

# **Bad Anarchism: Aestheticized Mythmaking and the Legacy of Georges Sorel**

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# About the Author

Mark Antliff, Professor of Art History and Visual Studies at Duke University, is author of *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (1993); co-editor with Matthew Affron of *Fascist Vision: Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (1997); and co-author with Patricia Leighton of two books, *Cubism and Culture* (2001) and *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism, 1906–1914* (2008). In 2010–11 he co-curated the exhibition *The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914–1918*, which opened at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and then traveled to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice and to Tate Britain. The present study derives in part from his book on Georges Sorel’s myriad impact on French politics, art and culture, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (2007).

# Abstract

This article considers the varied impact of the notion of revolutionary consciousness first developed by the French political theorist Georges Sorel (1847–1922) on proponents of anarchism and Marxism, including Walter Benjamin, Bart de Light, Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci and, most recently, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I question the strategy amongst these thinkers to draw selectively from Sorel’s writings in an attempt to create a *cordon sanitaire* around those aspects of his thought that are problematic by virtue of their impact on proto-fascist and fascist ideologues throughout Europe. In addressing this issue I examine how Sorel’s anarchist theory of anti-Statism, constructed around the power of myths, led him to endorse anti-capitalist anti-Semitism as an extension of class struggle; and I critique his Janusfaced concept of aestheticized violence as it relates to his quest for moral regeneration through revolution.

Among those theorists whose ideas served as a catalyst for twentieth-century anarchism, Georges Sorel (1847–1922) (**Fig. 1**) remains the most controversial, primarily due to his own troubled political trajectory and that of his self-proclaimed followers, many of whom were drawn to fascism following Benito Mussolini’s rise of power in 1922, the year of Sorel’s death.<sup>1</sup> Despite such associations Sorel’s notion of revolutionary consciousness and the role he ascribed to myth in constituting and fomenting political activism continued to attract theorists among the left in Europe, including the Marxist Antonio Gramsci, whose conception of an intellectual and moral “bloc” was indebted to Sorel, and the prominent champion of Négritude, Frantz Fanon, whose seminal books *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1962) drew on Sorel’s theory to instill revolutionary consciousness among blacks in Europe and Africa.<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin in his important essay “On the Critique of Violence” (1921) interpreted Sorel’s concept of the general strike in terms of the abolition not only of the state apparatus through non-violent resistance (the refusal to work) but also the destruction of the legal order maintained by the State to justify its oppressive

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<sup>1</sup> See *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> On Gramsci, see Enrico Angelli and Craig N. Murphy, “Consciousness, myth and collective action: Gramsci, Sorel and the Ethical State,” in *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies*, eds. Stephen Gill and James Mittleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25–38, Jack Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 175–178, and chapter six of Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci’s Political and Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); on Fanon, see Georges Ciccariello-Maher, “To Lose Oneself in the Absolute: Revolutionary Subjectivity in Sorel and Fanon,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* (Summer 2007), 101–112.

rule.<sup>3</sup> A comparable view was taken up by the anarchist Bart de Light who likewise endorsed Sorel's theory in the context of his monumental study of "direct non-violent action," *The Conquest of Violence: An essay on War and Revolution* (1937).<sup>4</sup> More recently the Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have sought to resuscitate Sorel's concept of myth in the context of their theory of hegemony, and the constitutive role of antagonistic struggle as a catalyst to a theory of revolution no longer premised on the outmoded Marxist concept of historical necessity.<sup>5</sup> By breaking with orthodox Marxism, which posited class conflict and revolution as the pre-determined outcome of economic inequality, Laclau and Mouffe follow Sorel's example in seeking to establish class identity and class antagonism by other means. In endorsing Sorel's theory of myth as an "anti-essentialist," anti-determinist tool for political activism Laclau and Mouffe argue that the later appropriation of Sorel's thought by advocates of fascism was "merely one of the possible derivatives from Sorel's analysis" and by no means a "necessary outcome" of his ideas. Thus the endorsement of mythmaking by Sorel's fascist followers, and their celebration of war as a mythic catalyst for ethical renewal and proletarian heroism was not "necessarily determined by the very structure of Sorel's thought" which reportedly remained "indeterminate."<sup>6</sup>

What Laclau and Mouffe fail to address is the extent to which Sorel's theory of radical subjectivity contained within it the seeds for such ideological volatility, as evidenced by the writings of Sorel himself. Such findings should stand as a warning to any endorsement among contemporary anarchists of Sorel's prognosis on how to achieve revolution, however attractive his theory of agitational mythmaking might first appear. In many respects Sorel's critique of the Enlightenment as the ideological means by which European democracies establish and maintain power and his related advocacy of the anti-rational power of myth as the catalyst for revolutionary consciousness, finds an echo in the recourse to mythmaking still operative in the work of contemporary anarchist theorists.<sup>7</sup> This unfettered embrace of irrationalism as a means of constituting a politics of revolutionary identity formation carries with it the perils of forming a movement lacking in any critical self-reflection, in which myth itself has the potential to become a pliant tool in the hands of a self-styled revolutionary — or

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<sup>3</sup> On Benjamin's debt to Sorel, see Werner Hamacher, "Afformative, Strike: Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'," in eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1994), 110–138.

<sup>4</sup> Bart de Ligt's book was first published in French in 1935 under the title *Pour vaincre sans violence: réflexions sur la guerre et la révolution*; the expanded and revised English translation appeared in London in 1937 and in the United States in 1938. See Bart de Ligt, *The Conquest of Violence: An Essay on War and Revolution* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1938)

<sup>5</sup> See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1987), 36–42.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Gavin Grindon, "The Breath of the Possible," *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations Collective Theorization*, Stevphen Shukaitis and David Graeber with Erika Biddle, eds. (San Francisco: AK Press, 2007), 94–107.

reactionary — elite. To probe this issue, we need to consider how Sorel's anarchist theory of antiStatism, constructed around the power of myths, led him to endorse anti-capitalist anti-Semitism as an extension of his theory of class struggle; and his Janus-faced concept of violence, as it relates to his quest for moral regeneration.

# Sorel's Political Trajectory

Georges Sorel was a prolific author whose tumultuous political evolution accounts for the fact that, following his death, activists across the full political spectrum laid claim to his philosophical legacy.<sup>1</sup> Born in Cherbourg as the son of a bankrupt wine merchant, Sorel received technical training at the École polytechnique in Paris before becoming an engineer in 1870. From 1879 to his retirement in 1892, Sorel was ensconced in Perpignan in the Eastern Pyrénées, and it was there, in 1889, that he published his first books, *Le Procès de Socrate* and the *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible*. These texts laid the ground work for the “sociology of morals” that became the central preoccupation of all his later writing.<sup>2</sup> After his retirement he moved to Paris, where he first embraced orthodox Marxism before embarking on a revisionist interpretation of Marx that would culminate in his conversion to revolutionary syndicalism. Between 1893 and 1897 Sorel contributed to the ephemeral journal *L'Ère Nouvelle* (1893–94) and to the more successful *Devenir Social* (1895–1898). Concurrently he continued to reflect on moral issues, publishing a Marxian interpretation of early Christianity titled *La Ruine du monde antique* (1901), and an important study of the Eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico's notion of historical processes of “corsi” (decline) and “ricorso” (rebirth) (1896).<sup>3</sup> Having become disappointed with *Le Devenir Social*'s adherence to the orthodox Marxism of Karl Kautsky, Sorel resigned from the editorial board in 1897, began reading Marx in the original, and sided with Eduard Bernstein's

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<sup>1</sup> Notable monographic studies of Sorel and his influence include, Michel Charzat, *Georges Sorel et la révolution au XXe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1977); Yves Guchet, *Georges Sorel, 1847–1922: “Serviteur désintéressé du prolétariat”* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001); Irving Louis Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason: The Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (New York: Humanities Press, 1961); J.R. Jennings, *Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of his Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985); *Georges Sorel et son temps*, eds. Jacques Julliard and Shlomo Sand (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985); James Maisel, *The Genesis of Georges Sorel: An Account of His Formative Period Followed by a Study of His Influence* (Ann Arbor: George Wahr Publishing Company, 1951); Jack J. Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Shlomo Sand, *L'Illusion du politique: Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1985); and John L. Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social Thought of Georges Sorel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). The journal *Cahiers Georges Sorel* (1983–1988), now titled *Mil neuf cent: Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* (1989-present) also contains valuable studies of Sorel and his legacy.

