

Socialism and Myth: The Case of Sorel and Bergson

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Georges Sorel (1847-1922) continues to exert a fascination for some radicals, as recent books and articles indicate [1]. This attraction is perhaps understandable, but in our view mistaken. It stems from his support for revolutionary syndicalism and his notion of the myth of the general strike, energetically expressed in Reflections on Violence, by far his most popular work [2]. It is understandable because Reflections provides an alternative to both the reformist and vanguardist forms of socialist politics, which have apparently failed to realise democratic socialist aspirations in Europe. Sorel's virulent hatred of centralised state authority, and his condemnation of socialists' acceptance of it strikes a chord among those favouring radical decentralisation and a maximisation of autonomy. His unrestrained contempt for the bourgeoisie may appeal to those seeking a responsible subject to hold to account in the face of the injustices of contemporary society. His rejection of all forms of compromise appears to represent a refreshing defence of principle in the struggle for socialism. His attempt to free Marx from rigid, deterministic interpretations was original and at times insightful. In addition, in The Illusions of Progress, written in the same period [3], Sorel produces a powerful criticism of the over-confidence and absurdity of Enlightenment rationalism which anticipates some of the themes taken up by the Frankfurt School, particularly by Adorno and Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment.

However, we would like to point out the weaknesses and dangers inherent in Sorel's outlook, which owes much to the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and which should be understood as part of what has been called the 'anti-intellectualist wave which broke out over Western philosophy towards the end of the last century' [4]. Anti-intellectualism rebelled against the mechanistic, Newtonian cosmology which believed in the machine-like regularity of nature, against Kantian philosophy, Darwinian biology, and the cultural authority of inductive sciences. Interest in psychical research, mystical experience, and the unconscious are also expressions of anti-intellectualist approaches during this period. This perspective was not a singular, identifiable intellectual movement in the history of European ideas, but a diverse range of attitudes and beliefs which attacked metaphysical causality and mechanical determinism in science and philosophy, in order to reconstitute and revitalise the relationship between philosophy and science. It pictured the universe as a more fluid place than mechanical determinists would have us believe, and it advanced the use of concepts such as instinct, intuition, impulse and feeling in discussions of the structure and changing nature of human society.

In philosophy, Bergson was a key figure in this somewhat disjointed network; in 1900 he was appointed to the Chair of Greek Philosophy at the College de France, and in 1904 he succeeded Gabriel Tarde to the Chair of Modern Philosophy. Stuart Hughes has described his popularity:

Bergson's lectures became major events. Tourists and society ladies flocked to them, as to one of the sights of the capital... People left the auditorium with a sense of liberation. They felt uplifted in the spirit as in the mind. Of all the intellectual innovators of the 1890s, Bergson was the one with the greatest charisma, the one whose direct personal influence was the most compelling [5].

Sorel was a regular attendee at these weekly lectures for a number of years from 1900. He considered Bergson to be a 'genius' [6], and his explicit acknowledgements of Bergson's ideas in Reflections and Illusions indicate the strength of the influence. It was Bergson's early works, Time and Free Will (1899), Matter and Memory (1896), and An Introduction to Metaphysics (1903), which made their impression on Sorel. Bergson's famous work, Creative Evolution, appeared in 1907, the year after the publication of the articles by Sorel which later formed the text of Reflections and Illusions. Sorel's detailed reaction to Creative Evolution has been discussed at length in recent books by Stanley and Jennings, but they pay only passing attention to the influence of Bergson's earlier philosophy on Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism [7], and we believe that this relationship warrants closer examination.

We hope to make clear in our discussion the strength of the influence of Bergson on Sorel during this period, but it would be quite wrong to suggest that his was the only influence. Sorel's eclecticism is well known, and he made no secret of his enthusiasms. The moralism evident in his earliest works owes much to Proudhon, as does the disdain for the state and representative institutions in general, and these convictions are evident throughout the various political allegiances which he made. We shall try to show that Sorel's rejection of a 'scientism' which sought to reduce our understanding of the human world to a set of objective facts owes much to Bergson and is vital for our understanding of the nature (and dangers) of his support for revolutionary syndicalism, but there is no doubt that Sorel's reading of Vico is also important in this respect [8]. Certainly this movement away from the view that one could scientifically 'know' the world represents a change of heart from his earlier enthusiastic embrace of Marx's 'science' in the early 1890s, and Sorel's use of Marx in the revolutionary syndicalist phase has nothing to

