

# Georges Sorel: a Jansenist Marxism<sup>1</sup>

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1 KOŁAKOWSKI, Leszek. **Main Currents of Marxism: its rise, growth and dissolution.** Vol. II. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 149-174. Transcribed by V. S. Conttren, August 2020.

## 1. The place of Sorel.

How far do Sorel's writings belong to the history of Marxism? He was not a member of any political movement that claimed spiritual descent from Marx, and, although he took part in all the great polemics of his day, he did so from the outside as it were, so that the guardians of orthodox Marxism were not much concerned to refute his views. He kept aloof from political and party quarrels, and wrote no treatises on historical materialism. He did not consider himself an orthodox Marxist, and criticized both the master and his disciples as he thought fit to do so. He remains vaguely associated with Italian Fascism, as Mussolini and other ideologists for a time acknowledged him as a prophet of the movement. From the viewpoint of Marxism he may be considered an accidental oddity: at the outset of his literary career he had nothing in common with it, and his name hardly figures in the later development of the doctrine.

At the time of his main writings, however, Sorel not only considered himself a Marxist but believed that he could extract the core of Marx's philosophy—the class war and the independence of the proletariat—and oppose Marx himself to the whole body of contemporary orthodoxy, whether reformist or revolutionary. His unfulfilled ambition was to be the Luther of the Marxist movement, which he saw as corrupted by the struggle for power and privilege, as Rome had appeared to the German reformer in the guise of the Whore of Babylon. He dreamt of a Marxism that would be morally and doctrinally pure; his own version, though it drew on a great variety of sources, was not a patchwork but an extremely coherent whole. He undoubtedly influenced the first ideologists of

Italian Communism, such as Antonio Gramsci, and also Angelo Tosca and Palmiro Togliatti.

However, Sorel differed from his Marxist contemporaries not merely by interpreting Marx in his own way, nor even by sometimes criticizing him, since this happened even to such fanatics of orthodoxy as Rosa Luxemburg. The main point of difference was that all the orthodox regarded Marxism as scientifically true in the same sense as, for instance, evolution or the quantum theory, whereas for Sorel it was true in a pragmatic sense, as the ideological expression of a movement to liberate and rejuvenate the human race. That it was true meant that it was the one irreplaceable instrument that history had put into the hands of the proletariat, though there was no guarantee that the proletariat would make successful use of it. Marxism was the truth of its own age in the same sense as early Christianity had been—the hope of a fresh dawn for mankind, not a “scientific” account of history, a means of accurate prognosis, or a reliable source of information about the universe. At the present stage of history it was the instrument best calculated to put into effect the supreme values of humanity; but these values, in their substance and origin, owed nothing to Marxism. Hence Sorel was free to change his mind about Marxism without changing his mind about values. He could be a Marxist or a nationalist and still remain faithful to the ideal in respect of which Marxism was only an instrument forged by history at a particular moment. From this point of view, even when most fervently devoted to Marxian philosophy he was not a Marxist in the same sense as Kautsky or Labriola—not because he construed the doctrine differently, but because he took a different view of its historical significance and was not afraid to interpret Marx in the light of quite other

authorities such as Proudhon or Tocqueville, Bergson or Nietzsche. He was one of the few who tried to adapt Marxism to the philosophical style of the neo-romantic era, i.e. to interpret it in a pragmatic and activist sense, with emphasis on psychological factors and respect for the independent role of tradition, in a spirit radically opposed to positivism and rationalism.

Sorel's thoughts on social problems are dominated by the idea of greatness, dignity, heroism, and authenticity, and he treats the revolution, the proletariat, and the class war as historical instances of these supreme values. Radicalism and intransigence are in his eyes valuable for their own sakes, irrespective of object. He seems to approve everything in history that proceeds from strong authentic impulses, disinterested fervour, lofty aspirations, and generous hopes. He respects the ardour of religious faith but despises religion when it appears in the form of scholasticism or politics or is tainted by calculation or a spirit of rationalism and appeasement. He is an enthusiast for the workers' movement as a revolt in the name of a great revivifying myth, but he scorns parliamentary manoeuvres and the feebleness of half-hearted reformism. He rejects the tradition of anticlericalism as a bridge between socialists and petty-bourgeoisie radicals, but also as a hangover of eighteenth-century rationalism with its optimistic faith in steady, inevitable progress. He opposes nationalism as a device for depriving the proletariat of its absolute separateness; but when estranged from the syndicalists, he turns towards nationalist radicalism with the same hope that made him a Marxist, namely that of recreating the world in its pristine image. In all struggles he is more interested in the heroism of the contendants than in who wins or who is in the right. The conquering spirit of the proletariat excites him more than the vision of

socialism. When he joins the proletarian movement it is not for the sake of improving the lot of the oppressed, but because the surge of historic events promises a rebirth of greatness. He stands for the complete spiritual separation of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie and all its works.

Different as Sorel's intellectual sources are, they form a coherent pattern in his work. His Jansenist upbringing no doubt gave him a dislike of any optimistic faith in the natural goodness of mankind, an easy triumph of good over evil, or the attainment of great ends at small cost. From the same source came his contempt for Jesuitical tactics of conciliation, his general intransigence, the all-or-nothing rejection of compromise, and the belief in a sharp distinction between the elect and the rest of the world. In opposition to the doctrine of automatic progress he was attached to the tradition of radical Christianity, i.e. the Christianity of the martyrs.

His technical education and work as an engineer instilled into him a cult of expertise and efficiency, a dislike of dilettantism and empty rhetoric, a conviction that it was production and not exchange that mattered, and an admiration for capitalism in its early, ruthless, expansionist forms, before it was contaminated by philanthropy and the spirit of compromise.

From Marx, he learnt to believe that the revolution that would restore society was to be carried out by the proletariat—a clearly differentiated class of direct producers, obliged to sell their labour-power and embodying the hope of a total revolution that would liberate mankind. The basic tenets of Sorel's Marxism are class war, contempt for utopianism, a literal belief in the abolition

of the state, and the expectation of a total revolution carried out by the proletariat alone, in isolation from the rest of society.

