Georges Sorel, Autonomy and Violence in the Third Republic

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of History in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT
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Abstract

How did Georges Sorel’s philosophy of violence emerge from the moderate, reformist, and liberal philosophy of the French Third Republic? This dissertation answers the question through a contextual intellectual history of Sorel’s writings from the 1880s until 1908. Drawing on a variety of archives and printed sources, this dissertation situates Sorel in terms of the intellectual field of the early Third Republic. I locate the roots of Sorel’s problematic at once in a broadly European late 19th century philosophy of science and in the liberal values and the political culture of the French 1870s. Sorel’s engagement with Karl Marx, but also Émile Durkheim, Giambattista Vico, and other social theorists, is traced in order to explain why, despite his Marxism, Sorel confronted the twin fin-de-siècle crises of the Dreyfus Affair and Revisionism as a political liberal. I show how his syndicalism became radical, scissionistic, and anti-Statist in the post-Dreyfus context of anticlericalism leading up to the separation of Church and State in 1905. Sorel drew on figures such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Benedetto Croce to elaborate his Reflections on Violence in 1906-1908, finally transforming his political theory of institutions into an ethics of myth and individual engagement.

Sorel has been best known as an icon of radicalism as such—in shorthand, an inspiration for both Lenin and Mussolini. This political polarization has occluded Sorel’s profound engagement with the foundational thinkers of the Third Republic. Against the backdrop of a systematic misunderstanding of the philosophical issues at stake, Sorel’s political ideas and interventions have also been misunderstood. Not only his insights
about the limits and potentials of the intellectual framework of the French Third Republic, but also their most significant contemporary resonances, have been lost. I show how and why this has been so by studying the reception of Sorel’s work in the Anglophone world from the immediate postwar years until the early 1970s. Finally, I investigate resonances between Sorel’s work as I have reconstructed it, and some currents in contemporary post-Marxist political thought.

Sorel is a revelatory figure in the entangled history of late 19th century liberalism and republicanism. He was profoundly engaged in the intellectual life of the French Third Republic and this, as much as his Marxism although less overtly, has shaped the meaning of his work. To return him to this context gives us a new understanding of the stakes of the philosophy of the period and the limits of its liberalism.
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I visited Paris, welcomed me and encouraged my interest in Sorel. I thank the committee as a whole for its forbearance, endurance, and enthusiasm.

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discouraged and scolded and retorted. I thank her for telling me what to do, even if I do not always do it.
Introduction

“M. Sorel is not a professor. For this reason, it is easier for him to walk off the beaten path, to open new roads. But he also has no taste for scholastic exposition.”¹ With this judgment, Elie Halévy began his response to Georges Sorel’s just-finished presentation on historical materialism. It was the 20th of March 1902, at a meeting of the Société française de la philosophie. Sorel was known then as one of the foremost French interpreters of Marx. Although without formal philosophy training or position, he had received an excellent technical education and was a powerful autodidact. He was also a Dreyfusard, and aligned himself in practical matters with the reformists among the socialists. His audience on this occasion was a select one, including Henri Bergson, Léon Brunschvicg, Lucien Levy-Bruhl, and Frederic Rauh.

Halévy was a rising star, a young philosophy student who had recently turned to history, and had just begun teaching a course on socialism at the Sorbonne. The central point of disagreement between Halévy and Sorel was whether or not, according to Marx, class consciousness, expressed in juridical and moral ideas, could itself be a historical force. For Halévy, who looked to Capital as the finished and systematic exposition of Marx’s thought, the material had priority over the ideal. Sorel drew attention to Marx’s political writings and pamphleteering, arguing that historical materialism was not a metaphysics, but a philosophy of practical action.

¹ Georges Sorel, "Le matérialisme historique," Bulletin de la société française de la philosophie 2, no. 5 (1902). p 94. All translations, unless otherwise marked, are my own.
This dissertation, a work of contextual intellectual history, takes as its guiding thread Sorel’s writings from the 1880s through the publication of *Reflections on Violence*. Sorel responded not only to the worker’s movement and to the moral mobilization of the Dreyfus Affair, but also to the intellectual politics of Catholicism, to the separation of Church and State, and the ideology of laïcité. I argue that because Sorel was rooted firmly in the intellectual culture of the French Third Republic, close attention to the process of his writing and thinking allows us to understand how violent, scissionistic radicalism can emerge from liberal political commitments.

In 1902, Sorel was welcome in the company of Halévy, Brunschvicg, and Bergson, not only for his learning but also because of his politics. By 1908, although he was still welcome at the Société, it was perhaps only as a tribute to the liberalism of the philosophical establishment. His socialism had not mellowed, but had turned bitter and sharp. He had abandoned reformism and embraced revolutionary syndicalism. In 1906 he ended *Reflections on Violence*, which he called his standard work, with the declaration: “it is to violence that socialism owes the high moral values by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world.”

Repudiating any attempt to mediate social conflict with reasoned discussion, he made himself the theoretician of the apocalyptic and revolutionary general strike, which he called an irrefutable myth. His political positions changed rapidly. Having penned an editorial in 1908 in defense of revolutionary

2 Georges Sorel and Jeremy Jennings, *Reflections on violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p 251. Translation modified. Because of its wide availability, I have cited from this edition. I have not cited from John Stanley’s translations, where they exist, because unfortunately they are relatively difficult to access, generally more so than the originals.
proletarian violence, by 1910 he was aligned with the antisemitic and monarchist *Action française*. Unlike some other more histrionic anti-patriots on the left, he could not bring himself to support war in 1914. He believed it from the beginning to be an unmitigated “catastrophe” which would end with the victory of the Jacobin and plutocratic Entente. 3 Near the end of his life, in 1919, Sorel added an appendix to his *Reflections*, “In defense of Lenin,” in which he attacked the “New Carthages” arrayed against “the Rome of the proletariat,” and hoped to live long enough to “see the humiliation of the arrogant bourgeois democracies.” 4 He died in August of 1921, and so did not live to pass judgment on the series of humiliations inflicted on that system over the next few decades.

Many of his interlocutors did. In 1936 Elie Halévy again spoke before the *Société*. He was by now perhaps the most respected liberal thinker in France. His topic on this occasion was the unprecedented control exercised by states over their populations. He dated this phenomenon from August of 1914, and styled it the Age of Tyrannies. Léon Brunschvicg framed the discussion as a continuation of the 1902 meeting at which Sorel had spoken, and suggested darkly that “many things have happened since then; and the work of the author of *The Illusions of Progress* and *Reflections on Violence* is not without its bearing on recent history.” 5 Halévy reported that in the spiritual realm the new tyrannies matched negative control, “the suppression of all expressions of opinion which were thought to be opposed to the national interest,” with a positive “organization of

enthusiasm.” In the economic realm “State Socialism […] is combined with syndicalist and ‘corporative’ elements.” Rather than a protective bulwark of civilization, Halévy feared, socialism had proven entirely compatible with barbaric nationalism and had long survived the removal of individual liberty from its agenda. Such liberty seemed increasingly obsolete: “When I look at the future from the point of view of all those who love peace and freedom, I am inclined to be even more pessimistic.”

Sorel, all those present felt, bore some kind of responsibility for the situation that generated this pessimism. And indeed his political trajectory gave plausibility to the suggestion that he was implicated in the terrifying left-right convergence of anti-liberal tyrannies described by Halévy.

Sorel remains available and salient in this capacity. In May of 2012, a Bay Area activist tweeted to hundreds of followers that “Sorel is an interesting figure because he is an intellectual father to both Mussolini’s Blackshirts and Militant Anarchists of #BlackBloc[].” This person had been an active Occupier, but felt that certain anarchists refused compromise so absolutely as to actually seek out violent conflicts with the police, and in so doing had destroyed the movement. Where did these anarchists come from? A combination of Google and Wikipedia—as well as UC Berkeley library books—yielded

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6 Ibid. p 78.
8 Halévy and Wallas, "The Age of Tyrannies." p 86. Halévy goes on: “The idea of a European Federation has very little life in it.” It was to this same group that, a few years later, Raymond Aron presented his own analysis of the rapidly worsening situation: Raymond Aron, “États démocratiques et états totalitaires (Juin 1939),” *Commentaire* 6, no. 23 (1983).
9 "Nécrologie: Georges Sorel (1847-1922)," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 29 (Supplement)(1922).
helpful results, which were reported via Twitter in something like real time: “Sorel keeps coming up like a bad penny”—“the best explanation i have read of the Anarchist & occupy ‘no demands’ strategy, is a hundred years old[.]” A series of tweets linked Sorel backwards to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and forward not only to Frantz Fanon, but also Antonio Negri and Alain Badiou.\(^\text{10}\) Both scholars and political activists continue to place Sorel’s writing on violence and myth at the beginning of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century’s grim history of experimentation with the generative powers of cleansing violence.

Yet Sorel’s most consistent political commitment was to combat precisely the statist destruction of individual liberty represented by Halévy’s Age of Tyrannies. Sorel’s writings on education, his attacks on socialist politicians, even his theory of art—everything was pitched to disrupt the organization of enthusiasm or the control of economic forces by state bureaucrats. In 1901, Sorel had written that “the highest mission of the State is to defend liberty of thought…The State has spiritual duties to fulfill and this is evidently the first of all in a democracy.”\(^\text{11}\) If, as Paul Leroy-Beaulieu wrote a few years later in 1908, Sorel had become a “cold and implacable enemy of modern society,” it was because by then he felt already something like the pessimism Halévy expressed decades later.\(^\text{12}\) Sorel diagnosed the pathologies that would become known as totalitarianism, but he did it early enough that he was believed to have been their prophet.

\(^{10}\) Jasper Gregory. Twitter posts, May 12\(^{\text{th}}\)-26\(^{\text{th}}\) 2012. [https://twitter.com/jaspergregory](https://twitter.com/jaspergregory)


Sorel’s writings, from the 1890s to just after the First World War, are a sustained, sophisticated, and informed attempt to ground human freedom in the modern world. Sorel was a reader of Marx and a theorist of revolution. His central problem was how a better society—new ways of living together, new ways of being—could emerge from the old. The self-organization of the working class as producers, he believed, could provide the material and spiritual preconditions for the rise of new institutions. In his most perceptive moments he was able to live up to his own ideal of discovering the lineaments of a society to come—that is, a new moral and juridical order—in the proletarian institutions emerging around the process of production. A plural, tolerant, political field would allow these revolutionary institutions to strengthen themselves. As I show in this dissertation, between 1903 and 1906, he fell away from this ideal. Resistance to the state, as a political imperative, overwhelmed the protection and development of revolutionary ways of being grounded in productive activity. When resistance decisively took priority over institution-building, we can see in retrospect, he lost his way. He began to over-read the strength of the state, and under-appreciate the dangers posed by nationalist mobilization.

The political lesson manifest explicitly in Sorel’s work, and implicitly in his trajectory, is that new ways of being emerge through institutions. Sorel’s best work and his most useful politics engaged with the growing institutions of the working class, the syndicats. He was disappointed by them—and his disappointment was not necessarily wrong—but he never succeeded in finding an alternative. Following his path through the hotbed of fin-de-siècle political thought allows us to observe at close range the emergence of revolutionary political radicalism from anti-statist liberalism.
The decades of Sorel’s greatest productivity were a time of both spectacular conflict and tectonic change in political life. The roots of the great ideologies of the 20th century are to be found in these years, as are the technologies—military, administrative, political—that permitted these ideologies to have such bloody consequences. For Sorel, the breaking point was the republican drive for ideological dominance in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, culminating in the 1905 separation of Church and State. The power exercised by state machinery in these years convinced him that the only possible form of dissent was radical and violent. Sorelian violence and intransigence, this is to say, emerged in response to what Sorel took to be the invasion of civil society by the overwhelming force of the State. If we wish to understand the dynamic and the problem-situation of those who seek radical change in contemporary liberal-democratic states—who, indeed, question the very nature of these states as liberal and democratic—Sorel is an indispensable resource.

Sorel’s fin-de-siècle transition from left reformism to anti-political intransigence was made in the name of liberal values. In pursuing his work, Sorel drew on resources elaborated over the course of the 19th century, particularly by those who sought to give liberal republicanism a firm theoretical foundation. He shares a great deal with the intellectual founders of the Third Republic. Once Sorel is rooted firmly in this context, it becomes clear that to reconstruct Sorel’s trajectory is to investigate a broader phenomenon at the heart of 20th century politics and still very much with us today: the

emergence of scissionism and violence from within political liberalism’s defense of autonomy. Sorel helps us to understand the dynamics of political radicalism within a liberal and democratic polity. What options are open to those who want to make a revolution through civil society, without capturing and using the power of the state? What are the consequences of pursuing a thoroughgoing pluralism? For Sorel these problems generated searing polemic and innovative social theory, as well as both courageous and catastrophic political allegiances. Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin referred to Sorel in their attempts to formulate a limit-concept of law because his own position moved across the border of legal action. At first a defender of republican legality, he came to believe that to defend freedom and law, one had to take a stand outside of it, had to generate new law. Sorel’s trajectory is an example of how the radicalization of liberalism raises the questions of law as such, of secularism, of the boundaries of the political, and of revolution. This is the significance of his transformation from Dreyfusard and reformist to the “metaphysician” of revolutionary syndicalism and apologist for violence.

The remainder of this introduction explains some of the terms used above, and limns out some of the key historiographic coordinates for the dissertation as a whole.

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14 The approach taken to liberalism and radicalism here certainly echoes some radical left critiques of the logic of liberalism, but by focusing on a single individual and their immediate context, it hopes to give texture and density to an account of liberalism that would not rely, as liberalism does not rely, entirely on concepts and their logic. Approaches to Sorel through liberalism are rare but not unprecedented. In terms of recent scholarship, most significant is the perspective elaborated by Marco Gervasoni. See, Marco Gervasoni, "La liberté, l'Etat et les associations. Alexis de Tocqueville et Georges Sorel," Mil neuf cent: revue d'histoire intellectuelle 14(1996); ———, Georges Sorel, una biografia intellettuale: Socialismo e liberalismo nella Francia della Belle époque (Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 1997). See also, Patrice Rolland, “Peut-on reformer la democratie?” Une préface de Georges Sorel ” Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques 11(2000).

First, I discuss how I frame the relationship between Sorel and the Third Republic. Second, I provide a brief explanation of the stakes of autonomy, as a political and historiographic concept. Third, although the relation of myth and the epistemology of the social sciences is discussed repeatedly in the chapters that follow, it is useful to explain it in a condensed way here. Fourth, a few remarks are necessary on how violence is understood in this dissertation. Fifth, I discuss the existing scholarship on Sorel, particularly over the last three decades, locating this dissertation in terms of emerging trends in research on and around Sorel. This provokes, sixth, a few words on method. Seventh and finally, I provide a narrative outline of the chapters, with special emphasis on the larger issues each one raises.

**Sorel’s Republic**

This dissertation is an investigation of the Third Republic through Sorel’s writing. It takes a cue from the slogan articulated recently by one historian of modern France, Vincent Duclert: “we must historicize the Republic.” Historians wishing to understand something called the French Republic must “study the political experience of society in the period during which the republican regime consolidated its position…[and] must adopt a more open concept of the Republic.”16 To study a political experience requires a polyvalent historical practice in order to reconstruct a subject who might have such an experience. This means combining an account of the material of everyday life, the

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institutions covering the field of the political, and the discourses through which politics was articulated. No one historian or work of historiography can hope to encompass such a range of material and analytic schemes. Against the backdrop of this fuller historicization of the Republic, this dissertation examines the writings of one particularly problematic and troublesome figure. Sorel, it is argued, was an enormously perceptive critic of the Third Republic’s political culture because he shared so much of its intellectual and institutional heritage—because his experience was an experience of the Republic.

But what Republic? It should not be forgotten that Sorel was born in 1847. This means that he received his first political education in the so-called liberal phase of the Second Empire. He even took part as a student in demonstrations against the imperial system. He was at university in Paris, this is to say, during the period in which, as Philip Nord has argued, elite institutions underwent a process of democratization, laying the groundwork for the Third Republic. In his later life, he still thought fondly about the oppositional role of the university in this era, because he belonged to the generation that came of age shortly after 1870-71. We can recognize something of Sorel in the portrait of

17 Such a claim is to be born out in the chapters themselves. But, by way of suggestion, this means taking seriously the institutions within which Sorel worked as well as cultural histories in which he is implicated, for instance the history of sexuality and gender as represented by historians such as Judith Surkis and Robert Nye. Judith Surkis, Sexing the citizen: morality and masculinity in France, 1870-1920 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); Janet R. Horne, A social laboratory for modern France: the Musée social & the rise of the welfare state (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Robert A. Nye, Masculinity and male codes of honor in modern France, Studies in the history of sexuality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
a “sacrificed generation” of 1885, marked by “pessimism” and “dilettantism” drawn in contrast with the soon to be pre-war youth in the famous 1913 *enquête* by Henri Massis and Alfred de Tarde.\(^{20}\) Or in a characterization with less polemical intent by Claude Digeon, we might assign Sorel to the generation of 1870, which did not experience defeat quite so brutally as its elders, and was slow to engage itself.\(^{21}\) As tempting as these generational boxes are, it is best to displace the question and take the Second Empire—plutocracy and corrupt democracy in the service of authoritarianism—as the political problem behind Sorel’s thinking.\(^{22}\) It is for this reason that Sorel could so confidently assert that the real dividing line in history was not 1789, but 1848. Only then was the era inaugurated by Rousseau over and only then did the hard and brutal present begin.\(^{23}\)

Among Sorel’s problems, this is to argue, was the same as that of the founders of the Third Republic: the mediation of democracy. Sorel wrote in the “Letter to Daniel Halévy” that he had worked for twenty years to rid himself of his education. Yet he was actively reading and responding throughout the 1870s. Sorel, as I shall argue at more length in the first chapter, should be contextualized with a stratum of liberal-minded intellectuals who rallied, eventually, to the republic, and tried to give it a firm theoretical

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\(^{22}\) For one brilliant and idiosyncratic analysis of the legacy of this problem in the *fin-de-siècle*, see the discussion of Maurice Joly and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in chapter 11 of Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and traces: true, false, fictive* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

foundation. This includes figures who were profoundly committed to a certain model of the Republic, even if they recognized it had to be moderated, such as Charles Renouvier (1815) or Alfred Fouillée (1838), and in their wake Émile Durkheim (1858). But also those such as Émile Boutroux (1845) who had to overcome their anxieties, particularly over the aggressive secularizing tendencies of the Republicans, and always sought to make room for a spiritual core in Republican moral theory. And indeed in the 1880s Sorel engaged explicitly with Fouillée, and connected perhaps even socially, but certainly intellectually, with Paul and Jules Tannery (1843, 1848), who were close to Boutroux. If he was hardly among Sudhir Hazareesingh’s *Intellectual Founders of the Republic*, he was a pupil of this group. He belongs, this is to say, with their heirs, the trans-Atlantic middle way, the *solidariste* revisers of republicanism recently brought forward by Jean-Fabien Spitz.

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27 On this ‘middle way’, see Kloppenberg, *Uncertain victory : social democracy and progressivism in European and American thought, 1870-1920*. For one reading of the *solidaristes*, discussed at more length later in this dissertation, see Spitz, *Le moment républicain en France*. 

12
Autonomy

Sorel’s values were liberal, his political technique republican, his most serious problem to mediate democratic forces—in all cases, against quite sharply different contexts, the guiding thread is autonomy. Nearly two decades ago, Jacques Julliard suggested that “autonomy” was the “key word” that could explain Sorel’s position at the turn of the century, as well as his movement toward “the proletariat as historical subject and as the creative instrument of a new society.” Sorel’s commitment to the working class was durable and real, but it was a political rather than a transcendent principle. It followed from autonomy and pluralism, not the other way around. Despite Julliard’s diagnosis, autonomy has rarely been seen as central to Sorel’s work. One reason for this is that it is by no means a politically transparent notion.

The political ambiguity of autonomy becomes immediately obvious when one tries to locate Sorel in terms of a left-right political spectrum. It seems to me clear that by far the most interesting parts of Sorel’s work are those written from and to the left. However, it must not be assumed that we have successfully placed Sorel on the left for us today simply because we can assert that his central philosophical value was autonomy—or even human freedom articulated as non-domination. One of Sorel’s contemporaries and some-time interlocutors makes a salient example: Giovanni Gentile, the philosopher of fascism. According to A. James Gregor, “Anglo-Americans have…a conviction that

Marxist-Leninists...were...committed to a host of positive normative convictions such as equality, democracy, and freedom. They have not been prepared to consider the possibility that Fascist intellectuals held some of the very same convictions. ”30 And indeed, Gregor argues that one can distinguish Gentile’s thought by “its insistence on liberty and freedom as the critical center of Fascist revolutionary thought.”31 Is Sorel’s preference for the discourse of autonomy over that of more recognizably liberal rights-talk a sure sign that he was not, in fact, anything like a liberal? Is it only evidence that Gregor and others who locate Sorel as a protofascist are correct?

These sorts of questions, as generations of argument over terms such as ‘protofascist’ should have demonstrated, can only be answered through a judicious combination of local contextualization and self-aware historiography. Sorel largely refused the language of rights not least for the same reason many Marxists did in these years and later—it was seen as a poisoned bourgeois draught. Yet Sorel, with some but not all Marxists, rallied to the defense of the rights—justice—for Alfred Dreyfus. And he drew away from the Dreyfusards, becoming with Charles Péguy a retroactive anti-Dreyfusard, when he felt that it was no longer an individual being defended, but a principle so abstract that amounted to a political faction. Sorel’s Dreyfusism is not straightforward, and has been interpreted in different ways, most generally as an “anti-politics.” It should be recognized that Dreyfusism was an antipolitics—a noble and heroic cause, beyond mere reason—for a great many people, and that this is not a good predictor

31 Ibid.p xi.
of political trajectory later. As discussed at more length in the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation, Sorel’s Dreyfusism and his turn away from the Dreyfusards depend on his understanding of juridical consciousness and class struggle, and also on his reading of the raw politics of the moment. This, in turn, depends on Sorel’s syndicalism.

The content of this syndicalism is not obvious. Yves Guchet’s 2001 biography of Sorel took as its subtitle the epithet that Sorel himself took from Proudhon—disinterested servant of the proletariat. The assertion that his heart at least was with the working class has sometimes been put forward as the central reason he cannot be assimilated to Gentile or other fascists. Indeed, Sorel’s heart was with the working class. He disavowed socialism repeatedly, but he always meant the organized, political, representatives of the working classes, those who lay illegitimate claim to the title of socialist. However, the mode in which he presented his allegiance has been plausibly challenged as, in a word, obsolete; in three, petty-bourgeois confusion. Meeting this charge will clarify the meaning of his autonomy.

At issue here are productivism and elitism. Sorel argued that new elements of civilization—new ideals, values, ways of being—would emerge from the productive activity of the workers. Through the institutions of the syndicats, workers would become better able to manage the entire process of production. At the same time and for the same reasons, they would develop their moral and juridical consciousnesses. These proletarian

institutions would draw their principles from productive activity and not, as bourgeois institutions do, from the logic of exchange or the court. Their expansion would be the process of revolution itself. The state is too dangerous to be the instrument of this expansion. Its functions will either wither away or be taken up by the syndicats. This—Sorel’s profound commitment to syndicalist self-organization—has long been regarded as quixotic at best and a dangerous confusion at worst.

Economic and political objections to this way of understanding revolutionary action can no more be dissociated from one another than can the political and the economic in Marxist theory. The era of Sorel’s greatest syndicalist enthusiasm, say from 1897–1908, is arguably the period when technological and political factors converged to eliminate the craft-based worker autonomy on which French syndicalism has been understood to rest. It became clear in these years—the retrospective argument goes—what large-scale industry would ultimately mean. The workers would be de-skilled, rendered into a mass worker, and they would have no chance at all to better their situation if they did not lean heavily on democracy, that is on their quantity (majority, voting bloc) and not their quality (place in production). Sorel’s syndicalism—the socialism of the skilled workers—simply became obsolete. Consequently, most of Sorel’s writings about working class organization lost their relevance. It stands to reason, one could

34 Patrick Gaud has a well-developed argument criticizing Sorel along these lines from a Marxist perspective, and carries Sorel’s economic blindness—related to the underdevelopment of French industry—into Sorel’s failure to think on a global scale and to predict the First World War, as Lenin did. Patrick Gaud, De la valeur-travail à la guerre en Europe : essai philosophique à partir des écrits économiques de Georges Sorel, Bibliothèque historique du marxisme (Paris: Harmattan, 2010).
further argue, that this workerist elitism became, after the First World War, elitism pure and simple.

This historical argument is supplemented in the present on the left by a well-articulated anti-productivist discourse. In line with an increasingly intellectually successful anarchism, this scholarship bursts the iron cage of production and exchange through the emancipatory apotheosis of daily life. Kathi Weeks, for instance, in *The Problem with Work*, mounts a powerful feminist critique of the invasion of Marxism by the protestant work ethic.35 Attacking the notion of the work ethic from a rather different angle in his *Against Thrift*, James Livingston nonetheless defends a consumerist vision of autonomy that Sorel would certainly have rejected.36 In as much as one can speak of evidence for or against taking a politically productivist line, social history has no easy answer. Although historians have emphasized the importance of certain notions of honor and dignity for 19th century French industrial workers, other historians focus on “Saint Monday” and *Workers against Work*.37

I do not argue here that Sorel somehow escapes all of these criticisms. I do argue that he was more aware of the changing nature of large-scale industry than is sometimes thought. And indeed it seems to me, further, that to assert that the technological process

35 The arguments that Weeks presents for the basic income, imagined as utopian demand, for what she wants to call a ‘post-work politics,’ are in large measure persuasive. Similarly her sensitivity to certain issues—most saliently the relation of ethics to politics, their mutual construction and the danger of confusing the one for the other—is exceptional. Kathi Weeks, *The problem with work : feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
36 Unless, perhaps, he had realized how elitist it was. See James Livingston, *Against thrift : why consumer culture is good for the economy, the environment, and your soul* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
of production rules out worker self-management and requires the leadership of a political party, is to have given in to Lenin and statist revolution in advance. Although one might argue that the 20th century and its heavy industry was a parenthesis, the main point here is that Sorel’s syndicalism was not simply, as Pierre Rosanvallon and others have taken it to be, a replacement of democratic construction with sociological fact. It was rather—as remained in the background in his argument with Halévy with which this introduction began—grounded in a philosophy that connected the ideal and the material in a circle of mutual constitution. That is, a theory of how science, law, and morals emerge from practice. Sorel might usefully be thought of as offering a friendly materialist corrective to the neo-Roman liberty proposed by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit. Sorel’s insight is that the conditions of non-domination can themselves really only be met in collectives organized around some end that transcends them. Here his understanding of science and production comes to the fore.

Science and Myth

For all its ambiguities, autonomy is a paradigmatically liberal value. For Sorel, philosophy of science is the key link between this Kantian-inflected liberalism and a Marxist understanding of history and social dynamics. Sorel drew on 18th century rhetoritician Giambattista Vico to articulate through Marx’s categories a historical materialism that gave an important place to the subjective. Sorel rejects a ‘thin-liberal’ notion of freedom as a sort of atomic indeterminacy in favor of autonomy’s etymological meaning of giving a law to one’s self. Law, in turn, implies a very real constraint—in the
social realm as well as in the natural one—but a constraint that is ultimately constructed within the world. For Sorel, this is inseparable from the question of science. Sorel, in this not far from Ernst Mach, believed that scientific language was a social language, and that therefore certainty—the goal of all rational science—was also social. The proletariat and their institutions, as those closes to precision machines that Sorel regarded as something like materialized equations, had a special epistemological status. The working class, for Sorel, truly was the heir of philosophy.

Myth is probably the term most often associated with Sorel. Among the arguments of this dissertation is that Sorelian myth is best understood as emerging from a long meditation on the epistemology of social science. Sorel’s approach to social science itself is grounded on a philosophy of science articulated at a very early moment in his writing career. Like Jules Ferry and the other positivist founders of the Third Republic, Sorel’s understanding of science was crucial to his politics. It is not least for this reason that Sorel looked to socialism which, as Christophe Prochasson has observed, “more than any other political thought, introduced science as a decisive reference into political discourse and practice.” But the reference to science as the foundation of politics was to be found across the political spectrum—Léon Bourgeois’ solidarisme was scientific, but so too did Charles Maurras claim to found his politics on positivist science.

38 This is a kind of freedom-through-auto-constraint that must be distinguished on the one hand from non-individualist forms that have a Hegelian horizon (Gentile), and on the other from anarchic-individualist varieties that, in the transition from Nietzsche to Foucault, tend to take the auto-constraint of the individual too literally.
The importance of Sorel’s epistemology has of course been noticed by previous scholars. Here, in addition to providing an alternative to Marxist praxis, it has two important functions. First, it connects him to a crucially important transformation in European philosophy and philosophy of science. This can be put in shorthand in the title of a recent work, *On Historicizing Epistemology*. Sorel belongs fully to the post-positivist moment represented by Ernst Mach and, in France, Henri Poincaré (whose work he knew well). Second, Sorel’s epistemological thought connects him—as does his physical presence at meetings and conferences—to the main stream of French philosophy. Sorel was a participant in, if also never a full member of, the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*’s circle. He engaged profoundly with their neo-Kantian defense of republicanism. In his reading of Alfred Fouillée and Émile Durkheim, Sorel was in dialog with *solidariste* thought, the quasi-official social theory of the Republic. To emphasize all this is not to discount Sorel’s radicalism, but rather to insist that this radicalism sprung from engagement rather than isolation.

What, then, was this radicalism? As is clear in his 1902 debate with Halévy over the meaning of historical materialism, Sorel sought to escape a dualistic interpretation of Marxism. As Halévy’s resistance suggests, this was not easily done. Much of Sorel’s thinking here drew on Italian interlocutors. His 1896 essay on Vico is a key moment in his attempt to give theoretical foundation to the integration of juridical and moral

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consciousness into historical materialism, and he remained engaged with a tradition of Italian philosophers of history. At issue here is the historical constitution of the human and of rationality. Sorel, thus, was working through in the fin-de-siècle issues that the recent historiography of French philosophy places firmly in the interwar years.  

Violence

As that which, paradigmatically, precludes thought and dehumanizes, violence is perhaps at the greatest remove from epistemology. The valorization of violence has long been associated with Sorel. In the late 1940s, struggling through the consequences of the Master-Slave dialectic, Jean-Paul Sartre could ask himself, “how to label this violence? […] a necessary Evil as Camus says or a Good as Sorel would have it?”

Responsible scholars generally qualify their association of Sorel and violence by pointing out that he had in mind a rather mild and limited sort of violence. Barbara Deming suggested many years ago that Frantz Fanon’s work would lose nothing of its critical edge, but would also be less susceptible to misunderstanding, if in reading one simply replaced violence with “radical uncompromising action.” One might make a similar point.

45 More than this, although Sorel was repeatedly described by contemporaries as piratical—for Benda he is a Norman pirate through and through—this was confined to polemic. He did not, for instance, as many did, fight duels. On dueling in this period, see Nye, Masculinity and male codes of honor in modern France.
about Sorel.\textsuperscript{46} Deming, it seems to me, is who we should follow if we want a present-political appropriation of Sorelian violence. In terms of historical understanding, however, one cannot bracket or substitute away Sorel’s—and, incidentally, Fanon’s—approval of at least limited bloodshed. Violence—however obscure the concept—emerged and came to define Sorel’s work in response to contextual developments. The historian must understand this context.

A central argument of this dissertation is that Sorel’s attitude toward the state is a crucial explanatory variable in the radicalization of the forms of resistance he proposed, and his eventual embrace of violence. Making this argument involves, of course, attention to ideas of the state contemporary to Sorel—Henri Michel, Émile Durkheim, the various Marxist state-theories, liberals such as Paul Leroy-Beaulieu.\textsuperscript{47} Subsequent developments are also instructive. For instance, certain moments in Sorel’s \textit{Reflections} are echoed by Pierre Clastres’s notion of society against the state. Clastres himself directly inspired Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the war machine, as well as a series of influential books by anthropologist James C. Scott.\textsuperscript{48} It was when Sorel came to see the state in the way that Clastres, Deleuze, and Scott see the state, that his

\textsuperscript{47}Of particular importance are the debates reconstructed in H. S. Jones, \textit{The French state in question: public law and political argument in the Third Republic} (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). I discuss Durkheimian and Marxist theories of the state later on in the dissertation, particularly in chapters two and three, but see Pierre Birnbaum, "La conception durkheimienne de l'Etat: L'apolitisme des fonctionnaires,” \textit{Revue française de sociologie} 17, no. 2 (1976).
\textsuperscript{48}From this perspective, as one anthropologist succinctly puts it, “‘The State’ is a hierarchical mode of organizing power that appears as a tendency or impulse throughout history.” Danny Hoffman, \textit{The war machines: young men and violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). p 7. In this connection, See, although I have not myself been able to consult it, this work on Sorel and Deleuze: Piotr Laskowski, \textit{Maszyny wojenne. Georges Sorel i strategie radykalnej filozofii politycznej} (Warszawa: Czarna Owca, 2011).
scissionism became radical. The anarchist reference is crucial here. For Clastres and Scott—and, more recently, David Graeber—revolution is really the extension of the spaces of pure egalitarian and communitarianism that typify, they believe, interpersonal interaction at its best. People in general get along with one another. The State gets in the way. It rationalizes, it destroys, it controls. In this anarchist paradigm, the state emerges as a hierarchical principle that is just as transcendental and ahistorical as is the imagined purely human community. Violence takes on an equally ahistorical characteristic. Sorel’s trajectory is a warning against this way of thinking.\(^49\)

Violence and ethics are bound up together, and a historian who proposes to write about violence, even the idea of violence, cannot avoid taking an ethical stand in relation to the object. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt cautions us against assuming, as it is so easy to do, that the fierce critics of bourgeois democracy in the decades before the First World War, including Sorel, but also Vilfredo Pareto and Friedrich Nietzsche, were obviously in the wrong. The real grievances they had against their society should not be dismissed with a wave of the hand. The culture and government that was the object of their pitiless criticism—that justified their violences—organized violence on an almost literally unimaginable scale in 1914.\(^50\) To refuse the


\(^{50}\) John Merriman’s recent *The Dynamite Club*, focused on the careful reconstruction and contextualization of the bomb-attack at the Café Terminus, makes the point particularly effectively, if only by implication, by contrasting in its last pages the deaths and mutilations caused by anarchist bombs with those that took place under the aegis of States during the war. John M. Merriman, *The dynamite club : how a bombing in fin-de-siècle Paris ignited the age of modern terror* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009). For a different
war—as Sorel did—is of course not the same as having effectively worked against it. This dissertation does not pretend that Sorel’s politics was anything but a failure, does not contest that his work was available and useful in a destructive way. But it does insist that Sorel was not only or always destructive. He recognized the obstacles in the way of autonomous and stateless life, as well as the dangers attendant on an uncontested and extralegal state power. Even *Reflections on Violence* is at its core an account of what kinds of institutions might secure the moral freedom of the individual in the face of an increasingly powerful state. To understand the dynamic of his thought and of the problems with which he struggled is to understand how a sincere and thoughtful defense of human freedom becomes a warrant for violence and hypocrisy.

**Historiography**

There is a substantial historiographic and interpretive literature on Sorel. I engage with this literature and draw on it throughout this dissertation. In chapter seven, I discuss at some length the postwar Anglophone reception of Sorel as its own object. Here, though, a discussion of more recent trends in Sorel scholarship, starting in the 1980s, is useful to position my own project. In order to explain these, in turn, a few words on the longer-term trends of interest in Sorel is necessary.

perspective on this anarchist moment, see Richard David Sonn, *Anarchism and cultural politics in fin-de-siècle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
The most important fact about the Anglophone scholarship after the war is the high level of continuity with Weimar-era German socialist understandings of Sorel. During and after the Second World War, Sorel was enrolled as material into the construction of a genealogy for the concept of totalitarianism. His image in Anglophone scholarship—shaped by the hands of, among others, H. Stuart Hughes, Jacob Talmon, and Isaiah Berlin—has thus been that of a profoundly anti-liberal thinker, an anti-intellectual and anti-rationalist philosopher. Even in sometimes poorly-theorized form, the notion of totalitarianism remains unfortunately salient in readings of Sorel today.

Although substantial scholarship on Sorel did appear in French after the Second World War, the political polyvalence of his legacy did not serve him well. In the ideological reassessment and hardening that followed liberation, he was felt to have been very much on the side of the fascists and therefore not to be trusted. This is visible in the appearances Sorel made in some of the era’s great works: Albert Camus gave him a minor role in The Rebel, but more typical was Sartre’s famous dismissal of his writings as “fascist prattle” in his preface to Frantz Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth.51 A milestone, and still invaluable, is Pierre Andreu’s 1953 biography of Sorel. Still, its limitations are

51 In fact, things are more complicated than this. Arguably, The Rebel has deep resonances with Sorel’s work, as does, although in a very different way, some of Fanon’s writings. For an argument to this effect, see Richard Vernon and Georges Sorel, Commitment and change: Georges Sorel and the idea of revolution (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1978). Without suggesting any direct influence or reading, it is nonetheless worth indicating how similar the problems with which Sartre struggled in the Critique of Dialectical Reason to those that drove Sorel’s most controversial reworkings of Marxism. Here is not so much a line of descent as a shared and recurring problematic, leading into the New Left in the Anglophone world, to say nothing of Italy. These issues are explored at somewhat greater length in chapters seven and eight of this dissertation.
signaled both by its title, *Notre maître, Georges Sorel*, and the fact that a preface for the first edition was provided by Sorel’s old friend Daniel Halévy.\(^{52}\)

Changes in the relationship of the French left with Marxism as a theoretical and a political project explain the turn of French historians to Sorel beginning in the late 1970s. In 1965, Louis Althusser famously lamented the barrenness of the French Marxist tradition: “In Germany there were Marx and Engels and the earlier Kautsky; in Poland, Rosa Luxemburg; in Russia, Plekhanov and Lenin, in Italy, Labriola, who (when we had Sorel!) could correspond with Engels as equal to equal, then Gramsci.”\(^{53}\) A decade rich in political experiences later, many younger French intellectuals felt the need to return to their own leftist traditions in new ways. As part of the same intellectual ferment that saw the revival of interest in 19\(^{th}\) century liberals such as Benjamin Constant and François Guizot, there was also a turn to non-Leninist Marxisms of the past in search of new political inspiration. Michel Charzat’s 1977 *Georges Sorel et la révolution au XXe siècle* marks the opening of a major body of historical research in this vein.\(^{54}\)

The central fact about this efflorescence is that it was undertaken from the left. To say this is by no means to impugn the objectivity or historical sense of this work, only to indicate the kind of questions that most interested these historians. Many of them were

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students of Madeleine Rebérioux, a labor historian and scholar of Jean Jaurès. In the midst of the crisis of the left at the end of the 1970s, their project was to return to the sources of the French socialist tradition and renew it in the present. Jacques Julliard is exemplary in this regard. Shlomo Sand’s 1985 book, *L’Illusion du politique: Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900*—perhaps the best monograph to emerge from this moment—was first a thesis with the title “Georges Sorel et le marxisme: rencontre et crise, 1893-1902.” It is framed as a rejoinder to the Althusserian reading of the history of French Marxism.\(^5\) These historians sought above all to locate Sorel—with all his contradictions, ambiguities, and political danger—as a French socialist, and more specifically a theorist of revolutionary syndicalism. For them he was, as he called himself and as in the subtitle of Yves Guchet’s biographical treatment, “a disinterested servant of the proletariat.”\(^6\) Fundamental scholarship emerged from this perspective, which endured because it found institutional expression.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Sand’s politics are decidedly on the left—but, importantly, this is the Israeli left. His book, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (originally in Hebrew, published with Verso in English in 2009), is a controversial attack on the notion of common Jewish ancestry. Sand has since published several smaller works in English on the politics of Israeli nationalism.

\(^6\) Yves Guchet, *Georges Sorel, 1847-1922 : serviteur désintéressé du prolétariat* (Paris: Harmattan, 2001). The book is recent, but Guchet has been associated with the CGS group for many years.

\(^7\) A major colloquium in 1982 led to the founding of the *Cahiers Georges Sorel*. Jacques Julliard’s introductory remarks in the first issue of this journal underline its scientific status. It was to be neither an *amicale* for Sorel nor a political mobilization of his work. Yet the enterprise took its justification from the fact that “Georges Sorel belongs authentically to the subordinate culture within the workers movement that stems from the tradition of direct action syndicalism.” The *Cahiers* published original research, but also correspondence and unpublished texts. In 1986, Charzat edited a *Cahier de la Herne* on Sorel, with a new set of essays, photographs, and documents. By the end of the decade, then, Sorel and his body of work was newly available to French audiences. Julliard, “Preliminaire” “Georges Sorel fait authentiquement partie de la culture dominée à l’intérieur du mouvement ouvrier, celle qui s’apparente à la tradition du syndicalisme d’action directe.” Jacques Julliard, "Présentation," *Cahiers Georges Sorel* (1983). p 6. In recent decades, representatives of this tendency have focused less on Sorel’s Marxism and syndicalism.
The revival of serious French scholarship found an echo in the Anglophone world, although in a much more fractured way than in France. Jeremy Jennings, closely involved with the group of French scholars writing on Sorel, had perhaps the most open and non-committal approach to Sorel. For John Stanley, Sorel’s work was valuable as a corrective to an overly rationalistic sociology. Stanley’s series of translations—the first of which arrived in 1969, and the last in 1994—and his 1981 monograph *The Sociology of Virtue*, were, or could have been, a major re-foundation of Sorel studies. Anglophone scholars, then, by the end of the 1980s, also had a quite substantial foundation for the study of Sorel and his integration into the historiography of the Third Republic and Europe’s political modernity more generally.

The most broadly influential account of Sorel, however, came from Zeev Sternhell. For Sternhell, Sorel was a crucial figure in the forging of an alliance between monarchists and syndicalists out of which fascism would spring. Sternhell’s work,

60 Another important use of this Sternhellian Sorel comes from a different political position. Sheri Berman’s *The Primacy of Politics* is an ambitious attempt to re-orient contemporary social democratic thought by providing a striking new interpretation of the ideological battles of the later 19th and 20th centuries. On her account, in addition to dividing between democratic and non-democratic ideologies, we must distinguish between those that ascribe determining power to economic forces, and those that give primacy to political ones. Liberalism (the first authentic political ideology) and Marxism are in this respect in agreement: economic forces cannot be resisted, political commitments must follow them—be it the free play of the market generating freedom, or the inevitable laws of capitalist development and crisis. Berman agrees with Sternhell, and particularly Gregor, in finding a fundamental identity between Social Democracy (which for her is essentially revisionist Marxism) and fascism. Both, in contradistinction from the Marxists...
productive not least of controversy for its accusations that fascism was not only native to France (rather than some foreign infectious disease), but also an *originally* French phenomena, has been influential. So there remains a substantial body of scholarship, particularly in English, that sees Sorel as essentially part of the lineage of European totalitarianism. Sternhell’s approach to Sorel and his legacy, which has the virtue of clarity if not complexity or sensitivity to historical specificity, continues to inform even otherwise innovative work on Sorel in English. For instance, Mark Antliff’s *Avant-Garde Fascism*, a work of art history on the aesthetics of the interwar French fascists, borrows heavily from Sternhell’s Sorel. Antliff’s work would have gained substantially in the complexity of its account of the origins of French fascism if it had adopted a more nuanced approach to Sorel, who Antliff focuses on in his first chapter and who operated as a sort of patron saint for Antliff’s central figures.

Very broadly, we can say that Sorel’s historiographic fate in the Anglophone world has been determined by the fact that even as a new body of French writing on Sorel and the Liberals, held that political forces could control and manage economic ones. The difference between the two is, for Berman, that social democracy is basically democratic, while the fascists are not—although Jacob Talmon might have a thing or two to say here. Berman, following Gregor and Sternhell, places Sorel at center stage in this voluntaristic revision of Marxism that issued in (via Bernstein) a Kantian and democratic vision of modernity that eventually brought peace and unprecedented prosperity to Europe, but also (via Sorel and others), fascism. Sheri Berman, ”The Primacy of Economics versus the Primacy of Politics: Understanding the Ideological Dynamics of the Twentieth Century,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 3 (2009).


was taking shape, the mainstream of American academic politics shifted, as Sheldon Wolin says of himself in the preface to the new edition of *Politics and Vision*, “from liberalism to democracy.” For their own specific reasons, the Cold War Liberals of the 1950s in general failed to recognize Sorel’s deep roots in the French liberal-republican tradition. Those who deposed them in the following generation could see quite plainly that Sorel was antidemocratic—he says so himself—and particularly with the whole weight of Leninism supporting them, they felt that nothing in particular had been lost in relegating Sorel to a marginal status.

The last important monograph on Sorel in English is more than a quarter-century old. In France, Sorel studies continue to develop. Willy Gianinazzi, drawing on decades of research, has recently published a major study of Sorelian myth. Continuing in the line of André Tosel, Patrick Gaud has taken Sorel up as a philosopher of Marxism, and brought an unmatched level of attention recently to, for instance, Sorel’s critique of the labor theory of value. No comparable works on Sorel have appeared recently in English. However, a series of fascinating and original essays from different academic

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contexts suggest that interest in Sorel is building. 

Dan Edelstein’s writings on Sorelian myth and the *idéologues* are particularly worth highlighting, as are Chiara Bottici’s anarchist appropriations of Sorel. 

The present dissertation draws on the salient observations of this most recent scholarship, while bringing to bear on it the more historically-minded research of the 1980s, with the ambition of grappling in a new way with large questions about political thought in the 19th and 20th centuries that confronted scholars in the postwar world.

**Method**

Sorel has long been subject to interpretation along, to borrow Amanda Anderson’s term, strongly “characterological” lines. An image of Sorel as either “a bitter and lonely old man” or, following Julien Benda, an irresponsible intellectual bomb-thrower, has

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69 As suggested below, Anderson’s portrait of a ‘bleak’ New York cold war liberalism is interesting here because it so well describes Sorel—despite being a portrait of a group of intellectuals convinced of his naïveté (Schlesinger), or, perhaps it is better to say, who used him as a figure of naïveté. This is indeed an argument for Anderson’s characterological and, to some extent, existential, analysis of liberalism and political self-positioning.
often been central to evaluations of the significance of his writings. First his zigzagging political commitments, then his social thought, and finally his intellectual work itself, have too often been cast out as emotional responses unworthy of serious engagement, or perhaps worse, as pathologies of mere exemplary value. Of course most scholars of Sorel himself avoid such vulgarity, but characterology is insidious and few treatments, however rigorous, manage to avoid using terms like ‘flirtation’ and ‘coquettery’ when discussing Sorel’s association with the Action française, for instance. The problem is compounded by the fact that for the Cold War Liberals who did so much to cement Sorel’s position in the broader intellectual culture, authoritarianism and liberalism were opposed as character types—personality, if not the personal, was very much political.

Of course this dissertation does not ignore biography, but it also does not aspire to be an intellectual biography. Details of Sorel’s early life, before he devoted himself to writing, are provided in the first chapter. Important aspects of the strictly biographical—for instance Sorel’s romantic partnership with Marie-Euphrasie David, a former silk-worker from Lyon—are deployed in certain places as argument. Nonetheless this dissertation is unapologetically centered on the interpretation of texts. Sorel’s authorship is a fact, but the goal is not to investigate the meaning of Sorel as person, or even Sorel as author—although, where my object is reception, in a sense this is what I am doing. Rather, this dissertation tries to grasp his writing as a process of problem-stating and problem-solving, always in response to other texts and exigencies of different sorts. It is

70 This first phrase is from a prominent obituary for Sorel “Nécrologie: Georges Sorel (1847-1922).” Benda objects to Sorel at some length in Julien Benda and Richard Aldington, The treason of the intellectuals (New York: Norton, 1969).
important that Sorel wrote, because he wrote for different audiences (French socialists, Italian neo-Marxists, sometimes a wide French audience...), and at different historical moments. The texts themselves can in this way—and, it seems to me, only in this way—be helpful in understanding this broader context.

Ideally, method is related dialectically to subject matter. The skeptical and partial approach to biography outlined above is not a principled stand against biography but a response to the particular gratuity of Sorel’s life. Unlike most of the philosophy professors to whom he delivered his presentation on historical materialism with which this introduction began, he radically chose his intellectual and political engagement. This choice is not, it seems to me, best treated as an invitation to pathologize, but rather to be all the more careful about contextualization. Similarly, my chronological and textual account of Sorel’s thought is dictated, I believe, by his actual writing practice. So, too, is my attention to reception dictated by the peculiar nature of Sorel as a historical object.

Martin Jay has recently cautioned against an approach that, inspired by Quentin Skinner, would insist on contextual meaning to the exclusion of other sorts of meaning.71 Jay, reading a sequence of French philosophy that turned to reconsider the Event in the wake of 1968, argues that intellectual historians ought to be alive to the capacity of certain ideas—texts, discourses, practices—to take on meaning only in the fullness of time. Jay then links this to another tendency in modern thought, which is a return to the experiential aspect of historiography—and here experiential for the historian, not their

reader. Jay looks back to Kantian freedom, to which he links Ernst Bloch and Hannah Arendt, as the fundamental source for this way of thinking. The text becomes a sort of event, constructed in its fullness and contingency by the fidelity—the ethical commitment—of the historian.

Curiously, perhaps, Jay leaves out of his brief essay the other figure with whom the French philosophers and others writers he discusses (with the possible exception of Kant) all struggle. That is, Hegel, and Hegel’s way of understanding the retrospective nature of historical meaning. It was, surely, in extricating themselves from the Hegelian-Marxian frame that Alain Badiou and others about whom Jay writes came to the event. And here, too, it is the argument of this dissertation that Sorel, if we attend to his context, turns out to speak to us who might think ourselves well beyond it. Sorel’s trajectory through Marx’s Capital, to Vico’s New Science, and into the elaboration of his own philosophy of diremption, always sought to free the present from the past, to accept the indeterminacy of human freedom, but also to refuse the Hegelian totality that, alone, was said to give it meaning. Sorel, from this perspective, has a few lessons for Jay himself. Sorelian myth, as I argue below, grew out of just such a consideration of historiography’s grappling with indeterminacy as generative of a new reality in the present. The present dissertation tries to take as empirical and as skeptical an approach to the retrospective constitution of Sorel’s texts, that is to their evental status. Put differently, it takes historiography as a political rather than ontological function—perhaps more important for all that.
Intellectual history, as a discipline, is shot through with productive methodological ambiguities. One ideal, and certainly not one scorned here, is the belief that, to follow John Dunn, “both historical specificity and philosophical delicacy are more likely to be attained if they are pursued together, than if one is deserted for the other at an early stage of the investigation.” This dissertation, however philosophically sensitive it wishes to be, is also about political ideas. More than that, it is a narrative. Taking somewhat out of context a passage from a recent essay by J.G.A. Pocock, we can say that political narrative has a distinctive characteristic, “it presents political action as inherently sharing the ambivalences of the narrative itself, and even, as multivalent. This is less a moral or philosophical proposition than a consequence of the narrative itself.” As we begin to fashion historiography, the logic—the rhetoric—of narration itself suggests “that historical action and process take place in more one context at a time.” Sorel himself explains that certain kinds of problems have only specific, not general solutions. Sorel’s work and its fin-de-siècle contexts present methodological problems that are not purely philosophical, historical, or political. Having made a general statement of principles in this introduction, solutions to these problems can only be presented in the form of narratives that assume them.

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Narrative Chapter Outline

This dissertation takes as its guiding thread Sorel’s writings from the 1880s up through the publication of Reflections on Violence in book form in 1908. A major methodological presupposition is that the sequence of Sorel’s writing, reconstructed with some care, and densely contextualized within its proper problematics, conversations, situations and conjunctures, is a historical object. This is, to borrow from John Stanley a term that he himself borrowed from Sorel, to reconstruct the “cinematics” of Sorel’s thought.

The first chapter begins by setting out the philosophical field that confronted Sorel when, especially over the course of the 1880s, he sought to emancipate himself from the education he had received at the hands of the French state. After giving a brief account of Sorel’s biography up to the time he began writing, it locates Sorel’s early writings within this field, in terms of work by philosophers such as Alfred Fouillée, Félix Ravaisson, Emile Boutroux, and Charles Renouvier. It shows how the bundle of his concerns and attempted solutions responded to the basic lines of post-Comtean and academic French philosophy. In this way, it is possible to understand what it was that Sorel found so compelling about Capital. The philosophy of science that Sorel articulated in what he argued was the spirit of Marx, most fully in “L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique,” takes on its full significance as a democratic and practice-oriented antifoundationalist epistemology.

Sorel’s Marxism has already been the subject of much excellent scholarship. However well-studied, the years of Sorel’s ‘orthodoxy’ (1894-1898) remain crucial to
understanding what follows. Further, as the second chapter of this dissertation shows, much of what was distinctive about Sorel’s Marxism in this period and later came from his profound engagement with—in addition to internationally known Marxists such as Antonio Labriola and Edouard Bernstein—mainstream intellectuals of this time such as Émile Durkheim, Gabriel Tarde, Fernand Brunetière, and others. These readings set the stage for understanding Sorel’s interventions in debates on education, his assiduous reading of 18th century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, and finally his influential workerist essay, “L’avenir socialiste des syndicats.” Out of this period, particularly out of Vico, comes the central topos of the institution.

Under the combined impact of the Dreyfus Affair and the Bernsteinstreit, the question of what it meant to be a socialist intellectual became more urgent just as the possibilities for public engagement on this ground widened. The third chapter examines the period (1898-1902) of Sorel’s most sustained commitment not only to what are generally thought of as liberal political positions, but with institutions and organizations that were explicitly bourgeois, pluralist, and liberal. Attending in particular to the way in which, in France, the revisionist crisis in Marxism manifested as a battle over the meaning of democracy, this chapter outlines the theorization and defense of pluralist democracy and liberal political culture that Sorel articulated in these years, through a number of scattered essays in France and Italy, but also through a long essay on the Church-State question. At the center of this theory, I argue, is a notion of the ethical subject who is constituted through political institutions.
The question of the Church dominates an important transition in Sorel’s political orientation, which is the subject of my fourth chapter (1903-5). I argue that the central factor pushing Sorel into an intransigent position vis-à-vis the bourgeois republican state, and increasingly advocating radical separatism for the worker’s movement, was the spectacle of the process of Church-State separation. Crucially, in this period Sorel was hard at work on his treatment of Ernest Renan’s historical method. This entailed a profound engagement with the Catholic modernism debate, which itself touched on philosophical questions long important to Sorel. In implicit dialog with such modernist writers as Alfred Loisy and the German liberal Protestant Adolph von Harnack, Sorel developed substantially toward the notion that discursive and historical positioning is crucial in the construction of an ethical identity. His characterization of Renan’s method as “generative history” presages the role that myth will take on in his most famous work. This context also sees the first formulations of diremption, which he will call his particular method.

The first four chapters of the dissertation are chronological, but also thematic in their contextualization. They can be summarized in the following way. The first chapter sees Sorel working essentially within traditions of French philosophy, and particularly philosophy of science. The second chapter places Sorel’s writing in terms of debates about the nature of social science, that is, of sociology. The third chapter examines Sorel in the context of the liberal political philosophy of the Third Republic, both its institutional existence and debates about the nature of representation, the state, and democracy. The fourth chapter sees Sorel against the backdrop of turmoil in Catholic
thought, centrally the modernist crisis, but also Church-State institutional relations. These different thematic contextualizations emerge from Sorel’s own writing. They are also to some extent artifacts of my own narration—Sorel wrote within all these contexts at once—but the artifice is necessary and, I believe, clarifying rather than confusing. The remaining chapters, however, take a different approach.

*Reflections on Violence* has long dominated writing on Sorel. For this very reason, it cannot be ignored. The fifth and sixth chapters deal with the context and composition of this book. Having established in the foregoing chapters Sorel’s political trajectory and the centrality of the institution, his anxiety before the state, the kinds of freedom he valued—I here show how these values and concepts interact, under the impulse of an ideologically republican state, and Sorel’s attempt to more fully articulate his notion of ‘generative history’ through Benedetto Croce’s aesthetic theory, in order to separate for Sorel resistance to the state from the productive forces of the proletariat. Resistance takes on an all-important role, as consequently does violence. I show how the fault-lines and ambiguities in Sorel’s most famous book render it so productive, so available for different readings. Moreover, I show how Sorel himself came, through the process of writing *Reflections*, to put the ethical subject at the center of politics—how it became impossible for Sorel, on his own terms, to distinguish an ethical stand in resistance to the state, from a genuinely revolutionary act of institution-building. It was a certain version of liberalism, a certain defense of these values, that opened Sorel to nationalist, and eventually fascist appropriation.
This dissertation examines Sorel’s productive life up to 1908, but does not treat in
detail work after that date. Breaking my treatment of Sorel at this moment is defensible
because it was at this point that Sorel became something of an intellectual celebrity.
Julien Benda later wrote that “Sorel belonged to that race of men who are susceptible
only to ideas and are totally indifferent to worldly trinkets. Certainly, following
Reflections on Violence, with the panic of enthusiasm into which that work threw Paul
Bourget, he could easily have entered the Académie. (It is hard to see Sorel doing the
rounds).”74 Benda is probably exaggerating Sorel’s chances, but it is nonetheless the case
that a new kind of politics intervened sharply in Sorel’s life following Reflections.
Already in 1906 he resigned from his administrative post at the highly bourgeois École
des hautes études sociales because, as he wrote, “it seemed dangerous for this
establishment that its administrator had published the Reflections.”75 And indeed this
remained his reputation, so that when he wrote in 1910 to Paul Claudel—a neo-
Catholic—in full enthusiasm over the latter’s most recent play, Claudel reported to André
Gide, “I was quite surprised by this letter. Who is Sorel? I thought he was a revolutionary
anarchist.”76 By this point, Sorel was soliciting Claudel’s participating not in a Marxist,
but in a nationalist journal. This is not to suggest that Sorel’s work between the moment

of *Reflections* and his death in 1922 is without interest. But a quite different set of concerns intervenes.\(^{77}\)

The narrative of this dissertation passes over the complicated story leading, in the interrogative title of an essay by Jacques Rancière, “From Pelloutier to Hitler?”\(^{78}\) Rather, the seventh chapter picks up the Anglophone reception of and scholarship on Sorel’s work at the end of the Second World War, and follows it through to the 1980s. This story is irreducibly transnational. The first studies of Sorel in English, profoundly shaped by a generation of émigré scholars from German universities, positioned him above all as a precursor to fascism and totalitarianism. I follow the evolution of this scholarship, showing how Sorel remained something of an ‘enemy other’ for Cold War Liberalism. The character of his otherness changed over the decades following the war, as the dominant image of Sorel shifted from a ‘German’ to an ‘Italian’ one. In the late 1960s Sorel functioned as a proxy for the New Left—to speak about him was to attack Herbert Marcuse and Frantz Fanon. This chapter closes with a discussion of the first works John Stanley devoted to Sorel, not least in order to explain why Stanley’s work never found the audience it deserved.

\(^{77}\) It would be, for instance, even less possible to pay so little attention to Italian politics as I do in this dissertation. Sorel’s philosophical essays in 1909-1910 are particularly interesting, as is the work that eventually went into his late book on Pragmatism. These are both subjects that I intend to pursue elsewhere, but which have only a tangential place in this dissertation.

This dissertation closes with a historical and theoretical examination of some recent work in postmarxist theory. On the one hand tracing a long, episodic, reading of Sorelian violence through Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Zizek, and on the other hand suggesting conceptual resonances between the Marxism of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and Sorel’s Marxism, I argue that many of these theorists are repeating Sorelian moves within and past Marxism. One problem that requires explanation is how Sorel, a ferociously antiformalist thinker, seems to be so easily appropriated into essentially formalist politics. Contemporary events, particularly the Occupy movement, have posed sharply dilemmas faced also by Sorel, for instance the problem of mediating between or synthesizing anarchist techniques of resistance and Marxist political economy analysis. My historical reconstruction of Sorel suggests both specific, perhaps unsuspected dangers, but also resources to solve pressing problems for theorists working in this vein in the 21st century.

Conclusion

The approach I take to Sorel in this dissertation is unusual, but not without precedent. Let us return to the interwar. At the same moment that Brunschvicg and Halévy were warding off Sorel’s ghost in Paris, his memory was also under contention in Italy. There, he had been claimed by none other than Benito Mussolini as an inspiration, although Antonio Gramsci, in a rather less official venue, continued in a searching and hesitant way to appropriate parts of Sorel’s political thought. Benedetto Croce—a figure of paramount importance for Gramsci—defended Sorel in print against fascist
appropriation. Croce’s intellectual and cultural achievements were internationally recognized in the first half of the 20th century. He was the most prominent liberal critic of the fascists. Although his cultural prestige protected him from outright censorship or imprisonment, his movements were tracked, his friends harassed, and his books no longer displayed in bookstores. Yet he still controlled his journal, La critica.