do with Marxian method, despite that shared emphasis on the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. Vico's concept of ricorso or moral renewal is used by Sorel in two essays supportive of revolutionary syndicalism which appeared before Reflections, the preface to Fernand Pelloutier's Histoire des Bourses du Travail (1902) and 'Revolutionary Syndicalism' (1905). In the latter Sorel suggests that ricorso occurs when 'the popular mind returns to primitive states, when everything in society is instinctive, creative and poetic' [9]. This appeal for instinct, creativity and poetry is also resonant of the philosophy of Bergson, for whom poetry attained a 'fuller view of reality' by means of 'so powerful an effort of inner observation' [10].

Revolutionary Syndicalism

We would like to discuss Sorel's revolutionary syndicalist period in terms of its negative and positive aspects. By 'negative' we mean Sorel's raging antipathies to the state, to democracy, and to parliamentary socialism. Sorel associated democracy with the prevailing rationalism in philosophy, claiming that the reverence for science engendered in education and the media had an ideological effect, and speaking of the 'barbaric illusions which democratic rationalism spreads among workers in the magical role which the people attribute to science' [11]. He argues that advances in the natural sciences and in mathematics had encouraged a general confidence in the idea of a lineal progress of society, and in The Illusions of Progress he cites examples in the fields of law, education and administration where attempts were constantly being made to apply analytical techniques which he considered appropriate only to the non-social sciences. This confident rationalism, dating from the 18th century and flourishing after the great French Revolution, generated the illusion of progress and concealed the reality of a society in decline.

Sorel was not against 'science' per se, but merely opposed to its misuse. Science, he claimed, 'permits us to avoid a lot of errors but creation is not within its competence' [12]. The democratic era, which 'systematised certain methods' but which 'invented nothing' [13], demonstrated corruption and mediocrity. Above all it was hypocritical, for it held out the possibility for each individual to better himself, but only in order to preserve the superiority of the bourgeoisie, who, through their control over the educational system, cultivated a deferential attitude among the workers [14]. Sorel was embittered by the various false conceptions of social life which had developed from the Enlightenment period in the name of rationalism, and his venom was directed at its beneficiaries, the bourgeoisie, and their political system of control, democracy.

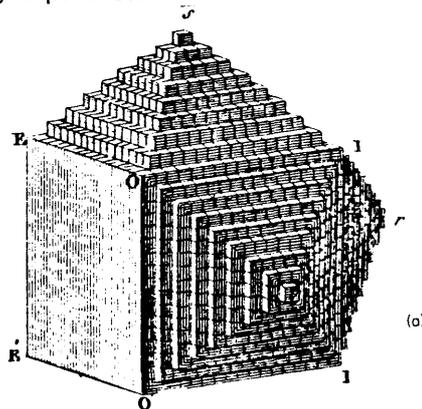
Sorel denounced parliamentary socialism for being statist, hypocritical, and potentially repressive; its leaders accepted the declarations of Marx and Engels that the state should be abolished, but in practice they were thoroughly statist [15]. He maintained that state socialism led to 'rule by a demagogic oligarchy, oppressing the producer to the profit of political cliques' [16], and he advised Marxists to battle against state socialism 'much more than against capitalism' [17]. At this time revolutionary syndicalism dominated in the syndicats, loosely organised combinations of workers unencumbered by the hierarchical bureaucratic organisations of the parliamentary socialists. For Sorel, this movement represented a rejection of hypocrisy and compromise, and gave an honest expression to class antagonisms. It was not a movement on behalf of the oppressed masses, it was their movement and must express itself in a truly revolutionary way if it was to fire the imaginations of its members. Sorel loathed professional politicians of any hue, and he also despised 'intellectuals who have embraced the profession of thinking for the

proletariat' [18], a criticism which he hopes to escape by refraining from specifying the particular forms which the revolutionary movement should take.

The Myth of the General Strike

Let us now look at the positive side of Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism, in which he looks at the forces present in the movement which offer it the chance to succeed. The loose organisation of the syndicats enabled the movement to resist the 'pull' of statism and compromise, but Sorel was not much interested in the form of the movement. His chief concern was with the consciousness of the movement, and here his concept of 'myth' comes into its own. A myth provides 'a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society' [19]. Sorel is not talking here of a myth as a distortion of truth, but rather as a vehicle for realising aspirations, however vague or unrealistic they might be. The power of the myth lies in its ability to revivify society, 'to produce an entirely epic state of mind', as the closing passages of Reflections make clear [20].