Giambattista Vico contributed the notion of *ricorso*, the cyclical return of mankind to its own forgotten sources. The proletarian revolution was to be a 'reversion' of this kind, a rediscovery of the primal values rooted in tribal morality.

Another influence was Proudhon, from whom Sorel learnt to regard socialism as primarily a moral question, that of breeding a new type of man (the producer ethic), and to consider the proletariat as a kind of race apart, called on to divide the world between itself and all the rest. The importance Sorel attaches to family and sexual morality in social life is due to Proudhon, as is the habit of characterizing socialism in terms of justice and dignity rather than welfare.

Bergson was the chief philosophical exponent of the style of thought that dominates the work of Sorel: the opposition between 'global' intuitive perception and analytical thought, which in Sorel takes the particular form of opposing "myth" to "Utopia." Bergson also provided Sorel with the conceptual means of contrasting scientific determinism, combined with a belief in the predictability of social processes, with the idea of unforeseeable spontaneity. In addition, Sorel derived from Bergson a conviction of the inexpressibility of the concrete, which enabled him to protect his idea of the 'myth' against rational argument.

The influence of Nietzsche is clearly felt in Sorel's cult of greatness, his hatred of mediocrity, and of party huckstering in political life.

The great exponents of liberal conservatism—Tocqueville, Taine, Renan—exercised a strong influence on Sorel in his early period, and to some extent in his Marxist phase as well. From them he learnt to approach politics soberly, to perceive the corruption of democratic institutions and the interests that underlay humanistic rhetoric. From these authors too he imbibed an understanding of early Christianity, the Revolution, and the *ancien régime*.

From these various sources of inspiration Sorel created an ideological whole which shattered traditional agglomerations of values and combined ideas in a different way from any of his predecessors. It was as a Marxist that he stood up for values traditionally associated with the Right: the dignity of marriage and of the family, tribal solidarity, honour and tradition, customary law and the sanctity of religious experience. As a writer he paid little attention to coherence and structure and was more of an apostle than a controversialist. His thoughts appeared to develop without a plan, gropingly as it were, but always in accordance with certain ruling tendencies and values. His works make laborious reading, not because they are obscure but because they lack literary unity. Sometimes he begins by stating a problem and then plunges into digressions, long quotations, aggressive polemics, and violent challenges, in the course of which he seems to forget the point at issue. As a writer he stood far above the orthodox Marxists, but he had insufficient command over his talent. His polemical ardour and lack of logical discipline make it especially hard to summarize his thought, but some recurrent themes can be clearly identified. Brzozowski, himself a writer of a similar kind, thought this spontaneity and lack of preconceived system a great merit in Sorel. The latter's style is reminiscent of

Bergson's 'creative evolution', developing in obedience to a governing tendency but without a predetermined goal.

The easiest way to present, or re-present, Sorel's thought in a systematic fashion is to list in parallel columns the ideas and values which he opposed or criticized and those which he advocated. This produces a result on the following lines:

Utopianism	Marxist historical realism
Epistemological rationalism	Bergsonian intuition and thinking in terms of 'wholes'
Sociological rationalism	Respect for tradition
Determinism	Spontaneity
Happiness	Dignity and greatness
Political socialism	Syndicalism
Dilettantism	Professionalism
Cult of the French Revolution	Cul of early Christianity
Reform	Revolution
Belief in progress	Voluntarism, individual responsibility
Inter-class alliances	Separateness of the proletariat
Politics and power	Production and the organization of production
Optimism	Pessimism
Intellectuals and politicians	The proletariat
Political parties	Working-class syndicates
Utopia	Myth
Democracy	Freedom



Consumer morality	Producer morality
Scholastic religion	The religion of mystics and martyrs
Decadence	<i>Ricorso</i> , a return to the sources
Social sciences	The activist myth
The State	An association of producers

This set of antitheses may seem strange to anyone acquainted with the stereotypes and conceptual associations of classical Marxism, but Sorel's positive values, taken together, define his polemical attitude with great clarity. He was opposed to contemporary socialist politicians, the leaders of the International, who in his eyes were a mere band of self-seekers out to enjoy the fleshpots of office once they had wrested them from the bourgeoisie. Jaurès, in particular, he pilloried in almost all his writings as a symbol of petty-bourgeois socialism seeking to win over the bourgeoisie in order to appease the proletariat, to destroy the idea of the class struggle, and to introduce a new system of privilege on the basis of a spurious unity.

## 2. Biographical outline.

Georges Sorel was born of bourgeois parents at Cherbourg in 1847. He studied at the Ecole polytechnique and became an engineer in the *Département des ponts et chaussées*, where he worked until 1892. His first writings were published shortly before he retired: *Le Procès de Socrate* (1889), *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible* (1889), *La Ruine du monde antique* (1888). In about 1893 he became interested in Marx and afterwards in an anti-political syndicalist

movement based in part on Proudhonist and anarchist traditions, its chief organizer being Fernand Pelloutier. In 1898 Sorel published *L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats*, later reissued as part of *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (third edition 1919): this was the first attempt at a theoretical analysis of the experience of the syndicalist movement developing independently of the socialist parties and even in opposition to them. In the 1890s Sorel wrote for *L'Ère nouvelle* and *Devenir social*, where in 1895-6 he published studies of Durkheim and Vico. Active in the defence of Dreyfus, he was disillusioned to find that the socialist *Dreyfusards* exploited the *Affaire* for purely party ends. Bernstein's work to some extent led him to criticize orthodox Marxism, but his own objections soon developed along quite different lines. (Although basically opposed to reformism he continued to admire and respect Bernstein, and agreed wholeheartedly with his contention that the policy of the German socialists had nothing to do with their revolutionary programme.) As time went on he became increasingly severe in his criticism of the socialist party, parliamentary democracy, and what he called "political socialism" as opposed to syndicalism. His chief Marxist writings are: *Réflexions sur la violence* (Reflections on Violence, 1908 and later, enlarged editions), *Les Illusion du progrès* (1908), *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (1908: essays dating from 1898 onwards), and *La Décomposition du marxisme* (1908). The first two of these originally appeared in serial form in *Le Mouvement socialiste*, edited by Hubert Lagardelle. The fourth edition of *Réflexions sur la violence* (1919) contains an appendix with an enthusiastic defence of Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution. (Lenin himself took no interest in Sorel, whom he mentions only once and in a disparaging tone.)