<sup>2</sup> See Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue*, for a comprehensive examination of Sorel's theory of morality.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 36–55; and John L. Stanley, “Sorel's Study of Vico: The Uses of Poetic Imagination,” *The European Legacy* (September, 1998), 17–34.

attempt to restore moral integrity to Marxism.<sup>4</sup> After 1902 Sorel parted ways with parliamentary socialism altogether, claiming that the true legacy of Marx resided in the agitational, direct action politics of the French *syndicats*, and their *bourses du travail* (a meeting hall, cultural center and labor exchange), which guaranteed their class autonomy. From 1902 to 1909 Sorel was an advocate of anarcho-syndicalism, publishing articles in the syndicalist journal *Mouvement socialiste* (1899–1914) and its Italian counterpart, *Divenire sociale* (1905–1911). During this phase Sorel became enamored of the anti-rationalist philosopher Henri Bergson, and regularly attended his lectures at the Collège de France. Subsequently he adapted Bergson’s critique of scientific determinism, and his alternative theory of creative intuition to his own radical revision of Marxism. Bergsonian thought, in conjunction with that of Vico, inspired Sorel’s interpretation of the syndicalist general strike as a “myth” that would awaken the intuitive capacity of the proletariat and spark their ethical war against a decadent Third Republic and its plutocratic system of governance, parliamentary democracy. Sorel outlined this new theory in three interrelated books, all published in 1908: *La Décomposition du Marxisme* (which extricated Marxism from political reformism), *Les Illusions du progrès* (a critique of the Enlightenment and its legacy in the culture and politics of the bourgeoisie), and *Réflexions sur la violence* (his Bergsonian apologia of proletarian violence, which outlined his theory of myth and revolution).<sup>5</sup>

The period from 1909 to the outbreak of World War One in August 1914 constitutes the most hotly debated phase in Sorel’s development.<sup>6</sup> Following the failure of strike activity in both Italy and France, and establishment of an alliance between parliamentary socialists and factions within the syndicalist movement, Sorel entered into a troubled alliance with a group of writers and activists affiliated with the anti-democratic royalist organization *Action française*. Sorel, along with his syndicalist ally Edouard Berth, joined the monarchists Georges Valois and Jean Variot in planning a national syndicalist journal, *La Cité française* (1910); when that effort failed, Valois and Berth carried the national syndicalist project forward by establishing the *Cahier du Cercle Proudhon* (1912–1914). Berth defined the group’s ideological position in 1914 in *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels* (*The Misdeeds of Intellectuals*), a theoretical tract that praised the disciplined militancy of self-styled Royalists and the revolutionary energy of anarcho-syndicalists whom Berth called on to join forces in combating the

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<sup>4</sup> See the chapters titled “The Decomposition of Marxism, 1897–1901” in Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue*; and Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 36–91.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Jennings cogently summarizes this phase of Sorel’s development in Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 116–142.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the following analyses of this phase of Sorel’s development: Guchet, *Georges Sorel*, 191–226; Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 143–159; Maisel, *The Genesis of Georges Sorel*, 203–215; Paul Mazgaj, *The Action Française and Revolutionary Syndicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 96–127; Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue*, 270–292; and chapters eight and nine in Zeev Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire: Les Origines françaises du fascisme, 1885–1914* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978).



plutocratic State. Although the Cercle Proudhon group claimed Sorel as their mentor, he declined to participate, preferring instead to join Variot in founding a journal appropriately titled *L'Indépendance* (1911–13). In *L'Indépendance*, and related articles published in the newspaper *L'Action française*, Sorel celebrated the resurgence of French patriotism and the regenerative effects of classical culture and the Christian tradition on French society. Sorel endorsed these new-found myths together with that of the general strike as able to generate opposition to the pernicious effects of Enlightenment rhetoric, which shored up support among all classes for parliamentary democracy. At the same time, while he lauded the *Action française*'s tenacious opposition to the Third Republic, he was careful not to endorse their vision of monarchical government, or the alliance of syndicalists and nationalists developed by his Cercle Proudhon disciples. Sorel and Berth also wrote anti-Semitic texts, which attacked the 'Jewish intellectual' as the enemy of French culture and the chief apologist for the Enlightenment and its plutocratic offspring, the Third Republic.

With the outbreak of World War One, Sorel withdrew from the public arena while reaffirming his anarchist-inspired opposition to parliamentary politics. It is in this context that he published his last two books: *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (1919) and *De l'utilité du pragmatisme* (1921). Following his death in October 1922, Edouard Berth, who had returned to revolutionary syndicalism, published a collection of Sorel's early writings under the title *D'Aristote à Marx* (1935), while Jean Variot, now a convert to fascism, published his own reminiscence of conversations with Sorel the same year, *Propos de Sorel* (1935).

# Myths and Radical Subjectivity

Central to Sorel's theory following his break with orthodox Marxism was his notion of myth-making as the principle means by which oppressed groups establish a radical subjectivity among the rank and file in their ongoing battle against their oppressors. Thus in his *Reflections on Violence* (1908),<sup>1</sup> Sorel concluded that the revolutionary transformations instigated by religious sects and political movements arise from the emotive impact of their core myths, defined as those visionary principles that inspire immediate action.<sup>2</sup> For Sorel, myths were decidedly instrumental; rather than providing people with a social blueprint for a future to be created incrementally through political reform and rational planning myths presented the public with a visionary ideal whose stark contrast with present reality would agitate the masses. For Sorel myths were at the core of the direct action strategies of the anarchists and the psychological catalyst for revolution. In his *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel underscored the emotive and intuitive nature of myth by defining it as "a body of images capable of evoking all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the War undertaken by socialism against modern society."<sup>3</sup> Having condemned parliamentary socialists for employing rational argumentation to promote social change, Sorel lauded the mythic power of the French anarcho-syndicalist vision of a general strike for its ability to instill revolutionary fervor among the working class. If each worker believed their strike action would spark similar acts throughout France and that the proliferation of such strikes would result in the downfall of capitalism, then the evocation of such an apocalyptic general strike would inspire workers to engage in heroic forms of violent resistance to the capitalist status quo. Sorel viewed the general strike as

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<sup>1</sup> Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* first appeared in an abbreviated form in Italian in the Roman journal *Il Divinere sociale*; it was then published as *Lo Sciopero generale e la violenza* in 1906. This volume, combined with additional essays from the syndicalist journal *Le Mouvement socialiste* and a new introduction, appeared in French under the title *Réflexions sur la violence* in 1908. For a survey of Sorel's myriad impact in France and Italy, see Jack Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians*.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, (1908, authorized translation by T. E. Hulme; reprint, London: Collier-Macmillan, 1961), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 127. Sorel relates his definition of myth as a "body of images" expressive of our faculty of "intuition" to Henri Bergson's theory of intuitive perception, defined by the latter as "empathetic consciousness," or a form of "instinct" that had become "disinterested." Bergson wished to stress the role of human will in this state of consciousness, which he related to our capacity for creative action and thought. For a succinct analysis of Bergson's impact on Sorel, see Richard Vernon, *Commitment and Change: Georges Sorel and the Idea of Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 50–61.

only the latest manifestation of the power of mythic images to transform individual consciousness and ultimately, whole societies. Other examples included the Christian belief in Christ's imminent return; the various utopic images that had inspired the citizen-soldiers of France to defend the Revolution of 1789; and Giuseppe Mazzini's visionary call for a united Italy which had motivated the common people to take up arms during the Risorgimento (1861–70). In each case, mythmakers drew a strong contrast between a decadent present, rife with political and ethical corruption, and their vision of a regenerated future society, premised, in no small part, on the spiritual transformation of each individual within the body politic.

At the heart of Sorel's theory of myth was a notion of aestheticized violence which served to distinguish his proletarian insurrection from the State's barbaric use of "force." "Proletarian violence," wrote Sorel, "carried on as a pure and simple manifestation of the sentiment of class war, appears thus as a very beautiful and very heroic thing; it is at the service of the immemorial interests of civilization . . . it may save the world from barbarism."<sup>4</sup> Proletarian violence was motivated by a desire for justice, it was a disciplined activity "carried on without hatred or a spirit of revenge." By contrast the "essential aim" behind the repressive violence meted out by monarchs, or bourgeois Jacobins during the Terror in 1793, "was not justice, but the welfare of the State."<sup>5</sup> Syndicalist violence, therefore, "must not be confused with those acts of savagery," and Sorel felt justified in hoping "that a Socialist revolution carried out by pure Syndicalists would not be defiled by the abominations which sullied (*souillée*) bourgeois revolutions."<sup>6</sup>

Sorelian violence, to quote historian David Forgacs, was "more image than reality," and supposedly minimal in its bloodshed by virtue of the sense of discipline and justice animating its practitioners.<sup>7</sup> In effect Sorel displaced the violent act from an infliction of bodily harm to an imaginary realm described as an act of heroism, a form of beauty, a civilizing force able to heal society. Forgacs sees a comparable operation at work in Italian Fascism, citing for instance Mussolini's declaration in 1928 that fascist violence "must be generous, chivalric, and surgical."<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that Sorel sought to minimize violence while Italian Fascism exalted it, both forms of violence operated "at the level of the imaginary" wherein violence was displaced "into something other:

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<sup>4</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 99; and *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908; reprint Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1946), 130. The English translation uses the word "very fine" for Sorel's "très belle." I have substituted the word "beautiful" which is closer to the original French.

<sup>5</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 111–12; and *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908; reprint Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1946), 147.

<sup>6</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 125; and *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908; reprint Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1946), 165–66.

<sup>7</sup> See David Forgacs important essay, "Fascism, violence and modernity," in *The Violent Muse: Violence and the Artistic Imagination, 1910–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 5–21.