The myth of the general strike constitutes an 'undivided whole' [21] and is therefore not susceptible to an analysis which would divide it into forms and stages, strategy and tactics. Consequently, any attempt to specify details of the general strike would vitiate the myth by depriving it of its essential spontaneity. The general strike was the ultimate weapon in the class struggle, and workers would rally to it not in order to win concessions but in order to throw off the burdens of exploitation and injustices which they had suffered over many years. Sorel contends that 'we hardly ever take action except when propelled by memories often more vivid in our mind than immediate reality' [22]. The necessity of vagueness and the emphasis on feeling rather than knowledge leaves us very short on detail when considering the general strike, and Sorel has nothing at all to say about the sort of social settlement that might follow a successful revolutionary action - 'socialism is very obscure,' he says, and the passage from capitalism to socialism must be conceived 'as a catastrophe, the development of which baffles description' [23]. This is a frankly non-rationalist approach, not simply in the sense that it emphasises the power of non-rational forces, but in the sense that he believes that reason alone is incapable of grasping this revolutionary experience.



Sorel does make some comments about what the general strike ought not to be, and from these we can gather a blurred picture of the character of the movement he was encouraging. He distinguishes the proletarian general strike from the political general strike, to which it is 'diametrically opposed' [24]. Here his terminology presents some difficulty, for the proletarian general strike appears to be quintessentially political, in that it strives for the wholesale destruction of existing power

relationships rather than seeking any short-term economic gain. However, Sorel uses 'political' in the 'statist' sense of negotiation and compromise about the allocation of resources within existing power relationships. Parliamentary socialists might support a political strike to wrest concessions from the government, or even to replace the government with one more favourable to improving the material conditions of the workers, but such strategies were anathema to Sorel and the revolutionary syndicalists.

Referring to the major strike movements in Russia and Belgium in 1905, Sorel diminished any momentary successes by indicating that the concessions had in fact suited the liberal politicians [25]. He was particularly critical of the Belgian movement, which, in his opinion, contained few syndicalists and was closely controlled by the reformist Socialist Party. Sorel's allusions show no sound knowledge of events in either country, and it is interesting to compare his vague, sketchy treatment with Rosa Luxemburg's 'The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions', which was written in the same years as Reflections. Her pamphlet contains a much fuller and more knowledgeable analysis of events in Russia. She shares some of Sorel's enthusiasm for spontaneity, because 'revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them', but she also insists that the political organisations of the labour movement would have to intervene and play a leading role if the mass strike was to succeed:

If, however, the direction of the mass strike in the sense of command over its origin, and in the sense of the calculating and reckoning of the cost is a matter of the revolutionary period itself, the directing of the mass strike becomes, in an altogether different sense, the duty of social democracy and its leading organs... The social democrats are called upon to assume political leadership in the midst of the revolutionary period [26].

It might well be remarked that Sorel had a more accurate assessment of the non-revolutionary nature of German Social Democracy than did Luxemburg, but his refusal to contemplate any form of political intervention amounted to ignoring the vital question of power.

Sorel's Marx

Sorel enlisted Marx's name to support the myths sustaining revolutionary syndicalism, devoting a section of Reflections to try to show that 'there is a fundamental identity between the chief tenets of Marxism and the coordinated aspects furnished by the picture of the general strike' [27]. Sorel admires the emphasis on class struggle, the view that the emancipation of the proletariat must be achieved by the proletariat itself, and the rejection of the state. In Reflections and another book written in the same period, The Decomposition of Marxism, he fired broadsides at those who claimed to represent the true Marxian heritage by acting either as reformists or advocates of state socialism. He rejected utopianism as based on intellectual fantasies rather than the class struggle [28], and as guilty of avoiding the truly 'terrible' nature of the forthcoming revolution [29]. He also rejected the idea of a vanguard party, which he associated with Blanqui, on the grounds that it might operate without a genuinely mass movement and would inevitably lead to a new form of statism [30]. Although he cited Marx and Engels in support of his anti-statism, Sorel failed to mention their conviction that a transitional state would be necessary, and this omission typifies his determined avoidance of the question of a revolutionary political settlement. Revolutionary syndicalism, the 'new school' [31], was the only movement which could claim to be implacably revolutionary, based on the class struggle, opposed to any form of the state, and so loosely organised that it could not be called a

party.