In the course of time Sorel lost faith in French syndicalism, but he hoped for a while that a similar movement might win the day in Italy. He had close contacts with that country, having contributed to Italian socialist periodicals from 1898 onwards: he wrote articles on Vico and Lombroso, and his own books, translated into Italian, were praised by Croce and Pareto and attacked by Labriola. In 1910, however, deciding that syndicalism was irretrievably corrupted by reformist trends, he switched to support of radical nationalist movements in France and Italy and for a time co-operated with the Action Française; he also influenced the national-syndicalist groups in Italy which helped to provide the basis of Fascism. He welcomed the first beginnings of the latter movement in 1912 and reiterated his sympathy in 1919, seeing in Fascism the promise of a social rebirth inspired by nationalist mythology, For the same reason he hailed the Bolshevik revolution as a retreat from Westernism to the true spirit of Muscovy. The Fascists, after they came to power, paid lip-service to Sorel as their spiritual patron, but the real trend of their movement, was to assert the brutal authority of dictatorial government, which Sorel abominated. On the other hand the first Italian Communist periodical, *Ordine Nuovo*, edited by Gramsci at Turin from 1919 onwards, regarded Sorel as an ideologist of the proletariat.

Sorel died in 1922 at Boulogne-sur-Seine, where he had lived for some years. Since the end of the 1920s his ideas have had no effective influence on any branch of the socialist movement or on the Communist International.

### **3. Rationalism versus history. Utopia and myth. Criticism of the Enlightenment.**

The “rationalism” to which Sorel was opposed was not a particular philosophical statement but an intellectual attitude which drew its strength from Cartesianism, flourished in the eighteenth-century salons, and, in his opinion, had a pernicious effect on the contemporary interpretation of Marxism. Rationalism) thus understood, consists of creating simplified, abstract patterns of thought and making them do duty for the real, complex world. Examples of such patterns are theories of human nature which regard man as an assemblage of permanent, general characteristics and types of behaviour, regardless of the historical circumstances which in practice affect human actions. By reducing society to the speculative universal of “man,” rationalists are able to conjecture at will as to the nature of the perfect community and to construct utopian models of the future, free from conflict, contingency, and rival aspirations. Engels was not exempt from this way of thinking, for he too “reduces the world to a single human being.” Rationalists also believe that all actions are governed by rational motives, and they thus blind themselves to the real-life complexity of psychological differences, the importance of tradition and custom, and the role played in social development by biological (particularly sexual) and many other factors. They regard the French Revolution, for instance, as the triumph of an idea over historical reality, oblivious of the many actual forces, especially those rooted in the plebeian levels of society, which combined to overthrow the old regime. Rationalism is a simplified, schematic mode of thought based on a legalistic form of reasoning which reduces human beings to the status of juridical units. The history of communist Utopias is full of rationalist

preconceptions, and that is why they have never seriously competed with existing forms of government. As Pascal pointed out, rationalism is not, as the Cartesians would have us believe, a synonym of scientific thinking. Cartesianism was successful and popular because it turned science into a drawing-room topic. Like the Scholastics, Descartes set up between man and reality ingeniously devised intellectual machines which prevented man from using his mind to any purpose. He provided the uninstructed laity with a simple formula for discoursing on scientific subjects in the belief that the 'natural light' enables everyone, however amateur, to pass judgement on everything. The Enlightenment writers adopted the same style: for Condorcet as for Fontenelle the object was not to instruct men how to be farmers or manufacturers, but merely salon philosophers. The dominant ideology of the eighteenth century was that of men in the service of the monarchy, with the philosopher playing the role of court jester: "*causeurs*, satirists, panegyrists, clowns in the pay of a degenerate aristocracy"—to quote Sorel's summing-up. To justify the moral depravity of the *salons* Diderot taught that the only instincts in nature were those of self-preservation and generation, and in Sorel's day Darwinism was interpreted in the same sense. The *Encyclopédie* contributed nothing to the development of science, but was a mere farrago of dilettantism for the purposes of polite conversation. The communist fantasies of Enlightenment authors were no threat to anyone. It was dangerous to criticize inhuman conditions in the mines, but the monarchy and its hangers-on had no objection to abstract praise of communism, republican virtues, and the natural law, or to those who disparaged tradition in the name of some paradisaal Utopia.

Utopian literature from Plato onwards was, Sorel argued, a typical and sterile product of rationalist delusion. "Since the Renaissance, Utopias have become a literary genre which, by simplifying economic, political and psychological questions to the extreme, has had a deplorable effect on the intellectual formation of revolutionaries" (*Matériaux...*, third ed., p. 26). Utopias are sterile because they postulate an abstract human individual uninfluenced by history, religion, inherited custom, or any national, biological, or psychological traits, and they create an imaginary state made up of such beings; they are also harmful, since their authors appeal to the prudence, enlightenment, or philanthropy of the privileged classes and weaken the proletariat's understanding of the class struggle. Marxism is closer to the Manchester school of bourgeois economics than to the utopian writers, for it is a realistic look at society torn by the class struggle, which can neither be avoided nor mitigated. Marx's occasional lapses into utopian naivety, as in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, are contrary to the true spirit of Marxism, which does not appeal to a universal sense of justice or attempt to compress society into a logical schema, but takes account of the forces that have actually affected history in all their complexity. Thanks to Marxism, socialism has parted company with utopian ideas. It no longer seeks to be a "scientific" blueprint for a future society, or to compete with the bourgeoisie in theorizing on the organization of production: its purpose is to provide the ideology of a radical class war.

Instead of constructing abstract plans for a perfect society, our task is to discover how social institutions have come into being spontaneously in the course of history, and to interpret them in the light of all the psychological and economic circumstances. This was done by Savigny when, in opposition to the

rationalist doctrine of a social contract, he expounded the notion of law arising in the form of local custom, gradually accumulating and adapting itself to new conditions in the course of history. The utopians were ready with draft constitutions for the whole of mankind because they took little heed of actual history; Marxism offered an analysis of history as it really was, not as it appeared in a rationalist schema.