<sup>8</sup> Mussolini's statement is reported by his confidant Marguerita Sarfatti in her biography *Dux* (1928), and quoted in Forgacs, 6.

a social medicine, a creation of order, a revolution-recomposition.”<sup>9</sup> Such historical precedents should give us pause when we read statements such as the following from *CrimethInc* calling on us to embrace “myth” as a catalyst for revolutionary inspiration: “When we tell tales around the fire at night of heroes and heroines, of other struggles and adventures . . . we are offering each other examples of just how much living is possible.”<sup>10</sup> Heroism in the realm of labor unrest had a constructive complement in the creativity of the industrial worker, whose interaction with modern machinery galvanized a workers’ potential for invention. To Sorel’s mind the ethical violence of the worker merged with the creativity of the industrial producer; Mussolini (and his French fascist counterpart, Georges Valois) appropriated this aspect of Sorel’s theory when they described the fascist movement as an alliance of combatants and producers.<sup>11</sup> At its most extreme a society built around such myths would no longer support institutions structured on Enlightenment precepts; parliamentary democracy would cede to the creation of a new form of politics, such as anarchism. As belief systems that served as catalysts for activism, myths not only nurtured social cohesion among disparate constituencies, they also made social and industrial dynamism, and the potential for violent upheaval, core aspects of any ideology employing such mythic images to achieve its objectives.

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<sup>9</sup> Forgacs, “Fascism, violence and modernity,” 11.

<sup>10</sup> CrimethInc, *Days of Love, Nights of War*, 113. In a cogent argument, Gavin Grindon has positioned *CrimethInc*’s mythmaking in the context of a broader movement among leftists to harness mythic moments for their revolutionary potential “from the Surrealists to the Situationists to Reclaim the Streets.” In the process Grindon touches on Sorel’s impact on Georges Bataille and his allies associated with the “College of Sociology.” See, Gavin Grindon, “The Breath of the Possible” in *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations//Collective Theorization*, eds. Stevphen Shukaitis and David Graeber with Erika Biddle (Oakland: A.K. Press, 2007), 94–107.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Sorel’s notion of the producer and its impact on fascists in France and Italy, see James Gregor, *Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). I discussed this theme at length in Chapter 3 of *Avant-Garde Fascism*, 121–143.

# The Abstract Citizen

The creation of the Third Republic produced a conflict between those favorable to the doctrine of universal suffrage and those opposed to it. As Pierre Birnbaum has detailed, political dissidents like Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès condemned the Republican principle of “one man, one vote” for falsely positing political equality among all citizens on the basis of Enlightenment ideals; they alternatively campaigned in favour of older forms of communal solidarity native to France, such as Catholic faith, regional identity, or the system of guilds that united workers according to their profession.<sup>1</sup> Study of Sorel’s writings reveals that his theory of syndicalist revolution was premised on antirationalist paradigms conducive to such rightist antidemocratic thought. Sorel drew a strong contrast between vital and degenerative social forces, premised on a Bergsonian division between social structures emanating from intellectual modes of thought and those tied to intuition, and thus expressive of a creative force opposed to intellectualism. In Sorel’s view Republican ideology subsumed all classes into its atomized concept of citizenship; he countered this homogenization by asserting the heterogeneity of class difference, and identifying vital qualities unique to each class.<sup>2</sup> In *Le Mouvement socialiste*, Sorel critiqued the deterministic, mechanistic and materialist aspects of both capitalism and parliamentary democracy, which in turn inspired him to posit a spiritualist road to revolution meant to galvanize both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. His primary concern was with the decadence of French society, for Sorel viewed class conflict as the means by which bourgeois and proletarian alike could be rejuvenated and the corrupting effects of parliamentary democracy successfully resisted.<sup>3</sup>

Fundamental to Sorel’s distinction between vital and degenerative social forces was a division derived from Bergson between those social structures arising from intellectual modes of thought and those tied to intuition, and thus expressive of the vital *durée* animating life. Duration, Bergson’s term for temporality, was synonymous with creativity, and each material manifestation of duration reportedly contained within it an *élan vital*, or vital impulse. According to Bergson intuition was the faculty of thought most adapted to this life force and thus able both to discern duration and contribute to its creative evolution, its production of material form. Ultimately Bergson hoped

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Birnbaum, “Catholic Identity, Universal Suffrage, and ‘Doctrines of Hatred,’” in *The Intellectual Revolt Against Liberal Democracy, 1870–1945*, ed. Zeev Sternhell (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1996), 233–51.

<sup>2</sup> Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 1994, 36–91; and Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism*, 73–81..

<sup>3</sup> See Mazgaj, *The Action Française and Revolutionary Syndicalism*, 1979.

that intuition would not only give us insight into life, but knowledge of each other, and that social forms based on intuition would create a society open to its own creative evolution. Since intuition was a form of empathic consciousness, a disinterested type of instinct, the social order arising from this state would be the product of a sympathetic communion of free wills, an order expressive of the consciousness of each citizen rather than one imposed mechanically from without by some external authority. Intuition then was a state of mind able to reflect on its own nature and externalize or express that nature in the form of creative acts. The nature of those acts necessarily mirrored the creative process from which they sprang; thus intuitive acts had all the attributes of creative duration itself: they were indivisible, heterogeneous, and qualitative processes.<sup>4</sup> For Sorel, Bergson's insights had profound consequences, both for his vision of society and the means by which he sought to change it. In his interpretation of Bergson, intellectualized conceptions described by Bergson as antithetical to intuition had their political equivalent in Republican and enlightenment ideology.<sup>5</sup> Sorel and his colleague Berth sought to identify the qualitative differences within the body politic ignored by democratic apologists, the most significant of these differences being that of class. In Sorel's theory each class had its unique *élan*; the error of democracy was that it subsumed all classes into its abstract conception of citizenship, thereby denying the heterogeneity of class difference and the vital qualities intrinsic to each class.

In his *Reflections on Violence* Sorel applied this theory of qualitative differences to his conception of collectivity, claiming that individuals chose to join a syndicat as an expression of their free will, and their intuitive sympathy with each other. The spiritual transformation of each individual assured that all action undertaken by an individual was in harmonious relation to that of his peers. In a chapter titled "The Morality of the Producers," Sorel related such harmonious actions to an internal discipline "founded on the deepest feelings of the soul" rather than a discipline that was "merely external constraint." He concluded that syndicalist action was the product of "a qualitative and individualistic point of view," before adding that "anarchists have entered the syndicats in great numbers, and have done much to develop tendencies favourable

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<sup>4</sup> For Bergson's views on the relation of human creativity to duration in the universe, see Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 1896, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer, 1911 (rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1978) 267–98; Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 1907, trans. Arthur Mitchell, 1911 (rpt. New York: Random House, 1944) 290–95; and Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 100–105; on the scientific implications of Bergson's theories, see P.A.Y. Gunter, "Henri Bergson," in ed. David Ray Griffin, *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Pierce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne* (New York: S.U.N.Y. Press 1993) 133–163.

<sup>5</sup> On Sorel's critique of enlightenment ideology, and his opinion that proponents of "the illusions of rationalism" find their adversary in "the teachings of Bergson," see Georges Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, 1908, trans. Charlotte and John Stanley, 1969, 1–29; Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 1908, 28–30, 157; for a good synopsis of Sorel's Bergsonism, see Richard Vernon, *Commitment and Change: George Sorel and the Idea of Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 50–61.

to the general strike.”<sup>6</sup> To Sorel’s mind anarchism and the intuitive consciousness animating syndicalism were utterly compatible, as long as creative individuals acted in consort, in response to a class consciousness premised on intuitive sympathy.

Berth, in a May 1905 article published in *Le Mouvement socialiste* — later reedited for *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels* — defined the role of revolutionary syndicalism in promoting that intuitive state and the manner in which anarchists hostile to collectivity, along with orthodox Marxists and parliamentary socialists, set out to impede it.<sup>7</sup> According to Berth the epistemological roots of the latter three ideologies resided in an intellectualised and atomised conception of the individual, whereas revolutionary syndicalism was allied to “a new philosophy of life” charted by Berth’s heroes, Friedrich Nietzsche and Bergson. Anarcho-individualism purportedly advocated “extreme social automatism” derived from intellectualism in the sciences and akin to the concept of “abstract citizenship” posited under “democratism.” Likewise orthodox Marxism, by virtue of its rationalism, did not escape what Berth called “the law of intellectualism,” for the collectivity promoted by Marxists amounted to a “totally mechanical” form of cooperation among workers, a cooperation, stated Berth, “where the will of the cooperators counts for nothing, a cooperation whose directing idea is exterior to the cooperators themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Whether social order took the form of the collection of atomized individuals as conceived by anarcho-individualists or a mechanical order external to its component parts, as developed by orthodox Marxists, it still amounted to an abstract conception of citizenship, no different from that posited under democracy.<sup>9</sup> In his *Illusions of Progress* Sorel endorsed Berth’s thesis, adding that the democratic concept of the “abstract citizen” stemmed from “theories of natural law,” and “atomistic theories” of physics; consequently the ideal citizen was divorced from “real people” and “real ideas.”<sup>10</sup> “Like physics,” Sorel asserted, “society can be simplified, and [take on] an atomistic clarity if national tradition [and] the organisation of production are disregarded in order to consider nothing but the people who come to the market to exchange their products.” The democratic idea of citizenship was therefore modeled on that of commercial exchange, rather than on “national tradition” or “the organisation of production,” crucial to class consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 284–85.