Sorel was not interested in adapting the theoretical framework enunciated by Marx in his 1859 Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy or in the specific analyses contained in Capital. Sorel recommends us 'not to take the text literally' but to acknowledge that we are in the realm of 'social myth' [32]. At this point Sorel had to concede that Marx did not consciously deal in myths, but 'he was sometimes so impassioned that this passion prevented him from viewing reality clearly' [33]. Sorel considered that the German socialists had failed to perfect Marxism because of the 'superstitious respect' paid to 'the mere text of its doctrines' [2=34], whereas it was the 'symbolic portions' which 'constitute the definitive value of his work' [35], irrespective of Marx's intentions. In generating the idea of 'apocalypse' the revolutionary syndicalists had 'purged Marxism of all that was not specifically Marxist' and thereby 'assured the glory of Marx' [36]. In the closing pages of Decomposition Sorel reiterated his assertion that the revolutionary movement can never follow a 'pre-determined direction', and that everything about it must be 'unpredictable', citing Bergson in denouncing the utopian 'illusion' that we can anticipate the future by fully understanding the present [37].

Sorel's recruitment of Marx to the banner of revolutionary syndicalism is certainly not at the level of method, but rather at the level of passion and fury - the spectre of Marx.



Bergson's Anti-Rationalism

If we want to understand the distinctive elements of Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism - and also understand its dangers - we must look to Sorel's use of Bergson's early philosophy. Two key areas of Sorel's apocalyptic doctrine bear the imprint of Bergson's philosophy of intuition: first, the rejection of analysis in the development of the revolutionary movement; second, the idea of social myths which will contribute decisively to spiritual rebirth in France, led by the proletariat. What we have is an attempt to make a social application of the philosophy of intuitionism, an attempt which Bergson neither encouraged nor repudiated. While Sorel maintained his appreciation of Bergson's work, despite some criticisms of the latter's views on labour and science contained in Creative Evolution [38], Bergson was more circumspect in his attitude towards Sorel. He acknowledged that Sorel had a thorough knowledge of his work and had not distorted it in any way, but he denied any responsibility for the products of Sorel's 'independent' and 'original' mind [39]. He also claimed that there was nothing revolutionary or syndicalist in his philosophy, adding that he was satisfied that Sorel had never made such a claim [40]. Bergson's philosophy contained no social theory, but the immense acclaim which his philosophy received encouraged some sort of social application, and it supplied Sorel with the inspiration and confidence to make such an attempt.

Bergson's intention was to direct our attention away from the prison of analysis and scientific rationality. He aimed to reconstruct the separation between metaphysics and science typical of enlightenment philosophy in terms of a 'spiritual realism'. His philosophy, which defies categorisation by conventional labels such as 'empiricist', 'idealist', or 'positivist', requires the examination of knowledge in relation to the hidden, inner reality of human consciousness. He attacks the extremist viewpoints of materialism and idealism, which generate only barren scholastic debates, and seeks to replace these abstract divisions of inquiry and understanding with a philosophical perspective in line with the vital, changing nature of human personality and consciousness. He wanted to reconstruct our image of philosophy itself so as to reconstitute rather than overthrow the existing dichotomies between science and metaphysics, space and time, matter and spirit. Bergson believed he had discovered a new mediation, an alternative intellectual compromise between rationalism and romanticism, which was not transcendental, but realistically based upon a common sense, simple act of intuition. Mobility, fluidity, and continual flux are the essential features of this common sense, felt reality, and they can be identified and understood through the indivisible realm of metaphysics (philosophy) rather than analysis (science).

The metaphysics promoted in Bergson's writing dispenses with symbols [41], and lets the reality of inner life 'live' in our consciousness, so that we 'catch' that sense of mobility and flux which is a natural part of human personality. This 'inner reality' has escaped the nets of the dominant methods of Newtonian science, empiricist philosophy, and psychology. However, it could be understood and grasped through the reconstruction of philosophy away from the artificial world of conceptual representations - 'to philosophise is to invert the habitual work of thought' [42]. The habitual, analytical demarcations of science and metaphysics, space and time, were illusory, and doomed to failure and mutual reproach:

Is it astonishing that, like children trying to catch smoke by closing their hands, philosophers so often see the object they would grasp fly before them? It is in this way that many of the quarrels between schools are perpetuated, each of them reproaching the others with having allowed the real to slip away [43].

