layer of Spanish intellectuals that broke with the existing republican parties and gravitated towards the workers' movement. Nin and Maurín had not imbibed anarchist theory and had a penchant for French-style "pure" revolutionary syndicalism. In their eyes, syndicalism was superior to traditional Marxism and anarchism because it stressed direct action and revolutionary unity. "I", confessed Nin, "am a fanatic of action, of revolution; I believe more in action than in distant ideologies and abstract questions".[20]

The quest for new revolutionary theories drew Maurín towards Sorel. This was not the case with Nin, who was familiar with the French thinker but did not become his follower.[21] Maurín possibly came across Sorel's work during his activism in the republican movement.[22] Spanish republicanism was in relative decline in these years. Socialism and anarchism gradually displaced republicanism among the working class in the 1900s.[23] However, it remained a powerful force among the intelligentsia. Republicanism included a revolutionary wing with a porous ideology that at times blended into anarchism. One of Maurín's early ideological influences, republican firebrand Joaquín Costa, was also popular among anarchists. The Aragonese newspaper *El Talión*, where Maurín had been involved in his adolescence, straddled republicanism and anarchism.[24] The most sympathetic readers of Sorel in Spain were arguably republican intellectuals such as deputy Luis de Zulueta, who singled out the Frenchman as a "thinker of remarkable mental clarity".[25] The republicans' concern with the moral regeneration of Spain drew them close to Sorel's own quest for an antidote to the perceived moral decline of the bourgeoisie.

Maurín developed an interest for Marxism, but was put off by the perceived reformism of the Socialist Party. "Doctrinally, I was close to the socialists", he recalled, "but in practice, the syndicalists seemed to me more realistic, more audacious, more youthful".[26] The discovery of Sorel was a stepping stone in Maurín's radicalization that drew him closer to syndicalism and the CNT. Sorel, who extolled both Marxism and syndicalism, bridged, in Maurín's view, the schism between the two systems of thought. "Sorel favourably resolved my doubts", he later recalled.[27] In July 1920, he wrote that "in Syndicalism there is a Marxist current influenced by Georges Sorel, but its main and most dynamic kernel is anarchism".[28]

Maurín's early writings as a syndicalist were infused with Sorelian themes of collective violence, of the insurrectionary general strike, and of working-class unity above ideological divisions in favour of bold revolutionary action. This distanced him from orthodox anarchists. In his last years of life, the French anti-capitalist thinker became a supporter of the Russian

[19] Pagès, *Nin*, 31-32.
[20] *Memoria del congreso celebrado en el teatro de la Comedia de Madrid 10-18 de diciembre de 1919* (Cosmos, 1932), 373.
[21] Andrés Nin, "La orientación del sindicalismo", *Lucha Social*, 5 August 1922.
[22] Historian Gerald Meaker claims he first read *Réflexions sur la violence* in 1919. See Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left*, 389.
[23] Angel Smith, *Anarchism, Revolution and Reaction: Catalan Labour and the Crisis of the Spanish State, 1898-1923* (Berghahn, 2007), 150.
[24] Dueñas Lorente, *Costismo y anarquismo en las letras aragonesas*, 17-42.
[25] Luis de Zulueta, "Materiales de una teoría del proletariado", *El Fígaro*, 18 February 1920.
[26] Joaquín Maurín, "A manera de prólogo" [1960], in Hoover Institution Archive, Joaquín Maurín Papers, box 18.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Joaquín Maurín, "La revolución rusa ante el sindicalismo", *Lucha Social*, 24 July 1920, p. 2.

Revolution.[29] He criticized the official Marxism of the Second International in favour of a more militant reading of the ideas of Karl Marx. Sorel defied mechanistic readings of Marxism and extolled the power of the will as a historical factor. This chimed with Maurín's intransigent and voluntarist temperament and with his support for Soviet Russia. Sorel was the mainstay for Maurín's revisionist syndicalism in the early 1920s.

4.The struggle for the CNT

Nin and Maurín led the second CNT delegation to Soviet Russia in the summer of 1921, which also comprised of Valencian marble cutter Hilario Arlandis, who had an anarchist background but was supportive of Bolshevism; Jesús Ibáñez, an ex-socialist carpenter from Asturias that was also enamoured with revolutionary Russia; and orthodox anarchist Gaston Leval, a Frenchman who resided in Barcelona and Zaragoza.

In April 1921, a secretive CNT plenum in Barcelona selected these five men to travel to Moscow to represent the CNT at the founding congress of the Red International of Labour Unions, a trade union movement connected to the Communist International that sought to galvanize radical labour activists under the banners of Bolshevism. The plenum entrusted them with a pro-Bolshevik mandate that even envisaged "the dictatorship of the proletariat exercized by the trade unions of the CNT" and, according to Maurín, with the request that they secure Soviet weapons for the Spanish revolution.[30]

Only a handful of activists were able to attend the April plenum in Barcelona. Therefore, critics of Nin and Maurín later protested that the gathering was unrepresentative and the delegation to Moscow illegitimate. However, in April 1921 enthusiasm for revolutionary Russia still ran high among certain sectors of the CNT, especially among younger activists at the forefront of the violent social struggles that raged in Barcelona and other industrial centres. Many continued to stand for an "all-out defence of the Russian Revolution".[31] Therefore, the pro-Soviet slant of the Nin-Maurín delegation to Russia still reflected the views of numerous *cenetistas*.

In the RILU congress that took place in Moscow in July and August 1921, Russian and foreign communists dominated the debates and shaped the main resolutions. The Spanish delegates strived to defend the principles of the CNT, fighting for the autonomy of the RILU vis-à-vis the Communist International and for syndicalist principles such as federalism and anti-statism. They also campaigned for the liberation of Russian anarchists from Soviet prisons. However, the Spaniards' opposition to the communists was constructive. They were willing to compromise with their adversaries and displayed a strong attachment towards the project of the RILU.[32] The orthodox anarchist delegate Leval broke ranks with his comrades over what he regarded as their excessive amicability towards the Bolsheviks. Nin, Maurín, Arlandis, and Ibáñez supported the congress resolutions, which had a communist slant. In fact, the correspondence between Maurín and Nin, held in the Russian State Archives of Socio-Political History, reveals that the delegates converted to Leninism around this time. "I am turning into a party communist (but keep it secret, eh!)", wrote Maurín to his friend in February 1922. "In

[29] Georges Sorel [1919], "In Defence of Lenin" in Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 283-93.
[30] "Informe de la delegación de la CNT (primera parte)", *Lucha Social*, 27 May 1922. See also Joaquín Maurín, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en España* (Ruedo Ibérico, 1966).
[31] "Los anarquistas y la Revolución rusa", *Voluntad*, 16 abril 1921.
[32] See the comments by RILU leader Solomon Lozovsky in *Bulletin Du Premier Congrès International des Syndicats Révolutionnaires*, n. 4, 8 July 1921, 2.

the last analysis, there is no alternative other than the creation of a powerful C[ommunist] P[arty] that will lead the entire movement", he confessed.[33]

Committed to the Russian Revolution, Nin remained in Russia after a short (and bumpy) stint in Germany (where he spent a few days in a Berlin prison). He became a full-time official in the RILU headquarters in Moscow. Arlandis also spent several months working for the RILU in Moscow and Paris in 1921-22. Conversely, Maurín and Ibáñez returned to Spain in the early autumn of 1921, although Spanish police arrested the latter near the border. Maurín thus became the only representative of the delegation on the ground. He substituted Nin as the national secretary of the CNT.

Upon Maurín's return to Barcelona in October 1921, the anarchists began to question his role in the delegation and his new leadership position. Many *cenetistas* were now turning their backs on Bolshevism. They formulated a libertarian critique of the Russian Revolution and reaffirmed their Bakuninist identity. Veteran militants such as Mauro Bajatierra, Eusebio Carbó, and Manuel Buenacasa, who had previously supported the Bolsheviks, initiated this volte-face around the summer of 1921. In late 1921 and early 1922, they started to dent the Bolshevik passion of many younger activists.[34]

Different factors explain this change of heart. Firstly, disquieting developments had taken place in Soviet Russia. The Kronstadt rebellion of March 1921 was followed by a crackdown on the dissident left, including the Russian anarchists. Lenin's government also adopted a more pragmatic course with the New Economic Policy. The Communist International replicated this pragmatism, advocating more judicious tactics such as the united front with Social Democracy. Anarchists in Spain followed these developments with preoccupation. At the same time, severe repression in 1921 had broken the back of the CNT and slashed the prospects for the Spanish revolution. The euphoria of the previous years now gave way to pessimism and bitterness. Many militants reverted to ideological conservatism, seeking comfort in old principles and rejecting the revisionism elicited by the Russian Revolution in its early days. Finally, two communist splinter groups merged into a unified Spanish Communist Party in November 1921. Although this party was relatively small, the fear that communists might displace the anarchists was magnified in a context of defeat and demoralization. The *cenetistas* had to "draw a line in the sand" with the Communist Party, as a veteran anarchist put it, and differentiate themselves from these unwelcome newcomers. This they did by recovering Bakunin's arguments against Marxism in the First International.[35]

The CNT's affiliation with the RILU, the legitimacy of the 1921 delegation to Moscow, and Maurín's own position at the head of the movement came under attack in the winter of 1921-22. Maurín was a skilled organizer who built a team of loyal followers, mostly based in Barcelona and in the town of Lleida, in western Catalonia, where he had helped build the local branch of the CNT in 1920. However, his energy and charisma notwithstanding, the anti-Bolshevik anarchists inexorably displaced him. In February 1922, police arrested and jailed Maurín. His opponents used this opportunity to remove him as national secretary of the CNT and replace him with anarchist old-timer Joan Peiró. In June 1922, the CNT held a conference in Zaragoza where it rescinded its affiliation with the RILU and its connections with the Third

[33] Maurín to Nin, 27 February 1922, in Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), Moscow, [fond]534/[opis']7/[delo]288/[listok]42.
[34] Chris Ealham, "An impossible unity: Revolution, Reform, and Counterrevolution and the Spanish Left, 1917-1923", in Francisco Romero Salvadó and Angel Smith (editors), *The Agony of Spanish Liberalism: From Revolution to Dictatorship, 1913-1923* (Palgrave, 2010), 106.
[35] Galo Díez, "Deslindando campos", *Redención*, 15 October 1921.

International, reaffirming its anti-statist, anti-Marxist character. Maurín and his followers were thus relegated to the position of a minority faction.[36]

By and large, this "communist-syndicalist" tendency, as it came to be known, was politically impotent. It comprised of a few dozen committed activists in Lleida, Barcelona, Valencia, and Asturias that were personally loyal to Maurín, as well as a loose periphery of a few hundred *cenetistas* that were broadly sympathetic to the faction. This included a group of Aragonese intellectuals that were influential in the CNT and were personal friends of Maurín, such as Ángel Samblancat, Gil Bel, Ramón Acín, and Felipe Alaiz.[37] In December 1922, Maurín and his followers attempted to establish a unified platform within the CNT, the Revolutionary Syndicalist Committees. Yet these committees only took off in a handful of localities where Maurín's men were influential, as in Lleida, or where they received external support from local communist party militants, as in Asturias and Biscay. Their existence, complained the RILU from Moscow, was rather "platonic".[38]

Though numerically insignificant, this tendency has attracted historiographical interest for its ideological sophistication. Indeed, its key animators, Maurín and Nin (who assisted and oriented the group from Moscow) became two of the most important Marxist thinkers in interwar Spain. They founded and led the anti-Stalinist Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) in 1935, which became an important actor in the Spanish Civil War.[39] Although Maurín, Nin, Arlandis, and Ibáñez converted to Leninism in Russia in 1921, they kept the official Spanish Communist Party at arm's length and avoided Marxist terminology in their propaganda. In its attempt to win the CNT over to Bolshevism, this tendency developed a unique form of syndicalism that drew its cues above all from Georges Sorel. In the words of historian Andy Durgan, the group "cited Sorel more often than Lenin".[40]

Maurín's ultimate objective was to rebuild the Spanish communist movement on the basis of the CNT, establishing its headquarters in Barcelona. He would thus displace the official, Madrid-based Communist Party, a small organization that had split from the PSOE. However, the communist-syndicalists were aware that the libertarian worldview was so deeply entrenched in the CNT that its conversion to Marxism would be very gradual. They had to make formal concessions to anarchism. At first, they would have to defend communism using the rhetorical and emotional repertoire of anarchism. In Maurín's view, Sorel and the ideas of the early French CGT were especially adroit for this task. Collective violence and the broad-church ethos of French trade unionism served as a bridge to the dictatorship of the proletariat, the vanguard party, and the united front. "If we now began to speak of a party", wrote Maurín in November 1921, "our failure would be absolute. We need to break with the established prejudices. To try to overcome them in one go will lead to failure".[41] *Cenetista* Adolfo Bueso, who collaborated with Maurín for some time, recalled that "it was clear he was convinced of the righteousness of Bolshevik communism, but he was always very careful to avoid the loathsome terminology of official communism".[42] Arlandis was blunter on this matter. In a letter to Nin about the tone of *Acción Sindicalista*, Valencia's communist-syndicalist weekly, and its attitude towards the anarchist-controlled CNT daily, *Solidaridad Obrera*, he reflected:

[36] Riottot, *Maurín*, 51.
[37] Dueñas, *Costismo*, 285.
[38] RILU executive bureau, "Au comité central des CSR d'Espagne", 12 July 1923, in RGASPI, 534/6/81/83.
[39] Alan Sennet, *Revolutionary Marxism in Spain, 1930-1937* (Brill, 2014)
[40] Durgan, *Comunismo*, 32.
[41] Maurín to Nin, 29 November 1921, in RGASPI, 534/7/288/7.
[42] Adolfo Bueso, *Recuerdos de un cenetista* (Ariel, 1976), 206.

> "In view of the inauspicious conditions in which we have to introduce our propaganda in this region, the paper should have a rather hybrid character. If it took on an openly communist profile […] our efforts would be fruitless. We need to go about our work very prudently [...]. We cannot start an open polemic with *Soli*[*daridad Obrera*] from the outset, for we would generate a lot of mistrust and we would be immediately branded as divisive elements. [...] In the third or fourth issue, we will have to sharpen our attacks, and take on a more openly communist character".[43]

5.Sorelian syndicalism

The communist-syndicalists engaged in "syndicalist revisionism". This they did through their mouthpieces, *Lucha Social*, based in Lleida, and *Acción Sindicalista*, from Valencia which in December 1922 transferred to Barcelona and merged into *La Batalla*. Maurín also developed this revisionism in his book *El sindicalismo a la luz de la revolución rusa*, published in May 1922. This was the most systematic exposition of his ideas up until then, which he addressed to a working-class audience. He considered the book "a pickaxe against anarchism and reformism".[44] These revisionist efforts arrived at a time of deep existential crisis for the CNT, shattered by repression and paralyzed by factional infighting.

In justifying his revisionism, Maurín argued that syndicalism "must be flexible, open to transformations, capable of evolving". "If we do not revise our methods of struggle", he warned, "our movement faces stagnation".[45] For Maurín and his men, revisionism was inherent to syndicalism. It was not a closed and circular system, but rather "a synthesis of experiences, brought together into a doctrine that evolves in a spiral".[46] The trade unions were by nature flexible and pragmatic due to their close contact with production and struggle with the bosses. They were thus hostile to abstraction and theoretical bickering.[47] This was a hardly-veiled caveat against the anarchist dogmatism that was spreading among the ranks of the CNT.

Through their revisionism, the communist-syndicalists claimed to tap into the true nature of working-class trade unionism. In their opinion, they were returning to the origins of the syndicalist movement in the French CGT of the 1900s.[48] This was the most conscientious attempt to import "pure" syndicalism to Spain, where, as noted above, it traditionally had a strong anarchist component. In Maurín's view, the early syndicalism of Pelloutier and Lagardelle was a synthesis of Marxism and anarchism. Unapologetically eclectic and pragmatic, syndicalism was not afraid of adopting the best parts of these two doctrines. It harnessed "all the formidable elements of Marx's thought", and drew "from anarchism the federalist ideas of Proudhon and the critique of the state". [49]

Above ideological hair-splitting, the priority for workers should be to mobilize and strike at the enemy. The communist-syndicalists exhibited a quasi-idealist passion for willpower and action. The will to struggle could overcome objective difficulties (which were plentiful in Spain in 1922). Anarchists were criticized for their contemplative attitude towards the class struggle and their concern for philosophical minutiae. Maurín considered their debates a sterile waste of

[43] Arlandis to Nin, 17 August 1922, in RGASPI, 534/7/290/84.
[44] Maurín to Nin, 27 February 1922, in RGASPI, 534/7/290/42.
[45] Joaquín Maurín, *El sindicalismo a la luz de la revolución rusa* (Lucha Social, 1922), 3-4.
[46] Ibid., 7.
[47] Ibid., 11.
[48] Joaquín Maurín, "El sindicalismo revolucionario de ayer y de hoy", *La Batalla*, 6 January 1923.
[49] Maurín, *El sindicalismo,* 10.

energies that they should instead direct towards organization and struggle. For the communist-syndicalists, the pragmatic trade union tendency around Catalan militant Salvador Seguí was closest to their action-driven, hard-headed conception of syndicalism. The CNT's greatest victories in 1917-19 were, in their eyes, connected to this pragmatic outlook. The spread of anarchist dogmatism in the early 1920s had stunted the CNT's development. After Seguí's assassination in March 1923, the communist-syndicalists even presented Seguí as the pioneer of the "Sorelianist tendency" within the CNT.[50] They thus attempted to claim Seguí's mantle for themselves (although in reality Seguí was never enthusiastic about Sorel, as explained above, nor was he friendly towards Maurín and his faction).

In turn, echoing Sorel's critique of Marx, the communist-syndicalists condemned classical Marxism for its "catastrophic concept of revolution". "The brain [is the force] that can destroy and build", not "the agitation of the stomach", they retorted to the orthodox Marxists.[51] In their eyes, this fatalistic materialism explained the perceived "inaction" of the Spanish socialists and also of the official communists, who they looked down upon.[52] Maurín and his followers stood for a subjectivist interpretation of revolution. Convinced that willpower was unstoppable, the communist-syndicalists were also inveterate optimists, imbued with a profound sense of their historical mission. "The hearts of our men overflow with faith, audacity, and optimism", they boasted.[53]

This voluntarism bore the mark of thinkers such as Nietzsche, Bergson, and Henrik Ibsen. Entire excerpts of their work appeared regularly in *Lucha Social*. They also shaped the literary style of *Lucha Social*, which had a penchant for epic metaphors. The fascination with action converged with the cult of the youth and of revolutionary sacrifice. This passage, opened and closed with quotes by Ibsen and Nietzsche, is characteristic of this upbeat mentality:

> "To wait for the fruit to ripen is a thing of tired old men. To grab it when it is still green is what the active, the indomitable, the youthful would do. Do not wait for the time [for revolution] to come. It is always the time for everything. The time to murder the past, to die heroically, to hoist the flag of hope. […] There is no obstacle for those who do not believe in them. Obstacles are to be destroyed".[54]

Sorel's voluntarist reading of Marx also chimed with the communist-syndicalist worldview. Yet as we shall see, the communist-syndicalists gave the Sorelian myth a Bolshevik inflection. This voluntarism was not remarkable in the Spanish far-left, especially among anarchists, who were also avid readers of Ibsen and Nietzsche.[55] What was unique here was its optimistic hue, its practical attitude, and its Bolshevik hue. Indeed, the example of Bolshevik victory was one of the main drivers of this revisionism. Maurín contended that the lessons provided by the "concrete example" of the Russian Revolution "will be a thousand times more important than all divagations, essays, dreams, and inventions". "The mission of syndicalism", he concluded, "cannot be the same after the Russian Revolution".[56]

Above all, the events of 1917 forced syndicalists to revise their position on the general strike, previously seen as a revolutionary panacea, and, naturally, on the dictatorship of the proletariat. This was a thorny concept for the anti-authoritarian CNT. In order to justify it, communist-

[50] Domingo Benedí, *Del anarquismo al comunismo* (La Batalla, 1924), 20.
[51] "Sindicalismo", *Lucha Social*, 19 January 1921.
[52] Maurín to Nin, 27 February 1922, in RGASPI, 534/7/290/44-46.
[53] "Jornada de dolor, de ira y de optimismo", *Lucha Social*, 30 April 1921.
[54] "Juventud", *Lucha Social*, 9 October 1920.
[55] Junco, *La ideología política*, 115-133, 148-58.
[56] Maurín, *El sindicalismo,* 6, 12.

syndicalists based themselves on "the principle of collective violence".[57] Sorel prescribed the violence of the organized masses against the bourgeoisie, rejecting both individual terrorism as well as democracy and parliamentarianism. This violence would also instil class consciousness in the proletariat. Using the language of Sorel, Maurín presented the dictatorship the proletariat as a "concentration of proletarian violence", a new expression of the theory of collective violence. The workers' dictatorship was the logical denouement of the class struggle – an intensification of mass social violence. Drawing on Sorel's concept of the myth of the general strike, Maurín singled out the dictatorship of the proletariat as the new myth that would chivvy the masses forward.[58] Collective violence was also an antidote to the individual terror exercised at this time by detachments of radical anarchists. However, Maurín and his team felt certain admiration for CNT gunmen and at times justified their violence.[59]

Based upon the experience of the Russian Revolution, it became clear that a spontaneous uprising, or a general strike, would be incapable of unseating the bourgeoisie. This was an anarchist misconception, based on the fact "that we are used to study political revolutions, which were resolved in eight days, and which have led us to mistakenly believe that social revolutions would also be almost instantaneous".[60] The First World War and the Russian Civil War had revealed the brutality and resilience of the capitalist state, "the Russian example shows that the consolidation of the revolution is not a question of days, but of years".[61] The general strike as "a revolutionary instrument has failed". Instead, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie would come through a "General Assault", inspired by the "Paris Commune and the Russian and Hungarian revolutions".[62]

For Maurín, the Spanish revolution could not be a narrowly proletarian movement, as envisaged by classical syndicalism. As in Russia, the revolution in agrarian Spain would have to encompass the peasantry as well. Spain was an "overwhelmingly agrarian country", and syndicalism, "a child of industry", "has had nothing to say to the peasants".[63] Maurín was no *narodnik* and was at times bitterly critical of the "selfishness" of the peasantry.[64] However, he considered that the labour movement had to make concessions on the altar of a workers-peasant alliance. Only a disciplined communist party rooted in town and country could mobilize the broad masses of the people. This concern with the peasantry and with Spain's specificities would become a lasting feature of Maurín's politics into the 1930s.[65]

The demise of the old anarcho-syndicalist nostrum of the general strike had organizational consequences. The trade unions were important but, ultimately, not enough to overthrow capitalism. The revolution, observed Maurín, "is a mathematical problem", and the responsibility for "the revolutionary preparations and the selection of the opportune moment for the decisive assault cannot belong the masses". A "fighting body" was needed, "a league of revolutionaries, establishing the cohesion of all the elements that are prepared to throw themselves into the fires of the revolutionary storm".[66] Although he did not use the term "party", tactfully speaking instead of a "league", this conception dovetails with the Leninist vision of the party of professional revolutionaries. Its collectivist ethos notwithstanding, Maurín's brand

[57] "La moral proletaria debe estar basada en el concepto de la violencia", *La Batalla*, 18 January 1923.
[58] Maurín, *El sindicalismo,* 53.
[59] "Los atentados sociales", *Lucha Social*, 9 January 1921.
[60] Maurín, *El sindicalismo*, 53.
[61] Ibid., 53.
[62] Ibid., 75-76
[63] Maurín to Nin, 27 February 1922, in RGASPI, 534/7/290/44.
[64] Maurín, *El sindicalismo*, 21-24.
[65] Durgan, *Comunismo*, 82-84, 193-213.
[66] Maurín, *El Sindicalismo*, 86-90.

of syndicalism was rather elitist. The masses were "malleable" like "clay". The revolutionary leadership had to "work on the masses" and use them as "an inexhaustible depot of energies".[67] This simultaneous exaltation of spontaneity and of an organized vanguard was somewhat distant from Sorel's own vision of syndicalism as a form of proletarian self-organization and bore the mark of Lenin.