In *Reflections on Violence* Sorel devotes special attention to those aspects of social life that offer most resistance to rationalization and form, as it were, a core of mystery, yet have more effect on social development than all the rest. In the field of morality the clear, rational element comprises relationships of reciprocity analogous to commercial exchanges, while sexual life, by contrast, remains opaque and difficult to reduce to simple formulas. In legislation the most easily rationalized measures are those relating to debts and contracts; the most refractory are those concerning the family, which affects the whole of social life. In economics, trade is a lucid area but production, which is the final determinant, is obscurely embedded in local and historical traditions. The rationalists come to grief whenever they try to reduce to simple legal formulas aspects of life which belong to the "dark areas" of experience and whose qualitative differences are the result of historical contingency. True history is more like a work of art than a pellucid logical construction.

The contrast between the rationalistic and the historical mentality is very similar to that between optimism and pessimism, in the special sense in which Sorel uses these terms. Among the optimists he includes Socrates, the Jesuits, the *philosophes*, the ideologists of the French Revolution, the utopians, believers in progress, socialist politicians, and Jaurès; among pessimists the early

Christians, Protestants, Jansenists, and Marxists. Optimists believe that the evil in the world is due to inadequate legislation, a lack of enlightenment and of human feeling. They are convinced that legal reform will soon bring about the earthly paradise, but in practice their delusions and ignorance of social reality lead them to adopt policies of terror like those of the Revolution. Pessimists, on the other hand, do not believe in any all-embracing theory or infallible method of introducing order into the universe: they are conscious that human projects operate within narrow limits set by the weight of tradition, human weakness, and the imperfection of our knowledge. Aware of the interrelation of all aspects of life, they regard social conditions as forming an indivisible whole that cannot be reformed piecemeal, but must either be left alone or destroyed in a catastrophic explosion. In Ancient Greece pessimism was the philosophy of warlike mountain tribes—poor, proud, uncompromising, and wedded to tradition—while optimism was that of prosperous city traders. The early Christians were pessimists; believing that no human effort could reform the world, they withdrew into themselves and impassively awaited the Second Coming. Protestantism began as an attempt to revive Christian pessimism, but later it fell under the spell of Renaissance humanism and adopted the latter's values. The pessimism of true Marxism lies in the fact that it does not believe in any automatic law of progress, in the possibility of gradual reform, or in the attainability of general happiness by a simple process of imposing on society some arbitrary construction of the mind. Marxism is an apocalyptic challenge to the proletarian consciousness, not in the name of some utopian programme but in that of an apocalyptic "myth."



A myth, in Sorel's sense, is not a kind of Utopia but the very opposite: not the description of a perfect future society, but the call to a decisive battle. Its value is not cognitive in the ordinary sense; it is not a scientific prediction, but a force inspiring and organizing the militant consciousness of a self-contained group. The myth of the proletariat is the general strike. Only by means of a myth can a fighting group maintain its solidarity, heroism, and the spirit of self-sacrifice. It is a state of mind that expects and prepares for the violent destruction of the existing order at a single blow, but has no ready-made paradise to set up against it. Unlike utopias, a myth is primarily negative, regarding the present world as a coherent whole that can only be destroyed root and branch: it represents a spirit of total opposition and cannot be criticized as though it were a plan of reform or a blueprint for the future. It must be wholly accepted or wholly rejected, and its devotees are impervious to any doubt that may be cast on its effectiveness. Utopians and social scientists imagine that they can foresee and plan the future, but the myth is an act of creation, not of prediction. The myth of a general strike embodies the whole idea of socialism and the self-consciousness of the proletariat, which radically severs its connection with the present society and seeks no help or allies of any kind.

These results could not be produced in any very certain manner by the use of ordinary language; use must be made of a body of images which, by intuition alone, and before any considered analyses are made, is capable of evoking as an undivided whole the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society. The syndicalists solve this problem perfectly, by concentrating the whole of socialism in the drama of the general strike; there is thus no longer any place for the reconciliation of contraries in professorial gibberish [*La conciliation des contraires*

*dans le galimatias par les savants officiels]. (Reflections on Violence, Ch. IV).*

The myth is not a matter of thinking about the future or planning it: it lives in the present, which it also helps to form. "The myth must be judged as a means of acting on the present; any attempt to discuss how far it can be materially applied to the course of history is devoid of sense. It is the myth in its entirety which is alone important: its parts are only of interest in so far as they bring out the main idea." (Ibid.).

As will be seen, while Sorel criticizes the rationalism of Descartes or the Enlightenment he does not expressly oppose to it an irrationalist point of view: he regards rationalist delusions as simply a mark of historical dilettantism, the mentality which prefers elegant speculation to complex reality. But when he contrasts social planning with the mythopoetic act he is no longer opposing historical reason to *a priori* abstractions, but upholding the claims of sentiment against analytical reasoning in general. The myth is an indivisible, inexpressible whole that can only be grasped in a single act of intuitive perception as described by Bergson. Acceptance of the myth is not an intellectual act, but an expression of readiness for destructive action. The myth is proof against argument, discussion, or compromise. It is anti-intellectual in a more radical sense than we find in Bergson, who did not condemn analytical reason as a source of decadence but merely defined the limits of its usefulness as an instrument for technical manipulation in describing physical or social reality. In Bergson's view rational and analytical thought on social problems was far from valueless, though it could not take account of historical breaches of continuity due to spontaneous creativity. For Sorel, however, belief in the myth was to be a

complete substitute for sociological knowledge, and all practical acts must be subordinate to the expectation of an undefined, indescribable apocalypse. By thus setting up a mythology immune to rational criticism Sorel gave advance endorsement to political movements founded on "instinct:" from this point of view the Fascists were right to claim him for their own, whereas his connection with Marxism must be regarded as accidental.