Bergson's distrust of schools of thought and his scepticism towards the apparently universal appeal of analysis was based on a belief that the history of modern philosophy had shown a tendency to avoid the necessary fluid and mobile features of human intellect and personality. He dissociated himself from theories of mind and matter which rely upon Newtonian physics, asserting that attempts to fix our understanding of the world in terms of static categories alone can lead to illusion and error. He wished to overcome what has been described as the 'Cartesian Anxiety', namely, 'that dread of madness and chaos where nothing is fixed, where we can neither touch bottom nor support ourselves on the surface' [44].

Sorel's Bergson

We have seen that Sorel expressed a similar scepticism towards the universal claims of the prevailing scientific rationality in The Illusions of Progress. However, he went beyond Bergson in seeing this prevailing rationality as part of a wider socio-political ideology defending the interests of the democrats, and asserted that it is this political aspect which invokes such hostility to alternative approaches, such as those of Bergson:

Today the idea that everything can be subjected to a perfectly clear analysis is about as strong as it was in Descartes' time. If someone considers making a protest against the illusions of rationalism, he is

immediately accused of being an enemy of democracy. I have often heard people who pride themselves on working for progress deplore the teachings of Bergson and point to them as the greatest danger confronting modern thought [45].

To reject the universal claims of rationalism without reverting to romanticism; this was a project shared by Bergson and Sorel, the former on the level of metaphysics, the latter on the level of social theory.

Bergson is far more than a footnote in Sorel's history of social myth expounded in Reflections on Violence. The references to Bergson's philosophy of intuition are central and explicit, and the style is imbued with Bergsonian traces. Sorel insists that the body of images which comprise the myth can be produced by 'intuition alone', in such a way that 'the soul of the revolutionaries may receive a deep and lasting impression'. The whole of socialism is reduced to the drama of the general strike, and this method 'has all the advantages which "integral" knowledge has over analysis, according to the doctrine of Bergson'. Sorel considers that there could be no finer example of Bergson's views [46]. A few pages later on he quotes Bergson in order to support his idea that a whole body of thought, for example socialism, can be truly grasped only if a myth acts as a catalyst; 'true and fruitful ideas are so many close contacts with currents of reality', and 'we do not obtain an intuition from reality - that is, an intellectual sympathy with the most intimate part of it - unless we have won its confidence by a long fellowship with its superficial manifestation' [47]. This, according to Sorel, was what the 'new school' of revolutionary syndicalism had done, by being a movement of the people rather than simply for the people. In the introduction to Reflections, written in the form of a letter to Daniel Halévy in July 1907, he approvingly quotes Bergson's idea of the rare moments of deep introspection in which we achieve true freedom and 'get back into pure duration'. He then extends this idea to the social realm, employing the concept of myth to describe the moment when the masses are deeply moved, a phenomenon equivalent to the 'free act' of Bergson's individual, and, furthermore, a phenomenon which is a necessary prerequisite in the building of a socialist movement. Without myths there will be nothing more than a succession of revolts, and 'this is what gives such importance to the general strike and renders it so odious to socialists who are afraid of a revolution' [48].

We have seen that Bergson believed in an inner reality beyond the grasp of analysis, and now we will try to put some flesh on the bones of the Bergsonian concepts which attracted Sorel's interest - intuition, integral knowledge, pure duration, and the free act. Let us first look at pure duration, which Bergson introduced in Time and Free Will. Pure duration is that form of consciousness in which our ego refuses to organise perception in terms of spatial, symbolic representation of phenomena. It is a feeling similar to 'the notes of a tune, melting so to speak into one another' [49], where the past and present are formed into an 'organic whole'. This 'organic whole' is the 'integral knowledge' referred to by Sorel. Duration involves memory:

I cannot escape the objection that there is no state of mind, however simple, which does not change every moment, since there is no consciousness without memory, and no continuation of a state without the addition, to the present feeling, of the memory of past moments. It is this which constitutes duration [50].

Pure duration is the continuity of consciousness or memory whereby the past survives into the present, not as tradition but as reflexive consciousness, aware of the force of intuition which is able to grasp violently the integral experience of inner life. The task of the philosopher is to encourage the mind to do itself 'violence' [51] in order to set itself free from a kind of thinking which gives 'a

mechanical explanation of a fact, and then substitutes the explanation for the fact itself' [52].