This Bolshevik reformulation of Sorel's collective violence was arguably the linchpin of Maurín's revisionism. In the words of Gerald Meaker:

> "Above all, [Maurín] distilled from Sorel and from the depths of his own personality an exaltation of revolutionary violence that would run like a red thread through all his writings in this period. The violence that he eulogized, however, would not be the spontaneous, individualistic and inchoate violence of the Anarchists but a purposive, collective, and organized popular violence, which, guided by an elite, would both destroy and regenerate. Which is to say that Maurín's revolutionary outlook was inherently more modern than that of most *cenetistas*, emphasizing as it did elitist and organizational themes; and it brought him, even before his visit to Moscow, remarkably close to the Leninist conception".[68]

The communist-syndicalists' apologia of Bolshevism was qualified. Basing himself on Sorel's critique of orthodox socialism, Maurín threw in some barbs against Marx, accusing him of "not having been able to devise a new form of proletarian organization without the state". Instead of the state, he posited that the monopoly of violence after the revolution would be exercised by a "federation of proletarian forces […] that cannot be labelled as a 'State'". "Let us instead refer to it", he suggested, "as the 'Organization'".[69] Maurín was critical of the "excessive centralization" of the Soviet regime. He sympathized with the Workers' Opposition of Kollontai and Shlyapnikov, who he saw as "heavily influenced by the Marxist revisionism of revolutionary syndicalism".[70]

Setting out from materialist premises about the centrality of production in the historical process, Maurín concluded that the trade unions should be the protagonists of the economic transformation of society after the revolution.[71] The communist-syndicalists regarded the soviets, the workers' councils that had led the October Revolution, as ideal springboards for the conquest of power. However, the trade unions, not the soviets, should direct the new socialist economy.[72] Yet this demanded greater organizational and theoretical sophistication from the trade unions, which should drop their "primitive" corporatist outlook.[73] This line of thinking was, in fact, not entirely new in the CNT. The need to prepare the trade unions for the management of a socialized economy had been discussed at length in previous years.[74]

Sorelian violence also served to justify another cornerstone of communist-syndicalism, the tactic of the united front. Maurín claimed to be in favour of "direct action", not in the

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[67] "Sindicalismo", *Lucha Social*, 19 January 1921.
[68] Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left*, 389.
[69] Maurín, *El Sindicalismo*, 63.
[70] Joaquín Maurín, "Impresiones de la Rusia sovietista: el Partido Comunista", *Lucha Social*, 22 April 1922.
[71] Joaquín Maurín, "La doctrina de los hechos", *Lucha Social*, 4 March 1922.
[72] Durgan, *Comunismo*, 31-32.
[73] Maurín, *El sindicalismo*, 8.
[74] María Cruz Santos, "Hace cien años, la CNT y el congreso de Sants: la respuesta sindical a los nuevos desafíos del capitalismo", *Viento Sur*, 7 December 2018.

individualist sense of the "propaganda of the deed", but as "the constant intervention of all the proletarian masses in the social struggles".[75] "Direct action", he summarized, "means mass action".[76] For genuine mass action, workers of different organizations ought to unite around concrete demands.[77] This was especially important in 1921-23 in Spain, when organized labour was on the defensive after years of setbacks. The communist-syndicalists framed the question of the RILU in similar utilitarian terms. Their punchline was "either Amsterdam or Moscow", that is, the Social Democratic, Amsterdam-based trade union international or the Moscow-based, pro-Comintern RILU: "Whoever is not with Moscow", stated the communist-syndicalist weekly *La Batalla*, "is in favour of […] capitalism".[78] There was no midway between the two, and the anarcho-syndicalist International Workingmen's Association, set up in Berlin in 1922 in opposition to the RILU and composed of "minuscule organizations" was "dead from the outset".[79]

The communist-syndicalists drew their cues from Sorel, but also put his work through their revisionist sieve. As explained above, they abandoned the myth of the general strike in favour of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In their opinion, after the Russian Revolution, the Soviet dictatorship had become the genuine expression of collective violence. Maurín utilized Sorel as a theoretician of insurrection and of the working-class vanguard, which required a thorough reinterpretation of his work and a dose of cherry-picking. Indeed, the communist-syndicalists utilized the French thinker selectively. They lacked a comprehensive vision of his work and its evolution. They leaned on a fragmentary reading of his most important books: *La ruine du monde antique*, *L'avenir socialiste des syndicats*, and, especially, his *Réflexions sur la violence*, all of which had been translated into Spanish in the 1900-10s.[80] They emphasized the passages that were closest to their crypto-Leninist views.

However, despite the revisionist and fragmentary character of this Sorelianism, *Lucha Social*, *Acción Sindicalista*, and, after 1922, *La Batalla*, reproduced, cited, and summarized Sorel's original work extensively. These weeklies at times opened with passages from *Réflexions sur la violence* and other Sorelian tracts. This was the most determined attempt to disseminate Sorel's thought among unionized workers in Spain. The small publishing house connected to *Lucha Social* republished his *La ruine du monde antique* (which had already appeared in Spanish in 1907).[81] They also issued a compilation of Sorel's writings on syndicalism. This pamphlet included additional texts by Émile Pouget, Victor Griffuelhes, Hubert Lagardelle, and Sergio Panunzio. The last two thinkers veered towards fascism in the interwar, as did many Italian Sorelians. In Spain, however, the communist-syndicalists were staunch anti-fascists. They never shared the fascination with the nation of many Italian Sorelians. On the contrary, the communist-syndicalists were rather contemptuous towards Spain. Maurín classed it as a "shepherds' country". Its "tragic situation" of poverty and underdevelopment conditioned the "disastrous fatalism" that characterizes the Spaniards.[82] The communist-syndicalists were

[75] Maurín, *El sindicalismo*, 9.
[76] Ibid., 9.
[77] See "Los Comités Sindicalistas Revolucionarios: Al proletariado militante", *La Batalla*, 24 August 1923 as well as "Frente Único", *La Batalla*, 28 September 1923.
[78] "Después del fracaso de la Conferencia de Berlín", *La Batalla*, 18 January 1923.
[79] Andreu Nin, "El Congreso de Berlín", *La Batalla*, 9 February 1923.
[80] Georges Sorel, *La ruina del mundo antiguo*, trans. Soledad Gustavo (Sempere, 1907).
Georges Sorel, *El porvenir de los sindicatos obreros,* trans. Soledad Gustavo (Sempere, 1900).
Jorge Sorel, *Reflexiones sobre la violencia* (Biblioteca moderna, 1915).
[81] Georges Sorel*, La ruina del mundo antiguo* (Lucha Social, no date, probably 1922).
[82] Joaquín Maurín, "Notas rápidas: tres tipos de pueblo", *Lucha Social*, 11 June 1921.

sympathetic towards Catalan nationalism and towards the anti-colonial struggle in Morocco. Maurín and his team adopted a separatist stance in the late 1920s.

Brought up politically in the virulent post-1917 period, inspired by the Russian Revolution, and locked in violent struggle with the employers and the state, the communist-syndicalists displayed unflinching anti-capitalist and internationalist mettle. They began to denounce fascism as early as the spring of 1921.[83] Soon after the March on Rome, they warned that fascism could also take root in Spain.[84] In their eyes, there was no contradiction between this anti-fascism and their Sorelian creed. Indeed, in Italy, the communists of *Ordine Nuovo* also tried to claim Sorel for the revolutionary left.[85] Maurín, in turn, followed the publications and activities of the Italian communists, who "strongly influenced my opinion".[86]

The communist-syndicalists were not unique internationally. Other syndicalist groups evolved in a Leninist direction in the early 1920s, and converged under the aegis of the RILU. The most notable group in this respect was Pierre Monatte's *La Vie Ouvrière* tendency in France. Maurín and his team were close to Monatte ideologically and established a close connection with this group. Both Maurín and Arlandis travelled to Paris in 1921-22 and solidified this alliance.[87] In turn, the Spaniards exerted considerable influence over the pro-Bolshevik faction in the Portuguese General Confederation of Labour, which adopted a similar outlook to their Spanish comrades.[88] Maurín and Ibáñez travelled to Lisbon and Porto several times in 1922-23 and helped mobilize the opposition to the anarchists in the Portuguese trade unions, following RILU directives.[89] Nevertheless, despite these international connections, Maurín's Sorelian syndicalism was home grown and largely responded to his own readings and reflections.

6.An "amphibian tendency"

During their trip to Moscow in 1921, Maurín, Nin, Ibáñez, and Arlandis became "Leninists at heart", as historian Gerald Meaker put it.[90] When Maurín returned to Spain, he sought to conceal his newfound Marxist creed and instead leaned on Sorel to seduce his anarchist comrades. However, his passion for Sorel and the fundamental views he set out in *El sindicalismo a la luz de la Revolución rusa* were sincere. Maurín's passion for Sorel preceded his trip to Russia. These men did not erase their anarchist and syndicalist background at one fell swoop. They continued to carry political baggage from the past. For instance, in private, Maurín embraced the idea of a communist party, but it ought to be "anti-elections".[91] Ibáñez later confessed that "above the 'sticky' Marx, my temperament will always be closer to Mikhail Bakunin".[92] In addition, the communist-syndicalist faction also comprised of militants that had not travelled to Russia, such as Pere Bonet, Víctor Colomer, Joan Farré, Tomàs Pàmies, Francesc Pelegrí, Daniel Rebull, Josep Maria Foix, and Tomàs Tusó, all of whom were prominent CNT activists. Their ideological transition to Marxism was more gradual and involved genuine syndicalist revisionism.[93]

[83] "Guerra social en Italia", *Lucha Social*, 27 April 1921.
[84] "Importancia de los CSR", *La Batalla*, 30 December 1922.
[85] Jack J. Roth, "The Roots of Italian Fascism: Sorel and Sorelismo", *The Journal of Modern History* 39, no.1 (1967): 30-45
[86] Maurín to Nin, 27 February 1922, in RGASPI, 534/7/290/44.
[87] Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU)* (Brill, 2016), 268.
[88] António José Telo, *Decadência e queda da República portuguesa*, vol. 1 (Regra do Jogo, 1980), 311–43
[89] Jesús Ibáñez, *Memorias de mi cadáver* (El libro perfecto, 1946), 263.
[90] Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left*, 397.
[91] Maurín to Nin, 27 February 1922, in RGASPI, 534/7/290/42.
[92] Ibáñez, *Memorias*, 263.
[93] Durgan, *Comunismo*, 26.

The upbeat, voluntarist ethos of *Lucha Social* also reflected the genuine optimism of Maurín and his team. The Russian Revolution, the initial upswing of the CNT in 1917-20, and the advances of communism in other European countries electrified these young radicals and instilled in them an attitude of self-assurance. In the words of Maurín's friend and biographer Víctor Alba, the years 1917-22 "were the most decisive and fulfilling" in Maurín's life. "This was a romantic period where he discovered an ideology, an organization, and set himself a concrete goal".[94] Driven by these newfound convictions, he threw himself headlong into the struggle. "I'm telling you I'm stressed", he wrote to Nin. "But I have the balls of a bull". "There is no doubt", he insisted in his private correspondence, "that if we work properly the CNT will end up going to Moscow and adopt Moscow's tactics and drop the routine and disastrous orientation of troglodytic anarchism".[95] Maurín's adolescent quest for the moral regeneration of Spain now found a more practical outlet in the mission of "building a new CNT" and solving the leadership crisis of the Spanish proletariat.[96]

The leading cadre of the Communist Party in Madrid was suspicious of Maurín and his men. They saw them as ideologically deviant and anarchist-inflected. For Juan Andrade, writing in 1924, this group was "not entirely communist".[97] Perhaps as a response to Maurín's eclecticism, the communist press published a long critique of Sorel (and other syndicalist thinkers) in mid-1922.[98] Communist leader Óscar Pérez Solís described the evolution of the communist-syndicalists in unceremonious terms:

> "What was the ideological composition of the *La Batalla* group? It comprised mostly of comrades who, having belonged to the CNT and even having assumed important positions in that organization, were never anarchists or were so more in appearance than in reality. Many had dabbled with the Socialist Party, abandoning it for its reformism in the days of the anarcho-syndicalist 'deluge' [e.g. Nin and Ibáñez], or had professed a rather anarchistic [*anarquizante*] brand of syndicalism [e.g. Maurín]. There were also ex-anarchists, who had been forced to reflect by the wreckage of the Confederation, driving them to accept the errors of principle of Anarchism and putting them on the road of communism [e.g. Arlandis]".[99]

The hard-line anarchists also branded the communist-syndicalists as heretics who should be "cast out" of the CNT. Radical anarchists branded them as an "amphibian tendency" halfway between anarchism and Bolshevism.[100] In turn, the moderate tendencies of the CNT had a friendlier attitude. In late 1923, a group of moderate *cenetistas* struck an alliance with Maurín and set up a joint publication, *Lucha Obrera*. This short-lived daily combined Maurín's Sorelian theories with an open-ended reading of anarchism. It called for ideological toleration in the CNT, for the freedom to form internal factions, and for the united front of all working-class forces. This publication only appeared for about a month. The newspaper underwent constant censorship, was beset by internal disagreements, and was cash-strapped (despite receiving intermittent Soviet subsidies). However, it reflected the potential appeal of Maurín's revisionist syndicalism at a time of deep crisis in the CNT. Indeed, this venture attracted important trade union leaders such as Joan Peiró and Josep Viadiu.

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[94] Víctor Alba, *Dos revolucionarios: Joaquín Maurín, Andreu Nin* (Seminarios y Ediciones, 1975) 98.
[95] Maurín to Nin, 29 November 1921, in RGASPI, 534/7/288/12.
[96] Maurín to Nin, 27 February 1922, in RGASPI, 534/7/290/42.
[97] Juan Andrade, "Muy confidencial: al Comité Regional de la Federación", 28 August 1924, in Archivo Histórico del Partido Comunista de España, Madrid, Documentos, Film 1.
[98] José Bullejos, "Partido y Sindicato, I, II", *La Bandera Roja*, 26 August and 9 September 1922.
[99] Óscar Pérez Solis, "Para acabar con una crisis indecente", 1926, in RGASPI, 495/120/215/95.
[100] Hermoso Plaja, "Pseudo revolucionarismo", *Redención*, 11 November 1921.

The stress on action, workers unity (nationally and internationally), and mass violence sought to justify *cenetista* support for the RILU and for Soviet Russia. However, these general formulas were also a response to the difficulties that beset the Spanish labour movement in the early 1920s. The downturn in mass mobilization after the "three Bolshevik years" of 1917-20 coincided with a deep economic slump. The employers and sectors of the state cracked down on the trade unions. This involved brutal repression, especially in Barcelona. Working conditions also came under attack. The experience of defeat exacerbated divisions in the labour movement. The CNT became sharply polarized between a moderate and an extremist anarchist tendency, in addition to the communist-syndicalist group. An important bone of contention in the CNT were the controversial terrorist tactics of the more radical anarchist factions. Deep schisms also appeared in the Marxist movement, as the socialists now faced the unwelcome competition of the Spanish Communist Party. More broadly, the antagonism between anarchist, socialist, and communist trade unions intensified. The appearance of dissident reformist trade unions such as the *Sindicatos Libres* complicated matters further. The fragmentation and sectarianism of the labour movement reflected the increased competition for a shrinking constituency of organized workers at a time of defeat and demoralization.

The communist-syndicalists raised the banner of the united front in order to overcome these difficulties. The slogan of collective violence provided a mass, constructive alternative to the controversial terrorist tactics of the radical anarchists. The communist-syndicalists believed that action and willpower could ultimately overcome unfavourable objective conditions. In this respect, they arguably put forward the most optimistic, original, and pro-active response to the quandaries of the country's labour movement.

Conclusion

The failure of *Vida Obrera* in the winter of 1923-24 revealed the difficulties of establishing a dissident, pro-Bolshevik tendency within the CNT. In late December 1923, the hard-line anarchists won a resounding victory at a Catalan trade union plenary in the town of Granollers. Heretofore, the relationship between Maurín and his followers and the leaders of the Spanish Communist Party had been frosty. This was a small organization that mostly comprised of ex-socialists. Its most important groupings were in Madrid and in Biscay, whereas the communist-syndicalists were strongest in Catalonia, Valencia, and eastern Aragon. Geographical distance fed into political differences. However, their dramatic isolation in the CNT drove the communist-syndicalists towards the Spanish Communist Party in the spring of 1924. That summer, a core of about eighty communist-syndicalists joined the party. In the autumn, its Central Committee transferred to Barcelona and Maurín became the communists' general secretary.[101]

The reorientation towards the Communist Party in 1924 coincided with an ideological turn towards orthodox Marxism. The communist component of their weekly, *La Batalla*, intensified over 1923-24. Quotes by Lenin gradually replaced Sorel's.[102] The Sorelian passion of this tendency was short-lived. It could not have been otherwise. The years that followed the Russian Revolution saw remarkable fluidity and cross-fertilization in the radical left, in Spain as internationally. Yet as the post-1917 convulsions subsided, the frontlines of the competing tendencies in the Spanish labour movement stabilized. Socialists, communists, and anarchists, internally divided into moderates and hard-liners, now vied for the support of the working class.

[101] Zoffmann Rodriguez, "Esdevenint comunistes de partit".
[102] This article marked an important rhetorical shift: Joaquín Maurín, "Marxismo y anarquismo", *La Batalla*, 7 September 1922.

This reflected global trends, complicated by the consolidation of the Communist International as a disciplined and centralized Marxist force.

The "amphibian" position of the communist-syndicalists was untenable in the long term. Their Sorelianism represented a transitional phase on the road to communism. In the 1900-10s, Sorel's eclecticism had undercut his appeal in the Spanish workers' movement, which was rigidly divided between a socialist and an anarchist wing. For the "chameleonic" communist-syndicalists (as a critic characterized them) this eclecticism became an asset that they sought to utilize as an intermediary stage in the CNT's anticipated transition from Bakuninism to Leninism.[103]

Maurín's insurrectionary, quasi-Leninist Sorelianism involved a revision of Sorel's original writings, albeit one that was not uncommon in the interwar. Yet the communist-syndicalists were wary to import Leninism outright into Spain and, especially, Catalonia. As they explained in their correspondence, Comintern publications jarred with the libertarian language and traditions of the CNT. Sorel thus became instrumental for the Bolshevization of a fraction of Spanish syndicalism, as his ideas were sufficiently flexible and "anarchist-sounding" to start smuggling Leninist concepts into the CNT. The peculiar theories of the Spanish communist-syndicalists underline the importance of instrumentality in the history of political ideas. As revealed in this case study, in times of splits and polemics, old concepts become weapons that can be twisted and turned in the heat of the controversy, in accordance with the task at hand. It thus behoves historians to connect the exegesis of ideas to a careful analysis of the changing political frontlines.

[103] Solis, "Para acabar con una crisis indecente".

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Georges Sorel in Australia

by Geoffrey Robinson
Deakin University

As in Europe, Britain, and America the Australian Georges Sorel was a figure resignified and invented by local readers.[1] His reception depended on the utility of his thought for local cultural and political conflicts. Before the First World War, Sorel, as in Britain, was evoked by conservatives and labour moderates as an icon of syndicalism (even if actual syndicalists seemed indifferent) and by some intellectuals as junior partner to Nietzsche and Bergson. This interest faded along with Australian syndicalism. In the thirties, interest in Sorel was revived by the Scottish born John Anderson, professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney from 1927 to 1958. His understanding of Sorel as a theorist of the "producers' ethics" had a powerful influence on a generation of his students. The "Andersonians", of which the most notable was the cold war liberal Peter Coleman, played a major role in Australian intellectual life. They experienced Australian society as one of stasis, where conservative values of consumption and security, ironically championed by the political left, dominated "radical" ideas of enterprise and production. The dilemma that the Andersonians faced was how to make allegiance to the producers' ethics into a viable political project, rather than an individualist and romantic expression of disdain for the affluent normality of twentieth-century Australia.

1.The syndicalist years 1900-1920

In early twentieth-century Australia, as in Britain, Sorel was understood by observers as embedded in a syndicalist framework.[2] Syndicalism was strong in early 20th century Australia, largely in response to working-class disaffection with the record of political labour. In power, the official representatives of the working-class continued liberal reformism that supported wage regulation, tariff protection, racial exclusion, and moderate unionism, but combined this with an uncritical faith in the democratic state.[3] The disappointments of this strategy inspired a syndicalist upsurge.[4] Seven years in Australia – from 1902 to 1909 – led the British socialist Tom Mann to turn to syndicalism.[5] The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) won support from young, male, nomadic workers concerned to battle the boss, and shock their fellow workers by individualist rebellion through sabotage and deliberate go-slows.[6] This was a style divergent from Sorel's critique of sabotage and individualist violence. The Australian IWW newspaper only once referred to Sorel in general terms.[7] Sorel was mentioned far more by

[1] Eric Brandom, "Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock", *History of Political Thought* 38, no. 4 (2017): 736.
[2] Tommaso Giordani and Henry Mead, "'The Regeneration of Society": Thomas Ernest Hulme and the Early British Reception of Georges Sorel", *Modern Intellectual History* 22 (2022): 111-20.
[3] James Walter and Tod Moore, *What Were They Thinking? The politics of ideas in Australia* (University of New South Wales Press, 2010), 120-24; David Kemp, *A Free Country: Australians' Search for Utopia, 1861-1901* (Melbourne University Press, 2019), 289, 372, 78, 81-82, 455.
[4] Herbert Heaton, "Syndicalism Considered", *Daily Herald (Adelaide, SA : 1910 - 1924)* (Adelaide, SA), 17 September 1918, 2, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article106511396.
[5]Graeme Osborne, "Mann, Thomas (Tom) (1856–1941)", Australian Dictionary of Biography, Australian Dictionary of Biography, 2006, accessed 21 June 2022, https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mann-thomas-tom-7475.
[6] Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary industrial unionism : the industrial workers of the world in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).
[7] "A Double-edged Criticism", *Direct Action (Sydney, NSW : 1914 - 1930)* (Sydney, NSW), 13 May 1916, 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article111350453.

opponents of syndicalism. Labor moderates cast Sorel as a prophet of irrationalism and violence.[8] Conservatives sought to link the mainstream labour movement to syndicalism.[9] Sorel functioned in these depictions as an apostle of violence and destruction.[10] Intellectual interest in Sorel was limited, but he was largely seen as aligned with Nietzsche and Bergson, who attracted substantial attention.[11] In the 1910s, Bergson was referenced in 1400 articles in Australian newspapers and Nietzsche in 2996, but Sorel only 68.[12] Nietzsche and Bergson were understood by dissident intellectuals as an alternative to the dominant Australian public philosophy of a Christianising idealism, and its faith in progress, Empire, and reform.[13] Some intellectuals were drawn to what Michael Roe calls "vitalism": a world-view that emphasised the role of heroic creative individuals, inspired by emotion and values rather than by reason, and which exalted the example of the ancient world in opposition to Christianity. From this perspective, Sorel's work was largely equated to Bergson's project, as modernist with an emphasis on will and agency.[14] Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* was part of radical reading culture.[15]

2.Realism and the intellectuals

The unexceptional nature of early Australian readings of Sorel reflected a local intellectual culture dependent on Britain and the United States. From the 1930s, however, a new generation of Australian intellectuals turned to a critical consideration of Australian life. Australian universities slowly developed a research capacity, but Britain remained the favoured location for postgraduate study, even if some Australians were frustrated by British snobbery and disappointed by the standards of Oxbridge.[16] Thinkers across the political spectrum called for a realistic examination of Australian failures, i.e. the limitations of the dominant political orthodoxies of an insular and xenophobic labourism, and a complacent Anglophile conservatism. The sentiment was one of "realism", less in the philosophical sense than as an

[8] Opra, "One Big Union", *Daily Herald (Adelaide, SA : 1910 - 1924)* (Adelaide, SA), 11 April 1914, 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article125052482; AWU President, "President's Address", *Australian Worker (Sydney, NSW : 1913 - 1950)* (Sydney, NSW), 10 February 1916, 22, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article145763828.