In its pages, Croce remarked upon the publication of a volume including letters from Sorel. Croce cites a passage from a letter written in October of 1914 in which Sorel defines liberalism as “a juridical system that allows citizens to defend their intellectual, moral or civic independence just as surely as though it were their right to property.” Sorel goes on to say that although parliamentary government was supposed to provide for this defense, it has proven unequal to the task. Still, Sorel says, sounding rather like Halévy would two decades later, “we can only watch [this liberalism] vanish with infinite regret.” Croce comments that unlike the fascists and even, “nourished as he was by Marxism…Sorel…did not allow himself to confuse…liberalism with capitalism, plutocracy, or worse, economic liberalism…[rather,] by virtue of his strong sense of human dignity, he understood the profound and eternal ethical demand to which it responds.” Croce deplores the confusion that has been created by anti-parliamentary polemic and laments the lack of responsibility, the anarchy—the fascism—to which Sorel contributed because “he never asked himself what would happen if men were given the

79 On Croce’s situation here, which has for obvious reasons been quite controversial, see Fabio Fernando Rizi, Benedetto Croce and Italian fascism (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Cecil Sprigge, Benedetto Croce: Man and Thinker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).
intellectual, moral, and civil freedom that he believed necessary, and it was not channeled into corresponding political institutions.”

This dissertation argues, against Croce, that Sorel did ask himself this question, that for an important part of his writing life he insisted on the necessity of institutions to channel freedom, and further that it was only when liberalism came to appear to him as a “profound and eternal ethical demand,” rather than a practical political project, that Sorel began to display, as Croce says, a genuine “lack of responsibility” quite distinct from radicalism. Croce leaves out Sorel’s republicanism, but identifies most of the terms—liberalism, anarchism, Marxism, ethics, and the institution—at the heart of this dissertation. In this light, Sorel occupies the same politico-intellectual space, although in a very different context, that was not long ago claimed under the slogan, *Liberty Before Liberalism*. The chapters that follow present the case that Sorel was first of all a philosopher of institutions. In this regard he was not, as one American historian wrote, “against the Third Republic,” but rather profoundly of the Republic.

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81 It might well be asked how Croce could fail to notice this sort of thing. See chapter six below.
1. French Republican Philosophy of Science and Sorel’s Path to Marx

Whether in these circumstances it is worth anyone’s while to choose science as a ‘vocation’ and whether science itself has an objectively worthwhile ‘vocation’ is itself a value judgment about which nothing useful can be said in the lecture room. […] I personally answer this question in the affirmative through the very fact of my own work. And moreover, I do so on behalf of the point of view that hates intellectuality as if it were the very devil […] If you wish to get the better of this devil, there is no point in running away from him, as so often happens nowadays. Instead, you have to acquire a thorough knowledge of him so as to discover his power and his limitations.

Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation.”

Introduction

The front-matter of the Cambridge translation of Georges Sorel’s Reflections on Violence proudly recounts J.B. Priestley’s suggestion that if one could understand why a “perfect representative of the stuffy petty-bourgeois class” like Sorel could write such a book, one could understand the whole modern age. Sorel indeed, as Priestley said, was an “exceptional man,” but it would be fruitless to demand that his biography explain his work in any strong sense. It is, however, entirely appropriate and possible to turn to Sorel’s biography—even, perhaps, as a representative of a certain class—in order to probe the conditions of possibility for his later work. Biography can, as Priestley suggests, serve as a guide to contextualization. In this chapter, it is pursued for that sake rather than for its own.

This chapter treats Sorel from the period before he began to publish up through his first major work that can be called Marxist. One important goal is to explain why

1 Max Weber et al., The vocation lectures (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004). p 27.
2 For Priestley’s comments on Sorel, see J. B. Priestley, Literature and Western Man (London: Heinemann, 1960). pp 301-306.
Sorel reacted as he did to his reading of *Capital*. This is framed as a reading, a textual encounter, rather than prejudicially or in teleological fashion as a ‘coming to Marxism.’ Sorel’s early Marxism is enthusiastic, to be sure, but the enthusiasm is for a new scientific tool rather than a new-found faith. Marx’s *Capital*, as Sorel read it, solved certain well-defined intellectual problems. Although Sorel’s solutions to these problems were original and idiosyncratic, the problems themselves were ones he shared with a generation of explicitly Republican philosophers. This chapter, then, seeks to contextualize Sorel’s *reading*, particularly in the 1880s, as well as his early writing.

The broad context invoked here is late-19th century history and philosophy of science, particularly in France. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger has recently argued that the end of the 19th century saw a major transformation in epistemological thinking. Rheinberger emphasizes that science lost its character as *system*, to become above all *process*. In the same motion it lost its unity and scientists at first reacted with alarm and mistrust to their newfound pluralism. This was the historicization of epistemology. ¹ It is one goal of this chapter to argue that Sorel participated in this movement, indeed anticipated some central elements of it. Despite Sorel’s lack of institutional affiliation, his engagements in the philosophy of science were neither idiosyncratic nor isolated. He took part in an intellectual community through the *Revue philosophique* and was recognized as a part of this community. The problems he discusses in articles and letters-to-the-editor in this

³ Rheinberger, *On Historicizing Epistemology: An Essay*. pp 1-2. Rheinberger’s terms seem to carry with them certain ethical or political norms. This, too, is something Sorel is useful in thinking through. For more on the late-19th century escape from science-as-system, see Leo Catana, "Tannery and Duhem on the Concept of a System in the History of Philosophy and History of Science," *Intellectual History Review* 21, no. 4 (2011).
period were widely recognized, although his perspective on certain issues was at odds with accepted opinion. Sorel’s adoption of a certain kind of Marxism, although motivated by his own particular itinerary, therefore has significance beyond this itinerary. For Sorel, *Capital* contained solutions to problems that dogged philosophical and *savant* discourse of the 1880s and 90s, especially among those participating in what we can usefully call republican critical positivism.

This chapter, then, combines biography, contextualization, and textual exegesis. It begins with an account of Sorel’s life and social location before he began working. The intellectual coordinates within which he seems to have moved before he began to publish are then mapped out, particularly the field of French philosophy that he would have encountered. After a brief treatment of his two first books, I turn to a more detailed consideration of his early writings, centrally those on philosophy of science and psychophysics. These writings, many of which appeared in the *Revue philosophique*, prepare the way for Sorel’s first real foray into social theory, his exegetical essay on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. I turn next to Sorel’s often-misunderstood declaration of Marxist faith, a three-page letter to the editor of the *Revue*. The last part of this chapter discusses Sorel’s first sustained philosophical publication, “L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique,” emphasizing the role played by Franz Reuleaux in shaping Sorel’s Marxism.
Contextualizing an Absent Writer

Although this dissertation is not an intellectual biography, it makes use of intellectual biography. If one wants to understand Sorel’s orientation and development, it is impossible to ignore the years before he began to publish. What can usefully be said not only about his training at the École polytechnique, but about his career as a civil servant, and perhaps his reading and thinking in the early decades of the Third Republic? What do his years of working and reading tell us about his writing that the writing itself does not? They can be a context that helps us to understand the conditions of possibility for his later engagement with Marx, the abiding problems that shape the deep structure of his work, even some aspects of his trajectory of sociability.

Lack of sources is a real difficulty for investigations of the first decades of Sorel’s life. The main file kept on Sorel’s professional activities by the government was destroyed in the 1910 flood of Paris. Sorel himself left us no centralized personal archive of letters or papers from this period. Although a few reminiscences exist, they are nearly all obituaries, and although they contain some factual information, can hardly be considered raw sources. This is not to say that no sources exist. Sorel did leave a bureaucratic trail of his professional life. ⁴ A few early letters have been discovered.⁵ Pierre Andreu was the first scholar to do real biographical research on Sorel, as early as the 1940s, and uncovered a list of volumes Sorel borrowed from the municipal library in

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⁴ See for instance the sheet reproduced in Charzat, ed. Georges Sorel.
Willy Gianinazzi, who has more recently renewed research into Sorel’s biography, has substantially enriched the picture of Sorel’s early life. Still, so much remains unknown about Sorel’s thinking in this period that scholars have generally been content to accept his own description of it: “I strove to free myself from what remained of my education” and “efface from my memory the ideas that had been thrust upon it.”

We ought not accept this account. While making use of the biographical information and few texts that do exist, I insist in what follows on the philosophical and political context in which Sorel was busy educating, or re-educating, himself. Using the materials that do exist to correct and extrapolate, significant points can be made through this context about Sorel’s formation and problem situation.

Georges Eugène Sorel was born on November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1847 in Cherbourg. Early accounts suggest that he was gifted at mathematics from a young age. The years Sorel spent at school in Paris—from 1864 to 1869, his late teens and early 20s—belong to the late, liberal phase of the Second Empire. The young Sorel had some insight into the intrigues of the imperial court through a relative placed as chambellan to the Empress. This did not lead him to favor the imperial system. These were the years in which, as Philip Nord has shown, democratic and egalitarian practices spread through a variety of

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\textsuperscript{6} Reproduced as an appendix in Andreu’s book, and unfortunately left out of the 1982 republication. See Andreu, \textit{Notre maître, M. Sorel}.

\textsuperscript{7} As he famously says in the letter to Daniel Halévy at the beginning of \textit{Reflections}. See Sorel and Jennings, \textit{Reflections on violence}. p 5.

\textsuperscript{8} For some of this detail, see Sorel’s own biographical letter (from 1910) and the reproduced official records in Charzat. In addition to Gianinazzi, see Bruno Centorame, “La jeunesse de Georges Sorel,” \textit{Figures cherbourgeoises, Mémoires de la Société nationale académique de Cherbourg} 31(1995).

social institutions so that habits of self-rule developed in bourgeois society. Following Nord, by the late years of the Empire, the lines of cleavage in the Latin Quarter were clear: “On the one side stood the imperial state and the regime of Moral Order, seconded by Cousinist and clerical interests; on the other were sincere and manly youth, partisans of science and free thought who fought against constraints dictated from above.” Sorel sided with the later. Rather than a monarchist, the young Sorel—in common with many of his peers—took a position that can be described as “conservative liberal and resting on a Catholic base.” Together with a broad spectrum of “young liberals,” Sorel engaged in anti-Bonapartist activism that, especially later on in his life, he would idealize.

Sorel received a first rate scientific and mathematical education at the École polytechnique. Many of the most sophisticated theoretical scientists of the later 19th century emerged from its halls—Henri Poincaré (1854-1912) is one example particularly relevant to Sorel. There is a long history of French social theorists—generally utopians—emerging from the Polytechnique, and a strong association of the school with the Saint-Simonians. It was through this school, the argument goes, that the Saint-Simonians and their developmentalist notion of modernity and freedom came to dominate the practical activities of the state during the Second Empire. Sorel himself complained about the

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11 Ibid. p 40.
12 Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne: Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889-1914.* p 28. Pierre Andreu reported that Sorel had traced out “Henri V” on one of his school books. Gianinazzi rejects even this report, whatever its worth, as second-hand reporting told to Andreu by Gilbert Marie, a monarchist. See note 22, p 28.
13 Ibid. p 27.
highly theoretical nature of the school’s training on many occasions—its students, he believed, were typically better prepared to enter into practical economic life before they entered the school than when they left. We must not be too hasty, however, to label graduates of the Polytechnique simple technocrats, eager to cut away at lived reality with the blade of theory.

Sorel’s education at the Polytechnique and his subsequent career path may have pushed him to think about the politics of practical and technical work, certainly it would have given him the opportunity to do so. Historian Theodore Porter, taking a broad perspective on technocracy, argues that “French engineers used mathematics to plan bridges and railroads, but they rarely entrusted decisions to the numbers. Their prestige rested mainly on their background, education, and the relation to the state. The authority of calculation and objectivity were secondary. Numbers were not powerful in themselves, and […] could only provide a modest supplement to institutional power.”15 Sorel eventually rose to the rather high rank of chief engineer in Ponts et chaussées. In this position, as Porter emphasizes, he would have been as much in charge of making administrative—essentially political—decisions as engaged directly in calculation or building.16 Mathematics alone can never decide where a bridge or a railway should go; politics, however disguised in economics, must always come to its assistance. Sorel

16 According to Porter, there were probably only about 300 civil engineers of this rank at any given moment in France. See Ibid. p 244, note 7. Porter’s interpretation of the nature of French technocracy runs counter to received wisdom on the topic. See, by way of comparison, the placing of Sorel in terms of a general submission of society to technical expertise in the classic, Sigmund Neumann, Permanent revolution: totalitarianism in the age of international civil war, 2d ed. (New York: Praeger, 1965). pp 163-164.
would thus, in his daily life, have been presented with the indissoluble connection between on the one hand science and technique and on the other social and political demands.  

Sorel graduated and left Paris for his first assignment just before the arrival of war with Prussia. He spent the last moments of Napoleon III’s empire in Corsica. This island had both symbolic and economic significance to the Bonapartist regime, which engaged in quite substantial infrastructure projects there. It is possible that in Corsica, Sorel would have come into direct contact with people fleeing political instability on the Italian peninsula—certainly Italian influence was historically strong there. After an interlude in the Tarn, Sorel was sent to a more straightforwardly imperial post: Mostaganem, in northwestern Algeria not far from Oran. Sorel’s experiences as an administrator engaged in developing—making French—this territory periodically find expression later on in his writings, but he rarely writes explicitly about it. He will often look to the Kabyles as an example of alternate, even stateless, ways of living. Algeria will be an important reference point for Sorel in discussions of land reform. Given the importance for the

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17 See the 1872 letter, written probably to one of his former professors, on the occasion of reading a “quite badly done” discussion of John Stuart Mill’s political economy in the *Revue de deux mondes*. Sorel is very aware of the political economic considerations of state involvement in building infrastructure, managing banks, and even the possibility that the state might appropriate some portion of *rentes*—unearned profits on land. In this letter, Sorel insists—again, probably to a former professor—that “certainly I am not a socialist,” but also that “I presume to examine any point, and the right to property is not for me divine or dogmatic.” Sorel and Andreu, "Une lettre de Georges Sorel en 1872. Science et libéralisme.” p 105.

18 On Corsica under the Second Empire, and the suggestion that the infrastructure built even at this point was semi-colonial, for resource extraction, see, Paul Arrighi and Antoine Olivesi, *Histoire de la Corse*, Univers de la France et des pays francophones (Toulouse: Privat, 1990); Michel Vergé-Franceschi, *Histoire de Corse : le pays de la grandeur*, 2 vols., Histoire (Editions du Félin) (Paris: Ed. du Félin, 1996).
Second International of the peasant or agrarian question, this will be rather often. It is not too much to say that Sorel’s few years in Algeria put him in a privileged position as an observer of what has more recently been called “the French Imperial Nation-State.”

The bulk of Sorel’s career in Ponts et chaussées, however, was spent in Perpignan, where he worked and was a “provincial notable” between 1879 and 1892. Sorel was not alone in Perpignan. In 1875, he fell ill traveling through Lyon. His nurse was a former silk-worker a few years his senior, Marie-Euphrasie David. Although the two seem not to have married officially, Sorel referred to her as his wife. They lived together until her death in 1897. After this date, he used black-border ed mourning paper for nearly all of his correspondence. He dedicated two of his books to her, and wrote later on that he had “worked to raise a philosophical monument worthy of her memory.” For much of his writing life Sorel lived with one of Marie’s nephews and his family. His rather meager estate went to them as well. If Sorel seemed solitary to those more

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19 See for instance, Sorel’s discussion of the difference between state-managed ‘internal’ colonialism in Algeria and state socialism, Georges Sorel, "Ein sozialistischer Staat?," Sozialistische Monatshefte 2, no. 1 (1898).
21 Letter to Lanzillo, in Charzat, p 12.
22 See the correspondence in the Marcel Rivière Archive, IISG, Amsterdam.
conventionally embedded in Parisian intellectual sociability, it is hasty to call him lonely or profoundly isolated.

Sorel had participated actively in the intellectual life of Perpignan, serving as secretary to a learned society, writing on the local history of the Revolution, and forming intellectual connections he would retain for many years. In this city, he worked his way up the ranks of Ponts et chaussées, no doubt increasingly obliged to deal with all the local, not to say petty, politics that makes up the lives of most reasonably high ranking bureaucrats. It was from Perpignan that he published his first two books in 1889. Although according to his mother, Sorel had always “worked excessively,” it is only for his time in Perpignan that direct evidence exists of what he was doing.23 This takes the form of the list of Sorel’s borrowings, between 1884 and 1891, from the municipal library.24

For the purposes of this chapter, the most important fact about this list is the prominence on it of the Revue philosophique. Of course the list is only a portion of Sorel’s reading in this period, but because it lines up reasonably well with what he published in the late 1880s, it seems broadly representative. We see reading that would have gone toward his book on the Bible.25 Similarly, some volumes obviously were occasioned by his work on Socrates (Xenophon, Aristotle, Fustel de Coulange) or the monograph on the Revolution (issues of the Revue historique or volumes from the 1790s

23 See the letter reproduced in Andreu, Notre maître, M. Sorel. p 315.
24 Reproduced in Ibid. pp 320-323.
25 Including many volumes of Ernest Renan, but also the great Jewish orientalist Joseph Halévy’s Mélanges de critique et d’histoire.
of *Le Moniteur*). Unsurprisingly, given how often references to them appear in Sorel’s writings on psychophysics and aesthetics, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, Herbert Spencer, and Wilhelm Wundt all appear on the list. We can see that Sorel, like much of the educated public, read the *Revue de deux mondes*. But we can also see that he borrowed at different moments most of the volumes of the *Revue philosophique*, which had begun publication in 1876. In addition to Aristotle and other Greek philosophers, there is Descartes, Laplace, Fresnel, Comte, Ravaission, Hartmann, and Vacherot. In short, this partial list of Sorel’s reading in Perpignan suggests that Sorel worked to educate himself about the main lines of French philosophy in the 19th century.26

The above considerations suggest an image of Sorel’s pre-Parisian life that is different from the one that typically provides the backdrop to studies of his later intellectual and political activity. He was not an instinctive monarchist, but a supporter of the liberal Republic. He was not an isolated and embittered technician, but a well-connected and sociable administrator with broad experience. His life in Perpignan was that of a reasonably high-status provincial notable. There is a simple point to be made here about Sorel’s life trajectory that is often missed when he is boxed together with the younger intellectuals with whom he got along best in Paris. We can look to Claude Digeon’s classic periodization and say that Sorel came of age in the generation of 1870.27 Digeon writes that this generation “was not, as a whole, struck intellectually by the defeat, but rather sentimentally,” so that “the formation of its historical philosophy was

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slow […] The generation of 1850 was brutally disoriented by the war, that of 1870 troubled and disconcerted by it in the long term.” Sorel belonged not to the generation disgraced by defeat, but to that which tempered a long heritage of republican revolution with liberalism, and made the Third Republic.

One consequence of this is to place Sorel’s self-education as a philosopher and social theorist within a specific moment in mainstream French philosophy. This is when, as suggested by the citation from Nord above, an insurgent body of philosophy sought to transform itself from critique (of Cousinian eclecticism and the Church) to construction. The old order was out of power, and the new order had to be built on firm moral and conceptual foundations. It was this project that Sorel would have seen in the pages of the *Revue philosophique*.

**The Philosophy of the Third Republic**

Sorel’s relationship to traditions of French philosophy has often been cast in terms that are both simplistic and largely negative. According to Daniel Halévy, Sorel “wanted to break through the wall presented to him by Comte’s relativism and Taine’s determinism, and cross the pitfalls that Renan’s skepticism opened beneath his feet.” Shlomo Sand, more recently, agreed that Sorel worked within “a philosophical problematic […] outside the domain of official philosophy.”

28 Ibid. p 318.

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academic philosophy in the later 19th century should not be over-estimated, one must also not be too quick to accept the disavowal of that era’s philosophy by the 20th century. A positive and complex connection existed between Sorel and the various philosophical traditions available to him, particularly academic philosophy.\textsuperscript{31}

In order to establish Sorel’s position vis-à-vis the philosophic-political project of founding the Third Republic, some coordination of that project itself is in order. In important ways, the history of French philosophy in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century has yet to be written. Much scholarly attention has gone to the early part of the century, working through the consequences of Revolution and Restoration. The ‘Victorian’ era of French philosophy, however, is radically foreign to us perhaps because it was so close to those who are now at the heart of the history of French philosophy. Recent work tends to reproduce the rupture that the interwar generation asserted had been caused by the arrival of Husserl and Heidegger’s phenomenology in France.\textsuperscript{32} Jean-Paul Sartre’s generation—with some important exceptions—repudiated the influence of Henri Bergson and especially his more universitaire contemporaries as chiens de garde, without intellectual importance. Historians have too often taken their word for it.

To write such a history of 19\textsuperscript{th} century philosophy—and particularly its accommodation with the Third Republic—is an inherently political task. Michel Foucault has suggested that a line could be drawn through the history of French philosophy

\textsuperscript{31} As more recent work such as Gianinazzi’s has recognized, but see also Rolland, “Peut-on reformer la democratie?” Une préface de Georges Sorel”; Patrice Rolland, “Droit, sociétés primitives et socialisme: Lettres de Georges Sorel à Jacques Flach (1900-1913),” Mil neuf cent: revue d'histoire intellectuelle 29(2011).
\textsuperscript{32} See for instance Geroulanos, An atheism that is not humanist emerges in French thought; Peden, “Descartes, Spinoza, and the Impasse of French Philosophy: Ferdinand Alquié versus Martial Gueroult.”
separating, “a philosophy of experience, meaning, and the subject, from a philosophy of knowledge, rationality, and the concept.” Foucault’s specific aim was to describe the underpinnings of the postwar intellectual world, and particularly to bring out the importance of Georges Canguilhem, but the distinction has larger significance:

Doubtless, this cleavage is of long standing and one could follow it back across the 19th century: Bergson and Poincaré, Lachelier and Couturat, Maine de Biran and Comte […] It would seem that the second remained both the more theoretical and the more focused on speculative tasks, the most distant from immediate political questions. And yet it was [this side] that during the war took part in the combat, very directly, as though the question of the foundation of rationality could not be dissociated from interrogation of the current conditions of its existence […] It might be asked why such reflection, following its own logic, would find itself so profoundly connected to the present.33

In as much as Sorel has been admitted into ‘Philosophy,’ it has been as a follower of Bergson, Nietzsche, James. One goal of the present contextualization is to argue that, in as much as we remain convinced that Foucault’s dichotomy retains at least heuristic value, we should admit that Sorel fits at least as much into the second line of filiations (Poincaré) as into the first (Bergson). Sorel’s eccentricity can usefully be understood as an instance of “ramifications, interferences, even connections” between what Foucault calls these two “quite profoundly heterogeneous” philosophical orientations.34

Foucault’s cut across French philosophy is self-consciously retrospective. It is usefully juxtaposed to Félix Ravaisson’s major survey La philosophie en France au XIXe siècle (1868), which we can treat as in some sense prospective. Ravaisson was a powerfully original philosopher in his own right, having written an influential thesis on

33 Michel Foucault, "La vie: l'expérience et la science," Revue de métaphysique et de morale 90(1985). p 4. For Knox Peden, this distinction indeed runs up into the present, in the form of a Deleuze-Badiou pair that, it must be said, makes for a rather monotonous sequel to the Bergson-Poincaré binary.
34 Ibid. p 4.
Aristotle’s metaphysics, and then the brilliant essay *De l’habitude* in the 1830s.\(^{35}\) Perhaps through the machinations of Victor Cousin, Ravaissone did not receive a position teaching philosophy, but by the 1860s had become the inspector general of higher education.\(^{36}\) It was in this capacity that he was asked to write a report on the recent progress of philosophy in France. The resulting book summarizes and discusses an extraordinarily wide range of philosophies then current. Ravaissone sets up a series of dichotomies to characterize in a manageable way the many philosophers he discusses: understanding and will (*l’entendement et la volonté*); materialism and idealism; form and content; analysis and synthesis—all of which express the basic question of determinism or free will. These divisions and disagreements—particularly managed around the question of free will—are at least as useful as broad and potentially misleading labels like ‘eclectic,’ ‘spiritualist,’ ‘positivist,’ and so forth.

It is perhaps not surprising that the answer given to the philosophical question of free will should have political consequences. This is particularly so given the commitment of the Republican camp to the rhetoric of science. A serious problem presented itself here: how to maintain at once a rigorously scientific worldview, and also take seriously human self-determination? Both of these seemed required for a solidly

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\(^{35}\) Although Sorel was not polite later in his life about the value of this work—it was, he reported in 1917 to Benedetto Croce, notable for its lack of intelligence, and owed its reputation entirely to Ravaissone’s powerful status within the administration. Sorel and Croce, *Lettere a Benedetto Croce*. p 261.

\(^{36}\) On Victor Cousin’s philosophy and the network of students through which he long exerted substantial intellectual, emotional, and political influence, see Jan Goldstein, *The post-revolutionary self: politics and psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). Ravaissone was not cut off from this, and indeed mentored younger philosophers in a way not radically different from Cousin—see the letters from Lachelier to Ravaissone, and then Lachelier to Boutroux, in the *Fonds Brunschvicg* at IMEC, côtes: BCR 01-04, BCR 02-01.
founded Republican regime. So it is not too much to say that the status of science vis-à-vis human beings was the driving question of the philosophy of the early Third Republic. How to escape the dualism of idealism and materialism that is implied in the very question of free-will? Or should dualism be embraced?

The philosophy of the first decades of the Third Republic is in a sense only a series of attempts to break free of the dichotomies or bad dualisms that sprang up all around the question of free will. The broad philosophical schools visible in the 1880s can be distinguished in part by their strategy for doing so. Ravaissone mentioned already the neo-Kantianism, or neo-criticism, of Renouvier, which maintained a dualism that often came down to mind and body.37 We are not entirely beyond the pale in suggesting filiations from this revived Kantianism to Émile Boutroux’s foundational 1874 thesis, De la contingence des lois de la nature, which finds a space for human freedom within the framework of scientific determinism. In 1893, the new Revue de métaphysique et de morale positioned itself, “between positivism…that stops at the facts and mysticism that leads to

37 On Renouvier, see Blais, Au principe de la République : le cas Renouvier; Warren Schmaus, "Renouvier and the method of hypothesis," Studies In History and Philosophy of Science Part A 38, no. 1 (2007); Mike Hawkins, "Charles Renouvier and the 'Conservative Republic' in France, 1872-9," History of Political Thought 33, no. 1 (2012). Sorel himself was quite aware of the weight of the Kantian legacy—which certainly dominates scholarship the history of philosophy about the late 19th century, in the way that social theory long dominated the period’s intellectual history—for instance in a review from 1893, Sorel writes that “Toutes les théories modernes datent de Kant: tout ce qui a été fait depuis la Renaissance jusqu'à la publication des Critiques ne compte pas pour grand'chose dans l'histoire de l'esprit humain. Toute la philosophie a été bouleversée de fond en comble par Kant; aucun révolution analogue n'a peut-être été opérée dans les connaissances. […] Comme tous les très grands penseurs, Kant n'a pas fondé une école; mais toutes les écoles dépendent de lui. Il est devenu, par suite, très difficile de savoir ce qu'il faut appeler le kantisme aujourd'hui.” Georges Sorel, "Fargès - L'idée du continu," Revue philosophique 35(1893). p 648.
superstitions.” Alfred Fouillée, about whom we will have more to say later, put forward a neo-Platonist ‘method of conciliation’ in order to overcome these binaries in his 1872 *La liberté et le déterminisme*. Léon Bourgeois, who was a politician rather than a philosopher, borrowed heavily from Fouillée’s writings in his 1896 pamphlet polemicizing for the program of *solidarité*. He mapped the very same binaries more or less seamlessly onto rational liberal individualism and emotional socialist collectivism—then presented a ‘third way.’ Émile Durkheim’s sociology should also be placed in this frame, as an attempt, after Comte, to solve philosophical problems by displacing them onto society. The only real heir of Ravaisson’s also deserves attention here—Henri Bergson, whose 1889 *Les données immédiate de la conscience* set out, very differently from Boutroux, to found human freedom within a world of scientific determinism. Of course, the manner in which one chose to solve this philosophical problem—though it took different forms, with specific meanings: freedom and determinism, idealism and materialism, spiritualism and positivism—was always political.

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41 For more on Durkheim, see chapter two of the present dissertation. But see for instance the introductory material for, Émile Durkheim et al., *Durkheim's philosophy lectures : notes from the Lycée de Sens course, 1883-1884* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
The question was met with most clearly in certain areas of medical science. Ravaisson wrote in 1868 that “the question of relations between the physical and the moral, the soul and the spirit, presents itself in its most precise form in the study of the nervous system and, above all, the brain.” In 1872, at the beginning of his career in the Ponts et Chaussées, Sorel sent a personal letter on this very subject to Monseigneur Félix Dupanloup, an eminent Catholic intellectual. Sorel apologizes for his forwardness, but says that the work of criticizing “bad doctrines” is “the duty of every good citizen and every honest man.” He argues against the notion that the nervous system is endowed with a special vital force, different from that present in, for instance, muscles. To accept such an idea is to locate the soul in the nervous system, and also to claim rights for science over the soul. This is both bad science and bad for religion. Sorel says of the work he is criticizing:

Many people today falter at the difficulty of establishing an accord between religious ideas and the discoveries of science. And reading these confused and ill-formed books is for them really dangerous: what will remain with them after this reading is that physiology must one day rule over the soul and the conscience [...] For myself, I have always found that in studying these things without taking sides, with a broad mind free of prejudice, one does not encounter serious difficulties in establishing an accord between faith and science.

The letter is a typical Sorelian text—a modest correction on some delicate but consequential metaphysical problems raised by a scientific claim. It is paradoxical, but

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43 Dupanloup sometimes sat on these juries at the Sorbonne. For instance, he seems to have attacked Fouillée quite vigorously for materialism as his defense. See William Logue, From Philosophy to Sociology: The Evolution of French Liberalism, 1870-1914 (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983). p 131ff.
not really unusual for the time, in that Sorel defends a particular kind of spiritual traditionalism by deploying an aggressive scientific rationality. It also shows that well before he began his public intellectual engagement, he was concerned with the issues identified by the philosophical establishment as most pressing.

Although it anticipates slightly, it is worth saying a few words about the end of the period that is described here. In 1908, Émile Boutroux wrote a pendant to Ravaisson’s epochal report. The period is marked off by Ravaisson’s act of synthesis, but also the pedagogical influence at the ENS of Jules Lachelier, and the growing importance of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Immanuel Kant. For Boutroux, the most important phenomenon was the attachment of philosophy to the sciences, and its consequent pluralization, not to say fragmentation. This was most visible in the realm of psychology—as Ravaisson said—but also in such upstart disciplines as sociology, all of which sought to answer, with their own methods, the problems of philosophy. For Boutroux, this poses the very serious threat of putting an end to philosophy itself. Philosophy has as its essential task to bring to the world “a principle of unity drawn from human nature. […] A certain anthropomorphism is thus implied in the very idea of philosophy.” Science, Boutroux is able to assert, definitively rejects both the principle of unity and this attendant anthropomorphism. Even so, a philosophy that seeks, as he says the tendency is now to do, to make itself “immanent” to science, is not in fact dissolving itself into the irreducible antihumanist pluralism of science itself. There is a

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46 Ibid. p 713.
47 Ibid. p 685.
secure role for philosophers: in “comparing what is with what science explains, they unfailingly point to a gap [un hiatus] between these two terms.”  In the end, indeed, for Boutroux there is perhaps not so much any longer philosophy, only philosophers, only a philosophical spirit, which amounts to a faith in this permanent gap between is and ought. “Devoted to science,” Boutroux wrote, philosophers “remain apostles of the ideal. They intend not to separate understanding of what is from pursuit of what should be.”

Boutroux defines the philosophical spirit as “the power of intellectual and moral creation,” to whose concept reality inevitably proves inadequate. Philosophy is thus an almost Bergsonian creative energy, “above all an effort of the philosophical spirit, which is to say the spirit, to become conscious of itself [prendre conscience de lui-même] through the sciences and institutions that, born from it, tend constantly to detach themselves from it and exist in themselves.”

For Boutroux, then, philosophy is something like mind itself, productive of concepts as such, inexhaustible and eternal. Sorel fits perfectly into Boutroux’s retrospective account of philosophy as an anthropomorphic principle of unity at the center of a constantly pluralizing and dissolving body of scientific knowledge.

Boutroux was rejected by the generation of the interwar for leaving politics out of his account of philosophy without, in fact, having an apolitical philosophy. Indeed the maxim by which he designates French philosophy—“par la vérité, pour la justice”—is a

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48 Ibid. p 714.
49 Ibid. p 714.
50 Ibid. p 716.
Dreyfusard one.\textsuperscript{51} It is a vision of the Republic as spiritual and conservative, but also liberal and open. So Boutroux does not tell us about the struggle of Renouvier or Fouillée to provide a philosophical foundation for Republicanism. He does not tell us about his own effort to keep a space open for a Catholic conception of human nature within a scientific worldview. He mentions Darwin and Spencer, but he does not—as some did—add Marx to that list. He says nothing at all about the rise of socialism, although he might have in the context of \textit{solidarisme}. From the perspective of Boutroux’s 1908 summation, we can say that Sorel belongs to the period of French philosophy dominated by the pursuit of immanence within science, and the belief that in so doing, one supported a certain political order. If the First World War brought a unity to the Republic that had seemed unavailable a decade earlier, it also brought politics well out into the open.

Similarly, the arrival of German phenomenology indeed marked a break, although not of the kind sometimes suggested. It was not the arrival of an antihumanism in French philosophy, but rather the appropriation of an antihumanism that had always, as Boutroux evidences, seemed to belong quite comfortably to the sciences. Sorel’s interest in the context of French philosophy as a long tradition is not least to highlight the fact that much of what is treated as belonging to the interwar was well established, if with a different political significance, before 1914. Rather than pursuing this further, we turn back now to Sorel’s writings of the 1880s.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. p 716.
Settling Accounts

Accounts of Sorel’s writing usually begin with the two books that appeared in 1889. Both the Contribution d’une étude profane du Bible and Le Procès de Socrate are clearly the result of long preparation and labor. These works have often been taken as evidence of a deep underlying conservatism: the Athenians were right to poison Socrates, who after all really was corrupting the youth; the Bible, a book of heroic morality, is and should be the book of the people. John Stanley argues not only that “the basic framework of [Sorel’s] moral system…is to be found in” Le Procès de Socrate, but that this book “contains one of the most complete outlines of the social basis of a moral society to be found anywhere in his works.”

What matters for Stanley is the Proudhonian attempt to combine traditional virtues with productivism. The family unit, for instance, is for Sorel as it was for Proudhon the unity of procreation with erotic love—failure to balance the two results in corruption. If this is taken to be the core of Sorel’s thought, we would indeed have to begin in Athens and Jerusalem.

The perspective taken here is different. The story being told in this chapter de-emphasizes these two books. This is a choice—as it is a choice not to spend more time with Sorel’s writings on the Revolution in Roussillon. I do not wish to argue that there is no continuity between these early writings and his later work, because obviously there

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52 Stanley, The sociology of virtue : the political & social theories of George Sorel. pp 28-29. Stanley points out that the importance Sorel ascribes to Xenophon is out of step with most modern commentators—with the notable exception of Leo Strauss.

53 Georges Sorel, "Les girondins du Roussillon," Bulletin de la Société Agricole, Scientifique et Littéraire des Pyrénées-Orientales 30(1889). This nearly monograph-length study might be interestingly juxtaposed with Hippolyte Taine’s French Revolution. Moreover, it shows Sorel experimenting with the historiographical utility of Cesare Lombroso’s scientific categories.
is some continuity. What interests me the most here, however, is Sorel’s involvement with larger, mainstream intellectual debates. From this perspective it seems to me best to treat all of these writings as a settling of accounts, as part of Sorel’s autodidactic declaration of independence. The trial of Socrates; the Hebrew Bible; the French Revolution—when arrayed in this way it seems not unreasonable to describe these areas of interest as foundational ones. To be sure, one could examine Sorel’s conclusions at this early date and find idiosyncrasies, but it seems to me that this is counterproductive. Sorel’s originality is best approached not in the moment of intellectual self-emancipation, but rather once he has re-engaged with the intellectual field on its own terms. For this project, the writings on psychophysics and philosophy of science are fundamental.

It is worth pausing, if only briefly, over what we might call Sorel’s citational practices in these books. In the *Contribution*, Sorel often argues with such Francophone orientalists and philologists as Ernest Renan, Édouard Reuss, Joseph Halévy, and often against David Strauss and other of their interlocutors. The Socrates book locates Sorel yet more clearly. Sorel’s preferences are on display, for instance in citing Victor Cousin’s repetition of the common opinion that religion was at the heart of the prosecution of Socrates. Sorel’s comment: Cousin “could not be more completely mistaken.” Alfred Fouillée, in contrast, “understands history too well to accept so unscientific a

54 Sorel’s range of reference was limited to French, but often looks to translations into French, for instance, the commentary on Matthew: Elie Soloweyczyk, *Kôl Kôrê. (Vox clamantis.) La Bible, le Talmud et l’Evangile* (Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1875).
Sorel prefers to turn for his Greek history to Fustel de Coulange, as well as German scholars Eduard Zeller and Ernst Curtius.

It was by no means idiosyncratic for Sorel to engage with Fouillée in a treatment of Socrates. In 1867 and 1868, he had published prize-winning studies of Plato and Socrates, followed a few years later by the already-mentioned and more overtly political thesis on *Liberté et determinisme*. Fouillée played an important part in the intellectual life of the early Third Republic. He was a living symbol of republican liberal meritocracy.

Largely self-trained, he caused a sensation in the late 1860s by taking first place in the recently re-instated philosophy *agrégation*—already something that it was assumed only a Normalien could accomplish. Resolutely secular in his philosophy, he earned the enmity, but also the respect, of more established philosophers. Fouillée, a sort of neo-Platonist, was devoted to recovering and ‘reconciling’ the kernels of truth contained within all the great philosophical systems of the past. He was regarded as a “subtle

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56 Sorel refers enthusiastically to Curtius book quite early and Zeller later on. He has both these Germans in translation. Ibid. p 7, 117.
57 Indeed, his partner, and eventual wife, wrote the *Tour de France par deux enfants*, the so-called ‘little red book’ of the Third Republic. His biography was very much ‘constructed’ along these lines. The first pages of a biographical sketch open with the following story recounted by Mme Guyau, of an incident from his childhood. His father, the owner of a small and failing slate mine, was confronted by an angry group of workers at his own home. He saved his family, which was cowering behind locked doors, from death at the hand of the mob by going out to meet them, dressed in his official costume, and calmly explaining to them the facts of the situation and the constraints that he himself was under. Reason and regalia tamed the wild crowd. Guyau, *La philosophie et la sociologie d'Alfred Fouillée*. pp vii-viii. For a different and interesting contextualization, see Jennifer Michael Hecht, *The end of the soul: scientific modernity, atheism, and anthropology in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Martin S. Staum, *Nature and nurture in French social sciences, 1859-1914 and beyond* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011). See also Mona Ozouf’s essay on the *Tour de France par deux enfants* in Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
58 This, at any rate, is the tone Lachelier takes toward Fouillée in his letters to Boutroux in the early 1870s. See IMEC. BCR 02-01.
dialectician.” He believed strongly in science, which he understood as the rigorous connection of cause with effect; but he also believed that ideas could function as causes. In particular, the very idea of freedom was, in his most well-known neologism, an “idée-force” that in fact produced freedom.\(^59\) Sorel’s engagement with Fouillée, here as elsewhere, is respectful but critical. We will return to Fouillée, and Sorel’s engagement with him, after treating Sorel’s writings on psychophysics.

**Psychophysics and the *Revue philosophique***

The significance of the fact that Sorel’s first publications were in Ribot’s *Revue philosophique* lies mainly in the position that this review occupied in the intellectual field at that time, and only secondarily in the accord of Sorel’s writings with the perspective of that publication.\(^60\) This is to say that although it is of course worth noting that Sorel’s essays fit with those they appeared next to, the most important thing is that he was publishing in the only professional philosophical journal of the time.\(^61\) This bears emphasis because it helps to correctly contextualize Sorel. His formative years were

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\(^{59}\) Described in this way, Fouillée begins to appear as a sort of ‘light-Hegelian,’ both in his politics (liberal-progressive), his vision of history (cumulative), and his metaphysics (idealistic, but with eyes to the ground). The idée-force, in particular, has been compared to the Hegelian Idea that brings itself about.


\(^{61}\) There was, for instance, space in school budgets for *lycées* to subscribe to this journal. On Ribot and the *RP*’s place in the intellectual field, see also Vincent Guillin, "Théodule Ribot’s Ambiguous Positivism: Philosophical and Epistemological Strategies in the Founding of French Scientific Psychology," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 40, no. 2 (2004); J. Thirard, "La fondation de la *Revue philosophique*," *Revue philosophique* 160(1976).
those when the philosophy of the university was dominated by spiritualist descendents of Cousin. The most intellectually and culturally important philosophers of the middle of the 19th century—Comte, Cournot, Renouvier—were not trained in philosophy and did not teach it. Positivism and the critics who took it seriously were outside the university system. Théodule Ribot, editor of the *Revue philosophique*, was himself sharply critical of the excessive idealism of Cousinian eclectic spiritualism, and encouraged philosophy to become more specialized, for instance through the incursion of experimental psychology into what had previously been philosophy’s realm.

Ribot was successful, indeed became a victim of his own success. In 1893, the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (RMM) began publication, founded by, in Ribot’s words, a group of “young rich people, Jewish, and very metaphysical…This review will be transcendent, ‘Universitaire and Sorbonnard’” In 1894, the *Année psychologique* enacted institutionally the split of scientific, experimental psychology from philosophy that Ribot had always advocated in theory. Émile Durkheim and his group founded the *Année sociologique* in 1897. If the RMM continued to defend the role of critical philosophy, it seemed that philosophy as traditionally practiced should cede psychology

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63 Although Ribot was also critical of Comtean positivism in its purer forms. For this debate, see John I. Brooks, "Philosophy and Psychology at the Sorbonne, 1885-1913," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 29, no. 2 (1993); ———, *The eclectic legacy : academic philosophy and the human sciences in nineteenth-century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998); Guillin, “Théodule Ribot’s Ambiguous Positivism: Philosophical and Epistemological Strategies in the Founding of French Scientific Psychology.”

to scientists who studied the brain, and perhaps ethics to those who studied society.

Ribot’s “ambiguous positivism” and his journal, which had in the 1880s done battle with the rear-guard of Cousinian eclecticism, by the end of the 1890s was itself the old-fashioned eclectic journal, a victim of specialization and disciplinarization.  

Sorel’s publications in the Revue—and by implication his formation—are located after this renewed empirical assault on a traditional philosophy understood to be beholden to the powers that be, but before the definitive professionalization and re-founding of the academic discipline of philosophy in the later 19th century. Indeed, Sorel had concrete connections with some of the foundational figures in the history of science as it would emerge. Paul Tannery, who had just published a book on ancient Greek science, reviewed Sorel’s own Procès de Socrates for the Revue philosophique. Sorel, who likely knew him from the École polytechnique, wrote a friendly letter in advance of this review.  

Paul, together with his brother Jules Tannery—director of the science curriculum at the ENS—were both childhood friends of, and important interlocutors for, Emile Boutroux. Sorel, then, can be located in a socio-intellectual context with a group of moderate Catholic intellectuals who rallied—well in advance of the Pope—to the Republic.

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66 I owe this reference to Willy Gianinazzi, by way of Michel Prat.

67 See particularly Nye, “The Boutroux Circle and Poincare’s Conventionalism.”
Psychophysics was an outgrowth of the experimental psychology pioneered in German universities by Wilhelm Wundt. Gustav Fechner, however, coined the term psychophysics, defining it as “the exact science of the functional relations of dependence among body and soul, more generally, between the corporeal and the mental, the physical and the psychological, world.” It was a major theme of transnational debate. In the French context, psychophysics served to articulate contending factions within the intellectual field because it posed the distinction between mind and body so sharply. Criticism of the concepts deployed in psychophysics was among the tasks undertaken by Henri Bergson in 1889. Ribot’s *Revue philosophique* was an important venue for the discussion of this new and assertive science.

The mode in which Sorel approached the question of psychophysics is indicative of his approach to science more generally. Sorel’s recapitulation of the definition is somewhat different from Fechner’s, emphasizing a dynamic rather than a static relation. For Sorel, the basic question presented by the science is: “if it might not be possible to determine our psychic acts by the dimensions of their excitations.” This, in turn, is essentially a question of perspectivalism, the idea that distortions exist in perception which might be corrected for if properly understood. Psychophysics, then, has the ambition of investigating the relation between that which, so to speak, exists in the world

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68 The International Society for Psychophysics provides a family-tree of their discipline. The tree gives Wundt the pride of place at the top-center, the effective *paterfamilias*. Fechner, with no immediate connections admitted, is given the title *paterfamilias spiritualis*. [http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~isp/isp/history/tree.htm](http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~isp/isp/history/tree.htm)


and exists in our perception of it. This is always a practical and localized question—“we have no formula allowing us to determine in a mathematical way the representation of objects as we see them, but have been content for centuries with approximate methods.”

And in fact, according to Sorel, a premium has always been placed on the simplicity of any given rule, often so that simplicity is valued more than exactitude: “Mariotte’s law is a remarkable example of this method: no one doubts the inexactitude of this formula, but it is constantly used nonetheless.” Weber and Fechner have sought to establish what they call laws of psychophysics, really rules for quantifying otherwise qualitative sensations. These laws, like all scientific laws, find their limits in application and are no less valid, only better understood, for being so limited. As with all sciences, so with psychophysics, “the great difficult is to define properly its field of action and the significance of its results.”

Perhaps the most important point, however, is that Sorel begins by historicizing the nature of this new science. This is the significance of his attempts to link Wundt, Weber, and Fechner to the history of perspective in painting, Viollet-le-Duc’s writings on Notre Dame de Paris, and Wagner’s darkening of the opera hall to emphasize sound.

That Sorel began his public consideration of the significance of science in such a way led

71 Ibid. p 365.
72 Ibid. p 369.
73 Ibid. p 363 Which Sorel sought to do by commenting in a friendly way on Paul Tannery’s writings on psychophysics. See ———, “La psychophysique,” Revue philosophique 25(1888). Tannery was engaged a debate that would also involve Bergson over the nature of measurement and quantity as such. See Heidelberger, Nature from within : Gustav Theodor Fechner and his psychophysical worldview. ch 6.
him to confront assertions of what he might have identified as the rationalist notion that science is essentially apodictic.\textsuperscript{75} Both the outer and inner limits of science had to be confronted—the inner limits being the capacity of science to found itself, and the outer limits those of the knowledge available through science.

It is not surprising that Sorel turned next to two linked sources of confusion that allow one to conceive of a deterministic universe. Writing again in the Revue philosophique in 1888 and 1889, Sorel attacked confusions surrounding first the idea of probability and then causality itself. Probability, for Sorel, is a constructed abstraction. In a game of dice, knowing what numbers have been thrown cannot tell me what will come next.\textsuperscript{76} Certain phenomena, however, observed for long enough, will begin to exhibit a normal distribution—they obey the laws that are “precise and truly scientific.”\textsuperscript{77} Sorel is, again, especially interested in the historical forms that such inquiry has taken—Gauss’ law as Quêtelet found it in his various social investigations.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{75} This is the force of the importance Rheinberger gives to the beginning of the end of the mechanistic conception of the world, in the later 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Focusing on the German scientists Émile Du Bois-Reymond, Rheinberger says, “the principle of a mechanical explanation of nature, when applied as it were to itself, collapses into agnosticism” (6)—hence, Du Bois Reymond’s famous ignorabimus: we will not know. Rheinberger, On Historicizing Epistemology: An Essay.


\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. p 53.

\textsuperscript{78} And Sorel laments the kind of work that Quêtelet has spawned today, “la plupart des ouvrages de statistique ne sont que de gros volumes plains de tableaux et de diagrammes”—actuaries, Sorel suggests, have the technical knowledge to do compile this data in a more meaningful way. Ibid. p 58.
not—the calculation of risks and benefits is different from the perspective of the individual and from the perspective of the state.\(^79\)

Probability gnaws away at the notion of causality. In a certain sense, there is an important difference between asserting that in some situations “causes are so numerous and their effects so interrelated” that it is impossible to predict except according to chance, and claiming that causality is fundamentally non-deterministic, as developments in quantum-theory would eventually oblige scientists to admit.\(^80\) Given the state of physics in the late 1880s, Sorel could not take the latter position. But in fact Sorel’s considered opinion is that the difference is no difference at all. Causality itself in the sense implied by a mechanistic determinism—the transmission of force from one rigid object to another—is no more an acceptable idea than “the anthropomorphic meaning” that is also sometimes given to the term.\(^81\) The fact of probability does not provoke, for Sorel, a metaphysical crisis, but rather confirms his position that “in all purely scientific research the problem of cause is identical to that of classification by kind.”\(^82\)

The emphasis placed on the purity of this science is not without interest. Sorel here argues that a sharp distinction must be made no only between common-sense and science, but also between science proper and the mere facts out of which it is


\(^82\) Ibid. p 467. Aristotle is crucial for Sorel here. Aristotelian essential, or formal, cause, is what’s at issue. In the translation by Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire.
constructed.\textsuperscript{83} Science, this is to say, is different from empirical knowledge: “science does not work [travaille] on phenomena or on the quantities that the experimenter measures, it works [opère] on something else, on schemas. Its field of action is outside any possible material realization.”\textsuperscript{84} Science has limits and should not be confused with practical activity, although the two are related. An interesting example is non-Euclidian geometry, which is scientific, but dangerous because the high level of abstraction it involves has caused mathematicians to forget, in places where they should not, the physical, practical, roots of geometry and therefore its limits.\textsuperscript{85} Although Sorel will quickly revise his opinions about the purity of science from material contamination, the notion of the schema remains central.

Schemas are changeable and can be evaluated according to their utility. But even this criteria is hardly straightforward. After all, “it is very difficult for the human mind [l’esprit humain] to separate schemas from reality.”\textsuperscript{86} For instance, although “moderns” seem perfectly willing to give up on the idea of the divinity, “many among them cannot resolve themselves to abandon faith in atoms, these immortal beings, not susceptible to deformation, which are like little gods, leaping in space and forming bodies that the

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\item[\textsuperscript{83}] “le bon sens ne peut produire que des pétitions de principe; il consiste, en dernière analyse, à répéter les préjugées populaire, et il ne saurait faire reconnaître aucun vérité nouvelle.” Sorel, "Le calcul des probabilités et l’expérience." p 50.
\item[\textsuperscript{84}] \textsuperscript{———}, "La cause en physique." p 470. But see pp 468-470.
\item[\textsuperscript{85}] See Georges Sorel, “Sur la géométrie non euclidienne,” Revue philosophique 31(1891). Sorel says there that geometry, for the Greeks, is rooted in movement—the circle is derived from physical rotation around a fixed point, describing a certain terrain. Certainly in this period there is a great deal of discussion of foundational issues in mathematics and physics.
\item[\textsuperscript{86}] Sorel, "La cause en physique." p 471.
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senses teach us to know. That is a purely schematic construction (of doubtful utility).”

For all the problems that schemas such as atoms present to us, “the human mind [l’esprit humain] has no way of knowing except through the analysis of kinds. When it cannot arrive at absolute truth, it constructs more or less artificial classifications.”

Or, yet more forcefully, “we insist that, in the flux of things, it is possible to know only schemas and not the totality of phenomena.” Schemas may be mathematical, but they may also not be. Sorel mentions Claude Bernard here, in defense of the idea that certain sciences are not amenable to calculation in the same way that physics is.

Against the relativistic implications that might follow from this position, Sorel argues for what he calls “critique de la connaissance.” Explicitly rejecting Kantian critique, Sorel asserts that in order to avoid “sinking into the domain of pure imagination, the critique of understanding [critique de la connaissance] must be based on the

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87 Ibid. p 471. Emphasis in original. See also Sorel’s long article in the *Annales de la philosophie chrétienne* of 1892, discussing the confusions of atomism. This periodical is also where the early writings of Maurice Blondel appeared.
88 Ibid. p 472. This was already not a radical point. See Rheinberger on Du Bois-Reymond’s “very useful fictions.”
89 Ibid. p 479.
90 It seems odd to me to enroll Bernard in this defense. Sorel does not, here, cite any particular text of Bernard’s, simply reporting that “Bernard...ne pensait pas que le nombre fût applicable aux études biologiques. S’il en est ainsi, on ne peut pas dire que la cause permet de déterminer l’effet, dans le sens où l’on peut le dire en physique” Ibid. p 474. However Bernard expresses the somewhat different opinion that while the biological sciences are not yet ready for the application of math, they must surely be one day: “Ce n’est point que je condamne l’application mathématique dans les phénomènes biologiques, car c’est par elle seule que, dans la suite, la science se constituera ; seulement j’ai la conviction que l’équation générale est impossible pour le moment.” Claude Bernard, *Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale*, Champs classiques (Paris: Flammarion, 2008). p 231. Similarly, the disjunction between Sorel’s general approval for certain uses of statistical reasoning, and the general rejection of such reasoning on the part of Bernard, should not go unnoticed. The larger point here is that although Sorel clearly has enormous respect for Bernard, and repeatedly argues that the philosophy of science should base itself on actual scientific practice, which is a nice summary of Bernard’s approach, Sorel’s own conclusions about the nature of science are not Bernard’s. More on this below. The absolute faith in material determinism that is crucial to Bernard’s whole worldview, and certainly to his scientific practice, is basically absent from Sorel’s work. The disjunction is not necessarily an opposition, but neither is it agreement.
procedures employed in order to understand [connaitre].”91 With these words, Sorel anticipates what is arguably the central theme of 20th century French epistemology. Reference to technical apparatuses, to practice, is a particularly effective ward against the confusions of determinism, not least because it allows us to “separate quite clearly the sciences and avoid confusions that […] lead to dead ends.”92 Critique, then, takes its starting point in the instruments (material and conceptual) that allow scientists to know, and to demarcate the boundaries between sciences.

The way is open here for a historicization of epistemology, but Sorel does not immediately pursue it. The idea of the schema and the focus on ways of knowing, as well as Sorel’s proclivity to historical investigation all point in this direction. As yet, however, he lacks a broad frame to orient such a project. This will change as he begins to write about economic and social science. For the moment, in the late 1880s, his interests lead him toward what might be called the outside, or practical elements of science—specifically, aesthetics.

The Aesthetic Limit of Science

A concern with aesthetic questions—value, beauty, creativity—stands at the beginning of Sorel’s body of published work. This was perhaps driven by a consciousness of historical changes in taste: “Our century has become too knowing [savant] and too encyclopedist for us to have the fineness of perception for color-

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91 Sorel, "La cause en physique." p 479.
92 Ibid. p 480.
harmonies that is frequently found among primitive peoples […] This vulgarity of our
taste appears quite strikingly in the pseudo-Greek monuments raised in such large
number since the middle ages, which are to Greek art what beet eau-de-vie is to
Burgundy wine." ⁹³ In a less cantankerous vein, as we have already seen, Sorel drew
several of his examples of early, pre-scientific psychophysics from the artistic realm. He
even went so far as to argue that one of the basic observations of psychophysics—that
some stimuli are too close for us to distinguish between them, while some are not—is
essentially the same principle as the musical interval. ⁹⁴

If Sorel was already interested in aesthetics, it was nonetheless polemic that
sharpened his engagement with such questions. A letter to the editor of the Revue
philosophique in 1890 takes Charles Henry sharply to task for attempting to use
psychophysics to generate a synthetic account of the “esthetic effect” in general. ⁹⁵ Using
something like the same tone he would again a few years later in his letter against Gabriel
Tarde, Sorel is not kind: “I do not want to quarrel with M. Henry about his reasoning; I
don’t understand it at all. […] I believe that M. Henry’s fundamental thesis is itself
completely false.” ⁹⁶ Henry based his reasoning on psychophysical experiments of

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⁹⁴ Ibid. p 370.
⁹⁶ Ibid. pp 182-183. Henry met Sorel on his own level: “Ce ne sont pas seulement mes raisonnements que
ne comprend pas mon contradicteur, ce sont: le problème que je me suis posé, mon principe, ma méthode,
mon but.” Charles Henry, "Correspondence," Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger 29(1890). p 333. Although it is difficult to imagine Sorel chastened at anything, he at any rate did not reject Henry
entirely. Indeed, arguably Sorel was so aggressive because their positions were in some ways so close. In
any case, when Sorel turned again to consider aesthetics in the middle of 1900, he recommended Henry’s
“strange theories” to Croce. See in particular letters 54 and 58. Sorel and Croce, Lettere a Benedetto Croce.
pp 91-93.
different kinds, for instance measuring the tensing or relaxing of muscles given the
stimulus of the strong odor of musk. Starting from the basic principle that all ideas or
feelings have physical correlatives, he concluded that pleasure and pain could be re-
described as sensations being either dymanogène or inhibitoire, that is encouraging or
discouraging movement.97 Further aesthetic principles could be on this basis
established—movements that point up and to the right are more energizing than ones that
point down and to the left.98 As Georges Lachelas commented later on in a review of a
different work of Henry’s, from these first principles “is immediately born the unity of
the fundamental aesthetic laws, each order of sensations raising only special problems
relative to the determination of motor reactions.”99 It is this essential unity that Sorel
flatly rejects: “one goes wrong in seeking to give a general psycho-physical formula to
the arts. The aesthetic problem gains nothing in being posed in the form of a synthesis:
great progress is made when one manages to properly distinguish the parts of which it is
composed and resolve it into several distinct problems.”100

Despite this fragmentation, there is still a role for psychophysics in the study of
aesthetics—critique—which turns out also to be essentially moral. Perhaps in contrast to
the intensely physiological research conducted by Henry, Sorel now insists on the

97 Charles Henry, "Le contraste, le rythme, la mesure," Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger
28(1889). pp 363-5ff.
96 Ibid. pp 366-367.
99 Georges Lachelas, "Henry - Cercle chromatique," Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger
28(1889). p 635.
100 Sorel, "Esthétique et psychophysique." p 184.
distinction between psycho-physiology, and psycho-physics. The former gets as close to physiological reactions as it can, but is often content grasping only two ends of a chain, the middle of which is hidden from it. “Psycho-physics,” on the other hand, “does not touch this chain. It knows neither the extremities nor the middle.” Rather, it concerns itself exclusively with “the physically observable state of an exterior phenomenon and a psychic act formulated by language.” With the specification that “the word language [langage] must be understood here in the most general sense.” Armed even with the idea of psychophysics, it becomes clear that various patterns found in architecture—the numerical proportions of the Greeks or of Gothic cathedrals as discussed by Viollet-le-Duc—are, as Sorel says, “not the masters, but the servants of art.” These rules are for the convenience of the architect, to avoid unnecessary “tâtonnements” or trial and error.

Certain philosophers, it is true, have reversed the correct order of mental operations, and put the theory, itself only a hypertrophy of artisanal practice, above all

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101 Much of this piece is a rebuttal, sometimes in the footnotes, sometimes with veiled references to “nos adversaires,” of Henry.
102 Georges Sorel, "Contribution psychophysique à l'étude esthétique," Revue philosophique 29(1890), pp 564, 565. I do not here investigate the evolution of Sorel’s beliefs about psychophysics except for those relevant to my argument. He comes to insist, for instance, of the difference between Weber and Fechner, criticizing Wundt for not taking more care of the logical gap between the two. Fechner founded a science through an act of genius, “we believe, for ourselves, that the logarithmic law has no direct applications; we regard it as a symbol and not as the expression of science.” 563.
103 Ibid. p 565.
104 Ibid. p 570.
105 In light of Sorel’s comparisons between artists and scientists, might we see here a version of Mach’s idea that scientific formula are really on compressed, convenient language good for transmission across social space-time. See ch 1, Rheinberger, On Historicizing Epistemology: An Essay.
else, forcing recalcitrant reality into its shape.\textsuperscript{106} We can also see what is at stake in the notion of the beautiful in different forms of art.