<sup>7</sup> Edouard Berth, “Anarchisme individualiste, Marxisme orthodox, syndicalisme révolutionnaire,” *Le Mouvement socialiste* (May 1905), 6–35; rpt. in Berth, *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 87–130.

<sup>8</sup> Berth, *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 95–119.

<sup>9</sup> Berth, *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, xi–xiv. “Nous savons aujourd’hui que cet homme abstrait n’était pas complètement fantaisiste; il avait été inventé pour remplacer, dans théories du droit naturel, l’homme du Thiers-Etat; de même que la critique historique a rétabli les personnages réel, elle doit rétablir les idées réelles, c’est à dire revenir à la considérations des classes.” Georges Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (*Quatrième édition*) (Paris, 1927), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 49–50. “On peut simplifier les sociétés comme le physique et y trouver clarté atomistique, en supprimant les traditions nationales, la genèse du droit et l’organisation de la production, pour ne plus considérer que des gens qui viennent, sur la marché, échanger leurs

In *The Illusions of Progress* Sorel traced the emergence of abstract notions of citizenship back to the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, when a leisured aristocracy embraced the philosophy of René Descartes and theories of “natural law” that set the stage for the democratic “doctrine of progress.”<sup>12</sup> According to Sorel, Enlightenment theories were based on Cartesian notions of endless progress, as evidenced by the continual growth of human knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Optimistic in outlook, the Enlightenment’s allies were hostile to concepts of original sin; indeed, the Cartesian universe was that of a mathematical machine set in motion by a divine being with little relevance in the realm of human affairs. According to Sorel, the decline in religious faith, signaled by the defeat of Jansenism under Louis XIV, was a function of the rise of Cartesian ideology among the aristocracy. “Cartesianism was resolutely optimistic,” stated Sorel, “a fact which greatly pleased a society desirous of amusing itself freely and irritated by the harshness of Jansenism.” Devoid of morality and rendered useless by Louis XIV, the aristocracy now exploited Cartesianism to justify its “frivolity,” since that ideology was “very amenable to Parisian intellectual circles.”<sup>14</sup> By preaching moral laxity to the idle rich, advocates of Cartesian ideology permitted “the enjoyment of the good things of today in good conscience without worrying about tomorrow’s difficulties.”<sup>15</sup>

To Sorel’s mind Cartesianism was tailor-made for the political oligarchy that arose in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789.<sup>16</sup> Cartesianism not only suited “the old, idle aristocracy” but also a later generation of “politicians elevated to power by democracy, who, menaced by possible downfall, wish to make their friends profit from all the advantages to be reaped by the state.”<sup>17</sup> “Nothing is more aristocratic than the aspirations of democracy,” Sorel asserted, for “the latter tries to continue the exploitation of the producing masses by an oligarchy of intellectual and political professionals.”<sup>18</sup> Divorced from the forces of production, the idea of progress developed by “our democrats

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produits et qui, en dehors de ces rencontres accidentelles, conservent leur pleine liberté d’action.” Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 97. Sorel’s reference to physics and the atomization of the social order as a consequence of republican notions of citizenship was a theme developed by Sorel’s close friend and follower Edouard Berth. See Edouard Berth, “Anarchisme individualiste, Marxisme orthodox, syndicalisme révolutionnaire,” *Le Mouvement socialiste* (May 1905), 6–35; and Edouard Berth, *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels* (Paris, 1914), 87–130.

<sup>12</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 21. “Le progrès sera toujours un élément essentiel du grand courant qui ira jusqu’ à la démocratie moderne, parce que la doctrine du progrès permet de jouir en toute tranquillité des biens d’aujourd’hui, sans se soucier des difficultés de demain.” Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 49.

<sup>15</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 21. “Le progrès sera toujours un élément essentiel du grand courant qui ira jusqu’ à la démocratie moderne, parce que la doctrine du progrès permet de jouir en toute tranquillité des biens d’aujourd’hui, sans se soucier des difficultés de demain.” Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 150.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.



[consisted] neither in the accumulation of technical methods nor even of scientific knowledge,” and instead took the form of a pure “logic,” insuring “the happiness of all who possess the means of living well.”<sup>19</sup> Like the aristocracy of the previous generation, these plutocratic advocates of abstract logic and moral laxity had their adversaries in the defenders of Christian belief, moral rectitude, and intuition.<sup>20</sup> In the Seventeenth century the followers of Descartes were challenged by Pascal, while in the Twentieth century, democratic ideology was threatened by the rising tide of Bergsonism.<sup>21</sup>

One should compare “Pascal and Bergson,” added Sorel, since both were opposed to “the illusions of rationalism.”<sup>22</sup> Democratic thought, like Cartesianism, had no role to play in human affairs other than to justify the existence of unproductive elements in society, whether they be the landed aristocrats and their intellectual courtiers, or large scale financiers and their democratic apologists.

The rise of the “productive bourgeoisie” after 1789, therefore, spawned the creation of an unproductive, *haute bourgeoisie* within its midst.<sup>23</sup> It was this haute bourgeoisie which undermined class consciousness by aping the aristocracy. The bourgeois assumption of power was accompanied by efforts to emulate the aristocratic delight in theoretical reasoning. Ironically this latter-day enthusiasm for the trappings of aristocratic culture had been preceded, in the Eighteenth century, by the aristocracy’s equally disastrous assimilation of bourgeois ideology into the cultivated world of the literary Salon. When the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed an abstract theory of “general will,” the aristocracy, states Sorel, “borrowed subjects for discourse from the Third Estate and amused itself with projects for social reform, which it considered on a par with accounts of marvelous voyages in the land of milk and honey.”<sup>24</sup> For these aristocrats Rousseau’s abstract ideas were first and foremost a form of Salon entertainment, not a call to revolution.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> The Jansenist Pascal had critiqued Cartesianists for applying the laws of physics to the realm of human affairs, thereby recognizing that “pseudomathematical reasoning” is not applicable to “moral questions.” “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.” Sorel drew on Henri Poincaré’s theory of conventionalism and Bergson’s critique of the “instrumental” limitations of intellectual analysis to reach similar conclusions. See Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 15–16; Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 1985, 96–99; 139–142.

<sup>22</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> On Sorel’s distinction between the productive and unproductive elements of the bourgeoisie see Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 86–87, 252–95; and John Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue*, 1981, 262–66.

<sup>24</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 45. “C’est que la noblesse n’a plus, à cette époque, d’idéologie qui lui soit propre; elle emprunte au Thiers-Etat les sujets de dissertation et s’amuse des projets de rénovations sociale, qu’elle assimile à des récits de voyages merveilleux faits des pays de Cocagne.” Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 90.

# The Anti-Enlightenment: Ancients Against Moderns

In *The Illusions of Progress* Sorel defined an alternative aesthetic to this leisure culture, based on adherence to aesthetic traditions grounded in productive labor and class consciousness. In his view, the proponents of progress were not only hostile to religious belief they thought their own culture superior to the art of past eras, including that of classical antiquity. The most important manifestation of this was the quarrel between Ancients and Moderns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a time when new philosophical precepts came into conflict with the long-unchallenged belief in the superiority of the culture of the ancient world.<sup>1</sup>

Cartesianism, stated Sorel, had influenced literary debates between the defenders of the Ancients, most notably Nicholas Boileau, and promoters of the Moderns, such as Charles Perrault. In Sorel's words, Perrault "systematically ranked his contemporaries above the great men of antiquity or the Renaissance [and] preferred Lebrun to Raphael."<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly Sorel claimed that Boileau had allies in those "men of the Renaissance" who had "studied Greek customs," and religious reformers like the Jansenists, who had defended the "classical tradition," and exalted St. Augustine as the Christian exemplar of classical values. By contrast the "moderns" valued novelty and viewed art as a mere "diversion."<sup>3</sup> "Almost all the women sided with Perrault's party," asserted Sorel, so that the cause of the moderns, like Cartesianism, was taken up in the literary salons; moreover Perrault's flattery of his contemporaries won him advocates in "the great literary gazettes" and among "the great mass of men who had pretensions to literary taste." As a result of Perrault's defence of progress in the arts the "philosophico-scientific poetry" of writers like Lamotte won widespread approval. Concurrently, Descartes' teachers, the Jesuits, defended "literary mediocrity against Boileau" and "moral mediocrity against the Jansenists," in order to gain influence over

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<sup>1</sup> On the battle between the Ancients and Moderns see, Georgia Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Musical Criticism: French and Italian Music, 1600–1750* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Press, 1981), 35–39; and Joan Dejean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin-de-Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 1–3. "Rien ne nous paraît plus étrange que le mauvais goût de Perrault mettant systématiquement ses contemporains au-dessus des grands hommes de l'antiquité ou de la Renaissance, et, par exemple, préférant Lebrun à Raphaël." Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 3–6.

“the greatest number of people.”<sup>4</sup> “Boileau’s defeat was thus complete,” lamented Sorel, for “all around him he could see a rebirth of literary affectation, while in the coteries, transformed into literary salons,” the “Fontenelles and Lamottes” were in ascendance.<sup>5</sup> Although the nineteenth century Romantics were to renew the attack on Boileau, he had a defender in the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, whose mixture of leftist politics and cultural conservatism appealed to Sorel (and to the Cercle Proudhon group). Thus Sorel cited Proudhon’s claim that “Boileau’s glory reappears ‘in proportion as the new generation rids itself of the romanticist mantle.’”<sup>6</sup> The quarrel between Ancients and Moderns had a Nineteenth century correlate in the battle between Romantics and Classicists, and more importantly, defenders of the decadent Republic and the followers of Proudhon.