[9] "Syndicalism and Society", *Western Star and Roma Advertiser (Qld. : 1875 - 1948)* (Qld.), 24 August 1912, 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article98154425.

[10] "Melbourne Letter", *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express (NSW : 1860 - 1938)* (NSW), 19 April 1912, 29, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article101187407; "The Real Intent of Syndicalism", *Bunbury Herald (WA : 1892 - 1919)* (WA), 4 July 1912, 5, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article87156769; "South Australian Parliament", *Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1889 - 1931)* (Adelaide, SA), 24 July 1912, 13, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article5314908; Anthony James Joseph St Ledger, "Newer Imperialism", *Herald (Melbourne, Vic. : 1861 - 1954)* (Melbourne, Vic.), 30 September 1916, 1, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242385851; J.H. Black, "The Notorious I.W.W. Cases", *Portland Observer and Normanby Advertiser (Vic. : 1914 - 1918)* (Vic.), 15 August 1918, MORNING, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article88196507; P.S. Cleary, "The One Big Union: A Failure Wherever Tried", *Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW : 1895 - 1942)* (Sydney, NSW), 14 November 1918, 21, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article105965389.

[11] Michael Roe, *Nine Australian progressives : vitalism in bourgeois social thought, 1890-1960* (University of Queensland Press, 1984), 1-4.

[12] Calculated from the National Library of Australia Trove on 10 June 2022 https://trove.nla.gov.au/help/categories/newspapers-and-gazettes-category.

[13] James Franklin, *Corrupting the youth : a history of philosophy in Australia* (Macleay Press, 2003), 114-24.

[14] "A Great French Philosopher", *Western Mail (Perth, WA : 1885 - 1954)* (Perth, WA), 18 December 1914, 43, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article44752624; Roe, *Nine Australian progressives*, 5.

[15] Jeff Sparrow, "Guido Baracchi, Betty Roland and the Soviet Union", in Sheila Fitzpatrick and Carolyn Rasmussen (eds), *Political Tourists: Travellers from Australia to the Soviet Union in the 1920s-1940s* (Melbourne University Press, 2008), 123.

[16] Alison Patrick, "Kathleen Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (1905–1990)", Australian Dictionary of Biography, 2007, accessed 23 April 2025, https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fitzpatrick-kathleen-elizabeth-12500.

aspiration to face facts and to inspire action. Yet these thinkers, like Sorel, were torn between cultural critique and direct political involvement.[17] The career of John Anderson displayed this ambiguity.

Anderson soon made his mark on local intellectual life after his Australian arrival in 1927. He was the first Australian thinker to give intellectual attention to Sorel. Anderson came from a family tradition of labour radicalism. As an undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh he studied science and shared in the reaction against idealism that inspired analytical philosophy.[18] Creagh Cole argued that Anderson's interest in Sorel reflected the strength of syndicalism in Scotland, especially Glasgow. [19]

Anderson first encountered Sorel as a syndicalist. In 1960 he recalled reading, "cover to cover" the British magazine *New Age* to which Sorel's English translator T. E. Hulme was a regular contributor. From this journal he took the idea of socialism "as a form of social criticism and not…an object of social advocacy" and focused on an historical understanding of the role of the producers. [20] The claim that socialism was not a form of "advocacy" but rather "criticism" reflected the late Anderson's political pessimism.

John Anderson was the first European-style intellectual in Australia, a figure with a personal following based upon his influence on students and his profile as a provocative commentator on public affairs. His commentary ranged far outside his intellectual remit, in opposition to conventional wisdom both right and left. [21] "Realism" for Anderson had a distinct philosophical meaning but for his disciples it meant more a performative tough-mindedness.[22] This style resembled that of James Burnham.[23]

Anderson's work ranged widely. He drew elements from a disparate range of thinkers, in particular Europeans such as Sorel, Vico, and Lenin. His students received a more "continental" education than others in the Australian university system. Anderson's highest intellectual productivity, in the sense of the production of journal articles, was prior to his rejection of the workers' movement around 1940. However, his most sustained reflections on politics were produced after this date. Anderson was not however a great conventional scholar, in the sense of one whose work systematically engaged with his predecessors.[24]

For much of his life Anderson wanted to be more than a detached cultural critic. In an influential formulation in 1962, the historian Manning Clark placed Anderson within a

[17] Stephen Alomes, "Intellectuals as Publicists 1920s to 1940s", in Brian Head and James Walter (eds), *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 70-85; Gregory Melleuish, *Cultural liberalism in Australia : a study in intellectual and cultural history* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 106-08.
[18] Brian Kennedy, *A Passion to Oppose: John Anderson, Philosopher* (Melbourne University Press, 1995), 18-70.
[19] Creagh McLean Cole, "Libertarian Traditions: F.A. Hayek and John Anderson", *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58, no. 1 (2012): 56-57; Creagh McLean Cole, "John Anderson's Political Thought Revisited", *Australian Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (2009): 233-5.
[20] John Anderson [1960], "Orage and the New Age Circle (1960)", in John Anderson, *Art and Reality: John Anderson on Literature and Aesthetics*, eds Janet Anderson, Graham Cullum, and Kimon Lycos (Sydney University Press, 2017), 277.
[21] John A. Passmore, "Philosophy", in *The Pattern of Australian Culture*, ed. Alan L. McLeod (Cornell University Press, 1963), 149; Peter Coleman, "Recovering from a Stammer", *The Bulletin*, 30 June 1962, https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-673081261/view?partId=nla.obj-673274231. Mark Weblin, "John Anderson (1893-1962)", *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* accessed 27 April 2025, https://iep.utm.edu/john-anderson/.
[22] Eugene Kamenka, "The Andersonians", *Quadrant* 31, no. 7 (July 1987): 60.
[23] James Burnham [1943], *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (Lume Books, 2019), 16, 30-31, 92.
[24] John A. Passmore, *Memoirs of a Semi-detached Australian* (Melbourne University Press, 1997), 94-96.

distinctively Sydney tradition of skepticism and individualism that went back to prewar vitalism, opposed to a Melbourne tradition of melioristic optimism.[25] Former students of Anderson have rejected this assertion and argued that he would have had no time for the sentimental expressivism of vitalism.[26] Anderson himself disparaged romanticism and opposed it to classicism.[27] Here he echoed the argument of Sorel's first English translator, T. E. Hulme, although Anderson never cited him by name.[28]Yet as Anderson's biographer notes, there was a tension between realist and romantic elements in his thought.[29] In 1941, as he renounced socialism, Anderson declared that the definition of artistic experience was that of "the struggle of a soul from bondage to freedom, from moral compromise to artistic integrity". [30] This was a classically romantic aspiration. For the first half of his career, however, Anderson presented himself both as the slayer of illusions but also as one, like Sorel, emotionally committed to the working-class movement.[31] He aspired to challenge the illusions of bourgeois society not as an individual dissenter but as the representative of the proletariat.

Anderson came to Australia with a deep-seated suspicion of the philanthropic state. Australian labourism – with its legalism, protectionism and dependence on the state – was immediately unattractive to him. He aligned himself with the tiny Communist Party of Australia and from the late 1920s enthusiastically defended international Communist orthodoxy: that social democratic parties, such as the Labor Party were social fascist.[32] He soon departed the Communists and aligned himself with the even smaller Trotskyist movement.

Anderson was a trenchant critic of the Christian-tinged Idealism that characterized much Australian philosophy at the time of his arrival. His "realist" alternative was however distinct from the narrow focus of later analytical philosophy. In 1930 Anderson argued that realism "proposes as the formal solution of any problem the interaction of complex things" rather than the discovery of meaning and purposes inherent in these things.[33] Marxists, he argued, were correct to recognize "that all things are events or processes, interacting with other processes".[34] He argued however that the "dialectical materialism" of official Communism, attributed a teleology to natural processes.[35]

Anderson was an intellectual combatant by nature. One foe was utilitarianism, which in the Australian context implied not the minimal government of the Victorian era but the application of the power of the state to serve group ends.[36] For the young Anderson this approach was represented most of all by Australian labourism. He was however unenthused by the conservative response to Australian labourism. Australian conservatism espoused an unreflective Anglophile traditionalism. From the thirties, younger Catholic intellectuals added an appeal to the eternal truths of natural law. Until around 1940 Anderson as a man of the left

[25] C. M. H. Clark, "Faith", in *Australian Civilization*, ed. Peter Coleman (F. W. Cheshire, 1962), 85.
[26] Passmore, *Memoirs of a Semi-detached Australian*, 95.
[27] John Anderson [1943], "Romanticism and Classicism" in Anderson, *Art and Reality*, 43.
[28] T.E. Hulme, "Translator's Preface", in Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T.E. Hulme (Allen & Unwin, 1916), xi; T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1924), 111-41.
[29] Kennedy, *A Passion to Oppose*, 192.
[30] John Anderson [1941], "Art and Morality" in Anderson, *Art and Reality*, 88.
[31] Peter Beilharz, "John Anderson and the Syndicalist Moment", *Political Theory Newsletter*, no. 5 (1993): 5-13.
[32] John Anderson [1930], "What is social fascism ?" in John Anderson, *A Perilous and Fighting Life: From Communist to Conservative: The Political Writings of Professor John Anderson*, ed. Mark Weblin (Sydney: Pluto, 2003), 59-65.
[33] John Anderson [1930], "Realism and Some of its Critics", in John Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2005), 73; Cole, "John Anderson's Political Thought Revisited", 237.
[34] John Anderson [1935], "Marxist Philosophy " in Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, 393.
[35] Anderson, "Marxist Philosophy", 373.
[36] William Keith Hancock, *Australia* (Ernest Benn, 1930), 67-86.

was preoccupied with the contest against utilitarian labourism, but after that he extended this criticism of utilitarianism to the entire socialist tradition. From the mid-forties he was an opponent of the left, but he could never be at home with the moralism and traditionalism of establishment conservatism, and the faith in government that it shared with labourism. The conservative Anderson withdrew to the isolation of academic life. The Andersonians were mostly men and women of the right who shared aspects Anderson's critique of establishment conservatism, but unlike him they were political combatants. Their careers illustrated Quentin Skinner's contention that ideas are weapons in politics.[37]They, most of all Peter Coleman, had to find common ground with the mainstream right.

Anderson's interest in Sorel emerged out of a preoccupation with ethics. Morality for Anderson, as for Sorel, was a central concern. For Anderson ethics was a scientific delineation of the nature of the good, not a set of abstract rules. [38] He believed that there was a "positive science" of ethics, as opposed to utilitarianism, but he did not see this in terms of the abstract moral principles of the natural law conservatism expressed by the Australian Catholic intellectual revival of the period. Like Sorel, Anderson was preoccupied with morality but rejected "moralism".[39] For Anderson, Sorel also offered a critique of orthodox Marxism which Anderson saw as a combination of ethical relativism and a simplistic moralism.[40] Sorel, Anderson argued in 1933, had opened up ethics to scientific enquiry by his idea of the "ethics of the producers": the identification of production as a value in itself, "the Marxist concept of society as organisation for production".[41] Despite Sorel's "Bergsonian confusions", Anderson argued in 1932 that his concern was "with movements as they are in themselves".[42] The worker's ethics of production, as an end in itself, Anderson contended, was opposed to an ethics of consumption apparent in those capitalists who valued the end of profit above production. [43] Anderson rejected the evaluation of social processes on teleological grounds as means to ends. In Anderson's Marxist phase, the ethics of the producers emerged out of the process of material production. In Sorel's perspective, the participation of workers in struggle and collective production would create a discipline that was not arbitrarily imposed but reflected "the deepest feelings of the soul."[44]

Those of Anderson's students who admired Sorel have shared this understanding of him as first and foremost a theorist of ethics. Creagh Cole, the most recent scholar of Anderson's thought, has come to a similar conclusion. This understanding of Sorel emerged to academic dominance from the seventies and supplanted older visions of him as a voluntarist advocate of irrationalism. [45] Anderson's approach anticipated this trend.[46]

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[37] Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3-53.
[38] Mark Weblin, "Concluding Scientific Postscript", in Anderson, *A Perilous and Fighting Life*, 273.
[39] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 218.
[40] Anderson, "Marxist Philosophy", 377-78; Anderson [1937], "Marxist Ethics" in Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, 405; John Anderson [1945], "Lectures on Socialism", in *Lectures on Political Theory 1941-45* (Sydney University Press, 2007), 195-96.
[41] John Anderson [1933], "Realism versus relativism in ethics", in Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, 310-11.
[42] John Anderson [1932], "Some Questions in Aesthetics", in Anderson, *Art and Reality*, 8-9.
[43] Anderson, "Marxist Ethics", 412-13.
[44] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 239.
[45] Creagh McLean Cole, "The Ethics of the Producers: Sorel, Anderson and Macintyre", *History of Political Thought* 31, no. 1 (2010): 155-76, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26224092; Cole, "John Anderson's Political Thought Revisited"..
[46] Cole, "John Anderson's Political Thought Revisited", 238-39.

As in Italy, the Australian Sorel was understood as a constructive thinker whose thought could be drawn upon to build a new order. The emphasis on Sorel and Anderson as ethical theorists however downplays the centrality of the working-class movement to their intellectual practice.[47] As late as 1940, Anderson argued that "the working class spirit is not dead", and that despite the deadweight of their parasitic organisations, workers retained an inherent opposition to capitalism.[48] Within a few years, however, he concluded that the labour movement had surrendered to the ethics of consumption, and the ideal of utilitarian redistribution rather than creative production, and that Sorel's critique of parliamentary socialism was applicable not just to the Labor Party but to any attempt at working class political activity. He concluded that Communism was now the principal threat to Australian liberty.[49]

If the thirties Anderson was a Marxist, he was a "western Marxist" in Perry Anderson's sense, focused on questions of philosophy and aesthetics.[50] Capitalism appeared to Anderson, writing in 1932, most of all as a "commercial civilization" characterized by distinct values not as a mode of production with its own laws.[51] Even as Anderson rejected socialism, he retained this suspicion of commerce. Artistic activity, he argued in 1941, was a way to escape the hold of "bourgeois values". [52] He now understood Sorel as a social critic, the defender of production against consumption. In 1945 Anderson argued that for Sorel the syndicalist general strike was not an "actual event" but a "theoretical device for bringing out sharply the difference between the two mentalities."[53] In 1954, Coleman argued that Sorel did not identify work with "workers" as a social category.[54] The approach of the late Anderson and Coleman resembled that which in 1911 T. E .Hulme, the English translator of *Reflections,* had espoused in his preface to the work. He presented Sorel as a warrior against civilizational decadence rather than a champion of the proletariat. Hulme's worldview asserted the reality of absolute moral values and a pessimistic view of human nature.[55] Hulme, like Isaiah Berlin, identified Sorel as champion of moral absolutism.[56]

Hulme's style was very different from the empiricism and traditionalism of the prewar British right. It looked more towards the example of European conservatism, conceived in fear of domestic revolution and the radical enlightenment. Many European conservatives, and some Americans, felt estranged from commercial civilization, of which they often saw Jews as the exemplar.[57] The fascist debacle ended the dream of a conservative alternative economic system to capitalism, but conservative anti-capitalism remained as a cultural critique. [58] An unreflective conservatism was impracticable in the cold war. Hulme's conservative principles

[47] Giordani and Mead, "'The Regeneration of Society'", 105-11.
[48] John Anderson [1940], "The Present Position of the Labour Movement" in Anderson, *A Perilous and Fighting Life*, 190-93.
[49] Anderson, "The Present Position of the Labour Movement", 190-91; Anderson, "Lectures on Socialism", 139; John Anderson [1946], "Letters to Origlass and Marshall" in Anderson, *A Perilous and Fighting Life,* 221-24.
[50] Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), 43-44.
[51] Anderson, "Some Questions in Aesthetics" in Anderson, *Art and Reality,* 8-9.
[52] Ibid., 8-9; John Anderson [1941], "The Banning of Ulysses", in Anderson, *Art and Reality*, 103.
[53] Anderson, "Lectures on Socialism", 183.
[54] Peter Coleman, "The Political Philosophy of Georges Sorel" (M.Sc (Econ) London School of Economics, 1954), 101-02.
[55] Hulme, "Translator's Preface", ix.
[56] Isaiah Berlin, "Georges Sorel", in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 390.
[57] Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 54-56; Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot* (Regnery, 2008), 356-66.
[58] Peter Kolozi, *Conservatives Against Capitalism: From the Industrial Revolution to Globalization* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 98.

were echoed in a more mundane style by the conservatives of the fifties, such as Russell Kirk.[59] From the seventies neo-conservatism drew upon the social sciences to support a pessimistic evaluation of the prospects of social improvement and deplored the self-indulgence of a consumerist society and the politics of identity.[60] An interpretation of Sorel as a cultural critic of pessimism and moral absolutism, on the lines that Hulme proposed, could render him compatible with a pessimistic liberalism. Coleman's reading of Sorel would be close to this position.

The socialist Anderson criticized Fabian elitism as ignorant "of the working-class movement, of social capacity and political forces".[61] After his turn from Marxism, he struggled to identify a movement that could defend the ethics of the producers. In 1947, Anderson argued that Sorel's focus on material production was misguided and encouraged a view of socialism as hierarchical organization for the utilitarian goal of increased consumption.[62] Anderson presumably had the Soviet experience in mind, but it was probably as applicable to the consciously "Sorelian" rhetoric of the Italian national-syndicalist tradition. These thinkers claimed to draw on Sorel to legitimate a productivist politics in which hierarchy was equated with non-political coordination for the common good. In interwar Australia, local spokespeople for the Italian regime had evoked this understanding of Sorel. [63]

In 1943, Anderson argued that ethics was a way of life manifest in the distinction "between science and obscurantism, between arts and philistinism, between the productive and the consumptive spirit…between freedom and servility".[64] Yet Anderson wanted to distinguish this vision from romantic ideas of individual creativity to which it might sound similar. Sorel is described by Berlin as committed to such a romantic vision. [65] It is an argument rejected by recent analysts of Sorel who emphasise Sorel's focus on the realities of collective production.[66]

The post-socialist Anderson claimed to eschew romanticism. Artistic production, he argued in 1941, was not a reflection of society, but neither was it a romantic expression of individual creativity. Rather, it had the potential to express the collective ethics of the producers.[67] How exactly this would occur was, however, undefined. The later Anderson struggled to identify a real base for ethical practice. For a time, he hoped universities could stand against the tide, but he grew increasingly pessimistic that they too had been corrupted by utilitarianism and egalitarianism.[68] Briefly he gave some attention to private capitalists. Sorel had seen in the American culture of ingenuity and inventiveness, even as expressed in some capitalists, the values of Nietzsche's masters.[69] In a 1945 lecture, Anderson argued against James Burnham

[59] Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot*, 3-11.
[60] Irving Kristol, "'When Virtue Loses All Her Loneliness'-Some Reflections on Capitalism and the 'the Free Society'", The Public Interest 21 (Fall 1970): 3-15.
[61] Anderson, "The Applecart (1932)", 124.
[62] John Anderson, "Anderson on Marx and Marxism (1947)", *Heraclitus*, no. 95 (2002), https://www.marxists.org/history/australia/libertarians/anderson/anderson-marxism.htm.
[63] Andrea Torre, "The Corporative System and Functions of the Italian Chamber", *Italian Bulletin of Commerce (Sydney, NSW : 1929 - 1935)* (Sydney, NSW), 1 October 1929, 3, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article259096896; A. Baccarini, "The Spiritual Crisis of a Nation", *Italian Bulletin of Commerce (Sydney, NSW : 1929 - 1935)* (Sydney, NSW), 1 May 1931, 1, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article260433305.
[64] John Anderson [1943], "The Nature of Ethics" in in Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, 267.
[65] Berlin, "Georges Sorel", 376-77.
[66] Brandom, "Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock", 759-61.
[67] Anderson, "Art and Morality ", 87-90.
[68]Anderson, "Empiricism and Logic (1962)", 236-37.
[69] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 232-33.

that some capitalists still manifested qualities of "direction". Capitalists were not just administrators as Burnham argued. It was still possible Anderson contended for capitalists to uphold Sorel's values of "enterprise".[70] In 1954 Coleman, who had probably attended Anderson's lecture, similarly argued that Sorel's entrepreneurs were not Burnham's managers.[71]

It was however an unrealistic judgment. Australian capitalists were mostly insular and self-interested, often reliant on tariffs and regulation, and those with broader horizons championed a corporate liberal welfare state. [72] Anderson read Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, but although both shared a critique of the paternalistic state, Hayek, and even more later neoliberals, appealed to the ethics of the consumers in their support of economic growth.[73] One student of Anderson, Gordon Barton, was inspired by Sorel's idea of the producers' ethics and Joseph Schumpeter's theory of entrepreneurship to embark on a successful business career that began as a disruptive challenger of transport regulation. Barton, however, ultimately saw his business activities as a means to support left-libertarian causes and a bohemian lifestyle. [74]

Despite Anderson's disappointments, he remained confident in his ability to stand against the tide. One aspect of this was his persistent hostility to organized religion. James Burnham argued that popular illusions and false beliefs could be beneficial to social stability.[75] Anderson's realism implied a relentless war on such illusions. This contrasted with some of his younger admirers. To James McAuley, the former Andersonian and poet, intellectual interest in Sorel could only be a superficial manifestation of dissent from liberal orthodoxy, only traditionalist Catholicism, for him, could effectively resist the cult of progressivism.[76] Peter Coleman was deeply attracted to McAuley's belief, but was unable to make such a leap of faith.[77] Coleman's interest in Sorel was in part an attempt to distance himself from Anderson's scepticism.

The contribution of Anderson to the Australian understanding of Sorel was profound, and his argument that Sorel was first and foremost a theorist of ethics was taken up, amongst others, by the Andersonian Eugene Kamenka. Did this make Anderson a Sorelian? Analysts have disagreed, Peter Coleman argued that Anderson took only the idea of the ethics of the producers from Sorel and was ignorant of the totality of Sorel's work, in particular his traditionalism and moral conservatism. The conservative Coleman evoked Sorel's traditionalism against Anderson's skepticism. Creagh Cole however argued against Coleman that ethics were central to Sorel's work. [78]

This disagreement spoke to the ambiguities of a Sorelian politics: if no actual bearers of the producers' ethics appeared, then Sorelianism threatened to become a utopia, grounded only in the aspirations of dissenting individuals. This could bolster a style of performative

[70] Anderson, "Lectures on Socialism", 184.
[71] Coleman, "The Political Philosophy of Georges Sorel", 111.
[72] Charles D. Kemp, *Big Businessmen: Four Biographical Essays* (Institute of Public Affairs, 1964), 83-84.
[73] Cole, "Libertarian Traditions: F.A. Hayek and John Anderson"..
[74] Sam Everingham, *Gordon Barton: Australia's Maverick Entrepreneur* (Allen & Unwin, 2009), 23, 32, 229-30; Valerie Lawson, "A style all of his own", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 April 2005, https://www.smh.com.au/national/a-style-all-of-his-own-20050411-gdl3vm.html.
[75] Burnham, *The Machiavellians*, 217.
[76] James McAuley, "On Being an Intellectual", *Quadrant* 4, no. 1 (1959): 23-31.
[77] Geoffrey Robinson, "From Georges Sorel to Peter Costello: Peter Coleman and the making of Australian liberal-conservatism", *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 68, no. 3 (2022): 451-52.
[78] Peter Coleman, "Was Georges Sorel an Andersonian?", *Quadrant* 46, no. 9 (2002): 56; Cole, "John Anderson's Political Thought Revisited", 237.

conservatism, of the self-conscious evocation of tradition against modernity. Sorel's own cooperation with the monarchist right before 1914 exemplified this style. Sorel turned away from these interests in his late years and was enthused by Bolshevism and anticolonialism but those of Anderson's students who carried on his enthusiasm for Sorel could not find comparable examples in Australia.

3.The Andersonians

Anderson rejected romantic individualism, but his style was powerfully attractive to those who felt alienated both from orthodox conservatism and from the established left. It appealed to practitioners of a cultural politics who wanted to make an impact on public life, but found the mundane world of Australian party politics unappealing. The global project that for many represented this opportunity was "cold war liberalism", incarnated by the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom and its Australian journal, *Quadrant*.