Sorel takes as his example, since it is a central one, music. Taste, he rejects almost out of hand.\textsuperscript{107} Rather, he looks to the functions of music in the past. It has, historically, calmed emotions of excited them. Music is especially good at taking listeners out of themselves—that is, removing their reason from them and giving reign to physicality, emotion, instinct: “music possesses an entirely special power over our person. It is dominating and by nature exclusive: when it is used properly, it absorbs the whole extent of the consciousness.”\textsuperscript{108} Sorel’s conclusions are rather extreme and would be old fashioned in any century: “all dulling of the intelligence tends to translate itself into a singular over-excitation of the sexual instincts.” Therefore, “music is a dangerous art, always ready to facilitate the progress of debasement and immorality. We know there will be objections, but our theory is founded on sure observations and on the unanimous testimony of the great Greek philosophers.”\textsuperscript{109} On the basis of this, Sorel identifies three

\textsuperscript{106} Sorel’s enemy-list is revealing: “Toutes ces difficultés ont pour origine les idées spiritualistes, que nous rencontrons toujours comme un obstacle dans toutes nos recherches. L’observateur n’est pas beaucoup gêné par les scolastiques [sic]: ceux-ci ne séparent point l’âme du corps; ils les unissent d’une manière substantielle; et les thomistes, tout au moins, placent le principe d’undividuation dans la matière. On peut donc s’entendre avec ces philosophes; il est impossible de le faire avec les spiritualistes, qui s’élèvent pourtant, avec orgueil, contre toute idée nouvelle.” And, in a footnote, “Jamais les docteurs du moyen âge n’ont été d’une intolérance pareille à l’école spiritualiste contemporaine.” Sorel, "Contribution psychophysique à l'étude esthétique," p 572.

\textsuperscript{107} Taste, \textit{gout}, is purely personal. The rapid evolution of French attitudes about Wagner (from the music critic of the RdDM claiming that serious people would not discuss him, to a panic of enthusiasm) is adduced as evidence of its basically unstable character. Such taste is driven by the desire for novelty—virtuosity for its own sake, for instance. Ibid. p 573.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid. p 575.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid. p 576. Sorel goes on: Aristotle did not like the flute because of its sexual implications. He preferred music that included words because, after all, there might then be reason. Today, opera is the continuation of the same argument—the words are sung as notes, destroying any intellectual value they might have had.
distinct kinds of effects music can have. First and most socially visible are “satisfactions connected to taste [goût],” which are not “susceptible to any scientific analysis” because too confounded by other factors. Second, and closest to the basic nature of music, is “sensorial emotion” which nonetheless “does not merit the name esthétique.” Third and finally, there is the properly aesthetic, which refers to the moral results that some music can have—although Sorel has provided only the examples of ecclesiastical music and Wagner. If music is difficult to moralize, other arts are less so. Architecture, for instance, since the apprehension of it is essentially formal, “is chaste and commands chastity around itself.”

If we do not allow ourselves to be distracted by Sorel’s prudish tone, and if we bear in mind the importance of the contrast with Henry’s psycho-physiological perspective, it becomes clear that this triadic division is structured by the relation of the individual to the social. Taste is complexly social, and cannot be formalized. It is possible to formalize sensorial emotion, but it is purely individuating, in the sense that it reduces the individual to the body. This, for Sorel, is necessarily to de-moralize the individual.

The staging is designed to overwhelm the intellect and provoke all the senses. Popular music is the same—obsessively sexual—unless it is only out for a laugh, which is morally to be preferred. Wagner sought to moralize music, and despite “our profound and sincere admiration for the genius of Wagner, we believe that his reform could not have been successful, and that his school died with him.” Ecclesiastical music has the goal of preparing the individual for prayer and communion with the divine—no easy task—and is a rare example of moral music. pp 576-579

12 Sorel, "Contribution psychophysique à l'étude esthétique." p 33. For more discussion of the psychophysiological intelligibility of good architecture, see pp 33-37.
Properly aesthetic effects are bodily, of course, and therefore graspable by psychophysics, but are also moral because also supra-individual. Sorel spends the second part of this essay attempting to establish, for different kinds of art, rules of “harmony” between the individual reaction to a given impression, and social and natural phenomena. Sorel cites M. Féré’s experiments on the exciting qualities of different colors—experiments also cited by Henry—which would suggest that as color approaches red it becomes more pleasing, more dynamizing, and as it approaches blue, more depressing. But, Sorel says, this is hardly a rule that can simply be followed—“the artists of the middle ages, on the contrary, lavished blue on their windows and their vaults: this hardly had the effect of deflating the spirit.”¹¹³ Rather, “the azure of the sky on a beautiful day” is a joyful color.¹¹⁴ Even this is mediated by historical experience, since we today do not experience the interiors of cathedrals, for instance, in the way that those who built them did. In general, however, “one must, in this research, concern one’s self with associations founded on natural spectacles.”¹¹⁵ Yet Sorel cannot restrain himself to follow this principle, he constantly modifies these natural reactions with much more local socio-historical factors.

These tensions play out in the relation the way Sorel explains the relations between artists and scientists. There is a long history of failure to communicate between the two groups: “The artist is an exceptional being, endowed with a special sensibility, a very intense but short-lived productive faculty.” The artist’s mind does not work like that

¹¹³ Ibid. p 24.
¹¹⁴ Ibid. p 25.
¹¹⁵ Ibid. p 25.
of other people, and therefore his self-consciousness is also not the same: “he reasons so quickly and in such an original way that he can hardly analyze his own actions.” Not capable of understanding what he has done, the artist grasps at any language available to describe it, and scholars have often been foolish enough to take this description at face value—hence the nonsensical idea of an “unconscious” impulsion in artistic creation. Scientists, always struggling to generalize and universalize, have missed the real specificity of the artist, who “goes always from particular to particular; he relates his idea almost never to some general form.” This artistic creation, it is true, relies on whatever materials are to hand—hence the use of canons and formulae. Science—psychophysics in one form or another—can analyze and criticize these short-cuts. This is particularly important because in art as in science, not everyone is a creative genius. Schools develop and apply thoughtlessly the methods of the master. The plodding analysis of science is a good check on the mindless synthesis of art.

This functional co-habitation reveals a certain similarity in the creative act common to both art and science. The artist and the scientist encounter the chaos of reality itself in parallel:

The creative artist studies nature in the same way as does the physicist; this is a point of the first importance. The scientist [le savant] does not pretend to understand the essence of things, in order to arrive deductively at the determination of accidents. His ambition is less great: he establishes frames, divisions, and seeks to know of each phenomenon only that which enters into a simple kind. In a word, he sees in nature only which he is able to represent in a scientific way. The artist does the same. In the midst of this seething tumult, of this heaped mass that seems impossible to sort out, he seizes outstanding

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117 Ibid. p 26.
118 Ibid. p 27. This is interesting not least because Croce will give such an important place to the individual concrete object in his theory of art as opposed to the science of the generalized abstract.
characteristics, he establishes a classification, a hierarchy. He sees the world by relating it, in some way, to the scale of his art.\textsuperscript{119}

The tools of representation are different for scientists and artists, because their goals are different. But both draw on a socially-available stock of representational tricks in order to re-present something like a primitive encounter with the phenomenal world. Since bodies do not change as quickly as the available tools, the locus of historicization is not the subject itself, not the seeing eye, but the thing seen, which is to say the work of art or the scientific theory. What can be safely left out of account, as far as Sorel is concerned, is anything that artists have to say for themselves about what they have done.

At the end of Sorel’s relation of psychophysics to moralism is the problem of dualism confronted with history, a problematic that echoes through Sorel’s work for decades. There is a body that makes demands and a spirit that controls it. But the spirit uses resources drawn from its material surroundings to do this. These resources—artistic or scientific short-cuts—change over time and space. Artistic practice is fundamentally moral, because it mediates between the individual as a body and the individual as a social being. It is only when the similarities between the process of the scientist and that of the artist emerged that it was possible for Sorel to see the new problems presented by the historicization of epistemology that he had been pursuing.

One way to resolve this problem of dualism is provided by Fouillée’s method of reconciliation. We have seen that Sorel was familiar with Fouillée already in the Socrates book. Fouillée was publishing on his notion of the \textit{idée-force} in the \textit{Revue philosophique}...

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. p 28.
in the same issues as Sorel wrote on psychophysics. In 1892, Sorel published in the same journal what must have been a long-meditated study of Proudhon’s writings. This was essentially an attempt to solve, by turning to the social phenomena of justice and of the economy, the problematic dualisms with which psychophysics had nonetheless left Sorel. Fouillée’s reconciliatory method was, in the process, tried and found inadequate. We turn next to this attempt.

**Proudhon, Fouillée, and Idealism in Social Science**

Alfred Fouillée, in *L'idée moderne du droit*, from which Sorel cites extensively in his “Essai sur la philosophie du Proudhon,” bases the ideal on the metaphysical limit of science: consciousness itself. Given this axiomatic consciousness, Fouillée deduces the necessity of (what he does not quite call) recognition. There are other selves, other moïs, and so egoism, beyond a certain degree, is actually destruction of our own self—can be metaphysically ruled out of bounds. This is the beginning of ideal law. These ideals have their own force, are material factors in how we behave. Fouillée is here participating, together with neo-Kantians like Renouvier, in a renaissance of attempts to provide

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120 But also earlier, see Alfred Fouillée, “La philosophie des idées-forces comme conciliation du naturalisme et de l'idéalisme,” *Revue philosophique* 8(1879).
121 See the final section of ———, *L'idée moderne du droit* (Paris: Hachette, 1904). Hans-Jorg Rheinberger begins his recent essay on *Historical Epistemology* with the condition of classical mechanics, and therefore a certain vision of determinism, with the difficult position of a mechanics which, just as Fouillée says, cannot account for its own basic preconditions.

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philosophical foundations to what would eventually be recognized as progressive or social democratic politics.\textsuperscript{122}

Sorel accepts much of Fouillée’s position here, which is more radical that it appears at first, or than Fouillée’s politics might lead one to think, but tries, through Proudhon, to historicize it. The decisive move, which Sorel himself does not quite recognize, is the insertion of this abstract self into historically given symbolic structures—we have seen this maneuver in his aesthetics above. Sorel’s thinking is always historical, in the sense that he does not take a present for granted. Everything must be built up on the basis of empirical evidence. So although there may be an abstract self, we do not have access to it in all its universality, only to the materiality of its expressions—language, say. So an anti-humanism (familiar enough from 20\textsuperscript{th} century French philosophy) is already in Sorel’s thinking here, despite his attention to psychology. It will require first Marx and then Vico to bring it fully forward.

Sorel deals first with Proudhon’s attempt to put economics, which is to say social science, on a properly scientific footing. This leads Sorel to discuss Proudhon’s theory of justice—which for Sorel is closely related to Alfred Fouillée’s philosophical position. This essay does not represent a radical break from Sorel’s previous writing on psychophysics. The stated goal is to attempt to explain “how [Proudhon] reduced economic problems to psychological questions.”\textsuperscript{123} Proudhon wants to make a science of political economy, “to constitute a science one cannot be content with vulgar ideas.

\textsuperscript{122} See Kloppenberg, \textit{Uncertain victory : social democracy and progressivism in European and American thought, 1870-1920}. For the specifically French context, Spitz, \textit{Le moment républicain en France}.

Schemas proper to the new science must be extracted.”¹²⁴ In physics, this was the transition from the notion of “matière” to reasoning about the better-defined concept of “masse.” Proudhon realized that, “value is the cornerstone of the economic edifice.”¹²⁵ One does not seek to define value in a way that will be useful for businessmen, but rather following the hypothesis that political economy can become a science. Neither Adam Smith’s notion of value as work, nor any other attempt to establish a clear meaning for the term had been successful until Proudhon. Smith’s intuition that value and work are related is correct, but it was Proudhon, who “had a perfectly clear idea of the autonomy of the sciences,” who saw that work must be understood in terms of psychology.¹²⁶

Value flows from work, and work, for Proudhon, can only result from the unified action of physical force and intelligence. This is the link to psychophysics, defined as the study of the relation of physical to psychic: “work [le travail] thus finds itself placed in the sphere of psychological concepts. Proudhon’s reasoning seems to us, here, irrefutable.”¹²⁷ While previous attempts to make economics a science have turned to physics or biology, it is really psychology with which one must begin. Sorel is here operating within a frame familiar to the period: in seeking the proper object of a science of society, he can see no other option than the individual—this is both pre-Marxian, and pre-Durkheimian. But even if we have brought work, and therefore value into the realm

¹²⁴ Ibid. p 624.
¹²⁵ Sorel cites this from Proudhon himself, Contradictions. Ibid. p 624.
¹²⁶ Ibid. p 626. Work is a human and not an animal activity.
¹²⁷ Ibid. p 626. “Irrefutable” is a Proudhonian word—but it should also be emphasized that it does not mean true, only self-consistent.
of the psychological, it is clear that values must be commensurable in order for them to constitute a useful part of a science of political economy. How is this to be understood?

A series of major conceptual leaps happen quite quickly, carrying Sorel from work as an individual experience, through the nature of society itself, and to time as a measure of value. Sorel says, “work is what renders exchange relations [les relations des échangistes] intelligible.” Exchange itself, according to Proudhon, is only intelligible, only scientifically graspable, within the cité. The following sentences are attributed by Sorel entirely to Proudhon, but that have major consequences that Sorel seems to endorse:

It is not yet clear what will be the common measure for what is produced, and there will not be one if man is considered outside the state [la cité]. The sailor who swaps with an African black is doing something that escapes all definition and all scientific research. But society is a living being, the personality of which is just as certain as that of the individual being. The social being is at once producer and consumer: each member brings its share of work and enters into exchange with all the others. The products considered from the point of view of the social-being are susceptible of measurement. Time is, for Kant, the form of internal sense: work, the activity of the general organism, has duration for its measure.

Work is human, and therefore psychological, part of what is really the physiology of individual production and consumption. In the same way, society as a whole is an organism that consumes and produces. Proudhon, Sorel argues, was well acquainted with Kant through his friendship with Claude-Joseph Tissot, one of the early translators of Kant into French. It is therefore legitimate to argue that he drew by analogy from Kant’s

128 Ibid. p 627.
129 Ibid. p 628. Sorel’s reading of Proudhon has therefore prepared him for two of the crucial demands of the first part of Capital, which he seems not yet to have read. First, without a social whole, economic activity cannot be grasped scientifically. Second, the measure with which science will grasp this activity is time. For Marx value is measured in time socially necessary for the completion of the given task.
notion that time is the form of internal meaning or sensation, and therefore the
commensurable (within a given society) factor in value. So, without Marx, Sorel has a
theory of value based on time-labored. Here, time as a measure of work is brought up just
long enough to make the leap from the individual, through psychology, to the social
organism.\textsuperscript{130} Already, on Sorel’s reading of Proudhon, economics as science must be
internal to society, must find its grounding within some sort of closed institutional
context.\textsuperscript{131}

In a footnote to this passage, Sorel directly challenges Fouillée’s claim that
Proudhon is the heir of Rousseau on the grounds that for Rousseau, work can exist
outside of society. Sorel’s reason that work can only exist within society (which seems
here to be equivalent to the state, \textit{la cité}) is that it is measurable, conceptually graspable,
only there. We should notice the idea of the society as a living being. This is, on the one
hand, a widespread view—certainly it is crucial for Rousseau in \textit{Du contrat social} that
social groups behave, in certain ways at least, like living organisms. Organic metaphors
for society are also important for Marx and Durkheim. Sorel’s reference point here is
more likely to be Claude Bernard, a doctor and physiologist whose writings on the nature

\textsuperscript{130} Some care should perhaps be given to this issue of time, especially in reference to Sorel’s later defense
of the Marxian construction of ‘socially necessary time,’ and what’s more, to Bergson’s anti-Kantian
intervention. If one follows Bergson, then it is no longer the case that time internal to an individual can be
measured. I suspect that the kind of time Sorel is talking about here is in no danger of the Bergsonian
critique—the metaphoric leap from individual to social organism is, in my opinion, a firewall there, though
this perhaps goes only to show that it is also conceptually bankrupt. On Bergsonian Marxism, see James
Jay Hamilton, “Georges Sorel and the Inconsistencies of a Bergsonian Marxism,” \textit{Political Theory} 1, no. 3
(1973).

\textsuperscript{131} Sorel dismisses the question of individual difference. Proudhon recognized, of course, that not everyone
would or could work with the same degree of effectiveness—but the differences are smaller than has
usually been asserted. More, Sorel laments that Proudhon did not seem to know Quételet, whose statistical
postulation of \textit{l’homme moyen} would have helped Proudhon’s arguments. Sorel, "Essai sur la philosophie
de Proudhon." p 629.
of scientific investigation, which Sorel cites repeatedly, were already classics in this period. 132 If this is the case, then there is certainly nothing mystical about Sorel’s version of the organic society: for Bernard life is defined as an arrangement of inanimate matter that creates a self-regulating internal environment.

If time is the internal measure that makes value commensurable within a given society, and value flows from work, the nature of work itself comes to seem important. Work is what people do. What does this mean? There is a fatal, productive, imbalance in all humans. Sorel cites Proudhon: “The capacity to consume is unlimited, while the capacity to produce is not.” 133 Scarcity itself is not the problem. Against Malthus, Sorel points out that “wheat is hardly lacking in the world; rather, the fear is that it is too abundant.” 134 Economic crisis and scarcity are distributive and relative problems, not absolute ones. The fundamental point is not only that humans must strive in order to have, but that it is in striving that we are most human. History shows, Sorel asserts, that “if one wants to change the social state of a people, to pull it out of its torpor and its barbarism, it must be given greater desires, made to feel that rest is not the only luxury that it could want.” 135 For Sorel, “Luxury, in itself, is neither good nor bad. It is a

132 It is worth pointing out that there is more ambiguity than is usually assumed to adopting an organic metaphor (Sorel would say, schema) to understand society. For a convincing account that Herbert Spencer, who often spoke of society as organic, had in mind a kind of organism without a central nervous system, which was itself more of a system than a self—this idea of an organism as less defined by a brain and the differentiation of functions than as a contained and self-regulating system should point us back to Bernard’s conception of physiology—see James Elwick, “Herbert Spencer and the Disunity of the Social Organism,” History of Science 41(2003).
134 Ibid. p 630.
135 Ibid. p 631. Here, Sorel is in lockstep with a basically racist philosophico-historical construction that takes climate as the premise of culture. It is the very ease of living on a Caribbean island that makes its inhabitants degenerate and that obliges us, for their own good, to torture them into productive labor. For a
stimulant that can be excellent, when it draws on the moral notion of dignity.” Indeed, Malthus, rejected as unscientific, returns in the notion that “man, transfigured by justice, frees himself from instinct. He conceives of and loves chastity.” Work, then, is inherent to what would eventually be called the human condition.

There is a circular relationship between work and progress in the material world, which allows Sorel, through Proudhon, to at once insist on justice as an organizing absolute, and to permit substantial change over time in the specific content of justice. Sorel observes that “work does not cease to intensify as progress increases […] Machines allow reduction in the muscular effort of workers, but work is not measured in kilogrammètres.” Industrial development generally, in improving efficiency in certain respects, lowers what Marx would call, but Sorel does not yet call, the rate of profit. The practical result of the tightening cage of production and efficiency is that the moral is an indispensable explanatory element of the social. Sorel, ventriloquizing Proudhon: “No solution is possible if one neglects to take into account ‘the spiritual and moral destiny’ of man. ‘Progress or perfection of our species is entirely in justice and philosophy. The

much broader perspective here, see Thomas C. Holt, The problem of freedom : race, labor, and politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). In this particular essay, Sorel is quite ambiguous about the racial implications of some of his positions. On the one hand, when Proudhon uses the phrase “d’un sang plus pur,” Sorel feels the need to add a footnote specifically telling us that this is a metaphorical use. On the other hand, later on in his discussions of law, he happily deploys classically orientalist stereotypes (which he later will drop) about degenerate Orientals.


137 Ibid. p 632.
138 Ibid. p 633.
139 Ibid. p 634.
growth of well-being appears there less as recompense and path to happiness than as an expression of the science we have acquired and as a symbol of our virtue."

This circularity, this necessary change and continuity, is an organizing absolute, which is to say is a metaphysical principle without which one cannot do. Sorel recapitulates the argument that he has been making about the nature of science of the past few years: you cannot simply assert that you have escaped metaphysics, in the sense of postulated, unverifiable entities. The scientific thing to do, rather, is to establish with as much precision as possible the boundary between the metaphysical and the empirical, and to reduce as far as possible the metaphysical postulates that cannot, entirely, be eliminated.141 With Aristotle, with Proudhon, Sorel suggests that these absolutes, these necessary metaphysical entities, can be thought of as causes and categorizations.

Liberté—to be distinguished from the problem of free-will—this is our condition. For Fouillée, the idée-force is a solution to the problem of free will. Sorel bypasses this problem altogether by dismissing it as ill-founded to begin with. The deadlock here, as is often the case, is the result of illegitimate borrowing of ill-understood metaphors from physics. Either the soul is imagined to be an inert point (like an atom) in which case one is obliged to accept determinism, or, in order to guarantee free will, it is conceived of as a point that can react differently to similar impulses, which is absurd.142

140 Ibid. p 635.
141 Ibid. Pp 636-637.
142 Ibid. p 635-6. This criticism is tied in to Sorel’s consistent attacks on Descartes and atomism in general. Sorel believes that recent developments in dynamics have made it plain that the theory of atoms, at least as immutable (non-elastic) points, cannot be correct.
The ideal, justice, liberty—these are organizing principles necessary for the study of human kind. The ideal, in and of itself, is always with us. As is our freedom: “we can define freedom: the individual ability to construct ideas and to act in conformity with ideas […] Man cannot dispense with the ideal, not only does he create it, but he tends to realize it.”143 We are condemned to freedom, and although this allows us to choose and be molded by justice, it also means that we can choose other orienting principles—thus justice is separate from the ideal as such. Not only is this separation “‘the first cause of our sin, the principle of all social retrogression,’” but it is, as Sorel glosses this passage from Proudhon, “the work of liberty.”144

The second part of Sorel’s essay on Proudhon is driven by the tension between Justice, as Proudhon defines it, and mere law. “Justice cannot consist in the definition of some things as permitted and others forbidden by the legislator. These rules are always temporary, based on relations of force, on an insufficient understanding of the economy.”145 Sorel is explicitly repudiating the bad effects this quasi-geometric approach to morality vising in Kant’s attempt to reduce morality to maxims or rules. Yet it is an absolute: “Justice, being an idea, allows no compromise [accommodement]; it is, or it is

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143 “Nous pouvons définir la liberté: le pouvoir individuel de construire des idées et d’agir en conformité des idées. […] L’homme ne peut se passer d’idéal; non seulement il le crée, mais il tend à le réaliser” Ibid. p 638. Here Sorel is especially scathing towards those who solve the problem by the addition of a homunculus of one kind or another. This is a classic ‘cartesian theater’ question, and Sorel’s reading in psychophysics serves him well here. This is to say: just as you have not explained vision by saying that there is a part of our brain that ‘sees’ (a smaller version of us, sitting watching through our eyes), so you have also not explained free will by saying that there is a part of our brain that ‘decides.’ These issues were extremely important, and the topic of widespread debate. See Matthew Stanley, "The Pointsman: Maxwell’s Deman, Victorian Free Will, and the Boundaries of Science.." Journal of the History of Ideas 69, no. 3 (2008).

144 Sorel, "Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon." p 638.

not. It can therefore not consist in a *rationality of variable things* [raison des choses variable].”

Yet rationalism—which is to say, philosophy—does have some contribution to make, as the Greeks showed by understanding justice in terms of an ideal state. We cannot make *a priori* judgments about some future or hypothetical state’s economic arrangements: “It is impossible for us to know them, even to imagine them; one thing only can be thought, the state of human desires [volontés] and aspirations. The problem of justice is therefore not insoluble, if it is asked to treat people rather than things.”

Law, Sorel says, is essentially related to force. Laws are made to regulate the actual functioning of society, which is to say to mediate between “the different social powers.” They are, therefore, always the result of certain relations of force. Law is therefore to be rigorously distinguished from justice, which is absolute. Sorel contrasts the two sharply. Justice is an “idea and makes sense only for relations between men in the mythical city conceived of by reason. Law includes legal evaluations of forces in conflict.”

Sorel explicitly assimilates Fouillée’s notion of the ideal, even of equality as the reciprocal recognition inherent to the human, to Proudhon. Justice is in reciprocity, and

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146 Ibid. p 42.
147 Ibid. p 42.
148 Ibid. p 47.
149 Ibid. p 47. It should be pointed out that in this form, Sorel’s distinction between law and justice is not especially controversial or innovative. Classic political theory in general acknowledges the difference between absolute or universal law and particular laws. Certainly even Rousseau is quite clear that while the general will can legislate only on universal matters, while its government can make decrees as to specific questions. Hobbes, similarly, recognizes such a difference. What is different here is that both these thinkers, who inaugurated certain kinds of political modernity, make the general or universal equal to the state, the commonwealth, the nation. These, already here for Sorel, can no longer constitute a general or abstract entity.
although he did not, “Fouillée […] could have noticed the analogy between [Proudhon’s] theory of the idea-function and that of the idea-force [idée-force].”\textsuperscript{150} However, neither Fouillée nor Proudhon are able to provide totally satisfactory accounts of “the genesis of the idea of justice.”\textsuperscript{151} To do so requires a history of morals. This leads Sorel into Proudhon’s writings on war and justice, from which he eventually concludes that “the just man is the worthy man such as our ideal conception of antiquity represents him to us, but transformed by our conscience refined through christian influences.”\textsuperscript{152} Sorel is attempting, through Proudhon, to historicize Fouillée just as he has, with more success, historicized epistemology.

Proudhon’s controversial point is that, in most cases, force settles disputes and in so doing, regardless of the purity of the victor, generates new morals. It leads to another, perhaps less controversial: economic struggles also generate ideals.\textsuperscript{153} If it is relatively easy to imagine contending military forces, how is the historian to think of economic ones? Here is Proudhon, cited by Sorel: “Modern critique demonstrates that […] truth is found not in the exclusion of one of the contraries, but rather in the conciliation of the two […] all antagonisms […] are resolved in more general facts […] that place the opposites in accord, in absorbing them, so to speak, the one into the other.” Sorel could

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid. p 43.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid. p 44. Fouillée provides a frankly philosophical account—almost a phenomenological one. This is clearly not enough for Sorel, who looks at the evidence of history and sees some societies without, apparently, the notion of justice. For instance those without contact with the ancient Greeks.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid. p 46. Some recent writing on Proudhon has also emphasized his theories of international relations. See Alex Prichard, “Justice, Order and Anarchy: The International Political Theory of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865),” \textit{Millennium: Journal of International Studies} 35(2007).
\textsuperscript{153} Sorel refers here to “ce bizarre culte rendu de nos jours a Jeanne d’Arc” in insisting on the unimportance of motive or purity for the eventual creation of new ideals through struggle. Sorel, “Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon.” p 50, note #1.
hardly have failed to see in this passage an image of Fouillée’s ‘conciliatory’ method of absorbing the antagonisms into one another (social contract vs social organism becomes contractual organism, taking on aspects of both...). Sorel comments, “Twelve years later, he [Proudhon] recognized the error of this first point of view.”\textsuperscript{154} Antagonisms, social and otherwise, Proudhon comes to see, are not solved by synthesis, but the more or less successful balancing of forces. Is it legitimate to leap from the abstract positions that Fouillée wished to reconcile—idealism and materialism—to social forces? Certainly Fouillée applied the same method to both.

At the end of the essay, Sorel puts forward what he regards as the path trodden and the conclusions reached. Two are especially important for our purposes. First, “the goal of moral sciences is to define \textit{absolutes}, which science cannot study, but which it can place to establish the separation of causes.”\textsuperscript{155} Sorel admits that there exists a science of morals, and we may perhaps say that in this science, the absolute is the goal in the same way as exact rationality is the goal for physical sciences. Second, “contradictions have their basis in freedom, which fools man, makes him despise justice and pursue illusions.”\textsuperscript{156} We might paraphrase this pessimism as, we are free and it’s too bad. For Fouillée, the idea of liberty creates the reality of liberty—there is one \textit{liberté}, and it has one effect. For Sorel, on the other hand, although there is such a thing as \textit{liberté}, it is plural because it is always enacted in society, and so it is in conflict with itself, and

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid. p 53.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid. p 67.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid. p 68.
creates contradictions. We might say that Sorel rejects Fouillée’s Platonism, but retains the set of problems Fouillée solved with this Platonism.

Sorel is left with a failed science of society. The ideal is split into two non-communicating parts: it is effective within each individual person and it organizes science. Sorel clearly believes it is, in some sense, socially and historically contingent—but in what sense? While Fouillée puts ideals on a metaphysical level, Sorel cannot bring himself to extricate them from history. The force they exert on each individual seems to him at this point trans-historical enough, but the direction and meaning of this force depend on the nature of the society in which it is found. This is the problematic played out in Sorel’s brief engagement with Lombroso’s criminal anthropology. The scientism, the cold rationality, of this essentially statistical approach appealed to Sorel. He was ready to see the same basic facts of human psychology at work now in 1793, and now in a common criminal—now playing an honorable and glorious role, now a degraded one. As has often been the case, Sorel ultimately did not believe that Lombroso’s results and categories were quite so meaningful and powerful as Lombroso and his followers held.157 Too much still rested on history, and this itself was too poorly defined.

The essay on Proudhon thus helps to explain why Sorel was excited by *Capital*. The essay is in continuity, through the commitment to psychology, with his earlier

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interest in psychophysics. Sorel is grappling with the question of a social science, based on the economy. The attempt to organize science around ungraspable absolutes suggests an overlap between natural and social sciences. The fact that Sorel puts Fouillée so explicitly in conversation with Proudhon suggests the body of philosophy with which Sorel is really grappling here, and how. Proudhon is supposed to help historicize Fouillée. In bringing psychology to economics to social science, he ends up stuck in a new variety of dualism. Neither Fouillée’s idée-force nor Proudhon’s absolutes that structure fields of rationality, in fact overcome the ideal/material dichotomy. Near the end of the essay, discussing education and its connection to the division of labor and science itself—sounding very much like certain other post-positivists of the late 19th century such as Ernst Mach—Sorel mentions the cinematics of Franz Reuleaux. It will be the reading of Marx that allows Sorel to bring Reuleaux, and a Reuleauxian way of inserting science into social practice, into social science.

Science and Socialism

Important changes in Sorel’s lifestyle and situation intervene between the writings on Proudhon of 1892 and those on Marx in 1893 and after. Sorel, together with his two brothers—also polytechniciens—had received a modest inheritance on the death of their mother. In early 1891, the property was divided between them. The next year, Sorel achieved the rank of chief engineer and was awarded the Légion d’honneur. He promptly resigned from his post. He would live from this point forward on the modest returns from his share of the inheritance and his writings. Apparently because he felt that to accept it
would have been a moral compromise, he refused the traditional favor granted to higher-ranking civil servants of retiring onto “congé illimité”—that is, extended vacation with full pay. Willy Gianinazzi has calculated that his income was approximately one third of what it would have been had he chosen to retire in the usual fashion. He arrived in Paris at the end of 1892, staying at first with his brother, before moving for a few years to the western end of the city, and then in 1895 to just outside it, to what he called “the country” and is now Boulogne-Billancourt.158

In May of 1893, a letter written by Sorel entitled “Science et socialisme” appeared in the Revue philosophique. This is Sorel’s declaration of allegiance to scientific socialism, and the first time he seems ever to have written about Marx or even specifically about contemporary socialism. The letter is in some ways similar to the one denouncing Charles Henry and his psychophysical aesthetics. Indeed, it takes the same form as both the letters from the early 1870s that survive: a polemical corrective—we can safely remove Gianinazzi’s question mark and say, “Georges Sorel, un homme de controverses.”159 But because this letter had consequences that the others did not, there is some justification in contextualizing this text more than its few pages would at first seem to demand.

Sorel writes in response to a review by Gabriel Tarde of Jean Bourdeau’s Le socialisme allemande et le nihilisme russe. Bourdeau was a figure of some importance in

158 There is now a rue Georges Sorel in Boulogne-Billancourt, which intersects at right angles the Boulevard Jean Jaurès.
French intellectual life. He was a feuilletonist for the *Revue de deux mondes* and the *Journal des Débats* and married to the daughter of the eminent spiritualist philosopher Elme-Marie Caro. Perhaps most telling of his position is that he was among the recipients of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Wahnbriefe* in 1889. He was the only journalist for a daily to be present at the founding of the CGT in 1895. A somewhat conservative liberal, he would be, like Sorel, disgusted by the “embougeoisement” of socialism. And indeed, Sorel and Bourdeau corresponded for decades, beginning with their first meeting in 1897.160 Tarde was in the early 1890s among the pre-eminent figures of French sociology. He would, famously, lose his debate with Émile Durkheim over the proper foundations of sociological knowledge. Where Durkheim would insist on the reality of the social fact, its *sui generis* existence, Tarde insists resolutely on a methodological individualism, constructing a theory of society out of, in the title of his most famous work, *The Laws of Imitation*.

In his review, Tarde is quite sympathetic to Bourdeau’s book, and much of what he says is consonant with positions Sorel will soon adopt. He notes the SPD’s spectacular growth, and also the important fact that it is not built on the immiseration of the workers—who are better paid than many other sectors of society—but rather the new forms of solidarity generated by the extraordinary demands placed on their *time* by industrial labor. Bismarck, of all people, knows that even millionaires are never satisfied, how can the working class be? All the socialist leaders, Tarde reports, possess

160 See the introductory material to the letters, especially the biographical information on Bourdeau by Irène Petit. Georges Sorel et al., "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Jean Bourdeau. 1re partie 1906-1913," *Mil neuf cent* (1996).
“remarkable pride,” a precondition of their work, after all, because “what dose of pride is not required to persuade one’s self that one has discovered the universal cure for the ills of society, […] that by virtue of a State medicine […] all sicknesses will vanish!” Tarde draws a sharp contrast between French and German socialism: “crossing the frontier, the doctrine changes its principle, Proudhon and Leroux are succeeded by theoreticians of the law of force, of natural selection applied to societies. The party of justice becomes the worker’s party.” As Sorel would later agree, much that is problematic can be blamed on “the first father of German socialism […] the great and abstruse logician Hegel.” Marx borrowed, Tarde opines, not only his notion of evolution from this predecessor, but also “his manner [sa manière].” They share, Tarde goes on, “the same torturous tunnel of enigmatic deductions, closely and obscurely connected, here and there shot with brilliance. Their obscurity […] is part of their power.” The single-mindedness of the most radical socialists, Tarde laments, tends to appear as logical clarity, and therefore to bring them success over the reformists.

It is this negative evaluation of Marx’s thought and style that becomes Sorel’s target, and in fact the politics of science, philosophy, and style are at the heart of the letter. Indeed, Sorel admits, one may “have little liking for people so unlikable as Bebel and Singer,” but the personalities of Marxist socialists are attacked only to avoid the real question, which is over doctrine. “Contemporary philosophy battles chimeras and plunges

\[161\] Gabriel Tarde, "J. Bourdeau. Le socialisme allemand et le nihilisme russe.,” Revue philosophique 35(1893). p 82.
\[162\] Ibid. p 83.
\[163\] Ibid. p 81.
on through the Empyrean,” and is able to put forward only “subtle” and ineffective refutations of “Marx’s new real metaphysics.” Sorel professes not to understand why Tarde takes the position he does, saying, “Marx is not a mediocre thinker” and although indeed his writing is difficult, “it is not Marx’s fault that social problems are complicated.” Capital is, it is true, no more amusing than Aristotle’s Politics. “J.-B. Say and Bastiat are not so difficult to read as Marx, but what can one learn in reading them? One of the merits of the German writer has been to place social science on the only correct terrain for it (admitting that there exists a social science).” The inability or unwillingness of contemporary French philosophers to engage with Marx is all the more destructive because, as Sorel ends the letter, “the problem is of a philosophical order, only philosophers accustomed to studying principles can take it on seriously.” But for Sorel the philosophical is difficult to unravel from the social and political.

It has been Sorel’s assertion of the scientific status of Marxism and its applicability to politics that has most attracted the attention of readers. And indeed although Sorel rejects Jacobinism, saying that “socialism is exploited by Jacobins and it is a great misfortune,” he sounds very like the arrogant Marxists Tarde describes. All changes, he says, take place through force. And what does socialism want? “that public

165 Ibid. p 509.
166 Ibid. p 509.
167 Ibid. p 511.
168 Ibid. p 510.
power [la force publique] acts in conformity to the rules of a rational State.” This is asking no more than reformers of the ancien régime received. “Socialism claims to establish,” Sorel says, “an economic science. If it has done so, it has the right to demand the legislative remaking of the State. Its theorems must be applied. What is rational and demonstrated must become real [ce qui est rationnel et démontré doit devenir réel].”

This is to throw Hegel directly back in Tarde’s face. These passages have often been cited to demonstrate that Sorel was somehow ‘converted’ immediately to a caricature of the already vulgar deterministic Marxism of the Second International.

As should be clear from what has already been discussed in this chapter, Sorel does not use the term ‘science’ lightly, and has already thought at some length about what it might mean to assert the existence of an economic science of society. And indeed the letter goes on in a vein that would have been obscure for anyone who had not been following Sorel’s writings up to this point. Today, Sorel laments, people want to speak only in terms of “empiricism and the relative.” “Rational science and utopia” are thought to be simply equal to one another because of the prevailing opinion that science is “only a construction of our minds [l’esprit], more or less but never completely adapted to real things.” The absolute disappears and skepticism reigns. “Is it not an admirable spectacle,” Sorel sneers, “to see the plebes remain faithful to old principles, still believing in law and absolute truth, while those supposed to direct them no longer do? Scientific skepticism constantly aggravates the separation of classes, from a moral point of

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169 Ibid. p 510.
170 Ibid. p 510.
171 Ibid. p 510.
view.”¹⁷² Science, in this sense, “still goes forward” despite clever objections to its very possibility—just as the crumbling of the “foundations of mathematics” have not slowed progress making use of its tools.¹⁷³ The various “social recipes” of reformers, the formulas describing the “so called evolution of societies,” these may “have practical value,” but they can only be “subjective” and are not science.¹⁷⁴ Rational science is always oriented around an absolute, and cannot be satisfied with subjectivity.

The important question is the same for Marx as it was for Proudhon, although here Sorel says nothing about the latter. Rather, he asks, “is it true that exchange contains an element that can be brought into rational science, as K. Marx claims, or rather is it a phenomena that escapes all possible scientific categories, as Aristotle seemed to believe?” The question has rarely even been posed in its proper form, least of all by economists: “these most annoying littérateurs have not even understood what their adversary is talking about.”¹⁷⁵ Sorel concludes, “For some time now I have sought, in vain, an answer to this capital question and I have not yet found an answer anywhere.”¹⁷⁶ Since no other answer was forthcoming, Sorel would have to provide one himself. But it is important to emphasize that in this letter, Sorel is not advocating, or even searching for, a determinist Marxism. Rational science is a moral absolute. Sorel is not desperately seeking foundations in a world where they seem to slip away, but is rather—as he had in the Proudhon essay—asserting the absolute as an organizing principle, a moral force in

¹⁷² Ibid. p 510.
¹⁷³ Ibid. p 511.
¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p 511.
¹⁷⁵ Ibid. p 511.
¹⁷⁶ Ibid. p 511.
the world. Much is left unsaid in this short letter, not only the debate between Aristotle and Marx is left unresolved, but also the relation of rational science to the chaotic material world. Resolving these and other problems will be the task of “De l’ancienne à la nouvelle métaphysique.”

Sorel’s letter to the editor did not go without response, the nature of which suggests that Sorel’s frustration with the state of social science was not misplaced. Sorel’s letter had appeared in the same issue with several reviews by Gustave Belot of books concerned, in various ways, with socialism. An anonymous letter to the editor (in fact written by Henri Mazel—best known as a symbolist dramaturge) in the next issue asked “why the Revue philosophique, which has been more and more preoccupied, for good reason, with the social sciences, does not bring to them the scientific rigor and precision of terms which has been so successful in the domain of philosophy ?” After all, Mazel added, “in sociography above all a science is a well-made language.” Mazel provoked Belot into a response, and meanwhile Tarde had published another long review of a clutch of books in sociology, including Durkheim’s De la division du travail.

Partly in response to all this confusion, Durkheim would later publish a short essay attempting to give his own, properly sociological, definition of socialism—his method is

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177 According to Mazel, Sorel and Belot are operating with two radically different definitions of socialism. Mazel gives Sorel’s definition as “la force publique agissant conformément aux règles d’un Etat rationnel,” which indeed is in sharp contrast with what Mazel says Belot means: “l’action commune et l’entente libres...compatibles en principe et d’une manière générale avec l’initiative privée.” More, Sorel’s definition is admitted by both the partisans and the detractors of socialism—why admit Belot’s ? Mazel made the suggestion in an anonymous letter to the editor, which he later admitted to having written.

178 Gabriel Tarde, "Questions sociales," Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger 35(1893). The other two books under review were Ludwig Gumplowicz’ Der Rassenkampf (in French translation), and Jacques Novicow’s La lutte entre les sociétés.
certainly at antipodes from Mazel’s. In May of 1894, the first version of Durkheim’s *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* began to appear, also in *Revue philosophique*. In terms of disciplinary formation, then, Sorel intervenes at a moment when a three-way argument about the nature of socialism and sociology can take place between a fully literary figure (Mazel), a non-academic practitioner of social science (Tarde), and a professor of the curious new academic discipline of sociology (Durkheim). The history of the academic politics of this period has often been devoted—and, as Mazel said, for good reason—to understanding how, exactly, a relatively newly assimilated Alsatian Jew teaching a discipline that he had practically invented at a provincial university could win this argument, and eventually achieve a powerful position in French academic life.

It is significant that none of the participants in this debate about sociology and socialism gave more than a passing glance to Marx’s writings. Marx’s texts, although not unknown in France at this time, were available largely in summary versions, partially and sometimes poorly translated. On the other hand, as Jean Bourdeau’s book made clear, Marxism was the ideological mainstay of the socialist party that had nearly doubled its share of the vote in German Reichstag elections between 1887 and 1890. The question of how genuinely Marxist the POF was is not at issue here. Certainly the theoretical sophistication of Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue leave much to be desired next to the leaders of the SPD. Perhaps the best response follows that of one of the POF’s recent historians. Robert Stuart quotes an 1895 editorial from *Le Socialiste*: “‘socialists are
reproached for not having produced a second Marx, as if [his] successor…was not the socialist movement itself.”

Certainly this would be Sorel’s view.

So Marxism in France—at least when Sorel encountered it—was represented not by theoretical constructions, but by the Guesdistes Party. Guesde had been organizing on an explicitly Marxist basis since the early 1880s. A major re-foundation and centralization took place in 1890, after which the Guesdistes took a leading role in organizing what would become a great working-class ritual: May Day. The importance of this event, and the Guesdistes’ participation in it was sealed when marching workers in Fourmies were fired upon. Paul Lafargue was thrown in prison for his public role in the event, and promptly elected to the chamber of deputies from his cell. 180 1892 was an important year for labor organization in France, with the general strike adopted by the Federation of Trade Unions, and the creation of the federation of the Bourses du Travail—it was also the first substantial electoral success of the Guesdistes, which is to say the arrival of Marxism as a practical political force in France. 181

Sorel’s letter appeared in May of 1893, when the electoral power of the POF was beginning to show (in municipal elections the previous year, and early and by-elections)

181 See the cursory treatment in Jean Marie Mayeur and Madeleine Rebérioux, *The Third Republic from its origins to the Great War, 1871-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). p 137. And from a different perspective, Stuart, *Marxism at work : ideology, class, and French socialism during the Third Republic*. pp 40-41. Stuart, whose mandate is to attend to the Party and not its intellectual apparatus, cannot resist labeling Lafargue’s description of the consequences of Fourmies as something like the founding of a new religion “unconsciously Sorelian”—just one small piece of evidence that Sorel did indeed do as he claimed, that is, translate into theoretical language the practical life of the auto-organization of the working classes.
but had not yet decisively arrived as it would a few months later in the main legislative elections. The theorists were not far behind the electorate.

*L’Ère nouvelle* was the first French journal dedicated to the elaboration of Marxism as a theoretical rather than strictly political project. Although there is some question about the precise circumstances of its creation, Sorel later recounted that a young medical student, George Diamandy was the main motive force. The son of a wealthy land-owner in Moldavia, Diamandy was sent by his family to Paris after finishing his secondary school. Neglecting his studies in Paris, he instead became involved in socialism, taking part in the founding of ESRI, one of the very first Marxist student groups in France, and working with Guesdistes. After the failure of *L’Ère nouvelle* he remained in Paris for some years until, in 1898, the death of his father left him in possession of a substantial fortune. He returned home, initially as a propagandist for socialism. He entered public life, left socialism behind and eventually, before his death in 1917, became an important liberal member of government and a tutor to the Queen of Romania.

Diamandy clearly had high, perhaps contradictory, hopes for *L’Ère nouvelle*. Indeed, there may have been tension on the editorial staff over its real purpose—was the review to be a general forum for the application of Marx’s ideas to literature and society, 

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182 Sorel sent a note to the editorial staff of *Jeunesse socialiste* in 1895, correcting them for having failed to mention that “le merite de l’oeuvre [that is, *L’Ère nouvelle*] appartient, en entier, a G. Diamandy, qui a consacré a cette revue beavoup d’argent.” Georges Sorel, "Rectification," *Jeunesse socialiste* (1895). p 179.
184 See the account in Maitron, *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français*. 110
or was it to be rather a tool for the elaboration of a stronger theoretical base for Guesde’s POF? Diamandy’s opening “declaration” makes Ère nouvelle almost a journal of Marxist literary criticism, concerned especially with positioning itself vis-à-vis Zola’s naturalism: “And if some man of letters asks what school we belong to and who are our parents, I will respond to him – and seriously: – We are the sons of the steam-engine.”¹⁸⁵ Yet, in a letter to Engels—trying to justify having printed excerpts from Engels’ Barbarie et civilisation without having first gotten permission to do so—Diamandy says, “I hope to be able to make of Ère nouvelle our Neue Zeit. It is understood with Guesde that after the elections and from the moment that we have a daily, the Revue would pass to the POF. You understand, dear citizen Engels, that deprived of your articles it will be absolutely impossible to bring to a satisfactory conclusion the work begun with so much moral and monetary difficulty.”¹⁸⁶ Although this confusion in its basic mission no doubt contributed to the review’s short lifespan of just 17 issues, l’Ère nouvelle holds a special place in the history of French Marxism.¹⁸⁷ Although the precise circumstances of Sorel’s involvement with the journal are unknown, it seems that Diamandy, on seeing his letter, invited him to

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¹⁸⁵ This is interesting for several reasons. France is exceptional in that its pre-war Marxist involved itself very little in literary matters—in contrast to Germany, for instance, and Diamandy’s Romania. (see Mouvement social 1967). Reberioux points to the fact that early French Marxist student groups were primarily drawn not from the faculty of letters, but from medicine and law. This describes Diamandy, but he was clearly very interested in literature. George Diamandy, “Déclaration,” L’Ère nouvelle 1(1893). p 10.


¹⁸⁷ The review’s broad cosmopolitanism may have contributed to its failure in France. No other Marxist publications would mix sociological and historical writing with literary criticism and original work in a similar way for some time. As already mentioned, the general aversion of French Marxists to things literary was marked. Might we say that Diamandy’s journal was a kind of transplant to the French scene? Certainly, the journal itself as a physical object served as a point of contact for foreigners in France—the advertisements on the back on one issue: for translation services, and an international boarding-house at which English, Italian, and German are spoken—attest to this.
contribute. And contribute he did, launching the involvement in Marxist theory and politics that would define his intellectual legacy.

Marx by Way of Reaulaux

“L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique” (“ANM”), Sorel’s first engagement in print with Marx, as promised in his letter, takes the challenge Marx presents as profoundly philosophical. Jean Jaurès would later call Sorel the “metaphysician of syndicalism”—in a sense he is completely correct. The title Edouard Berth gave the essay when, in 1935, he rescued it from the crumbling pages of the forgotten Ère nouvelle, where it had appeared over the first half of 1894, and republished it—D’Aristote à Marx—suggests quite nicely its level of ambition.¹⁸⁸ The essay’s focus on epistemological questions may not seem the obvious way to enter into Marxist philosophy. Aside from Sorel’s pre-existing interest in these matters, it might be observed that the philosophy of science is important for anyone claiming to represent scientific socialism. Polemics on this ground were not lacking in these years. Indeed, Lenin’s dismissal of Sorel as “muddle-headed”—in the 1907 Materialism and Empirio-

¹⁸⁸ I cite from the 1935 edition because it is widely available. The text of “ANM” was virtually unchanged for this re-edition, so it seems fruitless to point to the rare and difficult-to-access original. The first publication did not go entirely unnoticed. Although no response to it has been recorded, Shlomo Sand proudly takes as his epigraph what Engels wrote to Laura Lafargue in 1894: “Quant à la Métaphysique de Sorel, je n’ai vraiment pas eu le temps de la lire…Y a-t-il quelque chose d’intéressant dans cette étude de Sorel?”
criticism—was in reference to his supposed nominalism, not his revolutionary syndicalism.  

In “L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique”—hereafter “ANM”—Sorel approaches and moves beyond what are recognizably the same problems he confronted two years earlier through Proudhon. Then, he had defined liberté as “the individual capacity [pouvoir] to construct ideas and act in conformity with ideas […] Man cannot do without the ideal; not only does he create it, but he tends to realize it.” At the end of “ANM” Sorel again defined liberté, “we are free in this sense, that we can construct devices [des appareils] that have no model in the cosmic milieu. We cannot change the laws of nature, but we are masters enough to create sequences with an order that is our own.” The remainder of this chapter discusses the most important points of “ANM,” in order to explain the significance of Sorel’s move to replace “idée” with “appareil.”

Sorel’s project in “ANM” can be described as mapping out the relations between five terms, and his argument can be reproduced in a schematic form using them: rational and systematic knowledge, the expressive support, cosmic and artificial milieus. It must be recognized first that there are two kinds of science, which produce distinct kinds of knowledge: rational and systematic. Rational knowledge is abstract and objective.

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189 Specifically, Lenin criticizes Sorel in the context of a general attack on Henri Poincaré, and Sorel’s assertion that Poincaré, and the work of those inspired by him, for instance Le Roy, could be compatible with various forms of materialism.
190 Sorel, "Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon." p 638.
192 A number of topics are discussed in this long text—continuity and discontinuity, the theory of measurement, the notion of the ‘unknowable’—that I leave to the side or mention only tangentially. It should at least be mentioned that these topics are all explicitly under discussion in the pages of the Revue philosophique in these years.
Systematic knowledge, in contrast, is practical, useful, predictive. Given this rupture in science itself, we can postulate, or deduce, the existence of two natures, which Sorel here calls the cosmic and the artificial milieu. Humans have no direct access to the cosmic milieu, but rather only to the world as we have already, however slightly, altered it, that is to the artificial milieu. Mediating between these categories is what Sorel calls an expressive support. This is a form, drawn from one part of the artificial milieu, that we use to work within another part of the artificial milieu. So we have in sum, two pairs and a shifter: ration and systematic knowledge (which are exclusive), the cosmic and artificial milieu (where the first contains the second), and the capacious and ambiguous concept, expressive support. This last will play a crucial role in what we can somewhat anachronistically call Sorel’s historicization of epistemology.

Sorel begins “ANM” by distinguishing clearly between the two sorts of knowledge. His terminology is significant. He says,

Investigations of nature can have two quite distinct goals, and from this results two kinds of knowledge, radically different in their spirit. Sometimes, known phenomena are organized in such a way as to predict what will happen, with a level of approximation sufficient for practical needs. Sometimes, the phenomenal realm is left behind […] in the desire to join together scientific abstractions through laws independent of all possible conditions of real appearance—such is the goal of rational Science.¹⁹³

Several points should be highlighted from this passage. First, knowledge is always intentional—although rational science is entered into with the intent to have no intent. Second, prediction, which will be a major sticking point in the debates around Marx’s work, is already here, and brought by Sorel from the totally different realm of practical mechanics. Third, Sorel makes a distinction between a realm of rationality and law, on

¹⁹³ Sorel and Berth, D’Aristote à Marx (L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique). pp 96-97.
the one hand, and then the quite different real world of phenomenal appearance on the other. Although Sorel tends to valorize rational science over systematic knowledge, he is explicit that they are both necessary and vital, neither one is sufficient unto itself. The real problems will only come in confusion of the one for the other, or in the assumption (especially on the part of metaphysicians) that the two can in fact be held entirely apart: “all that can be asked is that one not give out as definitive solutions that are quite empirical.”\textsuperscript{194} So, we might say, the distinction between the rational and the practical is to be sought in the practical.

This first, practical, way of knowing is called “systématique.” Systematic knowledge seeks to “envelope” reality in one way or another. For instance, in engineering, one introduces variables into equations in order to calculate the necessary strength of a structural element given a range of possible, and technically unknowable, forces.\textsuperscript{195} Similar calculations can be made for various social phenomena. Insurance actuaries, for instance, gather enormous quantities of data and make complex calculations that can have remarkable predictive value. Life insurance none the less remains a systématique, and not a rational science.\textsuperscript{196} Echoing his own and Tarde’s language, Sorel calls such practical solutions “recipes.” The “social economists” often make policy recommendations that have no basis in real science, but none the less attain social

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid. p 133.
\textsuperscript{195} See Ibid. p 100. This was, naturally, a concrete problem for Sorel as an engineer. He discussed at some length the problem of wind-resistance and associated stresses on bridges and other structures in an article on attempts to measure wind. See Sorel, “La pression du vent. D’après les anémonètres de Robinson et de Bourdon.” Reprint from \textit{XVIIe Bulletin météorologique des Pyrénées-Orientales}, 1888. Held in the fonds Marcel Rivière, 503.44, IISG, Amsterdam.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid. p 121. Sorel mentions this example several times.
pacification, their stated goal. For instance, a certain kind of education pacifies social conflict.  

Systematic science, then, seems clear enough. But what is rational science, and how can we get there from mere practical knowledge? The key figure here for Sorel is a now-obscure German professor of theoretical mechanics, Franz Reuleaux. Reuleaux’s achievement was to formalize—that is, render into a system of symbols—machine technology. In Reuleaux’s words, “[a] machine is a combination of resistant bodies so arranged that by their means the mechanical forces of nature can be compelled to do work accompanied by certain determinate motions.” He abstracted size and material from the nature of the machine, grasping the geometric essence of the movement of each mechanism (which, with Reuleaux, is a technical term for an element of a larger machine). In this way, a given machine could be reduced to a formula that described not the accidents of, say, the steel or iron of which it was made, but the transformation of movement it performed: for instance, the transformation of the pressure generated by

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197 For instance, “Les pays modernes se sont organisés en vue de faire une place à ces ennemis: il est plus sage de subventionner les barbares que de les combattre; on agrège donc ces êtres dangereux en leur réservant les emplois dits politiques, en leur donnant le moyen de vivre en parasites sur les sociétés financières” Ibid. p 110. On one level, this might be read as a simple expression of bitterness toward the growing class of (not yet so-called) intellectuals. The state protects itself by bribing the potential leaders of its enemies—who here, in reference to Rome rather than Paris, are barbarians and not yet proletarians. Contemporary society generates a morally bankrupt class of parasitic intellectuals who dedicate their pens to protecting the state that protects them—the universitaires. There is more to it than this. Sorel has what we might anachronistically call a sociology of knowledge. For more on Sorel and education, see chapter two of the present dissertation.


steam into circular motion driving the wheels of a train. Reuleaux’s influence was considerable in his own day, and it is less surprising that Sorel would be aware of the translation into French of his treatise on machine-design, the *Cinématique*, than it is that Sorel took him as a model of scientific abstraction.

However that may be, Reuleaux provides for Sorel an essential conceptual link between the two modes of knowing—his work is at once an example to be followed and, not coincidentally, an investigation of the dominant characteristic of modern society.

Reuleaux makes rational science out of mere systematic knowledge. Sorel cites Reuleaux defending his theory thus,

> Scientific abstraction can show only, for machines, what is and is not possible to do, and it possesses no criterion for making the choice between what is practical and what is not. Theory has often been reproached for this absence of criterion: but this reproach is not truly founded except when it [theory] insists on remaining outside the domain of practical things. We have not abandoned this domain except to recognize more clearly the complicated developments of our problem. It is precisely through the choice between when is practical and what is not, that we find ourselves brought back to reality.\(^{200}\)

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\(^{200}\) Reuleaux’s *Lehrbuch der Kinematik* (1875) was quickly into French in 1877. Sorel seems to have depended entirely on this French translation. I none the less reproduce here the German text of the passage I have cited, “Denn die wissenschaftliche Abstraktion kann für die Maschine nur die Möglichkeiten liefern; sie besitzt kein Kriterium für die Auswahl zwischen „praktisch“ und „unpraktisch“. Man hat oft der Theorie diesen ihr innewohnenden Mangel vorgeworfen; solches geschieht aber mit Recht nur da, wo sie das reale Gebiet hartnäckig ignoriert. Von dem praktischen Gebiete haben wir uns nur deshalb auf das der Abstraktion entfernt, um die verwinkelten Gänge unserer Aufgabe mit Klarheit erkennen zu können. Jene Auswahl aber zwischen brauchbar und unbrauchbar ist es, welche uns immer wieder zum Realen zurückführen muss.” Franz Reuleaux, *Lehrbuch der Kinematik, V.1 : Theoretische Kinematik : Grundzüge einer Theorie des Maschinenwesens* (Braunschweig: F Vieweg und sohn, 1875). p 58. The English provided above is my own translation from the French Sorel used, which is somewhat different from what appears in the English translation. The French: “l’abstraction scientifique peut uniquement, pour les machines, montrer ce qu’il est possible de faire et elle ne possède aucune critérium pour le choix à faire, entre ce qu’est pratique et ce qui ne l’est pas. On a souvent reproché à la théorie cette absence de critérium; mais ce reproche n’est réellement fondé que lorsqu’elle s’obstine à rester en dehors du domaine des choses pratiques. Nous n’avons abandonné ce dernier que pour reconnaître plus clairement la marche compliquée de notre problème. C’est précisément par ce choix à faire, entre ce qui est pratique et ce qui n’est pas, que nous nous trouvons de nouveau ramenés dans le domaine de la réalité.” Sorel and Berth, *D’Aristote à Marx (L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique)*, pp 114-5. Sorel used, Franz Reuleaux, *Cinématique, principes fondamentaux d’une théorie générale des machines*, trans. A. Debize (Paris: Librairie F. Savy, 1877). For a
Sorel allows Reuleaux to formulate for him the complex relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge. Reuleaux’s work is remarkable because he is able, according to Sorel, to correctly relate theory to practice.²⁰¹

Up to this point in Sorel’s reasoning, we have remained within a fairly clear dichotomy between theory and practice, ideal and material. Matters become a great deal more complicated when we try to understand the precise nature of Reuleaux’s abstraction from machines, and above all the material conditions for its existence. In a compressed form, Sorel would say that Reuleaux has made of the machine (or more precisely, the mechanism) a support expressif, a “construction” that expresses a particular application of the general laws of nature, or the milieu cosmique, drawn from and applying itself to the milieu artificiel, which is the world as we experience it. The question then becomes, how is one to understand the historical nature of the expressive support?

An expressive support is an ideal construction that expresses, perhaps metaphorically, perhaps physically, perhaps algebraically, relations between things. Indeed, “the subordination of supports to relations is the fundamental principle of science […] By failing to respect this rule, one poses for one’s self absolutely insoluble metaphysical problems.”²⁰² Sorel allows that an expressive supports may be “geometric

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²⁰¹ fascinating archive of Reuleaux’s teaching machines, see Cornell University’s KMODDL project: http://kmoddl.library.cornell.edu/rx_collection.php (accessed May 4th, 2012).
²⁰² Although not everyone agreed that Reuleaux was practical. See Moon, “Franz Reuleaux: Contributions to 19th century kinematics and theory of machines.”
²⁰² Sorel and Berth, D’Aristote à Marx (L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique). p 140.
figures, mechanisms, living beings, collective bodies.”

He discusses all these categories of expressive supports at various points in “ANM,” but the mechanism or machine turns out to have a special status. Expressive supports are what we use to understand the world—the very architecture of our rational minds—they are therefore of the first importance. Each support has a history, and each body of knowledge “is characterized by the system of supports it employs.” For instance, Sorel attacks the concepts of sovereignty and the state as expressive supports naïvely used for the discussion of political and social issues.