Having sided with the Ancients, Sorel incorporated concepts of classicism and tradition into his theory of class consciousness. In Sorel’s schema, traditionalists respected past techniques of artistic *production*, and consciously adopted these methods in emulation of past artistic achievements. There are “two groups of writers,” wrote Sorel; “one prides itself on having become ‘good literary craftsmen’; its members have trained themselves by a long apprenticeship,” while “the other group has continued to churn out works according to the tastes of the day.” Like the Ancients, these craftsmen reportedly “felt the value of form in poetry”; they recognized that such production required “patient labour,” and, as a result, addressed “a limited public.” By contrast their adversaries shared the Moderns’ obsession with literary novelty, and compromised artistic standards for commercial success by writing “for café-concerts and newspapers.”<sup>7</sup> Decline in craftsmanship had accelerated in the eighteenth century, for proponents of Enlightenment philosophy like Condorcet not only condemned religious art, but the Medieval guild structure associated with it. Sorel thus speculated whether “the influence of the friends of the Enlightenment was not fatal to art during the end of the eighteenth century,” for they “helped to ruin professional traditions and to set art on an artificial path with a view to expressing philosophical fantasies.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Illusions of Progress*. 6; French edition 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* English trans., 7; French edition 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* English trans., 7; French edition, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 7–8. “Une révolution moderne a établi une scission fondamentale entre deux groupes d’écrivains; les uns se vantent d’être devenus de bons ouvriers des lettres; ils se sont formés par un long apprentissage et ils travaillent extraordinairement leur langue; — les autres ont continué à écrire rapidement selon du goût du jour . . . Nos artistes contemporains de style sont les vrais successeurs de ce Boileau, si longtemps méprisé . . . Si quelqu’un a senti le prix de la forme en poésie, c’est Boileau . . . Les hommes qui travaillent avec un patient labeur leurs écrits s’adressent volontairement à un public restreint; les autres écrivent pour les cafés-concerts et pour les journaux; il y a maintenant deux clientèles bien séparées et deux genres littéraires qui se mêlent guère.” Sorel *Les Illusions du Progrès (Quatrième édition)*, 25–27.

<sup>8</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 103. “Condorcet est inintelligible. On pourrait se demander plutôt si l’influence des amis des lumières n’a pas été funeste à l’art durant la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle; cette influence contribua à ruiner des traditions de métier pour lancer l’art sur une voie factice en vue de l’expression de fantaisies philosophiques.” Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès (Quatrième édition)*, 192.

If French society were to be saved, artisanal traditions and productivist ethics should guide all creative endeavours. Sorel, in the *Illusions of Progress*, found evidence of such resurgence in the timehonoured, aesthetic sensibility of independent, rural winegrowers as well as in the inventiveness of the industrial worker.<sup>9</sup> In his *Reflections on Violence* Sorel related the *esprit de corps* generated by the syndicats to “the morality of the producers” and the creativity workers brought to production processes.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on the anarchist aesthetics of Proudhon, Sorel declared art to be “an anticipation of the kind of work that ought to be carried on in a highly productive state of society.”<sup>11</sup> He then defined the conditions under which the modern worker could develop an aesthetic sensibility.<sup>12</sup> As “an experimental field which continually incites the worker to scientific research,” the modern workshop required workers to be forever open “to the difficulties the current method of production present.” “We are thus led to invention,” and through that to the realisation that “art should be regarded as being an anticipation of the highest form of production as it tends to be manifested more and more in society.”<sup>13</sup> Sorel’s correlation between creativity and a productivist ethic also inspired Berth, in an article of 1905 published in *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, to analyse the creative rather than routine nature of the work undertaken by syndicalists. According to Berth, production methods in the progressive unions required “an incessant adaptation to techniques always more delicate, whose rhythm is perpetually new, and to state it clearly, more revolutionary.” Creativity in the workplace assured that “the worker understands and loves his work,” that it becomes “the center of his existence,” a source of “pride,” “dignity,” and a feeling of “justice.”<sup>14</sup> Given the agitational role of industrial syndicats in Paris it is not surprising that Sorel and Berth would praise the urban worker in the modern workshop; what has gone unnoticed is that his eulogy to the rural *vigneron* was equally politicised, for winegrowers in the Midi had embraced revolutionary syndicalism and initiated a massive strike wave that engulfed the entire south between 1903 and 1911.<sup>15</sup> As one attuned to the condition of his fields, every winegrower had a “feeling of attachment” towards “the productive forces entrusted to him;” in like fashion, the proletariat was acutely aware of changes in industrial tech-

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<sup>9</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 154–57.

<sup>10</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 36. On Sorel’s fusion of the productive and artistic *esprit*, and separation of proletarian culture from a bourgeois “aesthetic education,” see Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 112–115.

<sup>11</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 39. On Proudhon’s declaration that art must have a moral purpose, and that the edifying effects of art should also animate the workplace, see George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography* (Montréal: Black Rose 1987), 256–9; on Proudhon’s influence on Sorel’s theory of art, see Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 1985, 112–115.

<sup>12</sup> See Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 286–288.

<sup>13</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 286–87.

<sup>14</sup> Berth, *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 126–128

<sup>15</sup> Laura L. Frader, “Grapes of Wrath: Vineyard Workers, Labor Unions, and Strike Activity in the Aude, 1860–1913,” in *Class Conflict and Collective Action*, eds. Louise A Tilly and Charles Tilly (London: Sage, 1981), 185–206.

nology. “It has long been pointed out,” Sorel continued, “how much the winegrower is an observer, a thinker, and is curious about new phenomena; he resembles the worker of progressive workshops much more than the labourer,” since “it is impossible for him to be content with routine, for each year brings a burden of new difficulties.” Devoid of routine, such skill had been “celebrated” by poets, “because they perceive its aesthetic character.”<sup>16</sup> Like the Ancients, the winegrower or industrial worker took pride in the craft of production: it was this relation of art to labor that distinguished classical and artisanal culture from those art forms designed to entertain a leisured class, whether aristocratic or bourgeois.

In his *Reflections on Violence* Sorel went further by comparing the ethos animating the male warrior of Classical Greece to that of striking workers, whether agrarian or industrial.<sup>17</sup> Sorel claimed that the myth of the general strike, in producing an epic consciousness, not only galvanized the worker’s creative capacities, such myth-making potentially regenerated the bourgeoisie by leading that class to abandon the politics of appeasement espoused by Parliamentary Socialists. Worker agitation would thus cause industrialists to foment the cataclysmic class war predicted by Marx.<sup>18</sup> The fundamental aim of the proletariat, argued Sorel, was to re-invigorate the bourgeoisie through class conflict, thereby making the middle class recover the “serious moral habits,” “productive energy” and “feeling of its own dignity” that had dissipated under the impact of democratic ideals.<sup>19</sup> For this reason Sorel regarded labor militancy as a salutary form of violence, qualitatively distinct from the oppressive force of the State. The Enlightenment precepts undergirding the Third Republic and its institutions had encouraged reconciliation between the classes. In response Sorel lauded the anti-parliamentary policies of the *syndicats*, and the decision of the *Confédération Générale du Travail*, or C.G.T. to employ strike action as a means of maintaining labor militancy and with it, class schism. The myth of the general strike therefore produced an intuitive class consciousness, typified by heroism, moral rectitude and sublimity, comparable to that of the citizen soldiers of classical Greece. “Proletarian violence,” we are told, is “a very heroic thing” since “it is at the service of the immemorial interests of civilization”: thus

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<sup>16</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 155–56. “Tout d’abord, on doit signaler les sentiments d’affection qu’inspirent à tout travailleur vraiment qualifié les forces productives qui lui sont confiées. Ces sentiments ont été surtout observé dans la vie champêtre . . . Il y a une l’agriculture grossière dans laquelle on chercherait vainement les vertue attribuées à la propriété; mais il y a une autre qui, pendant de longs siècles, a été fort supérieure au grand nombre des métiers urbains, comme travail qualifié; c’est celle-là que les poètes ont célébrée, parce qu’ils en apercevaient le caractère esthétique . . . on a souvent signalé combien est observateur, raisonneur et curieux de nouveauté le vigneron, qui ressemble bien plutôt à l’ouvrier des ateliers progressifs qu’au laboureur; il lui serait impossible de se contenter de la routine, car chaque année apporte un tribut de difficultés nouvelles; dans les pays de grand crûs, le vigneron suit avec une attention minutieuse tous les épisodes de la vie de chaque plant.” Sorel *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 281–83.

<sup>17</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 86–99.

<sup>18</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 126–39.