Some from this milieu took up Anderson's enthusiasm for Sorel. The leading figures in this milieu were the journalist and politician Peter Coleman, the writer Neil McInnes and the historian of ideas Eugene Kamenka. Their engagement with Sorel was in part shaped by their attitudes towards Anderson, and these attitudes were in part determined by their own level of political involvement. Anderson had briefly placed hopes in Communism, Trotskyism and the Liberal Party, but had no aspirations to political power. His style did not provide a model for political success in an affluent and conformist society. Like Michael Oakeshott, the late Anderson was on the right, but he was not in the organised right. Coleman complained that Anderson's late 1940s critique of Labor's economic planning was cast in a language that had little popular appeal.[79] McInnes moved in a different political space. He spent much of his working life outside Australia, as a financial journalist and freelance writer. With a focus on western Marxism and Eurocommunism, he was an active participant in the milieu of cold war liberalism. He returned to Australia in the late seventies for a second career as advisor to successive governments on national security policy.[80] If Coleman's enemies were the Labor Party and, from the seventies, the antinomian intelligentsia, McInnes confronted political Marxism, in the form of European Communism, much more directly. Compared to Coleman, McInnes' engagement with Marxism was much more systematic, and he was more willing to situate Sorel in relation to Marxism. Eugene Kamenka, born in Germany in 1928, was a scholar of Marxism, and the child of Jewish leftwing refugees from Bolshevism and later Nazism.[81] He was briefly close to the Communist Party at Sydney University, but soon turned to social democracy and Zionist activism.[82]Kamenka was an academic, not a politician or government insider, but as a young academic his incentives lay in challenging the cold war dismissal of Marxism.

Coleman, McInnes and Kamenka were the Australians who gave systematic attention to Sorel, but allusions to Sorel were also apparent in the work of the Sydney Libertarians. This group and the associated milieu of "the Push" coalesced in the late forties out of those Andersonians who believed that his exaggeration of the threat of domestic Communism bolstered domestic conservatism, a society of status opposed to a dynamic society of producers.[83]

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[79] Peter Coleman, *Memoirs of a Slow Learner* (Connor Court Publishing, 2015), 33.
[80] Peter C. Grundy, "Neil McInnes 1924-2017", *Quadrant* 61, no. 9 (2017): 78-80.
[81] David Lovell, "Kamenka, Eugene (1928–1994)", Australian Dictionary of Biography, Australian Dictionary of Biography, 2018, accessed 21 June 2022, https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kamenka-eugene-27242.
[82] Alan Barcan, *Radical Students: The Old Left at Sydney University* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 192, 214. "Scholarship For Sydney Man", *Australian Jewish Herald (Melbourne, Vic. : 1935 - 1968)* (Melbourne, Vic.), 28 January 1955, 3, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article261445897.
[83] Barcan, *Radical Students: The Old Left at Sydney University*, 250-54.

Peter Coleman's project was to harmonize aspects of Anderson and Sorel's work with mainstream conservative politics. The venture seemed quixotic in the fifties, but it became more relevant from the later sixties as growing cultural diversity and the decline of deference undercut the traditional foundations of Australian conservatism. Coleman was a student of Anderson's at Sydney University. In 1951, Coleman commenced a masters' degree at the London School of Economics, with a thesis on Georges Sorel under the supervision of Michael Oakeshott. The style of the thesis is expository and summary, but the image it presents is of Sorel as a conservative and liberal figure, a position that Coleman mostly defended throughout his life. Coleman emphasized Sorel's early sympathy with revisionism, and Bernstein's concept of socialism as a movement rather than an end state and argued that syndicalists had supported liberal reforms despite their rejection of political involvement.[84] This interpretation foreshowed Coleman's own later advocacy of piecemeal "liberal" reforms.[85]

Coleman rejected the suggestion that Sorel's work had contributed to fascism, and argued the syndicalist violence that Sorel evoked was far removed from brutality. [86] James Burnham had made a similar argument a few years earlier.[87] Coleman's positive evaluation of Sorel was a challenge to the orthodoxy of Cold War liberalism. Thinkers within this tradition tended to dismiss Sorel as a prophet of irrationalism whose work exemplified the fusion of left and right that issued in totalitarianism.[88] Coleman's style reflected the distinctive nature of the Australian Sorel and of Coleman's own conservatism. Coleman identified with the project of cold war liberalism but, like Irving Kristol, whom he admired, he was a dispositional conservative. He evoked Sorel's traditionalism against Anderson's individualism. Edwards Shils, in his introduction to the 1950 American edition of *Reflections on Violence,* saw the work as a reminder of a time when socialism was more than a set of institutional arrangements, but the expectation of a total transformation. Shils ultimately agreed with the cold war critique of Sorel, but his admiration reflected a sentiment divergent from a complacent liberalism.[89] Coleman admired Shils.[90]They both shared an apocalyptic response to the new left.[91]

In a 2004 article, Coleman looked back to Burnham's 1943 *The Machiavellians*. Burnham was the only figure of the fifties American right to which Coleman gave sustained attention. This interest contrasted with the general disinterest of neoconservatives in Burnham.[92] For Coleman, what Burnham took from Sorel was pessimism about the possibility of social transformation, a commitment to "moral secession from the existing order" which Sorel called violence, and a search for a myth which he found in the global battle against communism. [93] In describing Burnham, Coleman described himself.

[84] Coleman, "The Political Philosophy of Georges Sorel", 48-49.
[85] Robinson, "From Georges Sorel to Peter Costello: Peter Coleman and the making of Australian liberal-conservatism", 452.
[86] Coleman, "The Political Philosophy of Georges Sorel", 140-41.
[87] Burnham, *The Machiavellians*, 134.
[88] Brandom, "Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock", 748-52.
[89] Edward Shils, "Introduction to the American Edition" in Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (The Free Press, 1950), 11-12, 25.
[90] Peter Coleman, "Edward Shils 1910-1995. Obituary", *Quadrant* 39, no. 4 (April 1995): 45-48.
[91] Edward Shils, "Totalitarians and Antinomians", in John H. Bunzel (ed.), *Political Passages: Journeys of Change Through Two Decades 1968-1988* (The Free Press, 1988), 1-31; Robinson, "From Georges Sorel to Peter Costello: Peter Coleman and the making of Australian liberal-conservatism", 451.
[92] "[Burnham and neoconservatives]", X, 2024, accessed 29 May 2025, https://x.com/Joshua_A_Tait/status/1809863045272805662.
[93] Peter Coleman, "The Machiavellian Poetry of James Burnham", *Quadrant* 48, no. 10 (October 2004): 84-6.

Coleman's interest in Oakeshott was another sign of his divergence from cold war liberalism. We know nothing of the interaction between Coleman and Oakeshott during the writing of the former's thesis. In 1961, Oakeshott included Sorel – along with Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Burckhardt – as defenders of elite civilization against the conformist and barbaric anti-individual masses of the democratic electorate.[94] Coleman avowed himself an admirer of Oakeshott and in 1959 he described Oakeshott as Nietzschean rather than Burkean in his admiration for the ancient world.[95] As an aspirant politician in an egalitarian democracy, however, Coleman showed little interest in a reading of Sorel as radical elitist.

In the long boom of the cold war, it was easy for Coleman to argue that Marx's empirical propositions of catastrophe had been refuted.[96] Far from emancipatory, they had issued in a dictatorial and Blanquist politics – a possibility that Sorel, Coleman argued, had identified early. Coleman's interest for Sorel lay in his presentation of Marx as an advocate of working-class autonomy and organization on Proudhonian lines. For Coleman, Sorel rejected class war as a struggle for division of spoils, preferring to emphasize workers' rights to participate in the organization of industry. Sorel was actually a "skeptical liberal", but erred in his desire to marry liberalism to a heroic and romantic morality. [97] This depiction was also an implicit critique of Anderson's disdain for mass culture and democracy. The strength of liberalism, Coleman argued, lay in skepticism.[98] This interpretation implied a critique of the natural law conservatism of the Catholic right, as championed by McAuley, even despite Coleman's emotional attraction to this style. Sorel, Coleman argued, understood legal systems as the manifestation of a historical process rather than as the mechanical implementation of abstract principles, such as those of natural law.[99]

Coleman faced an unusual political environment in the 1950s. The Labor Party, having split on the issue of Communism in 1954, seemed politically irrelevant.[100] Despite this, many thinkers of the right felt that the left retained a cultural ascendancy, and that many intellectuals still understood Australian history as a story of egalitarian democracy in which the working class was the force of "initiative" opposed to the "resistance" of the right. Coleman was one of a grouping of younger intellectuals, many inspired by the example of American pluralist social science, who challenged this vision. Their vision of Australian democracy was pluralism. They argued for a recognition of the dynamic role of the middle-class, liberals and religious communities in Australian life.[101] Coleman was enthused by their work and went beyond their description to evoke the possibility of a new Australia characterized by values enterprise and autonomy as opposed to the insular, utilitarian, and levelling egalitarianism of the working class. The ethic of the producers belonged, this is to say, to the middle classes.[102] This approach de-radicalized Anderson, and even more Sorel. Anderson's vision of a society characterized by

[94] Michael Oakeshott [1961], "The masses in representative democracy" in *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Liberty Fund, 1991), 376.
[95] Peter Coleman, "Oakeshott's Neo-conservatism", *The Australian Highway*, April 1959, 3.
[96] Coleman, "The Political Philosophy of Georges Sorel", 79.
[97] Peter Coleman, "No Heroism for Liberals: The Neo-Marxism of Georges Sorel", *The Australian Highway*, July 1959.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Coleman, "The Political Philosophy of Georges Sorel", 30, 72-73, 116-17; Robinson, "From Georges Sorel to Peter Costello: Peter Coleman and the making of Australian liberal-conservatism", 454.
[100] Peter Coleman, "Life without Labour", *Observer* 2, no. 1 (1959).
[101] Peter Coleman, "Introduction: The New Australia", in *Australian Civilization*, ed. Peter Coleman (F. W. Cheshire, 1962), 8-9.
[102] Peter Coleman, "Proletarian Liberal", *Observer* 1, no. 10 (1958): 2; Peter Coleman, "Why Unions Fail", *Observer* 2, no. 4 (1959).

the competition of different ways of life was defined down to a celebration of pluralist democracy. Burnham had made a similar argument previously.[103]

The cold war liberal project that Coleman championed ebbed from the later sixties. The end of Stalinism, the libertarian upsurge of social movements, and the modernization of the Labor Party under the social democratic leadership of Gough Whitlam seemed to render fifties battles irrelevant. Australia's most famous cold war liberal Donald Horne, former enthusiast for Hayek and Mises and *Quadrant* editor, celebrated this "time of hope" and now championed Labor.[104]

Few of Horne's colleagues followed him to the left. Coleman was from 1968 a politician for the conservative Liberal party. He believed the political right had to adapt. He and other admirers of Anderson had sought to construct a "radical conservatism", radical not in the sense of extremism but as a break with the insularity and moralism of the conservative establishment.[105] From the seventies. this aspiration took shape as neo-conservatism inspired by the threat of new left but also the political failures of the establishment right.

4.Australian neoconservatism

From the seventies Coleman cast cultural progressivism, as championed by an antinomian "new class" as a new threat to freedom.[106] His critique of student activism as violent irrationalism echoed the themes of those rightward moving American liberals who became neo-conservatives. In the United States the specter of Sorel, as understood by postwar critics, was sometimes evoked by neoconservatives in their attacks on youthful protestors as romantic irrationalists.[107]

Coleman himself did not make this equation. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, he did argue however that although Sorel had demonstrated a "conservative sense of civilisation" he was also at times a "dilettante of violence". It was necessary to identify a conservative Sorel that defined separatism as pluralism, and "violence" as independence. [108] There were aspects of the neoconservative project that could draw on Andersonian and Sorelian themes. Sorel had complained that moralism was easily reduced to rhetorical simplifications.[109] In Coleman's dissertation, he highlighted Sorel's concern with morality as a way of life rather than as moralism.[110]

For Coleman, anti-moralism was a political tool against left-liberalism. In the nineties he championed the American crusade against "political correctness" and edited an influential collection of essays, including some by sixties leftists, on its excesses.[111] The decline of the

[103] Burnham, *The Machiavellians*, 118, 249.
[104] Ryan Cropp, *Donald Horne: A Life in the Lucky Country* (La Trobe University Press, 2023), 44-45, 51, 55, 239, 63.
[105] Pam Stavropoulos, "Conservative radicals : Australian neoconservatism and its intellectual antecedents", PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1989.
[106] Robinson, "From Georges Sorel to Peter Costello: Peter Coleman and the making of Australian liberal-conservatism", 452-53.
[107] Brandom, "Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock", 758-62.
[108] Peter Coleman, "Reflections on Violence", in *Blaming ourselves : September 11 and the agony of the left*, ed. Imre Salusinszky and Gregory Melleuish (Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002), 59.
[109] Georges Sorel, "The Socialist Future of the Syndicates (1898)", in Georges Sorel, *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy*, ed. John L. Stanley (Oxford University Press, 1976), 90-91.
[110] Coleman, "The Political Philosophy of Georges Sorel", 1-2.
[111] Peter Coleman, "Introduction: the morning after", in Peter Coleman (ed.), *Doubletake: Six incorrect essays* (Mandarin, 1996); Peter Coleman, "What is political correctness?", *Quadrant* 44, no. 3 (2000): 22-24.

totalitarian threat and the turn of Australian historiography to a focus on the experience of racism undercut the political right's claims to moral superiority.[112] Coleman accused progressives of a self-righteous swagger.[113] He particularly deplored progressive sentimentalism.[114] Coleman's aggressive style recalled Sorel's period of cooperation with the radical and antisemitic right, against the Dreyfusard establishment. [115] Compared however to many on the right Coleman was less prone to the counter-moralisation of assertions of civilizational superiority. [116]He was a conventional supporter of economic liberalism, not on the grounds of natural rights libertarianism, but as a nursery for the bourgeois values.[117]

Coleman's vehement attacks on the antinomian and moralising left were combined with an identification with the institutions of liberal society and of mainstream conservatives, including when they came under criticism from the populist right.[118] Eric Brandom argues that Sorel's engagement with the radical right represented a response to the invincibility of the Republican order rather than an anticipation of its overthrow.[119] Coleman similarly took for granted the stability of the Australian liberal order.

The dominant tone of the campaign against political correctness was less conservatism than that of an assertive individualism, which accounted for its attraction to some left libertarians. It anticipated contemporary conservative performativity. It was, however, a tone far removed from Anderson and Sorel's vision of moral conflict, understood as a battle between competing ways of life, not one of heroic individual truth-tellers against the herd. [120] What counted for Coleman in Sorel was the spirit of secession from, or rejection of, a decadent world.[121] Coleman's own political practice, as an aggressive but moderate neoconservative hardly amounted to a war against decadence, apart from a growing sympathy for the experience, if not the substance, of traditionalist religion.[122] Coleman was attracted to Sorel as a symbol of difference from conventional cold war liberalism or later neoconservatism, but this interest was always qualified for him by his dispositional conservatism.

Neil McInnes, like Sorel, argued that Marxism was weighted down by illusions. Much "Marxist philosophy" had been an attempt to preserve "dross—disproven prophecy, hasty generalization, and plain error" in Marxism after the matter useful to empirical social science had been extracted.[123] He argued that Western Marxism for all its claims to openness

[112] Geoffrey Robinson, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Party: Intellectuals and the Liberal Party of Australia* (Routledge, 2025), 136-37.
[113] Peter Coleman, "All That Swagger: Robert Manne's Virtuous Trajectory", *Quadrant* 49, no. 9 (September 2005): 82-5.
[114] Robinson, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Party*, 70.
[115] John L. Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (University of California Press, 1981), 270-90.
[116] Lawrence Wilde, "Sorel and the French Right", *History of Political Thought* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 361-74.
[117] Peter Coleman and Andrew Norton, "Conservative without a cause?", *Policy: A Journal of Public Policy and Ideas* 11, no. 1 (1995): 38-42.
[118] Robinson, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Party*, 77-79.
[119] Brandom, "Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock", 741.
[120] Anderson, "Anderson on Marx and Marxism (1947)", 231; Cole, "John Anderson's Political Thought Revisited", 231.
[121] Coleman, "Was Georges Sorel an Andersonian?", 58.
[122] Robinson, "From Georges Sorel to Peter Costello: Peter Coleman and the making of Australian liberal-conservatism", 463.
[123] Neil McInnes, "Marxist Philosophy", in Donald M. Borchert (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5 (Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 737.

maintained a mystical faith in totality.[124] Like Anderson, McInnes did not see Sorel as a romantic or irrationalist figure, and argued that Sorel's thought drew on specifically scientific anxieties about the growing levels of entropy, or disorder, within natural and social systems.[125] Compared to Coleman, McInnes was less repelled by Sorelian violence and took seriously Sorel's distinction between violence and force.[126] McInnes's personal politics seem to have been conventionally right of center, even though he served governments of different political persuasions. He argued that although Hayek's critique of socialist planning was confirmed by events, his assertion of a slippery road to serfdom was wrong.[127]

For McInnes, Sorel seems to have provided a critique in anticipation of new left romanticism.[128] McInnes attacked the new left reading of Antonio Gramsci represented by the Australian scholar Alastair Davidson, in which Sorel's influence on Gramsci was ignored.[129] McInnes argued that Davidson, through a narrow focus on the *Prison Notebooks,* came close to equating Gramsci with Herbert Marcuse in an emphasis on the role of intellectuals as a revolutionary force.[130] McInnes insisted instead that Gramsci was a Leninist committed to working class agency and activity.[131] Davidson contended, probably correctly, that McInnes' critique in part reflected his dislike of the humanist Marxism of the new left.[132] McInnes dismissed the young Marx's musings on alienation as irrelevant to his mature thought.[133] As an Andersonian, McInnes admired what he saw as Gramsci's attempt to combine "the tough-minded political practicality of communism with a liberal attachment to classical education and philosophical culture".[134] As a cold war combatant, McInnes saw himself upholding similar values from the opposite side. In a 1975 interpretation of Sorel's analysis of the trial of Socrates, McInnes argued that, for Sorel, Socrates was not to be understood as simple defender of liberal verities of freedom of conscience. Socratic rationalism, McInnes suggested, was for Sorel a form of domination.[135]

Eugene Kamenka was a former student of Anderson, who in 1955 secured a PhD scholarship at the new Australian National University. That year the project was defined as "Some Socialist Theories of Ethics", a newspaper summarised its content as an "emphasis on the work of Georges Sorel, and the differences between a producer's and a consumer's morality".[136] The project evolved to one of the "ethical foundations of Marxism". It was an early example of the sixties rediscovery of Marx as a serious political theorist. [137] There were few direct references

[124] McInnes, "Marxist Philosophy", 738.
[125] Neil McInnes, "Sorel, Georges (1847-1922)", in in Donald M. Borchert (ed.), *Encylopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 9 (Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 132-5.
[126] McInnes, "Sorel, Georges (1847-1922)".; Neil McInnes, "Georges Sorel", in Timothy Raison (ed.), *Founding Fathers of Social Science* (Penguin, 1969), 106-8.
[127] Neil McInnes, *The Road Not Taken: Hayek's Slippery Road to Serfdom* (Centre for Independent Studies, 1998).
[128] Neil McInnes, *The Western Marxists* (Alcove Press, 1972).
[129] Alastair Davidson, *Antonio Gramsci : towards an intellectual biography* (London: Merlin Press, 1977).
[130] Neil McInnes, "A caricature of Gramsci", *Politics* 4, no. 1 (1969): 115-16, https://doi.org/10.1080/00323266908401160.
[131] McInnes, "A caricature of Gramsci", 118.
[132] Alastair Davidson and Neil McInnes, "Gramsci: Caricature or unpalatable picture?", *Politics* 4, no. 2 (1969): 207-11, https://doi.org/10.1080/00323266908401171.
[133] McInnes, *The Western Marxists*, 29.
[134] Neil McInnes, "Gramsci, Antonio (1891-1937)", in Donald M. Borchert (ed.) *Encylopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 170.
[135] Neil McInnes, "Georges Sorel on The Trial of Socrates", *Politics* 10, no. 1 (1975): 37-43, https://doi.org/10.1080/00323267508401487.
[136] Australian Jewish Herald, "Scholarship For Sydney Man", 3.
[137] Eugene Kamenka, "The ethical foundations of Marxism", PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 1961, https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/10310; Eugene Kamenka, *The ethical foundations of*

to Sorel in the final thesis and book. Creagh Cole finds this curious.[138]Despite this Sorelian themes were central to the work and to Kamenka's later publications, most of all in his insistence that Marx was a philosopher of freedom rather than a utilitarian like Engels.[139]

Kamenka consistently argued there was a tension in Marx between focus on the economic preconditions of freedom and the aspiration to a true human morality, represented by Sorel's distinction between the ethics of the consumer focused on security and the heroic value of the producer, or the conflict between workers and intellectuals.[140] Later, Kamenka saw Sorel as anticipating the danger that socialism would amount to the rule of intellectuals in a bureaucratic state.[141]In reaction against the romanticism of sixties radicalism, Kamenka argued that Marx was not a speculative philosopher of the human condition but one who was focused on the social and material bases of political practice.[142] In the spirt of Sorel, Kamenka argued that for Marx ethics was not to be understood in the moralistic sense of rules for individual behaviour. Kamenka built on Anderson's critique of Lenin to argue that Soviet practice had transformed ethics into a pedestrian and moralistic technique of social control.[143] McInnes made a similar critique of Soviet ethics. [144] Marx, Kamenka contended, was distinctively anti-moralist, concerned with "social movements and social life".[145] Like Sorel and Coleman, Kamenka contended that Marx's enduring contributions were not in his empirical findings or even historical materialism, whose insights had now been incorporated into general understanding, but in Marx's rethinking of the nature of ethics. Marx's vision of communism was best understood by reference to Sorel's idea of the ethics of the producers. Kamenka contended that Marx's idea of creativity was distinct from romantic expressivist ideas of spontaneous individual creativity.[146]

Unlike McInnes, Kamenka insisted Marx's vision of communism as "freedom, of spontaneous cooperation, of men's self-conscious determination" was a consistent theme across his life.[147]For Kamenka, it was a futile effort to attempt to extract a proscriptive ethics from Marx's work. Rather, its value lay in recognition that moral discourse could only be undertaken in conjunction with the sociology and psychology of morals.[148] For Kamenka, this project could not ignore the truths of liberalism and the extent to which the capitalist market made it possible for men and women "to agree to common means while feeling they can maintain their diverse individual ends".[149] The new left shared Kamenka's conviction of Marx's intellectual

Marxism (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); Ian Hunt, "Marxist Philosophy", in Graham Oppy and Nick N. Trakakis (eds), *A Companion to Philosophy in Australia & New Zealand* 2nd ed. (Monash University Publishing, 2014), 274-75.

[138] Cole, "John Anderson's Political Thought Revisited"..

[139] Kamenka, *The ethical foundations of Marxism*, vii.

[140] Eugene Kamenka, "Marxian Humanism and the Crisis in Socialist Ethics", in Erich Fromm (ed.), *Socialist Humanism* (Allen Lane, 1965), 113, 16; Eugene Kamenka and Alice Erh-Soon Tay, "Freedom, law and the bureacratic state", in Eugene Kamenka and Marin Krygier (eds), *Bureaucracy: The Career of a Concept* (Edward Arnold, 1979), 114.

[141] Kamenka and Tay, "Freedom, law and the bureacratic state", 114.

[142] Kamenka, *The ethical foundations of Marxism*, viii.

[143] Kamenka, *The ethical foundations of Marxism*, 186; Anderson, "Lectures on Socialism", 132.

[144] McInnes, "Marxist Philosophy", 737.

[145] Eugene Kamenka, "Introduction", in Karl Marx, *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (Penguin, 1983), xxiv.

[146] Kamenka, *The ethical foundations of Marxism*, 113.

[147] Kamenka, "Marxian Humanism and the Crisis in Socialist Ethics", 112.

[148] Eugene Kamenka, *Marxism and Ethics* (Macmillan, 1969), 67.