Expressive supports give us some grasp of the milieu cosmique, which is to say the basic laws of nature, but they are rooted in, and draw their power to convince from the milieu artificiel. The distinction being drawn here will be important for Sorel over a long period of time. Its metaphysical status will, however, slowly evolve. For the moment, we can indicate a few sources.

Jeremy Jennings, who has done the best work on the relationship between Sorel’s scientific views and his early Marxism, emphasizes the role of Claude Bernard, a physiologist and founding figure of modern experimental medicine, in shaping Sorel’s epistemology. Jennings highlights significant parallels between Sorel’s two milieus and

203 Ibid. p 117.
204 Ibid. p 127.
205 See Ibid. p 248-253. I mention this here as an example of the reach Sorel gives to the concept of expressive support. The content of these passages is important and must be treated later in the broader context of Sorel’s critique of the political thought of his time. In particular, the significant overlap of Sorel’s ideas on the forms of relation between individual and state with the positions Durkheim stakes out in De la division du travail social, is in need of close scrutiny. Sorel, like Durkheim, is critical of Rousseau’s use of the contract as a way to understand society—Durkheim’s critique seems aimed at Herbert Spencer’s re-working of contractual political theory, Sorel’s critique operates on a different level. It would be out of place to discuss this at length here.
Bernard’s revolutionary idea of an ‘internal milieu’ that obeys the same basic physical laws as the rest of the world (thus precluding most forms of vitalism), but that is also a self-regulating system with special properties and requirements.206 However, Jennings’ reading is shaped by his focus on the question of Sorel’s Marxism. His goal is to exonerate Sorel from the charge of subscribing first to a vulgar materialist determinism, and then later on to a bitter anti-scientific relativism. This he does with authority, and it is a welcome point. But Jennings does a disservice to Sorel by pointing to Bernard’s determination (as opposed to determinism) as an alibi.

The distinction is basically over the reality of science. Bernard’s goal was to arrive at a perfect congruence between world and knowledge. For Bernard, to practice science “one must believe in science, which is to say determinism, in the absolute and necessary relation of things”—even while at the same time admitting that knowledge is, as yet, incomplete.207 Organisms are enormously complex, and any number of factors may intervene to complicate a given diagnosis—but the determinism is there. Further, it does not seem to me at all easy to map Bernard’s milieu interne onto the Sorelian concept of milieu artificiel. Bernard’s organism is “a living machine constructed in such a fashion that there is, on the one side, free communication between the exterior milieu and the interior organic milieu, and on the other side that the organic elements are protected.”208 This machine is nothing like the ones Reuleaux theorizes. Sorel cites Bernard often, but

206 J. R. Jennings, “Sorel's Early Marxism and Science,” Political Studies 31, no. 2 (1983). This way of demarcating a specific science without denying the unity of science was influential—Durkheim at several points adopts a version of it to explain the specificity of sociology.
207 Bernard, Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale, p 85.
208 Ibid. p 147.
for the most part as an example of excellent critical thinking. Bernard cuts through false reasoning in a way Sorel admires, and remains faithful to the principles of rationality in the face of the most complex phenomena. In the end, though, Sorel emphasizes the croire in Bernard’s formulation over the determinisme.

The status of science also separated Sorel from other, more proximate, Marxist sources for his terms. Indeed, the direct source for the distinction between cosmic and artificial milieus is very likely texts published in Ère nouvelle by Paul Lafargue. But lexical borrowing is not, in itself, definitive of very much. Lafargue, as Shlomo Sand emphasizes, drew the distinction as a mode of incorporating Darwinian theories into historical materialism without disturbing the basic historical vision of class struggle. This is far from Sorel’s project. Moreover, the terms are clearly integrated into a long-meditated position on the nature of science as a human activity. Adoption of these terms may have been a way of rendering more palatable, or more apparently Marxist, Sorel’s

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209 This is to say that Sorel appreciates Bernard as a critic. Much has been made of Sorel’s comments about Henri Bergson in “ANM.” Sorel is impressed first of all by Bergson’s analysis of the ‘solidification’ of ideas. For Bergson, in Données, this analysis really only serves to clear the ground for a discussion of durée—it is a description of what the moi profonde is not, so that he can get on to describing what it is. Sorel does not mention the moi profonde, and in fact criticizes Bergson for not drawing the conclusions of his work, and for finishing at a facile defense of free-will. This is not the whole of Sorel’s reading of Bergson—but again, this is not the place to discuss the complex and long-term relationship, which has anyway already received much attention. See Sorel and Berth, D’Aristote à Marx (L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique). p 183.


211 See the discussion in, Shlomo Sand, L’illusion du politique : Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900 (Paris: Découverte, 1985). pp 44ff
arguments, but Sorel’s position itself was fundamentally at variance with the Marxist epistemology as it had been defined by Engels.  

Expressive supports can be said to define the difference between the artificial and the cosmic milieu. It is tempting to reduce the expressive support to the status of metaphor, and to say that Sorel is a kind of soft constructivist. What is the nature of our knowledge about reality? We can only understand the world through the words and categories we have to describe it. After all, Sorel says that “the most clear and best analyzed units of explanation are those that we have imbued with our genius [pénétrer de notre génie], those that we find in the artificial milieu: today, it is mechanisms that we use to explain everything.” Is this not another way of saying that our categories arise from our social situation? The question is the question of science, and Sorel’s answer is more complex because he still retains an essential realism regarding scientific knowledge. His criticism of a solution that he calls ‘pantheism,’ suggests his position. The successors to the pantheists are nominalists. They saw that

Language plays an enormous role in science, that it furnishes each individual with a way of participating in a work of tradition. No one imagines that language could be the personal work of the individual [du sujet], nor that it is some kind of divine intervention. They [the nominalists] have therefore put the problem onto a real foundation [un terrain réel][…] But they saw only a single side of the question.

The clear point of reference here is Ernst Mach and related attempts to explain the conventional nature of scientific language in terms of its utility in human life. From the

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212 Sand emphasizes this break. Ibid. p 45. The question could be pursued into Ernst Mach’s work and Lenin’s epistemological writings.
213 Sorel and Berth, D’Aristote à Marx (L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique). pp 159-160.
214 Ibid. pp 192-193.
point of view of the new metaphysics, Sorel says, the answer is clear: “Science is social, it is within the economic milieu.” After all, Sorel says, “if there exists something perfectly social in human activity, it is the machine. It is more social than language itself.” This is the force of the claim that machines provide the best expressive supports in the contemporary world.

Sorel privileges the machine as an expressive support over language as such because machines have a connection to physical reality that words do not. It is a common 19th theme that “machines connect us to natural energies of different kinds and greater power than the energies used in the past.” But for Sorel, this is not simply a worship of Prometheus. Machines are directly linked to science, “the machine is a reasoned representation of material forces, because it obliges these energies to manifest themselves according to determined movements, the understanding of which covers that of causal laws, thus put to the test [mises aïsnì en expérience] in every workshop.” Machines express the laws of nature—they function as a direct result of the laws of causality, and can therefore be said to express these laws, to the degree that they institute them by constraining forces to obey them. Therefore, “to invent a mechanism is to

216 Sorel and Berth, D'Aristote à Marx (L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique), p 193. Sorel goes on to say that this formula has the advantage of retaining the importance of language. “Cette formule donne en vérité ce que le mythe panthéiste donnait en figure: la participation devient alors une chose parfaitement claire [flnt] ; on fait disparaître toute intervention des affections dans la connaissance : on rend compte de l'influence énorme exercé par l'organisme expressif de la société, la langue.” ———, D'Aristote à Marx (L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique), p 193. The footnote reads: « On peut encore observer que l'on arrive ainsi à comprendre comment il y a dans le travail de l'intelligence quelque chose de séparable, d'immortel, comme le disaient les philosophes grecs. » Sorel is here clearly struggling to retain his scientific realism in the face of the powerful historicist logic he is in fact deploying.
217 Sorel and Berth, D'Aristote à Marx (L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique). p 201.
218 Ibid. p 202.
219 Ibid. p 205.
discover a theorem that one represents by means of perceptible sizes [grandeurs sensibles] […] Mechanical invention differs from science (as it is usually understood) only in the mode of expression.” Mathematical formula and industrial machines are expressions of the same underlying reality.

The physicist’s lab and the factory floor are not so far apart, and the former does not have better access to the truths of reality than does the latter. In fact, Sorel’s image of industrial society as a vast agglomeration of physics experiments, in which the accelerating development of new kinds of mechanisms and machines is also the disclosure of new aspects of the natural world, privileges the machine-shop over the university laboratory.

There are, in the physico-chemical sciences, uncertain results. They are those that have remained individual, and I understand this word in the most general sense, meaning by it those [results] that have been announced only by men working in laboratories, and have not spread into industrial life. However many verifications and whatever the authority of those who have spoken about these phenomena, I consider them to lack the social certainty that alone makes science.221

Such a grand—and radically democratic—conception of the place of industrial activity in human knowing cannot fail to have implications for one’s philosophy of history.

Although Sorel continuously casts scorn on Comte, he none the less succumbs to what seems to be a relatively progressive account of human history, based on the development of machine technology: “what seems the most characteristic of progress in machines [le progrès machinal] is the exact determination of movements by geometric enchainment: if we sought to translate this formula into metaphysical language, we would say, ‘progress

220 Ibid. p 208.
221 Ibid. pp 212-213.
This implied philosophy of history also postulates a major turning point in human history with the rise of precise machines. As machines become a major part of society, mankind “thus finds itself in intimate relations with nature.” At this point, then, the progress of the artificial milieu (from which we draw expressive supports), has brought these supports into very close contact with nature itself.

This view of industry is available to Sorel only through Reuleaux’s project of abstracting mechanisms into a symbolic language that could be manipulated according to its own rules to produce new, previously unknown, physical mechanisms. Sorel generalized and radicalized Reuleaux’s method—but it was Sorel’s reading of Marx that gave this way of understanding the machine and its place in society an overriding historic-political urgency.

In this period, Sorel cites only from Capital. In the middle chapters (13-15) of Capital, Marx sets down a sweeping historic-theoretical account of communal labor and the spread of machines in society. It could not have failed to be of interest to Sorel, yet what concerned Sorel in “ANM” was Marx’s theory of value. Already in 1892, before, as far as can be told, Sorel had any knowledge of or interest in Marx, he had considered the problem of a scientific account of value in economics as crucial to any social or

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222 Ibid. p 228.
223 Ibid. p 226.
224 It is this sort of ‘progressivism’ that Sorel will later reject; he does not develop it at any length here.
225 The diffusion of Marx’s writings in France is a field in and of itself. It is unlikely that Sorel had read more than Capital, although he might, through the circle around l’Ère nouvelle, have had access to the “Manifesto,” which was republished there for the first time since its original appearance.
economic science. So it is perhaps not entirely surprising that it is Marx’s construction ‘time socially necessary’ that Sorel seizes upon.

As Berth’s title *D’Aristote à Marx* suggests, Sorel’s point of entry is the passage from Aristotle’s confusion in the face of what he called *chremismatics*—a form of trade that uses money to buy and then sells, having as its goal the limitless accumulation of wealth—to Marx’s analysis of capital’s essential structure in the formula M-C-M. It is in order to help explain the “peculiarities” of the equivalent form of a commodity’s value (exchange-value) that Marx suggests that “we go back to the great investigator who was the first to analyze the value-form, like so many other forms of thought, society and nature.” Marx unfolds Aristotle’s attempt to discuss commodity exchange in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, and concludes that “Aristotle...tells us what prevented any further analysis: the lack of a concept of value.” Sorel, however, cites a crucial section from “The General Formula for Capital,” saying that Marx cites Aristotle’s analysis of “l’usure,” and completes it, “the last term in each circle M-C-M, buy in order to sell, is the first term in a new circulation of the same kind [...] The circulation of money as capital contains its end within itself; because it is only by this ever renewed movement that value continues to increase itself. The movement of capital therefore has no limits.” Sorel is enormously taken with Marx’s analysis of the formula of capital. Sorel

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226 Marx goes on to explain why Aristotle was unable to arrive at a correct understanding of value: “The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion.” p 152.

227 Sorel and Berth, *D’Aristote à Marx (L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique)*, pp 232-233. Sorel points us to p 63 of the French translation. Although I have not been able to verify this, it seems to me that Sorel has left out a sentence. The edition that I believe Sorel to have used includes the following sentence where I
sees in this analysis the successful cutting-away of bad metaphysics to grasp the rational relations that structure reality.

This reasoning is quite remarkable. No time is spent seeking the influences under which the contracting parties operate, what are the paths of the main ideas in their minds, in a word the whole psychological apparatus [l’appareil] disappears. One takes a relation, which includes no individual phenomena, that of interest [l’usure] and capital, and one asks what it is rationally. To resolve the question, we have no need to involve men with their passions and accidents, we need only to imagine a mechanical support [support machinal], producing the primary effect on which we reason. The argument of Aristotle, completed by Marx, is irrefutable because the support is perfectly appropriate to the nature of the relation.228

It might well be suggested that the greater part of *Capital* does indeed have recourse to “men with their passions and accidents” in order to explain the growth and situation of capital in the world. It might also be asked what, exactly, Sorel finds machine-like about the general formula for capital. The first suggestion must remain for the moment unanswered.

To the second, we can respond that machines provide only an expressive support—different from those imprisoned within the individual, the contract, or the organism. Marx explains carefully the difference between C-M-C and M-C-M, and then how one moves from the latter to M-C-MI. Marx begins by observing practice, creates rational abstractions on which he is then able to reason, and finishes, perhaps, by informing practice—in this he is doing just what Reuleaux did. No doubt Reuleaux’s

have inserted an ellipsis, “La circulation simple – vendre pour acheter – ne sert que de moyen d’atteindre un but situé en dehors d’elle-même, c’est-à-dire l’appropriation de valeurs d’usage, de choses propre à satisfaire des besoins déterminés.” p 62. The corresponding passages are to be found on p 253 of the English translation.228 Ibid. p 233. It’s worth noting that the term ‘irrefutable’ was also applied by Sorel to Proudhon—indicating not so much a correct statement that could not be challenged in any way, but one that is logically unassailable.
machines are social with or without Marx, but Marx provided Sorel with a framework for
generalizing the intimate connection of machine with science suggested by Reuleaux.

Sorel repeats in various places that, as he suggested in his 1893 “Science et
socialism,” the socialists are the only ones who truly understand society. Here, he says,
“socialists pursue science by which they understand accounting for real phenomena. The
problem of value is for them the first and most important of all those that come to mind in
economic investigation.”229 For Sorel, the innovation here was to locate a genuinely
social object of scientific investigation. Mainstream economists never succeeded in doing
this:

They propose to explain to us the facts of collective life, the relations of contemporary
life, and they take psychology as a foundation. Beginning from the individual, they can
arrive only at the addition of individual acts, individually given: by no miracle can they
raise themselves to the social concept, any more than one can ever make a surface with
lines.230

Of course Sorel had explicitly sought to found economics on psychology in his Proudhon
essay, so these lines are at least in part self-directed.231 Marx has the supreme virtue of
not making the same mistakes as do the ‘social economists.’ Although Sorel asserts that
his ideas are compatible with the ‘two milieu,’ very little is said in this connection. At the
most it can be said that Marx is able to explain how the economy, which is a genuinely
social object, can be apprehended scientifically. My argument here is that much of the
work behind this ‘nouvelle métaphysique’ was done for Sorel not by Marx, but by

229 Ibid. p 238.
230 Ibid. pp 250-251.
231 The reference to making a surface with lines is also particularly interesting in light of Sorel’s later
interest in the aesthetic construction of social scientific texts. By 1903, he will argue that skilled social
scientists essentially act just as artists who render three dimensions on a flat canvas—or make surfaces out
of lines. See my work in progress, “The Picture of the General Strike” and the discussion in chapter six of
the present dissertation.
Reuleaux. If, for Sorel, the two are compatible, we can none the less—as I have attempted to do here—pick out the strands of thought that owe more to the one than the other.

In the very last pages of the essay, Sorel turns to summarize what he has done. He presents the idea of the expressive support as, among other things, a way to expose the bad metaphysics to be found in such density in the vicinity of the Sorbonne. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that “the duty of science is to locate the hidden metaphysical entity […] and to indicate the illusion, if it exists.” Sorel, therefore, sets out the problems that he feels he has solved. Chief among these is the problem of free will, cited in part above: “The existence of the artificial milieu is the fundamental condition of our freedom. Metaphysicians in the past set for themselves an unintelligible problem in mechanics with [the idea of] free-will […] We are free in this sense, that we can construct devices [des appareils] that have no model in the cosmic milieu.” Remarkably, for a book supposedly about Marx, Sorel then suggests that this principle of freedom would be best understood in terms of a historical study of machine technology undertaken along the principles set out by…Franz Reuleaux. If such a history of machines were to exist, Sorel insists, it would be possible to answer Kant’s question about the conditions of science—given that we know now that they are machinal, and not mathematical. The stakes of the enterprise are high. Sorel links here the freedom of critique to a historicity that is embedded in, but distinct from, society. In so doing, I would suggest, he stands at an

232 Sorel and Berth, *D'Aristote à Marx (L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique)*. p 262.
233 Ibid. p 264.
early moment in the history of science, as it is edging into the history of the philosophy of science.\textsuperscript{234}

It is always worth paying close attention to the last (and first) sentences of books.

Sorel ends his thus,

Anonymous workers, as were the great builders of so many artistic master-works, socialist philosophers have no ambition to lift themselves above the normal conditions of workers of their time. They do not continually speak of sacrifice devotion because it seems to them that there is neither sacrifice nor devotion in knowing scientifically and occupying one’s place as a man in the world.\textsuperscript{235}

We can say safely that Sorel’s Marxism is at this point ill-defined. It is no less important for all that. This is a good place to break the story because we have explained the basic set of problems that led Sorel to assert an identity as a socialist. With the publication of “ANM,” and then next year’s “Fin du paganisme,” Sorel became firmly attached within the still-small world of French Marxism. Although he would always remain an independent thinker, after this point, we must look more closely at his polemics with other socialists. A new set of references imposes itself, especially in 1895, as Sorel began to take on significant responsibilities for \textit{le Devenir sociale}, the replacement for the failed \textit{Ère nouvelle}.

\textsuperscript{234} Sorel’s connections to Paul Tannery and this circle are significant here. See Catana, “Tannery and Duhem on the Concept of a System in the History of Philosophy and History of Science.”

\textsuperscript{235} Sorel and Berth, \textit{D'Aristote à Marx (L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique)}. p 267. To know scientifically and occupy one’s place as a man in the world—is this really so different from Durkheim’s more bizarre (Deleuzian?)-sounding injunction that sociology should teach us to enjoy being simple organs of society? Both are struggling against a certain kind of individualism.
Conclusion

A complex movement has been traced in the preceding pages. If Sorel’s primary early engagement was with the nature and limits of science, it was not just practical engineering, but also social science. His investigations of psychophysics suggested to him that psychology could be scientific. Proudhon showed the need for a science of economics that was more philosophically—we might better say methodologically—sophisticated than the liberal political economy then on offer. A scientific psychology might make this possible. But as the limitations of Alfred Fouillée’s philosophy showed, it is particularly difficult to reconcile empirical observation and scientific rationalization in the psychological realm. Sorel tried and, by his own lights, failed to use psychophysics and Fouillée’s *idée-force* to construct a satisfactory economics. As he worked through Proudhon, problematic gaps continued to emerge—for instance between a rationally knowable and effective but merely ideal Justice, and an empirical and indeterminate law. This was the insistence of the ideal-material distinction.

Reuleaux’s symbolization of machines was so exciting for Sorel because it is an example of the absolute ideal (the purely rational language, manipulated by humans), deriving from the functioning of the world itself. Reuleaux created a science of machines—an abstraction from reality by means of which he was able to reason about reality. Marx performed an analogous feat by abstracting from the economic process of exchange in such a way as to be able to reason on the abstraction so created. This was an enormous leap from Proudhon’s theory of value, because Marx did away with any
discussion of individual psychology. The nature of the economic act, rather than the mode of human action, was the object of his science.

Marx also offered Sorel a way of thinking about machines in society. The distinction between artificial and cosmic milieu suggested to Sorel a way of understanding differences in the historical availability of absolutes: the Greeks did not have precision machines, or anyway not very many, and so a science of economy was not available to them, because it is only through the machine that we are able to consider economics (society, the artificial milieu) as functioning according to scientific determinism. In the beginning, Sorel certainly did associate this distinction of milieus with Marx, although he probably did so because of Paul Lafargue. The conjunction of Marx and Reuleaux, I argue, allowed Sorel to break out of the materialism-idealism binary in which Fouillée’s neo-Platonism remained trapped.

If this account does not seem to line up perfectly, it is because, indeed, Marx’s historical science of society and the grounded epistemology implied by Reuleaux’s cinématique do not necessitate one another. Sorel would become increasingly suspicious of the relevance of Capital—the economic situation had changed, and Sorel did not believe that all of Marx’s claims remained valid. Yet Marx had allowed Sorel to take a ‘Reuleaux-ian’ understanding of the relation between science and practice into the sociological domain. If Sorel’s philosophy of history became increasingly non-Marxist, it remained, I would argue, indebted to Reuleaux. In short, Sorel has begun to argue that society as a scientifically accessible object is constructed discursively—he is brought to this position not by Marx, but by Reuleaux. The force of Sorel’s dedication to a certain
radical vision of revolutionary syndicalism came at first from this knot tied by Reuleaux between industry and science. If, as has been suggested, Giambattista Vico’s historical vision would eventually become more important for Sorel than Marx’s, it is because Vico’s treatment of language allowed an insertion of this logical-node into a discursively-constituted social fabric that could be layered over Marx’s material constitution of the social whole.

Sorel, essentially concerned with epistemological questions in 1892, followed his understanding of the necessities of a genuinely social science into engagement on an intellectual and practical level with political socialism. The epistemological problems that confronted Sorel were common to many French philosophers. If Sorel’s path through Reuleaux to Marx was idiosyncratic, the driving force of his investigations was not. Sorel, in making the question of science central to that of philosophy, and particularly in recognizing that philosophy itself is thereby brought into the realm of the social and political, was participating in a broad movement of post-Comtean Republican philosophy. The next chapter, dealing centrally with Sorel’s relation to Émile Durkheim and his sociology, pursues another iteration of this problematic.
2. Social Science and the Institution

La Grande encyclopédie commenced publication in 1886. Volume 30 (Sigillateur-Thermopole) arrived in 1901, and included an article on “Sociologie” written by two young philosophy agrégés, Paul Fauconnet and Marcel Mauss. If this volume had appeared in 1886, although there would probably have been an entry on the discipline, it would certainly have looked very different than it did in 1901. Fauconnet and Mauss were members of Émile Durkheim’s circle, and they took the opportunity to synthesize the self-consciously foundational work that had been done by Durkheim and his younger collaborators over the past few years.² Having described the objects of their new discipline, they wrote that “it would be good to have a special word to describe these special facts, and it seems that the word institutions would be the most appropriate…The institution is…in the social order what function is in the biological order: just as the science of life is the science of vital functions, the science of society is the science of institutions.”³ Fauconnet and Mauss stress, for the purposes of analysis, what remains stable in society. However, observable phenomena may be “in the process of becoming

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² Durkheim’s major study, The Division of Labor in Society appeared in 1892, his programmatic Rules of Sociological Method in late 1894, and his methodologically innovative, and morally provocative, Suicide in 1897. The Année sociologique, a yearly journal that reviewed work in the field and was a venue for new scholarship, began publication in 1898.
³ Paul Fauconnet and Marcel Mauss, "Sociologie," in La Grande encyclopédie: Inventaire raisonné des sciences, des lettres et des arts. p 168, col 2. In his 1901 preface to a second edition of The Rules of Sociological Method, Durkheim mentions this article, and endorses its definition of sociology as a science in terms of its proper object, the institution.
social, rather than [already] being social. It is therefore not surprising that they cannot be included in any science.”

The two young scholars were busy founding an academic discipline, and sought a stable definition for their new science. Others, however, more interested in breaking radically with the given social order, would see that this borderland of both science and the social could be as productive as it was dangerous.

The institution is the central unit of analysis in Georges Sorel’s mature social thought. An institution is a materially-bounded ground for the instantiation of human collectivity. It implies a whole range of specific concrete connections interrelated to an intellectual or spiritual system. Institutions may be more or less powerful, but they shape human individuals, and are the necessary context for morality (taken in its broadest sense), the orientation for ethical action. If for Aristotle man is a political animal, for Sorel he is an institutional animal.

This chapter uncovers the process by which Sorel came to this definition, highlighting its origins in particular debates both within and well beyond socialist circles. As he took up editorial duties at Devenir social, Sorel began to deepen his understanding of Marx’s writings and the international socialist movement, especially through Antonio Labriola. Sorel wrote a great deal in particular about two ‘bourgeois’ intellectuals, one a rising star, and the other at the high point of his notoriety and influence: Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand Brunetièrè. Labriola’s reconstruction of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, initially a powerful impetus to Sorel, proved unsatisfying from an epistemological—and therefore a political—point of view. Sorel looked to Labriola’s

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4 Ibid. p 168.
own heritage—the 18th century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico—to strengthen the foundations of the critical communism Labriola thought Marxism ought to be. Sorel, with a different set of philosophical references than Labriola found very different things in Vico than did Labriola. Ultimately, he looked to Vico in order to arrive at a satisfactorily materialist account of humans in institutional life. Marx remained, of course, central for his analysis of capitalism as a social mode, but as is clear by 1898, Marx is not able to explain to Sorel’s satisfaction the nature of the rising proletarian civilization. For this, Vico is required. Vico led Sorel to engage himself early in support of the syndicat as the fundamental unit of socialism, because Sorel recognized in the syndicat an institution in the strong sense of the word he took from Vico, society in becoming.

The institution is also a solution to the problem of the intellectual. The very division of intellectual and worker is bourgeois. The party is not a satisfactory way to resolve it, because at least in the Labriolan version Sorel felt that it only reproduced the division between mind and muscle, ideal and material. It merely enclosed, and failed to embody, consciousness. Sorel’s alternative was the syndicat, as institution. In resolving, or bypassing, the division of physical and intellectual, the syndicat also resolved a fundamental division in the French philosophical tradition—between the material and the ideal.

This chapter begins with Sorel’s friendly, or at least respectful, account of Durkheim. I present his subsequent engagement with Labriola, and I show how and why, on the basis of the problematic presented by the Labriola-Andler-Durkheim debate, Sorel
found Vico enormously useful. Starting from an account of Sorel’s theory of education, elaborated in polemic against Brunetière, I argue that Sorel’s workerism as expressed in the 1897/8 *L’avenir socialiste des syndicats*, is essentially built on Vichean institutions. Vico allows Sorel to present a materialist but non-totalizing, non-dialectical, theory of humans in the world. That is, the institution. Given *this*, it becomes possible to formulate a subject-position for the scientific writer on society. *L’avenir* suggests this—outside, but not disinterested, compelled by the encounter with production, but not claiming to be a part of it.

**Durkheim’s Method**

*Ère nouvelle*, the periodical through which Sorel had first begun to publish substantial work on Marxist topics, had collapsed by the end of 1894. Sorel took up editorial duties with its successor, *Devenir social*, and between April of 1895 and the end of 1897, wrote a plurality of its pages. The first article in the first issue of this new journal of theoretical Marxism was Sorel’s examination of Durkheim’s *Règles de la méthode sociologique*. This was his second publication on Durkheim; the first being a short piece in an Italian journal, also on *Règles*, that contrasted the professor from Bordeux very favorably with Gabriel Tarde.⁵ Scholars of Durkheim have tended to be

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uncomfortable with the level of enthusiasm Sorel demonstrated for him. One recent biography of Durkheim claims that, “the Durkheim in which Sorel was interested, for political reasons, was in fact less that of the Rules than that of The Division of Labor in Society,” as though this meant that Sorel missed the heart of the project. Yet Sorel wrote at length about Règles, and never directly confronted the 1892 thesis, Division. Although Durkheim’s status as an universitaire and a non-socialist were never forgotten, Sorel approached Durkheim’s Rules very much on its chosen terrain of method and epistemology rather than socialist defense. By 1901, the institution would be the proper object of Durkheimian sociology, but in 1895 this way of thinking had not yet found articulation. Sorel’s reading of Durkheim, therefore, takes place on philosophical and epistemological grounds and calls for, rather than finding, the institution.

Sorel’s lack of hostility toward Durkheim should not go without saying. At the beginning of his essay, Sorel calls Durkheim “an adversary of the first order” for socialism. This is meant in the best possible way, and Sorel ends by suggesting that Durkheim’s logic might, possibly, bring him one day into the socialist fold. If that were to happen, Sorel says, “I would be the first to claim him as my master. No scholar is as well prepared as he to bring the theories of Karl Marx into higher education; he is the only French sociologist with a sufficient philosophical preparation and a well enough

7 Although in 1896 he claimed that he was at work on a project on the division of labor. See Georges Sorel, "La science dans l'éducation," Le Devenir social 2, no. 5 (1896). p 435.
developed critical spirit.”9 Such language is quite unusual coming from Sorel’s generally acerbic and detached pen. More, it is striking that Sorel should view the possible academicization of Marxism as a good thing. Sorel’s willingness to listen to Durkheim is evidence of the ideological fluidity of the moment, of Durkheim’s relatively ambiguous status, but also of Sorel’s genuinely open intellectual approach. After all, he spent much of the rest of 1895 and 96 writing, as we shall see shortly, about Ferdinand Brunetière—who occupied a position much opposed to either Durkheim or Sorel.

The 1890s offered a number of possible social sciences and Marxism, Sorel believed, was distinguished among them by its correct epistemological foundation—it is therefore on this ground that Durkheim must be evaluated. Sorel approves of Durkheim’s stated methodological principles—his discussion of the criteria of proof is “luminous”—but does not believe that he always draws the correct conclusions from them. For Sorel, causality is reduced to category, or, we might say, definition. This is why he is so pleased when Durkheim suggests that we think of cause and effect as in ‘solidarity’ with one another.10 Yet Durkheim goes too far down this road. Sorel cites Durkheim thus, “the manner in which a phenomenon develops expresses its nature. In order for two developments to correspond to one another, there must also be a correspondence in the natures that they are manifesting.”11 Sorel criticizes this handling of category as a real thing, arguing that it amounts to the transformation of form into content, or put

9 Ibid., no. 2. p 180.
differently, that it introduces an essence where previously there were only relations, “clearly, this doctrine is borrowed from an old conception of metaphysics.”\textsuperscript{12}

For Sorel, science treats relations, and only relations. It is not concerned with nature or with essence.\textsuperscript{13} This is, in part, what Sorel means when he uses the phrase “métaphysique ancienne,” and is a problem overcome or displaced by awareness of the difference between the cosmic milieu and the artificial milieu.\textsuperscript{14} Sorel spends much time trying to clarify Durkheim’s treatment of the milieu, which indeed goes to the heart of Durkheim’s project of explaining the social by the social.\textsuperscript{15} No less an authority than Raymond Aron has argued that for Durkheim, “the efficient causality of the social milieu is the condition of existence of scientific sociology,” because without this causality social facts cannot be explained by other social facts.\textsuperscript{16} Sorel agrees with Durkheim that the milieu is a crucial object of study, but he rejects the basic Durkheimian position that social phenomena are ‘facts.’ The milieu artificiel to which we have access, for Sorel, not an objectively existing field susceptible at least in theory of full definition, but rather only graspable in relation to a given object at a given moment. It is painstakingly made and maintained, rather than simply given.

\textsuperscript{12} Sorel, Ibid. p 14.
\textsuperscript{13} This is by no means an idiosyncratic position. Here is Henri Poincaré, from the introduction to his 1902 Science et hypothèse, “ce qu’elle [la science] peut atteindre, ce ne sont pas les choses elles-mêmes, comme le pensent les dogmatistes naïfs, ce sont seulement les rapports entre les choses; en dehors de ces rapports, il n’y a pas de réalité connaissable.” Henri Poincaré, La science et l’hypothèse (Paris: Flammarion, 1968). p 25.
\textsuperscript{14} Discussed at length in chapter one of this dissertation.
\textsuperscript{15} The correct methodological approach to milieu is still a cause for debate and polemic. See, for instance, David Harvey’s chapter on the uses and misuses of the concept of ‘environment’ in David Harvey, Cosmopolitanism and the geographies of freedom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
Sorel’s insistence that science treats relations, rather than essences, thus signifies that Durkheim has confused the *milieu artificiel* for the *milieu cosmique*. The status of the ‘social fact’ as an expressive support is equally important for Durkheim. Aron, again, points out that for Durkheim, social facts are real: “Durkheim is always inclined to think that once a category of facts is defined, it will be possible to find one and only one explanation for it. A given effect always comes from the same cause.”¹⁷ Different causes are associated with different social facts. So that, if causality can be collapsed into category, it is also the case that these categories describe really existing objects, rather than simple explanatory metaphors. This is the sense of Durkheim’s term ‘collective representation’—for Sorel, this is epistemologically unsound.

Sorel, one may certainly say unfairly, argues that Durkheim has unwittingly erected a psychological theory of society. According to Sorel, “the spiritualist schools explained the difference between psychology and biology by the addition of a new essence: M. Durkheim does not believe it necessary to add a social mind, but he reasons as though he does.” The culprit here is the old 19th century theme of association, “in his [Durkheim’s] eyes…association, through a mysterious alchemy, adds something, and it is through this operation that the sociological phenomenon appears in its reality.”¹⁸ The social fact is, as far as Sorel is concerned, an *invented* fact that has as its vocation to explain otherwise obscure phenomena. Durkheim is enormously subtle, but ultimately, for Sorel, this introduction of a new fact is logically the same as invoking the ‘dormative

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¹⁷ Ibid. p 366.
properties’ of opium in order to explain why it puts you to sleep. The explanation must be given real (in this case, physiological) content in order for it to be science—that is, explanation must be conducted in terms of relations, rather than essences. So Durkheim’s social facts, along with the society they imply, should be treated as merely heuristic place-holders.

Sorel is saying, in effect, that there is no such thing as society. Even in 1895, this is not a Marxist point of view. Sorel is perfectly aware of what would constitute a conventional Marxist objection to Durkheim, and does appear to make it when he asserts that “the material of sociology is…the system of production and exchange.”

Durkheim, two years later, in a review of Antonio Labriola’s *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l’histoire*, categorically rejected this primacy of the economic, arguing that, rather, “sociologists and historians tend increasingly to agree…that religion is the most primitive of social phenomena.”

The orthodox Marxist response would be that these other facts are, in the last instance, dependent on and subordinated to the system of production. Yet Sorel has something other than economic facts in mind. He contrasts Durkheim’s “empirical procedures of distinction and classification” with “a really scientific principle

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19 I say straightforwardly Marxist because I read Sorel as saying here that Marxist sociology investigates the economy from two, conflicting, points: the forces of production and the relations of property that govern them. In orthodox terms, it is immanent contradictions between these two realms that will eventually bring about the revolution, that is, the overthrow of the current relations of property. “La matière sociologique est...le système de production et d’échange.” Ibid., no. 2. p 161.

founded on the theory of knowledge [la théorie de la connaissance]” which would be, according to Sorel, an essentially socialist point of view.21

Distinction and classification should take place not in a strictly empirical fashion, which is always vulnerable and partial, but in view of the relations of production that structure the common social realm. The point of departure for the elaboration of a conceptual framework adequate to the messy phenomena of society must be the material technologies that generate and support social forms. In arguing along these lines, in a sense, Sorel is building upon Marx’s famous passage from *The Poverty of Philosophy*, “the handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist.”22 Sorel is struggling here to make this principle less monolithic, less mechanistic, indeed more of a critical principle than a constructive one. If the single machine is an acceptable unit of scientific determination, it is clearly not sufficient. Sorel rejects the hypostatization of society that he believes Durkheim falls into, but nonetheless appreciates the inadequacy of simply replacing it with a hypostatization economy.

To attempt a simply empirical cataloguing of social facts—as Sorel claimed Durkheim ultimately did—was to pursue a deceptive and impossible objectivity. The inevitable result would be the introduction of some metaphysical essence. Yet Durkheim’s basic position here, metaphysical warts and all, was perfectly understandable to Sorel, who recognized and took seriously Durkheim’s commitment to the utility of

sociology. Durkheim’s mindset is “that of any serious political man.” This is the sense in which Sorel understands Durkheim’s distinction between normal and pathological. The normal is that state in which the business of the governing class can continue. Durkheim’s point of view is, in this sense, medical. If he is not one of the “pharmacists of the social question,” in Labriola’s phrase, which Sorel often cites, it is only because of his delicacy. To introduce a metaphysical essence is to take an ideological position—and of course this is what Durkheim is doing. But what position does Sorel wish to occupy? Does he want to avoid ideology altogether, or simply re-orient social thought according to a different objectivity than Durkheim?

Sorel at this point is still working his way toward the fractured, partial, overlapping and conflictual model for the social generation of ideas that is already implied by his basic argument. Sorel has not yet committed himself to the notion of the institution. He can criticize Durkheim’s apparent social objectivism, and he can propose technological objectivism to replace it, but he is not yet able to explain how this might be socially articulated. Antonio Labriola’s attempt to re-found critical communism, to begin anew the project of Marxist praxis and critique, to which we turn next, offers one possible way forward. Ultimately, it too will be found unable to account in an epistemologically secure way for the interaction of human beings within material circumstance—it will still appeal to a totality to explain the individual without being able to mediate between them.

Antonio Labriola’s Manifesto

According to Leszek Kołakowski, Antonio Labriola, “played a similar role in Italy to that of Plekhanov in Russia and of Lafargue in France,” as the first to “expound Marxism as a system.” To put this differently, Labriola was among the very first to open the question of Marxism as a philosophy. If, on the one hand, Labriola should be located in the tradition of Italian “Revolutionary Humanism,” he should also be placed in the conjuncture of the 1890s in which the death of Engels opened space for discussion by eliminating his authoritative voice, and the political progress of socialist and Marxist parties across Europe made such discussion urgent. More generally, Labriola, as Benedetto Croce’s teacher, has a central role to play in the history of Italian intellectual culture. Certainly Gramsci, who read his work scrupulously, recognized the centrality of his position.

It is therefore of some interest that Labriola’s most enduring work, his essay on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto, was published first in French, in Devenir social, and only later with Croce’s assistance, in Italian. Sorel was in contact with Labriola beginning at least with Sorel’s assumption of editorial duties at Devenir social in early 1895, and Labriola begins to crop up in his writing in early

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26 For these connections, see also Paul Piccone, Italian Marxism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
1896. For Sorel, the essay on the *Manifesto* remained the best expression of Labriola’s thought—or at any rate, of what he found most useful in it.

Labriola saw in Marx’s work neither exclusively a form of economic analysis nor a set of political proscriptions or strategies, but rather a philosophy of history that was reflexive, engaged, and at the same time scientific. Historical materialism as a method was, for Labriola, the living part of Marx. It posed the question, “do we or do we not find society today in the most advanced countries to be organized in such a way that it must pass into communism by the immanent laws of its own becoming [le leggi immanenti al suo proprio divenire], given its present economic structure and the friction which it necessarily produces within itself, so that it finally will break and dissolve itself?”

Given this new horizon imposed by Marx’s work, Labriola described the task of scientific socialism,

> Our intentions are nothing if not the theoretical expression and the practical explanation of the data offered us by the interpretation of the process that takes place through us and within us, and which is entirely within the objective relations of social life, of which we are subject and object, cause and effect, end and means [termine e parte]. Our intentions

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28 Sorel mentions Labriola in his very first letter to Croce. Labriola had long been in contact with Engels and the broader group of Marxist activists and intellectuals. He was perhaps not their favorite person, as Engels wrote to Kautsky in late 1891, “Labriola is very dissatisfied with the way things are going in Italy and I’m not sure that it may not have something to do with his disappointment over the fact that his joining the movement did not immediately revive and revolutionise it.” Letter to Karl Kautsky dated Dec 3, 1891. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: collected works* (New York,: International Publishers, 1975). Vol 49, p 317.

are rational, not because they are based on arguments drawn from rational reason [ragion ragionante], but because deduced from objective consideration of things, which is to say from the clarification of their process, which is not, and cannot be, a result of our will but rather defeats our will and subdues it [aggioga].

In these pages, Labriola is explicitly trying to draw a contrast between his own Marxism and positivist sociology. This is precisely Sorel’s problem as well. The problem was especially sharp given his evident attraction to Durkheim, who was self-consciously trying to carry on the legacy of Comte. Of course practically everyone would insist that they too are concerned only with objective reality—even idealists would claim this for themselves. Labriola is trying to get at something beyond the obvious disagreements this suggests over what constitutes ‘objective reality.’

One sticking point is the relation of this reality to the individual human will. We have seen how Sorel rejects Durkheim’s excessive objectification of the social fact. Labriola insists on the implication of the philosopher within the objective world under consideration. His ‘we’ is concrete rather than rhetorical. We the communists are subject and object of the process of history, part of it and also its telos. This is not determinism, but rather history as classical tragedy. The rational distance on which Durkheim insists is dissolved into history. Although Sorel does not seize on it at first, he will become suspicious of Labriola’s assertion that the intellectual may really be ‘subject and object’ together with the proletariat in its development. This has generally been read as anti-

30 “I nostri intenti non sono se non la espressione teorica e la pratica esplicazione dei dati che ci offre la interpretazione del processo che si compie attraverso noi e intorno a noi; e che è tutto nei rapporti obiettivi della vita sociale, di cui noi siamo soggetto ed oggetto, causa ed effetto, termine e parte. I nostri intenti son razionali, non perché fondati sopra argomenti tratti dalla ragion ragionante, ma perché desunti dalla objettiva considerazione delle cose; il che è quanto dire dalle dilucidazione del processo loro, che non è, né può essere, un risultato del nostro arbitrio, anzi il nostro arbitrio vince ed aggioga.” Labriola and Gerratana, Saggi sul materialismo storico. p 18.
intellectualism. It really is the distinction, we will see, between history’s unity of substance, and its status as a totalizing process. History for Labriola is one process, it is all of a piece. For Sorel, although it is of one substance, it is fragmented, not at all one process. For the moment, however, this problem has not yet become urgent for Sorel. The de-emphasis of the will that he finds in Labriola is good. All the will can do is clarify, render explicit, just as the scientist’s task is to put into symbolic form the practically-determined movement of the machine.

Labriola’s specific task in this essay was to grasp the historical conditions that gave rise to the Manifesto, because only by understanding these historical conditions would it be possible to pass beyond the Manifesto’s particular viewpoint and approach the contemporary world in what remained its living spirit, that is, the spirit of critical communism. In this way it was possible, following the lead of the Manifesto itself, to read later social developments—industrial and political revolutions—as critiques and expansions of the program established in the Manifesto. For Labriola,

Critical communism does not manufacture revolutions, it does not prepare insurrections, it does not arm uprisings. It is, itself, one with the proletarian movement, but it watches and supports this movement in the full understanding [intelligenza] of the connections that it has, or can and must have, with the whole of all the relations of social life [con l’insieme di tutti i rapporti della vita sociale]. It is not, in sum, a seminary [seminario] in which would be trained the captains of the proletarian revolution, but is only the consciousness [coscienza] of such a revolution and above all, in certain cases, the consciousness of its difficulty.

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31 To seek the true meaning of a thing in its origin is already a Vichean position, although, as I show in chapter four of this dissertation, when Sorel turns to the question of origin, he takes a radically different perspective on it. This element of Vicheanism returns at odd moments in the history of critical thought. This, for instance, is the significance of Edward Said’s title, Beginnings.

32 “Il comunismo critico non fabbrica le rivoluzioni, non prepara le insurrezioni, non arma le sommosse. È, si, tutt’una cosa col movimento proletario; ma vede e sorregge questo movimento nella piena intelligenza della connessione che esso ha, o può e deve avere, con l’insieme di tutti i rapporti della vita sociale. Non è, in somma, un seminario in cui si formi lo stato maggiore dei capitani della rivoluzione proletaria; ma è solo
This is, of course, one of the great normative and empirical problems of socialism in the period of the 2nd International, resolved in different ways by Lenin and Gramsci: what is the relationship between theorists and organization, between party and worker? What ought it to be? Labriola elaborates his response to this question in a frustratingly ambiguous manner. He says,

Communism stands with the proletariat because in it alone consists the revolutionary force that bursts, breaks, shakes and dissolves the present social form and establishes within it, bit by bit, new conditions; or to be more exact, with the very fact of its movement demonstrates that new conditions are here making, fixing and developing themselves already even now.33

Is the communist theoretician supposed to engage with the proletariat, riding, in some manner, its force—something like a politician or agitator standing up to speak to an already-angry crowd—as is suggested by the first part of this quotation? Or is the communist theoretician supposed simply to observe and perhaps comment, tied to the proletarian movement only in the sense in which a scientist is tied to and bound by the object of study? This would be more in line with other passages, in which Labriola speaks of consciousness. The ambiguity here will have consequences for Sorel.
For both Labriola and Sorel the relationship between theorist and worker is determined by the ‘metaphysical’ conception of materialist history. Labriola points to Vico as a reference for this basic, underlying notion of Marx: man makes his own history. Labriola puts it,

Man has made his history, not by a metaphorical evolution, nor by running along the line of a pre-established progression. He made it creating for himself its conditions, which is to say forming for himself through labor an artificial milieu [un ambiente artificiale], and successively developing technical aptitudes, and accumulating and transforming the products of his labor within this milieu. We have but one history, and we cannot compare real history, which has in fact happened, with another merely possible one.34

This is very much in line with Sorel’s position in “L’ancienne et la nouvelle metaphysique.” Of particular importance here is the term ‘ambiente artificiale.’ This sounds a great deal like Sorel’s term, ‘milieu artificiel,’ the reality of which, as we saw in a previous chapter, he held to be a “fundamental condition for the existence of our freedom.”35 Labriola seems to have taken this idea in part from the German philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart.36 It is important to understand the difference between the false reality of Durkheim’s social fact, and the real existence Sorel believed the ‘milieu artificiel’ to have. Durkheim posited the social in order to ground his statistical construction of the social fact. The ‘milieu artificiel,’ on the other hand, resides in the material existence of technology. Sorel understood Labriola to be indicating the material

34 “L’uomo ha fatto la sua storia, non per metaforica evoluzione, né per correr su la linea di un presegnato progresso. L’ha fatta, creandone a sé stesso le condizioni; cioè, formando a sé stesso, mediante il lavoro, un ambiente artificiale, e sviluppando successivamente le attitudini tecniche, e accumulando e transformando i prodotti della operosità sua, per entro a tale ambiente. Noi di storia ne abbiamo una sola: né quella reale, che è effettivamente accaduta, possiamo noi confrontare con un’altra meramente possibile.” Ibid. pp 54-55.
relations of the human world, rather than elevating a methodological tool into a metaphysical principle.

Intellectual change is related at every turn to material change. Inevitably, the question of the relation of theorist to worker arises. Describing the paired rise of proletarian organization and communist theorization, Labriola says,

And as from the ordering [processo] of things comes the ordering of ideas, thus to the multiform practical development of the proletariat, which is so varied in forms and interrelations [intrecci] that nobody could have it entirely before their eyes and consider it [ripensarlo] wholly, corresponded a gradual development of the doctrine of critical communism in understanding history and in understanding contemporary life, even to the minute description of the smallest parts of the economy: it, in sum, became a *science*, if that name is understood with the requisite care [discrezione].

In this passage and elsewhere, Labriola suggests the existence of a problem that will arise in relating, in any precise fashion, supposedly pure thought to practical action. He does not even really acknowledge how difficult the problem will be, making no effort to ask or frame it properly. The order of ideas follows the order of things. This is a Vichean principle that developed out of a philological approach to material culture supported by a robust notion of human nature. The idea that something like the Communist Party would

37 “*come dal processo delle cose viene il processo delle idee, così a questo multiforme sviluppo pratico del proletariato, che è tanto vario di forme e d’intrecci, che nessuno può più vederselo innanzi agli occhi e ripensarlo tutto, ha corrisposto un graduale sviluppo delle dottrine del comunismo critico nell’intendere la storia e nell’intendere la vita presente, fino alla minuta descrizione delle più piccole parti della economia: esso, in somma, è diventato una scienza, se tal nome vuol essere inteso con la debita discrezione.*” Labriola and Gerratana, *Saggi sul materialismo storico*. p 41. The term “processo” has strong juridical associations in Italian, as does its equivalent in French. This passage suggests first that the French translation is defective, and second that other translations were made from the French. Both the French and English renderings of this passage simply omit the clause, “che è tanto vario…e ripensarlo tutto,” as well as the finally cautionary clause about the word ‘scienza,’ which complicates and nuances Labriola’s point. Possibly, this indicates an alteration to the text between the French and the Italian publications. See Antonio Labriola, "En mémoire du Manifeste du parti communiste," *Le Devenir social* 1, no. 4 (1895). p 322. And Labriola, *Essays on the materialistic conception of history*. p 55.
develop as the critical consciousness of economic reality, however, is not exactly implied by Vico.

Sorel’s encounter with Labriola’s Marxism was of the greatest importance for him, and he at first supported Labriola with boundless enthusiasm. However, Labriola’s basically Hegelian notion of consciousness in the world seemed to Sorel a completely metaphysical proposition. The concrete manifestation of this is conflict over the nature and meaning of the political party. When, three decades later, Antonio Gramsci, a great reader of Labriola, asked in his notebooks, “how it came about that Sorel never advanced from his conception of ideology-as-myth to an understanding of the political party, but stopped short at the idea of the trade union,” he was still taking Labriola’s side against Sorel.38 If Sorel remained unconvinced by the Labriolan processo, as he had been by Durkheim’s social totality, he was at this point able to present his epistemological arguments as criticism—he had no positive suggestion for an alternative social basis for critical thought. It is possible to see, however, the glimmerings of the idea of the institution in Sorel’s running battle with the literary critic and public figure, Ferdinand Brunetièrė, particularly on the question of education.

Contra Brunetière: Science, Production, Education

In *Capital*, Marx writes that capitalism, “pushes men to develop the productive forces and material conditions which, alone, can form the basis for a new and better society.”

Sorel, commenting on this passage in 1901, wrote:

this society will be one of freedom rather than constraint. But the freedom of men must be prepared by a long evolution which, during the era of capitalism, will have transformed them into superior producers. To ensure the coming liberation, it is necessary to bring young people to love their work, to treat everything they make like a work of art that cannot be done too carefully, to seek out the intelligibility of everything that happens in the workshop. They must be made at once scrupulous, artistic, scientific, in everything regarding production.

Education, as a standpoint for thinking about social processes and human motivation, has rarely been given a central position in Sorel’s political and social thought. Yet it was central to his vision of revolution, just as in was to the project of the Third Republic.

In early 1896, Sorel published a long essay on “Science in Education,” which is both an episode in his running confrontation with Ferdinand Brunetière, and a substantial intervention into debates on the nature of schooling taking place in these years. This is not the place to review the contentious politics of education reform in the Third Republic, but a few things are worth noting. First of all, one major period of reforms was already

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39 Sorel cites this passage from the French edition of *Capital*, p 259, col 2. He alters lightly the order of words for the convenience of citation, and assimilates the capitalist acting as an agent of capital into ‘capitalism.’ The French version of this passage calls the society to come, “new and superior.” The German specifies, “Als Fanatiker der Verwertung des Werts zwingt er rücksichtslos die Menschheit zur Produktion um der Produktion willen, daher zu einer Entwicklung der gesellschaftlichen Produktivkräfte und zur Schöpfung von materiellen Produktionsbedingungen, welche allein die reale Basis einer höheren Gesellschaftsform bilden können, deren Grundprinzip die volle und freie Entwicklung jedes Individuums ist.” p 618 or 619 of the Werke. That is, the French translation left off what Fowkes gives as, “a society in which the free and full development of every individual forms the ruling principle” p 739.


41 Which Edouard Berth wanted to republish, as he did “Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique.” See his preface in Sorel and Berth, *D'Aristote à Marx (L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique)*. p 8.
past—the Ferry laws of the early 1880s had been, if not such a profound change as they are sometimes said to be, at least a major republican victory. A new round of reforms would take place in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, but this was yet a few years away.

Sorel’s views on this topic are interesting not least because they bring together both elementary education and higher education. As Patricia Tilburg has recently shown, Republican primary pedagogy was ambiguous: on the one hand it was very much designed to stabilize the regime and suppress conflict, but on the other hand it did valorize manual labor and class mixing in a way substantially at odds with the prevailing social structure. For physiologist and former minister of education Paul Bert, for instance, the children of the bourgeoisie and of the various laboring classes would benefit from learning technical tasks together—the bourgeois child would come to respect the value of the laborer, and would even learn about the true, solidaristic, nature of class relations. This would lead, in the end, to social peace and civilization.

Looking at a different level of the educational system, Daniela Barberis has emphasized the degree to which debates over the “moral education” that elites students would receive in philosophy classes was really a debate over the meaning of science. Her reconstruction of the debate between Durkheim and the RMM group might be described as an argument over whether science is centrally engagement with objective reality, or rather a practice

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43 Cited in Ibid. p 31. But see Paul Bert, *Leçons, discours et conférences* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1881). pp 402-3ff. Bert suggests, among other things, that society will benefit from students learning the basic laws of nature because, after all, *a coup d’état* is just a miracle in the juridical arena—so students who don’t believe in miracles are unlikely to support one. Bert was a student of Claude Bernard’s, and Sorel often faults his understanding of Bernard’s writings—for Sorel, the Bernard-Bert relationship becomes an example of how radically disciples can fail to grasp their master’s central lesson.
of critical thought—in both cases it might be said to have moral content. Sorel argues for a kind of scientific education that would be based on practical industrial activity, thus uniting while also undermining Republican common sense on primary and higher education.

“La science dans l’éducation” is a direct response to Ferdinand Brunetière’s pamphlet, “Éducation et Instruction.” Brunetière had been for some time the editor of the Revue des deux mondes, and had in its pages and elsewhere developed an impressive and erudite body of literary criticism on the basis of an evolutionary theory of genre. He had, in 1895, quite publically converted to Catholicism. Science, he said then, had not kept its promises, and was not enough—faith was required, and it seemed sensible to go ask the Pope for it. Brunetière was extremely concerned about the decline of humanistic education in favor of technical scientific instruction. Scientists, a decade of republican

44 Barberis, "Moral education for the elite of democracy: The classe de philosophie between sociology and philosophy."
45 Charles Péguy would argue forcefully, although perhaps to little effect, that there were only these two kinds of education—primary and higher. Primary education is about equipping the individual to be a functional member of society (which might entail a great many different things), and higher education is about the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Péguy and Sorel were temperamentally suited to one another, but here Péguy is simply re-inscribing, re-asserting, the dualism of ideal and material that Sorel believed it to be the task of the revolution to overcome. See his preface in Edouard Dujardin, Les universités populaires 1900-1901. 1 - Paris et bainlue, Cahiers de la quinzaine (Paris,: Cahiers de la quinzaine, 1902).
46 Ferdinand Brunetière, Éducation et Instruction (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot, 1895). Ferdinand Brunetière had been since 1893 the main editor of the Revue des deux mondes, and had, in 1895, quite publically converted to Catholicism. Brunetière, who had not been through the university system (that is, had not entered the ENS, had not sat for the agrégation), was nonetheless a widely respected literary critic who had developed a complex theory of genre based on evolutionary theory. See Antoine Compagnon, Connaissiez-vous Brunetière ? : enquête sur un antidreyfusard et ses amis, Univers historique (Paris: Seuil, 1997).
education has demonstrated, are the most intolerant people that there are. Democracy, in its paradoxical urge for equality, has instituted everywhere farcical exams—“the...idea of a competition [concours] has become inseparable from the...idea of democracy.”

Students mainly learn the lesson that they must defeat their fellows, that the school is just one more arena for competition. Brunetière had learned to turn the language of democracy against itself—like the classical liberal Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, Brunetière suggests that universal education is not really democratic at all. In fact, France is fast on its way to becoming—thanks to the thoughtless dogmatism and materialistic instruction of the Enlightenment—as rigidly materialistic as China. Education, on the other hand, according to Brunetière is oriented toward the moral being of the individual, awakening their sense of human nature. It inculcates in the student those moral sentiments necessary for peaceful existence in common—sentiments that are, in fact, “the condition of existence for the idea of country [patrie]”

Sorel agrees with Brunetière’s identification of the symptom. Obsession with memorizing facts leads to an absence of critical thought, and eventually a scientistic rather than scientific attitude—all this is both socially and individually destructive. But he disagrees with essentially everything else about the diagnosis. It is perfectly meaningless, Sorel believes, to simply say that education ought to fulfill human nature—everyone has a different idea of what human nature is and clearly for Brunetière, Sorel says, “to be really human is to belong to the cultured upper bourgeoisie. The question

49 Brunetière, Éducation et Instruction. p 34.
51 Brunetière, Éducation et Instruction. p 18, footnote.
is...whether or not the interests of an oligarchy of this kind ought to serve as the basis for a system of education.”

Clearly, Sorel thinks that they should not.

But how to navigate between the class interests of the cultured elite and the naïve scientism that was, indeed, being taught in French schools? In line with his historical materialism, Sorel argues that, “an educational system is worthwhile only to the degree that it is in harmony with a given organization [of society].” So the problem of education naturally and rapidly expands into a problem of sociology. What is the nature of contemporary society? “all modern institutions are...carried away by a vertiginous movement onto the capitalist path.”

Scientism, because it tends to the static and the abstract, is clearly incompatible with capitalist industrialism. Why does the bourgeoisie insist upon an educational system inadequate to the permanent revolution that is capitalism?

Looking to the Eighteenth Brumaire for support Sorel argues that although the bourgeoisie presides over great economic dynamism, its central political goal is order.

The resources of the State are deployed to this end. There is physical strength to break strikes, but here Sorel is most concerned with how the state uses the schools to project its own ideology. All social groups explicitly or implicitly order the domains of life according to their own interests, and this is the basis of metaphysics, expressed perfectly

53 Ibid., no. 2. p 111.
54 Ibid. p 118.
55 In addition to citing the Eighteenth Brumaire, Sorel points out that order proceeded progress for Comte, “the most naïve theoretician of capitalism,” who he addresses in the vocative, “Oh! Great metaphysician of opportunism and wholesale grocery!” Ibid., no. 5. p 137. On the reception history of this text, see Donald Reid, "Inciting Readings and Reading Cites: Visits to Marx's The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," Modern Intellectual History 4, no. 3 (2007).
well in a State school system that makes morals—“the philosophical translation of the
police”—into first philosophy. Sorel hammers away at this theme: “morality [la morale]
is only an annex of the police, of the gendarmerie, the prison. It is a supplementary way
of keeping the mass of workers on a regular schedule.”  
This kind of teaching takes
priority, and “science will take what space is left, and can develop within the limits
established by the needs and interests of capitalism. This is indeed what they teach at the
Sorbonne, only they are careful not to emphasize the capitalist viewpoint.” Or, yet more
simply, “the beautiful is still what pleases the category of those who govern.”  
For Sorel, this will always be the meaning of idealism.

Idealism—and this remains an important connection for Sorel’s whole life—is
closely allied to statism. It reduces, on behalf of the state, troublesome and unstable
reality to a set of easily grasped principles, facts, formulae, which are then taken as
reality itself. Thus Sorel explicitly rejects Brunetière’s characterization of China its the
system of exams as materialist—for Sorel, it is the highest idealism.

Sorel does not hesitate to invoke his own experience, if obliquely, with the French
system. He was educated at the École polytechnique, notoriously overrun by the epigones
of Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. The school, Sorel argued, was from its foundation in
the 18th century characterized by a tension between two modes: a practical living science
and a formalized ideal science. On the one hand, the founders of the school were military

56 This is a pure recapitulation of standard anarchist propaganda. L’Assiette au beurre ran in these years a
cartoon with three identical buildings and yards side by side, with the labels, “École,” “Caserne,” “Geôle.”
57 All citations in this paragraph, Sorel, “La science dans l’éducation.” p 137. The reference here is first,
probably, to Taine, who is often the object of Sorel’s abuse, and in similar terms. But also, and more
generally, Cousin and spiritualist universitaires.
men. They were interested in the solutions to practical problems. On the other hand, they also wanted to be able to form students as rapidly as possible, and relied on basically Jesuit methods to do so. In industrial life, however, really in all kinds of practical activity,

it is quite rare that a completely satisfying doctrine can be applied with good result in industry. One finds oneself, almost always, in the presence of enormously complex phenomena, that cannot be analyzed in a complete way and for which, nonetheless, one must find a solution. Thanks to clever constructions, to transformations that put a fictive state in place of a real one, to coefficients of correction, one can, almost always, using a certain number of wisely chosen observations, find satisfactory solutions. But of what value are these solutions for science? Nobody concerns themselves with that. 58

At the École polytechnique, then, an in-itself reasonable desire to teach students the practical formulae they would really need, as quickly as possible, came into conflict with consciousness of the practical reality itself. In general, the formalist side of things won out. That is, the production of students able to regurgitate a list of shortcuts and equations for an exam—what Sorel identifies as Jesuitical, Positivistic, Chinese, essentially statist education—took priority over the practical capacity to apply these formula.