<sup>19</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 69–73, 84–91.

we should “salute the revolutionaries as the Greeks saluted the Spartan heroes who defended Thermopylae.” Such epic consciousness also instilled a spirit of invention among the working class, akin to the creativity that had motivated Gothic artisans during the Middle Ages.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 99, 286–295. “La violence prolétarienne, exercée comme une manifestation pure et simple du sentiment de lutte de classe, apparait ainsi comme une chose très belle et très héroïque; elle est au service des intérêts primordiaux de la civilisation . . . Saluons les révolutionnaires comme les Grecs saluèrent les héros spartiates qui défendirent les Thermopyles et contribuèrent à maintenir la lumière dans le monde antique.” Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence, édition définitive* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Rivière, 1946), 130–31.

# The Myth of Anti-Capitalist, Anti-Semitism

Sorel's blueprint for social revolution underwent radical revision after 1909, when the C.G.T.'s strike activity faltered and the syndicalists entered into a dialogue with Jean Jaurès' parliamentary socialists. Sorel and Berth responded by turning to anti-Republican advocates of militant Catholicism for potential allies in their fight against the parliamentary system and its Enlightenment underpinnings. In *L'Indépendance* Sorel further melded his ideological doctrine with a theory of culture, and deployed notions of classicism and religious aesthetics as a bulwark against the Republic and its allies in the cultural domain. In *Reflections on Violence* Sorel had already related religious faith to revolutionary consciousness, claiming that "Bergson has taught us that it is not only religion which occupies the profounder region of our mental life; revolutionary myths have their place there equally with religion." Christians, like revolutionaries, could possess "sublimity" provided that believers were motivated by "well defined myths" in their epic struggle against the forces of immorality.<sup>1</sup> After 1909, Sorel (in conjunction with his *L'Indépendance* allies) incorporated religious belief into his program by proclaiming the battle between Dreyfusard Republicans and their Catholic adversaries a momentous confrontation between decadent and regenerative forces in French society. The myth of a Catholic France, purged of destructive rationalism, would now sustain the forces of resistance. Though "the present time is not favorable to grandeur," Sorel wrote in a 1910 appendix to *The Illusions of Progress*, "history teaches us that greatness cannot be absent indefinitely in that part of mankind that possesses the incomparable treasures of classical culture and the Christian tradition."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 35, 243–44. "Mais l'enseignement de Bergson nous a appris que la religion n'est pas seule à occuper la région de la conscience profonde; les mythes révolutionnaire y ont leur place au même titre qu'elle . . . Ces faits nous mettent sur la voie qui nous conduit à l'intelligence des hautes convictions morales; celles-ci ne dépendent point des raisonnements ou d'une éducation de la volonté individuelle; elles dépendent d'un état de guerre auquel les hommes acceptent de participer et qui se traduit en mythes précis. Dans le pays catholiques, les moines soutiennent le combat contre le prince du mal qui triomphe dans le monde et voudrait les soumettre à ses volontés; dans les pays protestants, de petites sectes exaltées jouent le rôle de monastères. Ce sont ces champs de bataille qui permettent à morale chrétienne de se maintenir, avec ce caractère de sublime qui fascine tant d'âmes encore d'aujourd'hui." Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, 49; 319–320.

<sup>2</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 186. "L'heure présente n'est pas favorable à l'idée de grandeur: mais d'autres temps viendront; l'histoire nous apprend que la grandeur ne saurait faire indéfiniment

While the mythic power of Catholicism served to reinvigorate France, proponents of rationalism in both art and politics actively undermined such resurgence. In Sorel's own day Enlightenment philosophers were replaced by politicians as symbols of decadence, with the difference that parliamentary socialists like Jean Jaurès substituted democratic ideology for the Social Contract, and catered to an idle bourgeoisie rather than the landed aristocracy. "Parliamentary socialism," argued Sorel in *The Illusions of Progress*, "would not recruit so many adherents among the wealthy class if Jaurès's revolutionary harangues were taken seriously in those rich bourgeois circles that seek to imitate the inanities of the old aristocracy."<sup>3</sup> Worst still these socialists also campaigned among the working class. According to Sorel the parliamentary socialists who had mounted a defense of Captain Dreyfus founded the *Universités populaires* after 1899 to spread democratic ideology and bourgeois culture among the working class. "Democracy has as its object the disappearance of class feeling," wrote Sorel, and if "the movement that, for several years, propelled the most intelligent workers toward the popular universities had developed as the bourgeoisie had wished, [revolutionary] socialism would have fallen into the democratic rut." "Instead of teaching workers what they need to know to equip themselves for their life as workers," the popular universities strived "to develop in them a lively curiosity for things found only in books written to amuse the bourgeoisie." As a result "the public universities were a vast advertisement for reading the books of the Dreyfusards."<sup>4</sup> In *The Illusions of Progress*, Sorel also attacked the writer Anatole France, describing him as a Dreyfusard who frequented the literary salons of wealthy Parisians. "Following the Dreyfus Affair," wrote Sorel,

France became "a refined boudoir entertainer of the Monceau Quarter" whose "little drolleries to the fine ladies and gentlemen of high finance" eventually transformed him into "an oracle of socialism."<sup>5</sup> Woven into this latter description were the threads of anti-capitalist anti-Semitism, for the correlation of Dreyfus's defenders with figures of "high finance" was a theme that would reappear in Sorel's writings on culture for *L'Indépendance*. By contrasting "financiers" with the truly productive members of

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défaut à cette partie de l'humanité qui possède les incomparables trésors de la culture classique et de la traditions chrétiennes." Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 335.

<sup>3</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 186. "L'heure présente n'est pas favorable à l'idée de grandeur: mais d'autres temps viendront; l'histoire nous apprend que la grandeur ne saurait faire indéfiniment défaut à cette partie de l'humanité qui possède les incomparables trésors de la culture classique et de la traditions chrétiennes." Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 335.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 62–64. Indeed Georges Deherme and others associated with the *Universités populaires* thought the Dreyfus Affair played a crucial role in uniting bourgeois intellectuals and the working class elite in the creation of these Popular Universities after 1899. For an evaluation of the movement, See Lucien Mercier, *Les Universités populaires: 1899–1914* (Paris: Ouvrières, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 62–63. The passage reads as follows: "A la suites de l'affaire Dreyfus, nous avons vu un délicat amuseur des boudoirs de la plaine Monceau transformé, par badauds, en oracle du socialisme; il parait qu'Anatole France s'étonne d'abord beaucoup de cette métamorphose, mais qu'il a fini par se demander, tout de bon, si, vraiment, en contant ses petites drôleries aux belles dames et aux gentils messieurs de la finance, il n'avait pas découvert l'énigme de la question sociale." Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 122.



French society, Sorel wished to underscore the classless, unproductive and rationalist nature of financial speculators, whom he stereotyped as Jews. For Sorel, these Jewish capitalists were instrumental in promoting the Republic's abstract concept of citizenship, thereby suppressing the class identity and the productivist ethics Sorel wished to develop. The social corollary to this anti-Semitic anti-capitalism was decadence in the realm of art. "It is often asked why rich Jews are so sympathetic to utopian ideas and sometime give themselves socialist airs," wrote Sorel in *The Illusions of Progress*, and in response he attributed the phenomenon to economic reasons. "These men live on the margins of production," Sorel proclaimed; "literature, music, and financial speculation are their interests," and their "outspoken boldness [thus resembles] that of eighteenth-century gentlemen."<sup>6</sup>

In an article of October 1912 published in *L'Indépendance*, Sorel took this thesis to its logical conclusion in a diatribe against the symbolist and pro-Dreyfusard journal *La Revue Blanche* (1890–1903).<sup>7</sup> As Venita Datta has demonstrated, *La Revue Blanche* was a major target for the anti-Dreyfusard camp due to the high number of Jewish intellectuals on its editorial staff, its alliance with Dreyfusards in the universities, and the journal's defence of the concept of "abstract" citizenship that regionalists, Catholics and royalists found so abhorrent.<sup>8</sup> Sorel added his own voice to this chorus by vilifying *La Revue Blanche* as an unholy alliance between a fully secularised Jewish intelligentsia and their anarchist counterparts among the Nabis and NeoImpressionist painters. Having condemned Dreyfus' supporters for rejecting the French tradition and propagating a concept of nationhood premised on a faith in "the dialectic of absolute reason," Sorel described the 'fanatical' idealism of the *Revue Blanche* circle as the logical outcome of such thinking. Quoting liberally from Henry de Bruchard's anti-Semitic *Petites mémoires du temps de la ligue* (1912), Sorel referred to the journal's

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<sup>6</sup> Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 115. "On s'est demandé souvent comment il se fait que des Juifs riches aient de sympathies pour des utopies et parfois même se donnent des allures socialistes. Je laisse ici de côté naturellement ceux qui voient dans la socialisme un moyen nouveau d'exploitation; mais il y en a qui sont sincères. Ce phénomène n'est pas à expliquer par des raisons ethniques (1): ces hommes vivent en marge de la production; ils s'occupent de littérature, de musique et de spéculations financières; ils ne sont pas frappés de ce qu'il y a de nécessaire dans le monde et leur témérité a la même origine que celle de tant de gentilshommes du XVIIIe siècle." Sorel, *Les Illusions du Progrès* (Quatrième édition), 213.