[149] Kamenka, "Marxian Humanism and the Crisis in Socialist Ethics", 117.

significance, but their revolutionary politics diverged from his social democratic convictions and benign view of contemporary western society.[150]

The Sydney Libertarians and "the Push" were an attempt to live out the Andersonian vision, to model a bohemian lifestyle of "critical drinkers" who rejected the possibility of systematic political change but were committed to an eternal struggle against servility.[151] They emerged out of a 1950-51 split in the Andersonian Freethought society in reaction to Anderson's defence of military conscription and suppression of militant unions.[152] The presence of an authoritarian and corrupt state Labour government discouraged faith in possibilities of politics. Sorel's scepticism of the political class as mediated by Anderson struck a deep chord. A Libertarian theorist argued: "libertarians have no hope of reforming the world. They will remain a special interest group with no concern about promulgating policies for non-libertarians. Their concern is to maintain their own ways of going on against those of other interests which are hostile to them."[153] The mood of political despair was closer to Vilfredo Pareto, whom some Libertarians admired, than to Sorel, but the Libertarians did see themselves as defending their way of life in opposition to the materialist spirit of the age. Libertarians did express support for struggles against oppression such as those local militant unionists.[154] This was combined, however, with a strong stress on the impossibility of bringing about desired social change by state action. [155] Liberty, they argued, could not be secured through political means.[156] Instead, ideological struggle – the exposing of illusions – was the central goal.[157] Following Anderson, Libertarians argued that conventional anarchism was romantic and harmonic in its dream of social consensus.[158] Anderson had earlier argued against the moralistic theory that sexual activity must be purposeful and subordinated to the tasks of reproduction. Libertarians built on this interpretation, together with the work of Wilhelm Reich, to argue that casual sexual activity of a heterosexual variety could be a manifestation of the producers' ethics, as an activity not directed towards a specific end.[159] It was a style far removed from Sorel's moral traditionalism.

By the early 1970s, Sydney Libertarianism was in decline. The new world of activism seemed to render their bleak pessimism obsolete. The rise of feminism, espoused by younger Libertarian sympathisers such as Lynn Segal and Germaine Greer, also challenged their Reichian model of sexuality.[160] Eventually the new left's expressive individualism, and

[150] Kamenka and Tay, "Freedom, law and the bureacratic state", 112-13.
[151] Rudolf Smilde, "On Authoritarianism – A Reply", *Broadsheet*, no. 16 (1961), https://www.marxists.org/history/australia/libertarians/smilde/anti-authority.htm.
[152] Barcan, *Radical Students: The Old Left at Sydney University*, 270-71.
[153] David Iverson, "A Reading List for Libertarians", *Broadsheet*, no. 39 (1965), https://www.marxists.org/history/australia/libertarians/iverson/reading-list.htm.
[154] Rudolf Smilde, "Arbitration and the New Seamen's Accord", *Broadsheet*, no. 6 (1960), http://www.marxists.org/history/australia/libertarians/smilde/wharfies.htm.
[155] David Iverson, "Deadlock in Little Rock", *Broadsheet*, no. 1 (1956), https://www.marxists.org/history/australia/libertarians/iverson/little-rock.htm.
[156] David Iverson, "Is There a New Left?", *Broadsheet*, no. 6 (1960), https://www.marxists.org/history/australia/libertarians/iverson/new-left.htm.
[157] "Sydney Libertarianism", University of Melbourne, Marxist Internet Archive, 1960, accessed 12 January 2022, http://www.marxists.org/history/australia/libertarians/baker/without-tears.htm.
[158] Anderson, "Anarchism (1949)", 242-49; Henry Mayer, "The Thoughts of Malatesta", *Broadsheet*, no. 44 (1965).
[159] Anne Coombs, *Sex and Anarchy: The life and death of the Sydney Push* (Viking, 1996), 60-83; Baker, "Sydney Libertarianism".; David Iverson, "Some Thoughts on Libertarianism", *Broadsheet*, no. 35 (1964), http://www.marxists.org/history/australia/libertarians/iverson/some-thoughts.htm; Anderson, "Art and Morality", 84-87; John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites: Intellectual Traditions in Sydney and Melbourne* (Angus & Robertson, 1974), 140-41.
[160] Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics* (Serpent's Tail, 2007), 46; Coombs, *Sex and Anarchy*, 269-70.

postmaterialism was joined to a confidence in righteous power that left little scope for Sorelian themes.[161] Across the broader new left, Anderson's memory was associated with the conservatism of *Quadrant* and the dominance of the University of Sydney philosophy program by right-wing Andersonians.[162] In 1954, Coleman argued that Sorel rejected the idea of science as an impersonal investigation of the external world and advocated a history focused on ideas, more and institutions rather than individuals.[163] This was a paradigm that resembled aspects of the turn to "theory" that supplanted Marxism from the eighties. The intellectual left however ignored Sorel. [164]

Except for comments by Coleman, Sorel disappeared from Australian intellectual life. A passing reference in a 2012 article by conservative sociologist John Caroll argued that whatever Sorel's intentions he had legitimated violence as an end in itself.[165] John Anderson's legacy entered the realm of history rather than current politics. Creagh Cole's studies of Anderson presented Sorel as a moralist appealing to absolute values on the lines of Hulme and asserted Anderson's importance beyond Australia on grounds of his influence on Alasdair Macintyre.[166]

5. The politics of production

If there was an echo of Sorel in recent Australian political life, it lay in concern with the politics of production. In the early eighties, Australian unions entered a corporatist partnership with the Labor Party in government. The alliance won support from many of the left influenced by Gramscian ideas. Their hope was that the working class, by accepting wage restraint, would demonstrate its hegemonic ambitions and underpin a long-term Labor government that would bring about social democratic reform.[167] The Labor government of 1983-96 did provide some social democracy, but its major legacy was neoliberal economic reform and left-liberal progressivism. Disorientated by the global crisis of the socialist project, the left offered little effective resistance to this ambition. From the late 1980s, emboldened employers began to pursue aggressive policies of deunionisation. The employers' campaign was facilitated by the weakness of many Australian unions at the workplace level, a consequence of decades of dependence on the state.[168] It was in this context that some labour movement intellectuals, particularly John Matthews, championed a "post-Fordist" politics. The analysis drew on Gramsci's ideas of Fordism. The age of mass production was they argued giving way to an economy of smaller enterprises producing for a discerning consumer market. The implicit argument of post-Fordism was for a refocusing of union energy away from political engagement and towards the politics of the workplace. Social democracy was not an end state, the construction of an Australian Sweden, but on Bernsteinian lines a process of democratic

[161] Marion Tapper, "Ressentiment and power: Some reflections on feminist practices" in Paul Patton (ed.), *Nietzsche, Feminism and Political Theory* (Routledge, 1993), 130-43.
[162] Franklin, *Corrupting the youth : a history of philosophy in Australia*, 281-312; Cole, "John Anderson's Political Thought Revisited", 231.
[163] Coleman, "The Political Philosophy of Georges Sorel", 12, 34.
[164] Geoffrey Robinson, *Being Left Wing in Australia: identity, culture and politics after socialism* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2019), 3, 21, 34, 128.
[165] John Carroll, "Reflections on Violence: Three Theses", *Culture and Society* 49 (2012):182-6.
[166] Cole, "The Ethics of the Producers: Sorel, Anderson and Macintyre", 158-60, 174.
[167] Elizabeth Humphrys, *How Labour Built Neoliberalism: Australia's Accord, the Labour Movement and the Neoliberal Project* (Haymarket, 2019); Peter Beilharz, *Transforming Labor: Labour tradition and the Labor decade in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[168] David Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World: The Future of the Australian Trade Union Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

governance. [169] It was Proudhon over Marx. The vision echoed the reformist Sorel, the liberal pluralist imagined by Coleman. Yet, post-Fordism also was political program designed for an affluent democracy. The ethics of the producers it evoked was subordinated to the goal of productivity and competiveness, it sought to confront the neoliberal right on its own terms. The critics of the post-Fordist hypothesis argued it represented an economic reductionism focused on skilled manufacturing workers, who were a small portion of the workforce. They also argued that postwar liberals such as Clark Kerr had made similar arguments. Employers, they contended, were more likely to pursue a neo-Fordist strategy of casualisation and increased labour intensity.[170] The critics had the better of the argument, as union membership plummeted and the labour movement leadership retreated from any broader ambitions to a focus on the preservation of its remaining strongholds and a dependence on the Labor Party. A long economic boom from the late nineties seemed to vindicate neoliberalism and underpinned a conservative electoral ascendancy at the national level. Coleman had overemphasised Sorel's reformism for political purposes. Labour movement intellectuals in the eighties had similarly recast Gramsci on reformist lines. Yet Gramsci was a Leninist and Sorel's late praise for Lenin was not an aberration.

6. Conclusion

In 1898 Sorel, in an article for Eduard Bernstein's *Socialist Monthly,* rejected the assertion of liberal reformers that Australian economic interventionism demonstrated a solution to the social problem. He argued that Australia, naturally wealthy and under the shield of the British Empire, more resembled ancient Rome than modern Europe.[171] Across the twentieth century, the Australian political establishments of left and right appealed to an ideal of British-Australian distinctiveness and social harmony enforced by the state. This perception was challenged by those like John Anderson who looked to Europe, both as an indication of Australia's future and as a source of social theory that would empower collective action. The idea of a division between a producers' and consumers' ethics seemed to offer solutions to the political and intellectual deadlocks of the local social order. As in Italy, Sorel seemed to offer an alternative to the ascendancy of a moralising utilitarianism and, as in Italy, the Australian Sorel was not an irrationalist and voluntarist figure.[172]

The challenge that Australian Sorelians faced was to locate a material base for a producers' ethics. Until the late thirties, Anderson found this in the working class – but then lost faith. Anderson was content in academic isolation, but for his admirers the idea of the ethics of the producers, detached from any social basis, largely served to legitimate a sceptical centre-right politics, most notably in Coleman's work. The postwar weakness of the political left meant this was often turned against traditionalist conservatism. The Andersonian shadow discouraged the emergence of a left-wing Sorel. Kamenka's anti-communist social democracy isolated him

[169] John Mathews, *Age of Democracy : The Politics of Post-Fordism* (Oxford University Press, 1989); John Mathews, *Tools of Change: new technology and the democratisation of work* (Pluto, 1989).
[170] Peter Gahan, "Mathews and the New Production Concepts Debate", *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 31 (1992): 74-88; Ian Hampson, "Post-Fordism, the French 'Regulation School', and the Work of John Mathews", *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, 28 (September 1991): 92-130.
[171] Georges Sorel [1898], "Sorel on Australian Socialism-1898 A Socialist State ?" *A.P.S.A. News* 6, no. 3 (1961): 4. The leading example of French reformist interest in Australia was the 1901 book *Le socialisme sans doctrines* by Albert Metin, sociologist and later government minister. The title became a cliché of Australian self-description (Colin Nettelbeck, "French Awareness of Australia: The Role of Albert Métin (1871–1918)", *French-Australian Review*, No. 64 (2018): 29-37). Sorel's article was translated by Peter Coleman and published in the journal of the fledging association of Australian political scientists.
[172] David Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* (University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 75, 77, 166.

from the new left. Sydney Libertarianism was unable to compete with the new left. The resurgence of the left from the seventies, under the banner of expressive and antinomian individualism, offended Coleman's traditionalist sympathies, but he continued to reject the foundationalist natural law conservatism of much of the right. Coleman appealed less to the ethics of the producers and more to Sorel's traditionalism, an appeal in tension with the expressive performativity of much of the contemporary right.

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Myth against Utopia

by Eric Brandom
Kansas State University

1. Introduction

Georges Sorel wrote in 1901 that the "spiritual goals" of democracy, such as freedom and equality, were basically shared with socialism. In order to resolve the economic contradictions that, as Marx had shown, did exist between socialism and democracy, socialists should work within existing legal and political structures to achieve their aims. Socialists should and could, as the *Communist Manifesto* urged, "win the battle of democracy". By 1908, in contrast, Sorel held "violence enlightened by the idea of the general strike" essential to proletarian self-development. Democracy was not a battle but a degrading card trick. It was rather "to violence that socialism owes those high ethical ideals by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world".[1] Today it is for this later position that Sorel is remembered – as a theorist of syndicalism, myth, and violence, dangerous precisely because his work historically served as a juncture between left and right critiques of liberal democracy. Looking back in 1910 at his own trajectory, Sorel explained his earlier misjudgment: he had "confused the philosophical utopia of democracy…with the reality of the democratic regime".[2]

Historian Willy Gianinazzi, at the outset of his important 2006 book on Sorel, *Naissance du mythe moderne*, speculates that Sorel's reputation as a political thinker across the 20th century would perhaps have been better if he had valorized not myth but the "twin category of utopia".[3] In what follows I argue that Sorelian myth is in important respects a critique of the utopian dangers that Sorel identified specifically with parliamentary liberal democracy. Understanding myth as a response to and critique of a certain idea of utopia will allow us not only to better grasp myth itself, but also to put it to work in undoing or side-stepping some vacillations of utopian thought in the 21st century.

Sorelian myth has been the object of a substantial amount of scholarship, not least Gianinazzi's book mentioned above. Although Sorel was uncharacteristically clear about the opposition he constructed between myth and utopia, scholars have generally approached myth on its own terms. Utopia, after all, was a vernacular term of abuse current in the late 19th century, while myth is something like Sorel's own contribution to social science. Breaking with this tendency, in a recent essay Antonis Balasopoulos describes Sorelian myth as a "critical anti-utopianism".[4] This is to argue that Sorel approached utopia in the same spirit as did Marx. Sorel, Balasopoulos argues, sought to revise Marx in light of historical experience – very much as Engels, for instance, in the much-read chapters on that subject, had insisted was essential to any socialism that did not want to land in utopianism – but did not want to allow transformations in the

[1] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999). 251.
[2] Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d'une Théorie Du Prolétariat,* 2nd ed. (Marcel Rivière, 1921), 264. And see a discussion of this quote in a different context, Shlomo Sand, "Georges Sorel Entre Utopie et Politique", *Mil Neuf Cent: Revue d'histoire Intellectuelle* 11 (1993): 87–93.
[3] Willy Gianinazzi, *Naissance Du Mythe Moderne : Georges Sorel et La Crise de La Pensée Savante, 1889-1914* (Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2006), 1.
[4] Antonis Balasopoulos, "Georges Sorel and Critical Anti-Utopianism", *Polis. Journal of Political Science* VIII, no. 4 (30) (2020): 127–44.

dynamic of capitalism or the concept of the proletariat to sap the revolutionary force of Marx's earlier analysis. Balasopoulos compares Sorel to Walter Benjamin in his critique of the flattening of futurity by the ideology of progress and argues that "myth is a pedagogical instrument adapted not to the speculative serenity of historical prediction but to the dire emergencies of the present. It is thus aligned with Machiavellian virtù rather than with the teleological thought of German Idealism, particularly in its Hegelian guise".[5] Without disagreeing, the present essay takes a historical approach to these terms, and puts at the center of analysis not capitalism, and not Benjamin, but rather the confrontation of revolutionary institutions and liberal democracy. Sorel can rightly be seen as a critical anti-utopian, and Sorel did try to remain in the spirit of Marx, but Sorelian myth is best understood as emerging conceptually and in a specific historical context from the critique of a particular kind of utopianism.

In both cases, utopia and myth, Sorel is interested in what seem to be social phenomena or objects of understanding, and also in elaborating a *method* of thinking about social transformation. This is a vacillation, or rather a double purpose, that is certainly still typical of scholarship around utopia, itself widely understood to be at once a literary genre and a method. How to integrate language, in all its affective and practical density, into a materialist account of social reality? How, especially, to think about language – the cultural or spiritual realm more generally – as a terrain of social conflict? And if language is such a terrain, what then ought to be the position of the intellectual who does not wish to be functionally counter-revolutionary by re-enforcing the relatively high status – the leading role – of the intellectual? This in turn is a question about the autonomous subjecthood and the historical agency of the proletariat. How can this be recognized? What are its historical effects? Can proletarian agency be fostered, or is this already to undermine it? Myth may indeed be thought of as pedagogical, but the teacher here is the working class itself, and the student the intellectual more than the individual worker. As we shall see, the contexts in which Sorel posed and tried to answer these questions matter, as do the resources on which he drew – in particular the work of the 18th century Neapolitan Giambattista Vico. The fundamental difference between utopia and myth, for Sorel, is in how each figures collective action.

2.Sorel as Revisionist

A well-established set of criticisms of utopia already circulated among Marxists when Sorel began writing in this tradition.[6] The *Manifesto* set out its basic coordinates. The utopian literature especially of the early 19th century contained valuable critical elements. The work of Owen, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Cabet, and so on, was motivated by the honorable desire to improve the lot of the poorest and worst off. Rooted as it was, however, in an early phase of economic development, and therefore relying on the individual perspective of each founding figure rather than the self-consciousness of the working class, it had sharp limits. The Owenites must look back always to Owen, and not to the world around them. In Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, which appeared in French in the non-Marxist *Revue socialiste* already in the 1880s, the distinction of Marxism from utopianism was attached again to a failure to see the world as it is – to be scientific. The moral impulse was to be applauded, but for the pre-Marxists, as Engels writes, "socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice".[7]

[5] Balasopoulos, "Critical Anti-Utopianism", 8.
[6] See Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Peter Lang, 2010); Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism* (Peter Lang, 2008); Frank Edward Manuel and Fritzie Prigohzy Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Belknap Press, 1979).
[7] See Engels in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (Norton, 1978). 693.

Such a perspective is not scientific because it is metaphysical rather than dialectical. It takes the ideal as given, and seeks to adjust reality, rather than understanding that ideals themselves emerge from history. The latter – like nature itself – must be grasped dialectically because "it is dialectical".[8] Marxism – dialectical materialism – is *not* utopian because it does not just criticize contemporary society, it explains and therefore "masters" that society. The means of overcoming capitalism are not to be had "by deduction from fundamental principles but are to be discovered in the stubborn facts of the existing system of production".[9] Already here utopia is a merely individual perspective attached therefore to a sort of cult of the founding figure, an idealism disconnected from history, and therefore not a science.

As Sorel began to read and write about socialism in the 1890s, the confidence and relevance of Engels' division between scientific Marxism and mere utopianism were sapped by two related but distinct processes: first, the confrontation of Marxism with electoral democracy and second, the revisionist crisis within Marxism. Situating Sorel's Marxism in these contexts is essential if we are to make sense of what Sorel meant when he used the term 'utopian,' and also therefore of the significance of myth. Sorel's position does not go without saying in either context, and a word about Sorel's biographical trajectory will be helpful here.

Sorel was exceptional among the French socialist intellectuals of his moment. He had attended the Ecole Polytechnique, been trained as a civil engineer, indeed had worked a whole career specially concerned with building canals and railroads in the south of France.[10] As a civil engineer involved with decision-making over infrastructure projects, Sorel had had a professional obligation to study local history, which seems among other things to have confirmed him in his skepticism about the application of abstract schemas to the mess of social reality. In addition to work on the local history of the French Revolution, he seems to have had a longstanding interest in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. In the early 1890s, Sorel retired from that position and moved to Paris.[11] His arrival in Paris coincided with the first electoral successes of Jules Guesdes' *Parti ouvrier français* (POF) in 1893 and, not coincidentally, growing interest on the part of intellectuals in Marxism. Sorel was involved with the very first journals that sought in a self-conscious way to elaborate Marxism as a theoretical project in France.[12] Sorel's writing and editorial work brought him into contact with what we might call the socialist European public sphere, and this in turn substantially increased his profile among French socialists. By the late 1890s he was an intellectual with a modest reputation as a theorist

[8] Ibid., 697.
[9] Ibid., 701. Henri Maler remarks that a certain kind of reader of this text, "first flattened it out into positivism crossed with dialectics and then folded it into a sort of scientism devoir of dialectics". See Henri Maler, "An Apocryphal Testament: Socialism, Utopian and Scientific", *Science & Society* 62, no. 1 (1998): 49. Engels himself goes on, "modern socialism is nothing but the reflex, in thought, of this conflict [between productive forces and modes of production] in fact; its ideal reflection in the minds, first, of the class directly suffering under it, the working class" (Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader,* 702). What indeed, Sorel would spend years asking, could that mean?
[10] On the importance of Sorel's professional life for his later intellectual output, see Alice Ingold's pathbreaking essays Alice Ingold, "Penser à l'épreuve Des Conflits. Georges Sorel Ingénieur Hydraulique à Perpignan", *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire Intellectuelle* 32 (2014): 11–52. And Alice Ingold, "Terres et eaux entre coutume, police et droit au XIXème siècle. Solidarisme écologique ou solidarités matérielles ?", *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines*, no. 33 (September 26, 2017): 97–126.
[11] See the fundamental research here in the first chapter of Gianinazzi and, also on Sorel's time at the EP, in Tommaso Giordani, "The Uncertainties of Action: Agency, Capitalism, and Class in the Thought of Georges Sorel" (European University Institute, 2015).
[12] See for instance Christophe Prochasson, "Sur La Reception Du Marxisme En France; Le Cas Andler (1890-1920)", *Revue de Synthèse* 110, no. 1 (1989): 85–108.

of Marxism and an interpreter for the French public of European-wide debates concerning socialism.

As French Marxists and other socialists started to win elections they were faced with the real possibility of wielding elements of state power. It was a striking propaganda victory to be able to send Paul Lafargue to the Chamber of Deputies from his prison cell in 1893, but a serious dilemma to be asked if the socialist Alexandre Millerand should participate in a bourgeois government in 1899. The latter generated intense debate and recrimination, not least because, indeed, electioneering clearly did push some socialist candidates into moderation and revealed some as crass opportunists. What was an acceptable and pragmatic compromise with power, and what a betrayal? And what should be the relationship between the organizations of the working class – the labour unions – and the political parties that sought to represent them? The problem of electoral power was posed for socialists across Europe, of course, but had a particular shape in Republican France. The POF was weaker than the German Marxist party in its electoral weight and in its connection to organized labour. Indeed, the relative distance between socialist politics and the organized working classes would be a major feature of the landscape of the French left for a long time. Yet France was a substantially more democratic state than Germany. Figures like Jean Jaurès and Millerand – socialists, not Marxists – could be and were carried into positions of real power by the votes cast by the working classes for socialism.[13] And, to many Marxists – Sorel among them – it seemed right that socialists ought to engage politically in defence of the bourgeois Third Republic in the context of the Dreyfus Affair and antisemitic nationalist mobilization. Millerand's acceptance of a ministerial post in that context provoked serious debate and disagreement, not to say schism. Sorel supported Millerand's arrival to ministerial power at the time as a pragmatic and reasonable measure. The latter proceeded to move steadily to the right as he ascended, eventually in 1920 to the presidency of France. Millerand was only the most successful turncoat, and Sorel was not the only socialist who came to feel that anti-electoralism was well-justified. Arguably the debates over electoralism that continue into the 21st century on the left find their beginnings in this late 19th century moment. Certainly what was to be done could not be the same in Republican France as in Tsarist Russia.

The revisionist crisis within Marxism metastasized in this context. Debate over Eduard Bernstein's arguments are central, and mattered to Sorel, but the crisis was felt yet more widely.[14] The theoretical issues involved are weighty, and can only be suggested in their barest outlines here. The fundamental question as it posed itself for Sorel was over the scientificity of Marxism, and therefore the relationship between the body of Marx's work and changes that may or may not have occurred in capitalism since he wrote.[15] Sorel found himself convinced by Bernstein, according to whom Marx's predictions about the concentration of capital, about

[13] On some of the tensions at work here, see the illuminating essay, André Tosel, "Jean Jaurès et Georges Sorel, Les Frères Ennemis Du Socialisme Français", *La Pensée* 352 (October 2007): 33–49.

[14] It would be implausible to summarize the scholarship on revisionism or the controversy over Bernstein's work here. See, however, Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism; Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx* (Collier Books, 1962); Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917; the Development of the Great Schism* (Harvard University Press, 1955); Henry Tudor and J. M. Tudor (eds), *Marxism and Social Democracy. The Revisionist Debate 1896-1898*, trans. Henry Tudor and J. M. Tudor (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context* (Brill, 2005).