The doctrine of intuition celebrates the intellect which can take possession of a constantly changing, mobile reality outside the boundaries of analysis or the ordinary functions of positive science. Bergson defines intuition as 'the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it' [53]. Metaphysical intuition is the simple act of seizing reality, but being prior to analysis it 'is quite other than the mere summary or synthesis of that knowledge. ... In this sense metaphysics has nothing in common with a generalisation of facts; and nevertheless might be described as integral experience' [54].

Human action takes place in space and time and Bergson considered that the legacy of Kantian philosophy and scientific rationality involved considering time as a fourth dimension of space, measurable and divided into equal portions like the face of a clock. Consequently, 'science cannot deal with time and motion except on condition of first eliminating the essential and qualitative element - of time, duration, and of motion, mobility' [55]. In spatial form, consciousness can be 'localised' through symbolic and conceptual differentiations which are, in effect, diagrammatic representations of psychic states. This approach failed to recognise that time is a wholly qualitative medium objectively constituted through duration.

Just as there are two conceptions of time, the spatial conception and the qualitative conception (duration), so there are two aspects of the human personality appropriate to each. Bergson describes a self that needs to separate, quantify, and organise; a consciousness 'adapted to the requirements of social life in general and language in particular' [56], for language 'makes us believe in the unchangeableness of our sensations' [57].



He considers that language, which is stable and common, covers over the fluid, inexpressible features of human personality, and so directs and restricts our consciousness. But there is also a fundamental self, lying below our social self, existing through consciousness of duration, grasped by the simple act of intuition. Intuition cannot be derived from analysis [58]. It is the unconditioned, free act which Sorel so admired. Bergson insists that the social practical self and the intuitive self are dimensions of the same human personality, reflecting the demarcation and potential mediation between space and time, analysis and intuition, science and free will. He demands that we restore a psychological dimension to philosophy and science, so that 'a truly intuitive philosophy would realise the much desired union of science and metaphysics' [59]. The new science of metaphysics, both progressive and indefinitely perfectible, does not dig tunnels beneath reality, or construct elegant bridges over experience, but positively, violently, dives into the moving stream of experience.

Bergson's philosophy of intuition does not reject science, but reminds us of the limitations of its methods and seeks to enrich it with metaphysics. This was well suited to Sorel's concerns as a scientist - an engineer by

profession - and as a social commentator who considered the methods of positive science wholly inappropriate to understanding human life. Bergson was not reverting to transcendental philosophy, for he believed that intuition was part of a felt reality of everyday human experience, that there was 'nothing mysterious in this faculty', and that 'everyone of us has had occasion to exercise it to a certain extent' [60]. Sorel, searching for moral renewal on a national scale, saw the possibility of the proletariat intuitively experiencing its class 'soul' by acting on the myth of the general strike. For him, too, there was nothing mysterious about such action, for it was a revolt whose spontaneous power would be propelled by the vivid memory of past oppression. We have seen that Bergson viewed memory of the past as part of the present in duration, and this theme is developed in Matter and Memory, in which he declares that memory is not simply a mechanical process of 'motor mechanisms' but also a psychological state of 'independent recollections' [61]. This vivid form of memory was spontaneous and capricious [62] and could not be summoned by will.

Bergson's views on the 'socialising' effects of language also leave their imprint on the revolutionary syndicalist writings of Sorel, whose calls for a return to the 'sublime' and the 'epic', and whose stress on 'violence' and 'catastrophe' are intended to indicate a rupture in the communication of ideas, just as Bergson had stated that the mind must do itself violence in order to escape from the imprisonment of orthodox thinking. In the 1908 conclusion to The Illusions of Progress Sorel is sure that the 'war' which the proletariat should conduct against its master will develop in it 'noble sentiments that are today completely lacking in the bourgeoisie', and he exhorts the sympathetic reader 'to prevent bourgeois ideas from coming to poison the rising class' [63].