<sup>7</sup> Sorel, "Aux temps dreyfusiens," *L'Indépendance* (October, 1912), 51–56. For an overview of the pro-Dreyfus stance of the journal, see Halperin, *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin de Siècle France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 319–323, and Richard Sonn, *Anarchism & Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 17–19, 40–43, 175–76, 185–86.

<sup>8</sup> Venita Datta has examined the stereotype of the Jew as Intellectual in avant-guerre France and the espousal, by secular Jewish intellectuals, of "rationalism and universality" as ideals allied to a Republican notion of citizenship (thus facilitating their integration into the French body politic). Although Datta has studied the role of *La Revue Blanche* in this discourse, she does not consider the thought of Sorel and his circle. See Datta, *The Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 85–116.

founders, the Natanson brothers as “two Jews come from Poland in order to regenerate our poor country, so unhappily still contaminated by the Christian civilization of the seventeenth century.”<sup>9</sup> These foreigners reportedly set out to corrupt French literature, and in so doing enlisted the anarchist Félix Fénéon in their cause, by making him the journal’s editor-in-chief.<sup>10</sup> Sorel, like his close ally Edouard Berth, equated the anarchist defence of individual freedom with the atomised rationalism stemming from parliamentary politics, and both doctrines served the Jewish intelligentsia’s desire to merge classes under an abstract concept of citizenship.<sup>11</sup> “The paradoxical collaboration of classes which arose with the Dreyfus Affair,” stated Sorel, “was only an imitation of that which took place in the Natanson academy.” Thus *La Revue Blanche*, which numbered the anarchists Fénéon, Félix Vallotton, Maximilien Luce, and Paul Signac among its contributors, was condemned by Sorel as “a salon of cosmopolitan anarchy, where esthetes rubbed shoulders with usurers and impressionist painters, or more to the point, those who had provoked bomb throwing.”<sup>12</sup> Sorel, like Berth, regarded the anarchists of the 1890’s as an undisciplined rabble, devoid of the intuitive cohesion, heroism or sense of collective purpose that served to define anarcho-syndicalists. By labeling these Neo-Impressionists and Symbolists promoters of the *propaganda of the deed* and damning such acts as instances of unruly “anarchy” rather than “anarchism,” Sorel condemned an older generation of self-proclaimed militants for betraying the spirit of anarchism itself.

Berth lent theoretical weight to this thesis in his book *The Misdeeds of Intellectuals*, a text outlining his synthesis of Sorelian syndicalism and royalism. In that book, for which Sorel wrote a laudatory preface, Berth claims that democracy, as an ideology, wants to deny qualitative differences and subsume “all life in the flat transparency of an antimetaphysical, antipoetic, and antivital rationalism.”<sup>13</sup> The virtue of both the Action française and the syndicalist movements, states Berth, is that they recognize such differences in the form of bourgeois and aristocratic values in the case of the royalists and proletarian consciousness among the syndicalists. In a chapter of the book titled “Tradition and Revolution” Berth singles out the intellectual as the chief

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<sup>9</sup> “A la *Revue Blanche* se préparaient de merveilleuses anticipations de la pensée future; cette officine appartenait aux Natanson, deux Juifs venue de Pologne pour régénérer notre pauvre pays, si malheureusement encore contaminé par la civilisation chrétienne du XVIIe siècle.” Sorel, “Aux temps Dreyfusiens,” 52.

<sup>10</sup> Fénéon was the journal’s editorial secretary from January 1895 to 1903. See Halperin, *Félix Fénéon*, 299–323.

<sup>11</sup> Sorel, “Aux temps Dreyfusiens,” 51–56; Berth, “Anarchisme individualiste,” 6–35; and Berth, *Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 37–43.

<sup>12</sup> “La paradoxale collaboration des classes que fit naître l’affaire Dreyfus, était seulement une imitation de ce qui se passait dans l’académie des Natanson. Je vais avoir, encore une fois, recours à Henry de Bruchard qui nous donne, en quelques lignes, une esquisse très accentuée de ce Parnasse: ‘Salon d’anarchie cosmopolite, dit-il, où les esthètes coudoyaient les usuriers et les peintres impressionistes.’” Sorel, “Aux temps Dreyfusiens,” 51–56.

<sup>13</sup> Berth, *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 11.

spokesperson for democracy, antithetical, he adds, to the “ancient values, heroic, religious, warlike, national,” that would constitute a regenerated France.<sup>14</sup> It is these intellectual advocates of pacifism and enlightenment rationalism who hold republican ideals; as “stockholders on the market of ideas” they “are like their accomplices the stockholders of the *Bourse*, completely devoid of all sentiment of honour and eternally dedicated to trickery, that weapon of the weak.” Berth claims that these intellectual and economic stockholders, divorced from the ethics of production, reject the “ideal of virile dignity” that would exist under a Sorelian “warrior state.”<sup>15</sup> It is “their essential feminine nature and impotence” which makes them incapable “of having or acquiring the force, loyalty, the duty, the feeling of honour of the soldier.”<sup>16</sup> Berth anti-Semitic diatribe reached a crescendo in a section that singled out Julien Benda as “the Jew of metaphysics,” “the Ghetto intellectual,” “the quintessence and the extreme end of modern intellectualism.”<sup>17</sup> Here we are told that Benda, the Cartesian adversary of Bergson, is as dead as his antivital ideas: he purportedly practised “a philosophy of transcendental immobility” that left him enclosed in a darkened study, “stiffened in contemplation of his unchanging concepts.” Most damning of all, Benda “wants to make us believe that in defending intellectualism he defends aristocratic conceptions” when in fact the “warrior” and “heroic” spirit of the true aristocrat is “anti-intellectual.” In truth, declares Berth, Julien Benda is a Jew whose class allegiances are a sham, and his intellectualism is the philosophy of the uprooted and rootless, fully compatible with the universalist pretensions of democratic rationalism. Benda’s rationalism, we are told “is antitraditional, antiphysical . . . it only wants to know ‘pure spirits,’ detached from all historical time and place.” For this reason Jewish intellectuals are divorced from the peasantry or proletariat, the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy, for “the people, like the aristocracy, are a historical reality, a carnal reality; it is not the Pure Idea that constitutes them, but blood, traditions, race, all physical and nonintellectual things.”<sup>18</sup> With Sorel and Berth, Bergsonian intuition and qualitative differences have at last become essentialised as a racial and corporeal essence, and intellectualism reified into the disembodied, racial Other, the Wandering Jew, foreign to the *esprit de corps* of the French folk.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Berth, *Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 18–19.

<sup>15</sup> Berth, *Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 28–29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. In effect Berth maps out, in Sorelian terms, all the anti-Semitic tropes of racial theory, for as Sander Gilman has demonstrated, fin-de-siècle scientific pathophysiology declared the Jew intrinsically unfit for military service, susceptible to feminine illnesses like hysteria, and thus not worthy of assimilation into the European body politic. Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 38–59.

<sup>17</sup> Berth, *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 37–43.

<sup>18</sup> Berth, *Méfaits des Intellectuels*, 37–43.

<sup>19</sup> This association of the Jew with the “disembodied” power of a pure intellect, devoid of creativity, is, to my knowledge, an understudied dimension of anti-Semitic discourse.

For a study of the fin-de-siècle claim that Jews lacked creative ability by virtue of their pathological condition, see Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*, 128–149.

# Sorel's Reactionary Anarchism

As I indicated at the outset, Sorel's theory continues to be attractive to the radical left by virtue of his intransigent call for an abrupt rupture with the political status quo, and his recourse to mobilizing myths as a means of galvanizing activist cadres as the potential 'spark' of revolution. In the absence of the large scale proletarian base which filled the ranks of such twentieth-century, anarchist institutions as the Confédération Générale du Travail (C.G.T.) or the Industrial Workers of the World, today's marginalized radicals are in a position not unlike those beleaguered groups described in *Reflections on Violence*, whose mobilizing myths served to sustain them through prolonged periods of persecution. Were Sorel to be writing today the mythic status of the "Battle of Seattle" among insurrectional groups such as the Black Bloc (the concept of a "bloc" is itself Sorelian) would fit seamlessly into this strategy for self-preservation in the midst of the capitalist juggernaut. However, as valuable as these mobilizing myths may be in instilling a spirit of resistance — and one has only to think of the continuing role of May Day in focusing our hearts and minds on the Hay Market "martyrs" — they cannot become an end in themselves. This is particularly true in the case of Sorel whose singular focus on moral regeneration as the desired outcome of activism driven by myths led to what Malcolm Vout and Lawrence Wilde identify as a "necessary vagueness about the effects of any action which holds out hope for moral renewal."<sup>1</sup> Such calls for moral resurgence could arise just as easily from the extreme right as the extreme left, and Sorel's willingness to draw on a motivating myth shared by both camps in the guise of anticapitalist anti-Semitism underscores the volatility of his ideological agenda.

In like fashion the fetishistic correlation of parliamentary democracy with Enlightenment rationality in Sorel's theory is matched by the organization of revolutionary resistance around an irrational belief system whose motivating myths carry within them the seeds of reaction. Again, such is the case with Sorel's myth of anti-capitalist anti-Semitism, wherein a call for anarchist resistance was premised on the vilification of an ethnic group. A comparable pitfall befell Frantz Fanon in his transformation of Sorel's myth of an absolute divide between classes into a mythic schism between races through which the revolutionary Black subject discovers his or her racialization. Having theorized this ontological self-assertion in *Black Skin, White Masks* as devoid of critical self-reflection or analysis, Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Vout and Lawrence Wilde, "Socialism and Myth: The Case of Sorel and Bergson," *Radical Philosophy* (Summer 1987), 2–7.