#### **4. "*Ricorsi*." The separation of classes and the discontinuity of culture.**

Although Sorel's myth is a negation of the present in the name of a future catastrophe, it also has some roots in the past, though not in the manner of religious myths. It purports to be a revival of what formerly was, a rejuvenation of the world by stripping it of the accumulated layers of civilization. This is what Vico called a *ricorso*, when a people reverts to its primitive state and all its works are creative, instinctive, and poetic, as in early Christianity or the decline of the Middle Ages. Revolutionary syndicalism is to bring about a universal rebirth of this kind, based on the proletariat as a self-contained enclave within an alien society.

Sorel laid especial emphasis on the separateness of the proletariat, but in a different sense from that of orthodox Marxism. When the leaders of the Second International spoke of the independence of the proletariat they had in mind the political distinctness, the independence of the workers' parties, the movement developing according to its own interests and pursuing its own goals. Neither Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, nor even Lenin and Trotsky ruled out tactical alliances with non-proletarian parties in particular circumstances, nor did they advocate a

break with existing civilization: on the contrary, it was taken for granted that this included human values that socialism was capable of assimilating and to which it was indeed the sole rightful heir. To Sorel, on the other hand, the point at issue was not the political separateness of the workers' party, since he was opposed to parties as such and regarded them as a badge of bourgeois society. The party expressed, naturally and inevitably, the subjection of the proletariat to professional politicians. Not only could it not assist in liberating the proletariat but it was bound to frustrate its liberation, at best replacing the former tyranny by that of party officials, parliamentary orators, and journalists' clubs. The proletariat's hope lay not in parties, or in trade unions striving to improve conditions for the time being, but in revolutionary syndicates—expressly non-political, indifferent to parliamentary tactics, refusing to play the bourgeois game, devoting all their efforts to forming the consciousness and solidarity of the working class against the day when society would be totally transformed.

The syndicalist movement (or anarcho-syndicalist, as it is usually called) developed in France in the 1890s, in Italy and Spain a little later; in Germany it did not prevail to any extent. In keeping with the Proudhonist tradition it rejected any kind of political activity or participation in bourgeois institutions, and subordinated the economic struggle of the proletariat to the coming revolution, which would not replace existing political institutions by new ones of the same kind, but by loosely federated producers' associations governed exclusively by workers. Marx stigmatized this as a petty-bourgeois Utopia, arguing that workers' self-government could not in itself put an end to competition and anarchy in production, and that if Proudhon's ideal were realized it would bring back all the horrors of capitalist accumulation. To Sorel,

however, syndicalism offered the only hope of a genuine victory of the proletariat. He did not join the movement, believing that middle-class intellectuals could only do harm as members of workers' organizations, but he provided it with an ideology from outside.

The business of the syndicalist movement, then, was to imbue the workers with a sense of alienation from bourgeois society, to break with bourgeois morality and modes of thought, to have nothing to do with party and parliamentary intrigue, and to defend proletarian purity against ideologists and rhetoricians. The proletariat would never free itself if it tried to ape the bourgeoisie: its first rule must be to “preserve its exclusively working-class character by keeping out intellectuals, whose leadership would bring about the re-establishment of hierarchies and create divisions among the workers” (*Matériaux*, p. 132). It is not only a question of organizational purity, however, but still more of spiritual purity. “My friends and I are never tired of urging the workers to avoid being drawn into the rut of bourgeois science and philosophy. There will be a great change in the world when the proletariat discovers, as did the bourgeoisie after the Revolution, that it is capable of thinking in a manner appropriate to its own mode of life” (*Illusions*, p. 135). The new proletarian culture will be founded on labour, and “will afford no cause to regret the disappearance of bourgeois culture. The war that the proletariat is called on to wage against its masters is, we know, calculated to arouse in it a sense of sublimity that today's bourgeoisie completely lacks... We must make every effort to ensure that the rising class is not poisoned by bourgeois ideas, and for that reason we cannot do enough to free the people from the shackles of eighteenth-century literature” (*ibid.*, pp. 285-6). The new philosophy is “one of arms and not

of heads" (*Décomposition du marxisme*, p. 60), its purpose being to convince the working class that its whole future lies in the class struggle. It is a philosophy that comes into being spontaneously: the revolutionary syndicalist movement is created by men who know little of Marxism, but it expresses the truest need of the class of producers. Without it the proletariat would be exposed to the same fate as the ancient Germans who, after conquering Rome, felt ashamed of their barbarism and succumbed to the decadent culture of the rhetoricians, or the men of the Reformation who let themselves be corrupted by the values of humanism. The proletariat, engaged in the class war, must firmly understand that all other classes without exception are opposed to its liberation. The society of the future will inherit capitalist technology, but there will be no place in it for the spiritual culture of capitalism. Any ideological or political battle, however justified in other ways, will do the workers more harm than good if it involves their co-operating with bourgeois radicals—for instance, in combating the Church and clericalism, not to speak of defending patriotic causes—since it will weaken the sense of class separateness and foster the dangerous illusion that the proletariat can effectively join forces with liberals to bring about social change. The revolution will be "an absolute separation between two historical eras" (*Reflections*, Ch. IV), and the proletariat, which is to carry it out, must have no moral scruples *vis-à-vis* other classes. "People who have devoted their lives to a cause which they identify with the regeneration of the world could not hesitate to make use of any weapon which might serve to develop to a greater degree the spirit of the class war" (*ibid.*, Ch. VI.).

## **5. Moral revolution and historical necessity.**

This does not mean, however, that the proletariat is, or can be, indifferent to morality. On the contrary, the basic purpose of the revolution and of the preparatory period is to effect a moral transformation of the working class that will restore its dignity, pride, independence, and sense of mission and exclusivity. Although his best-known work is largely an apologia for violence, Sorel regards violence as being morally right only in so far as it plays a part in the moral education of its users. It is a military and not a police type of violence that he has in mind, devoid of cruelty and certainly not motivated by envy of the wealthier classes, which would be immoral and degrading to the proletariat. Far from seeking to replace the present form of government by one equally authoritarian, the object of proletarian violence is to do away with government altogether. Morally commendable violence is evinced, he argues, in spontaneous acts of popular justice by Norwegian mountain-dwellers, in lynch-law or the Corsican vendetta. It is the advocates of political revolution, such as the socialists who wish to supplant the privileged minority of today, who are liable, as the Revolution showed, to adopt inquisitorial methods of cruelty and terror as a cure for political or economic difficulties. In this absurd and hopeless course the Jacobins were encouraged by Rousseau's doctrine of the social contract, since they regarded themselves as the embodiment of the "general will" and therefore entitled to do whatever they chose. Being morally unprepared to rule, the best thing they could think of was to imitate the Ancien Régime. The same kind of despotism would result if power were placed in the hands of Jaurès and others like him, who use humanistic rhetoric to imbue the proletariat with a

bourgeois desire to set' its party in power, instead of preparing it to smash the machinery of public authority.