[15] On Sorel's position here as a mediator between French and Italian Marxisms in relation always to the overwhelming weight of the Germans, see Tommaso Giordani, "Redefining Historical Materialism in the Peripheries of Marxism: Georges Sorel and Antonio Labriola between France, Italy, and Germany", in *Decentering European Intellectual Space*, eds Maria Jalava, Stefan Nygard, and Johan Strang (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 88–113.

the proletarianization of society, about the tendency of wages to fall – and therefore also about the ineluctable arrival of a final crisis of capitalism – simply had not held up in the face of actual events. The political conclusions the two drew from this analysis were, at first, not so distant.

Crucially, for Sorel the answer here was not to abandon Marx, but rather to return to his texts and recover their essential insights. In a letter to Bernstein in 1898, Sorel described how he understood the project he believed they shared, "you bring the spirit of Marx out of a purely scholastic and ossified Marxism...It has been said, 'return to Kant,' has the moment not come to return to Marx?"[16] As Sorel wrote looking back in 1910, "I was persuaded in 1894 that socialists concerned about the future had to work to deepen Marxism, and still today I do not see that there is any other way forward in order to construct the ideology that the proletarian movement requires".[17] How exactly to relate the categories of Marxist analysis to the changing facts of modern economic life? For Sorel this meant proposing a non-determinist reading of Marx – rescuing, we might say now, the philosopher from the economist.

The key problem for Sorelian revisionism is the relationship between past tendency (amenable to objective description, at least in principle), present institution (contested, but empirically given), and will to the future (radically open, but deceptive). From Marx Sorel accepted the postulate that the proletariat as revolutionary force would be forged within and at least partially by the capitalist process of production. But what did that entail in the present? What was the relationship between this emerging subject and the liberal freedoms of the Third Republic? How to defend the emerging institutions of the proletariat against opportunistic politicians?

3.Against Utopianism

It was in this context of revisionism and electoral engagement that Sorel developed his critique of utopia and utopianism. "Is there Utopia in Marxism?", Sorel asked in March 1899, in the pages of the mainstream philosophy journal the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*. Yes, he responded – in Marxism but not, if we read him right, in Marx. In order to situate Marxism, Sorel proposed a tripartite typology of utopia. First, there was a tradition of backward-looking utopias. These were were "literary exercises, didactic stories…sly satires of society".[18] The Catholic Church made great use of them. Thomas More's utopia was not meant to be revolutionary, nor indeed, says Sorel, are most of these utopias to be considered anything other than reactionary valorizations of an imagined lost pastoral paradise.[19] Second, and in political contrast to the first, forward-looking utopias began to emerge, especially in the early 19th century utopias. Here Sorel means especially those of the utopian socialists such as the various Saint-Simonian projects. In these first two categories Sorel recognizes utopia as a genre, or a generic system. This was an expression of a fairly long-standing interest. Already in 1896 he had written that a given "utopia can be considered [an] anamorphosis of the society" in which it is produced – that is, a image appearing distorted and meaningless until seen from the correct

[16] Georges Sorel to Eduard Bernstein, 12 May 1898, in Michel Prat, "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Eduard Bernstein (1898-1902)", *Mil Neuf Cent: Revue d'histoire Intellectuelle* 11 (1993): 155.
[17] Sorel, *Matériaux*. 250.
[18] Georges Sorel, "Y A-t-Il de l'utopie Dans Le Marxisme?", *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 7 (March 1899): 153.
[19] Ibid., 154.

perspective.[20] In contrast—although this is anticipating a bit—myth will be a simple image of a society *in becoming*, rather than the distorted self-consciousness of one that already is.

Sorel's third category is the most interesting. Deriving partly from forward-looking utopias, in any major political movement, there is an element of utopian promise, for instance in the Republican slogan of liberty, equality, fraternity. Indeed, socialist utopianism, Sorel says, is all borrowed from "the democratic tradition, from which it has never seriously freed itself".[21] Ideologies, this is to say, all have a utopian moment or element. The similarity here to Karl Mannheim's later account of ideology and utopia within a more explicitly articulated sociology of knowledge is striking – and no doubt why Ruth Levitas paired Sorel and Mannheim in her classic treatment. Yet, the historicity and process of Sorel's thinking here is worth recovering.

According to Sorel Bernstein, and revisionism more generally, could help socialists avoid utopianism. Thinking perhaps of the line from the 18th Brumaire, Sorel wrote that "social science" could not pronounce on the "poetry" of the world to come. Social science could, however, reasonable make claims about the probability of an emancipatory catastrophe in the near future. And the answer was negative. The "social catastrophe…is a purely utopic perspective".[22] As Marx himself usually recognized, thereby avoiding utopianism despite his tendency to make predictions, the mechanisms of society are variable.[23] We do not know, cannot know, what capitalism will become. Indeed, Sorel argued that it was changing, and the social democrats were becoming utopians because they were reasoning no longer on the basis of a reality that they could observe, but instead beginning – just like the utopian Enlighteners of the 18th century – with an abstract principle to which they would attempt to bend reality. Sorel drew for this formulation on Plekhanoff's description of utopianism, which he used also to attack Paul Lafargue. Lafargue and others, for Sorel, are guilty of imagining a past golden age before domination and before capitalism, to which the revolution will return a society cleansed of sin. They have been captured by moralizing (for all Lafargue's ostentatious scandal-mongering) and present simply mirror images of the theology they want to destroy.

How then to rescue Marx from his son-in-law? By recognizing where Marx went wrong. Much of Marx's analysis can be retained, Sorel argued, but much had to be discarded because of his Hegelianism according to which, finally, "the development of the Spirit dominates history".[24] For Sorel, this is a quasi-theological philosophy of history that Vico, too, could not escape. Relatedly, Marx radically over-estimated the degree to which one state of development, one mode of production, simply replaces another. Like many people in the middle of the 19th century, he was hypnotized by the rise of large-scale industrial production, and assumed that it would triumph in all spheres eventually. Yet according to Sorel, manifestly, "in our very complex societies all the products of human nature exist in a mixed state".[25] Religion is by no means disappearing, as Marx thought it would. Many industries show no tendency to concentrate; agriculture as a whole does not seem to obey Marx's rules – there, says Sorel, electoral opportunism has at least pushed the POF to revise its ideas. The idealist elements in

[20] Georges Sorel, "La Science Dans l'éducation", *Le Devenir Social* 2, no. 3 (March 1896): 233. See also the similar approach to utopias as evidence of past attitudes rather than a real recipe for action, in the long review, Georges Sorel, "Ferrero - Grandeur et Décadence de Rome", *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 19, no. 176 (1906): 266.
[21] Sorel, "Y a-t-il de l'utopie Dans Le Marxisme?", 155
[22] Ibid., 156.
[23] Ibid., 158
[24] On Sorel and Hegel, see Eric Brandom, "Georges Sorel's Diremption: Hegel, Marxism and Anti-Dialectics", *History of European Ideas* 42, no. 7 (October 2, 2016): 937–50.
[25] Sorel, "Y A-t-Il de l'utopie Dans Le Marxisme?", 173.

Marx are Hegelian, are utopian, and are in Sorel's telling not so different from the utopianism that Engels and Marx were so insistent on separating themselves from.

Marxists – social democrats – had fallen into rationalist utopia. They took historical schema for reality. For Sorel, the properly scientific part of Marx had to be distinguished from the part that remained trapped within Hegelian rationalism, according to which, "history is first of all ordered by the immanent logic of concepts". Sorel prefers the Marx for whom, and this is Sorel's summary, "it is not our way of understanding that determines the quality of our way of being, but on the contrary our social life which translates itself into concepts".[26] That principle, Sorel accepts – but finds that almost always even Marx takes it to have implausibly simple consequences. Sorel reads the comments of Marx and Engels on religion, on the freedom that will be attained through the Revolution, to indicate that what this revolution really means is the total conquest of the physical realm by the intellectual one. We will be free as we feel our minds may be, having attained a consciousness emancipated from mere materiality – like god.[27] Utopianism with Hegelian characteristics, Sorel says. What is left when we have taken away the utopian elements of Marxism? "The response seems to me simple: socialism is the labour movement, it is the revolt of the proletariat against the owner's institutions [les institutions patronales], it is the organization, at once economic and ethical, that we see taking place before our eyes in order to struggle against bourgeois traditions".[28]

We can easily understand the continued appeal of a dream of sudden, total transformation, especially for demagogues. Yet as we pass more fully into the third category of the utopian – no longer an explicit other place, but a sort of promised heterotopic possibility – we encounter slogans or programs the success of which can be surprising.[29] Sorel explains the power of utopias over minds in a number of historically specific ways, but the central concept is what he calls *formalism*. In formalist thinking, the form is taken for the content, the equation or the schoolbook for the real world. Extreme formalism results in what Sorel calls the "utopia of the logical world".[30] Drawing on debates in the philosophy of science of the day, Sorel maintained that no ground existed for assumptions that nature could be described by precise and elegant formula. That the Newtonian model could be generalized is a rationalist presupposition. The reduction of empirical evidence into manipulable regularities, at some moments at least, is a necessary phase of scientific investigation of most kinds – and so it remains a constant possibility in the social and political sphere. Sorel after all had been a civil engineer, well positioned to understand both the necessity and the limitation of schematizing abstraction. The very real practical success of scientific activity of which such a clarifying abstraction is a necessary phase is what makes "the complete flushing clean of social systems, the elimination of anything that is obscure, imperfect, unintelligible…seems possible".[31] When technical and political developments have given rationalist utopians power, their philosophical confusions can have serious consequences.

[26] Ibid., 167.
[27] Ibid., 171.
[28] Ibid., 175.
[29] See in this connection William Reddy's remarks on the relationship, the peculiar unintentional fit, between Guesdist political rhetoric and shop-floor realities in late 19th century France. William M. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture : The Textile Trade and French Society, 1750-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
[30] Sorel, "La Science Dans l'éducation", 218. For a different treatment of this, see Eric Brandom, "Against the Hierarchy of Knowledge: Georges Sorel, Education and Revolution", *French History* 37, no. 1 (March 2023): 53-70.
[31] Sorel, "La Science Dans l'éducation", 219.

Rationalist utopia depends on the supremacy of the intellect, spirit, and will over matter, mere recalcitrant being. This supremacy, Sorel never fails to remind us, means the supremacy of those in the position of intellect—the professionals of thought, as Sorel often calls them, who have claimed the mantle of rationality for themselves. Sorel's pessimism is reflexive and calls for constant vigilance: "a utopian sleeps within each of us"[32] – this caution about the danger of one's own tendencies is a constant refrain. Here, then, is the eternal utopian impulse, an anthropological feature of human being, but no longer an individual desire (for freedom, say) rather its inversion: the desire to control, to dominate the very worldmaking capacities of others. Here indeed we are at the heart of Sorel's political thought.

So, Sorel in the years before 1900 sought to combine several not really compatible positions. First of all, a Marxist-but-not-Hegelian analysis of the economic development of the modern world; second a marked affinity for the development of the working class through its own institutions *only*, as opposed to a political party such as the POF, which is to say for revolutionary syndicalism; third and finally a basically moderate attitude toward the Republican state – Sorel was a Dreyfusard, he was in favour of the participation of Millerand in a government of Republican defence, and he thought incremental legal reform was a good thing. Sorel was suspicious of demagoguery, and his objections to utopianism are also his objections to parliamentary democracy. In both cases, the dangers stem from *mere* language, in both cases, agency is assigned to the bourgeois intellectual, whose task it is to speak and think for the working class.

Starting in 1903, Sorel radicalized in the sense that he increasingly rejected any cooperation whatsoever between the worker's movement (in the form of the CGT) and the Republican State.[33] At the same time, Sorel deepened his reading of Marx by placing Marx alongside other historical narratives and returning also to his own earlier readings of Vico. Political and methodological transformations went hand in hand.

4.Arriving at Myth

It was in these years in confronting, again and again, the relationship between socialist politics and Marxist theory, that Sorel first articulated "myth" as a theoretical term. Put differently, Sorel articulated myth as an approach to the relationship between language, theoretical activity, and collective action, which would not prioritize theory and therefore theorists over the action of the working classes themselves. Myth would avoid the utopianism built in to both social science and electoral politics.

In his 1903 *Introduction à l'economie moderne*, Sorel maintained that a purely objective social science was impossible. A moment of narrative creativity was unavoidable in any such work, which had after all to be written from a certain perspective oriented minimally around a question. Marx was, Sorel wrote, especially effective, maybe too effective, in this creative perspectivalism. Marx's interpreters—and here Sorel perhaps includes himself—had often taken for logical connections those which were also, perhaps mainly, a product of exposition: "reality must be considered under aspects that, in their succession, entirely cover it and that are

[32] Ibid., 220.
[33] The reasons for this are complicated. For one strong account, see Christophe Prochasson, "Georges Sorel: Itinéraire d'un Dreyfusard Antisémite", in Michel Winock (ed.), *L'affaire Dreyfus* (Seuil, 1998), 235–44.

related by a system corresponding to the chosen goal".[34] In light of this, Sorel returned to the very Marxist dogmas that he had been pleased to see Bernstein reject. Evidence now shows, he wrote, that the iron law of falling salaries and rate of profit, the inevitable tendency of capital to concentrate in the hands of a few and to provoke a catastrophic revolutionary crisis—"these famous 'dogmas' contain something essential to the life and progress of socialism".[35] These empirically false ideas may turn out to be crucial to political activism. Sorel wondered, rhetorically suggesting a negative answer, "if it is possible to give an intelligible exposition of the passage from principles to action without making use of myths".[36] Here, myth is a heuristic, a way of understanding social reality—in this case action—that does not seem to be otherwise comprehensible.

We must beware of our own tools, especially the conceptual ones. Alongside Marx Sorel invokes Vico:

> Ideological constructs are necessary, but they are also the most frequent cause of our errors; anything that is not the product of reflection on institutions, practices [usages], and empirical rules that have acquired well-determined forms through regular use [la pratique], must be rejected. This proposition brought to light by Vico is one of the most important for Marxists. There is first in history, according to the great Neapolitan, a vulgar wisdom that feels things and expresses them poetically, before reflective thought succeeds in understanding them theoretically.[37]

This Vichean poetic wisdom is not unreal, but it is partial.[38] The social world is always incomplete, never fixed. And since the linguistic environment is part of the material one, to articulate poetic wisdom is to change and develop it. Myth is the tool used to grasp hold of these "*devenirs partiels*" and "traces de mouvements parcellaires" that are all we have access to. Myth – here – would thus be not Vichean poetic knowledge itself, but evidence one might use to investigate or describe it.

However, we are not simply speaking about a way to describe irrational or non-rational action. Sorel's language is enormously tentative: "if it was possible to demonstrate that myths are necessary in order to present, in a precise way, the conclusions of a social philosophy that does not want to mistake itself and does not want to take for science that which is not science – one would doubtless be lead to demonstrate also that *contested theories* are necessary for modern revolutionary action".[39] Put differently, it is only in contesting objectivity, itself always and necessarily partial, that revolutionary action is possible. Myth, then, is the symbolic structuring of the field of collective action—that is, politics. One cannot ask of a myth whether it is true or false, the question makes no sense. Like a political party, it is not true or false, but effective or not. Here perhaps we can recognize the utopian function within an ideology, but transferred to myth.

[34] Georges Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie Moderne* (Jacques, 1903), 372. Sorel reworked this section for later editions, removing this clear statement of a rule, and inserting the term "stylized projection" as a description of the kind of presentation that Marx undertakes and that sociology ought to make its own. The changes (pp 387-390 in later edition, 369-372 in the first edition) reduce the weight of Marx's own text as an example, and tighten the vocabulary Sorel uses to describe social description. I thank Michel Prat for drawing my attention to this, and for making the text of the first edition available to me.
[35] Ibid., 395-396.

[36] Ibid., 394.
[37] Ibid., 390.

[38] Ibid., 391-2.
[39] Ibid., 396.

This was not the first time that the creative element of theoretical work, even of social description, had appeared important to Sorel. He had long been worried about what we might call the rhetoric of theoretical inquiry. Sorel had written already in 1898 (for an Italian audience), in the context of the "crisis" and "decomposition" of Marxism, about how genuine and necessary reforms are not made simply on the basis of science. "Our mind needs poetry in order to resolve the heart into action", he wrote, but "the socialists must not, through sheer imagination, finish by dreaming up a sociological mythology rather than observing the facts".[40] By 1903, Sorel was willing to place as it were adjacent to one another the creative moment of social science or historical writing and the myth as a non-objective, *contested*, motor of revolutionary action. An important transition in Sorel's work takes place when myth, an act of aesthetic creation, an act of self-narration, allows institutions to become subjectivities (or at least have a subjective moment) within an otherwise determined context. This is the emergence of collective agency. In this transition, the very existence of myth, previously only a hypothesis, comes to be evidence for the existence of revolutionary institutions. Where were the resources for such a transition? And how is this, now, supposed to be different from utopia?

In order to see how myth could grasp an institution or a society *in becoming* rather than merely reproduce, like a utopia, a distorted image of something that exists already, we need to turn back directly to Sorel's long 1896 essay on the author of the *New Science*, Vico. Sorel's reading strove to do for Vico very much what we have seen Sorel trying to do for Marx – to separate out the idealist, the theological, the rationalist elements from the scientific ones. What above all drew Sorel's attention was Vico's way of connecting the evidence of language to the stuff of material and institutional life: for instance his assertion that it was the "spectacle of the inhabitants of Athens coming together through the act of legislation" for the common good that inspired in Socrates the idea of "intelligible kinds or abstract universals".[41] Commenting on Vico, Sorel wrote that "language must be considered to have as object not the things in themselves, but…certain peculiarly human relations relative to the use of things". In myths "it is not things that are assimilated, but actions". And Sorel went on, offering close commentary on Vico, "the imagination possesses the faculty of abstraction, but it abstracts in its way, choosing from a vast picture the marks that suit it to recall the ensemble of relations that the totality evoked in a more primitive way". Whole social realities, "vast imaginations, Vico says, 'curled themselves up and were indicated by the smallest signs…' But each of these signs was, just as much as the things that it replaced, the bearer of all the relations, and these relations could not be separated from the sign".[42] Poetry, Sorel understood Vico to be arguing, thus has as its special function the representation of "the impossible that is nonetheless believable".[43] The poetry of an institution has this function, to represent in impossible yet believable pictures the essential lines of its own internal development, known to its own vulgar and poetic wisdom but not yet graspable in the "flushed clean" language of rational theory.

It is precisely that too-clarified and rational language that Sorel so scandalously asserted had no purchase on the myth of the general strike in the *Reflections on Violence*. The myth of the general strike – any genuine myth – cannot be explained in theoretical terms. It is an image, charged with affect – movement, action – that must be seen whole and all at once. It may be recognized by the theorist, but it cannot be *constructed* by theory. The initiative lay not with utopian reason, but with the movement of social reality.

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[40] Georges Sorel, "La Crisi Del Socialismo Scientifico", *Critica Sociale* 8 (May 1898): 138.
[41] Georges Sorel, *Georges Sorel's Study on Vico: Translation, Edition, and Introduction*, eds and trans. Eric Brandom and Tommaso Giordani (Brill, 2019), 72.
[42] Ibid., 122.
[43] Ibid.,125.

The myth of the proletarian general strike emerged in practice as a reality principle employed against political speech. It cut through the confusions inherent to language and encouraged by the rhetoric of unscrupulous politicians. Sorel lamented that "in the mouths of these would-be representatives of the proletariat all socialist formulas lose their sense".[44] Over and against this dialectical cleverness, the "revolutionary proletariat" itself "made adherence to the general strike the *test* by means of which the socialism of the workers was distinguished from that of the amateur revolutionaries".[45] Revolutionary syndicalism here appeared as a struggle for clarity of vision: "Syndicalism strives to employ methods of expression which throw full light on things, which put them exactly in the place assigned to them by their nature, and which bring out the whole value of the forces in play".[46] The performative effect of the proletarian general strike—it identifies itself as genuine in accomplishing this task—was in continuity with Sorel's earlier description of myth as a re-articulation of the political field. In the chaos of social reality, scientific reason is never sufficient to underwrite action, and generally distorts it. The clarity won by the general strike, therefore, would be ethical or practical, not cognitive.[47]

This gives some depth to the most-quoted definition of myth, which appears in the 1908 introduction to the *Reflections*. There, Sorel wrote that "myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of will".[48] His main object was the myth of the proletarian general strike, which had an "infinite quality" and gave to socialism "high moral values".[49] Although "very few myths…are perfectly free from any utopian element", Sorel maintained that myth and utopia must be rigorously distinguished from one another. Utopias are the work of a theorist, they function by analogy and the usefulness of each piece of the construction can be discussed. In contrast, a "myth cannot be refuted since it is at bottom identical to the convictions of a group, being the expression of those convictions in the language of movement". The proletarian general strike is an almost pure myth. The history of French democracy, according to Sorel, is a powerful mixture of myth and utopia. "Liberal political economy" on the other hand, is "one of the best examples of utopia".[50]

[44] And Sorel goes on, "The class struggle still remains the great principle, but it must be subordinated to national solidarity. Internationalism is an article of faith…but patriotism also imposes sacred duties. The emancipation of the workers must be the work of the workers themselves…but real emancipation consists in voting for a professional politician…In the end the State must disappear…but this disappearance will take place only in a future so far distant that one must prepare oneself for it by using the State…and the best means of bringing about the disappearance of the State consists in strengthening temporarily the governmental machine". Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*. 111.

[45] Sorel, *Reflections*, 110.

[46] Ibid., 112.

[47] Sorel ruthlessly attacks bourgeois "little science" because it "believes that when it has attained clarity of exposition…it has attained truth" (133-134). The positivists—and Sorel smears a wide range of *universitaires* and others with this brush—cover over their confusion with sophistries which "consist in putting very different things on the same plane from a love of logical simplicity" (139). Sorel, hobbled by no such sentimentality, is free to distinguish the clarity of moral perspective granted by the general strike from scientific, or cognitive, clarity.

[48] Ibid., 28. Translation modified. The original French reads, "ce ne sont pas des descriptions de choses, mais des expressions de volontés". Jennings' edition has "will to act", while T.E. Hulme's first translation reads "expressions of a determination to act". On Hulme, see Tommaso Giordani and Henry Mead, "'The Regeneration of Society': Thomas Ernest Hulme and the Early British Reception of Georges Sorel", *Modern Intellectual History* 21, no. 1 (2024): 103-32.

[49] Sorel, *Reflections*, 24.

[50] Ibid., 28-30.

Myths are the very movement of an institution framing and authorizing action. Myths contain "all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party or of a class…which recur to the mind with the insistence of instincts in all circumstances of life, and which give an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action upon which the reform of the will is founded".[51] And action indeed is key: "myths must be judged as a means of acting on the present".[52] And yet, "all discussion of the method of applying them as future history is devoid of sense".[53] The great task of *Reflections* is "to ask how it is possible to conceive of the transformation of the men of today into the free producers of tomorrow working…where there are no masters. The question must be expressed accurately", Sorel says, "we pose it not for a world that has already arrived at socialism, but solely for our own time and for the preparation of the transition from one world to the other; if we do not limit the question in this way, we shall find ourselves straying into utopias".[54] At the juncture of past collective and future individual action is the institution within which the individual can be an ethical subject. In utopian thinking, a single will reaches out into the future to attempt to control events, and is unable in the end to do anything but reproduce itself. Utopia, when it is not simply a literature of distraction, means political domination. Myth poses a different relation between present and future, an intuitive and creative movement from the first to the second, an unfolding of material conditions into discourse that is essentially collective.

Utopia for Sorel is an individual, rather than a collective, a critical rather than a constructive image. Myth is the intuitive form-giving performed by institutions in the brief moments when they achieve subjectivity. For Sorel utopia means domination, and myth is his name for collective agency without domination.