Sorel Today

As we indicated in our introduction, radicals today may be attracted to the Sorelian approach for a number of good reasons, and certainly his demand for a rupture with prevailing ideology anticipates concerns which remained underdeveloped for decades after the period under review. However, there is a danger in an approach which builds on a philosophy of 'spiritual realism' and which seeks to kindle a 'social spiritualism', and this lies in the necessary vagueness about the effects of any action which holds out the hope of moral renewal. For moral renewal is Sorel's overwhelming concern, rather than the social relations of production of an alternative society. He is consistent in rejecting the 'democratic mediocrity' of the status quo, but such a rejection, based on the vague call for moral resurgence, could come just as easily from the extreme right as from the extreme left. In those passages in which he makes his explicit references to Bergsonian concepts he makes it clear that the specification of aims is incompatible with the generation of the myth necessary to accomplish the revivification of society. In this way he makes a principle out of vagueness, and this opens the way for the startling vacillation in his commitment to political movements. By the time of the second edition of The Illusions in 1910 he had already concluded that 'the present time is not favourable to the idea of grandeur', and he advises sympathetic individuals to cultivate 'the most noble qualities of their souls' [64].

The revolutionary wave had ebbed and left Sorel stranded, and he began an association with the extreme right in France which lasted until 1913 and saw him make a number of nationalistic and anti-semitic contributions to his journal, L'Indépendance [65]. This was followed by a period of despair and inactivity until after the war, when he became an enthusiastic publicist for the Bolsheviks, who had awakened 'the sentiment of the sublime' in the 'popular soul' [66].

These shifts are explicable only when we understand his overwhelming commitment to moral renewal as a substitute for socialist politics. His appropriation of Bergson led him to shun politics, in so far as politics involved working out strategies and tactics based on analyses, aiming for the conquest of state power with clear ends in view. In this sense Sorel was not a political theorist but rather a critic and a chiliastic agitator. What Bergson and Sorel did was to create theories out of purely negative criticism of existing methods and philosophies of method [67]. Bergson sought to redirect our understanding of the essential qualities of human experience to a higher, aesthetic realm of contemplation, where intuition is separate and superior to analysis. Sorel reaffirmed the

superiority of intuition over analysis and his frenzied exhortations forbid serious consideration of the central social questions. In celebration of the vital, the passionate, and the ultimately unknowable, both writers lose sight of the actual conditions in which these experiences are lived. This blindness is dangerous because it creates the possibility of the manipulation of passions, and this is quite likely to be managed by demagogues without reference to any specific social aims. Many of Sorel's supporters in France and Italy lent their support to fascism [68], and perhaps this is the strongest testimony to the dangers of the irrationalist approach to social theory.