For these reasons syndicalism is against democracy, which encourages the proletariat to take part in bourgeois institutions, especially parliament, and is a source of demoralization, corruption, and the undermining of class solidarity.

The general strike, which is the proper aim of the proletarian struggle, is thus to be distinguished from political revolution. In this conception of Sorel's the conventional opposition between an economic and a political strike does not apply. The general strike is not an economic one in the sense of an attempt to improve the situation of the working class in capitalist conditions, but it is also the contrary of a political revolution. The purpose of the latter is to attain power, and it is subject to all the laws of a fight for power, including tactical alliances, but it does not premise the division of society into only two camps. Besides the syndicates it presupposes other organizations, committees, or parties with programmes and ready-made forms for the future: it must be planned, and can therefore be criticized in detail. Moreover, a political revolution is not based on the Marxian doctrine of class division but on an anti-Marxist opposition between rich and poor: it appeals to base instincts of envy and vindictiveness, instead of the sublime heroism of popular champions. A general strike means the destruction of the existing order without any idea of setting up a new authority: its purpose is to restore control of production of free men who have no need of masters. It is a single, indivisible action, not to be broken down in to stages or conceived as a strategic plan. The definition of socialism in terms of a general strike "means that politicians' revolutions have had their day; the proletariat refuses to have new hierarchies set up over it. Our formula has nothing to say



concerning the rights of man, absolute justice, political constitutions and parliaments: it rejects not only bourgeois capitalistic government, but any hierarchy that at all resembles that of the bourgeoisie" (*Materiaux*, pp. 59-60). Syndicalism cares nothing for doctrines or "scientific" preparation: "it proceeds as circumstances dictate, regardless of dogma, of fearing to commit its forces in ways that prudent men deplore. A sight calculated to discourage those noble minds who believe in the supremacy of science in modern times, who expect the revolution to be brought about by a mighty effort of thought, who imagine that the world has been ruled by pure reason since it was freed from clerical obscurantism" But "all experience has shown that revolution does not possess the secret of the future: it acts in the same way as capitalism, rushing to occupy every outlet that presents itself" (ibid., p. 64).

Revolutionary syndicalism is thus equally opposed to utopianism and to the Blanquist doctrine that a group of conspirators claiming a mandate from the proletariat may take advantage of circumstances to seize power and then transform society by means of force and repression. Blanquism or Jacobinism stands for a revolution of the poor against the rich, not a Marxian revolution carried out by producers alone. The latter is by no means aimed at a party dictatorship: Bernstein is right when he says that the assumption of power by the social democrats would not make the people sovereign, but merely dependent on professional politicians and newspaper owners, Until such time as the workers have a strong economic organization and attain a high standard of moral independence, the dictatorship of the proletariat can only mean the dictatorship of party orators and men of letters.

Again, the syndicalist revolution cannot be simply the result of the economic decadence of capitalism. Revolutions that take place when the old regime is in a state of impotence and collapse do not lead to improvement, but petrify the state of decay. The syndicalist revolution requires capitalism to be expansive—to suffocate by its own energy, not to die of inanition. It is not, therefore, in the workers' interest to weaken capitalism by forcing legislative concessions and reforms: it is best for them that capitalists should be overcome by a ruthless, predatory spirit of expansion, like the American conquistadors of capitalism. This is the way to foster the sense of absolute class division, the solidarity of the oppressed, inflexible heroism, the grandeur and dignity of a historical mission—everything that socialist politicians sacrifice when they cheat the exploiters into making petty concessions and in so doing demoralize the working class.

Nor should we be deluded by “so-called scientific socialism” into thinking that victory is assured by historical necessity. As Bergson showed, history proceeds by unforeseeable acts of creation. The illusions of determinism are due to the exaggerated hopes aroused by the progress of natural science in the nineteenth century: the utopians naively imagined that the future course of society could be plotted like the movements of heavenly bodies. But, as Bergson's theory of personality and evolution makes clear, the future is constantly taking a fresh start as the result of freely creative action. The revolutionary movement is directed towards the future, but it foresees it only in terms of its own spontaneous action, guided by a single, indivisible, unanalysable idea—the sublime myth of a total transformation of the world in a final, apocalyptic battle. Such was the inspiration of early Christianity, which

refused to compromise with the world or to regard itself as part of society, withdrawing instead into the myth of the Parousia. But the Church's later history shows how, defying the predictions of the wise, it periodically renewed itself in bursts of vigorous expansion, as initiated by the great reformers and founders of new monastic orders. The syndicalist movement is likewise a spontaneous process of renewal which may regenerate the working class, corrupted by politicians and legislation, and in due time bring salvation to all mankind.

The purpose of the new revolution is not to bring prosperity and abundance, or to make life easy. Sorel makes fun of Destrée and Vandervelde, who imagine the future socialist state as a Land of Cockaigne or a place where the inhabitants may do as they please, as in the Abbaye de Thélème. The mainspring of the revolutionary movement is not poverty but class antagonism, and the workers' cause is not that of the poor who want to take away the property of the rich, but that of direct producers who wish to be the organizers of production. The principal values of socialism are those of morality and not of well-being, and it may be noticed that the poorest members or the proletariat are the least, not the most, revolutionary-minded. A just society must, as Proudhon put it, acknowledge the "law of poverty;" a frugal life is an honest and happy one. Proudhon saw the future society as a loose federation of agricultural and industrial associations, with public life based on communal and provincial units, freedom of the Press and of assembly, and no standing armies. Sorel despised all planning for the future and vouchsafed no details of the "perfect society," but as an exponent of Proudhon he no doubt imagined it on similar lines. In *L' Avenir socialiste des syndicats* he says that society will be "organized according to the plan of production," and that the object of socialism is to "apply

the workshop system to public life" (*Materiaux*, p. 70), so that all social issues will present themselves in terms of production units.