Scientism, then, is the “categorical error”59 of taking the word for the thing, the neologism for the new reality, and basically for the inability to distinguish—as Sorel says all reasonably competent scientific practitioners do—between formal analysis and reality:

58 Ibid. pp 133-134
59 Sorel takes this term from J.B. Stallo, a German-American Hegelian (and refugee from Hegelianism) who lived for a long time in Cincinnati. Stallo’s work Concepts of Modern Physics (eventually important for Russell and Mach) had been translated into French in 1884—Sorel referred to it often. In this book, Stallo takes the position that many of the concepts of modern science are not nearly so ‘purely empirical’ as they claim to be, that they must be criticized and the metaphysics still hiding in them rooted out. The French edition had a preface by Charles Friedel which dealt with the notion of atomism specifically—that is, suggesting it was more a metaphysical prejudice than established fact that matter could be divided into discrete and indivisible atoms the behavior of which could in principle be fully calculated. These debates over the nature of non-Euclidean—Stallo calls it ‘transcendental’—geometry and Thermodynamics would drive the revolution in modern physics of the turn of the 20th century. John Bernhard Stallo, La Matière et la physique moderne (Paris: Bibliothèque scientifique internationale, 1883). On Stallo, see Loyd David Easton, Hegel's first American followers: the Ohio Hegelians: John B. Stallo, Peter Kaufmann, Moncure Conway, and August Willich, with key writings (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966).
“The practitioner might prefer a handy empirical formula to a complicated scientific analysis of phenomena and a personal investigation into causality; but this preference does not necessarily imply a confusion in the mind between these two quite distinct ways of approaching problems. A good education ought to equip him [the practitioner] to know what he is doing and not let him believe that he is doing science when he is following a script.”

60. The predominance of the state, which is really just an expression of the self-destructive contradictions of bourgeois rule, encourages this idealist, formalist, obeisance before abstraction that education ought to eliminate.

How to organize an education system that strikes at precisely this evil? The working class should take control of its own education, and should integrate the schooling of young people into practical industrial life. 61. Education must be based upon the concrete division of labor within the struggle for more efficient and higher-quality production. Bring the children back into the factories! But into factories in which the laboring process is controlled by the proletariat. 62

60. Sorel, "La science dans l'éducation." p 135.
61. This is a markedly different idea than the Universités populaires that would represent the great Dreyfus-era engagement of intellectuals in an alternative popular education. The UP pose the question of elitism in education in a very sharp way—Sorel, although not militating specifically against them, held himself aloof. Worker education should not have the goal of turning the proletariat into the bourgeoisie, but of developing fully the proletariat itself.
62. This is not to say that Sorel rejected book learning. In fact he discusses at some length the proper approach to manuals, both writing and reading. Why, he asks, should you memorize things rather than learn how to look them up? A good education will teach you how to use the shortcuts and formula that others have found, while remaining sensitive to their limits as well as, perhaps, improving on them. He approves particularly of the *Intermédiaire des mathématiciens*, which took as its mission to educate the interested public about the different specialized branches of mathematics by introducing problems, and showing how they might be solved. It is hard not to see in this general approach to education the mark of Sorel’s autodidactic path. Although he certainly had received an excellent education at the Polytechnique, it was not there that he learned his way around modern philology enough to discourse learnedly with, for instance,
If the metaphysics of bourgeois Statism is idealist and insists on the stark division between intellectual and manual labor, the metaphysics of the nascent proletariat is materialist, and rejects this distinction. Among the reasons that Sorel adduces for the truth or Marx’s historical materialism is that the materialism of the proletariat accords much better with the practical realities of scientific and technical development than does the idealism of the bourgeoisie. Participating in the struggle for production, Sorel believes, it is possible to observe the social articulation of this very metaphysical foundation for science. The division of labor does not de-skill workers, or it needn’t, it simply sharpens the conflict between the owner or administrators—who care only about formal profit, and have no understanding of the technical process itself—and the workers themselves who must solve the material problems presented by the machines.

Yet, Sorel believes—as so many *solidaristes* of the 1890s believed, Durkheim most rigorously among them—that the division of labor actually allows for the fulfillment of the human being. The specialization it implies does not mutilate the human spirit, because critical thinking, in its minimal Sorelian form, applies everywhere equally. “The totally developed man will therefore be the one in total possession of a branch of science.” More, “to know how to talk about everything, that is the ideal of bourgeois society, the inheritance of the old aristocracy. To know fully one’s own area, there is the

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Jacques Flach, who lectured on ancient legal texts at the Collège de France – See Rolland, "Droit, sociétés primitives et socialisme: Lettres de Georges Sorel à Jacques Flach (1900-1913)."
proletarian ideal.” This is a kind of integral development of the human being totally foreign to Brunetièr or, for instance, to the crackpot anarchists who think a human being should do everything, should expand equally in all directions.

So, education that takes place in and through the struggle for technical perfection will have the effect of teaching the student about both the conflictual nature of social relations and the essential difference between practical problem-solving and formal investigation. In fact, the capitalist industrial struggle is the social articulation of philosophy, it critiques itself. This is both related to and a radical assault on Paul Bert’s way of understanding the social function of technical education. Sorel’s practical technical education will not have the effect of endearing the classes to one another by revealing the basically solidaristic nature of society, but rather just the opposite: it will sharpen class division by throwing into practical relief the different metaphysics implicit in the practice of the bosses and the workers. It does not teach the bourgeoisie to respect individual proletarians for the hard work they do, but rather teaches the proletarians that they are just as capable of science as is the bourgeoisie.

64 What is a democratic education? Hard-liberals such as Paul Leroy-Beaulieu argued, in some ways like Sorel, against the triage of talented individuals from the popular classes through the school system. This is anti-democratic, L-B asserted, because it deprives the different social classes of their most active and intelligent elements. I would argue that L-B’s position is elitist (to wit: not everyone can do intellectual work, lots of middling-intelligent people should remain workers, since they’ll know agitation isn’t a good idea), while Sorel’s is emancipatory—but the congruence of the two arguments is not without significance. See Leroy-Beaulieu, L’État moderne et ses fonctions. Leroy-Beaulieu wrote, in a 1908 review of Sorel’s Reflections, “le syndicalisme a son théoricien, le théoricien de la violence systématique et de la grève générale, écrivain instruit, correct et disert, ennemi froid et implacable de la société moderne.” ——, “Le syndicalisme: la confédération générale du travail, la théorie de la violence.” p 482.
Yet for Sorel education still has the task of preparing a full individual, of impressing the nature of social reality onto the student, and of doing this in a communal way. For Sorel at this point, all of the energy for change comes from a total system of capitalism. To this degree, he has not escaped from Labriola or Durkheim. His writing in 1896 on education hesitated around the syndicat itself because he did not yet have a firm idea of how to explain the relationship between the individual—graspable through scientific psychology—and the social structure. Neither Labriola’s Marxism nor Durkheim’s sociology could avoid invoking a mysterious ideal mediation producing ‘forces’ going from society or the complexus, to the individual. Vico would provide Sorel with a materialist philosophy of history into which psychology could be integrated, and which could account for both intellect and affect.

**Vico’s Institution and not Hegel’s Totality**

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) was a Neapolitan professor of rhetoric, relatively unrecognized in his own time, whose work has since been hailed as foundational or prescient of any number of incompatible things. Historian Jules Michelet reintroduced Vico into France about a century after his death through a widely-circulated and much

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65 Vico prefigures, for instance, both Hegel’s historicism and the flatness of the postmodern. For a recent contextual treatment, see Barbara Ann Naddeo, *Vico and Naples: the urban origins of modern social theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). Vico remained most read in Italy, but came again to the attention of a broadly European audience with Benedetto Croce’s major 1911 study. It was not until 1944 that a translation of the *New Science* appeared in English. Isaiah Berlin’s writings on Vico brought him to a larger Anglophone audience during the 1960s, so some extent in tandem with Sorel—Sorel and Vico appeared one after the other on the cover of the TLS.
edited translation of Vico’s *New Science*. In more recent decades, in parallel to continuing scholarly work, Vico has been the object of a certain amount of attention from intellectuals seeking foundations for a Marxist or leftist theory of language and culture.

Sorel’s debt to Vico has often been remarked upon. Jeremy Jennings has argued that despite Sorel’s early and enthusiastic Marxism, Vico ultimately left a deeper and more lasting mark on his thought. Jennings notes the power for Sorel of “the Vichian epistemological criterion that we can only have knowledge of what we have made ourselves,” and understands Vico to fit into Sorel’s larger epistemological framework as a way of discrediting a sort of naive representationalist view of scientific knowledge, and opening the door for Sorel’s later engagement with Henri Poincaré’s conventionalism and William James’ pragmatism. This makes sense, but Sorel’s Vico is also part of a specific and contextually rooted interpretive field. In addition to Sorel’s great texts of reference—Aristotle and Marx—there are repeated references to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Religion*.  

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66 And a generation of readers themselves probably came to Vico through Michelet through the opening chapter of Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland station; a study in the writing and acting of history* (New York: Harcourt, 1940).


Also, we need here to take account of the specific sequence of writings and problems that lead up to Sorel’s work on Vico. Anne-Sophie Menasseyre, in her introduction to a new edition of the essay, suggests that the best context is the famous debate between Jean Jaurès and Paul Lafargue over idealism and materialism in history. For Menasseyre, Sorel turned to Vico in order to lay “the foundations of a materialist explication of the origin of law that would not cede to the facility of a vulgar materialism according to which law is, and is only, the disguised expression of relations of force.” Vico, then, would be a crucial figure for Sorel’s revision of Marxism in that he allowed Sorel to better respond to the question of morality in history. Menasseyre is clearly correct, but given Sorel’s reading of Labriola, it is hard to believe that Vico was necessary in order to make historical materialism less than vulgar.

Jennings and Menasseyre are both right, but their perspectives need to be synthesized. Doubtless with encouragement from Labriola and Croce, Sorel turned to Vico in order to think about Marxism as a history of philosophy. Sorel found something different in Vico than had Labriola—indeed, I suggest that we see Sorel’s reading of

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seem to be the dialectic of master and bondsman, in the form given to it in the Encyclopedia. Georges Sorel, "Dove va il marxismo?,” Rivista critica del socialismo 1, no. 1 (1899). p 13.

71 Jaurès’ lecture and Lafargues’ response were immediately published in 1895 together as a pamphlet, and have since been reissued many times in the same format. Jean Jaurès and Paul Lafargue, "Idéalisme & matérialisme dans la conception de l’histoire," (Paris: Publication du groupe des étudiants collectivistes, 1895).

72 Introduction, Georges Sorel and Anne-Sophie Menasseyre, Étude sur Vico et autres textes (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007). p 45. It is perhaps a clue as to Sorel’s place in the great repeating-machine of the history of Marxism that he should break ground on a ‘Marxist’ theory of law, and therefore of politics. See Frederic Jameson’s recent polemic against the attempt, which he traces to Nicos Poulantzas, to ‘add’ theories of law and politics to Marxism, and his defense of the holistic purity of materialist critique, in the chapter on Lenin in, Fredric Jameson, Valences of the dialectic (London: Verso, 2009). p 297.
Vico as, in part, giving him the resources to mount genuine criticisms of Labriola’s work. Ultimately, Vico allows Sorel to move from his machine epistemology to a broader theory of the institution. The institution, after Vico, is both an epistemologically sound object and a potentially revolutionary one. It is so because through it the division of affect and intellect, of material and ideal, is held together and made productive.

Certainly the intellectual sparring between Lafargue and Jaurès is an important backdrop to Sorel’s project, and Sorel takes several swipes at Jaurès in these pages. Sorel dissects Vico’s work into “the original part…which is still today worth pursuing and…the superficial parts of the system, above all that which is best known, but which is accessory.”73 The superficial part of Vico’s work is the histoire idéal, that is, Vico’s idea that all civilizations go through a specific cycle of development, moving from barbaric to a heroic age, to full adulthood, and finally to decadence. In critiquing this, Sorel also criticizes Jaurès’ idealist revision of materialism. Indeed, the first several sections of the “Étude” argue that there is no way to imagine anything like Vico’s ideal history without recourse to the principle of Providence.74 The argument is similar to those that are deployed against all kinds of teleological historicism, in particular, later, Marxism. Sorel does not, however, find the worthwhile part of Vico echoed in Lafargue’s materialism.75

74 Which, incidentally, Jaurès recognized perfectly; only, he accepted and even welcomed the addition of a deity to the ‘Marxist’ worldview. Divinity giving meaning to the story of the past was crucial to his philosophy of history. For a discussion of this, see Jean-Pierre Rioux’s introduction to the collection, Jean Jaurès, Rallumer tous les soleils (Paris: Omnibus, 2006).
75 It should not, however, be inferred that the Jaurès-Lafargue debate was of no importance, on the contrary, it is of lasting importance despite Sorel’s low opinion of Lafargue. See for instance the letter to Joachim Gasquet from 3 March 1901, in which Sorel brings up the debate: “Dans les articles si souvent bouffons de Lafargue, il y a quelque chose de vrai: les peuples n’agissent point en raison des idées de
Rather, it seems to me, he finds in Vico a way to retain Durkheim’s objectivity while dissolving the totality implied by Labriola’s theory of *praxis*.

Through his reading of Vico, Sorel was able to work through for himself the problems presented by Labriola’s way of understanding history as a whole process. Vico’s institution provided a conceptual tool for breaking apart Labriola’s *processo*, while retaining the reality of the *milieu* and providing an object for sociology, all the while avoiding the metaphysical trap into which Durkheim had fallen of giving ‘society’ essential existence.

The presence of the “Étude sur Vico” in a journal of theoretical Marxism was justified at once by reference to Marx’s footnote on Vico: “Darwin has drawn attention to the history of *natural technology*...Is not the history of the productive organs of social man worthy of similar research? And would it not be easy to lead this enterprise to a good conclusion, because, as Vico says, the history of man is distinguished from the history of nature in that we have made this and not that?”

My main purpose here is to

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In what follows, I cite from the original text rather than from Menasseyre’s new edition of it. This is for the practical reason that *Devenir social* is, through Gallica, more accessible than Mesasseyre’s scholarly edition which, in any case, marks the original pagination. Sorel, "Étude sur Vico." p 786. I have translated the French quoted by Sorel. The current English translation reads: “Does not the history of the productive organs of man in society, of organs that are the material basis of every particular organization of society, deserve equal attention? And would not such a history be easy to compile, since, as Vico says, human history differs from natural history in that we have made this and not that?” This does not seem to me an unqualified endorsement of Vico. Marx must be sneering as he says ‘easy’. Karl Marx et al., *Capital: a critique of political economy*, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976). p 493.
draw out two points about this essay. The first has to do with Sorel’s careful use of the concept of the unity of history, which is implicitly but clearly distinguished from a totalizing conception of either the substance or theorization of history. This is of enormous importance not only in order to understand Sorel’s eventual break with Labriola, but also Sorel’s place in the history of Marxism. Second, we can see in this essay the uneasy co-existence of, on the one hand, a classically Marxist praxis in which theory follows practice, and on the other hand an empirical claim about the practical, social origins of intellections. Given the uncertainty in this period (and always) about the best way to conceive of the base-superstructure relation, even a nascent theory of practice was bound to have some traction. Here, again, we can see the roots of Sorel’s peculiar revision of Marxism and his coming break with Labriola—it is in the Vichean institution.

Sorel is most interested in Vico for the latter’s enunciation of what Sorel will eventually call his “loi idéogénétique.” This ‘law’ is first encountered in a discussion of the origin of *le droit*. On the one hand, Sorel says, Vico seems to argue that there is something *idéal* and therefore eternal about law. Yet, on the other hand,

Vico…teaches us to look for the origins of our metaphysical constructions in the more or less empirical constructions of social life, -- the same as we find the origin of our scientific theses in observations made in the arts by technicians…It is from the more or less thoughtful or scientific practice of life that philosophers take their ideas.78

78 “il [Vico] nous apprend à chercher l’origine de nos constructions métaphysiques dans les constructions plus ou moins empiriques de la vie sociale, -- de même que nous trouvons l’origine de nos thèses scientifiques dans les observations faites dans les arts par les techniciens…C’est dans la pratique plus ou moins mal réfléchie ou savante de la vie que les philosophies ont puisé leurs idées.” Ibid., no. 9. p 801.
Sorel has discovered in Vico something like a prefiguring of his own view in “L’ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique.” Sorel, thus, is enrolling Vico into his own project, showing that Vico himself starts from the same epistemological presuppositions, and therefore that other elements of his work may also be appropriated.

Sorel bases much of his treatment of Vico’s theory of science on the conflict with Cartesianism. Sorel concludes that for Vico science “is not an object that demands personal belief or adherence; it concerns the life of man as species and the development of humanity. It is not individual, it is social, we would say today.” At least, this is what Sorel himself had said a few years earlier. In the same vein, Sorel paraphrases Vico in more modern language: “the scientist works on a material furnished for him by previous generations. This material belongs to what we call today the artificial milieu. It is therefore in a milieu made by humanity that we practice induction, and not in a cosmic milieu.” Sorel goes on, “experimentation is therefore creation; it belongs entirely to the artificial milieu.” This is tied up in the Vichean knot quite neatly: “we never really know the cosmic world, but we must know the artificial world because we make it. About

79 “elle intéresse la vie de l’homme comme espèce et le développement de l’humanité; elle n’est pas individuelle, elle est sociale, dirions-nous aujourd’hui” Ibid. p 812. The vitalist language here is not usually Sorel’s. This is possibly connected to his engagement at this moment with the Italian scene, in which vitalist language had less sharp connotations.
80 Ibid. p 814. Note that even induction, a basic procedure of logical reasoning, is rooted firmly in the artificial milieu rather than belonging to any higher universal realm.
81 Ibid. pp 816-817. Interestingly, Sorel attaches a citation from Capital to his assertion that experimentation is a sort of creation. He refers to the page where Marx cites Pietro Verri. Karl Marx, Paul Lafargue, and Vilfredo Pareto, Le capital (Paris: Guillaumin, 1893). p 16 col 2. Marx says on this page, “L’homme ne peut point procéder autrement que la nature elle-même, c’est-à-dire il ne fait que changer la forme des matières.” To which is added the footnote from Verri: “Tous les phénomènes de l’univers...ne nous donnent pas l’idée de création réelle, mais seulement d’une modification de la matière.”
the first we can have opinions and form hypotheses. The second gives us science."82
Sorel is clearly recasting Vico into his own language. This point is worth emphasizing
because Sorel does not begin again in each of his philosophical essays, nor does he write
simply in emotive response to his context. Rather, we must read at least a certain slice of
his writing as an ongoing, continuous, philosophical reflection that takes as its occasion
the text and world around him.

Vico’s loi idéogénétique is of general application. Sorel eventually expressed the
law as, “the formation of philosophy under the influence of the spectacle of practical
political life.”83 Later on in the essay, discussing the reasons for anthropomorphism,
Sorel follows Vico back to the ‘origins’ of humankind. He says, “at the origin, man could
make sense of things only by constructing representations with what he experienced,
which is to say with emotions and passions,” hence in the hypothetical beginning,
humans attached the various otherwise inexplicable events in the world, such as thunder,
to expressions of emotion.84 But eventually people began to have more resources at their
command, “in so far as man raises himself up and accomplishes more complex, more
thoughtful, and more scientific deeds, he transports into physical nature the new means of
which he disposes”—people build the world up around themselves according to the new
materials that they have to hand. Eventually, “this results in the introduction of relations
that I call mechanical, because it is indeed rational mechanics that offers their most

83 “la formation de la philosophie sous l’influence du spectacle offert par la pratique de la vie politique.”
Ibid., no. 10. p 906, the law is elaborated and extended on pp 924-28.
84 Ibid., no. 11. p 1029.
perfect and clear type."85 Technological development eventually introduces, this is to say, determinism into the artificial milieu. The ideal constructions of science build on the new determinisms introduced technologically. Or, put differently, the intellectual apparatus of a given society will be related in complexity and perfection to the level of that society’s technological development.86 Importantly, there is still an implication of something like progress here, in the sense of increasing the domain submitted to rational determinism. A conception of the processes through which this takes place is, for Sorel, the essence of historical materialism. Near the end of the essay, he argues that the particular decisions of judges change the deep meaning of laws and calls this “one of the clearest manifestations of historical materialism: *theory follows practice and does not precede it.*”87 Theory derives from practice, as in science so also in law.

This does not constitute, however, a Marxist theory of *praxis*. Such a theory would require a degree of reflexivity that Sorel is unwilling to adopt. Labriola’s account of the historical genesis of the *Manifesto* is an attempt at praxis, because it aims not only at Marx, but at Labriola himself. As heroically as Sorel strives to link all theory to specific kinds of practice, he at no point denies the difference between them. Indeed, the spaces between scientific determinism, practical production, and philosophy, are of

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85 Ibid. pp 1029.
86 Later on, Durkheim and others will object to Labriola’s historical materialism that it bases everything on technology. In fact, already for Sorel ‘technology’ is to be understood in a broad way. The *matière* at hand are used to imagine relations between things. This is a significant word. See Sorel’s discussion of the Vichean *materiaux*, Ibid., no. 10. pp 912-13.
87 “une des manifestations les plus claires du matérialisme historique: *la théorie suit la pratique et ne la précède pas.*” Ibid., no. 11. p 1045. From the perspective of Anglo-American case and common law, it is not so remarkable to discover that individual decisions have this property. In French and continental jurisprudence more generally, it has a different significance.
crucial importance. Labriola’s apparent willingness to collapse the subject into the object (or to assert that, in due historical time, the two will be one) is not compatible with Sorel’s idea of science which has remarkably little room for ‘consciousness’ as an explanatory force or even place-holder.

Certain of Vico’s claims, Sorel stresses, are empirical, and have been disproven by later scientific developments. Parts of Vico’s *New Science* are obsolete. Perhaps Vico’s most glaring problem, according to Sorel, is his tendency to compare the course of history to the development of a single individual—as though primitive societies are like children, and more complex ones like adults. This, Sorel says, has been a very common problem, and is a misconception that explains in part why travelers have so much trouble understanding ways of thinking different from their own. These difficulties would disappear, Sorel says, “if one were immersed in the principles of historical materialism and if one did not always suppose, in an unconscious way, that man is nonetheless identical to himself, and that his system of ideas is independent of the needs and desires that result from his way of living.”

This is to say, only a strong idea of historically-contingent-yet-radical difference can protect against superb disdain for the genuinely foreign. This is an indictment of a particular kind of universalism that crosses the line from defining the human through relations and concrete conditions, and passes over into essence. Yet there is something in Vico’s idea.

Contemporary experimental psychology, Sorel says, has shown that there are certain fundamental sequences through which the individual mind passes from sensation to cognition. The fact that in historical reality no social group as a whole obeys these sequences in a simple and unproblematic way does not detract from their existence and relevance. Thus, Sorel says that Vico’s fame would be assured if only for recognizing, “that history has an identity of substance.” This identity of substance in psychology seems at first like a simple kind of materialism: we have discovered how the human mind works, “rather than a false unity, we have found a concrete and living unity of man obliged to follow certain paths, always the same, in order to rise to intellectual understanding.” Sorel does not mean, however, that everyone is therefore the same, or that every individual moment of mental activity could somehow be analyzed and placed onto a chart—man is not everywhere equal to himself—but there is some kind of fundamental unity, or identity of substance.

Vichean corsi and ricorsi seem to be hiding behind this, but they are not. For Sorel this unity of the substance of history takes place in and through matériaux, “civil institutions” which are understood as matière, “considering the passage from the

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90 Sorel cites Théodule Ribot here and the loi des suites. Ibid. p 911. The logic of the application of this materialist psychology to history is essentially the same as that of the debates about applying evolutionary psychology or contemporary brain science to historical study.
91 “l’histoire a une identité de substance.” Ibid. p 912.
92 Ibid. p 913.
93 Sorel’s uses of Vico’s corsi and ricorsi come later in his life, and are clearly invoked not even as metaphors, but as moral tropes. In 1898, writing for a German audience, he says, “Die corsi und ricorsi existieren nicht; aber der grosse neapolitanische Philosoph hat sehr gut bemerkt, dass es in der Geschichte eine gewisse ‘Einheit der Substanz’ gibt...” ———, "Was man von Vico lernt." p 270. See also chapter five of this dissertation.
individual to the social.\textsuperscript{94} Put differently, \textit{matériaux} are the things themselves, the concrete elements out of which institutions are built as they show themselves to individuals, while \textit{matière} is the sociality of these institutions, the element of ideal unity generated by the workings of the institution. Historical \textit{materialism}, then, is the study of these institutions in light of the rules by which we now understand them to operate, that is, the rules by which certain kinds of institutions generate at first affect, and then, through a particular sequence, intellection. Historical materialism becomes the method according to which history is composed of \textit{matériaux} and \textit{matière}. The title Sorel gave to a much later collection of essays, \textit{Matériaux d’une théorie du prolétariat} (1919) gains another shade of meaning once we are aware of this distinction.

The closest Sorel approaches to \textit{praxis} in the Labriolan mode is the implication of his assertion that this institutional reality constitutes the unitary substance of history.

Discussing Vico’s theory of poetics, Sorel says,

\begin{quote}
The imagination always obeys the same laws: the Madonna is a unique entity, but the faithful is hardly moved by simply theological considerations, if he addresses himself to an icon, it is because this figure recalls to him a group of memories: each possesses its miraculous legend, evoked by the plastic sign. To adore a particular Madonna is therefore to evoke all the memories of the prodigies connected with its cult. Here again therefore is a group of relations that is figured [figuré] by a sign, and which cannot be separated from it.\textsuperscript{95}
\end{quote}

This is an illustration of a general psychological law. But this fundamental psychological law is always embedded in, and entirely dependent for its meaning on, social reality. This surprisingly linguistic and symbolic conception of unity is integral to Sorel’s historical materialism. There is always multiplicity within the unity because the unity is itself only

\textsuperscript{94} ibid., pp 912-913, footnote #5.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., no. 11. p 1023.
an ideal. Matériaux can only be identified, and therefore might in fact be defined by their capacity to actualize a particular sequence of psychological development, that is to support a particular kind of matière. Another way of saying this, it will turn out, is that institutions deserve this name only when they engage the moral lives of the individuals of whom they are composed.

Vico provides a model for a philosophy of history that admits the unity of substance in history without intellectualizing it into a totality. As we have seen, Sorel explicitly rejects the ‘totalizing moment’ of Vichian history (the ideal history, the ruse of providence, the corsi e ricorsi), in favor of the analysis of institutions and their ideas. Unity of substance means that it is possible to think about human beings as organic bodies in their material interrelations in institutions, through the ideal constructions attached to these institutions: law, affect, religion. On this basis, Sorel developed a critique of Labriola, which unfolded in the charged context of the revisionism debate, but which cannot be reduced to that debate’s Bernsteinian terms.

**Andler and Sorel against Labriola**

When Labriola’s *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l’histoire* appeared in French, Sorel gave a preface to the book. Sorel spends the bulk of the preface criticizing distorted understandings of the meaning of ‘historical materialism’ that he says are

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prevalent in France. They stem from Gustave Rouanet and Jaurès especially, but from others also.\textsuperscript{97} Sorel rapidly defends historical materialism as a method from the various allegations against it, which he says are essentially all beside the point. He then suggests two angles from which historical materialism as practiced by Marx and Labriola might be criticized with some validity. First, he says, the metaphysical foundation of \textit{Capital} and the \textit{Manifesto} are neither clear nor unproblematic. Second, on a different level, Sorel says that there is an implicit psychology in Marx’s historical interpretation that is not itself justified.\textsuperscript{98}

When Sorel objects to the metaphysics of historical materialism, we should read a critique of Labriola’s claim that one must study the whole \textit{processo} of society as a totality. This is a delicate matter. While Sorel would certainly agree with Labriola that history cannot be explained by the aggregation of individual motivations—as with Gabriel Tarde—he consistently refuses to take the next step and erect ‘the social’—or anything else—as an autonomous level of objective knowledge. He mounted the same criticism in 1895 against Durkheim.

Sorel’s last words in the preface to Labriola are, “the historian will find, in these pages, substantial and precious indications for the study of the genesis and transformation

\textsuperscript{97} Gustave Rouanet had taken over the helm of the \textit{Revue socialiste}, long run by Benoit Malon. This was the ‘major’ socialist periodical of the period in France, and was ecumenical rather than Marxist. On Malon, see K. Steven Vincent, \textit{Between Marxism and Anarchism : Benoît Malon and French reformist socialism} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

\textsuperscript{98} Later, in his letters to Sorel (the \textit{Discorrendo}, published in French as \textit{Socialisme et philosophie}), which are really an extended response to Sorel’s preface, Labriola adds ‘ethics’ to the list of Sorel’s questions. Antonio Labriola, \textit{Socialisme et philosophie} (Paris: Girard et Brière, 1899); Antonio Labriola and Benedetto Croce, \textit{Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia}, 5. ed., Biblioteca di cultura moderna, (Bari.: G. Laterza, 1947).
of institutions.” While Labriola insists that the great task for historical materialism is to grasp history as a whole, Sorel will only go as far as the institution of which he speaks here—that is, of the matériaux becoming matière in matérielisme historique. This is the result of Sorel’s working through of Vico. Sorel was, and remained, enormously excited by Labriola’s discussion of the conditions for the genesis of the Manifesto, but he does not accept that this kind of explanation must be linked to a total appreciation of history. Labriola pointed out in response that when Sorel asked after the metaphysical foundation of historical materialism, he really was after a “general doctrine of knowledge, or of the fundamental forms of thought.” Labriola is absolutely correct. For Sorel, metaphysics cannot be separated from epistemology. As we have seen, it is on the ground of his theory of knowledge that Sorel distinguishes between the postulated unity of substance of history, and any kind of totality or totalization of history. Given a unity of substance, Sorel will speak of multiplicity rather than totality.

Now, at times, Labriola himself denied that his method was totalizing, but he none the less represented historical knowledge through the method of historical materialism as an intuitive grasping of a given whole. In this sense, although Labriola does gesture in the direction of multiplicity, in his view the task of historical materialism remained that of constituting totalities. Some philological care is needed here, but it

100 Labriola, Socialisme et philosophie. P 76. This is from the beginning of the fifth letter, sent May 24th, 1897.
101 This, I think, is an enormously important point that requires elaboration. Sorel does not accept the category of totality. It is in this sense that he is out of step with the entire tradition of western Marxism, from Lukacs until relatively recently. See Martin Jay, Marxism and totality : the adventures of a concept from Lukacs to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
102 Labriola, Essays on the materialistic conception of history. pp 135, 154-5.
seems to me that there is ample evidence that Sorel’s “institutions” are genuinely not total.

This brings us to the question of psychology. Here, we should see the accusation that although Labriola puts himself with remarkable insight into the position of historian of subjectivity, he never in fact provides us with the tools that would generate subjectivities between the level of the individual and that of the so-called whole. For Sorel, ‘materialist,’ which is to say positivistic, psychology remains active and salient, even within the frame of the relativism implied by historical materialism. Again, if Sorel agrees that historical understanding cannot result from the simple aggregation of individuals, he none the less suggests that a complex and historically sensitive aggregation is necessary. The result of this aggregation is not the historical processo (hopelessly abstract and totalizing), but rather the institution (concrete and irreducibly plural). Again, this critique of Labriola was possible only after Sorel had worked through the philosophy of history offered by the pre-Marxist Vico.

Sorel’s objections find an echo in those made by Charles Andler, in his review of Labriola for the RMM. Andler had recently defended his thesis on German state socialism, and was already among the foremost Germanists in the French academy.

According to Shlomo Sand, this review was “the first serious critique of Marxism in

103 If Labriola presided over one phase of Sorel’s apprenticeship in Marxism, Andler did the same for another. Andler was on his way to becoming by the late 1890s France’s premier germanist. He would be instrumental in introducing both Marx and Nietzsche into France—if he does not have the honor of being France’s first great reader of Marx, he certainly was France’s first serious reader of Nietzsche. The beginning of his life was dominated by study of Marx and socialism, the end by Nietzsche. It is, however, not entirely clear of Marx brought him to Nietzsche or the other way around. See Christophe Prochasson, “Sur la reception du marxisme en France: le cas Andler (1890-1920),” Revue de synthèse 110, no. 1 (1989). See also Prochassson’s introduction in the republication of Andler’s La Civilisation socialiste.
France." Andler claims that Labriola has missed the real subject of history, which is eternal mankind itself. In the paradox-loving spirit of polemic, Andler says,

If there is determinism in history, we will not recognize it there. Thus, there is no more ideological science than history, which of all sciences is the only one that never deals with reality... Inasmuch as it is none the less possible, since it never reaches the real, what it does reveal to us, is the man in general contested by the Marxists. The very possibility of history gives the lie to historical materialism.105

This, it seems to me, is an early expression of a French way of understanding a certain kind of German historicism as beginning with Hegel, proceeding to Nietzsche, and ending in (eventually) Heidegger. For Andler, the history we make is man in general, and a sharp division must be enforced between the natural and the human sciences.106 Sorel agrees that there must be a unity to history, but he wouldn’t describe it as a man in general, rather he would prefer to stay rooted in concrete experience and evidence. But there is the ‘psychological’ substrate of the fact of association and collective existence, there is the unity of substance of history manifest in the concept of the institution.

For Labriola, the theorist is the consciousness of the proletarian movement. The two are separate, although related through praxis. In his letters to Sorel, Labriola expanded on, among other things, what he meant by this. At the end of the third letter, he says,

In the process of praxis there is nature, which is to say the historical evolution of man. And in speaking of praxis under this aspect of totality, one aims to eliminate the vulgar opposition between practice and theory because, in other words, history is the history of labor and as, on the one side, in labor thus integrally understood is included the respectively proportioned and proportional development of mental and physical aptitudes,

106 Obviously, this is a tendentious interpretation. See Prochasson, "Sur la reception du marxisme en France; le cas Andler (1890-1920)."
and on the other side in the concept of the history of labor itself, and the variations of this form—historical man is thus always social man, and the so-called pre- or supra-social man is a child of the imagination. 107

Or again, in somewhat similar language, he says,

The philosophy of praxis...is the philosophy immanent to things about which it philosophizes. From life to thought and not from thought to life...from labor, which is knowledge in action, to knowledge as abstract theory; and not from the latter to the former. From needs and thereby the different internal states of well-being and ill-being born from the satisfaction and the non-satisfaction of needs, to the mytho-poetic creation of the hidden forces of nature; and not vice versa. 108

Finally, Labriola explains that the idea of praxis is what separates historical materialism from (other?) monisms. He says, “the main critical point of view by which historical materialism corrects monism is...that it begins with praxis, that is to say from the development of activity, and just as it is a theory of laboring man [l’homme qui travaille], it also considers science itself as labor.” 109 For Labriola, then, praxis is a point of view that escapes the materialism-idealism dichotomy from within a generally monist perspective. Yet, it might be said that what is really happening here is that action has been taken as a point of view in order not so much to transcend the old dichotomy as to smear its two sides together. We must pay carefully attention to the terms in which Sorel implicitly rejects this definition, with which, in many ways, we have seen that he agrees.

Durkheim would say that consciousness cannot exist without its substrate. This has been enough for Sorel. But the great problem of Sorel’s syndicalist phase is precisely this question of the theorist’s relation to and possible corruption of the actual worker’s struggle. It is not enough, when one is faced with the sausage-making of political parties

107 Labriola, Socialisme et philosophie. p 51.
108 Ibid. p 73.
109 Ibid. pp 103-4.
in power, to assert that from the philosophical perspective of *praxis*, manual and intellectual labor are the same. To do so becomes *de facto* a political position in favor of parliamentary socialism. If Labriola’s *praxis* seems to be based on reflexivity and a humble attitude toward history, it has the function of simply denying the really separate position of the intellectual. It has the pretense, but not the practice, of reflexivity.

The question of prevision is related to all this. For Sorel, there can be no *theoretical* prevision that does not, by its very nature, corrupt its object. Prevision can only be local and tactical. Any strategic prevision is a form of domination exercised over the only real source of creative energy, that is, the factory as a site of production and struggle. This is also related to Sorel’s observation that Labriola has not gone far enough to provide the mechanisms by which subjectivity is created.\(^{110}\) He does not believe that it is possible to link the production of subjectivity to a totalizing social *processo*, which for him is at best a construction without objective reality. The *processo* is to be contrasted to institutions, *matière*, which do have objective historical reality. This problematic is crucial. It is the source, for instance, of his later articulation of *di(s)remption*. It is also describable as the gap between insisting on the historical roots of theory in practice, and the totalistic perspective of *praxis*.

Andler was not the only German-trained French intellectual to review Labriola’s book, Durkheim also penned a review for the *Revue philosophique*. For Durkheim, the

\(^{110}\) We do not need to wait, this is to say, for the concept of ‘biopolitical production’ to find a theorist who sees physical production as intimately linked to the production of subjectivity. For a recent review of the relation of biopolitics to Marxism and various revisions of Marxism, see Miguel Vatter, “Biopolitics: From Surplus Value to Surplus Life,” *Theory & Event* 12, no. 2 (2009). See also chapter eight of this dissertation.
book is “among the most rigorous efforts that have been made to reduce [ramener] Marxist doctrine to its elementary concepts and to deepen them. The thought…goes straight ahead with a sort of verve.”

Durkheim agrees with Labriola and historical materialism in as much as it seeks an objective, rather than a subjective, account of historical change. Durkheim means by this that writing history does not consist in recounting what major historical actors thought they were doing, but rather in excavating the institutions and social forms in which these actors moved. That is, humans make their own history, but not as they mean to, and under conditions of which they generally are not aware, of which they perhaps could not possibly be aware except retrospectively. Durkheim understands Labriola to be asserting that economics is at the origin of social life. Although he agrees that there are hidden springs to human motivation he does not accept that they can be reduced to obvious material needs.

This is not at all what Labriola thinks, and a confusion between technology and economics is at the root of Durkheim’s misunderstanding. Technology, if it is understood broadly, is really the whole of the mediating structure between man and nature that is social life—to the point where society as a whole becomes subsumed under the category and it becomes meaningless. It is to this broad category of material mediation that Labriola refers, not to the limited sphere of economics. Roberto Dainotto argues that

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111 Text collected in Filloux ed. Durkheim, La science sociale et l'action. p 249. See also André Tosel on Durkheim’s failure to read Labriola and Marxism more generally. For Tosel, this is evidence that, from its inception, French sociology was unable to achieve a genuinely critical stance vis-à-vis its society (especially, but not only, in terms of class conflict). Hirst, whose analysis is Althusserian, has the same opinion about Durkheim. Paul Q. Hirst, Durkheim, Bernard and epistemology (London: Routledge, 1975); Tosel, "L’impensé de la sociologie française, ou Labriola lu par Durkheim."

112 Durkheim, La science sociale et l'action. pp 251-2.
Labriola’s attempt to rescue the philosophical core of Marxism ended up in a historical materialism that really amounted to a theory of praxis and the immanence of philosophy to the becoming of the social world. It is significant that Sorel, starting from a different place, was moving in the same direction, and ‘revised’ Marxism along similar lines.

The social is so far from a purely material phenomenon, according to Durkheim, that modern social science is increasingly of the opinion that “religion is the most primitive of all social phenomena.” Durkheim ends the review by arguing that, essentially, religion has always been with mankind, whereas the changes wrought in the past two centuries by industrial development and other economic change are, although certainly important, not essential and “in no way demand the complete overthrow and renewal of the social order…The malaise that European societies suffer does not have these transformations for its origin.” Economic change does not require social revolution, and is not even the ultimate cause of moral dislocation. It would be difficult to articulate a more thoroughgoing refusal of the orthodox Marxist worldview, especially in 1897.

We should pause, however, and remember how Durkheim understood religion to work, and in what sense he believed it to be essential to social reality. Durkheim certainly did not mean by ‘religion’ some element inherent in the individual. For Durkheim,

113 Dainotto, "Gramsci and Labriola: Philology, Philosophy of Praxis."
114 "la religion est le plus primitif de tous les phénomènes sociaux." Durkheim, *La science sociale et l'action*. pp 253.
115 Ibid. p 254.
116 Although, for an argument to the effect that in *Division* Durkheim understands society to be conflictual, and is therefore more able to ‘think’ capitalism and society than he is usually given credit for, see Anne Warfield Rawls, "Conflict as a Foundation for Consensus: Contradictions of Industrial Capitalism in Book III of Durkheim's Division of Labor," *Critical Sociology* 29, no. 3 (2003).
religion is a deeply social phenomenon—indeed, as we shall see, it is in a sense the essence of the social. Religion is basically synonymous with moral regulation.

Certainly, Durkheim would argue in 1898 in defense of intellectuals’ engagement in the Dreyfus Affair, that the religion of humanity, the cult of the positive freedom of the individual, was the only moral force remaining that could bind France into a whole nation—that, indeed, to attack this religion was tantamount to attacking France. At base, however, he believed religion to be constituted not by shared belief in some social totality, but essentially by shared practice. Ultimately, in working his way toward a full expression of this idea, Durkheim also developed an explanation for the generation of rationality itself through social practice that has much in common with Sorel’s account of the constitution of rationality through technology conceived as social practice.

Sorel in fact rejects many of Labriola’s most fundamental—or at least oft-invoked—concepts. This need not surprise us, since Sorel often vocally endorses a philosophical system while rejecting what are generally understood to be its most basic

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117 It is perhaps worth noticing that Durkheim deploys this argumentative strategy, to say to one’s opponents, ‘in attacking me, you really attack what you yourself hold most dear,’ both in the context of the Dreyfus affair and, as we have seen, in the context of the disciplinary differentiation of sociology. Steven Lukes is right to spend time on Durkheim’s rhetorical strategies. See Lukes, Émile Durkheim; his life and work, a historical and critical study.

118 This claim about the nature of Durkheim’s work is not entirely uncontroversial—but I am hardly alone in taking Durkheim in this sense. As will be clear in the following pages, my reading owes an enormous amount in particular to the work of Anne Rawls, but also to other ‘new Durkheimians.’ Anne Warfield Rawls, Epistemology and practice : Durkheim’s The elementary forms of religious life (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Warren Schmaus, Rethinking Durkheim and his tradition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also Robert Alun Jones, The development of Durkheim’s social realism, Ideas in context ; 55 (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

119 For a more wide-ranging account of Durkheim and Sorel, touching on some of the same questions as this chapter, see Eric Brandom, "Georges Sorel, Émile Durkheim, and the Social Foundations of la morale," Proceedings of the Western Society for French History 38(2010).
arguments or concepts (it has been said that this is what he did with Marxism in general). Society does not constitute, for Sorel, a Labriolan complexus, but rather a milieu, the essence of which is to be undefined. Prevision of trends—to be distinguished from determinism—which Labriola asserts is a major goal of historical materialism as a science, is simply ejected by Sorel from the realm of rational science.

In what sense, then, does Sorel agree with Labriola? Why is he enthusiastic about his work? Sorel, already in 1894, understood Marxism as first and foremost a way of thinking about social reality as something man-made. For Sorel, this included from the beginning, and perhaps most importantly, the ideal constructions that occasionally qualify as science. As Labriola often repeats: “ideas do not fall from heaven.” Rather, they rise from the material practice of everyday life. Labriola worked hard to establish scientific socialism as a mode of thought that is entirely immanent to observed reality. Although, as we have seen, French commentators did not find this convincing, it was crucial for Sorel. He asks after Labriola’s epistemology in the disguise of metaphysics because he believes that he has found in Labriola’s version of historical materialism a theory of social life and social science based on practice. Ultimately, Sorel rejects Labriola’s approach because while he wholeheartedly embraces the theory of practice he finds in Labriola, he cannot accept the totalizing praxis that, for Labriola, is necessarily attendant to it. As we have seen, for Sorel, pedagogy is something the workers can do for the theorists of socialism, not something the theorists can do for the workers. Vico provided Sorel with the

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120 Or at least this is how Labriola understands Sorel’s use of ‘metaphysics’—Labriola, *Socialisme et philosophie*. pp 76, 91.
conceptual tools to offer an alternative account of revolutionary action, one that was not available to Andler or desired by Durkheim. We have seen traces of it already, but it is worked out fully and to great effect in “L’avenir socialiste des syndicats.”

The Metaphysician of Syndicalism

The argument of “L’avenir” is quite clear: the way forward for socialism is the autonomous syndicats. The syndicat is the kernel of the collectivist society of the future. Its great mission is to develop itself according to its own immanent principles, without the guidance of party leaders or intellectuals of any kind. Sorel says, “to summarize my whole idea in a formula, I would say that the whole future of socialism is in the autonomous development of the worker syndicats.” Or, somewhat more

121 “L’avenir socialiste des syndicats” appeared in 1898 in L’Humanité nouvelle, a journal run by Augustin Hamon with an ecumenical anarchist editorial policy. The essay was republished in pamphlet form in 1901 and again in 1905. Sorel also included the text in his 1919 collection Matériaux d’un théorie du prolétariat. Very little work has, to my knowledge, been done to date on Hamon, although he clearly is a central figure in left-anarchist circles at this time. See, Patrick Galliou, Bernard Shaw, and Augustin Hamon, “George Bernard Shaw et Augustin Hamon : les premiers temps d’une correspondance (1893-1913)” (Doctoral, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 1998., 1998). This is, in essence, an annotated edition of the correspondence between Hamon and Shaw, but it also includes substantial biographical essays on the two.

122 Paragraphs cut from the first publication show the degree to which Sorel is engaged in polemics in the ‘Revisionist’ crisis of this period. Sorel argues for a looser understanding of the relation between economic structure and superstructural elements, and in general for a conception of Marxism as a sociology rather than an economics. The essay, however, clearly remained relevant for Sorel for the remainder of his life. See, in general, Julliard’s placement of this text between “theoretical Marxism” and “practical syndicalism.” Julliard, in Charzat, ed. Georges Sorel. For the bulk of the material cut, see Georges Sorel, “L’Avenir socialiste des syndicats,” L’Humanité nouvelle 2, no. 9 (1898). pp 295-298.

123 “pour résumer toute ma pensée en une formule, je dirais que tout l’avenir du socialisme réside dans le développement autonome des syndicats ouvriers.” Sorel, L’Avenir socialiste des syndicats. p 60. This is to be contrasted with Sorel’s earlier view of syndicats, in which they were not capable of such autonomy: “au fond, qu’est-ce qu’un syndicat, sinon une association dans laquelle la loi est obligée de faire intervenir le principe collectiviste?” Georges Sorel, “Geblesco - La propriété rurale à Rome, en France, en Roumanie,” Le Devenir social 1, no. 4 (1895). p 496.
prosaically, as Sorel described his argument in his first letter to Eduard Bernstein in May of 1898, “in the spirit of Marx, the actualization of socialism consists, to begin with, in a society in resistance [la société de résistance] in which develops a proletarian civilization capable of substituting itself for bourgeois civilization without taking over its traditional form.”

Sorel argues in “L’avenir” that, first of all, although it is impossible to predict the future, it is both possible and necessary to evaluate the preparedness of the proletariat for the revolution. What, according to Marx, is a revolution? Sorel says that it is not the seizing of state power, but the replacement of one juridical and moral order with another. In an oft-repeated formula, it is struggle for the law. The paradigm here is the long ‘revolution’ in which the church and Christianity replaced the Roman Empire and the classical world. If this is the model for revolution, then preparedness must be evaluated in terms of moral and juridical development. The syndicats, resolutely workerist, are the only place that Sorel sees this happening.

The greatest characteristic of the syndicats is that they reject the false division between intellectual and physical labor. This division is the cornerstone of the bourgeois-

124 “Dans l’esprit de Marx, [l’]actualisation du socialisme consiste à partir de la société de résistance où développer une civilisation prolétarienne, capable de se substituer à la civilisation bourgeoise, sans lui emprunter sa forme traditionnelle.” Letter from 12 Mai 1898, in Georges Sorel and Michel Prat, "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Eduard Bernstein (1898-1902)," Mil neuf cent: revue d'histoire intellectuelle 11(1993). p 155. It is worth emphasizing the consistency with which Sorel advocates this basic schema—in which a new, non bourgeois society will replace the decadent bourgeois one largely through its moral superiority. This is precisely how Sorel imagines first the Bolshevik Revolution, and then, more surprisingly, the possibility for anti-colonial revolution in Egypt in the early 1920s. On this, see the 2009 number of Mil neuf cent, and more specifically, Jeremy Jennings, "Georges Sorel and Colonialism: The Case of Egypt," History of Political Thought 8, no. 2 (1987). pp 331-2.

125 Sorel says this several times in this period. The language is that of Rudolph Jhering, a German jurist and legal philosopher of the middle of the 19th century. See Carlos Miguel Herrera, ed. Georges Sorel et le droit (Paris: Editions Kimé,2005).
capitalist social order, in which administrators and intellectuals claim greater compensation for their qualitatively distinct labor. The *syndicats*, as a form of organization based concretely on the process of production, naturally do not accept this division. Their historical task, as Sorel sees it, is to develop themselves as *institutions*, slowly building themselves up on their own terms, becoming, in effect, a society within a society, a state—though differently—within a state. Sorel is very excited, for instance, by the growth of the *union libre* as a juridical institution recognized by the *syndicats*, and compares this to the legal recognition of Christian, as opposed to civil, marriages in the late Roman period.

All of these principles, however, grow out of the basic technical imperatives of production, which for Sorel are entirely separable from the demands of capitalism as a property regime. The materialism of the workers is set against the idealism of the bourgeois-capitalist state. In response to Brunetière, Sorel had looked to worker organizations engaged in actual production as educational institutions—here the consequences of the move are apparent. In educating the proletarian into production, the syndicat educates into revolution. The goal of education is autonomy on the part of the worker, which is at once necessary for capitalism as an economic system and destructive of the bourgeois political order.

Sorel’s practical attitude toward the state might well be placed between classical anarchism and Lenin’s early position. According to Bakunin, the workers are making the new society, which really already exists in a suppressed form, and it will emerge when the old one is totally destroyed. In this kind of anarchism—still familiar today—there is
no need to build, only to strip away the corrupt and dead old society. Lenin, in *The State and Revolution*, wants to explain how it is that a proletarian organization can conquer the bourgeois state, take what is useful from it, and still remain a proletarian organization, that is, avoid becoming simply the same state run by different people. Similarly, Sorel tries to show how, through the *syndicats*, the bourgeoisie will be obliged to give over everything useful they have to the proletariat that is in the process of creating itself.126

Yet several traits distinguish Sorel from Bakunin or Lenin. Of all the surprising things about “L’avenir”—for instance, the number of references to female workers and women’s emancipation—perhaps the most surprising is the central place occupied in it by Durkheim’s recent work, *Suicide*.127 We can understand Mauss’ anxiety in the 1920s about the Durkheimian sources of Bolshevism when we read in the *Revue de métaphysique et morale*’s obituary for Sorel that “L’avenir,” would play “a singularly important role in the history of contemporary syndicalism: the doctrine of revolutionary syndicalism entirely derives from it.”128 Let us look carefully at how Sorel believed he could derive support for his quasi-anarchistic workerism from Durkheim’s pioneering work of quantitative sociology on the problem of *anomie* and social dissolution.

Sorel invokes Durkheim—one of “the most skilled sociologists in the University”—in order to contrast his position on *syndicats* favorably with that of Jaurès. Durkheim, says Sorel, wants professional corporations, federated across territories, all

127 Sorel also reviews *Suicide* for *L’Humanité nouvelle*. The review is published in the same issue as the second installment of “L’avenir.” Georges Sorel, “Durkheim - Le suicide,” *L’Humanité nouvelle* 2, no. 10 (1898).
submitted to the general loose coordination of the state. Jaurès “does not dare to go so far as the professor from Bordeaux” and instead ends the purview of the syndicats at the level of the commune, the first full political unity. Jaurès is caught in the trap typical of bourgeois socialism—he cannot think his way past the (republican) state and into a genuinely new form of organization. Durkheim is wrong to put the state in the role of ultimate mediator, but is right to argue that professional organizations are central to morality in the modern world.

Sorel returns to Durkheim in the last section of the essay. He wants to discuss a difficult subject that he “would perhaps not have undertaken to treat if I had not found in a recent work by M. Durkheim theses that tend to support historical materialism.” We must pay careful attention to Sorel’s terms here, as he asserts that, “the weak part of socialism is the moral part.” By socialism, he means a theoretical and political program for social change propounded in part by theoreticians. He does not mean the contemporary worker’s movement. For Sorel, morals are always related to law, and are an unstable but imperative system of internalized norms. One of Sorel’s great principles intervenes here: a social revolution undertaken in conditions of moral weakness will

130 Ibid. p 9. Sorel mentions here an anecdote from Charles Andler’s thesis defense. Two things to mention: Sorel is giving Durkheim more credit than he deserves for reducing the role of the state—but this is because Sorel sees the radical potential of Durkheim’s work. Second, Jaurès’ view here is consummately republican. See the discussion of republican regionalism and the communes in chapter five of Hazareesingh, Intellectual founders of the Republic : five studies in nineteenth-century French republican political thought.
131 Sorel, L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats. p 51.
132 Ibid. p 51.
133 See Sorel’s suggestive summation of Marx’s own definition of socialism: “Pour Marx le socialisme n’était pas une théologie dogmatique...mais une manière de vivre la vie populaire en opposition avec la manière traditionnelle.” Sorel and Prat, "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Eduard Bernstein (1898-1902).” p 155.
result in bloodshed and barbarism. Sorel shows himself here to be very much of the fin-de-siècle: “It would be criminal to press forward a social revolution that would result in the imperiling of the little morality that does exist.”\textsuperscript{134} This is justified by the historical materialist principle of the interdependence of phenomena. The problem, as Sorel puts it at the beginning of “L’avenir,” is how to be sure that “struggle does not lead to a destruction of civilization.”\textsuperscript{135} The indefinite article Sorel puts before ‘destruction’ is significant. The point is not that a revolution ill-prepared would be the end of the world, but that it would lower the level of civilization, that it would destroy something without building at all. Durkheim’s work intervenes at the moment in which struggle for revolution overlaps with the positive construction of \textit{morale}.

Sorel allows Durkheim to explain how neither lecturing on \textit{morale}, nor teaching it in school, nor even preaching it from the pulpit, will call it into existence. All of these methods are not only ineffectual, but also assume that we know already the nature of the morals necessary. This is not the right level on which to approach the problem since, after all, a revolution is all about establishing a \textit{new} morality. Sorel says, “the point is not to know what is the best morality, but only to determine if there exists \textit{a mechanism capable of guaranteeing the development of morals} [\textit{la morale}].” Sorel believes, and he is pleased to see that Durkheim also believes, that this mechanism is to be found in “professional groupings.”\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{134} Sorel, \textit{L’Avenir socialiste des syndicats}. p 52.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid. p 5.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid. p 54. As Sorel says in an oblique reference to the Dreyfus affair, in his preface, dated July of 1898, to a translation of Saverio Merlino’s recent book, ”La seule manière que nous avons de cultiver un
Where Durkheim gives moral regulatory functions to the corporative professional group, Sorel gives them to the federally organized syndicat. Sorel puts an accent on the voluntary nature of the syndicat as opposed to the corporation, saying, “but is not the syndicat much superior to the corporation in that it is formed in an entirely voluntary fashion, that liberty organizes itself in its fold [dans son sein la liberté s’organise], and that it brings together those who, to the greatest degree, have proven their productive capacity, their intellectual energy, and their devotion to their comrades?” 137 Durkheim wants only moral regulation from the corporations, but Sorel wants moral regulation of a new society from the syndicats. 138

More than this, Sorel begins by saying that it is crucial that syndicats continue to reject the distinction between intellectual and physical labor. Is this just garden-variety anti-intellectualism, typical hypocrisy from Sorel, the archetypal floating intellectual himself? No—for Sorel, the syndicat enacts the overcoming of the dichotomy between mental and physical labor in the same way that historical materialism is supposed to overcome the dichotomy between idealism and materialism. This is one way we should read Sorel’s insistence that what he is really doing is continuing Labriola’s reading of Marx and the method of historical materialism. By focusing on the syndicat, however, as an organization growing according to its own rules, Sorel refuses the perspective of

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137 Sorel, L’Avenir socialiste des syndicats. p 55.
138 See, however, Hans Joas’ argument that although Durkheim tends to speak in terms of apparently static systems, his real interest is always in the possibility of the emergence of new forms of morality. Joas, in Stephen P. Turner, ed. Emile Durkheim, Sociologist and moralist (London: Routledge,1993).
totality. This sets him apart from both Labriola and Durkheim. Sorel was able to do this only by borrowing Vico’s concept of the institution in order to replace either ‘society’ or the *processo*. The idealism/materialism dichotomy rests on bourgeois relations of production (the division of labor), and only the *syndicats* can institute new relations of production. This is the reason they are the great hope of socialism as a *theoretical* or *philosophical project*, because it is only with new social forms that new philosophical ones will become possible. This is not a Hegelianism—not even one turned on its head. We might say that for Sorel, Labriola’s *praxis* is something for which the *syndicat* must struggle and which might, in some respects, be possible in the future. It cannot, however, be declared or philosophized into existence.

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139 And, incidentally, from Lenin. Sorel has grasped perfectly the Marxist-Leninist point that economic and political struggles cannot be dissociated, but he will consistently refuse to take the perspective of totality. It is not only that he mistrusts the party form (although he does), but on a more fundamental level, Lenin’s party has as its vocation the elucidation of the social structure as totality to the workers (this is what is meant by bringing the proletariat into consciousness), and Sorel will never admit that this is a meaningful concept.

140 Another difference with Durkheim makes itself felt here: for Sorel, the overcoming of dichotomies is articulated through autonomous collectivities, whereas for Durkheim, it is articulated through the individual body with the help of a totality. Both make practice central to this overcoming; for Sorel, practice can only be collective, but that alone is not enough to make it Marxist praxis. Interesting perspective is provided on the question of the body, and what it does, although not with reference to Sorel or Durkheim, in Francois Vatin, "Le ‘travail physique’ comme valeur mécanique (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles); Deux siècles de croisements épistemologiques entre la physique et la science économique.," *Cahiers de l’histoire* 110(2009). The recently-published letters of both Durkheim and Sorel to regionalist poet Joachim Gasquet are instructive in regard to their positions vis-à-vis Republicanism—and indeed as a general example of the complex and shifting field of political conflict and allegiance in this period. Durkheim, horrified by Gasquet’s transformation from Dreyfusard into nationalist, wrote to him in late 1900, “Nous avons dépassé, depuis un certain nombre de siècles, la phase de la cité. Subordonner le culte de la raison à quoi que ce soit d’autre serait pour nous un suicide; car toute cohésion sociale est impossible sans un minimum d’idées communes, et je ne vois pas d’autre idée où tous les Français puissent communier.” p 155. This letter, really a rebuttal of what Durkheim felt to be Gasquet’s misuse of his ideas in print, was published in the latter’s journal. Sorel, responding in a more personal letter to Gasquet, said, “Quant à Durkheim sa lettre est cocasse; quand...a-t-il vu un peuple communier dans une idée abstraite? S’il y a une chose dont les Français se moquent joliment c’est du ‘culte de la raison.’ Il n’y a que les professeurs pour être aveugles à ce point.” p 158. Sorel, Durkheim, and Gianinazzi, "Régionalisme, dreyfusisme et nationalisme: Lettres d’Émile Durkheim et de Georges Sorel au poète Joachim Gasquet (1899-1911)."
Vico authorizes Sorel’s dynamisation of Durkheim’s sociology with the motor of the institution. For Vico, institutions are legible only in as much as they change, going through a sequence of affect and intellect. Sorel moved from writing about and against Brunetièr in the frame of education, but without being able to give any flesh to his idea that, somehow, the practice of the syndicats would shape and educate individuals, to the institution of “L’avenir,” which takes on in a revolutionary way the whole life of the individual. That is the story this chapter tells, and Sorel’s crucial step is moving from Labriola back to Vico, in order to ground politics in the institution. This opens the way to a remarkably comfortable relationship to the actual institutions of the Third Republic—the subject of the next chapter.
3. The Abyss of Real Politics

A person who had thought of Sorel as the petit-bourgeois – plump, round-cheeked, chatty and joking – that we saw so many times in the shop of the Cahiers, or even in the triply-bourgeois areopagus of the École des Hautes Études Sociales, asking after gossip and tirelessly spinning out quietly ironic slanders – how could such a person succeed in imagining the dark abysses and the heroism that confronts them in his writings.