Notes

- 1 In particular, M. Charzat, Georges Sorel et la Revolution au XXe siecle (Hackette, Paris, 1977); L. Portis, Georges Sorel (Pluto Press, London, 1980); R. Vernon, Introduction to R. Vernon (ed.), Commitment and Change: Georges Sorel and the Idea of Revolution (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1978); J. L. Stanley, The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981); Conclusion, E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (Verso, London, 1985), pp. 37-42.
- 2 G. Sorel, Reflections on Violence, trans. T. E. Hulme and J. Roth (Collier Macmillan, London, 1974). The original articles which comprise the text were published in Le Mouvement Socialiste in 1906. The first book version appeared in 1908, and went to six subsequent editions.
- 3 G. Sorel, The Illusions of Progress, trans J. and C. Stanley (University of California Press, London, 1972). The original articles which comprise the text were published in Le Mouvement Socialiste in 1906 and, like Reflections, the first book version appeared in 1908.
- 4 W. B. Gallie, Pierce and Pragmatism (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1952), p. 12.
- 5 H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society (Random House, New York, 1958), pp. 114-15.
- 6 G. Sorel, Preface (1913) to E. Berth's Les Mefaits des Intellectuels (Riviere, Paris, 1926), p. ii.
- 7 J. R. Jennings, Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of His Thought (Macmillan, London, 1985), pp. 139-42 and 134-35; Stanley, op. cit., pp. 133-32. Stanley writes: 'Sorel did not follow Bergson very far before deviating from his ideas' (p. 66). It is this short but eventful journey which concerns us in this paper.
- 8 See J. R. Jennings, 'Sorel, Vico, and Marx' in G. Tagliacozzo (ed.), Vico and Marx: Affinities and Contrasts (Macmillan, London, 1983).
- 9 G. Sorel, 'Revolutionary Syndicalism' in R. Vernon, op. cit., p. 115.
- 10 H. Bergson, 'Laughter' in W. Sypher (ed.), Comedy (Doubleday Anchor, New York, 1956), p. 169.
- 11 G. Sorel, 'D'un ecivain proletaire' in L'Independance, March 1912, p. 34.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Illusions, p. 27.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 63-64.
- 15 Reflections, pp. 86 and 121.
- 16 G. Sorel, Preface to S. Merlini, Formes et essence du socialisme, in Vernon, op. cit., pp. 91-92.
- 17 Illusions, p. 207n.
- 18 Reflections, p. 138 (the emphasis is Sorel's).
- 19 Ibid., p. 127.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 248-49.
- 21 Ibid., p. 157 and p. 123n, where he relates it to Bergson's theory of movement.
- 22 G. Sorel, 'The Decomposition of Marxism' in I. L. Horowitz, Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961), p. 242. The book first appeared in 1980, and is based on a speech delivered in Paris in April 1907.
- 23 Reflections, p. 148.
- 24 Ibid., p. 155.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 154-57.
- 26 In Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, ed. M. A. Waters, trans. P. Lavin (Pathfinder, New York, 1970), pp. 188-89.
- 27 Reflections, p. 129ff.
- 28 'Decomposition', p. 240.
- 29 Reflections, Introduction, part four. Utopias are regarded as intellectual products focusing on the analysis of imaginary institutions and implicitly begging reforms whereas myths are merely determinations to act, and as such are irrefutable and unanalysable.
- 30 'Decomposition', pp. 242-43.
- 31 Ibid., p. 251, and Reflections, p. 131.
- 32 'Decomposition', p. 248.
- 33 Ibid., p. 248n.
- 34 Reflections, p. 131.
- 35 'Decomposition', p. 251.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid., p. 253.
- 38 G. Sorel, 'Critique de l'Evolution creatrice' in Le Mouvement Socialiste, October, November, December 1907 and January and February 1908. See also his 'A Critique of Creative Evolution' in J. L. Stanley (ed.), From Georges Sorel (Oxford University Press, New York, 1976), p. 284ff.
- 39 H. Bergson to G. Maire, published in L'Independance, No. 39-40, November 1912, p. 167.
- 40 Bergson to Le Bon, July 1909, quoted in R. A. Nye, 'Two Paths to a Psychology of Social Action: Gustave Le Bon and Georges Sorel', in the Journal of Modern History, 45(3), 1973, p. 432n.
- 41 H. Bergson, An Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. T. E. Hulme (Macmillan, London, 1913), p. 8.
- 42 Ibid., p. 59
- 43 Ibid., p. 47.
- 44 R. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (Blackwell, Oxford, 1983), p. 18.
- 45 Illusions, p. 22.
- 46 Reflections, pp. 122-23 (emphasis is Sorel's).
- 47 Ibid., pp. 130-31.
- 48 Ibid., p. 49.
- 49 H. Bergson, Time and Free Will, trans. F. L. Pogson (Allen and Unwin, London, 1971), p. 100.
- 50 Metaphysics, p. 6.
- 51 Ibid., p. 48 and p. 54.
- 52 Time and Free Will, p. 181.
- 53 Metaphysics, p. 6.
- 54 Ibid., pp. 78-79.
- 55 Time and Free Will, p. 115.
- 56 Ibid., p. 128.
- 57 Ibid., p. 131.
- 58 Metaphysics, p. 41.
- 59 Ibid., p. 63. Bergson considered that this union would lead the positive sciences 'to become conscious of their true scope, often far greater than they imagine'. Since then, of course, the theories of Heisenberg and Bohr and the development of quantum physics have thrown into doubt the high abstractions of measurable space and time.
- 60 Ibid., p. 76.
- 61 H. Bergson, Matter and Memory, trans. N. M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Allen and Unwin, London, 1913), p. 87.
- 62 Ibid., p. 102.
- 63 Illusions, p. 157.
- 64 Ibid., p. 186.
- 65 See L. Wilde, 'Sorel and the French Right' in History of Political Thought, 7 (2), Summer 1986.
- 66 Illusions, p. 213.
- 67 See G. Lukacs, The Destruction of Reason, trans. P. Palmer (Merlin, London, 1980), p. 104. For Lukacs, irrationalism reacts to the new questions posed by science and philosophy 'by designating the mere problem as an answer and declaring the allegedly fundamental insolubility of the problem to a higher form of comprehension'.
- 68 See J. J. Roth, The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians (University of California Press, London, 1980), chs. 11, 12, 13. Also Roberts, The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism, (University of Manchester Press, 1979).