5.Myth against Utopia Today

Why this long passage through the history within which Sorel's writings on myth and utopia developed? Because it is in the context of electoral power and scientific uncertainty that it became important to Sorel to critique utopia. For Sorel more than for Engels or others, the central issues utopia raises are about the relationship of language and rationalism to the historical process – utopia is a name not just for the individual's vision, but for a specific rationalist delusion about reality. Sorel existed within a context of electoral democracy, that is the terrain on which he developed his thinking about socialism and politics. More, that is the terrain on which he passed from an acceptance, even an enthusiasm, for the 'battle of democracy' to a scissionistic rejection of it. Why? because of the way class power projects and reproduces itself through language itself. Utopias are always and necessarily caught in this -- in their very form, rather than just their content. Here we might connect Sorel to James C. Scott's influential *Seeing Like a State*—and note the political ambivalence of both. Myth, however, is most strikingly a theory about how discursive action can take place at the level of the institution (that is Vico's poetic wisdom), and this is especially important if socialists are trying at least not to lose the battle of democracy. The claim from the *Communist Manifesto* that bourgeoisie will produce its own grave-diggers found itself at least temporarily falsified by the practice of parliamentary socialism. And the news from the political economists suggested that the predictive value of the larger analysis of capital's dynamic could no longer

[51] Ibid., 115.
[52] Ibid., 116.
[53] Ibid., 116-17. Compare Elizabeth Stainforth, "Excavating the Future: Utopia as a Method of Historical Analysis", *Utopian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2021): 598–612.
[54] Sorel, *Reflections*, 238.

be relied upon. What then? How to preserve the political role of the working class in such a context? Myth is part of Sorel's answer to this question.

Sorel's articulation of myth should be grasped historically because it developed as a critique not just of utopia, but of the specific dangers of utopia as a machine for stripping agency and subjecthood from the proletariat in favor of the bourgeois intellectuals. The doubling of the concept of utopia, both function and form, is certainly also present in myth, but cuts across a different object. In utopia, the cut indicates alterity – a desire within subjects, irrepressible and so on, or a literary object that imagines it in one way or another. In myth the internal distinction indicates not alterity but agency that we find either observed or lived.

In the 21st century we have a very difficult time identifying, rather than imagining, collective subjects. Utopia is now regularly invoked as a function, but it gets dangerously close to a compensatory mysticism, even a self-help technique. To such a state has Herbert Marcuse's utopian technological impulse been reduced—Marcuse who was in this close to Sorel, as we can arguably see now that polemics around the New Left have lost some of their heat. Utopia is where we have curled up to rest after the long retreat from the catastrophic collapse of the alternatives to the class subject. Sorelian myth, then, is a useful tonic because it comes to us from an early moment in the long slow dissolution of that revolutionary subject. Both method and subject, it obliges the intellectual to step back and consider the world as it is and may be – in becoming.

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Sorel and Mythomania in Interwar France[1]

by Kevin Duong
University of Virginia

1. Introduction

"La mythomanie" emerged in the 1930s as the name for a recurring trope in French intellectual politics, although nobody could agree on what it meant. Far-right intellectuals, mainly lower middle class, found myth-talk congenial to their cause. It gave them a vocabulary to revisit longstanding problems of modernization in its anticlerical or capitalist trajectories.[2] This was especially true for those associated with the Parti populaire français (PPF) like Jacques Doriot and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle—men who are remembered today for invoking myths of decadent homosexuals and abjected Jews in contrast to the "new Man".[3] Robert Brasillach, in his summer 1938 *Je suis partout* essay, "Introduction à l'esprit fasciste", explored "how myths are formed" while supplying French fascism its own mythic genealogy from Salazar to La Tour du Pin.[4]

The far-right did not have a monopoly on myth. In Walter Benjamin's reflections on "mythic violence", André Breton's call for "a method of creating a collective myth", or Roger Caillois's 1936 "Le mythe et l'homme", we see evidence of widespread intellectual ferment.[5] Texts like these indicated, Raymond Queneau observed in 1938, how "the algebraic, accounting form of thought practiced in the West under the name of rationalism" had for years come under criticism.[6] Sociological and philosophical provocations were reinforced by anthropological landmarks like Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *La Mythologie primitive* (1935) and Georges Dumézil's *Mythes et Dieux des Germains* (1939). From phenomenology to psychoanalysis, comparative ethnology to aesthetic modernism, myth offered a point of cross-pollination for new developments in the human sciences.

There were also the critics: men and women whose impassioned efforts to repudiate mythomania nevertheless drew them into its orbit. "Mythomania", Paul-Louis Landsberg explained in *Esprit* in 1938, was a "malaise in the feeling of reality" activated by a "deep and universal crisis in the idea of truth". It grew, not out of widespread public lying, but the

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All translations by the author unless otherwise indicated.
[2] Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (W. W. Norton and Co., 1994); Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (University of Chicago Press, 1994); Kevin Passmore, "La droite entre les deux guerres: psychologie des foules, sciences de l'organisation et publicité moderne", *Politix* 106, no. 2 (2014): 31-57; Daniel Knegt, *Fascism, Liberalism and Europeanism in the Political Thought of Bertrand De Jouvenel and Alfred Fabre-Luce* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017); Richard Griffith, *France's Purveyors of Hatred: Aspects of the French Extreme Right and its Influence, 1918-1945* (Routledge, 2021), 57-140.
[3] Sandrine Sanos, *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France* (Stanford University Press, 2013); Frederick Brown, *The Embrace of Unreason: France, 1914-1940* (Knopf, 2014).
[4] Robert Brasillach, "Introduction à l'esprit fasciste, II: Comment se forment les mythes", *Je Suis Partout*, 1 June 1938, p. 3.
[5] André Breton [1935], "Political Position of Surrealism", in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 205-278, at 210; Roger Caillois, "Fonction du mythe", in *Oeuvres*, ed. Dominique Rabourdin (Gallimard, 2008), 235-245.
[6] Raymond Queneau [1939], "Le Mythe et l'imposture", in *Le Voyage en Grèce* (Gallimard, 1973), 151-55, at 151.

"specific danger" of "forgetting the idea of truth itself and replacing it with the idea of myth".[7] Replacing discoverable truths with realizable myths would in the end unleash upon Europe a politics of unremitting voluntarism. Queneau registered his objection a month later in *Volontés*. There was a "thirst for myths currently shown by certain minds". "Brilliant minds, let it be said"—but minds misled. No doubt it was "a mistake to try to expand [rationalism's] validity to other areas" outside of "certain technical practices". But prescribing myths as a type of "counter-reason", Queneau insisted, was like healing "headaches with a guillotine".[8] Already in a 1933 issue of *La Critique Sociale* the young Simone Weil attacked France's addiction to myths of popular uprisings, an ahistorical "myth [légende] too easily accepted" by socialists.[9] And by early 1939, Jean-Paul Sartre added his voice to the chorus of warnings. "This has gone so far", he wrote, that "to speak like these authors, we can fear today there is a myth of myth", a culture-wide fascination that demands "sociological study".[10]

What was mythomania? What was the problem-space articulated by these figures and texts?[11] To pose the question this way is already to suggest some distance from how a prestigious historiography has approached interwar mythomania: as an antiparliamentary cultural politics. Much has been written on how particular myths of spiritual decadence figured in far-right critiques of Marxism, liberalism, and materialism; how myths of world-historical personalities buttressed fascism's politics of leadership; how myths of the family shaped reactionary constructions of sexual difference and homosexuality; and, above all, how palingenetic myths of national regeneration facilitated the creation of genuinely mass fascist politics.[12] Here and elsewhere, myth indicates a non-rational means of persuasion tailored for an oppositional antiparliamentary politics.[13]

This essay is occasioned by a conviction that it is a mistake to characterize mythomania in 1930s political theory in the same way. For one, approaching mythomania as a cultural politics understates its theoretical dimension. Those who called upon specific myths, from Jeanne d'Arc and Napoleon to the *volk* and *le peuple*, were not all dangerous critics adopting a dangerous type of persuasion. I will suggest they were also engaged in a profound philosophical debate about what myths were and why humans often did their thinking with them. This debate,

[7] Paul-Louis Landsberg, "Introduction à une critique du mythe", *Esprit* 64, no. 1 (January 1938): 512-529, at 514, 524.
[8] Queneau, "Le Mythe et l'imposture", 151-152, 155.
[9] Simone Weil, "Réflexions sur la guerre", *La Critique Sociale* no. 10 (1933): 153-158, at 156. The Marxist Boris Souvarine edited *La Critique Sociale*. André Breton hated it, but Bataille was closely connected to it. Ironically, Weil's essay immediately preceded Bataille's "La structure psychologique du fascism" in the journal issue—a small allegory for how conflicted the French left had already become over the concept of myth by the early 1930s.
[10] Jean-Paul Sartre [1939], "Denis de Rougement: 'L'amour et l'occident,'" in *Situations, I* (Gallimard, 1947): 57-64, at 59.
[11] The term "problem space" is now well-known from David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004).
[12] Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton University Press, 1996); Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual life* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986); David Carroll, "Literary Fascism or the Aestheticizing of Politics: The Case of Robert Brasillach", *New Literary History* 23, no. 3 (1992): 691–726; Carolyn Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (University of California Press, 2000); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (University of California Press, 2000); Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939* (Duke University Press, 2007).
[13] The classic example of mythomania contributing to an antiparliamentary politics is Carl Schmitt's 1923 *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (The MIT Press, 1988).

whose aim was to enhance rather than manipulate the people's agency, fades from view the more we emphasize the instrumental use of myths in interwar cultural politics.

Moreover, construing 1930s mythomania as an antiparliamentary cultural politics emphasizes its availability for fascist tendencies but does little to explain the important attention it enlisted from antifascist intellectuals. For sure, myth-talk conveyed some of the interwar period's most famous men and women of letters to open filiation with fascism. Before joining with the PPF Drieu La Rochelle had confusing sympathies with both Dada and the *Action française*; Gustave Hervé, once the leader of Europe's most important prewar antimilitarist movement, praised both Mussolini and Philippe Pétain in the 1930s; and the acolytes of the *Collège de sociologie*, to whom we will return, walked a fine line between analyzing fascism and sympathizing with it.[14] At the same time, not all or even most mythomaniacs succumbed to "fascist drift", as Philippe Burrin calls it.[15] Led by Paul Rivet, the ethnologists at the *Musée de l'Homme* had dedicated their careers to the study of myths in non-Western societies. Yet they formed one of the first cells of resistance to Vichy for which several of them, including Anatole Lewitzky, earned execution.[16] Mythomania appealed to intellectuals of every stripe. In an age exhausted with rationalism's over-extension into everyday life, from realism in aesthetics to scientific management in the workplace, that appeal was understandable. Myth was a promissory note that things could be otherwise because ancient and foreign societies—those Europeans characterized by their exotic myths—*did* seem otherwise.[17]

What follows is a reconsideration of interwar mythomania, not as a cultural politics, but as a profound debate about the conditions of revolutionary agency in a desacralized society. At least for some mythomaniacs in France, myth-talk was not a means of mass persuasion. Actually, it was not fundamentally about mass *anything*, whether collective action or conformity. At issue was something else: the apparent impossibility for individuals to act in the face of improbable prospects for success. Why would an individual, with no plausible evidence that it will be efficacious, act? How could someone choose revolt in the face of futility? These existential questions, I will argue, indicate the problems with which mythomaniacs wrestled—and not that of "fascist" mass persuasion or mobilization.

My reconsideration proceeds from the political theorist whose name appeared more than anyone else's at the height of mythomania: Georges Sorel. Although Nietzsche, Bergson, and Sade all played their role, it was Sorel—"le premier *sociologue du mythe*"—whose name

[14] William R. Rucker, "Fascism and Individualism: The Political Thought of Pierre Drieu La Rochelle", *The Journal of Politics* 27, no. 1 (1965): 153-177; Robert Soucy, "Le Fascisme de Drieu La Rochelle", *Revue d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale* 17, no. 66 (1967): 61-84; Michael B. Loughlin, "Gustave Hervé's Transition from Socialism to National Socialism: Another Example of French Fascism?" *Journal of Contemporary History* 36, no. 1 (2001): 5-39. For a recent account of why Bataille's thought should not be seen as fascist mirroring but its democratic supersession, see Robyn Marasco, "Bataille's anti-fascism", *Contemporary Political Theory* 21, no. 1 (2021): 3-23. For an account that traces the ambiguity of the *Collège*'s politics of myth to Durkheim's own ambivalences, see Tiina Arppe, "Sorcerer's Apprentices and the 'Will to Figuration': The Ambiguous Heritage of the *Collège de Sociologie*", *Theory, Culture, & Society* 26, no. 4 (2009): 117-145.

[15] Philippe Burrin, *La Dérive fasciste. Doriot, Déat, Bergery, 1933-1945* (Seuil, 1986).

[16] Julien Blanc, *Au commencement de la Résistance. Du côté du musée de l'Homme 1940-1941* (Seuil, 2010).

[17] This is the major theme of Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934) and *L'Âge d'homme* (Gallimard, 1939). See also James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (1981): 539-564; Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Duke University Press, 1996); Suzanne Marchand, "Leo Frobenius and the Revolt Against the West", *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 2 (1997): 153-170.

became synonymous with mythomania.[18] This was especially true for some members of the *Collège de sociologie*, that famous group of mythomaniacs who I read together with Sorel and who in early 1937 founded at the café Le Grand Véfour a research group dedicated to "a sort of psychoanalysis of society" based on myth.[19] This choice of constellation should seem less odd than it actually is. Sorel's prominence before the First World War lay with Italian, not French intellectuals.[20] Though esteemed in the Latin Quarter, Sorel's stature was modest in his own country before 1914. When Sorel finally achieved canonical standing, it was amid interwar mythomania alongside the *Collège de sociologie*. By the eve of the Second World War, Sorel's name was inseparable from those of Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois. The latter in particular defended Sorel's legacy after the Popular Front's demise starting in the summer of 1937.[21] For critics like Sartre and Landsberg, "mythomania" simply *was* this constellation of authors.[22]

Nor was this constellation arbitrary. Like Sorel, members of the *Collège* invoked "myth" to extend Marxist social theory. They imported the concept of myth from the French tradition of sociology, especially Durkheim's nephew Marcel Mauss. For his part, Sorel worked with Mauss directly, first at *Devenir social* in the 1890s and then at Hubert Lagardelle's *Le Mouvement socialiste* from around 1905-1910.[23] The filiations between the prewar Sorel and interwar *Collège* were real, and mythomaniacs—defenders and critics alike—appreciated that fact.

We should do the same if we want to understand why myth became a principal theme of interwar political thought. Mythomania should be remembered as a watershed chapter in the history of theorizing myth. Sorel and his infelicitous interwar readers helped modernize the concept of myth from a form of historical explanation into a forward-looking revolutionary activity. They did not approach myths as their Romantic antecedents did, as visible signs of invisible truths. They saw myths as things to be *made* true through action. The political orientation this perspective encouraged—a prescriptive mixture of heroic individualism and fateful submission to destiny—was ideologically indeterminate. The laudable goal of renewing humanity's agentic capacities could, and did, tilt into the thrill of "positive barbarism".[24] Yet the problems which mythomaniacs tried to solve were not illusory. A century later, it is still not clear if we can bridge the gap between what we can reasonably expect to achieve through premeditated action and what we know must be done on a world-historic scale. However

[18] Landsberg, "Introduction à une critique du mythe", 518.
[19] Alastair Brotchie, "The College of Sociology: A Paradoxical Institution", in Georges Bataille, *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology,* ed. Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie, trans. Natasha Lehrer, John Hartman, Meyer Barash (Atlas Press, 2017), 63-86, at 63.
[20] Shlomo Sand, "Legend, Myth, and Fascism", *The European Legacy* 3, no. 5 (1998): 51-65.
[21] Claudine Frank, "Theory and its Thirties, 1934-1949", in Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Duke University Press, 2003), 1-58.
[22] Jean-Paul Sartre [1943], "Un nouveau mystique", *Situations, I* (Gallimard, 1947): 133-174; Landsberg, "Introduction à une critique du mythe", 517.
[23] It is important to note that Mauss later distanced himself from Sorel's writings on violence. In so doing, however, he emphasized the conspiratorial element of the Parisian syndicalists, their "minority agitation strategy"—an emphasis that placed Sorel as a direct antecedent to the conspiracies and secret societies associated with Surrealism, *Acéphale*, and the *Collège de sociologie*. See Marcel Mauss to Élie Halévy, November 1936, in, in Denis Hollier, ed., *The College of Sociology, 1937-1939* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 347-350.
[24] Hal Foster, *Brutal Aesthetics: Dubuffet, Bataille, John, Paolozzi, Oldenburg* (Princeton University Press, 2020). "Positive barbarism" is the term Foster gives to distinguish the redemptive turn to the *brut* in Bataille from the actual barbarism embodied by civilization.

idiosyncratically, interwar mythomaniacs wanted to overcome that gap. That is one small reason to recall the spirit of their project and to reflect on what we are doing when we think about myths.

2.

"This idea of myth" which so conditioned the 1930s, Sartre argued, was "the product of this era and very fashionable since Sorel".[25] What was this "very fashionable" idea of myth? On one hand, what Sorel meant by "myth" is familiar enough from his 1908 *Reflections on Violence*. "Myths" were powerful image constellations that, in penetrating into the deep strata of our mental activity, motivated action prior to its capture by calculations of utility or cause and effect. Myths were important to Sorel because they explained, in ways the "rationalist" intellectuals of his day could not, the motivational sources of collective revolutionary acts. Myths were akin to psychological prime movers, condensing a whole range of social relations into a single powerful visualization.

On the other hand, what made Sorel's theory of myth distinct was its emphasis on protecting individuality. Liberal critics of fascism usually attribute to interwar mythomaniacs a desire to secure behavioral conformity at the expense of individuality, but this gets it exactly wrong when it comes to Sorel. The *Reflections on Violence* is a sustained argument that the narrowness of parliamentary political culture, its culture of sober utilitarianism and means-end calculations, solicits "automatic obedience" to state authority. "Democratic rulers adopt as their mission the accomplishment of the *moral unity* of France", and so the mass action they secure is the "automatic discipline" of "automata". The purpose of myth is to counteract that obedience by protecting the experience of individuality. Epic myths of revolutionary catastrophe and deliverance magnify the importance of every "individual [as] having something of importance to do in the battle". They solicit mass action while enhancing the experience of singular irreplaceability within: everything depends on everyone. That is why the "whole revolutionary effort" of working-class socialism "tends to create *free men*" who enjoy their individuality in the wombs of a self-seeking political culture.[26] The echoes of de Tocqueville are deliberate: the author of *Democracy in America* is copiously cited.

The individuating myths which concerned Sorel were collections of images of the future rather than a story of the past. This contrast between myth's visual density and language's semantic poverty distinguishes Sorel's myths from one of the ways Tae-Yeoun Keum has argued political thinkers usually treat "myth", namely as a tacit "imaginative framework" for everyday belief.[27] Unlike myths that function as background frameworks, Sorelian myths stand at the foreground of the mind. They are vibrant image constructions whose luster strikes a dramatic contrast with the verbosity of parliamentary socialists, "a doctrine expressed entirely in words" and therefore subject to language games of refutation.[28]

An orientation towards the future also makes Sorel's account of myth unusual. Myths in eighteenth and early nineteenth century thought, Dan Edelstein has argued, tended to situate

[25] Sartre, "Denis de Rougement", 58.
[26] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 76, 170, 172-173, 240.
[27] Tae-Yeoun Keum, *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2020).
[28] Sorel, *Reflections*, 24.

the present in relation to a mythical past.[29] Here myths were narratives to be reenacted rather than images to behold. The French Revolution was at times conceived of as a revival of antiquity or those of the Golden Age; likewise with European romanticism's revival of myths like that of Prometheus. Rather than see myths as imaginative and narrative touchstones of the past, however, Sorel's myths depict a future that we subjectively feel *must* come true, if only we stay true to our convictions. "Men who are participating in great social movements", Sorel believed, "always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph".[30] These images gave pictorial form to the group's convictions and its will to act. As Marx had called for, they drew their content from the poetry of the future rather than a distant past shrouded by the mists of time.

Sorel's account of myth is usually described as where he deviates from Marxism. Where Sorel is most interested in myth, his debts to Marxism seem thinnest. Indeed, his Marxism and Bergsonism have long been considered philosophically incompatible.[31] Yet consider the following passage from his "Letter to Daniel Halèvy".

> "For a long time socialism was scarcely anything but a utopia; and the Marxists were right in claiming for their master the honour of having changed the situation: socialism has now become the preparation of the masses employed in large-scale industry who wish to do away with the State and with property…. Unfortunately, [Marx] was not acquainted with the facts which have now become familiar to us… the myth of the general strike has now become popular and is now firmly established in the minds of the workers; we have ideas about violence that it would have been difficult for him to form; we can therefore complete his doctrine, instead of making commentaries on his texts as his unfortunate disciplines have done for so long".[32]

Rather than positing myth as the place where Sorel opts for Bergson rather than Marx, Sorel says outright that the "myth of the general strike" in some way "completes" Marx's doctrine; that it both contributes to, and fulfills, what Marx himself was trying to do. Myth expresses the spirit of Marxism while making it adequate to the situation of class struggle in the 1900s. In the wake of the 1906 Charter of Amiens, the French left is split between the syndicalist *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) and socialists of the *Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière* (SFIO), like Jean Jaurès, who have entered parliamentary institutions.[33]

There were scientific reasons Sorel felt compelled to theorize myth in such idiosyncratic terms. For Sorel, "knowledge of these myths" is crucial for the historian, because without them she cannot explain how revolutionary action happens in history. For Sorel, when we act, we posit a picture of the world in which we are acting as well as picture of what the world might look like after we act. A "myth" crystallizes this second picture: it offers an artificial visualization of a future state of affairs that depends entirely on our acting. No doubt our actions always

[29] Dan Edelstein, "The Modernization of Myth: From Balzac to Sorel", *Yale French Studies* 111 (2007): 32–44.
[30] Sorel, *Reflections*, 20.
[31] James Jay Hamilton, "Georges Sorel and the Inconsistencies of a Bergsonian Marxism". *Political Theory* 1, no. 3 (1973): 329–40; Malcolm Vout and Lawrence Wilde, "Socialism and Myth: The Case of Bergson and Sorel", *Radical Philosophy* 46, no. Summer (1987): 2–7.
[32] Sorel, *Reflections*, 30.
[33] Marco Gervasoni, "L'invention du syndicalisme révolutionnaire en France (1903-1907)", *Mil neuf cent* 24 (2006): 57-71.

solicit a future that is equivocal. But our *acting* depends on picturing a future that is vouchsafed by our action itself. This phenomenological dimension of action—its basis in conviction rather than certitude about the future—is what Sorel believed his contemporaries could not grasp, so wedded as they were to models that retrospectively viewed action as a function of utility.[34]

The historian is not alone in needing a theory of myth. Sorel claimed that the myth of the general strike was popular, held by workers who had a world to win. They were the ones who first discovered the myth of the general strike, and they certainly were not doing so as historians. As always is the case, scholars can only discover the importance of myth after revolutionaries have already done so. Knowledge is generated by and belongs to those who act. That was the famous premise of Vico's science of poetic knowledge which so influenced Sorel.[35]

What then does myth mean for those who must act rather than those who seek to explain the past? What does myth do for revolutionaries rather than historians? Here we do not get a direct answer from Sorel. Instead, the text offers indirect explanations by way of analogy to religion. Contemporary socialists moved by the myth of a general strike, Sorel suggested, resemble early Christian revolutionaries moved by myths of persecution and redemption. Indeed, the resonance between the two was why so many critics of socialism construed it as a kind of religion. The Christian life, Sorel argued, was once understood as "penetrating to the roots of one's being; consequently, a new analogy has been discovered between religion and revolutionary socialism which aims at the apprenticeship, preparation and even reconstruction of the individual which takes place with this gigantic task in mind". For Sorel, what the Christian and revolutionary socialist share is not dogmatism. They do not enjoy epistemic certitude in the righteousness of their beliefs. What they share is conviction: that there is a battle to be won, and even if they lose now, it only means that preparations for the final confrontation must go on. Hence why "people who are living in this world of myths", whether Christian or socialist, "are secure from refutation".[36] Hence, too, why the positivists of Sorel's day could not explain revolutionary action. They assumed people acted upon elaborate probabilistic calculations of their activity's outcome. Religious zealots and insurrectionary workers perplexed them, because they could not understand how those groups acted precisely *because* the outcome was irrelevant. What eluded positivist appraisal was the very thing that made revolutions possible: absolute moral conviction.