From the moral and organizational points of view Sorel's ideal seems to have been one of isolated mountain clans or Swiss communes practising direct democracy, more or less self-sufficient in production, and not involved in commercial exchanges on such a scale as to affect their customs and traditions. The morality of the proletariat was a morality of producers as opposed to merchants; modern democracy was still modelled on the stock exchange, whereas the democracy of the future would be analogous to co-operative manufacture.

These comparisons are not devoid of foundation. The history of democratic ideas and institutions is certainly related to the history of trade, and the whole Mediterranean culture arose and developed in terms of ports and commercial towns. Trading encourages habits of compromise: negotiation and bargaining as well as deceit and hypocrisy, rhetoric and demagoguery, prudence and competition, love of wealth and comfort, rationalism and disregard for tradition, shrewd calculation and prediction, and the ideal of success. The subordination of production to exchange-value, which according to Marx is the essence of capitalism, is a natural culmination of these trends. The society in which "everything is for sale," and in which family, tribal, and local links, irreducible to exchange relationships, count for nothing, was attacked by all the Romantics including Marx in his young days. Sorel, like Nietzsche, was a sworn enemy of this type of society and to that extent an heir of the Romantics, but the upshot of his criticism was very different from Marx's. He was attracted by the picture of untamed warrior clans fighting for survival rather than wealth or comfort,

valiant but not cruel, proud in spite of their poverty, devoted to their tribal customs and their freedom, ready to fight to the death against foreign rule. The main purpose of socialism, in Sorel's mind, was to revive this type of morality as opposed to that of commercial society. "Socialism is a moral issue in that it provides a new way of judging all human acts, or, in Nietzsche's famous phrase, a revaluation of all values" (*Matériaux*, p. 170, quoting from his own preface to the French translation of a work by Saverio Merlino). The new morality takes shape in the working class under capitalist conditions, and is in fact a prior condition of revolution and of economic change: here Sorel agrees with Vandervelde, who says that a victory of the workers without a radical moral transformation would plunge the world into a state of suffering, cruelty, and injustice as bad as the present, if not worse. The chief points at which the new morality comes into play are the family, war, and production, and in all these spheres it means an increase of dignity, solidarity, heroism, generosity, and personal responsibility. Sorel attaches especial importance to sexual restraint and family virtues, the weakening of which he regards as a natural reinforcement of bourgeois society. "The world will become a juster place only in so far as it becomes more chaste—I believe there is nothing more certain than this" (*ibid.*, p. 199). The ideal to which he looks up is that of the Homeric heroes as seen by Nietzsche.

## **6. Marxism, anarchism, Fascism.**

As we have already observed, the interrelation of values and ideas in Sorel's work is quite different from that of the orthodox Marxists or any critic of Marxism. In this respect he stands unique. His attacks on reformism are

sometimes very like those of the orthodox social-democratic Left, but his criticism of Marxist orthodoxy has much in common with that of the anarchists. He attacks anarchism from a Marxist standpoint, yet on some points he criticizes Marx from the angle of Bakunin or Proudhon. The usual classifications of socialist thought at this period do not apply to him.

Like Marx, Sorel regarded socialism not merely as a better form of social organization but as a complete transformation of every aspect of life, morality, thought, and philosophy: not a mere set of reforms, but a reinterpretation of human existence. The socialists of his time did not, in his opinion, take a serious interest in human nature and the final aim of life. They adopted the shallow metaphysics of the eighteenth-century free-thinkers and failed to realize the importance of evil in Marx's historiosophy; their rationalistic optimism prevented them from matching the Church in understanding men, but it was necessary for socialism to offer all the values that the Church did if it was to prevail. Sorel, following Gustave Le Bon, did not hesitate to ascribe to socialism a religious and charismatic character: in this he differs from Marx's views, at all events in *Capital*.

Marxism, to Sorel, was above all the poetry of the Great Apocalypse which he identified with social revolution. He combated reformism not because it was ineffectual—on the contrary, he knew it to be effective—but because it was prosaic and unheroic. He believed in the class basis of socialism and the unique role of the producers as agents of the revolution. The proletariat, as a militant sect, must guard above all things its independence of existing society. Sorel dreamt of a free society, i.e. an association of producers with no bosses over them, its basic values deriving from the fact that it was devoted to material

production; Marx, on the other hand, thought the great achievement of socialism would be the conquest of leisure, enabling people to devote themselves to creative work as the labour hours necessary for material production were progressively shortened. Marx put his faith in technology, which he thought would liberate mankind from the cares of material existence; Sorel, on the contrary, regarded productive activity as the source of all human dignity, and the desire to be free from such cares was, to him, no better than bourgeois hedonism. Marx was a rationalist inasmuch as he believed in scientific socialism, i.e. that a rational analysis of the capitalist economy would show that it was bound to be replaced by a collective system; he also believed in the continuity of civilization. Sorel regarded the idea of the historical necessity of socialism as a survival of the Hegelian *Weltgeist*; he accepted Bergson's theory of spontaneity and advocated a complete break in cultural continuity, yet at the same time he wished to preserve the traditions of the family and tribal solidarity. His arbitrary treatment of Marxist doctrine may be seen in the definition, which he ascribes to Marx, of a class as "a collectivity of families united by traditions, interests and political views, and possessing a degree of solidarity such that they may be regarded as forming a single personality, a being endowed with reason and acting accordingly" (*Matériaux*, p. 184).