Romain Rolland¹

He must be able, following his own terms, to make the moral ideal ‘immanent’ and to show that it derives from experience itself.

Jean-Marie Guyau,²

Introduction

This chapter argues that Sorel had a liberal and pluralist theory of politics, including a vision of positive ethical engagement on the part of individuals within the institutional space of parliamentary government. Sorel articulated this pluralist liberalism and this ethics in response to the early phases of the contemporaneous crises of Revisionism in Marxism and the Dreyfus Affair. This liberal pluralism did not displace his previous embrace of Marxism as a social science, nor his political commitment to syndicalist organization. It was also not a momentary aberration brought on by the collective enthusiasm of the heroic defense of Dreyfus. Rather, as is evident from the way


in which Revisionism and Dreyfus were linked for Sorel, this liberal pluralism drew on his earlier thinking, and would feed into his later work. Out of this pluralist liberalism, I argue, came the idea of the social myth.

The Dreyfus Affair and Revisionism have both been crucial events in shaping Sorel’s historiographic legacy. In both cases Sorel initially took what appeared as a moderate or liberal position—or at least the one that would be endorsed by liberals and moderates of later decades—and in both cases, Sorel subsequently adopted radical and uncompromising positions that put him at odds with mainstream opinion. In 1909, his venomous pamphlet *La Révolution dreyfusienne* attacked the Reinach brothers in particular, and repudiated nearly everything that the Dreyfusard coalition had accomplished. Like Charles Péguy, Sorel appears as a retroactive anti-Dreyfusard—although, as Christophe Prochasson suggests, post-Dreyfusism might be a more descriptive term.³ Sorel’s Marxist revisionism, also, turned out to move in a very different political direction than did Bernstein’s. As Jacob Talmon wrote in 1971, “Sorel accepted the whole of Bernstein’s social economic critique of orthodox Maxism, but drew diametrically opposite political conclusions.”⁴ As we will see, if Sorel’s political significance has come to be quite different from Bernstein’s, his conclusions were not

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³ Prochasson in Charzat, ed. *Georges Sorel.*
⁴ Ibid. Laclau and Mouffe make the same point, “Sorel, starting from the revisionism debate, accepts *en bloc* Bernstein’s and Croce’s critiques of Marxism but in order to extract very different conclusions. What is striking in Sorel is the *radicalism* with which he accepts the consequences of the ‘crisis of Marxism.’” Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2001). p 38. That Laclau and Mouffe find Sorel so congenial to their larger anti-foundationalist leftism is probably to be taken as evidence that Talmon is broadly correct in his assessment of the affinities between Sorel and the New Left—although, as I argue in chapter seven below, for the wrong reasons.
immediately. The importance of both these upheavals, and of Sorel’s trajectory through them, for a broader evaluation of his historical significance, suggests that we should attend carefully to their functions.

However, this chapter is focused on Sorel’s liberalism, rather than the particular sequences against which it was elaborated. It does not present a complete picture either of Sorel’s engagement as Dreyfusard, or of the positions he took vis-à-vis Marxist Revisionism. Each for their own reasons, these two moments have been the subject of extensive and excellent scholarly work. Rather, in this chapter I take these sequences as the backdrop and enabling context against which Sorel elaborated a theory of liberal pluralism within a democratic social and political field.

This chapter diverges in several ways from the predominant historiographical interpretation of this period and of Sorel’s significance more generally. I argue first of all that, some appearances to the contrary, Sorel was basically a Dreyfusard intellectual. Beginning in early 1899 with a text entitled, “Y a-t-il de l’utopie dans le marxisme?”, in the *Revue de métaphysique et morale*, Sorel published a series of major interpretive essays, several delivered first as lectures, aimed at a non-socialist audience. The lectures were given at the *Collège libre des sciences sociales*, where Sorel also served in an administrative capacity. Sorel wrote about freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, the limitation of government power. His work intended for a socialist audience was

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5 Sorel’s precise opinions in the Revisionism controversy have been particularly important for previous generations of scholars who sought to locate Sorel as a Marxist. See in particular Sand, *L’illusion du politique : Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900*. And, more recently, Gaud, *De la valeur-travail à la guerre en Europe : essai philosophique à partir des écrits économiques de Georges Sorel*.

6 Prochasson, "Sur l'environnement intellectuel de Georges Sorel: L’École des hautes études sociales (1899-1911)."
increasingly published outside of France in this period. In addition to a few pieces in
*Sozialistische monatshefte*, Sorel produced essays on the theory of the state, the relation of socialism to the idea of race, socialism and democracy, and the properly Marxist notion of law, for Italian reviews. In response to the twin crises presented by Dreyfus and Bernstein, Sorel initiated a career as a public, international, philosopher and pamphleteer based on his recognized expertise in socialism—which is to say, he was an intellectual.

I argue against an important body of scholarship that presents Sorel as essentially anti-political. Such an interpretation emphasizes his moralism, his philosophical and theoretical positions, but argues that his refusal to compromise precluded genuine engagement in political reality. Sorel’s Dreyfusism, on that account, is radical and therefore messianic or moral rather than political. Shlomo Sand, while pointing to the temporal coincidence of the Revisionist crisis, broadly follows Sorel’s own interpretation, dismissing his theorization of liberal pluralism as a momentary enthusiasm brought on by the heroic moment of the Dreyfus affair. According to Sand, Dreyfus presented Sorel with a heroic, “Sisyphean” task, and “can be considered as partly responsible for Sorel’s

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7 Some—but not all—of these essays were collected and published in book form in 1903 as the *Saggi di critica del marxismo*. This material was made available to the French-speaking public for the first time in 2007. Although thanks to John Stanley, it was available much earlier in English. Georges Sorel and Vittorio Racca, *Saggi di critica del marxismo*, Biblioteca di scienze sociali e politiche. n.45 (Milano: R. Sandron, 1903). Sorel, *Social foundations of contemporary economics*. Georges Sorel, *Essais de critique du marxisme: et autres études sur la valeur travail* (Paris: Harmattan, 2007).

For Sand, however, this politicization is really only an anti-politics: "the later rejection of utopia by Sorel would be a rejection of his Dreyfusard past." In the wake of the Affair, "the bitter deception [felt by Sorel], out of proportion and full of resentment, is probably the measure of the initial investment of hope." Steven Vincent notes that Sorel was by no means uniformly antagonistic to parliamentary government, writing of the 1901 *De l’église et de l’état*, "in terms of nineteenth-century French political discourse, what Sorel in essence recommended was a liberal institutional structure that emphasized the separation of powers to protect against a tyranny of the majority, the defense of liberty of thought and expression, and the protection of traditions from sudden revolutionary change." Yet Vincent agrees with Sand: Sorel experienced in Dreyfusism only a moment of enthusiasm for representative government. The parenthesis soon closed and Sorel turned, or returned, to the antipolitics of revolution, in this case revolutionary syndicalism rather than Guesdiste Marxism. On this view, Sorel was never genuinely concerned with politics, never accepted its long, slow drilling of hard boards. Despite his anti-utopian strictures, his political engagements were in fact utopian. His support of Dreyfus was an enthusiasm quenched when Dreyfus went free—in just the same way, the argument would go, his support of radical syndicalism fell away when the CGT succeeded in gaining influence and in winning concessions from the

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10 Sand, "Georges Sorel entre utopie et politique." p 92.
11 Ibid. p 93.
government. In view of Sorel’s whole career, Sand and others have felt obliged to regard
the liberal views Sorel expresses as an aberration, an accidental alignment of the stars, all
the more radically rejected for its contingency.

The present chapter diverges from this view and takes Sorel’s liberalism
seriously. This is for two reasons. First of all, Sorel elaborated his position more fully
than has generally been understood and it is therefore worth reconstructing on its own
merits. Second, without understanding the nature of Sorel’s liberalism, it will be
impossible to interpret in a satisfying and correct way his turn to radicalism, the topic of
the next chapter. By discounting Sorel’s liberal and moral moment, historians have
deprived themselves of a crucial aspect of the radicalism that comes next.

In order to make these arguments, I first give a general account of the Revisionist
Crisis, of its origins and the stakes it was perceived to have, before turning to the early
and concrete discussions that took place in publications with which Sorel was closely
associated. I then turn to Sorel’s own reconstruction of a theory of liberal pluralist
institutional structures, which must be pulled together from scattered texts in French,
Italian, and German. Turning then to the impact of the Dreyfus Affair, I examine Sorel’s
personal engagement in Dreyfusard institutions, and his positions on the importance of
individual commitment and ethical life. Out of this, I argue, comes Sorel’s formulation of
the social myth. By way of conclusion, I turn to the work of present-day historian and
philosopher Pierre Rosanvallon, and suggest that Sorelian myth as it appears in 1903 is
very like Rosanvallon’s own theory of democratic subject-formation.
Revisionism and Political Theory

Political engagement puts pressure on any theoretical apparatus. The relative political success of socialism, and Marxism in particular, across Europe in the 1890s posed problems that Marx’s texts themselves were unable to answer. Probably most significant on the European level was the spectacular growth of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) after the lifting of the antisocialist laws. Even for the smaller French Marxist party (POF), however, over the course of the 1890s it became possible to elect a politically meaningful number of deputies to the national assembly. Naturally the question of what to do with this newfound conventional political power imposed itself. The death of Engels in 1895 meant no voice existed that could respond to new challenges from an unambiguously authoritative position within Marxism.\footnote{Although, in an importance sense, Engels had already before his death provided material for the ‘democratic’ criticism of Revolutionary practice in the 1895 preface to \textit{Class Struggle in France}. On this point, and on the broader issues involved in Revision, see “Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International” in Lucio Colletti, \textit{From Rousseau to Lenin; studies in ideology and society} (New York,: Monthly Review Press, 1973).}

The Revisionism Crisis—or, the \textit{Bernsteinstreit}—was touched off by Eduard Bernstein’s questioning, in this sensitive context, of the continued significance of Marx’s findings in political economy.\footnote{Eduard Bernstein and H. Tudor, \textit{The preconditions of socialism}, Cambridge texts in the history of political thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).} For Bernstein, the basic problem was that capitalism did not seem to be having the effect on social structure that had been predicted. Capital itself did not seem to be concentrating in the hands of a few; society as a whole did not seem to be increasingly divided into two antagonistic classes. Social interests, even within the
group of what seemed to be the proletariat increasingly diverged. Rates of profit did not seem to be falling. The class basis required for the imagined Marxist party of the future seemed no longer to hold. If Marx’s prediction that capitalism would inevitably throw itself into increasingly destructive crises did not hold, then perhaps the real material gains possible through compromise and democratic participation—generally available only if strong revolutionary rhetoric was discarded—were not illusions, but the road to socialism. It followed that the dictatorship of the proletariat, among other things, was not a useful or perhaps even legitimate goal.

Bernstein was not the only one criticizing or revising Marx’s work, but his status as a founding figure in the SPD gave special urgency to his claims. Against Bernstein’s position, which became Revisionism, Karl Kautsky and others—most famously Rosa Luxemburg—articulated what came to be called orthodox Marxism. The theoretical debate had significant political-strategic implications, and not only within the SPD. Although of course the different European states had varying levels of political freedom at the turn of the century, all shared an essential problematic: should specifically Marxist parties make use of legal mechanisms to expand individual and collective freedoms, enact social reforms, and push the governments in a liberal direction? Would such participation, such pursuit of incremental change, necessarily preclude genuinely revolutionary activity? Was it even necessary to actively pursue radical economic change, or would capital destroy itself?

The fin-de-siècle crisis of Marxism provided the ground for polarizing debates that remained very much alive at least through the Bolshevik Revolution. Although one might well object to Perry Anderson’s assertion, in his classic *Considerations on Western Marxism*, that “Before Lenin, the political domain proper was virtually unexplored within Marxist theory,” one can only agree with Anderson that the “scale of his [Lenin’s] accomplishment on this plane transformed the whole architecture of historical materialism, permanently.”\(^\text{16}\) Whether one chooses to argue that the Leninist moment is now past, or that we are once again confronted by it, the intervention of the Bolshevik Revolution gives a certain unity to what came before it.\(^\text{17}\)

In whatever mode, the politico-theoretical problems confronted by Marxists in the years around 1900 remain current. In 1985, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe dedicated the first chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* to a reconstruction of the crisis; more recently, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri ‘return’ to Rosa Luxemburg’s response to Revisionism in order to refresh their theorization of the political articulations of global capitalism. Looking back from what is perhaps the end of the sequence that began with the resolution of the Revisionist crisis, Laclau and Mouffe identify its two primary moments, “the new awareness of the opacity of the social, of the complexities and resistances of an increasingly organized capitalism; and the fragmentation of the different positions of social agents which, according to the classical paradigm, should have been

united.” In these more recent considerations as in the crisis itself, fundamentally at issue is both the correct interpretation of the dynamic of capitalism and of the interaction of this dynamic with the liberal parliamentary order.

Sorel played an important role in the Revisionism and Bernstein debate, although it must be remembered that his understanding of the stakes of the conflict were shaped by his linguistic boundaries. After all, Sorel felt himself obliged to add, in a letter to Bernstein, “I don’t read German.” He certainly followed the debate in Italian, and in this context the division between Croce and Labriola was crucial for him (although Sorel did not simply ‘follow’ Croce). In what follows, then, I reconstruct the Revisionism debate as it presented itself to Sorel, in order to highlight not so much its consequences for his Marxism, as has been the central concern, but rather to emphasize that, as for Laclau and Mouffe, as for Hardt and Negri, most fundamentally at issue is the meaning of democracy as a condition of political action within modernity.

In France the conflicts brought out by the Dreyfus Affair gave special urgency to the question of proletarian participation in representative institutions. In retrospect it is clear that in these years a substantial change took place in the constitution of French political parties—they were increasingly solid organizations impressing their will on elected representatives, rather than existing in order to support these representatives. The core of the debate within the SPD and among Marxists internationally turned on the

18 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics. p 18
19 Sorel and Prat, "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Eduard Bernstein (1898-1902)." p 169. Sorel’s first letter to Bernstein was prompted not by Bernstein’s own writings, precisely, but by a summary of an article, which included significant extracts from Bernstein’s text. See Prat’s footnote #1, p 154. Interesting to note that Bernstein’s initial intervention was posed in terms of the appropriate socialist response to colonialism.
interpretation of economic data, and especially the philosophical foundation of such data. Sorel was deeply engaged with these questions—indeed they had a great part in his break with Antonio Labriola—but in France the question of democratic participation took priority, not least because many socialists who were not Marxists were nonetheless quite hostile—even more hostile than the Marxists—to parliamentary engagement.

The political context of the revisionism debate in France was the increasing participation, following the Dreyfus Affair, of socialist parties in government. Important statements from Bernstein and others appeared in French through the first half of 1899. In June, following a series of crises in the upper ranks of the government (not least set in motion by the death earlier that year, reportedly while closeted with his mistress, of Félix Faure, president of the Republic), Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau was called upon to form a new government. He succeeded in constituting a cabinet of republican defense, including both Alexandre Millerand, a socialist, and Gaston de Gallifet, notorious for his part in suppressing the Commune. French socialists, having for the most part reconciled themselves to the idea of standing for elected office, already sharply divided on the question of participation in government, were now faced with a clear moral issue. If a decade earlier there was a question even about the desirability of winning seats in the Chamber, here was a socialist actually working in the government together with a man who almost literally had proletarian blood on his hands. Sorel—eventually to become such a radical scissionist—was among those in favor of Millerand’s participation in the government.
Bernstein in France

Sorel’s initial reading of Bernstein was in the pages of *Devenir social* in the form of a summary and translation of one of Bernstein’s articles from *Neue Zeit*. The translation includes the infamous lines, which are worth citing in their original context:

> I am hardly concerned with what is meant by the ‘final goal of socialism.’ This goal, whatever it may be, does not interest me: the movement is everything. By movement I understand both the general movement of society, which is to say social progress, and propaganda and economic and political organization to favor this progress.  

Sorel, in his letter of 12 May, 1898, summarizes to Bernstein what he has understood: abandon the idea that an economic catastrophe will bring about a political crisis, abandon the idea of taking political power before capitalism has finished its work, drop formula about the ‘final goal’ of socialism, make socialism by “raising the working class.”

Sorel is thrilled because he sees in Bernstein a reiteration and furthering of his own thinking in “L’avenir,” a copy of which he sent to Bernstein with the letter. Sorel believes that Bernstein (and Saverio Merlino) agree that for Marx, socialism was “a way of living popular life in opposition to traditional ways.” Bernstein is part of a larger movement, says Sorel, “you bring the spirit of Marx out of a purely scholastic and ossified Marxism...It has been said, ‘return to Kant,’ has the moment not come to return to Marx?”

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22 Ibid. p 155.

23 Ibid. p 155.
Labriola is much on Sorel’s mind, and after asking Bernstein what he thinks of the Italian philosopher’s essays, Sorel presents his own problem. Marx, Sorel understands, held that real history was based on “la vie en association (gesellschaftliches Leben),” and that, further, this is based on material production. All modern historians, Sorel says, agree with the first part of the claim, but not all with the second. Sorel does not believe that all social relations can be reduced to, or understood as, something like those between the farmer and the land-owner, the worker and the capitalist. “Today one is struck above all by the social influence of superstitions and (admitting that totemism, taboos, etc. have been exaggerated) one brings out the great importance of associative ties originating in religion.” What, Sorel goes on, of the military and the aristocratic family organization that supports it? But Sorel pulls back, “I see that I’m going on.” Religion is a crucial and material issue for Sorel. At no point can religion be dismissed as simple idealism or confusion— it has a real effect in the world that must be explained and understood.

Bernstein makes some important points that Sorel does not explicitly mention. First of all, it is odd that Sorel insists on the materialism of Bernstein’s position, congratulating him on combating “illusions...stamped with idealism,” even though Bernstein makes significant use of language that can only be called idealist, speaking of

24 Ibid. p 156. Sorel was familiar with the cutting edge of historical methodology in this period. See the treatment of this in Gianinazzi, Naissance du mythe moderne : Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889-1914.
26 “je m’aperçois que j’abuse; ne pouvant marcher en ce moment, je remue les doigts avec exagération.” Ibid. p 157.
“social duties...duties and rights corresponding to individuals in relation to society, and to
the obligations of society in relation to the individual.”

Materialism, in this case, means above all an engagement with the data of social science. It does not preclude a
consideration of social duty or right, in as much as these phenomena emerge from the
materiality of the social field as real and measurable forces.

It is also crucial that Bernstein’s article is written in response to the issue of colonial expansion. Bernstein claims that the socialist party must

politically organize the working class in order to give it a democratic education, and to struggle for all reforms that could raise up the working class and make the state more democratic. As far as colonial policy and the conquest of new markets, the socialist party, in virtue of its own principles, ought to oppose all colonial chauvinism, without lettings itself be drawn to the opposite extreme, which rejects as chauvinism any affirmation of national rights, of national consciousness.

Sorel’s reading of this, and the mode of his response to it, justifies asking how he gets from this kind of revisionism—in which democracy and institutional life outside production are at issue—to the work on church and state which is itself about the colonial and the non-national condition of the nation. Legality cannot come from the nation, because the nation is not a positive institution. It is an open institutional structure in which many forces are at play. So, already, in Sorel’s response to Bernstein, he is questioning, without being clear about it, the very categories with which Bernstein is working.

28 Esse, "Revue des revues." p 368.
29 Ibid. pp 368-9. On Bernstein and the SPD more generally on the issue of imperialism, see Fletcher, "Revisionism and Wilhelmine Imperialism."
Hubert Lagardelle’s *Mouvement socialiste* made itself the translator into French of the debate over Bernstein. There, in 1899, Sorel could read an extract from Bernstein’s major statement together with responses from Karl Kautsky, both Antonio and Arturo Labriola, Victor Adler, and Rosa Luxemburg. The debate was profound, although some did their best to ignore the fact—especially Adler and Antonio Labriola. The essential question: will Social Democracy commit itself to progressing through the parliamentary process, making strategic as well as tactical alliances with ‘progressive elements’ of the bourgeoisie, downplaying, in fact dropping, the rhetoric and goal of sudden revolution in favor of incremental legal change? Or will it emphasize the division between bourgeois and proletarian, the incommensurability of the two spheres, perhaps making tactical alliances, but always keeping its eye on the final goal of revolution, of the expropriation of the expropriators?

Then as now, the central problem, on both theoretical and practical registers, was the meaning of democracy—indeed, the title of Bernstein’s text is “Democracy and Socialism.” Bernstein assumes that democracy has become entrenched, that it has begun to progress and cannot be rolled back. His definition of democracy, though, is a little peculiar. He rejects out of hand the idea that it will be useful to define democracy as popular sovereignty; rather, he says, it is, the “absence of class government...[it is] a social state in which no class raises itself in virtue of political privilege, above the whole

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30 I reconstruct here the debate as it appeared in this magazine, but the ecumenical *Revue socialiste* was also an important site of translation.
of the citizens.” 31 This is a fundamentally juridical conception of democracy, in which universal (manhood) suffrage is the thin edge of the wedge for legal equality in general. Democracy has arrived, Bernstein seems to say, and it is a stronger means for bettering the condition of the working class than revolutionary rhetoric.

Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg provided the most trenchant responses to Bernstein, focusing on popular sovereignty and the necessity for theoretical articulation of the socialist political program. Kautsky’s response—which, pointedly, was titled, “Democracy and Class Struggle”—is unambiguous. He simply refuses Bernstein’s subtraction of the language of popular sovereignty from the definition of democracy, “equality under the law must be accompanied by the submission of the government to the will of the people in order to speak of democracy.” 32 Kautsky puts no faith in the supposedly natural and inevitable link between juridical equality, suffrage, and political influence. He affirms the basic opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Their interests cannot be made to align, they cannot be reconciled. Bernstein is not wrong that democracy will favor the proletariat, will lead in fact to socialism, says Kautsky, but “the informed bourgeois know it too, and for that reason they dislike democracy.” 33 Bernstein, he says, assumes that rights come first, and that political power flows from them. Far from it. The organized proletariat exerts political power in order to win rights.

31 Edouard Bernstein, "Démocratie et Socialisme," Le Mouvement socialiste 1, no. 6 (1899). p 321.
32 Karl Kautsky, "Démocratie et lutte des classes," Le Mouvement socialiste 1, no. 7 (1899). p 387.
33 Ibid. p 395.
Rosa Luxemburg’s forceful contribution to this debate—which Sorel dismissed to Bernstein as “scholastic argument”—pushes Kautsky’s objections to their rhetorical and logical conclusion. The lesson of Bernstein’s work, she says,

is that the worker’s movement could be and today is the only support of democracy...that democracy is...vitalized to the degree that the socialist movement becomes strong enough to combat reactionary consequences of world politics... that in giving up on socialism, one also gives up on democracy.\(^{34}\)

Luxemburg goes on, arguing that Bernstein’s claims not to be against any of the practical activities of the party are totally out of place. He says that it shouldn’t make a difference for practical activity if he has theoretical objections. This only proves, says Luxemburg, that Bernstein has lost, “the meaning of the connection between the practical action of socialist democracy and its general principles...In reality, Bernstein’s theories lead to this elementary socialist conception that, without fundamental principles, practical struggle becomes useless and without value, that in abandoning the final goal, the movement itself must fail.”\(^{35}\)

Sorel will in general reject the language of popular sovereignty. This is one reason why, on the face of it, he prefers Bernstein to his opponents. There are, however, conceptual consequences to Bernstein’s figuring of the basis of reformism. For Bernstein, democracy—understood as formal politico-legal equality—is in effect the endpoint of deep political conflict. This equality is certainly not complete, but it cannot be repealed,

\(^{34}\) Rosa Luxemburg, "Démocratie industrielle et Démocratie politique," *Le Mouvement socialiste* 1, no. 11 (1899). p 655.

\(^{35}\) Ibid. p 656. One of the broad questions that calls out to be addressed by any consideration of Sorel in terms of the history of Marxism is precisely what must change between this—Luxemburg’s—figuring of movement and goal, and Sorel’s social movement and myth. To what extent is ‘myth and violence’ a transfiguration of ‘theory and practice’? For the time being, though, we should bear in mind the similarities between Luxemburg’s radicalized link between socialism and democracy and the positions Sorel would articulate in the same period.
and it contains within it all future reforms. Given universal suffrage, Bernstein reasons, it is inconceivable that, in the fullness of time, radical economic inequalities will not disappear. Sorel can accept neither Kautsky’s party politics nor his catastrophist rhetoric. Yet Bernstein’s position, as Sorel perhaps eventually realized, is something like political determinism, mirroring the worst technological determinism. Legal equality no more simply ‘gives you’ a just society than the steam engine ‘gives you’ industrial capitalism.\footnote{Sorel often complained about vulgar readings of this passage from \textit{La Misère de la philosophie}. Marx wrote, “Le moulin à bras vous donnera la société avec le suzerain; le moulin à vapeur, la société avec le capitalisme industriel.” Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Karl Marx, \textit{Philosophie de la misère/Miserie de la philosophie}, 3 vols., Collection anarchiste (Groupe Fresnes-Antony). T3, p 253.}

What is more, even Bernstein’s position in this debate does not in fact arrive at a defense of liberalism. Luxemburg’s argument that only the workers can save democracy comes closer to what Sorel will later maintain than does Bernstein’s legal determinism, but it still ignores—willfully, perhaps—the autonomous individual as the highest political value.

The debate between Bernstein on the one hand, and Kautsky and Luxemburg on the other, immediately took on specific significance as elements from the world of French socialism became increasingly integrated into the republican family. Indeed, following Madeleine Réberioux, this is the period in which it could be suggested that, “radicals, radical-socialists or socialists, these were only ‘forenames’; the surname was ‘republican.’”\footnote{Mayeur and Rebérioux, \textit{The Third Republic from its origins to the Great War, 1871-1914}. p 214.} Acutely aware of this discursive stew, Sorel had already argued in 1898 that the political sphere could not be formalized in the way that certain Marxists believed was possible. This is the force of his insistence on the constitution of the social not only
through productive relations, but also other, religious, political, ones. Politics cannot be reduced to the expression of class interests, but it also cannot be reduced to the working out of an idea of freedom, equality, or the individual. We now turn to Sorel’s own attempts, in 1899-1901, to answer some of the fundamental questions of political theory raised in the *Bernsteinstreit*.38

**Framing Liberal Pluralist Politics**

The essays in which Sorel elaborated his own liberal pluralist political theory are scattered and require synthesis. In 1896-98, although Sorel published in different places, the bulk of his output went to *Devenir social*. Sorel had editorial responsibilities with that journal, and a strong affiliation with its staff. He did not find a similar ‘home’ for his work for some time after his official break with the journal at the end of 1898. The temptation to see the location of Sorel’s publications in this period as haphazard, the result of chance and therefore devoid of meaning, should be resisted. Just because Sorel was eager to publish, and did not have a natural base, does not mean that he did not think about what to publish where. Much of what follows is taken from Italian-language

38 Although Laclau and Mouffe never get very close to Sorel’s texts, they none the less provide a perceptive and appreciative reading of his position in the debate. For them, Sorel’s key contribution was to recognize that class was no longer going to lead to, or found, political engagement. Sorel radicalized Bernstein. He recognized that with the collapse of economism went the collapse of purely class-based politics. Politics, that is, had to itself become constitutive of political identities. I think this is broadly correct, although it is not transparent precisely where—in general, it is in Gramsci—Laclau and Mouffe find all this in Sorel. They further argue that although Sorel’s theoretical framework allows a turn to the nation, it certainly does not imply it—despite what Berth and other followers of Sorel’s maintained.
journals, in part because Sorel seems to have felt free to stretch his theoretical legs in front of this readership in a way that he did not for French-language readers.

We have seen Sorel’s discussions of the *syndicats*, and we know that he had written on other institutions, such as the church. We have also seen him criticize Durkheim’s totalizing, functionalist concept of society as excessively metaphysical. In the wake of Revisionism, however, Sorel begins to offer, tentatively, more global theories of society—although he continues to resist the closure that would be required even for an incipiently functionalist theory of society.

One alternative to the perspective of totality that found many partisans in the *fin-de-siècle*—and still does today in attenuated and disguised forms—was to see society as an expression of the hereditary biological nature of the population of which it is composed. Some revisionist Marxists moved in this direction, arguing that a strong notion of race was implied in genuine materialism. Sorel explicitly rejects this line of reasoning in an 1899 essay entitled “Il socialismo e il teoria delle razze.” He argues that most of what writers such as Gustave Le Bon ascribe to race is better ascribed to “apparent heredity,” which is essentially a bundle of practices and attitudes imbibed at an early age from one’s surroundings. Sorel admits that race, or some notion of biological heredity, is one of many things that must be taken into consideration in sociological

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40 This argument is made forcefully, if not entirely convincingly, in A. James Gregor, *Marxism, fascism, and totalitarianism: chapters in the intellectual history of radicalism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009). But we could also look to the worldview, and the view of class struggle, expressed in HG Wells’ *The Time Machine.*
analysis, but argues that reliance on it betrays a confused notion of social reality. Sorel asserts that, “Society is a system of which all the parts are interdependent, without it being possible to deduce the ones from the others.” In the context of Sorel’s epistemology, the difference from a mechanical system (in which the parts can in a sense be deduced from one another) is pointed. This is an anti-metaphysical or anti-rationalist position: neither the state nor the individual can be deduced from one another. The parts of society and their interaction with one another must be empirically investigated. Much of what is distinctive and frustrating about Sorel’s conception of social reality flows from his willingness to accept that certain parts of society are indeed better described mechanically—in particular, the sphere of economic exchange—and others in a biological way.

The stakes of this conception of society for the government of society are clear. In his 1903 Introduction à l’économie moderne, discussing the influence of government policy on money lending institutions, Sorel contrasts the old notion of the economy with the new one. Since the middle of the 19th century, says Sorel, “for the idea of a bronze chain, binding everything in an absolute manner, there is substituted the idea of islands, of independent cells, each having their own life floating in a milieu.”

41 To admit race as one ‘factor’ among many was almost required. Even explicitly antiracist writers had a difficult time escaping this paradigm. See Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985).
42 “la società è un sistema di cui tutte le parti sono interdipendenti, senza poter essere dedotte le une dalle altre.” Emphasis in original. *Georges Sorel, "Il socialismo e la teoria delle razze," Rivista critica del socialismo* 1, no. 7 (1899), p 583.
contrast of mechanical and biological metaphors—but the biological metaphor owes more to the empirical than the vitalist aspects of Claude Bernard’s physiology. The important thing here is not the notion of life, but rather that of *milieu*: not self-propelling being, but near-equilibrium of conditions and forms. In order to bring about reform, given this new understanding of society, “it will no longer be a question of changing the whole organization of society...one will rather search for the means to eliminate a bad situation, remaining within the principles of the law.”44 That is, when society is considered as a complex system, the parts of which are interdependent without being mechanically connected, the state is called upon to govern in a rule-based, reactive, fashion—the role of the state is managerial, rather than heroic or symbolic.

Sorel does not accept a metaphysical theory of the state. For Sorel, the state is like any other institution, so that “everywhere, a group that holds immediate authority becomes a little State.”45 Any institution’s rules and procedures interact with the goals of the individuals whose group identity it constitutes in ways that are difficult to predict. Different institutions compete with one another, and what we call the state is just the victory of one of these institutions.46 This victory is always relative. For instance, the Roman Empire was governed by a less perfect state, because less regular in its juridical and administrative practices, than most modern states. Sorel says, “the State is not truly constituted except in as much as order has become the normal condition, in as much as

44 Ibid. p 301.
45 ———, “Schizzo d’uno studio sullo stato,” Rivista critica del socialismo 1, no. 9 (1899). p 806.
46 One thinks of Charles Tilly’s description of the state as an extended and enormously successful protection racket. Charles Tilly, "Warmaking and Statemaking as Organized Crime," (University of Michigan, 1982).
this order is assured by an organization that acts according to principles, in as much as a complete juridical regime exists.\footnote{Sorel, "Schizzo d'una studio sullo stato." p 804.} So, although the state is certainly for Sorel the bearer of a rationality, it is not the bearer of \textit{rationality as such}. The standard Marxist account of the state, superficially similar to Sorel’s, is that it acts as the ‘legitimate’ weapon of the bourgeoisie to repress class conflict. Sorel has departed significantly from this perspective. The state may or may not conduct itself in the best interest of a given class, but it is likely to conduct itself in the best interest of those whom it employs, “experience shows that whatever system is adopted, it manages after a certain time to form a bureaucratic organization that puts personal interests first and forms real classes when the number of functionaries is sufficiently great.”\footnote{Ibid. p 805.} This statement is perhaps more remarkable than it at first appears. It was, to say the least, unusual for a Marxist, in 1899, to appeal to experience to argue that all organizations inevitably bureaucratize themselves, and that states often act in their own interest rather than that of the bourgeoisie or even some particular sector of the capitalists.\footnote{Rosanvallon remarks on the generally flat nature of critiques of bureaucracy until quite recently in France. Few, he suggests, articulated criticisms of bureaucratic structures quite so fully as Sorel. Although we should also look to Sorel’s reading of Marx—the \textit{Eighteenth Brumaire} certainly has passages that suggest a political sociology of the functionaries. Pierre Rosanvallon, \textit{L'Etat en France de 1789 à nos jours}, Univers historique (Paris: Seuil, 1990). pp 49-74.} Sorel departs, this is to say, from a Hegelian notion of the state as reason as such, from a Durkheimian notion of the state as the incarnation of the mind of society, and from
Marxist analyses of the state as a tool of class repression.\textsuperscript{50} The state, for Sorel, is a sociologically graspable institution with its own density and dynamic.

The state, as one institution among others, but one with the special mission of managing the other institutions—that is, of propagating its own juridical order—is prone to the corruption of making itself its own end.\textsuperscript{51} This corruption, however, is justified in particularly dangerous ways. Sorel’s fire is directed first of all at the Guesdistes who, for Sorel, are an example of the corrupt attempt to seize state power for itself. Sorel describes their rhetoric, “bitterly criticizing the entirety of contemporary society and showing the insufficiency of reform to perfect the world does not enlighten the people, nor does it render them better able to govern the economy, nor does it do anything to better their condition; but it does always bring great triumphs in public meetings.”\textsuperscript{52} Sorel pours scorn on the notion of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ which appears to him an obvious smokescreen for the seizing of untrammeled governmental power. Nothing

\textsuperscript{50} On Durkheim’s somewhat Hegelian notion of the state, see Birnbaum, “La conception durkheimienne de l’Etat: L’apolitisme des fonctionnaires.”
\textsuperscript{51} Sorel no doubt has in mind Aristotle. “Governments which have a regard to the common interest are constituted in accordance with strict principles of justice, and are therefore true forms; but those which regard only the interest of the rulers are all defective and perverted forms, for they are despotic, whereas a state is a community of freemen.” Book III, sec 6, 1279a, 15-21. Aristotle and Stephen Everson, The Politics, and the Constitution of Athens, Rev. student ed., Cambridge texts in the history of political thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). p 71. Incidentally, this is the definition of corruption offered today by Enrique Dussel, who has also moved through a careful study of Marx to a theorization of the nature of practical political action that, while retaining some of the concepts and certainly the moral energy of revolutionary socialism, is in fact in point-by-point practical agreement with contemporary moderate progressive liberalism. See Enrique D. Dussel, Twenty theses on politics (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{52} Georges Sorel, "Socialismo e democrazia: conclusione sulla faccenda Dreyfus," Rivista critica del socialismo 1, no. 11 (1899). pp 966-967.
would be easier, says Sorel, given the machinery of repression available to the
government, than to “organize a dictatorship in the name of the proletariat.”

It is important to bear in mind that Sorel is not simply making an ad hominem
attack on Guesde’s POF and other socialist politicians. Certainly, he believes that many
politicians are motivated entirely by personal interest. There is a deeper disjunction,
however, between the Guesdistes and effective government. The notion itself is foreign to
their worldview: “the early Christians awaited parousia in just the same way that social
democrats await the dictatorship of the proletariat.” These Marxists, believing that
everything is determined by the economy, also believe that once they are in control of the
state, they will be able to make any necessary changes. For them, the state is either on
the side of the bourgeoisie or on the side of revolution. This partly explains, says Sorel,
the controversy over the entry of a socialist, Millerand, into the cabinet. For the
Guesdistes, this was experienced as a sort of logical contradiction, or contradiction in
terms. Here, Sorel’s polemic and his sociology intersect, “workers, less fanatical about
doctrine, understand the advantages that this fact could bring them, and are not
scandalized by it as are Lafargue, Guesde, Vaillant, and other workers...in journalism!”

In taking such a position, Sorel at once deploys and radicalizes Bernstein’s legalism and
his criticisms of the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

55 Sorel, ———, “Schizzo d'une studio sullo stato.” p 805.
56 Sorel, ———, “Socialismo e democrazia: conclusione sulla faccenda Dreyfus.” p 971. Sorel is not doing
justice to the issue here. A significant part of the resistance to Millerand’s entry into the cabinet stemmed
from the presence of General Gallifet, who was there to ‘republicanize’ the army, but who had also been a
commanding officer during the suppression of the Commune. The contradiction was at least as much moral
as it was ‘logical.’
The nature and goals of engagement in the political arena are understood differently by the workers than by the leaders of the POF. For the workers, the goal is “to topple the existing political order, to break through obstacles, to perform a purely negative task. The workers, once liberated, would organize spontaneously around existing Syndicats and would take over production themselves.” The continuity here with the argument of “L’avènir” is quite strong. The criticism of worker party leaders, however, has grown, “the leaders understand things differently. They think that the workers are not able to govern themselves by themselves, and believe that they themselves form an intellectual aristocracy whose intervention will be necessary in order to replace the capitalists and the statesmen.” In this way, Sorel’s criticism of the centralized revolutionary party apparatus meshes with his theory of the state itself as essentially reformist.

Some important questions remain: if the POF is not what a political party ought to be, then what is? If the POF is not socialism, then what is? Since much of this polemic was unleashed by the participation of a socialist in a democratically elected government, what is, or ought to be, the relationship of socialism to democracy? Sorel’s answers to these questions are more normative than he has generally allowed his social theory to be—and more nuanced than either side in the Bernstein debate.

For Sorel, the POF, or at least its leaders, do not know how to be a political party. They do not yet understand that, “a party is an organ in an organism, a force that unites with other forces, that is held in equilibrium with others, and that cooperates in the

57 Sorel, -------, "Schizzo d'uno studio sullo stato," p 800.
administration of affairs, in the improvement of laws, and the direction of general policies.” Just like the state, a party is an objective sociological reality. Parties are certainly not “groups of initiates; one is not socialist in the same way that one is Catholic.”\(^{58}\) In his 1900 preface to Napoleone Colajanni’s *Le Socialisme*, Sorel uses very much the same language.\(^ {59}\) The inclusion of Millerand in the government is then part of a larger “passage from a sectarian mindset to a political one, from abstract speculation to real life.”\(^ {60}\) Leaning on a sort of Hegelian triad, Sorel describes socialism as having transformed from a philosophical doctrine, to a sect, and finally, in its maturity to

\[\text{a political party, which is to say...a force combining itself with other allied or antagonistic forces in order to administer business, improve legislation, and direct the State. The sect can isolate itself, isolation is even a condition of its doctrinal purity; the political party can exist only if it is mixed into general life, if it is an organ in an organism. Socialism is becoming, more and more in France a worker movement in a democracy.}\]  

Given this emphatic definition, we must turn to some indeterminate words in the last part of this citation. Does Sorel mean that socialism is tending to become equal to the political party that represents the workers in parliament? Surely Millerand is not the essence of socialism. Sorel cannot be giving ‘democracy’ here a purely juridical meaning, or surely since the institution of universal suffrage, socialism would have been *in a democracy*. Rather, the point here is that socialism is increasingly acting in and through democracy as a socio-political paradigm, meaning that democracy for Sorel implies, although it cannot be reduced to, institutional pluralism.

\(^{58}\)———, “Socialismo e democrazia: conclusione sulla faccenda Dreyfus.” p 971.  
\(^{59}\) Sorel considered this preface important enough to include in the 1917 collection, *Matériaux d’une théorie de la prolétariat*.  
\(^{61}\) Ibid. pp iii-iv.
Socialism and democracy are both practical realities, but they are also ideals—or, what amounts to the same thing, tendencies—within modern society. The important thing about this mode of conceiving socialism in particular is that it removes any direct agency from the question. Jules Guesde is not making socialism; socialism is happening.

Socialism is a state of mind that acts like a living force in the world to transform institutions in a direction favorable to the working classes. One would have to close one’s eyes in order not to see that everywhere forces arise to give to the workers new ways of developing themselves intellectually and progressing materially...In short, in a more or less conscious way, men, seeking to adapt to new living conditions, are transforming traditional society and giving it a more social appearance.

In this view, socialism is related to the conditions of production, but also other systemic changes in the economy that it may or may not be possible to relate to changes in the mode of production. Large factories, but also things like the socialization of risk through insurance, bring socialism about almost involuntarily. In this Sorel was only participating, as we shall see shortly, in a substantial tradition of left-republican thinking that took socialism to be immanent to the social field.

Democracy, for Sorel, is a similar phenomenon. It is, first of all, objective. As Sorel would maintain, “democracy is not an ideal that we invent, it is a thing that exists.” In this it is related to the collapse of vulgar Marxist sociology that reduces all of society, at least tendentially, to two classes. This is Sorel’s concession to democracy as the power of simple number, “when one abandons abstractions and looks society as it is in the face, one enters democratic terrain.” The POF insists that society is divided into

63 Or at least so Sorel is recorded as having said at a meeting of the Société française de la philosophie discussing Henry Michel’s ideas about the nature of democracy. Henry Michel, “La doctrine politique de la démocratie,” Bulletin de la société française de la philosophie 1(1901). p 119.
two parts, that the bourgeoisie controls the state, and that the electoral victory of the POF will bring the state under the control of the workers. This is bad politics built on bad sociology. Modern society is democratic, and under such conditions, “political struggle is dispersed; it is not a matter of conquering a fortress, but of acting at once on the entirety of society by modifying every part of it: from this it follows that democratic tactics tend to span the whole of life and are favorable to local institutions and to the federation of groups.” Sorel goes so far as to argue that Socialism as an institution or an idea, “becomes social and socialist thanks to the combination of all the political powers of democracy.” The political struggle carried on democratically yields practical results, not least among them increasing acceptance of the principle that, “only the collective contract is a real contract.” Sorel believes that because of its economic location, the proletariat is at an advantage in democracy. For Sorel, socialism and democracy are thus social forces with their own weight, positive in the sense that they are unwilled. Politics, on the other hand, is a negative activity. Its task is to clear space and hold open possibilities for these positive forces—hence the pluralist and liberal form imposes itself.

The proximity of Sorel’s position to that of Bernstein should be clear. The crucial difference, however, lies in Sorel’s continued division of negative and positive tasks. The negative task of the socialist movement takes place on the terrain of parliamentary process and legality. It makes use of suffrage and the apparatus of the government. It

65 Ibid. p 978.
67 Ibid. p 978.
protects individual and social rights, upholding the law and working through the law, to make the lives of its citizens better and society more just. For Bernstein, this is the only political task. Always implicit, however, in Sorel’s thinking is the positive and revolutionary task of the syndicats. Although he is now writing about other parts of society, he always makes room for the syndicats. Through them, through their collective engagement in material production, the workers generate new modes of gesellschaftliches Leben and engage in the revolutionary struggle for the law.

Dreyfus and the Individual

The individual finds moral improvement through engagement in collective—that is political—activity. This proposition about the articulation of the individual and the political is one of the typical ways of distinguishing republicanism from liberalism. Sorel’s relatively consistent ascription of individual moral significance to collective political action has been regarded as cause to assign him to the classical republican tradition, just as his defense of institutional autonomy and Dreyfus seem to place him in

68 In addition to reprinting “L’avenir,” Sorel still wrote about concrete forms of worker organization, see for instance the preface to Pelloutier’s *Histoire des bourses du travail*, written at the end of 1901.
69 As one satirical cartoon had it: everyone but criminals and madmen were then ‘republicans.’ Spitz, for instance, ends up making the writers he discusses seem static, homogeneous, and surprisingly like contemporary social democrats. Nicolet’s classic account is sprawling and suggestive, rather than typologizing. Hazareesingh starts with a clearly political definition, and then demonstrates the ideological diversity of the ‘founders of the republic.’ Spitz, *Le moment républicain en France*. Claude Nicolet, *L’idée républicaine en France (1789-1924) essai d’histoire critique*, Collection Tel (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). Hazareesingh, *Intellectual founders of the Republic: five studies in nineteenth-century French republican political thought*. It may be more useful to cut the field in a different way, as do, Blais, *La solidarité: histoire d’une idée*; Cécile Laborde, “Pluralism, syndicalism and corporation: Léon Duguit and the Crisis of the State (1900-1925),” *History of European Ideas* 22, no. 3 (1996); ———, “The Concept of the State in British and French Political Thought,” *Political Studies* 48(2000).
the liberal camp at a particular moment. This last has also, especially together with the extreme voluntarist position he took within Marxism, been seen as a sign of his incipient fascism. Perhaps these old broad political descriptors are not very useful here. I want to suggest, before entering into Sorel’s explicit articulation of a philosophy of *la morale*, that his integration of a strictly individual (and individually-oriented) *morale* into the collective formations of political action is a maneuver of post-Kantian revision much like his philosophy of science. Democracy, considered at the level of the individual, becomes a form of ethical practice, a condition of ethics.

Such an interpretation would align Sorel with, for instance, Charles Renouvier. Renouvier performed a crucial neo-Kantian\(^{70}\) revision of the idea of *solidarité*, enabling it to pass from the era of a social science that was both “ontologique et pratique,”\(^{71}\) (and aspiring to replace religion) to the more recognizably modern form of postivistic social science in the late 19\(^{th}\) century. Renouvier made it possible to articulate *solidarité* as a law of social reality, but he himself resisted the reification of ‘society’ beyond the individual. As Marie-Claude Blais explains, great difficulty lies in the “step between the formal and subjective idea of duty and the objective determination of the just...it will be

\(^{70}\) The terms ‘post-Kantian’ and ‘neo-Kantian’ require some explanation. I take a perspective here broadly similar to that of James Kloppenberg. I want to distinguish between those like Renouvier (but also certain members of the RMM group), who looked explicitly to Kant and sought to further his project as they understood it, and those like Sorel or, according to Kloppenberg, Fouillée, who saw Kant as a fundamental horizon for philosophical thought and attempted to elaborate new vocabularies and ways of thinking specifically in order to break out of the Kantian box. For Sorel, as I say here, the solution was above all a materialization, which turns out to imply an historicization, of reason. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain victory: social democracy and progressivism in European and American thought, 1870-1920*.

\(^{71}\) Blais, *La solidarité : histoire d’une idée*. p 74.
the crucial point” in fin-de-siècle debates around solidarité.\textsuperscript{72} At issue in how one crossed, or refused to cross, the gap between felt duty and objective law, was the moral status of the individual.\textsuperscript{73} ‘Association’ was the watchword of the solidariste tradition, but it was only after, and in contest to Renouvier, that it came to challenge the moral primacy of the individual. Blais describes how this tension worked for Renouvier,

\begin{quote}
If he was a fervent adept of voluntary associations, it was because they were the chosen instrument for the conquest of autonomy in history and of the pressure toward a rational society. If he retained confidence in the exemplary enterprise of a minority despite his skepticism about the possibility of ending social warfare, it was because he was convinced that ‘customs are changed in no way but through the action of freedom.’\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

To be sure, Sorel’s notion of ‘rationality’ was considerably more historical and materialist than Renouvier’s. Yet it should be clear that Sorel’s mode of bringing together individual morality and associative life, collective action (surely a degree-zero definition for the political) and individual ethics, were not so far outside the philosophical pale of the Third Republic. For Sorel the voluntary association—although organized around the task of production, and therefore not purely voluntary—was also, and emphatically, the instrument through which autonomy could be conquered.

But this commitment to the institutional conquest of autonomy did not preclude Sorel from engaging himself in the Dreyfus Affair, nor did it lessen for him the importance he placed on the word voluntary—stitutions require personal moral

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid. p 148. For an extended treatment of Renouvier, see ________., Au principe de la République : le cas Renouvier.
\textsuperscript{73} The tradition of left-Marxist revolutionary thought might be defined by those who push historical ‘laws’ out not only of history, but even out of nature itself. Shulamith Firestone confronts this question directly, and I think in the most radical way carries forward the separation of human norms from non-human, or pre-human, ones. This is a radical humanism that is occluded, it seems to me, by recent revivals of metaphysics such as speculative realism. Shulamith Firestone, The dialectic of sex : the case for feminist revolution (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).
\textsuperscript{74} Blais, La solidarité : histoire d’une idée. p 154.
investment. There is, to be sure, a circular relation between institutional setting and the energy an individual brings to it, but Dreyfus was nothing if not a demonstration that meaningful institutions could be built up through this kind of voluntarism.

**Public Moral Philosopher**

Beginning in late 1898, Sorel became a public, rather than simply a Marxist, philosopher. Sorel as an internationally recognized authority on Marxism, had become an important voice explaining the nature of the Revisionist crisis to the non-socialist world. The publication of his essay, “Y a-t-il de l’utopie dans le marxisme?” in the RMM in 1899 made him something like an intellectual in the sense being given to the word at that moment—speaking from a position of expertise to public moral issues. More essays in the *Revue de métaphysique et morale* followed, as did lectures at the *Collège libre des sciences sociales*. This ‘public moment’ of Sorel’s writing career runs only for a few years, and perhaps reaches an institutional high point in a lecture on historical materialism delivered to the *Société française de la philosophie* in 1902.

The *Collège libre des sciences sociales* had as its explicit mission to house the courses of lecturers with very different philosophical points of view and opinions. A volume on the *Collège* published some years later describes the lessons taught there as “delivered according to the really scientific spirit, beyond any idea of party, under the

75 See, Georges Sorel, "La crise du socialisme," *La Revue politique et parlementaire* 18(1898).
inspiration of liberty and social peace,” attended by “a deferent and disciplined public.”

The Collège was increasingly perceived at this moment as a quasi-official auxiliary to the Sorbonne. The institution was defended to the chamber of deputies in 1900: “the Collège is not a meeting-place for the malcontents, for the outcasts of the social sciences. It is the gathering of free spirits ardently taken by the social problems which are the honor and the torment of our generation...Yes, all these professors are of one mind and share a bond. This bond is their free effort toward the social ideal.” Sorel chose to work within this environment, speak to these people (although he soon left it for the somewhat more independent École).

In his introduction to a book collecting lectures given at the Collège, including one by Sorel, Émile Boutroux, at this point an academic philosopher of great standing, admitted that a diversity of opinions existed among the speakers, but insisted that they also shared the fundamentals. All the speakers, according to Boutroux, agree that while morality is basically social, it is also communicated from one individual to another—what is more, the speakers all agree that, “being, in all things, proceeds knowing, although knowing reacts back upon being.” Boutroux’s introduction is shot through

77 Prochasson, "Sur l'environnement intellectuel de Georges Sorel: L'École des hautes études sociales (1899-1911)." pp 19-20. The École des hautes études sociales was founded in 1900 in reaction to this perception—at least according to the testimony of Dick May. The Collège was closely associated with the Revue internationale de sociologie, edited by Renée Worms, where Sorel occasionally published.
79 Questions de Morale. (Paris: Felix Alcan,1900). p iii. This might be contrasted usefully with the famous passage from Renan: “Le grand progrès de la critique a été de substituer la catégorie du devenir à la catégorie de l'être, la conception du relatif à la conception du l'absolu, le mouvement à l'immobilité. Autrefois, tout était considéré comme étant; on parlait de philosophie, de droit, de politique, d'art, de
with the language of *solidarisme* inherited from Fouillée. When conflicts arise, “what must be done is to reconcile [concilier] them; this operation is only really performed when one has found not a compromise, but a new and higher principle, in which the two hitherto antagonistic principles become means in solidarity with one another toward a common goal.”

Thus, the individual is not to be understood as in conflict with society, rather, “the individual is the concrete reality of humanity, of which society is the natural and necessary form,” each in developing its own virtues will develop those of the other.

Boutroux asserts that the series of lecturers exhibits a “harmony of unity and variety, of the universal and the individual, which is life and which is the ideal.” This is Léon Bourgeois’s *solidarisme*, an attenuated Durkheimian sociology. All this is to say that Boutroux had no compunction in assimilating Sorel’s writing into this larger project, and Sorel had no problem participating in this thinly disguised official effort on behalf of the morale of the Republic.

On the 20\textsuperscript{th} of February, 1899, Sorel stood up in front of a public audience at the *Collège libre des sciences sociales* to give a lecture entitled “L’éthique du socialisme.”

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80 *Questions de Morale.* p viii.

81 As Boutroux means it, this is a fundamentally liberal principle—putting the individual first. However, one might simply reverse the formula: society is the concrete reality of humanity, and the individual is its natural and necessary form. What has changed? In this way it becomes clear that the decisive point is not whether one prioritizes the individual or the social, but how one understands the relationship between form and content.

82 *Questions de Morale.* p xi.

83 Prochasson, “Sur l’environnement intellectuel de Georges Sorel: L’École des hautes études sociales (1899-1911).” On the ‘respectifying’ of the *École*, see p 31. For the suggestion that Sorel’s involvement could be seen, after Bourdieu, as a strategy of legitimation, see p 33.
Sorel’s basic position in his writings on *l’éthique et la morale* is that these spiritual factors are crucial for historical and sociological explanation. They cannot be derived from *a priori* principles, but must rather be understood as generated historically and sociologically. To this end, he begins “L’éthique du socialisme” by asserting that in order to answer the social question, one must first ask what socialism, as an actually existing movement in society, really is, and what kind of ethics it imagines for itself and entails. Contemporary socialism turns out to be,

at once a revolt and an organization, it is the work of the proletariat that has been created by big industry. This proletariat rebels against hierarchy and against property, it organizes groups for mutual aid, common resistance, cooperation between workers. It aims to impose on the society of the future the principles that it has worked out within itself for its own social life. It hopes to bring reason into the social order by ending the direction of society by capitalists.84

This is clearly a notion of the proletariat drawn from Sorel’s earlier writings, it would be in no way out of place in “L’avenir”—although Sorel does add to the notion of class struggle another, more ambiguous one, the historical mission of the proletariat. Sorel’s real object here, however, is to draw out the consequences of this conception. Basing himself on Marx’s extended treatment in *Capital* of the struggle for the eight hour day, Sorel argues that, contrary to what certain socialists and liberals say, class struggle and by extension the social question are not first about the partition of goods (even just of food). Rather, as Sorel says Marx’s narrative illustrates, “the class struggle concerns juridical systems; it could be said that it is a struggle between two principles, a *struggle over law*,

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84 “C’est, à la fois, une révolte et une organisation; c’est l’œuvre propre du prolétariat créé par la grande industrie; ce prolétariat s’insurge contre la hiérarchie et contre la propriété; il organise des groupements en vue de l’aide mutuelle, de la résistance en commun, de la coopération des travailleurs; il prétend imposer à la société de L’avenir les principes qu’il élabore dans son sein pour sa vie sociale propre ; il espère faire entrer la raison dans l’ordre social en supprimant la direction de la société par les capitalistes.” Georges Sorel, "L'éthique du socialisme," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 7(1899). p 281.
each system is characterized by the political idea that each class has of the role of law."\(^{85}\)

The conflict is not, however, symmetrical. The situation favors the proletariat.

Sorel does not say very much here about the bourgeois side of the conflict, but his meaning is implicit in the relation of the two classes to the economy. The proletariat is at this moment struggling to constitute law within contemporary socialism, and since it is closest to production, it is on the side of, if not history, at least capitalism. In worker organizations, “we find law in action, it is the living ethical moment."\(^{86}\) Ethical action is the concrete instantiation of the unstable articulation of the two normally separate systems by which we live: law and morals. The two are felt rather than thought.

Morals and law are not products of our imagination. They are systems of judgment on the present that we form by virtue of the laws of our spirit and that matter a great deal more to us than most scientific theories, because our conduct and our happiness depend on these judgments.\(^{87}\)

Language is problematic here, because it continually fails to ‘fit’ the present. Sorel says, “the language of law and morals was made by those who fashioned the old theories; we are continuously obliged to think with forms of language that are no longer appropriate to the contemporary needs of our thought."\(^{88}\) In addition, then, to the problem that our current sentiments do not fit with the language we have inherited from the past, and that different social strata represent different juridical notions, there is also a fundamental conflict between the moral and the juridical. The meaning of the historical mission of the proletariat to bring justice into the world is to be found in this conflict: “The motor of all

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\(^{85}\) Ibid. p 287. See also ———, "Morale et socialisme," Le Mouvement socialiste 1, no. 4 (1899). pp 208-9.

\(^{86}\) "nous y trouvons le droit en action, c’est le moment de l’éthique vivante.” Sorel, "L’éthique du socialisme." p 290.

\(^{87}\) ———, "Morale et socialisme." p 207.

\(^{88}\) Ibid. p 208.
class struggle...is the opposition that exists in real life between decisions in conformity to the law and our moral aspirations." The individual is an ethical subject, obliged to choose on a daily basis and at decisive moments between two compelling but competing sets of values, the law and morality.

The defense of Dreyfus, particularly individual decisions to take up this defense represented the same ethical moment, the transformation of law driven by the moral imperative to individual defense.

What mattered about Dreyfus’s trial was not least the degree to which it was, in a certain sense, covered by the forms of legality—yet was, at least to his defenders, obviously wrong, obviously morally indefensible. The connection is clear, “to make our conscience more accessible to the sentiment of the injustice that strikes an individual and that does not touch our own interests, this is the goal that socialism must set for itself if it wants the proletariat to fulfill its mission.”

Sorel roundly and spectacularly defends the role of socialist political engagement in the moral life of those individuals calling themselves socialists:

Conduct should not be judged only by exterior characteristics. This would be, anyway, impossible. One must never separate the exterior and the interior, the body and the life that animates it, the organ and the function. Our conduct is the conduct of free men; we are obliged to explain to ourselves the uprightness of our intentions, we are obliged to judge ourselves in our own conscience and to testify to ourselves that we have acted as socialists. This is why we must never lose sight of what a really socialist soul is, why we must give a socialist meaning to our life, why we cannot give up representations of an absolute socialist regime—because these representations are the means (and the only that

89 Ibid. p 210.
90 Sorel was always closer to ‘law for law’s sake’ than he was to ‘art for art’s sake’—which is one reason why it is difficult to assimilate him to anarchist and artistic radicalism in this period as a certain number of historians and critics have attempted to do. Sorel approves, for instance, of the ‘return to Kant’ then under way in Germany. ———, "L'éthique du socialisme." p 292.
91 ———, "Morale et socialisme." p 211.
are really practical) of understanding the identity of the states of our conscience with genuinely socialist intentions.\textsuperscript{92}

Where Boutroux had divided individual and collectivity as content and form, for Sorel there can be no clear distinction between the two—in this way he remains closer to Durkheim’s socially constituted individualism. And it is here, articulating a juridical theory of socialist participation in a plural social field as an account of individual moral engagement in public debate, that Sorel is already indicating what will become myth.

The formal structure that myth will take on flows directly from the requirements of moral voluntarism in a liberal and pluralist society. In order for the “conduct” of socialists—and here Sorel deploys the first person plural—to be that of “free men,” they must retain “representations of an absolute socialist regime”—this is to say, although in significantly less provocative terms, that the vulgar Marxist notion of the catastrophic revolution is, indeed, a necessary moralizing force. Pluralist parliamentary government, in the defense of a juridical liberalism, pushes Sorel toward myth.

The text in which Sorel wrote the above words was published in March of 1899 in \textit{Le Mouvement socialiste}—only a few months later, in June, Rosa Luxemburg’s rebuttal of Bernstein would appear in the same pages. The gap between Luxemburg’s defense of the necessary unity of theory and practice and Sorel’s articulation of the necessity of a representation of the absolute for the individual, is an important one. Its content is not, however, immediately obvious, beyond the fact that Luxemburg would assert a scientific justification of the final goal. Luxemburg said that the idea of the Revolution was

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid. pp 212-213.
necessary to orient effective socialist action. Sorel is saying that the representation of an “absolute socialist regime” is necessary for the moral existence of socialism, for the ethical action of the socialist. In this comparison, Luxemburg’s world is made up of forces, tendencies, practical concepts; Sorel’s world is made up of individuals using languages to forge ideals for themselves that in turn motivate and shape them. As Sorel has explained, socialism is for him not an idea, but the practical existence in the world of individuals fashioning themselves ethically by pursuing the moral ideal of socialism. Collectivity is not really a problem for Luxemburg; for Sorel it always will be.