The analogy between revolutionary socialism and early Christianity gives us a clue to what Sorel believed myths offered revolutionaries. Myths are not objects to be assessed but a distinct kind of mental activity. Proletarians think in terms of myth when they are thinking about the future as actors rather than as intellectuals, first-personally rather than third-personally. When they think with myths, they act on behalf of a future image whose realization is imminent but whose precise shape is irrelevant. There is "no longer any need", Sorel writes of proletarians

[34] Sorel, *Reflections*, 23.
[35] According to Vico's "Maker's Knowledge" thesis, poetic knowledge takes priority over rational ones, because the activity of creation is the condition for making something available to knowing. Only human needs and accomplishments can count as the "ultimate circumstances" which render things knowable. Humans have privileged insight into civil society because, since they made it, they could know it. "For all these doubts [about what we can know] combined can in no way cast doubt upon this unique truth, which must be the first in such a science, since, in this long, dense night of darkness, this one light alone gleams forth: that the world of gentile nations was certainly made by men". No wonder "the Greeks, in their superstitious times, [regarded] the appearance of those who made discoveries useful to mankind as divine". Giambattista Vico, *The First New Science*, trans. Leon Pompa (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30, 152.
[36] Sorel, *Reflections*, 30-31.

thinking in terms of myth, "to concern [themselves] with the organization of industry" or "to discuss how many men must organize themselves in order to enjoy future happiness".[37] What matters is the apprenticeship and preparation for class struggle.

Myth, in other words, is the shape our apprehension of the future takes when we take our own action to be the central ingredient of that future itself. It is how we think about the future when we are trying to fulfill it rather than trying to predict it. We might even say that myth is how we think about the future when the future enjoys no foundation except for our conviction in it. The presence of a myth explains why failure and defeat can strengthen the moral conviction of a group rather than raises doubts about their cause.

There is a classic problem in the history of Marxist criticism to which this idea of myth corresponds. How are revolutionary actors, not intellectuals, supposed to relate to Marxist theory? Critics like Georg Lukács sometimes called this a problem of unifying theory and practice. They wrote with the assumption that the two were supposed to go together.[38] Sorel's theorization of myth, however, suggests they cannot go together. There is a fundamental perspectival shift that separates the thinking involved in acting and analyzing. Myths turn out to be crucial to the history of revolutions, because theory cannot be "in unity" with action, at least not in any straightforward way. Revolutionary actors think through myth, not theory, because the way we think about society when we act to change it is not necessarily how we think about society when we are trying to understand it.

Sorel's category of myth is designed to capture this vicious circle characteristic of revolutionary action generally: the future we aim at when we undertake action is itself the fruit of our action. This vicious circle presents a familiar tension in Marxism: the well-known difficulties with reconciling social determination and collective voluntarism, or with Marxism as a science and a politics. Sorel was not criticizing "intellectuals" or "little" scientists for failing to be revolutionaries. He was not asking them to be better organizers, to yield to commonsense, or to descend from the heavens to the firm ground of reality. At issue was not an intellectuals' orientation towards politics. Sorel was *explaining* why intellectuals did their thinking in a different register than that of revolutionaries and emphasizing that the psychology of the latter is irreconcilable to the psychology of the former.

Sorel might be among the earliest readers of Marx to identify this tension without trying to resolve it in dialectical terms. Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual", developed in dialogue with his reading of Sorel, could be interpreted as an effort to correct Sorel's cynicism on this point. We might also say that subsequent debates over vanguardism were one extended attempt to finesse this tension in practice. The masses act, the vanguard knows, and the two form a historical unity but they remain epistemologically at odds. Sorel understood that if the masses thought like vanguard intellectuals did, they simply would not act. Hence why the self-organizing masses think *in* myths while intellectuals and historians think *about* myths.

3.

The *Collège de sociologie* continued this approach to myth. They were an elective group of heterodox Marxists, dissident surrealists, philosophers and ethnographers who met from 1937-1939 and made "myth" central to their aesthetics and social theory. Their most prominent

[37] Sorel, *Reflections*, 30.
[38] Georg Lukàcs [1924], *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought* (Verso, 2009).

members included Bataille, Caillois, and Michel Leiris, although Alexander Kojève, Jean Wahl, and Walter Benjamin were involved too. Like others of their generation, the Popular Front's failures were interpreted as proof that parliamentary France had reached the end of its tether. Kojève was telling students in his Hegel lectures that history was over. Even prominent Surrealists, so explosive and innovative, had become "artists" with gallery expositions.

The *Collège* met in the cafes of Paris's left bank. There they debated the specificity of the social. What makes a society? What makes it more than an aggregation of individuals? What is the nature of the social bond, and what protects its integrity over time? The members of the *Collège* tackled these questions through the categories of "myth" and "the Sacred". It was their homage to the intellectual program inspired by Durkheim and elaborated by Mauss. Sorel's theory of myth features explicitly in the lectures, essays, and debates of the *Collège*, as it did with the wider mythomaniacal moment. For both enthusiasts and critics, Sorel's theory of myth became a pretext to debate the crises of interwar Europe.

The *Collège* was heterogeneous, but its basic positions are well known.[39] Myth is not monopolized by primitive societies. It was an arrogant mistake of republican ethnographers to assume that "myth" was synonymous with the "premodern". Modern societies lived on myth, too, especially the myth of the death of myth.[40] At the same time, the urgent crises of interwar France could be traced to the fact that society was losing access to the Sacred. All societies are held together by the Sacred, understood as Durkheim's moments of collective effervescence where an economy of psychic attraction and repulsion constitutes social cohesion. Each society consecrates certain things so they can be desecrated. This dynamic, centered on rituals of exchange and violence, gives shape to the social body. Since modern French society was losing access to the Sacred, it was also losing its social cohesion. This was apparent in the way the Sacred's traditional function of cohering society had been subverted into something that threatened "secular" society itself.[41] The task of the *Collège de sociologie* was to rekindle the Sacred in society by manufacturing new myths. This was a way to repair the fraying social bonds of a world where communal sacrality had been displaced by privatized capitalist consumption. Theirs was an "activist" sociology, encouraging "contagious" collective representations by exploiting "the interplay of instincts and 'myths' that compose or mobilize them in contemporary society".[42]

The group's ambition to reclaim religious experience for modernity was outlined in some of its earliest manifesto documents at the *Nouvelle revue française* where Jean Paulhan organized their literary debut. Their modeled their effort to rekindle myth in modernity after a myth itself: the Sorcerer's Apprentice. They turned to this classic story to restage Sorel's own arguments about myth. Reading it together with Sorel reveals the latter to have been a point of departure for a whole tradition of social criticism, going through the Surrealists, that believed myth offered a way to think social determinism together with collective voluntarism in Marxism.

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[39] Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, "A Left Sacred or a Sacred Left? The *Collège de Sociologie*, Fascism, and Political Culture in Interwar France", *South Central Review* 23, no. 1 (2006): 40-54; Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Cornell University Press, 1992); Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

[40] Georges Bataille [1947], "The Absence of Myth", in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (Verso, 2006), 48.

[41] Georges Bataille [1946], "The Moral Meaning of Sociology", in *The Absence of Myth*, 103-112, at 107.

[42] Roger Caillois [1938], "Introduction", in Hollier, *The College of Sociology,* 9-11, at 10-11.

Bataille's diagnosis of the modern condition mirrors Sorel's. "A man who takes upon himself the burden of science", Bataille believed, "has exchanged his concern for living out human destiny for a concern to discover truth".[43] He has exchanged action for knowledge. Science seduces Man when the latter ceases to feel the need to be human. Like Sorel, Bataille also believed that "if the truth revealed by science is stripped of human meaning, if only the *fictions* of the mind correspond to the strange human will, these fictions must be *made true* in order for this will to be carried out".[44] This restates Sorel's own position described in his 1900 essay on "Science and Morals":

> "If scientific truths hardly affect men, we have the faculty of substituting for them an imaginary world that we populate with plastic creations and that we perceive with much greater clarity than we do the material world. It is these idols that are penetrated by our wills and are the sisters of our souls".[45]

For both Sorel and Bataille, human wills are not moved by knowledge of the world, but conviction in fictions that become real through action's alchemical powers. "Action alone sets out to transform the world, that is to say, to make it like a dream" Bataille concluded.[46] Action is a metabolic process where one approaches reality like a dream so that those dreams can become reality. It would be difficult to imagine a better restatement of Sorel's own theory of myth.

Bataille elaborated this activist, future-oriented conception of myth by reprising the canonical myth of the Sorcerer's Apprentice. There the sorcerer's apprentice casts a spell that is too powerful. She loses control of the magical forces that she herself has summoned up. It is a story that prescribes humility towards our own agency. It reminds us that humans are often overwhelmed, even swindled, by our own agency. Of course, Marx had called upon this myth in the Communist Manifesto to describe why bourgeois society had unleashed the productive powers that would come to abolish it.

> "Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the netherworld whom he has called up by his spells… The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself. But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are able to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians".[47]

Marx restates this myth in variations across his work. In the early writings, alienation is the name for when the worker confronts the product of their labour as an external power confronting them as an alien and tyrannical force. In *Capital*, the exchange of commodities through money for the purposes of human consumption gives rise to a process where the exchange of commodities becomes an end-in-itself. C-M-C' becomes M-C-M', and a process

[43] Bataille [1938], "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", in Hollier, *The College of Sociology*, 12-23, at 15-16.
[44] Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", 14-15.
[45] Georges Sorel [1900], "Science and Morals", in Georges Sorel, *From Georges Sorel: Vol 2, Hermeneutics and the Sciences*, ed. John L. Stanley, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (Transactions Publishers, 1990), 123-138, at 126.
[46] Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", 16.
[47] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin, 1967), 225, 230.

which was supposed end in the expenditure of use-values ends up instrumentalizing that expenditure for the sake of value's self-valorization. In either case, a process initiated by humans takes on a life of its own. Our agency usurps itself.

Bataille's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" retells this Marxist story, but as in Sorel its purpose is transformed. The magician becomes more than a model for understanding abstract domination or self-alienation. The magician also models revolutionary action.

At first the "Man of Action", Bataille argues, feels "the need to create". The command, "Act", "resounds in our ear like Jericho's blasting trumpets". In the twentieth century, however, as soon as the Man of Action tries to act,

> "…he who demands that action realize the will that prompts it quickly meets with strange replies. The neophyte learns that the will whose action is effective is the will that is limited to dismal dreams. He accepts; then gradually he understands that the only thing he has gained from action is the benefit of having acted. He believed he could transform the world according to his dream, and he only transformed his dream in accordance with the most impoverished reality. All he can do is to stifle his own will—*in order that he be able TO ACT*".[48]

A person acts on the basis of their will to transform the world. But they are told that the only effective action in the world is one that takes into account the limits of reality; indeed, they are taught that truly effective action must be carefully circumscribed. "The first abnegation action requires of the one who wishes to act", Bataille argued, "is to reduce his dream to the proportions outlined by science". Hence by a cruel dialectic, those who hope to act to change the world instead let the world tell them how to act. In the name of changing the world, they become a slave *of* that world. Efficaciousness in acting is purchased at the price of action becoming impotent. In the end, the Man of Action succumbs to utilitarian calculations about effective action or "slavishness to function". They are praised for being realistic and moderate: "Powerless to change the world, Action is changed by it".[49]

This is a felicitous restatement of Sorel's critique of parliamentary socialists. "Parliamentary socialism feels a certain embarrassment from the fact that, at its origin, socialism took its stand on absolute principles".[50] Socialists entered into parliamentary competition with moral purpose, but they learned they were naïve. Real reform is built from realistic compromise, not moral conviction. Parliamentary socialism henceforth aims at winning compromises from the bourgeoisie rather than waging uncompromising class struggle.

Ordinarily the myth of the Sorcerer's Apprentice is meant to explain self-domination. In an extraordinary argument, however, Bataille inverts the meaning of the story. The figure of the Sorcerer actually rescues us from our rational and self-imposed impotence. Becoming the dupes of our own myths is an enabling and liberating constraint.

> "Simple, intense existence, not yet destroyed by a slavishness to function, is possible only to the extent that it has stopped being subordinate to some particular

[48] Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", 16-17.
[49] Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", 16-17.
[50] Sorel, *Reflections*, 68.

> project such as acting, depicting, or measuring: It is dependent on *the image of destiny*, feeling silently bound up with this seductive and dangerous myth".[51]

This "image of destiny" is for both Bataille the quintessential myth; Sorel preferred to call it an image expressing "the will to deliverance" [la volonté de délivrance]. Bataille believed "the world of politics" was a world of impotence, because those who inhabited this world had destroyed their own powers of action. They had become "disassociated", thinking of the world as ones of limited, partial spheres, each with specific functions and never adding up to a social totality subject to human recreation. The opposite, however, was true in "the world of lovers". Lovers meet through luck. There is no experience of life more saturated with contingency than finding love. Nevertheless, in such fortuitous contingencies, star-crossed lovers find proof of fate. In the world of absolute experience they form together, there is genuine communication grounded in what had once been a trick of the mind. "Thus", Bataille believed, "the tempestuous rhythm of love makes true what was only an illusion on the first day".[52]

It has to be said that Bataille's portrait of "the world of lovers" is a bit juvenile. Like most Surrealists and their fellow-travellers, Bataille made amorous passion the centrepiece of revolutionary politics.[53] André Breton's famous *L'amour fou* from 1937—published the same year as Bataille's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice"—figures love for women as something so transcendent that it comes off as adolescent. Simone de Beauvoir later observed that Breton's valorization of love had nothing to do with real women. It was all "myth", yet another alibi to replace actual women with "Woman" as pure Symbol.[54] What de Beauvoir says of Breton applies to Bataille, too. At its worst, his portrait of "the world of lovers" is puerile. It echoes Sorel's own remarks on conjugal love which similarly depict it as more imagined than real. All of his work exalts the "sublimity" of conjugal heterosexual love, a love so immaterial as to be a "mystery" unexplainable by science.[55] The same otherworldly conjugality provides a template for Bataille's all-important "world of lovers" ruled by fate.

Maybe the best that can be said in their defence is that interwar mythomaniacs avowed their juvenility. They thought it offered a counterpoint to the suicidal and arrogant maturity exemplified in "the world of politics", the same realism that was bringing the world to the brink of geopolitical and military catastrophe. In their "Declaration on the International Crisis" on October 7, 1938—Hitler signed the Munich Agreement the prior week with France, the United Kingdom, and Italy—the *Collège* denounced the "*utter deceit* of all present forms of politics". It was precisely because of their mature and sober realism that French politicians refused to see "the absurdity of the current political positions" or the inevitability of war.[56] The *Collège*'s indulgence of childish absurdities was neither indulgent nor absurd, which is why someone as dead serious as Suzanne Césaire could declare in 1943 that Surrealism was "a force, the only one, which permits us to recover 'this unique, original faculty, of which the primitive and the child keep a trace.'"[57]

[51] Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", 18.
[52] Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", 18-19.
[53] André Breton, *L'amour fou* (Gallimard, 1937).
[54] Simone de Beauvoir [1949], *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage, 2011), 246-251.
[55] Georges Sorel, *Le Procès de Socrate* (Félix Alcan, 1889).
[56] Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois [1938], "Declaration on the International Crisis", in Bataille, *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 340-342.
[57] Suzanne Césaire, "1943: Le surréalisme et nous" *Tropiques* no. 8-9 (October 1943), in *Tropiques, Tome II* (Éditions Jean-Michel Place), 14-18, at 15.

There is more than one way to act on reality. That is Bataille's point, as it was for all the interwar mythomaniacs. If in the "world of politics" we are taught to amputate our dreams in accord with a science of reality, we can still act on the world in terms of myth. Like sorcerer's apprentices, we can fall under the effect our own illusions like those of fate. When we believe something is as fate would have it, we act in ways that subjectively feel impotent and helpless; and paradoxically, that is why our actions defy reality's rules and objectively transform it. As Sorel explained time and again, Christian martyrs acted according to a providentialism. Reality could never destroy their conviction and, hence, why Christian martyrs in time triumphed over reality and made Christianity a temporal power. Revolutionaries completely enslaved by myths are like Bataille's sorcerer apprentices. "Whereas art acknowledges the final reality and the superior character of the real world that constrains man", Bataille believed that "myth enters into human existence like a force demanding that inferior reality submit to its rule". It is when we act under our own illusions that, paradoxically, we demand reality become more like fate. That is what makes revolutionary action revolutionary. And this subjective trick transforms the objective world. It is real magic.

4.

Clever as this argument was, it encountered problems. To reintroduce myth into modernity by acting like sorcerer's apprentices raises the same paradox Sorel had already identified. Critics like Kojève understood this immediately. When Bataille proclaimed his desire of instigating a contagious return of the Sacred which, like a boomerang, "would end by reaching and in inflaming the one who first planted its seed", the famed teacher of Hegel warned him that "such a miracleworker, for his part, could be no more carried away by a sacred knowingly activated by himself, than could a conjurer be persuaded of the existence of magic while marveling at his own sleight of hand".[58] We cannot expect moderns to be duped by myths of our own making. The development of self-consciousness is dialectical. The path back to a spontaneous sacrality is forever foreclosed; it can only now be achieved through knowing irony. Kojève's critique of Bataille's project restated in new language the philosophical problem Sorel had identified with myth. Scholars of myths cannot at the same time be moved by myths. The perspectival shift between analyzing and acting is not one of degrees but of kind.

Whether one agrees with Kojève (and Sartre) or Bataille depends on how much mileage we get with Hegel.[59] For Bataille, Kojève's devastating criticism of the Sorcerer's Apprentice had missed the point. What Kojève thought was impossible, Bataille thought humans did all the time. We simply call it luck, chance, fortune and fate. It happens whenever we fall in love. And in any case, Kojève's Hegelian objection implies that there was once a time when myths were intact but, like the Garden of Eden, we have exited and can never return without irony. But if one rejects history as a dialectical progression, then the conclusion left is that humans have, and always will, be susceptible to being ensnared in their own traps.

Consider how Bataille sums up the argument.

> "Actions committed to some rational end are only responses to a necessity to which one slavishly submits. Only actions committed to the pursuit of the

[58] Quotation in Hollier, ed. *The College of Sociology*, 11-12.
[59] Sartre gave a different image for Kojève's objection in his own critique of Bataille years later: "One might as well try to lift by its arms the chair on which one is sitting. This is however the vain effort that Bataille delights in", in Sartre, "Un nouveau mystique", 173.

> seductive images of chance correspond to the need to live by the example of a flame…
>
> Life plays itself: Life risks itself. Destiny's plan is realized. What was only a dream figure becomes myth. And *living* myth. Myth, which the dusty remains of intellect know only as dead and consider to be a touching error of ignorance, figures fate and becomes *being*.
>
> For myth is not merely the divine figure of fate and the world in which this figure moves: It cannot be separated from the community whose creature it is and that ritually takes possession of its authority. It would be fiction if a *people* in festival excitement did not show in their accord that it was the vital human reality. Myth is perhaps fable, but this fable is made the opposite of fiction if one looks at the people who dance it, who act it, and whose living *truth* it is".[60]

By living myth as reality, fate becomes real. Hence the true meaning of myth is that it is an activity of using subjective unfreedom to create objective freedom. The Sorcerer's Apprentice is not only a story of tragic human disempowerment. It is also the figure of how we moderns can free ourselves from our own human-made chains. Sometimes we enslave ourselves despite ourselves, as Marx demonstrated. But if we get lucky, sometimes we also free ourselves despite ourselves. This, I am suggesting, is the hope that connects Sorel and his interwar readers.

If we situate Sorel and Bataille's reflections on myth in the context of revolutionary action, then their understanding of revolution becomes clearer, too. Revolutions happen when we deceive ourselves with myths. Because history is destiny, we believe we have no choice but to fulfill its aims through mass action and transform myth into fate and a *fait accompli*. Revolutions are powerful and world altering, not because they are carefully calculated actions, but because they are illusions made real by those living in "the world of lovers", not "the world of politics". The real analogy for revolution is not science, but the love-struck idiot.

5.

What do we make of this portrait of mythic revolutionary action? The first thing we can say is that it bears little resemblance to the familiar one found in Cold War historiography. Myth appears there as mass delusion for a mass society, "ideology" designed for popular mobilization. However true it is that Mussolini's Italy or Pétain's Vichy called upon pernicious myths to organize the masses and concentrate state power, the same cannot so easily be said of the many interwar intellectuals who debated myth's meaning and purpose. The problems this generation tried to solve with myth are not the same problems that have traditionally captured the attention of historians of fascist culture. And the most famous of the mythomaniacs, like Bataille, neither pursued nor defended an ideological vanguard. On the contrary, they turned to the concept of myth to perish the thought. Like Sorel, they were idiosyncratic theorists of self-organization and autonomy.

If we read the wider theoretical debates about myth in the 1930s with similar care, it is not even clear if a figure as stigmatized as Maxim Gorky held the theory of myth which historians have attributed to his "totalitarian" generation, either. Did the founder of Soviet realism—a favorite

[60] Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", 21-22.

example of ideological manipulation and aesthetic conformity if there ever was one—even think of myth this way? At the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, just as Bataille and Caillois were creating their *Collège* in France, Gorky declared that

> "Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery—that is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add – completing the idea, by the logic of hypothesis – the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way".[61]

Gorky considered myth the main "method" of Soviet realism, because it transformed realism from a science into a politics. But even here, myth had nothing to do with a Machiavellian form of social engineering either.[62] Like French mythomaniacs, Gorky's reflections on myth had everything to do with holding together a science of society and a politics of revolution, an image of historical fate with the need for collective voluntarism.

There are many reasons to revisit the mythomania debates of the late 1930s. But surely one is to liberate that debate from historiographic commonplaces and to appreciate, if not accept, how myth-talk occasioned efforts to spur human agency, not confiscate it. We should situate the mythomania debates in a heterodox strain of Marxism which, overshadowed by its canonical tradition, nevertheless endured and aimed to activate ordinary people's agency through aesthetic means. This mythomaniacal perspective was revolutionary. Of course that does not mean it was emancipatory. That is the ambiguity that demands we be honest about what mythomania was rather than treating it cynically as a "cultural" or "ideological" politics designed to engender enthusiastic conformity.

Breton, the personality behind Surrealism, liked to describe the movement's aim as bringing together "a method of creating a collective myth" with "the liberation of man who tends first to change fundamentally the bourgeois form of property". This, for Breton, was essentially "the problem of *action*" for revolutionaries.[63] As much as Breton and Bataille fumed at each other within their respective Surrealist circles, they each hoped to create a new myth that would enable forms of collective action stifled by political realism. Breton visited Leon Trotsky in 1938, and for weeks they collaborated on a joint statement about the role that art played in realizing communism. Their conclusion is not incompatible with what Sorel, Bataille, and others advocated at different points in the first decades of the twentieth century.

> "The communist revolution is not afraid of art. It realizes that the role of the artist in a decadent capitalist society is determined by the conflict between individual and various social forms which are hostile to him. This fact alone, insofar as he is conscious of it, makes the artist the natural ally of revolution… The supreme

[61] Maxim Gorky [1934], "Soviet Literature", https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1934/soviet-literature.htm last accessed 16 September 2025.
[62] Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic, 1890-1934* (Northwestern University Press, 1999), 65.
[63] Breton, "Political Position of Surrealism", 210.

> task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution".[64]

The role of art must be to create an image of collective fate. Such myths are an enabling constraint. It seems to me that this way of thinking about myth is what makes Sorel's theory of myth, and those who built on it, so new in the history of political thought. Marx used the Sorcerer's Apprentice to explain how we make history behind our backs. Yet in the hands of the mythomaniacs, the Sorcerer's Apprentice becomes a way to think about unintended liberation. If we are to regain our capacities for collective action, we must all become sorcerer's apprentices.

[64] André Breton and Diego Rivera [1938], "Art and Revolution", in Leon Trotsky, *Culture and Socialism, and a Manifesto, Art and Revolution* (New Park Publications, 1963), 36, 38.

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