Sorel did not profess to be an anarchist: the anarchists of his day were not well-defined from a class point of view, but tended to enlist support among the lumpenproletariat and the *déclassé* intelligentsia. A movement led by lawyers, journalists, and students clearly had nothing to do with revolutionary syndicalism as Sorel understood it, and he was also repelled by the anarchist groups of Bakuninist persuasion who combined conspiratorial methods with

authoritarian principles. At the same time, he shared with the anarchists their basic premiss of the need to do away with all state institutions and their refusal to take part in parliamentary life or to support “political socialism.” From Bakunin's time onward it was a constant feature of anarchist propaganda, emphasized, for example, by Machaiski, that “political” or “party” socialism was only the prelude to a new tyranny, and that the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as a form of state organization meant subjecting the workers to the despotism of professional politicians. Sorel also agreed with those anarchists who insisted on a 'moral revolution' as an integral part of the social revolution. “Social democracy is cruelly punished today for having fought so hard against the anarchists, who tried to bring about a revolution of minds and hearts” (*Matériaux*, p. 380, commenting on a letter from Proudhon to Michelet). The nationalization of means of production was valueless in itself as far as liberating the workers was concerned, for it merely increased the power of politicians over producers.

It may appear strange that a writer who so fiercely attacked the idea of patriotism, state institutions, and party organization should have been recognized as an ideologist of the budding Fascist movement and should have supplied arguments to the functionaries and apologists of a brutal nationalist tyranny— the more so as, unlike Nietzsche, Sorel accepted the basic doctrines of Marxism. Yet his link with Fascism is a real one, though clearly it was impossible to judge the first intimations of Italian Fascism in 1912 with the eyes of those who witnessed the Second World War. Everything in Sorel's work that related to the revolution and the free post-revolutionary society belongs, it is true, to the realm of “myth,” which in principle admits of no discussion or explanation.



Fascism drew its strength from the sense of desperation and desire for absolute change, the disillusionment with democracy and disbelief in the possibility of reform, the obscure need for some radical break with the existing scheme of things. Sorel's appeals were well adapted to the spiritual conditions out of which Fascism was bred. He did not set up to be the planner of a new order, but the herald of catastrophe. He called for a break in the continuity of civilization in the name of a better culture, a return to the popular sources of legislation and morality; in so doing he unconsciously showed that an attack on the whole of an existing culture is in effect an invitation to barbarism unless it is based on already existing values and a clear knowledge of what the new order is supposed to comprise. Sorel aims many shrewd blows at the naivety of the rationalists; but if an attack on rationalism is not clearly distinguished from an attack on reason, if it appeals to a *philosophie des bras* which is not so very different from a philosophy of the mailed fist, then it becomes a rebellion against the mind and a plea for violence pure and simple. Sorel's advocacy of violence related, in his mind, to the warlike variety as opposed to that of a *gendarmerie*; but the distinction is a fine one, based on literary stereotypes and the idealization of Grecian or Viking heroes. A morality that regards violence in itself as a source of heroism and greatness is very near to being an instrument of despotism. The same is true of Sorel's criticism of parliamentary democracy: there was much truth in it, but the same could be said of Hitler's writings on the subject. The criticism of pervading corruption, abuses, petty squabbling, and the competition for jobs masquerading as a conflict of ideas—all these have been denounced by anarchists, communists, and Fascists in very similar terms. But a criticism of democracy that wraps itself in "myth" and advances no tangible alternative, merely the absence or the negation of democracy, can be nothing

but an apologia for tyranny: at any rate when it descends from the realm of literature into practical politics.

As a professed Marxist who supplied inspiration to Fascism, Sorel is important in that the destiny of his idea reveals the convergence of extreme forms of leftist and rightist radicalism. If leftist radical phraseology confines itself to attacking bourgeois democracy without offering a better democracy in its place, if it merely opposes rationalism without setting up new cultural values, if it advocates violence unhampered by moral restrictions, then its programme is merely that of a new despotism and is essentially the same as that of the radical Right. If, as in Sorel's doctrine, the ultimate catastrophe is represented as an object in itself, or even as the supreme object, irrespective of the consequences it may produce, then the proletariat's role is, first and foremost, that of the expected agent of cataclysmic change. Since it failed to play this part, Sorel could without inconsistency turn to nationalism as a more promising embodiment of the cause, which in his eyes was still "total revolution" and not the nation as such. Thus, his passionate defence of Lenin and the Bolsheviks was highly ambiguous. He admired the Russian Revolution as a dramatic apocalypse, a death-blow to intellectuals, a triumph of willpower over alleged economic necessity, and an assertion of native Muscovite traditions over Western ones. "The sanguinary object-lesson in Russia will prove to all workers that there is a contradiction between democracy and the mission of the proletariat. The idea of a government of producers will not perish; the cry 'Death to intellectuals', for which the Bolsheviks are so much abused, may in the end be taken up by workers the world over. Only a blind man could fail to see that the Russian

Revolution is the dawn of a new era" (*Matériaux*, postscript to Preface of 1919 ed.). In the 1919 appendix to *Reflections on Violence* we read:

When the time comes to evaluate present-day events with historical impartiality, it will be recognized that Bolshevism owed a great part of its power to the fact that the masses regarded it as a protest against an oligarchy whose greatest concern had been not to appear Russian; at the end of the year 1917, the former spokesman of the Black Hundred said that the Bolsheviks had "proven that they were more Russian than the rebels Kaledin, Roussky etc., who betrayed the Tsar and the country" (*Journal de Genève*, 20 December 1917)... One may speak as a historian of the process of revolutionary repression in Russia only by keeping in mind the Muscovite character of Bolshevism... the national traditions provided the Red Guards with innumerable precedents, which they believed they had the right to imitate in order to defend the Revolution... If we are grateful to the Roman soldiers for having replaced abortive, strayed or impotent civilizations by a civilization whose pupils we are still in law, literature and monuments, how grateful will not the future have to be to the Russian soldiers of socialism!

Sorel knew little of Leninist doctrine: he admired Lenin as a prophet of the Apocalypse, and Mussolini for the same reason. He was ready to support anything that seemed heroic and promised to destroy the hated system of democracy, party strife, compromise, negotiation, and calculation. He was not interested in the petty question of human welfare, but in discovering the circumstances most propitious to an outburst of energy. The penetrating critic of rationalism ended as a worshipper of the great Moloch into whose jaws the blind, fanatic, jubilant mob advanced, in a warlike frenzy, to its own destruction.