In as much, however, as Sorel is indeed suggesting that the rights and moral purpose of the individual must, in the modern world, be protected and guaranteed by social—socialist—action, he is standing well within the tradition of solidarisme. If we put Sorel next to Léon Bourgeois, we find that both reject a dichotomy between socialism and liberalism in favor of third way with a ‘genuinely scientific’ foundation. Both turn to the dynamic of the collectivity to understand history and the contemporary world, although they both deny that society has objective existence as anything other than the sum of the individuals of which it is composed. They diverge sharply, however, in the metaphors by which they understand all this.

Bourgeois’ Solidarité relies on two metaphors to describe society: the organism and the firm. We might see in the organic metaphor a model for grasping the movement of society scientifically, and in the corporate metaphor the model for regulating its norms, that is, its juridical frame. Neither of these metaphors, as conventionally understood, was acceptable for Sorel. The organic conception of society relies on a notion of evolution
that is, to say the least, simplistic. To be acceptable, it requires a strong Bernardian
critique. Bourgeois—and he was hardly alone in this—read evolution onto social
hierarchy, generating, or authorizing, an almost breathtaking condescension to the lower
classes. For instance, Bourgeois believes that he is progressive when he says that “[t]he
simplest worker of our time is advanced beyond the savage of the Stone Age by the same
measure as he is himself distanced from the man of genius.” For Sorel, on the other
hand, genius is at best the epiphenomena of a productive society and at worst the self-
justifying fantasy of a parasitical class of courtier-intellectuals. Genius, in short, is built
on the genuine productive force of the worker, who is the one engaged in the epic and
perhaps ‘progressive’ struggle of human science with unknown and uncontrolled nature.
Bourgeois understands the metaphor of the organism to imply a whole evolutionary
structure—for Sorel, following Bernard, the organism is nothing more than a system in
equilibrium, a self-regulating internal milieu.

Bourgeois’ turn to the firm, or business enterprise, as the normative model for the
juridical structure of social law points back to the tension that Blais identified in
Renouvier’s elaboration of solidarisme. Do natural laws of social movement have
normative force? How to get from empirically observed laws—whatever epistemological
status they are given—to ethical imperatives? The crucial intervention of the solidaristes
was to insist that it was social. The precise meaning of this ‘social’ nature of moral

94 Sorel approves of Claude Bernard’s reticence before Darwin for just this reason. The physiologist cannot
be concerned with the origins of the organism being studied—from this perspective Darwin, all the debates
around transformism, are literary, artistic, and perhaps political, but not scientific. See for instance Sorel,
“La science dans l’éducation.” p 355ff.
evaluation, however, was always contested. Sorel faced the same problem—existed within the same problem-situation—as did the *solidaristes* in this regard. For Sorel, the juridical structure of a given institution is the ideal apparatus through which individuals and their material practices are given meaning within the institution. Law is the way in which an institution, defined in a certain sense by material practices, disciplines—if this word can be used without the specter of Foucault—the individuals who enact the institution. The gap between the morals that rise out of the changing material practices of a given institution and its less-easily-changed juridical frame, is the space of ethical action, as Sorel wrote, “our conduct and our happiness depend on these judgments.”95

This basic understanding of the nature of the institution and the individual, together with the basic understanding of the democratic situation of modern politics, describes Sorel’s moral and liberal, Dreyfusard moment. Institutions in conflict with one another, and the more basic eternal gap between legal norms and moral ideals, generate the space of ethical action for individuals. Our day-to-day representations of the world, which allow us to act within it, are necessarily at odds with any reality that scientific thought would recognize. Any kind of courageous or energetic action requires absolute and uncompromising beliefs about the world, ones that would be particularly difficult to defend in an empirical way. The liberals of the RMM want to call these principles, Sorel will suggest that a more accurate term is myths.

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95 See above, ———, "Morale et socialisme." p 207.
The Turn to Myth

Sorel’s first substantial and explicit discussion of myth is in his 1903 *Introduction à l’économie moderne*. This text presents Sorel’s conception of the economic realm in a post-revisionist mode. The purpose of the analysis is to lay the groundwork for a better socialist strategy, in particular by laying out the quite different dynamics and forms of intervention available in the realms of production and circulation. In the final pages of the text, Sorel moves in a direction that seems to make little sense in terms of the revisionism for which he argued a few years earlier.

Sorel discusses the old dogmas of Marxism—the very ones that he was so excited to see Bernstein reject in 1898. Evidence now shows, he says, “that these famous ‘dogmas’ contain something essential to the life and progress of socialism. I do not even think that it is possible to give up entirely on the catastrophic conception.”96 The iron law of falling salaries and rate of profit, the inevitable tendency of capital to concentrate in the hands of a few and to provoke a catastrophic crisis; these are the claims made by vulgar Marxism and rejected as empirically false, disproved, by Bernstein and other revisionists. Sorel seems to be saying that even though ‘we now know’ these ideas to be false, they turn out to be crucial to political activism. He wonders, rhetorically suggesting a negative answer, “if it is possible to furnish an intelligible exposition of the passage from principles to action without using myths.”97 It is easy to see how this might be read

97 Ibid. p 394
as a suggestion that in order to pass from principles to action, one must employ myths—deliberate lies—but this is not at all what is being said.

The section of the book in which myth is discussed is a methodological reflection. Myth is introduced after the presentation of three methodological principles that Sorel considers to be “fundamental for the scientific study of social phenomena, the utility of which is all the greater as one approaches problems dealing more closely with production.”

The first principle is that sociology must embrace subjectivity as its condition of existence. The search for a single viewpoint from which social reality can be explained is simply hopeless. The continual search for objective foundations presents a terrible spectacle so that, says Sorel, “one might well ask if it does not indicate a real mental illness among our contemporaries, always in such a hurry to chase the phantom of a science that always gets further away from them and always fools them.”

The second principle is that concepts, as they have traditionally been elaborated and understood by philosophers, have no place in the analysis of social reality. Conceptual knowledge has its origins in geometry and “it seems therefore to be as poorly adapted to social facts as could be.” In order to make concepts adequate to reality, they must be used with art, placed in tension with one another. Marx does this quite well, but his interpreters have often taken for logical connections those which were only aesthetic. In sum, “reality must be considered under aspects that, in their succession, entirely cover it [l’enveloppent tout

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98 Ibid. p 384.
99 Ibid. p 385.
100 Ibid. p 387.
entière] and that are related by a system corresponding to the chosen goal.” Third is a reflection on the continual drive to idealism. Sorel says, “ideological constructions are necessary, but they are also the most frequent cause of our errors.” Conceptual knowledge, unstable as per the first principle, and unfit to describe social reality, as per the second principle, is none the less all we have.

All this constitutes an epistemological foundation for the social sciences characterized chiefly by its modesty. At this crucial juncture, Sorel brings Vico back in:

It is therefore necessary to reject everything that is not the product of reflection on the terrain of institutions, customs, and empirical rules having acquired well-determined forms through practical activity. This proposition, brought to light by Vico, is one of the most important for the Marxist. There is firstly in history...a vulgar wisdom that feels things and expresses them poetically, before reflective thought manages to understand them theoretically.

Idealists, attempting to find the principles for living in the present world in an imagined future one, will only ever be confused. The ideological principle of the present will only be clear once contemporary society is gone—Sorel says here that this is Vico, that this is Marx; of course it is also Hegel. Thus, says Sorel, “what one can hope to find...in the contemporary world, are partial becomings, traces of fragmented movements; and still these observations must limit themselves to the economy.” In sum, then, we have three principles: subjectivism, processualism, and the fragmentation of reason in the world.

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101 Sorel, Introduction à l’économie moderne. p 372. This passage is taken from the first edition. Sorel reworked this section for later editions, removing this clear statement of a rule, and inserting the term “stylized projection” as a description of the kind of presentation that Marx undertakes and that sociology ought to make its own. The changes (pp 387-390 in later edition, pp 369-372 in the first edition) can be said to reduce the weight of Marx’s own text as an example, and to have tightened somewhat the vocabulary Sorel uses to described social description. I explore the issue of the aesthetic component of social science description at greater length in “The Picture of the General Strike.”


103 Ibid. p 390.

Together, they impose limits which demand from the social scientist not so much a rigorous method as a certain stance or attitude.

This is the field on which Sorel introduces myth. It is in no sense a suggestion of how to make things happen within social reality. It is rather invoked as a necessary postulate for scientific explanation of the movement of society near what Vico identifies as its productive core. Myth is the tool used to grasp hold of these “partial becomings” and “fragmented movements” that are all we have access to in the world. Myth would thus be not Vichean poetic knowledge itself, but an empirical resource one might use to investigate or describe it. 105 In introducing such a notion, Sorel is conscious of intervening at once in scientific, political, and normative fields. His language is enormously tentative,

If one managed to demonstrate that myths are necessary to describe, in a precise way, the conclusions of a social philosophy that does not want to mistake itself and does not want to take something for science that is not, -- one will no doubt be lead to demonstrate also that contested theories are necessary for modern revolutionary action; and it is likely that one could demonstrate at once that the scientific, juridical, and practical constructions advocated at the present time by more or less socializing sociologists, are nothing but misrepresentations and false science. Evidently, the inventors of systems of superior law will desperately fight any attempt made to elucidate problems that they have such an interest in obscuring; I therefore address myself not to them, but only to those individuals who understand the demands of disinterested thought. 106

It would be easy to dismiss Sorel’s apparent claim to be disinterested, and to represent science. But he has been very clear about what he takes this to mean. Social science is scientific when it states its subjective position, when it states the problem that it seeks to

105 That is, it would come to stand in Sorel’s work in the same position as Vico’s notion of ideal history— that is, as an interpretive tool to order and make sense of the historical or sociological data. Poetic wisdom is recognizable in itself and in its proper relation to other social phenomena only through the lens of ideal history; in the same way the struggles—eventually the violence and the general strike—of the syndicats will be recognizable and comprehensible only through the lens of myth. See my discussion of Sorel’s 1905 “Syndicalisme revolutionnaire” and Reflections in chapters five and six.

106 Sorel, Introduction à l'économie moderne. p 396.
solve straight out, when it assumes, we might say, its own limitations. The claim of objectivity and universality made by these ‘more or less socializing sociologists’ is the negation of science. Sorel at no point conflates objectivity and science. Science is situated and explicitly limited rationality.

The accusation is that Sorel has just accepted the deliberate lie for political effectiveness. But the myth—and we are indeed lead to think that the points of Marxist doctrine discarded by Bernstein’s Revisionism are so many myths—is not a deliberate lie. It rather represents the recognition that all these points of doctrine in fact are predictions about the future that cannot have scientific status, but rather structure the field between morality and law in which individuals take ethical action.

To the degree that Revisionism was a debate about the truth-value of various economic predictions made by Marx, it was in a sense beside the point. Sorel engaged in this debate, to be sure, for the correct analysis of the contemporary economy was and remains a matter of some importance; but from the beginning, Sorel did not accept social science predictions. For Sorel, the Bernstein debate was also about the nature of revolutionary activity given the democratic conditions of modernity. Democracy is the structuring principle of the political terrain upon which struggle takes place. This terrain is understood as plural and heterogeneous. If democracy is, on an institutional level, rule by all in the sense of the assertion of equal ‘weight’ for every individual, it becomes on the individual level an ethical ideal. It is a sociological fact struggling to find appropriate juridical expression. It subsists in complex and unpredictable relation with socialism as an ideal arising from modern forms of technical production.
Myth, then, is simply the best way of talking about the ‘discursive’ structuring of the field of collective action—that is, politics. Myth is, we might say, the political version of the ethical ideal. The ethical ideal arises from institutional practice, and provides the point around which ethical subjects can be formed, and the institution can practically cohere. Myth does the same thing for political subjects. One simply cannot ask of a myth whether it is true or false, the question makes no sense. Like a political party, it is not true or false, but real or illusory. I have shown in the above pages how it is that the attempt to explain institutional conflict and mass political mobilization together with the reality of a moral life—the attempt, that is, to descriptively grasp how a plural democratic political culture articulates the individual as an ethical subject—led Sorel to this inclusion of myth within social science.

**Rosanvallon’s Republicanism**

Sorel conceived of the public sphere as a space constituted by manifold overlapping institutions, each pursuing its own interest, imperfectly covered by the state which stands over them and regulates some of the rules by which these institutions function, particularly regarding the limits of their power over individuals. Economic forces are crucial, but are not necessarily primary, and are always embodied in institutions just like everything else. Material economic development is an important motor for social change, but it is not the exclusive motor of social change, nor is it catastrophic in the Marxist sense. Democracy and socialism are both understood as
progressive moral forces generated by institutions of particular shapes. Ethical subjects may form around them. Democracy is egalitarian, socialism is collectivist. They are not necessarily either in conflict or concert with one another. The institution whereby certain state functions are bestowed upon certain individuals through the one-man-one-vote principle is not the essence of democracy, and does not necessarily coincide with democracy understood as a moral imperative. Vote-getting and deal-making are potentially useful ways for certain social sectors to exert their power, which in the case of workers generally means making their lives better—“ameliorer leur sort”—but can be so used by any sector of society, including especially professional politicians. Politics in the best sense is a sort of management, a collective intervention to solve problems—acute injustices—that arise unpredictably in the course of social change.

All this, it should be clear, makes Sorel look something like a liberal republican. He is not a radical democrat, if we mean by this a Jacobin, or even just a person for whom the primary political principle is the equal (or equitable) distribution of political influence based on simple number. He is no longer a Marxist, at least in the limited sense that he no longer believes that economic forces are determinative, and are tending toward a catastrophic breakdown. He is, on the other hand, like a liberal republican in that he takes seriously both the need for the state to intervene and mould social reality (republican), and the necessity of limits on the state’s power over individuals (liberal). In common with a whole generation of social thinkers, in fact, Sorel argued that the best role for the state is in the creation of the conditions in which individual and collective development can take place. The importance of seeing Sorel in this light—or, at the very
least, of understanding this moment in his development—becomes clear if we consider the arguments of one of the premier contemporary historians of French political thought, Pierre Rosanvallon.

Rosanvallon’s *Le Peuple introuvable* examines the changing modes in which political representation took place and was imagined in 19th and 20th century France. By the 1880s, critiques of dogmatic individualism became so prevalent that “the unity of the end of the 19th century is to be found in this critique. The enormous infatuation with the social sciences that marks the period must be understood on this basis.”107 These criticisms of the reigning Jacobin political monism were not simply theoretical—they had a foundation in slowly growing institutions. The famous law of 1884 legalizing certain kinds of *syndicat* was only one aspect of a changing legal framework for collective activity.108 Rosanvallon is interested in the growth and institutionalization of political parties. Conceptually, the political party was in this period “a profoundly original *social form*, at the intersection of a double tension: between the individual and the collective on one side, and the given and the constructed on the other.”109 The institutionalization of party politics constituted, “a new level of the democratic experience, that of an organized

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108 Ibid. p 169. On the long term importance of Republican institutions and modes of subjectivity (as opposed to Jacobin ones) in the founding of the Third Republic, see Nord, *The republican moment : the struggle for democracy in nineteenth-century France*. On the intellectual foundations of some of these institutions, see Hazareesingh, *Intellectual founders of the Republic : five studies in nineteenth-century French republican political thought*.
and accepted pluralism.”

The party-form as it developed in the Third Republic was not without its critics, among them the revolutionary syndicalists.

Rosanvallon gives an account of revolutionary syndicalism drawn from the writings of Emile Pouget, Hubert Lagardelle, and Victor Griffuelhes, who all rejected the regime of competing political parties and, indeed, procedural democracy as such. For Rosanvallon, the revolutionary syndicalists represent a failure to come to terms with the political mode of democratic modernity. These writers and organizers incarnated “the aspiration for a substantialist democracy.” This negative conception of representation ignores or rejects the constructive function that Rosanvallon assigns to democracy, linking the project of the radical syndicalists backwards to Burke and forward to fascism: “the substantialist vision of democracy tends, in the end, to return to archaic approaches to the social. It points toward a sort of ‘politics of the body’ while implicitly denouncing modern democracy of individuals.” Rosanvallon cites Sorel, and in particular “L’avenir socialiste des syndicats,” as a source for the fundamentally sociological critique of democracy these more engaged writers propounded. Inspired at least in part by Sorel’s writings, “the syndicalists opposed a doctrinal socialism founded on a philosophical theory with a sociological socialism directly derived from the activity of worker organizations.” This is to say that the syndicalists were distinguished from the

110 Ibid. p 190.
111 Ibid. p 221.
112 Ibid. p 232.
113 Ibid. p 223. Historians have debated the degree to which any kind of ‘theory’ influenced the ‘practice’ of the syndicats. Sorel and others asserted that they were themselves inspired by the workers, that they were simple commentators on the spontaneous practice of the syndicats. This seems not to be a sufficient description. Sorel was certainly not a syndicalist leader, or even master thinker, if the phrase has any
Republicans on the one side by a rejection of the constructive aspects of political representation, and from the Guesdistes (and orthodox Marxists in general) on the other by a rejection of a philosophy of history in which the economic specificity of the proletariat is dissolved through political action into the universality of revolution. For Rosanvallon,

> Because it is immediate to social activity, the syndicat resolves in itself the normal tension between individual and collective. For its apostles, it is the only association that results from the absolute identity of interests, because it has its principle of existence in the form of production on which it models itself and of which it is simply an extension. The syndicat, for this reason, is capable of resolving the constitutive aporia of modern democratic society...In the syndicat, real popular sovereignty, individual autonomy, and representation all go together. It therefore incarnates a new sort of political subject that is able to transcend the contradictions of modern politics.

Attempts to eliminate the constitutive aporia of politics are attempts to eliminate politics—for a student of Claude Lefort such as Rosanvallon, this is the sign of a slide into totalitarianism. This is to say that Sorel, in as much as his work fits with this kind of syndicalism, fits Rosanvallon’s narrative in much the same way as he fits into other, differently-told stories about the 20th century: as an enabler of totalitarianism. Rosanvallon’s denunciation of the politics of Revolutionary Syndicalism is neatly parallel to Jacques Donzelot’s somewhat earlier argument about the technocratic impulses of solidarisme in this period. For Donzelot, the solidaristes eliminated the conflict of politics in favor of the management of the social—but this attempted suppression simply

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115 Ibid. pp 246-7.
caused conflict to erupt in an even purer form. Donzelot finds Sorel emblematic of this conflict. He is not alone in identifying Sorel in this way—probably the first to diagnose Sorel as a symptom of the deeper failure of parliamentary democracy was Carl Schmitt. So there is a traditional interpretation of Sorel that runs from the crown jurist of the Third Reich to perhaps the premier contemporary French theorist of democracy.

The account of Sorel’s liberal pluralism presented in this chapter does more than remove Sorel from the substantialist camp. It provides a useful supplement to Rosanvallon’s own thought. At the end of *Le peuple introuvable*, Rosanvallon suggests that the contemporary situation is one in which the old constitutive aporia of the political between the individual and the collective has been displaced. The so-called death of the subject has opened the era of the politics of subjectivity: “If a ‘we’ is now necessary for there to be a self, then construction of the self and construction of a common world go together.” That is, political action at high levels is linked to the construction of subjects on the level of the individual. Sorel’s is a notion of political engagement that takes full account, I want to argue, of Rosanvallon’s insistence on the constructive nature of political action. Rosanvallon speaks of identity and discourse, Sorel speaks of ethics and myth. They are not so far apart. Sorelian myth, taxed at least as a symptom of nascent totalitarianism (if not the thing itself), or as a positively irrationalist Machiavellian

construction is really Sorel’s attempt at the integration of pluralism into the collective construction of individual identities—it is, that is to say, a product of Rosanvallon’s own liberal republican form of moral discourse.

Although this argument can only be developed properly over the course of the remaining chapters of this dissertation, the material here presented is enough to insist that there is an intimate connection between the problematics and resources of liberal pluralism, republicanism, and the radicalism for which Sorel would eventually become best know. Indeed, without retreating to a Marxist attack on the anarchist or petit-bourgeois elements of syndicalism, we can look to Jeremy Jennings’ suggestion that the doctrinaire liberals and the syndicalists had the same reasons for rejecting the notion of parliamentary democracy as an agonistic field of competing interests.119 Moving in a different direction, Julian Bourg has recently demonstrated how the post-68 Maoist emphasis on the ethics of spontaneity and violence—the characteristics that led many scholars to accuse these students of simply re-heated Sorelianism—in fact contained the seeds that grew, over the later 1970s, into the revival of French liberal thought.120 Individualism and an ethical conception of politics can link anarchist or gauchiste and liberal politics.

120 Bourg, *From revolution to ethics : May 1968 and contemporary French thought.*
Conclusion

This chapter broadly argues that Sorel’s post-Dreyfus adherence to liberal democracy was not a parenthesis born of enthusiasm, but was linked to his previous and to his later work. His is a liberal pluralism because it combines a robust defense of the moral and physical autonomy of individuals within a dense and highly differentiated field of institutions, including parliamentary representation. It can be called republican in that it insists on a moralizing link between the individual and collective activity.

The liberal pluralism ascribed here to Sorel is not, I want to emphasize, an elitist liberalism. This option was of course open to him. Ernest Renan, in the preface he wrote in 1890 for the publication of *L’avenir de la science*, a text itself written in the heat of 1848, expressed such a liberalism. For Renan, freedom, and particularly the freedom of science, was the greatest good, and with it goes a kind of aggregative progress of knowledge. Yet “inequality is inscribed in nature. It is a consequence of liberty. However, the liberty of the individual is a necessary postulate of human progress.” For this reason, Renan was willing to accept such irrationalities and inconveniences as nations, because, after all, the individual would have to sacrifice for the greater good of science and therefore humanity: “A state that would bring the greatest possible happiness to individuals would probably be, from the point of view of the noble pursuits of humanity, a state of profound abasement.”¹²¹ This is the pessimistic and elitist, aristocratic, essentially conservative liberalism that historians have been most

comfortable ascribing to Sorel. We have only to look to Sorel himself, however, to see that this attitude is what he would call a literary one. If Sorel might have agree with Renan’s sardonic “better an immoral people than a fanatic people,” he could never have gone on to write, as Renan did, “because the immoral masses cause no problems, while fanatic masses stupefy the world, and a world condemned to stupidity has nothing left in it to interest me. I’d just as well see it perish.”¹²² Sorel could have taken this position, or one like it, even within Marxism and Dreyfusism. Certainly he comes closest to an aristocratic liberalism in his discussions of democracy and antisemitism—but his critique of the political management through representative government of the sociological fact of democracy is a friendly one.

Sorel developed his particular approach to what might now be called the articulation of le politique with la politique in the years of the Dreyfus Affair. We will not understand this without seeing it in the context of his earlier writings. The mode of thought for which Sorel became famous—the pessimistic nexus of myth and violence and irrationality—does not come after the closing of a parenthesis of liberalism, is not a new direction taken when it became clear that ‘real politics’ was insufficiently heroic. This nexus, this conceptual bundling-together, grew directly out of a defense of liberalism tinged with the broadly ‘republican’ project of taking seriously the moral environment created for the individual by politics. Myth is a product of liberalism, not a compensation for its disappearance.

¹²² Ibid. p x.
Sorel’s elaboration of myth as a social science concept arose as a result of the attempt to understand how the moral imperative of democracy could be saved in a political environment that was increasingly ideologically polarized, particularly between the institutions of the Church and the State. A focus on the power of myth would provide a way of understanding how the space of ethical action was created and what dangers faced it. It was not Sorel’s syndicalism—anchored as it was in material production—that brought him to myth, but rather his attempt to pluralize republicanism.
4. From Liberal Tolerance to Radical Intransigence

Polemical observations…in truth lack the serenity proper to scientific works.
François Simiand, on Sorel’s *Introduction à l’économie moderne*.\(^1\)

Every Modernist sustains and comprises within himself many personalities; he is a philosopher, a believer, a theologian, an historian, a critic, an apologist, a reformer.

“Pascendi Dominici Gregis”\(^2\)

**Introduction**

Among the discoveries and observations that Sorel believed Giambattista Vico to have made, perhaps the most important was what he called in 1896 the “loi idéogénétique”: “the formation of philosophy under the influence of the spectacle of practical political life.”\(^3\) This law is singularly applicable to Sorel’s turn to radical intransigence. The present chapter has as its motive spring what Sorel himself wrote in 1904: “the experience of the anticlerical policy pursued with such ostentation by the French government…constitutes one of the most important social phenomena that the philosopher can study. There is no doubt: it will give rise later on to profound investigations.”\(^4\) This chapter argues that the spectacle of Church-State struggle in the years leading from the law on associations to the 1905 separation put unbearable stresses on Sorel’s liberal pluralism.

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\(^2\) [http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html)


Between the 1901 Law on Associations and the 1905 separation, the state became threatening in a new and immediate way. The growing power and assertiveness of what Sorel identified as statist logic pushed him to attend to the autopoetics of institutions—ultimately, to the notion that institutions could be the bearers—rather than incubators—of revolutionary subjectivity. This does much to explain why it was in these years that two of Sorel’s most original and durable concepts—myth (discussed in the previous chapter) and diremption—found their first sustained articulation. In the face of statist power, Sorel moved increasingly away from a politics of institutions, and toward one of discourse. This is especially evident in his book on Ernest Renan, part of a long-running intervention in the Catholic Modernism debate. Modernism—understood as a Catholic response parallel to that of liberalism to the given socio-intellectual situation—therefore emerges as a crucial and thus-far largely ignored context for Sorel’s transition from liberalism to the scissionistic intransigence of Reflections on Violence.

Historians have typically ascribed the newly bitter and anti-liberal tone of Sorel’s writings beginning around 1903 to the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair. Charles Péguy’s famous complaint that the Affair had fallen from “mystique” to mere “politique” is often cited as though it were an explanation. Some historians have sought a contextual rather than psychological explanation. Christophe Prochasson identifies the 1902 affaire des fiches—the revelation that elements within the government kept records on the religious associations and beliefs of senior army officers for consultation in the process of

\[\text{5 It seems that Sorel first uses the word ‘diremption’ in 1901. In this case, it describes a kind of economy, and does not receive the theoretical elaboration that it has a few years later. See ———, ”Economie et agriculture,” Revue socialiste 33(1901). p 434.}

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promotion—as the main (although not only) triggering event in Sorel’s retrospective anti-
Dreyfusism. For Prochasson, “Sorel’s case offers the paradox of an intellectual emerging
from the Dreyfus Affair armed with a critique of democracy and its principle agents, the
scholars [les clercs], who like the Jews he reproaches for occult activities reinforced by
networks of personal loyalty.” Sorel’s trajectory through the Affair is certainly
paradoxical, yet it seems to me that Prochasson’s observations can, in a broader field,
take on deeper significance. It was not democracy, even identified with narrow class rule,
that Sorel primarily feared, but the growing power of the state.

Sorel feared not the disappearance of Republican Dreyfusism, but its apotheosis
through the ever-more-powerful apparatuses of the State. An acute awareness of the
political limits, the outright antipluralism, of the laicizing Republicans in the aftermath of
Dreyfusism acted powerfully on Sorel. And Sorel’s perspective is coming to be that also
of certain scholars of the period today—Ruth Harris’s major new work on the Affair and
its aftermath certainly does not flinch from this understanding. If today’s historians are
all Dreyfusards, let us not forget that Sorel was, too. Sorel’s most durable and easily-
appropriated ideas—particularly myth, but also diremption—thus find their immediate
context in and take their shape from this newly problematic state.

Historians have looked to enthusiasm for the rise and heroic moment of
revolutionary syndicalism as a positive factor in Sorel’s turn to intransigence and

7 More generally, Jean Pierre Machelon, La République contre les libertés?: Les restrictions aux libertés
publiques de 1879 à 1914 (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1976). And,
Harris, Dreyfus: politics, emotion, and the scandal of the century.
violence. The resurgent worker’s movement was supposed to represent a challenge to an otherwise decadent polity. In consequence, the language of corruption and decadence has been the focus of most scholarly attention to these years. And indeed we find Sorel writing to Croce in early 1903 that “the Church – like socialism – will need to descend some way yet down the slope of decadence before finding the elements of a reorganization.” This fits well into the narrative in which Sorel, in his discouragement after Dreyfus, is swept up in naïve enthusiasm for heroic violence. I by no means wish to deny the importance of the paradigm of decadence or of syndicalist activity in Sorel’s thinking. However, as previous chapters have shown, Sorel had already absorbed the anarchist lessons of the syndicats by 1898. Virtually everything he identifies as specific to revolutionary syndicalism in 1906 was already present years earlier. The important change is not first in the syndicats, but in the context of their action. Further, the assertion of a general immersion in the language of decadence is not a sufficient explanation for Sorel’s trajectory.

The Dreyfus Affair was not a single event. It was a sequence, a political experience, through which organizations and individuals moved, and out of which they drew different lessons. In the previous chapter, I discussed Sorel’s self-positioning in the peak years of the Affair and after—principally 1898 to 1901. Here, the focus is on Sorel’s changing understanding of the significance of the Affair as its raw political consequences—combisme—unfolded.

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8 To mention only one prominent example: the excellent introduction Jeremy Jennings provides to the 1999 Cambridge edition of *Reflections*.
In order to make the above arguments, this chapter begins with a discussion of the position in which the Catholic Church, as institution, found itself around the year 1900. It then turns to analyze Sorel’s views in 1901 on the situation of Church vis-à-vis State. These were years of intellectual crisis across the political spectrum, and I therefore next turn to a running discussion of “the crisis of liberalism” that took place in the pages of the RMM. Catholic Modernism, for Sorel, is an attempt to respond to some of the same pressures. In this context, I examine Sorel’s evolving analysis of the internal intellectual state of the Church, particularly its capacity to confront liberalism. These reflections are the ground on which Sorel first sets out his philosophy of diremption. This, together with myth, marks Sorel’s turn to what we can call a more discursively oriented approach to the articulation of politics and morality. Sorel’s book on Renan demonstrates the new importance he assigns to the discursive in forming historical subjects—the slide he allows himself to make from consciousness to institutionality. To conclude the chapter, I show to what degree Sorel had assimilated—via discursive similarity—the situation of the syndicats in the present day to that of the early Christians. This account of Sorel’s decomposition of liberalism opens the way to the reading of *Reflections on Violence* pursued in the next chapter.

**The French Catholic Church in 1900**

The origins of the temporal crisis of the Catholic Church in France are to be found in the French Revolution. If it had been possible in the early part of the 19th century to
believe that the anti-clericalism of the Revolution could, perhaps, be rolled back—that the Church might regain some of the position it had once enjoyed—by the later part of the century, it was clear that the change was both irreversible and broadly European. Across Europe, resurgent nationalisms came into conflict with, and had to find some settlement with, the old religious order. The new Italian nation was not compatible with the temporal claims of the Vatican. With the fall of Napoleon III in 1870, the French troops that had been defending the remnants of these claims packed up and left the Vatican to the mercy of the new Italian state. The French Republic that emerged in the 1870s was sharply anticlerical—the antipathy was mutual. It was therefore not least in self-defense that the Republic hastened through the Ferry laws secularizing primary education. The other new European nation of the later 19th century—Germany—also proved hostile to Catholic influence. Certainly French debates about Catholicism must be seen in the context not only of fairly extreme Italian anti-clericalism, but also Bismark’s *Kulturkampf*.¹⁰

In the 1870s and early 1880s, in the foundational—and quite uncertain—years of the Third Republic, many Republicans pursued secular schooling as a necessary defensive measure. Jules Ferry was the great architect of this: the schools were to be free, obligatory, and *laïque*. Why use this last word, rather than the apparent English translation, secular? *Laïque* did not mean an absence of God or spirituality. The 1882 law changed the national curriculum so that the morning lesson was no longer given over to

¹⁰For one atmospheric reconstruction of this, see Michael Burleigh, *Earthly powers : religion and politics in Europe from the Enlightenment to the Great War* (London: HarperCollins, 2005).
“moral and religious instruction,” but to “moral and civic instruction.” Catholicism was scrubbed out, and replaced by a “universal moral religion.” By the end of the 1880s, Ferry’s reforms were made, and there was a widespread sentiment that the anticlerical moment of the Republic was over now that it was better established. Ferry died—conveniently—in 1893, and Ferdinand Buisson carried forward his project for a universal, moral, religion. Pope Leon XIII launched the ralliement in 1892, encouraging Catholics to reconcile themselves with the Republic, and do what they could within it. The most pressing conflicts over education were settled, the Republic itself was more assured of its own survival, and the Church had at least the continuation of the Concordat. Indeed, certain institutional features of the new French Republic suggested that the Church need not be an enemy. In particular, the crucial role of French Catholic missionary orders in supporting the French Empire—which the Third Republic, especially after 1885, decided decisively to remain—particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia, would seem to be a powerful argument against the adoption of an aggressive an anti-Catholic program on the part of the government. Sorel recognized this phenomenon,

12 Ibid. p 287.
which contemporary historians have recently beginning to excavate from the anticlerical assumptions that generally dominate the history of the period.\textsuperscript{14}

Is there not a fundamental incompatibility between the secular, modern, Republic and the essentially medieval Catholic Church? Sorel had long insisted that the opposition was not, in fact, preordained or necessitated by each institution’s structure. An argument might well be made to this effect. Indeed, it was the Church’s responses first the Boulanger sequence, and then the Dreyfus Affair—two political events that were nothing if not contingent—which ultimately reignited Republican anticlericalism. Yet the triumphal Republican secularist narrative is not entirely wrong. The hierarchy of the French Church leapt at the chance that General Boulanger apparently offered to overthrow the Republic by coup and institute popular dictatorship. A few years later, though, in the Dreyfus Affair, which turned out to be by far the greater test, the Catholic Church as a body came down on the side of the military, the antisemites, and the anti-Republicans. The tacit—in some cases vocal—approval of the Catholic hierarchy for the antisemitism and (worse) anti-Republicanism unleashed during the Affair made it clear to many people that the Church was implacably anti-Republican. As Sorel wrote in these years, the Church “wants domination, and will do anything that it can to get it.”\textsuperscript{15} In 1898-99, despite the efforts of many moderate and even Republican Catholics, the Catholic Church as a whole identified itself firmly with authority, hierarchy, tradition, all apparently for their own sake.

Moderate Republicans were well represented in the 1899 elections, and under the leadership of Waldeck-Rousseau, began to draft a law on associations, which passed the Senate on July 1st, 1901. This law, writes Maurice Agulhon, “well and truly followed on from the Dreyfus Affair,” in that the political realignments of the Affair allowed Waldeck-Rousseau to cut the “Gordian knot” presented by “the republican need to complete the array of fundamental freedoms by granting the right of association, and the no less republican mistrust with regard to possible subversive groups...by preparing a frankly discriminatory law.”16 Under this law, association became a recognized right. An exception was made for religious associations, which would be obliged to apply to the state for approval.

The elections of 1901 brought in a radical wing of the Republicans and many more vocally anti-clerical socialists. Émile Combes, beginning in June of 1902, began to apply the law on associations in a much more repressive way than Waldeck-Rousseau had intended. Combes transformed what had been a project of containment into one of destruction, “the battle unexpectedly escalated into a full scale war against…the Catholic Church and the concordat with the Pope.”17 The laws of the 1880s had not drastically reduced the number of pupils in schools run by congregations—between 1881 and 1901 the percentage had dropped from 33 to about 27. By 1906, the figure was at 4%.18 If the radical anti-clerical impulses of combisme spent themselves quickly, their work was

18 Ibid. p 291.
nonetheless carried on into the 1905 law of separation. The divisions born in those years did not end even with the unity of 1914—perhaps, looking to more recent scholarship on French identity, not until the early 1960s.\(^\text{19}\)

**Institutions in Conflict – Church and State**

On July 1\(^\text{st}\), 1901, the law on associations passed the French senate. Under this law, association became a recognized right. An exception was made for religious associations, which would be obliged to apply to the state for approval. If they failed to be approved, they would be disbanded and their property confiscated. The first installment of Sorel’s essay “l’Église et l’État” appeared in August. This text, taken by Sand to be “a striking synthesis of his Dreyfusism,”\(^\text{20}\) will help us to understand the consequences of this general vision of social reality as they unfold in the turbulent post-Dreyfus period of French political life. No doubt the essay was written as the law on associations was being debated.\(^\text{21}\) Sorel would have been able to watch as the original law, proposed more than a year earlier, was revised by the chamber in an increasingly harsh direction. Sorel believed at the time that Waldeck-Rousseau’s intentions would win the day. It would be wrong, he wrote, to see in the law, “preparation for the abolition of

\(^{19}\)This is perhaps to over-read: Todd Shepard, *The invention of decolonization: the Algerian War and the remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

\(^{20}\)Sand, “Georges Sorel entre utopie et politique.” p 93.

\(^{21}\)Years later, in his retrospective “Mes raisons du syndicalisme,” Sorel cites abundantly from this essay in order to show how he had confused the philosophical utopia of democracy with democracy as it really is. He says there that the text was written shortly after the law. See Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris: M. Rivière, 1929). p 263.
the regime of the Concordat, it seems to me rather to be a reinforcement of the
Concordat.” 22 In fact, it was famously said, the law mutated from a measure of
‘republican defense,’ to the first step in the republican offence. 23 As Sorel’s essay was
going to press, the 1901 law was being applied by Combes, the new prime minister,
“rigorously and restrictively.” 24 Far from a renewal of the Concordat, the law was the
beginning of separation.

But this was not yet clear to Sorel in mid-1901. Combisme would play an
important part in Sorel’s later development, but it was not yet in power. In retrospect for
both contemporary historians and for Sorel, it would become evident that this law, as
Maurice Agulhon writes, “well and truly followed on from the Dreyfus Affair,” in that
the political realignments of the Affair allowed Waldeck-Rousseau to cut the “Gordian
knot” presented by “the republican need to complete the array of fundamental freedoms
by granting the right of association, and the no less republican mistrust with regard to
possible subversive groups...by preparing a frankly discriminatory law.” 25 The
significance of the Affair, however, indeed what might be said to constitute it as an event,
became clear only gradually and in retrospect. What was clear already in 1901 was that
the Catholic Church was in a somewhat dangerous position in France, that anti-
clericalism was again a significant political force.

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23 McManners, Church and State in France, 1870-1914. p 128.
25 Ibid. p 99.
The history of Christianity, and of the Roman Catholic Church in particular, were important points of comparison for his understanding of socialism.26 “L’Église et l’État” is an attempt to apply what Sorel regards as “a method...entirely within the Marxist spirit”27 to the relations of two major institutions with an eye to present action as well as historical analysis. The thrust of Sorel’s argument is that the conflict between the Church and the State should be understood as a conflict between two fundamentally different forms of rationality. Church law and Civil law differ in their historical origins, supporting institutions, and purposes. It is unsurprising and unavoidable that conflict should exist between the two. The present political meaning of this conflict, in particular for socialists, is dependent not on abstract philosophical allegiances, but on strategic analysis of the power relations in society—that is, Sorel strongly implies, it may be in the best interests of the socialists not to allow State to entirely defeat Church. Sorel understands the conflict to have created two opposing and equivalent fanatical camps: the anticlerical universitaires and the catholic ultras. These two groups, he argues, in some sense created one another as dogmatic mirror images. Neither should be allowed too much power.

From the beginning, the essay is about what we would call ideology. After all, playing out in French politics before Sorel’s eyes at this point is an eminently ideological conflict of surprising longevity. He says, “durable doctrines do not arise through simple evolution...they result from the conjunction of several movements: there must be a

26 In an important sense, the Church was the institution for Sorel, to which all others were compared. Sorel shares this with Carl Schmitt. See David Bates, "Political Theology and the Nazi State: Carl Schmitt's Concept of the Institution," Modern Intellectual History 3, no. 3 (2006).
meeting of intellectually elaborated theories and of sentiments born in a class through its conditions of life – and finally there must be a corporation to maintain the doctrine.”28

Doctrines last only if there is mind, physiology (sentiment), and what we might call ‘embodiment’ of the two in a corporation. Sorel seeks to describe and analyze the conflict between the two institutions at each level, taking into account ideas, individuals, and their institutional embodiment. The analysis therefore circles back on itself at several points, covering the same ground from somewhat different points of view.

The modern state is built on capitalist property relations. This is absolutely not the same thing as saying, in a vulgar Marxist way, that it is at the service of the bourgeoisie.

Rather, Sorel says,

The parliamentary regime is founded on the same principle as the capitalist economic regime. It works well only in a country where the modern industrial spirit is strongly developed and where the industrial classes play a preponderant role in the Parliaments. It is a regime where everything is provisional. The variability of power has the consequence of facilitating successive corrections in the laws and avoiding the accumulation of abuses.29

This form of life is totally foreign to the Church. Rather than provisional decisions and practical solutions, it has rigid hierarchies and eternal truths. The Church is unable to grasp “this complete rupture worked by man in nature, this independence of each producer who tries what he can invent exposing only himself, this rage to destroy the old view of things in order to try by turns the genius of each.”30 Individualism, identified with economic modernity, is fundamentally foreign to the Church. The reason for this

28 Ibid. p 130.
29 Ibid. p 148.
30 “cette déchirure complète pratiquée par l’homme dans la nature, cette indépendance de chaque producteur qui essaie ce qu’il invente en n’exposant que lui-même, cette rage de destruction des aspects anciens des choses pour essayer au hasard du génie de chacun.” Ibid. pp 148-149.
lack of understanding is historical. The hierarchy and ideas of the Church were formed in late antiquity, which was a completely different politico-economic configuration. It was ruled by accumulation through simple exploitation and chance. The emperor and the very wealthy enjoyed total power, but could be overthrown quite brutally. This world, in short, made no sense. The actual economic structures of the ancient world were relatively static, but the juridical structures were so fluid as to be nearly non-existent, changing as they did with the pleasure of those in power. This generated an extremely abstract and ideal structure of law. Since there was no certainty in the world, there was a need to create it outside the world.31

The modern world is different. There is no longer a need—although there is still a motivation on the part of some—to erect an abstract and idealist law beyond the observable. Law does not change quickly today, “the heavy working of the parliamentary machine constitutes a happy accident for modern peoples...it would be dangerous if Parliaments could do everything their electors asked of them; but the theoretical question of the limits to assign to them is evidently not solvable.”32 Law exists and functions in the world, it changes, but not so rapidly that it is not possible to grasp it rationally. A genuine science of law is possible under the Parliamentary system. The anarchy of the ancient world gave rise to a desire for “an immutable truth, residing in the divine principle.”

Science for the moderns, says Sorel, is about extending the practical capacity to act in the

31 Ibid. pp 326-7. Sorel’s analysis of this kind of idealist structure sounds a little simplistic, but it is not too far away from some historical accounts of the psychic crisis at the origin of Wittgenstein’s “The meaning of the world lies outside the world.”
32 Ibid. p 326. This is in a sense a reminder that although the French state is constitutional, it did not until recently have a supreme court in the American style—that is, there was no body whose task it was to establish the constitutionality of a given law.
world and so, “immutable truth no longer concerns us.” Yet this is obviously more of an aspiration than a description. Such truth does still concern many people in the modern world.

The desire for the absolute takes many forms, but the one that concerns Sorel here is the notion of sovereignty. He arrives at this by criticizing the notion that it is possible for law to be sovereign, even if it is founded on reason. Sorel cites Aristotle here, but disagrees with him, preferring Proudhon. Aristotle was talking about a very different juridical situation, says Sorel. Reason can criticize, but not found law. Indeed, the freedom that philosophers have to criticize is not granted them by law, but rather rests on reason itself. The point here is that there can be no effective synthesis between the scientific analysis of law as it exists in the world, say by a lawyer, which is an act of reason, and the law-giving, law-making activity that takes place on an institutional and practical level.

Idealist syntheses of these two activities have produced the notion of sovereignty, but “real syntheses take place in the domain of the real.” The de facto principle—normative practice—of modern government is the separation of powers and not sovereign decisionism, “therefore no synthesis, and no need for a doctrine of sovereignty.” Modernity as a form of life renders absurd the notion of sovereignty central to the Church. In an economy, there is no such thing as sovereignty, so that of the Pope—along

33 Ibid. p 327.

34 Ibid. p 328. Doubtless Rosanvallon’s position would be that the syndicat was taken to be just such a ‘real’ and therefore sovereign synthesis. Perhaps for some, not for Sorel.

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with that of the King, Reason, the Nation, or the People—vanishes into obsolescence. In what he no doubt later considered to be an access of utopian zeal, Sorel wrote that “today, theories of sovereignty are abandoned by all reasonable people: the absolute is banished from politics and everyone understands that liberty is the essence of democracy.”35

Democracy, because of the institutions that in fact constitute it in the modern world, is liberal. It is important that this is a statement of fact about the world Sorel saw around him, not about the nature of democracy as such. Everywhere in this text, Sorel emphasizes the plurality of the real and the autonomy of reason. If liberty is the essence of democracy, it is no less the case that “philosophy does not imply the division of society into a thinking class and classes disconnected from the capacity to reason. Philosophy is entirely liberty.”36 All this is essentially on the level of ideas, yet Sorel does not pursue the implication that, if liberty is the essence of democracy, and philosophy is liberty, then there must be some necessary relation between democracy and philosophy. Sorel is, perhaps, too sympathetic to those who executed Socrates to think very far along these lines.

The institutional structure of the Church, Sorel maintains, means domination. Sorel writes that the “Church presents itself doubly: school of theology and corps of religious police: unity is achieved through a pontifical authority that is at once supernatural and civic, that promulgates dogma and regulates practical life, that reigns

36 Ibid. p 334. The argument has been made that philosophy, beginning with Plato, has indeed predicated itself on the division of humanity into those able to speak, and those unable to speak. Cf: Jacques Rancière and Andrew Parker, The philosopher and his poor (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
over faith and custom.”37 The authority of the pontiff once removed, the Church as an institution would have no coherence and would dissolve. For Sorel, the state’s vocation to enforce law, the continual struggle to render the law ‘perfect,’ does not constitute such a principle of unity.

The Church is something like a person, the State is not. This crucial difference becomes clear, Sorel says, the instant one considers in all their breadth the relations between the Vatican and the French state. For Sorel, this is manifest above all in the Empire, “France has become...the secular arm used by the Church to defend its interests the world over.”38 How can the French state persecute Jesuits at home and provide them with support abroad? This can be understood only in terms of the fragmentary nature of the state as an institution, “obviously this would be incomprehensible if the State were an individual finding itself in the presence of another individual which was the Church; but the difficulty vanishes (for the most part) when one examines the multiple elements of which the State is composed.”39 Within the French state, the Church is allied to the military, and has had great success linking itself to patriotic propaganda—in this regard

37 Sorel, “L’Église et l’État.” p 335. We have here, incidentally, a definition of the difference between theology and philosophy: institutional discipline.
38 Ibid. p 338.
39 Ibid. p 339. J. P. Daughton argues along much the same lines that indeed the conflict between Church and State cannot be understood if one remains within the Hexagon. He sharply criticizes McManners and other historians of the Church for ignoring the Empire, and implicitly criticizes the vision of French Empire one gets from, for instance, Alice Conklin as a project the contradictions of which are internal, as it were, to the Republic. Daughton’s work suggests, as does Compagnon’s reading of Brunetière, that ‘Republican Universalism’ cannot be dissociated—in the metropole or the colony—from Catholic universalism. To the extent that contemporary Marxism’s avatars Badiou and Zizek are deeply Jacobin, they carry the same double legacy explicitly, recognizing as they do the importance of St. Paul’s universalism to their own project. See Daughton, An empire divided : religion, republicanism, and the making of French colonialism, 1880-1914.
the Republic educational project has actually been complicit in sowing support for the Church in its deep nationalism.\textsuperscript{40}

In Sorel’s analysis, the Church’s support for the anti-Dreyfusards was a major strategic error. Just as no necessary conflict exists between science and faith, so no necessary conflict exists between the Church and the Republic. And yet, Sorel insists, “the whole history of the relations between Church and State in France is dominated by memories of the Revolution; the Church...does not simply want back its former lands and tithes; it wants domination, and will do what it can to get it...what the Church offers that is most tempting to its clerics, is domination.”\textsuperscript{41} The Church’s actions around the Dreyfus Affair, and in particular its—at best—tacit acceptance of antisemitic propaganda, are the result of stupid decisions taken for short sighted personal motives.\textsuperscript{42} These mistakes made anticlericalism, which had seemed outmoded, a viable political force once again.\textsuperscript{43}

It is at this point in Sorel’s analysis that he turns sharply away from most other commentators. The Church, he says, has always thought of itself as engaged in an epic struggle with an anti-church of some sort. Hence the prominent place—out of all proportion to reality—given to the Masons in Church historiography. Yet, over the course of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, as the Church chose decisively to ally itself to reaction, an odd thing

\textsuperscript{40} Sorel, "L’Église et l’État." p 342.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. p 406.
\textsuperscript{42} There is an interesting analysis of antisemitism here, touching the usual points about why it is successful with the masses (its simplicity) and what the socialists need to do to combat it (education, focus on the concrete). Sorel discusses what seem like personal observations about the actions of the Church in manipulating the entrance lists to the ENS during the Second Empire.
\textsuperscript{43} Sorel, "L’Église et l’État." p 409. This analysis is more or less also Larkin’s. Larkin, \textit{Church and state after the Dreyfus affair; the separation issue in France}. 269
happened in the French universities. The post-Revolutionary university was in fact neutral toward the Church, says Sorel, but the Church attempted to make it subservient,

Against the Church, under the influence of the anticlerical press, a politico-scholastic party constituted itself, which pretended to represent the University, or rather to defend it—since no one would dare to pretend that this party was in the majority among professors. This party pursued dominion over minds and was too much inspired by the narrow ideas of the 18th century; it can therefore be considered, to a certain degree, as being an Anti-Church; when one speaks of the struggle of State and Church, on the terrain of education, one speaks, in reality, of the conflict that exists between this party and the clerical party. 44

The State, after all, is not an individual. The military and various parts of the colonial administration are pro-Catholic, only parts of the domestic state are programmatically anti-Catholic. The conflict between Church and State thus begins to look like the mutual constitution of two increasingly radical blocs. Education is suffering as Catholic schools are shut or dogmatized, and ‘secular’ schools are also increasingly dogmatic and closed. 45

It is important to understand precisely why this political conjuncture concerns Sorel. Faced with a situation in which Church and Anti-Church struggle over control of the apparatuses of state control, no one can know what will happen. In particular, it is impossible to have faith in the notion of revolution, “for quite a number of years, all revolutions seem to have automatically acted to increase the emancipation of man; but it is not at all evident that a similar movement must always take place.” 46 It is at this point that Sorel begins to sound most like a ‘classical liberal.’ He declares that, “the highest mission of the State is to defend the liberty of thought, just as much against the caste of priests as against the caste of professor-journalists. The State has spiritual duties to fulfill

46 Ibid. p 414.
and this is evidently the first of all in a democracy; liberty of thought is not decreed, is not taught; institutions must spontaneously produce it." 

Modern political culture is marked for Sorel, as for any Marxist, by capitalism. For Sorel, the values implied by democracy are those generated by the system of unlimited but in principle egalitarian competition. This is the democratic ideal, it is the liberal ideal. It is, one might say, the utopia of capitalism. It cannot be legislated into existence, but must be supported institutionally. Sorel, although with a Marxist conception of how history is driven by changes in the forces of production, is basically a liberal pluralist when it comes to the present.

If freedom of thought results from something like accreted tradition, the obvious question becomes how to defend or extend it in the face not only of creeping state socialism, but worse, of ‘revolutionary’ challenges (in this case the clergy and the scholastics). Sorel has some concrete suggestions, mostly drawn from Marx’s letter on the Gotha program, in particular decentralization and the federalization of education.

The fundamental point, though, is that while the anticlerical struggle makes good sense for the socialists today, Sorel suggests that perhaps it will not always do so. Perhaps the socialists should not be reflexively anticlerical, because in doing so they may hand the reigns of power over to the scholastic party. Freedom of thought, on this

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47 Ibid. p 414.
48 It seems to me that strong parallels can in fact be drawn between Sorel’s position here and the “pluralist” liberalism that Vincent shows to have arisen in response to the Terror in the work of Benjamin Constant and Germain de Stael. See K. Steven Vincent, Benjamin Constant and the birth of French liberalism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
49 Sorel, "L'Église et l'État." p 415. The letter on the Gotha program was clearly an important indication for Sorel about how Marx thought it best to proceed practically.
understanding, can perhaps not be legislated into existence, but it may be maintained through a plural and agonistic political situation. Put another way, socialism should be careful that it is always on the side of democracy. This is, for Sorel, only natural, “socialism contains spiritual elements and at the very least it contains them in as much as it is concerned to develop democracy; for democracy has only essentially spiritual ends: liberty, law for all, and so forth.” Marx, Sorel admits, held that democracy was not an extension of socialism, but rather simply sharpened class conflict, but Sorel insists that despite the apparent contradiction, democracy “is also an aliment to...[socialism’s] progress, because thanks to it popular education takes place most completely. The contradiction between democracy and socialism lies above all in the economy, their accord on the spiritual side of social life.”

The fundamental difference between socialism and democracy, Sorel comes around to saying, is that democracy has, or at least ‘democrats’ have, no concept of the economy. But liberalism, as we have seen, springs essentially from the economic realm as a mode of collective life. So there is a danger here implicit in democracy, as perhaps in socialism.

We are left at the end of the essay with a brief discussion of militarism, an issue at the center of the post-Dreyfus world Sorel has been describing, and a major propaganda-
point for left-wing agitators. Blind militarism was defeated, at least temporarily, during the Dreyfus Affair because anticlericalism was able to provide the socialists with the support of an “amalgam of diverse social classes; it perfectly represents the daily struggle against domination”.

The discipline of the church being the most insidious and total, struggle against it is the most perfect. Sorel’s suggestion—and it remains only that here—is that given the nature of political engagement in the contemporary world, and the dangers attendant to it, even a struggle such as that against clericalism should be waged with a notion of the contingency of political alliances in mind. The problem we are left with at the end here is the articulation of the individual as an ethical actor into these different political structures. At stake is neither the notion of pluralism itself, nor the propagandistic manipulation of the individual, but the scientific understanding of how individuals engage in political action as they demonstrably do.

**The Crisis of Liberalism**

If the Dreyfus Affair renewed the energies of self-described liberals against the party of authority and tradition, the developments of anti-clericalism and the sharpening of Church-State conflict under Combes’ leadership, provoked a crisis among liberal

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52 Ibid. p 419. This “amalgame” is perhaps an early version of the notion of the historical ‘bloc’ that Mouffe and Laclau, following Gramsci, found in Sorel.

53 As Ruth Harris and others have argued, it is a-historical to believe that even the most rationalist Dreyfusards arrived at their Dreyfusism through a rational evaluation of the evidence. Sentiment and contingency were enormously important in deciding who would end up on which side. The point is that Sorel’s view of how the in fact noble alliance of the Dreyfusards was constituted, while irritating to a certain angelic view of the Dreyfusards, is closer to the truth. Harris, *Dreyfus: politics, emotion, and the scandal of the century*. 
intellectuals. The question of education was particularly problematic. Many liberals were torn: on the one hand it seemed unacceptable to allow the Church to continue teaching blind obedience and superstition to vulnerable children, on the other hand it was hard to accept that the State should attempt to control the spiritual life of the society in any way at all. What was left of intellectual liberalism if the belief in the efficacy of rational discussion was removed? Were there acceptable limits to state control over the schools? It was understood that economic liberalism—*laisser-aller, laisser-passer*—was a thing of the past. Did that mean that the liberal ideal of free discussion was, by analogy, also obsolete?

The *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* hosted a discussion of these questions in 1902-1903 under the heading “La crise du libéralisme,” beginning with a searching essay by Celestin Bouglé. Three recent events have, Bouglé says, shaken the pillars of liberals. The anarchist attacks of the middle 1890s convinced many that certain ideas should not be expressed at all, that perhaps it was not so easy to tell where word transformed into deed, and so the freedom of expression had to give way to obedience to law. The Dreyfus Affair, during which the role of the press was similarly problematic, highlighted the practical importance of philosophical differences that, it had previously been thought, could be tolerated with no difficulty in a liberal society. Finally, the current crisis around the role of the Catholic Church suggested that the unity necessary for any society to function at all was threatened by the Church as a “state within a state.” All of this, Bouglé says, has provoked a crisis among believers in “absolute liberalism” by

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suggesting that the principles of liberalism—freedom of expression, of conscience, of association—are coming into conflict with the minimal necessities of a coherent and functional society.\textsuperscript{55}

For Bouglé, as for most of the others who weigh in under this rubric, the central question is the degree of control and power to be handed over to the state. Citing Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville, but arriving finally at Durkheim’s terms, Bouglé declares the existence of “a hypertrophic state over an unorganized mass of individuals” to be “a veritable sociological monstrosity.”\textsuperscript{56} Mediating institutions are necessary to check the power of the State. To the socialists who want to use the State to crush the Church, if only so that socialism itself has room to grow, Bouglé says, you “should be on guard […] lest the weapon you have forged be turned against you,” and goes on to wonder about “advanced parties” more generally if “in hurrying to wall up the past in its tomb they do not crush the future in its cradle?”\textsuperscript{57} Many of the responses to Bouglé’s piece were less concerned about the power of the State.

Gustave Lanson, in these years a central player in the ongoing reform of secondary education, recognized himself among those Bouglé designated as “authoritarians,” but insisted on his essential liberalism.\textsuperscript{58} He defended not only the

\textsuperscript{55} For Bouglé—a disciple of Durkheim—it is sociologically demonstrable that a society requires in order to act in concert, and therefore to exist as society, a certain amount of obedience to a code of law; resemblance among its members, and centralization of administration.


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. p 650.

\textsuperscript{58} Lanson was perhaps the greatest historian of literature of his day. For various reasons his reputation declined rapidly over the 20th century, although as interest in literary history grew in the 1990s, he became interesting again. See Gustave Lanson, Nicholas T. Rand, and Roberta Hatcher, “Literary History and Sociology,” \textit{PMLA} 110, no. 2 (1995).
capacity of the State to manage education—although, as many seemed to think best, indirectly through control of certification—but also a strong distinction in the realm of the printed word between thought and action. For Lanson, the advent of democracy changed the nature of the government’s authority. According to Lanson, for the State to assert authority today simply is “simply the legal organization of freedom, the definition by law and conservation by government of national freedoms. Even here there is no contradiction between liberal republic and authoritarian democracy: the one is the realization of the other. To accept, for example, the authority of M. Waldeck-Rousseau is not to recover, through a reactionary apostasy, the principle of Louis XIV or Gregory VII.”

For Lanson, freedom of thought had to be defended absolutely, and with it freedom of expression—but some expressions were really actions. While any journalist should be free to write, ‘I wish someone would deliver us from this terrible government’ without fear of legal reprisal, to write, ‘meet at Place de la Nation at 3pm, and bring your revolver,’ or to print a lie about a specific individual—such statements “can make no claim on the freedom of thought.” What is being highlighted here, in an almost lawyerly fashion by this literary critic, is a distinction between a realm of pure thought, and one of action.

Lanson’s implicit distinction between a realm of the spirit and one of material—that is, of freedom and constraint—is above all evident in his discussion of religion. Of course beliefs are absolutely protected, the society has nothing to object to any kind of

60 Ibid. p 752.
individual belief “but,” Lanson says, “as soon as the exterior life of the believer is no
longer the simple and direct expression of his mystical activity, as soon as it develops
beyond the properly religious terrain, into the domain of economic interests and social
functions, although the believer might well attach all these modes of activity to his
mystical activity, and give them out as necessary prolongations of it, we are not obliged
to believe him.” 61 For Lanson—as for Harnack—religion is essentially a mystical relation
between an individual and his god. Although Lanson allows that some “prayer or ritual”
may “express this relation” and therefore deserve protection, it seems to him to be
minimal, and easily subtracted from real, material, society: “the organization of property,
of teaching corporations, of aid societies, the conditions for the recruitment of
functionaries: all this has nothing at all to do with the question of religious freedom.” 62
This is all because, for Lanson as for many of the participants in this discussion, religion
is spiritual, and therefore cannot legitimately impinge on the material except through the
mediating functions of science and universal suffrage.