Sorel's myth of the general strike and class conflict into the colonial context as a violent confrontation between natives activated by the myth of Négritude and their colonial oppressors. Fanon described the natives' desire "to wreck the colonial world" as "a mental picture of action which is very clear, very easy to understand"; moreover such images are not formulated through "a rational confrontation of points of views" but instead constitute "an untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute."<sup>2</sup> As George Ciccariello-Maher points out in his cogent analysis of Fanon's debt to Sorel, such myth-making had unfortunate consequences, for by the time Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* Négritude "had largely become a reactionary tool in the hands of neo-colonial puppets in Africa."<sup>3</sup> Thus the myth of Négritude, like that of class, could be marshaled to serve progressive or reactionary ends, and an anti-colonial movement founded on the myth of racial absolutes could unwittingly generate the very racial prejudice that its progressive adherents sought to overcome.

Finally we need to take another look at Sorel's concept of heroic violence, which he defined in opposition to the punitive violence of the State. Those who have endorsed Sorel's concept of the general strike as the principle expression of proletarian violence have mostly interpreted Sorel's theory as a form non-violent resistance to the government's barbaric use of "force." Even Bart de Ligt, who acknowledges that Sorel's doctrine "is anything but a plea for nonviolence" nevertheless does not take up a discussion of that issue, preferring instead to celebrate Sorel's distinction between "Bourgeois violence" and Proletarian violence," which de Ligt recasts as a contrast between "bourgeois violence and proletarian strength," the better to ally Sorel's theory with "direct non-violent action."<sup>4</sup> What figures like Benjamin, de Ligt and Laclau and Mouffe hold in common is an unwillingness to probe the most troubling aspect of Sorel's theory of proletarian violence, namely his comparison of the sense of morality and justice motivating striking workers in their resistance to the State with that instilled in soldiers engaged in military battle.

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<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1962), trans. C. Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 40–41.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Ciccariello-Maher, "To Lose Oneself in the Absolute: Revolutionary Subjectivity in Sorel and Fanon," 111.

<sup>4</sup> Bart de Ligt, *The Conquest of Violence*, 113–14.

# Janus-Faced Violence

Sorel's overarching vision before 1914 was premised on military virtue, productivist ethics, and the maintenance of those values through active resistance to the plutocratic State. Sorel's concept of military virtue was modelled after the citizen-soldier of ancient Athens while his productivism combined an antique concept of the dignity of labour with a nineteenth-century definition of "industriousness" encompassing managerial, productive and inventive skills, especially in modern industry. Historian Richard Vernon has examined the historical genealogy of Sorel's theory, drawing attention to Sorel's contrast between military virtue and industriousness, and the degenerative impact of mercantilism and rationalism on the body politic.<sup>1</sup> Sorel followed such luminaries as Montesquieu, Hume, and de Tocqueville in noting "the contradiction between the classical ideal of the self-repression and self-forgetfulness of the citizen and a social order in which the predominant motive is profit seeking."<sup>2</sup> Whereas military values extolled heroism and self-sacrifice in the name of the community, commercialism promoted individual selfinterest at the expense of the collective good. Sorel's 1889 study of Athenian society, *The Trial of Socrates* examined the class-based dimension of this paradigm: the ancient Athenians, wrote Sorel, were "much superior to our envious, ignorant and greedy bourgeoisie . . . The citizens were not merchants, demanding guarantees for their transactions and protection for their industry, or seeking favours from government. They were soldiers whose very life was linked to the greatness of the city."<sup>3</sup> As Vernon demonstrates, Sorel identified contemporary syndicalists as the inheritors of this military ethic, declaring that "socialism returns to ancient thinking" and that "the warrior of the city" had a modern counterpart in "the worker of advanced industry."<sup>4</sup> Thus the ethical violence of class war had an historical precedent in the heroism of citizen-soldiers in ancient Greece: this accounts for Sorel's comparison, in *The Reflections on Violence*, of striking proletarians to the "Spartan heroes who defended Thermopylae."<sup>5</sup> Sorel's faith in this warrior esprit led him to praise the citizen-soldiers of the Revolutionary era in France as modernday Athenians: thus Sorel concluded

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<sup>1</sup> See the chapter titled "Citizenship in Industry: Georges Sorel" in Richard Vernon, *Citizenship and Order: Studies in French Political Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 146–68.

<sup>2</sup> Vernon, *Citizenship and Order*, 148.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Sorel, *Le Procès de Socrates* (Paris: Alcan, 1889), 172; cited in Vernon, *Citizenship and Order*, 149.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Sorel, *La Ruine du monde antique* 1901 (Paris: Rivière, 1933), 311; cited in Vernon, *Citizenship and Order*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Sorel, *Reflection on Violence*, 98–99.

that, with the early Republic's recreation of citizen armies, "a quite new notion of the Cité [French community] was born, with strong analogies to that of antiquity, and patriotism became a force of hitherto unsuspected importance."<sup>6</sup>

Yet another regenerative mechanism for the French proletariat was proposed by Sorel: war between nations. In his *Reflections on Violence* Sorel speculated that "two accidents" were capable of combating the unproductive decadence and pacifist lethargy resulting from the democratic betrayal of France's classical legacy:

a great foreign war, which might renew lost energies, and which in any case would doubtless bring into power men with a will to govern; or a great extension of proletarian violence, which would make the revolutionary reality evident to the middle class, and would disgust them with the humanitarian platitudes with which [the socialist politician Jean] Jaurès lulls them to sleep. It is in view of these two dangers that the latter displays all his resources as a popular orator. European peace must be maintained at all costs; some limit must be put to proletarian violence.<sup>7</sup>

For Sorel then, a war in the name of the appropriate values could reinvigorate the nation; examples included "the wars of Revolution and the Empire" which, by virtue of their success, were also a stimulus to "industrial production."<sup>8</sup> One had only to turn to the Classical era to find an historical precedent for this paradigm. In his *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel described ancient Greece as a society "dominated by the idea of war conceived heroically," asserting that classical institutions "had as their basis the organisation of armies of citizens," that "Greek art reached its apex in the citadels," and that philosophers before Socrates "conceived of no other possible form of education than that which fostered in youth the heroic tradition."<sup>9</sup> Thus proletarian producers could find their regenerative *raison d'être* not only in the general strike, but in the heroism of militant nationalism. This thinking accounts for Sorel's support of Italy's 1911 military campaign in Libya in the pages of *Indépendance*, which he praised for instilling "military virtues" among the Italian populous. According to Sorel, the Italian proletariat avidly "followed the adventures of its soldiers with passion," despite the "harangues" of the parliamentary socialists who opposed the war as an Imperialist enterprise.<sup>10</sup>

Such thinking also accounts for the appeal of Sorel's theory to European fascists in the wake of World War One, for figures like Mussolini and his French counterpart

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<sup>6</sup> Georges Sorel, *La Ruine du monde antique* 1901 (Paris: Rivière, 1933), 317–18; cited in Vernon, *Citizenship and Order*, 150.

<sup>7</sup> Sorel, *Reflection on Violence*, 82–83. Ironically when Sorel wrote this he appended a footnote to the effect that "the hypothesis of a great European war seems far fetched at the moment." When war did arrive in 1914 Sorel condemned it for causing the left to capitulate to Republican ideology. His association of the World War I with "demagogic plutocracy" thus differed fundamentally from that of Georges Valois and Sorelian fascists throughout Europe. See Stanley, *Sociology of Virtue*, 1981, 293–297.

<sup>8</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 188.

<sup>10</sup> Georges Sorel, "La rivolta ideale," *L'Indépendance* (1 April, 1912), 161–177; and Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism*, 70–71.

Georges Valois, interpreted that conflict as yet another instance of a Sorelian ‘regenerative war’, and described their movement as an alliance of “combatants and producers” that would harness the virtue instilled in war veterans as a result of the *esprit de corps* forged in battle. In post-war Europe these returning combatants would then rejoin the ranks of a restive proletariat eager to overthrow the plutocratic State through strike activity and forms of violence Mussolini deemed “generous and chivalric.” Thus the non-violent resistance exemplified by the general strike was one dimension of an ideological matrix that included armed aggression, for in Sorel’s mind both postures could potentially be animated by the same spirit of heroism, dignity and justice. This synthesis, like that of anti-capitalist anti-Semitism, indicates that Sorel’s theory encompassed revolutionary and reactionary elements. Thus in announcing their allegiance to Sorel, Europe’s fascists could rightly claim that their notion of violence was a direct outcome of — to paraphrase Laclau and Mouffe — the very structure of Sorel’s thought. Given such realities, anarchist activists and theorists would do well to ponder the example of Sorel not only as a potential model for progressive activism, but as an object lesson in how a doctrine of aestheticizing myth and ethical violence not subject to rational analysis (or critical reflection on the part of those who embrace such notions) can quickly devolve into a reactionary tool in the hands of political elites.



# Notes

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