Baptiste Jacob’s intervention is perhaps the most acute articulation of this
dilemma. Jacob made his name with an 1898 defense in the pages of the RMM of
rationalism against Bergson’s *Matière et memoire*, and here, too, defends a rigorously
rationalist liberalism. 63 Jacob sets out his position by drawing an analogy with economic
liberalism. Like Bouglé, he is confident that the economic perspective of liberalism is no

61 Ibid. p 754.
62 Ibid. p 755.
63 On this defense, and on Jacob, see Soulié, *Les philosophes en République: L'aventure intellectuelle de la
Revue de métaphysique et de morale et de la Société française de Philosophie (1891-1914).* pp 264-273.
longer that of free competition: “in the order of ideas as in the order of interests, liberalism has ceased to be an apology for absolute *laisser-faire* [...] Rational pedagogical liberalism consists in establishing the conditions for a just competition between ideas, as rational economic liberalism does in establishing the conditions for a just competition between practical ambitions.”  

Rational liberalism is therefore entirely comfortable, in theory, limiting, although not suppressing, the freedom of action of those who would themselves abolish the conditions of just competition—again, in pedagogy as in economy.

Rational liberalism, however, can only ever be an ideal—regulative, to be sure, but never more than that. Jacob arrives at this position not through political realism, but through a basic metaphysical principle: “to realize the conditions of true liberalism, it would be necessary—absurd hypothesis—to eliminate the whole of the sensible and leave on the field only pure minds [esprits].”  

It is impossible to arrive at a pure rationalism because, following Aristotle, the intelligible is inseparable from the sensible, and the sensible always contains something indeterminate and irrational. So we have a regulative ideal of just competition, in economic as well as spiritual matters, but one which recognizes what might be called the irreducible contingency of the original situation—all competition actually takes place in history, and the constitutive injustice of history viewed abstractly cannot be eliminated. Rational liberalism is an impossible dream, empirical liberalism an endless battle.

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65 Ibid. p 106.
This metaphysical position—which drew Jacob close to Boutroux, and which was
dear to the hearts of the editorial committee of the RMM—was by no means universally
shared, and had significant political consequences. Paul Lapie, another participant in the
discussion, defended a less modest rationalism. Lapie, a co-founder of the *Année
sociologique* with Durkheim, Parodi, and Bouglé, was very much a product of the
Republic’s meritocracy who would spend the last part of his life in high administrative
positions.\(^66\) In 1921, he reaffirmed his anti-pluralism in the clearest possible way: “there
is no conflict, bloody or verbal, local or global, that does not have at its root an error or a
misunderstanding […] Correct action follows correct thought.”\(^67\) Even making
allowances for the effect that the war may have had to harden and render brittle his
rationalism, this same fighting faith is visible in his 1902 defense of liberalism. Lapie
insisted that the law of the state, in order to retain “its impersonality, that is to say its
moral value,” must never be aimed at individuals or specific classes of individuals.\(^68\)
Only social functions can be the legitimate objects of laws. It therefore makes no sense to
specifically target religions teachers, teaching institutions, or any kind of religious
association. Laws of general application would be entirely sufficient to protect what had
to be protected from religious influence. Without making any reference to religion at all,
the State should simply oblige all teachers to successfully complete a given course of

\(^{66}\) Lapie attended the Sorbonne with the support of a scholarship. He took up the rectorship at Toulouse in
1911, later becoming the director of Primary education. See Hervé Terral, “Paul Lapie (1869-1927):
a new edition of the book, which was originally published in 1902.
The implication here is that religion is not a social function—in as much as it can be discussed at all, it is purely individual, and therefore outside the purview of the law.

Lapie, resting comfortably on his rationalism, is much more willing to use the coercive power of the state than Jacob. Jacob, in what might be a direct response to Lapie, worries about the State, “to invite the State to paralyze the influences that artificially favor conservative or reactionary ideas is to forget that the State can itself by artifice attribute to certain ideas, old or new, an influence that does not naturally belong to them.” Jacob is happy to admit that the “tyranny of social and worldly prejudices is not a chimera, but neither is that of the State.” Perhaps speaking again to Lapie, Jacob says that “many minds are confused on this point because they imagine that in a democratic regime the opinion of the State becomes at one, through the intermediary of universal suffrage, with that of common sense. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

For Jacob, although he professes himself to be as attached as Lapie to a rationalist ideal, this ideal can by its nature never be realized. The practical consequence of this is that Jacob will not trade—as Lapie will—liberal means for liberal ends. The spirit of liberalism must be protected, especially given the increasingly inescapable demands for economic restructuring coming from the socialists, demands to which Jacob in common with most

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69 Ibid. pp 771-772.
70 Jacob, "La crise du libéralisme," p 116. And he goes on to say that “Le sens commun populaire, qui d’ailleurs n’est pas impeccable, n’a nullement sa représentation exacte dans la volonté du suffrage universel.”

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participants, are quite sympathetic. The best grand strategy, Jacob believes, would be to let the Church die the natural death that is already very much on the horizon.

Something like the last word in the RMM’s discussion of the crisis of liberalism went to Dominique Parodi, who claims to side firmly with Jacob’s distinction between a rational and an empirical liberalism, even while taking an effectively different position. According to “M. Jacob’s luminous formula, beyond empirical liberalism there is a rational liberalism, which corrects and deepens the first.” The nature of a rational liberalism, even as principle, is absolutely necessary to understand, because “principles are, in the practical order and for the conduct of life, what theories are in the speculative order and for the progress of the sciences.” These principles of course come into contact with messy reality. Looking to Renouvier, Parodi explains that “human action, taking place in an unjust, abnormal, and irrational milieu, reason cannot pretend to determine it completely [intégralement], under pain of working against itself”—and, yet more strongly, “cannot conform to intransigent principles except at the price of their eclipse, their more complete and durable violation in humanity as a whole.”

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71 Everyone who says anything about it comes down on the left. Freedom of though requires, the logic goes, freedom from certain kinds of want and risk. See Spitz, Le moment républicain en France.
72 Jacob, "La crise du libéralisme," p 120. Not that Jacob’s liberalism is unarmed. We liberal rationalists, he says, should bring sword and fire only to those Catholics—and there are more than a few—who have expressly declared war on the modern world. Meaning, one suspects, the Assumptionists.
73 Parodi’s father was Italian, but had success writing, among other things, verse in French. Parodi, a firmly rationalist Dreyfusard, taught philosophy at various lycées, after the war becoming inspector general of public education. He took over the direction of the RMM after Halévy’s death. See André Lalande, “Dominique Parodi (1870-1955),” Revue de métaphysique et de morale 60, no. 4 (1955). And Soulié, Les philosophes en République: L’aventure intellectuelle de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale et de la Société française de Philosophie (1891-1914). p 57 note 147.
75 Ibid. pp 265-266.
76 Ibid. p 268.
claiming to walk in Jacob’s footsteps, is really pushing in a different direction from Jacob’s cautious, methodological optimism. To save liberalism, Parodi asserts, its principles cannot be sacred: “Can I act toward the invalid or the madman as with a healthy man?” and more directly, “is the best way to prepare the development of reason in a child […] in fact to address ourselves from the beginning and exclusively to it [reason]?” 77 Here is the rub: the child—and, by extension, “the worker, the peasant […] the alcoholic or the son of an alcoholic”—does not yet possess “rational autonomy” and so it is reasonable on the part of the pedagogue, in order to inculcate reason, to draw on resources exogenous to it. 78

As Parodi points out, from a practical perspective, the differences between himself, Jacob, Lapie and other participants in this debate, whatever their metaphysical roots, amount to different evaluations of the danger presented to liberalism by the Church. Parodi himself is deeply pessimistic, objecting strenuously to Jacob’s idea that Catholicism will die a natural death. On the contrary, Catholicism is on the march, “undeniable, constant, menacing. The struggle is open. Great care must be shown in the choice of weapons: will would be imprudent, perhaps naïve, to disarm.” 79 A secular worldview should have spread from the top of society downward, but something like the reverse happened in France over the course of the 19th century. “The people” have steadily shed their religious beliefs, while the bourgeoisie has turned increasingly toward the Church, producing “an ever-deepening scission [scission] between two hostile

77 Ibid. p 268.
78 Ibid. p 277.
79 Ibid. p 276.
Frances: it is to be feared that only violence can resolve the conflicts that arise quietly between them.” Such is the besieged situation of liberalism in France.

To the questions, what violence? In whose favor? Parodi gives a clear answer signaled, if nothing else, by repeated references to 1848. The violence need not be bloody, but might well be the forceful imposition of secular education on the whole nation, carried out in the name of the people. Indeed, there is a messianic imperative to educate, of course the lower classes, but yet more urgently the upper ones who are the more at fault. The Second Republic was lost by the too-hasty ascription of rational autonomy to the people as a whole. The Republic—liberty itself—was betrayed by workers and peasants not yet ready to be free. The Third Republic must avoid this fate, and so must insist on fashioning for itself a free—that is, a Republican—electorate. One might well ask where Parodi thinks of himself as standing here—not among the bourgeois, and clearly not le peuple. Parodi, it seems clear enough, is a sworn man for the Republic, a functionary, an autocrat, for freedom. Unlike the pure rationalists like Lapie, however, Parodi gives us a fully, remarkably, historicized world: “on the moving scene of our social life, conditions of action are constantly changing, and perhaps the solution that seems to impose itself today will no longer be possible tomorrow, if some irrevocable act or other intervenes, such an event that decisively engages us in a life from which we can no longer exit: for such is the inevitable tyranny of social solidarity.” For Parodi, social action is a gambit that each person must make for themselves. Is Jacob right that the

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80 Ibid. p 277.
81 Ibid. p 278.
Church is in decline and enforcing secular education will only poison liberalism for the future? Or is the Church really more powerful than it might appear, and is it necessary to actively defend the freedoms already won? Parodi’s historical vision gives both weight and lightness to this question. In 1848, the wrong choice was made, and a generation or more was lost. History condemned that choice—but perhaps one day, a secular monopoly on teaching will not be experienced as dogmatic or intolerant, but will be understood, as all good liberals believe it to be now, “as a social organization of intellectual freedom.”

Parodi in particular, then, defending liberalism, arrives at a Manichean, scissionistic vision of social reality that demands what can only be called an existential commitment on the part of individuals, to take coercive political steps now in the hopes of future justification for a utopian rationalist project. Violence, this is to say, finds its justification in the ethical imperative carried by the myth of rational liberalism. Not all the participants in the debate arrived at such an extreme vision of the world as did Parodi, but all of them mobilized the same basic dualistic framework—reason and freedom in a realm of the ideal, irrationality and constraint in the material world. Parodi sought to break out of this dualism by articulating an historical ethic of reason—of science. Unlike Sorel, he never sought to ground reason in the material conditions of production. Indeed,

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82 Ibid. p 279. It is not surprising that Parodi would take this position if he had been reading Renouvier on 1848. See Blais, *Au principe de la République : le cas Renouvier.*

83 This rationalist liberalism is itself a sort of high-point of irrationality. The field of ideas has been entirely consumed by the rhetoric of economics and of social Darwinism, with a messianic twist. A level playing field must be established, perhaps at great cost, so that in the free play of competition reasonable ideas can defeat unreasonable ones—as we know they must. It is unsurprising that these same people would later find so upsetting the pragmatist suggestion that, perhaps, the winning ideas are the ones that define reason and even the shape of the field, rather than the other way around.
where for Sorel reason springs from engagement with the world, for Parodi, for Jacob, reason, available through the sensible, is also corrupted by it.

The crisis of liberalism, which Bouglé recognized as a politico-philosophical problem provoked by the institutional conflict primarily, but not exclusively, between Church and State at the end of the French 19th century, provoked a thoroughgoing reappraisal of metaphysical foundations and the relation of politics to these foundations. This reappraisal was, of course, historically implicated with the Dreyfus Affair—but we must be clear here. For the RMM group, liberalism was thrown into question not by the backhanded and antisemitic machinations of the army, not by the virulence of the resistance to revision of the Dreyfus verdict, but by the very real prospect that they themselves would use the coercive power of the state to enforce a condition of autonomous rationality. This was a crisis, and it was also Sorel’s crisis. At its heart was a grappling with dualism and the relation of metaphysics and the ethics of philosophical practice to the active world.

**Catholic Modernism**

Sorel always connected the internal intellectual state of the Church to its situation in the larger society. If the liberal intellectuals felt themselves thrown into crisis by the sequence of events, so, too, were Catholic intellectuals. But the crisis was not the same for those liberals ensconced within the state as it was for those outside the state. In 1901, Sorel had argued that the political field was essentially plural, and had based his analysis
of the Church’s situation on this. As the combiste assaults on the Church continued, however, this position became more difficult to maintain. As the State increasingly flexed its muscles in preparation for a profound re-shaping of the social field, the Church itself had to react in some way to the potential of a reduced pluralism. Modernism can be understood as one such response, or assertion of the Church’s capacity to exist under the conditions of modernity.

The intellectual history of European Catholicism is difficult to disentangle from the political history, indeed the external, or temporal crisis in European Catholicism was closely tracked by a series of spiritual and intellectual crises. For this reason, the roots of the intellectual crisis of the Church are more difficult to fix, but for present purposes they should probably be sought in the aftermath of 1848. During the Second Republic, many people saw no necessary contradiction between Catholicism and socialism. Yet over the course of Louis Bonaparte’s rise to power, Catholicism become strongly associated with repressive government—an important difference from the traditional, traditionally defensible, association with the crown. Moreover, decisive scientific and technological developments began to impose themselves in the second half of the 19th century. The pure and well-known forms of this conflict are taught in elementary school (in certain states), Darwinian evolution, for instance. But the more interesting and in some ways pressing terrain of conflict was over history. The most famous example in France is certainly Ernest Renan’s 1863 bestseller, La vie de Jésus.84 The contestable and contested

nature of historical science made it perhaps the sharpest edge of the wars between religion and science. The philosophical problematic of the 1860s and 70s that concerned itself so deeply with the problem of free will in a world of scientific determinism was also an index of the Church’s dilemma. Philosophers such as Alfred Fouillée came at this problem from a secular angle, but others, most importantly Émile Bourroux, did so from an implicitly Catholic one.\textsuperscript{85}

As the Church fought a series of battles over science and secularism in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, it marched steadily into intransigence. The essential strategy of the Church, in the face of the continual intellectual assault of modern science, was retrenchment. In 1863, the last proposition of the \textit{Syllabus of Errors} rejected the idea that “the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.”\textsuperscript{86} In 1870, the doctrine of the \textit{ex cathedra} infallibility of the Pope was officially affirmed. The strength of the Catholic Church in France came to lie in resurgent popular movements.\textsuperscript{87} Thus it was easy to have the notion that the Church, however popular it might be, was fundamentally authoritarian—in its doctrine just as in its politics. As the century drew to a close and certain intellectuals began to turn back to the Church, it was in many cases in order specifically to shoulder the burden of refusing


\textsuperscript{86} Proposition #80: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html

\textsuperscript{87} One sensitive treatment of this is, Ruth Harris, \textit{Lourdes : body and spirit in the secular age}, 1st American ed. (New York: Viking, 1999).
modernity. So great was this refusal that by 1913 Pope Pious X was, famously, “L’Européen le plus moderne.”

Many within the Church hierarchy sought to hold open the possibility of a different relation with modernity—the latter always up for interpretation—and this generated the Modernist Crisis. Individuals and sections of the Church attempted to articulate reform programs that would preserve the essence of the Church, but would admit enough change to either account for, or safely delimit, those claims of modern science which it seemed increasingly unreasonable to deny. Those eventually called modernists were one such group. Although their legacy can be seen in Vatican II and other later reforms, at the time those who sought to work within the Church met with flat failure. The 1907 papal encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* is definitive. It provided a didactic account of modernism in order the more securely to condemn it as “the synthesis of all heresies.”

The Modernist Crisis as a historical term refers to the intellectual and institutional conflict in France begun most prominently with the debate over the abbé Alfred Loisy’s *L’Évangile et l’Église* (1902). One recent scholarly work suggests that “a common question… was certainly characteristic of Modernism…How should one relate the findings of modern scholarship, especially critical history, to the inherited doctrine and

89 Much could be said about the rhetorical strategy employed in this encyclical. Modernism is given a false unity in order to serve as the name for all the beliefs the Vatican most wants to reject. This is a tendency about which Sorel wrote in his 1901 essay on Church as State: the Church sees in its enemies its own image: in this case, a concrete organization in the service of a unified doctrine. The encyclical is available on the Vatican’s website: [http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html)
theology of the Church?" In its broadest terms, then, the debate was over the means and desirability of reconciling Catholic teachings with modern science.

It is obviously not enough to see the modernist crisis as the result of a sudden realization that modern science is not compatible with theology. The specificity of this crisis is to be sought in the geopolitical situation of Catholicism described above, but also in the more specific French context. Catholic institutions of higher education had come into being only recently as a result of the educational reforms of the 1870s—for instance the founding of the *Institut catholique*. Pierre Colin, who, following modernism’s great historian Emile Poulat, sees the movement as tied to deeper intellectual and cultural contradictions, points to Maurice Blondel’s 1893 thesis *l’Action*, as the opening volley of the war because it attempted to defend Catholicism using the tools of Bergsonian philosophy. From this perspective, modernism might be seen as the conceptual expression of the newfound institutional specificity and autonomy of Catholic intellectuals. It might be seen, this is to say, as an intellectual liberalization taking place within an institutional context that demands it—a complementary movement to the self-criticism of the liberal secularists who found themselves in an institutional environment that was increasingly anti-liberal.

Alfred Loisy—the abbé Loisy—is generally regarded as the ‘father’ of modernism. Loisy thought of himself as a student of Renan’s, but believed from the beginning of his studies that Renan was wrong about the incompatibility of science and

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faith. Loisy, says one historian, argued “that faithful Catholics could participate fully and freely in modern intellectual life…They could argue with Renan on his own ground and win.”\textsuperscript{91} For Loisy, “like history and science, theology had to progress; biblical theology had to be translated into modern terms in order to be true relative to the modern period…Loisy assigned this work of translation to the magisterium and concluded, ‘the Bible is true but the Church is infallible.’”\textsuperscript{92} With the aid of the historicism of John Henry Newman—an Anglican convert to Catholicism—Loisy sought to “historicize theology without theologizing history.”\textsuperscript{93} Confronting the arguments of liberal protestant theologians, in particular Harnack’s \textit{Essence of Christianity}, translated into French in 1900, Loisy assigned a normative role to theology, but linked this to historical interpretation. In attempting to mount a scientifically acceptable defense of Catholicism against Harnack’s protestant critique, Loisy brought down upon himself the wrath of much of the Church’s hierarchy, and indeed has the reputation of himself taking an excessively anti-Church position.\textsuperscript{94}

Harnack’s liberal protestant program was the recovery of the personal essence of Christianity from the historical encrustations of Catholicism. For Harnack, Roman Catholicism, despite the influence of St. Augustine and the continual renewal provided by monasticism, had nonetheless come close to losing the essence of Christianity—a

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid. p 78.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. p 91.
\textsuperscript{94} The citation to which Loisy has broadly been reduced is, “Christ announced the Kingdom, but it was the Church that arrived.” Out of the context of a book written largely \textit{against} Harnack, it might well appear to have been written by Harnack.
personal relation to the living God—under the weight of tradition, intellectualism, and ritualism, all accentuated by the essentially political nature of the Church. Harnack—in his famous metaphor of seed and husk—argued that the meaningless husk of religious ritual had to be stripped away to reach the essence, although of course one must not strip away too much and be left with nothing. Loisy asked in response, “why the essence of the tree…might not be more truly and perfectly realized in the tree than in the grain? Is the process of assimilation by which growth takes place to be seen as an alteration of the essence of the grain? Is it not rather the indispensible condition of its being, its conservation, its progress in a life always the same and continuously renewed?”

Interestingly, Loisy accused of Harnack of coming close to a Hegelian definition of religion—which charge Sorel among others promptly turned directly back onto Loisy.

The debate between Loisy and Harnack—or, rather, Loisy’s attack on Harnack—centrally concerned the legitimacy of the Catholic Church in the modern age. Placing the debate into the larger context of the moment, it is clear that Harnack’s definition of religion was also that deployed by the liberal rationalists of the RMM. According to this definition, religion was essentially moral, and therefore essentially spiritual, and therefore did not have legitimate political claims—which is to say that it could not make claims a liberal was obliged to respect. Loisy’s defense of the historical, materially conditioned and adaptive nature of Catholicism—of truth itself—presented a real challenge to rationalist liberalism.

Catholicism and Liberalism

Writing in 1902 for the RMM, Sorel took his cue from Mgr Turinaz’ shrill accusation that Loisy’s work was neither Catholic nor even Christian.96 Such spectacular accusations were incomprehensible except as a sort of compensatory mechanism. For Sorel the contemporary crisis was not the result of a newly sharp incompatibility between science and faith: in fact there was increasingly little reason for the two to come into conflict. Rather, he wrote, “the same process that produced this attenuation of conflict, engendered the crisis.”97 That is, the kind of philosophy over which believers and non-believers had been forced to struggle, had become outmoded. The state of struggle, however, is normal for Church theology—when the need for it abates, theology goes into crisis. The crisis within Catholic thought, then, is really over how best to re-found a meaningful Catholic philosophical worldview given current, pluralist, conditions.

These conditions have everything to do with what modern science does and does not rule out. Looking back to his earlier epistemological writings, Sorel argued in some detail that “science today begins with what is done in laboratories, infinite multiplicity is a given. It could be said that modern science is an abstraction from technology, borrowing from it its essential characteristics, but technology does not present, in any way, the characteristic of unity. With it, one finds above all particularity, infinite

dispersion.” Given the technological basis of scientific knowledge, although “there is a
relation (very difficult to define) between nature and our artificial constructions [...] we
can never identify the laws of nature with those of science [...] they are two worlds
different in their essence. It follows that determinism in nature appears rather as a
prejudice than as a principle of philosophy.” To have confidence in science is no longer
to have confidence in the divine nature of the first mover, but rather simply to feel that
there is an agreement between theory and observed fact sufficient to the day. Therefore,
Sorel concludes, “there is no peremptory reason for or against [any particular] miracle, it
is accepted or rejected based on one’s intimate convictions, over which science has no
directive power.” Modern science, then, is compatible with faith—as is evidenced by
the large number of believing Catholic scientists, who experience no functional
contradiction between their faith and their scientific practice.

The crisis within Catholic thought, then, is not a scramble to justify continued
faith in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary—rather, it is evidence
of confusion over how, in these new conditions, to elaborate a philosophy that would be
both effective in the modern world and continuous with existing Catholic institutions.
Thus far, no philosophical elaboration—secular or otherwise—of the present-day
“science des arts” had yet successfully imposed itself, and it seemed that none was likely

98 Ibid. p 534.
99 Ibid. p 535.
100 Ibid. p 537. Sorel says, a little further down, that if the laws of nature are only approximate “on peut
admettre que dans le petit intervalle libre se glisse quelquefois une action surnaturelle; cette idée se
retrouve dans beaucoup de livres anciens, et elle a permis à la théologie dite rationaliste d’imaginer des
solutions aussi ingénieuses que bizarre.” p 540. There is a reference here to Émile Boutroux’s Catholic
philosophy of science. But it is also important to point out that Sorel is not exactly eager to find miracles in
the world, he’s only pointing out that it is nearly impossible to definitively exclude them.
to do so soon, because, Sorel says, contemporary metaphysics bases itself on “the study of the deep states of consciousness.”  

In order, Sorel believed, to see clearly to the bottom of a philosophical problem, one must “consider philosophy as depending from the conditions of society, it must therefore be asked what Catholic life has become and what characterizes it today.”  

For Sorel, the answer is clear. Since the middle of the 19th century, Catholicism has become mystical, its active institutional life dominated by popular enthusiasms—Lourdes, for instance. Its theology must thus borrow from the lay world the metaphysics of deep consciousness, “it is in this way that the current crisis can be resolved. The spirit of doubt disappears, and religious life serves to explain the world. Thus theology could take back its role, which is to be, in relation to the sciences, what a sovereign is in relation to its vassals.”  

Sorel, freely giving advice to the Catholics, believes that it is only by plunging theology into what is basically a Bergsonian philosophy, that it can re-found itself on mysticism in a way meaningful within the conditions of scientific modernity.  

And indeed, this option was hardly original to Sorel—Maurice Blondel was only the most famous example of a Bergsonian defense of Catholicism.

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101 Ibid. p 534. Sorel himself elaborated to some degree, although never successfully, such a philosophy of arts.  
102 Ibid. p 548.  
103 Ibid. p 550. On this mystical revival, see Harris, Lourdes : body and spirit in the secular age.  
104 It is not a coincidence that when the author Varieties of Religious Experience began to be known in France, he was associated with Bergson, and appeared as a rank enemy of rationalism. See David G. Schultenover, The reception of pragmatism in France & the rise of Roman Catholic modernism, 1890-1914 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).  
105 Wolf Lepenies highlights the ideological importance of this proposition, although in terms of the disagreement between Péguy and the Action française—for Péguy, Bergson was the only powerful and authentically French philosophical option…for Maurras, he was too Jewish. Wolf Lepenies, Between literature and science : the rise of sociology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
A little over a year later, toward the end of 1903, Sorel returned to these questions in a global consideration of the recently-ended pontificate of Leo XIII, and centrally of its relation to liberalism. 106 Although Sorel reiterated more explicitly his belief that only Bergson offered the Church a metaphysics that could be orthodox, it had by this point become clear that the hierarchy had no interest in allowing the exploration of such a philosophy. The Church set itself decidedly against liberalism, and in a sense this was the necessary correlate of the mysticism that has been the source of energy for Catholics in the 19th century—“when one is sure of possessing the truth, one cannot allow error to spread.”107 This is the principle that the Church has followed always, but particularly in the 19th century as its temporal power waned.

In contrast to religious fanaticism, there is liberalism. Sorel argues that a philosopher like Renan arrives at tolerant liberalism because he believed that “nothing in history suggests a plan arranged by an intelligence governing events,” there is no way to plan or control historical change, nor even to know with any certainty what meaning our actions will eventually have. And yet, “amid this terrible disorder, across numerous retrogressions, the world nonetheless produces something. There is a sort of precipitate that hardens and resists accidents […] Thus something is accomplished, and despite our madness and our crimes, and this something conforms to what is the most desirable.”108

Renan’s liberalism is particularly pessimistic, but its essence is a certain moral stance taken in the face of an unknowable future. More simply, Sorel says, “Liberalism has as its

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106 He wrote now for his own journal, the Études socialistes.
107 Georges Sorel, ”Léon XIII,” Études socialistes 1, no. 5 (1903). p 270.
108 Ibid. p 271.
foundation our ignorance of the future and has the goal of calling to life all our
energies.”¹⁰⁹ This liberalism is not so much a political philosophy as it is an attitude
toward the world, a psychology, which it is possible but not necessarily useful to
formalize.

The worldview or ideology of liberalism is intimately related to economic
structure. Rehearsing an argument he has made in the past, Sorel insists that “modern
liberalism has an economic base,” which dates back to the middle of the 18th century
when it began to seem, for certain people, impossible for the state to plan the economy.¹¹⁰
This economic liberalism went together with a political liberalism, “the universal
competition that existed between business people [entrepreneurs] gave rise to the
ideology that we call liberalism […] Today free-trade and competition are under assault:
liberalism is also in decline.”¹¹¹ There is at least correlation, but Sorel is unspecific about
the causation.

The assault of which Sorel speaks comes from two sides at once—neither the
State nor the Church any longer is interested in free competition, and the State, at least, is
increasingly in a position to impose its will. Sorel identifies Jacobin democracy—
centralized, directive, leveling, totalizing—as a deviation or possibility internal to the
modern state as such, but especially pronounced in the neo-Jacobin Republicanism of
combisme and the anti-clerical campaigns. But the Church also has its own modern form
of democracy, which is not exactly a mirror image of the neo-Jacobinism of the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p 272.
¹¹⁰ Ibid. p 272.
¹¹¹ Ibid. p 272.
Republicans, but certainly has much in common with it. Sorel believes that the Church has made its bargain with modernity and democracy in the form of vulgar antisemitism, drawn from but by no means limited to the conflagrations around Dreyfus.\footnote{Again, Harris’ perspective on the Dreyfus Affair and its immediate consequences—as well as the angry reactions the book won from some historians—is instructive here. Sorel’s notion of democracy is very much borrowed from Tocqueville (Ancien régime is cited throughout these pages).}

In the face of this pair of totalizing and anti-liberal institutions, Sorel’s basic task is to rescue what was great in liberalism: the acceptance of uncertainty with the capacity to call to life all our energies—that is, the capacity to mobilize. Sorel’s syndicalism, like Proudhon’s anarchism, rejects the State and replaces or supplements free-trade by the institutions of free producers. Just as the essence of liberalism is not the economic structure of free-trade, but the political institutions to which it gave rise, so the essence of the proletarian civilization will not be the free-trade that continues to exist, or even the restructured production that is its technical base, but the institutions that grow up around this base. These institutions will be carried by individuals who are tolerant of uncertainty, practical, individualistic, but also moral, solidaristic, devoted.\footnote{Although there are differences in emphasis, it should be clear enough that there was and remains broad agreement (although not total, and not without its borders) about the \textit{kind} of person that is desired, the differences of opinion arise over how to arrive at this result.}

Different metaphysics are appropriate to these different institutions. The old metaphysics of liberalism has dissolved together with the science from which it sprung. The Church ought, perhaps, to endorse Bergsonism, but remains tied to its orthodox Thomism. The State, as we know, favors abstraction, rigidity, and, as Sorel would call it, Jesuitical self-justification—that is, the State is always calling forth a basically Hegelian philosophy of totalization and retroactive self-justification. Loisy accuses Harnack of
Hegelianism, but it would be easy enough to see Loisy himself as an historicist Hegelian pantheist. In any case, it is difficult for either the State or the Church to escape totalistic self-justificatory philosophies. The institutions of the proletariat, however, require a different philosophy, one that springs from the “science des arts” believed to define the present.

Syndicalism, for Sorel, is the socio-political expression of this science of artisanal production, and as such is the inheritor of liberalism. If the energies released by free-trade are no longer sufficient to combat the weapons that industry has put in the hands of the state (really, its administrative-financial capacity), it is perhaps the case that syndicalism, which finds its motive spring not in human competition with other humans, exactly, but direction in human struggle with nature, can resist the logic of the State. The difficult point here is the significance of democracy. Sorel does not accept popular sovereignty, and so regards democracy not so much as a political ideal but as a sociological fact. Like Tocqueville, for Sorel democracy is primarily a leveling process, rather than an extension of political self-rule to the totality of citizens, although the leveling process can have the effect of weakening the social power of certain institutions. The fact of democracy can take on different political expressions, which to some degree the leaders of different institutions can choose. The Catholic Church has decided to manage the fact of democracy through a sharp turn to antisemitism. Sorel calls it a great progress in political science to realize that “antisemitism is one of the authentic forms of democracy,” and expresses surprise that “[Anatole] Leroy-Beaulieu, who has so often spoken and written against antisemitism, has not seen that christian democracy and that *doctrine of hate* are
one and the same thing." Syndicalism, Sorel suggests, would continue to manage democracy through the representative mechanism, with its worst aspects mitigated by the re-focusing of life toward production—which is a zone of autonomy vis-à-vis other individuals—and away from the state. In this sense, syndicalism appears not as an anti-liberalism, but as a new iteration of it in changed circumstances.

**Diremption as Method and Metaphysics**

The two words most famously associated with Sorel’s writing are, certainly, myth and violence. Diremption, as a description of Sorel’s method, is the third. It has not, as far as I know, ever been noticed by scholars of Sorel that this word is strongly associated with Hegel. Indeed, it has been suggested that the word was Sorel’s own invention. In order to properly understand the significance of Sorel’s use of this particular word in this particular situation, a brief detour is required back through, first, the history of this word and second, Sorel’s engagement with Hegel. Sorel’s deployment and association with

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114 Sorel, "Léon XIII." pp 363, 365. Sorel cites the Church’s new-found willingness to discuss the blood-libel. He says, “There really is no good demonstration on the part of friends of the Pope without antisemites” p 367. All this is not least evidence that Sorel, for all his venom against the secularizing republicans, neither harbored illusions about the Church nor—and here a crucial difference with Maurras, ever sided with it. Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu was an historian, and brother to the liberal economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, also often cited by Sorel.

115 See Cerullo, "A Literary Sorel: 'Disremping' a Fin de Siècle Moralist." At some point, Sorel switches from ‘diremption’ to ‘disrempion’—it’s not clear to me that the ‘s’ carries any meaning.

116 The 1950 English translation marks the word out specially as without an equivalent in English, suggesting that Sorel perhaps coined it himself. More recently, Willy Gianinazzi, while not offering any theory about the origin of the word, does complain about “la mauvaise lisibilité du concept” (47) due to its double function as both a metaphysics and a method. This ambiguity makes a great deal more sense if we take account of the Hegelian origins of the word. Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne : Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante*, 1889-1914.
diremption in this context is a clear attempt to overcome the crisis of liberalism. Hegel represented one such attempt at overcoming liberalism, but his legacy was for various reasons poisoned. Sorel, therefore, had to re-establish the conditions in which a new philosophy of politics in modernity could take place.

According to the Littré, diremption is a correct, if obscure, French word “meaning, in terms of law, dissolution,” and particularly applied to marriage. Littré points to a use of the word by none other than Proudhon, commenting on the Church’s policy toward divorce. In principle divorce is not admissible, “but, by a casuistic fiction” a given marriage can be said never to have existed if certain conditions apply. Sorel gives no indication that he was thinking of Proudhon, but certainly having studied Proudhon deeply it is possible he made this association. Indeed, in 1913 letter to Berth in which Sorel expanded on the significance of the term as method, he also insisted that it had always been, although unspoken, Proudhon’s own method.

By the later 19th century, the term in French was strongly associated with Hegel, and German idealism more generally, and remains so today. For instance, a Catholic

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117 Littré says that the word was borrowed from English. The OED gives three meanings. The first two correspond to the two senses of the word given by Littré, and are attested in the 17th century (Hobbes, for instance, provides, “they cannot be parted except the Air or other matter can enter and fill the space made by their diremption”). The third sense is a special botanical one, referring to the separation of leaves, which also existed in French at least by the 19th century. Oxford English Dictionary, "diremption, n." (Oxford University Press).


120 Enrique Dussel casually ascribes the term to Hegel. ‘Diremption’ appears in the Historische Wortebuch Philosophie in a discussion of Marx’s “Zur Judenfrage,” and the English translation of this text (Cambridge) also uses the word, but in the place of both trennung and spaltung. This passage appears on
encyclopedia from the 1840s used the word in its article on metaphysics: Schelling “explains neither the why nor the how of this primitive diremption that he supposes within absolute unity, the result of which is the manifestation of the absolute in the double form of subject and object. […] This is the task that Hegel undertook.”

The word appears frequently in Auguste Ott’s 1844, Hegel et la philosophie allemande. Etienne Vacherot uses it in 1869 in the context of a Hegelian account of Christianity, as a gloss or equivalent for judgment. In general, in translations, diremption was used to replace Entzweiung. In the usage of the time, diremption, then, is the moment of the dialectic in which judgment destroys the unity of a notion, which must then be healed, or surpassed, by the Aufhebung into concept.

French reception of Hegel begins in Hegel’s own lifetime with Victor Cousin’s enthusiastic, if perhaps not rigorous recapitulation of a philosophy learned from the

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master himself.\textsuperscript{124} There was also an important socialist current of Hegelianism, which included in different ways Saint-Simon, Comte, and of course Proudhon.\textsuperscript{125} After 1848, in the authoritarian context of the Second Empire, the strongest Hegelian influence was felt in the historiography of Jules Michelet and Hippolyte Taine.\textsuperscript{126} The Franco-Prussian war in 1870 cast a shadow over discussion of anything German for decades—arguably until it was replaced by the much darker and longer shadows of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{127}

Sorel’s reading of Hegel was sustained, but necessarily highly mediated by the availability of texts and prevailing preconceived ideas.\textsuperscript{128} Most of the text available in

\textsuperscript{124} Cousin, a figure of the intellectual opposition during the Restoration, traveled to Berlin in one of several periods of exile and met with Hegel personally. His 1828 lectures were famously a non-credited recapitulation of Hegelian philosophy of history. Cousin’s personal prominence and eventual institutional power made his re-interpretation of German idealism into what became known as eclectic spiritualism, enormously influential in 19th century French academic philosophy. For an excellent treatment of Cousin and his immediate legacy, see Goldstein, \textit{The post-revolutionary self: politics and psyche in France}, 1750-1850. For later echoes, see Brooks, \textit{The eclectic legacy: academic philosophy and the human sciences in nineteenth-century France}.

\textsuperscript{125} This socialist Hegelianism is particularly emphasized in Michael Kelly, "Hegel in France to 1940: A Bibliographical Essay," \textit{Journal of European Studies} 11(1981).

\textsuperscript{126} Who Sorel seemed to think was running some kind of elaborate intellectual scam on the French people. Sorel is flatly disrespectful in an anonymous 1895 article for \textit{La Jeunesse socialiste}. Interestingly, in connection with Hegel, Sorel says of Taine that, “Il fabriquait une métaphysique de la bourgeoisie.” “Au fond sa méthode s’est trouvée être la même que celle des Jacobins; il a pris dans la tradition chrétienne et dans les créations du moyen age ce qui lui a paru le meilleur, au point de vue de la constitution d’un noble caractère, et il a imaginé un homonculus (très semblable à Taine) qu’il a déclaré être le vrai et réel homme moderne.” Georges Sorel, "Taine devant l’Académie," \textit{La Jeunesse socialiste} 1, no. 2 (1895). p 102. Despite this and other dismissive remarks, Taine remained an important reference-point (or perhaps whipping boy) for years.

\textsuperscript{127} See, classically, Digon, \textit{La crise allemande de la pensée française}, 1870-1914. The language used by the French to describe the quasi-Hegelian Prussians after 1870, and the language that, for instance, Hobhouse uses in 1914, is remarkably similar. It had become more difficult, by 1939, to see the Germans, this time the Nazis, as Hegelians. On this, and the citations from Hobhouse, see Herbert Marcuse, \textit{Reason and revolution: Hegel and the rise of social theory}, 2d ed. (New York: Humanities Press, 1968).

\textsuperscript{128} This reception history is beyond the scope of the present chapter, and has yet to be written. For the best work on Franco-German philosophical exchange, see Michel Espagne, \textit{Le creuset allemand : histoire interculturelle de la Saxe, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles}, 1. ©9d. ed. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000); Michel Espagne and Matthias Middell, \textit{Von der Elbe bis an die Seine : Kulturtransfer zwischen Sachsen und Frankreich im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert}, Deutsch-französische Kulturbibliothek (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1993). But see more specifically Kelly, "Hegel in France to 1940: A Bibliographical Essay," And the response: Baugh, "Limiting Reason's Empire: The Early Reception of Hegel in France."
French had been put there by an Italian Hegelian, Augusto Vera. By the end of the 1870s, he had put into French the entirety of the *Encyclopedia*, as well as the complete version of the lectures on Religion. Sorel was deeply interested in the philosophy of science debates that, by the closing decades of the 19th century, dominated French philosophical writing. Since Hegel was already being invoked in the 1850s and 60s in debates over positivism, Sorel would probably have been aware particularly of how for Ernest Renan and allies of the quasi-empiricism that he represented in philosophy and historiography, Hegel was an enemy, associated with excessively unifying idealist narratives. By the 1890s, speaking schematically, the belief was that philosophy should either purify its concepts—best accomplished through a return to Kantian criticism—or it should take its cues more directly from the vast strides being made in the physical and brain sciences. Certain prominent neo-Kantians such as Émile Boutroux and Octave Hamelin did suggest that that the Hegelian “concrete universal” might be pressed into the service of French epistemology as a mediator between empiricist and rationalist positions (or, put differently, materialism and idealism, synthetic and analytic method…). Basically, however, the powerfully anti-Hegelian positions of all three major contenders in French philosophy at this time left little room for any Hegelian concepts. In sum, in Sorel’s

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129 See on Renan and Vacherot, Gaulin, "Refonder la philosophie en 1860: Ernest Renan critique de Vacherot."
130 Much of this account is drawn from Baugh, which is in some sense a direct response to Kelly, cited above. Baugh, whose focus really remains the 20th century Hegel debates around people like Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and Levinas, argues that these positions were already implied by the critiques leveled at Hegel, and the uses to which he was tentatively put, in the last decade of the 19th century. Baugh, "Limiting Reason’s Empire: The Early Reception of Hegel in France."
131 Baugh argues that this position was already over-crowded. Hegel was squeezed out of the field of French philosophy. Between the neo-criticist Léon Brunschvicg—a figure of substantial institutional
earlier productive years, Hegel was widely held to be the chief ideologue of Prussian militarism, whose real-is-rational slogan meant, in practical terms an amoral worship of the powers that be, and in philosophical ones a self-absorbed but also imperial rationalism, or panlogism, that was not only opaque but also inadequate to the complexity of the world. The contrast would have been with Kant’s rigorous ethics and careful delimitation of reason’s space of operation.

Sorel came to think about the relation of Marx to Hegel well-armed not only with the tools of non-Marxist sociology, but also with the tradition of French philosophy of science, and his reading, from whatever distance, was incisive. References to Hegel are

power by the first years of the century in professional philosophy—and Henri Bergson—who wielded much less institutional, but perhaps more cultural influence—there was simply no room for Hegel. Left entirely to the side in this discussion—and unjustly—has been the reception of Hegelian aesthetics by generations of French artists. Most famously Stephane Mallarmé and Louis Aragon—but this reception begins in the 1850s with the publication by Charles Bénard of a commentary on the Aesthetics. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Charles Bénard, Hegel. Esthetique. (Paris: G. Baillière, 1875). We can get a sense of this shadow from an essay published for Hegel’s centenary in 1870 by Émile Beaussire, an historian of philosophy. It was published in the January 1st issue of the Revue des deux mondes, along with articles discussing from various angles the siege of Paris—then still under way—and comparing the present Prussian invasion of France with that of 1792. Émile Beaussire, "Le centenaire de Hégel en 1870," Revue des deux mondes 91(1871). Germany, said Beaussire, celebrates the centenary of Hegel’s birthday and “le but qu’elle poursuit par la violence et par la conquête n’est que la réalisation d’idées hégéliennes. La philosophie de Hegel se nourrit d’abstractions ; mais elle ne se nourrit pas d’idées pures. Elle aime la force, elle préconise la guerre, elle est pleine d’enthousiasme pour les conquérans…On fait trop d’honneur à l’Allemagne contemporaine et à M. de Bismarck quand on les suppose élevés à l’école de Kant.” p 145. According to Beaussire, Hegel simply took the material world for the incarnation of the ideal one—his idealism is nothing but a materialism that worships the the strong for their strength. The free will of the individual is both more truly in line with reason and universality and also, Beaussire strongly suggests, more French. Michael Kelly cites Beaussire and Ravaissé, both supposedly commemorating the centenary, “Between then they did not so much commemorate Hegel as commit him to oblivion, for they represent almost the last comments to be made on the philosopher within the French university for fifteen years.” Kelly, “Hegel in France to 1940: A Bibliographical Essay.” p 37. Kelly also emphasizes the arguments around Hegel and positivism in the later 1850s—significant as this is, contextualizing Sorel here would be too radically speculative.

There is, of course, a great deal to be said about the French Marxist reading of Hegel, and the re-appearance of Hegel in France through Marx. A full account would obviously take this into
scattered throughout Sorel’s writings. The 1896 essay on Vico makes continual reference to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Religion*. Citations suggest that at least by late 1898 Sorel had read substantially in Hegel’s *Encyclopedia*. The great arguments over the epistemological status of Marxism naturally pushed Sorel to enquire into the meaning of the dialectic, and this meant forming an opinion about Hegel.\(^{134}\) For Sorel, the dialectic was always a means of resolving apparent paradox.\(^{135}\) In a letter to Benedetto Croce from December 1897, he complained that despite the ease with which it is invoked, “what above all seems to me obscure is the *dialectical method*.” Sorel asks, “would it not be better to suppress this expression, the *dialectic*, and everything connected to the *negation of the negation*? It would be a great progress, given that, for our contemporaries, this whole Hegelian apparatus has no meaning.”\(^{136}\) A fuller exploration of this would take seriously consideration—Sorel was close to some of these documents, for instance Pleckanov’s essay on Hegel in *l’Ère nouvelle*. See Kelly, "Hegel in France to 1940: A Bibliographical Essay." pp 38ff, 50.

\(^{134}\) This was a methodological question of some weight. For instance, Antonio Labriola’s defense of dialectical method was no small part of the reason for the rift between him and Sorel. Labriola included, as an appendix to the French translation of his *Discorrendo*—written as a series of long letters to Sorel—several pages from Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* on the dialectic. Sorel (trained, remember, in theoretical mathematics) was unimpressed by Engels’ demonstration of the negation of the negation (-a*-a=a). In a review of Labriola’s book, Sorel deplored that Labriola, “accepte, sans chercher à la concilier avec sa doctrine, ce qu’on a appelé la *dialectique* d’Engels et il a joint à son livre un passage où Engels expose cette bizarre théorie…J’avais fortement engagé M. L. à supprimer cet appendice.” Georges Sorel, "Labriola - Socialisme et philosophie," *Revue philosophique* 48(1899). p 109. See also in connection to Engels, Sorel’s rejection of his use of Spinoza, Sorel and Croce, *Lettere a Benedetto Croce*. p 58.

\(^{135}\) For instance, the letter from 14 January 1896 to Croce, speaking about Campanella, “alla sua epoca nessuno si immaginava che si potesse correggere un vizio un altro modo che spromendone la causa; oggi ci sembra che la correzione debba provenire dal completo sviluppo, schiuso alla grande luce del reale, di tutta la causa. Prima di Hegel nessuno poteva sospettare un paradosso simile.” Sorel and Croce, *Lettere a Benedetto Croce*. p 35.

\(^{136}\) “ciò che soprattutto mi sebra oscuro è il *metodo dialettico*… Non converrebbe forse sopprimere questa espressione, la *dialettica*, e tutto ciò che si risconduce alla *negazione della negazione*? Sarebbe un grande progresso, dato que, per i nostri contemporanei, tutto questo apparato hegeliano non presenta alcun significato.” Ibid. pp 48-49.
Giovanni Gentile’s essays on Marx and Hegel, as well as Croce’s writings on this subject, which Sorel certainly read.\(^{137}\) It can be said that the dialectic appeared to Sorel as just one more way of finding always the same thing, of getting always the same, pre-established answer, no matter the question posed by empirical reality.

However, Sorel saw that Marx had inherited more than remnants of idealism from Hegel. In an article on the future of Marxism Sorel cites a passage from Capital on the inevitability of proletarianization, which he says occupies roughly the same place in Marxism as the fourth Gospel of the Bible does in Christianity.\(^{138}\) In a footnote to this passage, he says “no one has yet observed…that Marx’s theory of the proletariat is entirely borrowed from Hegel’s Philosophy of Spirit. [note: not the Phenomenology] The revolution has as its object the passage to general self-consciousness and thus to bring about the reign of reason on earth.”\(^{139}\) Sorel promises that he’s going to look into this question at length later on. He never did. But, in a text first delivered as a lecture and probably written soon after the one just mentioned, Sorel returned to Marx’s Hegelianism, saying that Marx, “remembered what Hegel wrote about the opposition of master and servant, and about the process through which reason appears at the moment


\(^{138}\) Chapter 32 is the one in question, and authorizes much of Engels’ language: “The capitalist mode of appropriation, the result of the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labour of the proprietor. But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation. It is the negation of negation. This does not re-establish private property for the producer, but gives him individual property based on the acquisition of the capitalist era: i.e., on cooperation and the possession in common of the land and of the means of production.”

\(^{139}\) “Nessuno ha ancora osservato, mi pare, che la teoria del proletariato di Marx è tolta ad imprestito dalla Filosofia della spirito de Hegel ($$ 434, 435$$. La rivoluzione ha per iscopo di passare alla coscienza del sé generale, e allora avverrà il regno della ragione sulla terra. Io mi propongo di scolgere questo concetto in uno studio sull’origine hegeliana del marxismo.” Sorel, “Dove va il marxismo?.” p 13.
when this opposition disappears. The disciple…perhaps…even exaggerated the influence that reason was to have in the society of the future."140 It is a measure of Sorel’s capacity as a reader that he makes this connection—generally associated with Kojève’s lectures in the 1930s—between Marx and the Master-Slave dialectic. Yet he does so from within the frame of a mainstream French critique of Hegel’s panlogism, and of the excessively unifying nature of Hegelian reason, above all when applied to history.

Diremption, then, signals as a term Sorel’s specific attack on the panlogism of Hegelian dialectics. Sorel uses this word, which re-appears at several important later moments in his work, first in consideration of Church, modernity, and liberalism. The philosophy of diremption is posed here in contrast to a philosophy of unification.

According to Sorel, many philosophers “postulate that the mind [l’esprit] requires unity; but this is completely inaccurate.”141 Contradictory logics manifestly exist in every historical formation. This is clear from the work of genuine historians like Renan. Sorel says that

man cannot create unity in his thought unless he allows himself to give up part of reality. In order to construct a new metaphysics that corresponds to our needs, it must be admitted that in coming into contact with the world, our mind divides itself into distinct

140 "se souvenait de ce que Hégel a écrit sur l'opposition du maître et du serviteur, et sur le processus par lequel apparaît la raison, au moment où cette opposition s'efface. Le disciple n'a pas reproduit purement et complètement la pensée de son prédécesseur; mais il s'en est inspiré et peut-être même a-t-il exagéré l'influence que la raison devrait avoir dans la société future." ———, "L'éthique du socialisme." p 282. See also, from the same few months, and also published in RMM, the footnote on Hegel: “le lecture voudra bien se reporter aux §§ 436-440 de la Philosophie de l’esprit de Hégel pour comprendre l’origine de cette théorie, de même qu’il faut se reporter aux §§ 431-435 pour bien comprendre la théorie du prolétariat. Je me réserve de revenir amplement plus tard sur ces bases hégéliennes du marxisme.” Georges Sorel, "Y a-t-il de l'utopie dans le marxisme?," Revue de métaphysique et de morale 7(1899). p 171. Andler, in his treatment of Hegel, mentions the Master-Slave relation, although he does not explicitly connect it to the Bourgeois-Proletariat relation. Charles Andler, Les Origines du socialisme d’État en Allemagne (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1897). p 28.
141 Sorel, "Léon XIII." p 265.
ideologies, which deal with areas that become more separate as we gain a broader knowledge [connaissance] of the real. Humanity has always acted as though it understood this metaphysics and the evidence of history legitimizes the enterprise of those who seek to create this philosophy of diremption to replace that of unification.¹⁴²

This is a clear statement of opposition to the kind of unification—totalization—that Hegel was taken to represent. Sorel, in selecting this Hegelian word, is refusing specifically the Aufhebung, the dialectical resolution or, he says, unification. Abstract reason does destroy the apparent unity of its objects—and although this reason does have a concrete foundation in institutions, no unity necessarily follows from this. Sorel does not mention him here, but Vico is clearly behind this way of dividing the realm of reason into separate materially grounded ideologies. As Sorel maintained earlier in the same Church-State context, it is a mere prejudice, without scientific justification, to assume that the world has a rational unity in and of itself that could guarantee the rational unity of human thought. Diremption—understood as an interruption or revision of the dialectic—brings this principle up to the level at once of method and metaphysics.¹⁴³

It becomes a critical principle through which the dilemmas faced by the contemporary Church might be understood. It is a counter to the totalization implicit in the (Hegel)-Newman-Loisy line of historicist reasoning about the Church and its meaning. Diremption is explicitly not a thoroughgoing subjectivism. The Pope would like to enforce Thomist philosophy on Catholic intellectuals but, as Sorel says, the main virtue of Thomist metaphysics was that it fit quite well with ancient scientific knowledge. It is unsurprising if the vast majority of younger Catholic intellectuals prefer Bergson and

¹⁴² Ibid. p 265.
¹⁴³ This is a conceptual parallel with Hegel’s dialectic, the ambiguities of which Fred Jameson has recently stressed. See the first chapter of Jameson, Valences of the dialectic.
Blondel, who provide a more scientifically acceptable philosophy of subjectivity, of the absolute, of mystic experience. The other option—which Newman and Loisy attempt to articulate—is a theological philosophy of history. This, however, Sorel argues, reduces itself basically to Hegelianism and does not fail to slide from his panlogism into pantheism, which is obviously not acceptable to orthodoxy. The difficult matter is to maintain unity across dialectical transformations (Loisy’s object would be tradition), and this is what cannot escape Hegelianism, which for the Church means pantheism. Diremption does not deny rationality or reason, but it does localize and delimit the unity of reason. It is a subjectivism tied strongly to material conditions, and one always conscious of its own limits.

For Sorel, Hegel is the thinker of the State. Hegelian thought tends to support statism, and those in power gravitate toward Hegelianism. This means a logic of abstraction capable of assimilating anything to preconceived categories, as well as a teleology able to justify any kind of action. Diremption interrupts this process of abstraction and self-justification, and is therefore the philosophy appropriate to enemies of the State. We can see here the first suggestions that the State—as Sorel comes to regard it as increasingly insidious—comes to define, if negatively, even the concepts that

146 For more on Sorel’s philosophy of science in this period, see Coumet, "Écrits épistémologiques de Georges Sorel (1905) : H. Poincaré, P. Duhem, E. Le Roy."
were supposed to supplant it. Bergsonian critique will not, in the end, be enough to prevent this generative non-state philosophy from becoming a sterile anti-state philosophy.

**Fear of the State**

The 1901 law on associations, which Sorel and others had thought would prepare a new *Concordat*, had clearly by 1904 given way to the expropriation of Church by State and imminent separation. In the face of increasingly unhinged political positions—and for Sorel the Republican and the Catholic positions were equally disturbing—Sorel sought to understand what kinds of institutions create and sustain these commitments. Why, for instance, do nominally socialist politicians pursue Church-State separation to the exclusion of more socially radical measures? Sorel in 1904 and 1905 begins to argue not only, as he had for several years, that the state has its own special logic, but that this logic imposes itself on all those who actively participate in government. It is at this point, and on this issue, that we begin to hear Sorel’s tone ratchet up into the frantic, shrill, denunciatory register for which he has so often been rebuked.

Religion had been a field with its own specific institutions and logics of governance. As we have seen, Sorel—although retaining a surprising optimism about possibilities—believed that the Catholic hierarchy would not be eager to adapt itself to the situation into which it was being forced. Rather than adapting itself, the Catholic Church sought to remain in control of the machinery for the direction of consciences—
the schools, and moral instruction in general. This was the content of anti-clericalism.

“There can be no doubt,” Sorel wrote, “that the present campaign of anticlericalism hides…a monstrous attempt on the part of the State to take in hand consciences and to shape the new generations with a view to a servitude founded on hazy ideology. Free men ought to show more foresight than they do in this moment, and not leave to the defenders of the Church the task of combating these dangerous ideas.”¹⁴⁷ This is the lesson Sorel drew from the post-Dreyfus political sequence. Sorel saw a neo-Jacobin revival in the secularizing wing of the Republicans. Its capacity to effect a certain kind of Church-State separation—and to rally socialist support for it—was for him a demonstration that the State as an institution contained within it a much more powerful and dangerous force than he had previously thought. It therefore became imperative to resist the state, but how to fight the state without trying to conquer the state?

State socialism had long seemed to Sorel to be avoided at all costs, but the danger had not always seemed immediate. It had been possible for Sorel to distinguish between genuine and merely parliamentary socialists. He abused Jean Jaurès most prominently, but many others as well, for their moderate and conciliatory positions. In 1901, Sorel wrote at the end of La ruine du monde antique that “happily, the workers will remember the precepts of the International and will allow the easy imposition of neither Church socialism nor State socialism.”¹⁴⁸ In 1904-1905, a new tone of urgency comes into

Sorel’s writings on the collaboration of socialists with the State. The progress of the anticlerical campaign has convinced him that, indeed, the socialist leaders were successfully drawing the proletariat into the State’s version of the Church.

Manifest in Sorel’s work from this period is a deep mistrust of contemporary socialist leaders. He makes the link—a step only away from antisemitism, if that—between politics and speculative finance: “we find today the same alliance as in the time of Pompey, with Crassus appearing as a Rothschild in command of the socialists.” The ruling class has learned to live very well with a certain kind of revolutionary, “the ‘militants of the stock-market’…can sleep in peace in the midst of an appeased population of anarchists, and can even proclaim themselves anarchists…in the year 4,000.” This is what has become of Sorel’s observation that the future catastrophe of the Marxists is the myth proper to the intellectual.

Statist socialists are worse than other kinds of statists, and not only for their hypocrisy. Reviewing a book about the arch-conservative Vicomte de Bonald, Sorel does not miss the opportunity to attack contemporary socialists. Bonald was the Rousseau of the counter-Revolution, every bit as abstract—every bit as inspirational for authoritarian socialists. “Many neo-socialists are inspired by his views on unity,” Sorel writes, so that after having claimed for the State the duty to teach, they would not fail to repeat after Bonald, ‘the most inalienable function of public authority is the instruction of the people and their direction in moral and political matters…let us say therefore: a newspaper is

\[\text{See for instance, Rémi Fabre, "Une séparation révolutionnaire ? Allard et Vaillant... les ultras de la commission Briand," Cahiers Jaurès 175-176(2005).}\]
...In a touching reconciliation we see the advanced parties and the conservatives come to an agreement about the fundamental principles of the social order. M. P[aul] Bourget joins hands with M. Jaurès: what a touching spectacle! The bells of liberty are not ringing for France."152

Of course the primary instrument of this ideological control is the university. Sorel leaves us in no doubt of the forces driving it: “clearly, politics plays an ever-greater role in the University, as it does everywhere. The professor-journalist, provided that he doesn’t have too many scruples, and does have some audacity, can trample his colleagues…No reform of the University can rid it of politicians.”153 The University, as an organ of the State, cannot escape the politics of the State, cannot become a site for the generation of alterity.

**Renan and Generative Historiography**

In November of 1904, Sorel wrote to Edouard Berth “I am…decided to no longer write anything about socialism and, what is more, to no longer write in socialist journals. The demagogy and foolishness of socialists who are obliged to compete with boasters, flatterers of the worst sort, disgusts me very much.”154 Indeed, he was already no longer writing much about socialists. Most of his considerable energies were directed toward his *Système historique de Renan*. This preparatory work generated scores of short book

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reviews, dealing with contemporary as well as historical issues. Yet within a few months, he would begin to publish the first parts of *Reflections on Violence*—perhaps not about socialists so much as proletarians. Sorel’s writings about the Church, and about early Church history, have much to tell us about his theorization of contemporary society—after all, as he would write in the *Système*, “the origins of Christianity have only ever been studied in order to resolve problems in the present.” Patrice Rolland has emphasized that Sorel turned to Renan in 1914 to make sense of the unprecedented situation brought on by the war. So he had also turned to Renan in 1904. The *Système* is thus at once a study of Renan’s work, an intervention into the modernist crisis, and a methodological renewal of the question of revolution.

My argument here is that the newfound power of the State compelled Sorel to begin thinking about the auto-poetics of institutions, which is to say, collective subjectivities, and that he did this, through Renan, with the resources of the modernist debate—discourse here takes on a power that the materiality of institutions had always, previously, denied it in Sorel’s work. Catholic modernism grew up on the soil of institutions of higher education newly freed from the state, it was a natural point of reference, an obvious resource, for Sorel in thinking about what might confront proletarian institutions, also free of the logic of the state. At a more abstract level, we can say that in the formation of political subjectivity, the future always appears mediated by

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156 This book itself was very much written in the wake of Sorel’s earlier interventions, mentioning with some bitter glee reactions to his “Crise de la pensée catholique” on the part of “les doctes que l’Etat brevète pour écraser l’Infâme” Ibid. 2.
images of the past. Hence, the paradigm of the theological imposes itself. Even the resolutely technical and future-oriented foundation of proletarian civilization could not escape the weight of the past—the Church provided a remarkably successful model, and then a useful counter-model, for how to manage this weight in the acute form of fidelity to an unchanging text.

Institutions manage through time both continuity and change in the conditions of objectivity—the Church is no different in this respect than any other institution, only more successful. Sorel’s argument begins from the quite straightforward abstract position that in many cases, the stories people succeed in telling are more important than the truth or falsehood of their contents. This starting point is especially necessary with the study of religion: “we need to have done with discussions about the facts of the life of Jesus and concern ourselves entirely with Christian propaganda and manifestations through which the new religious belief was affirmed.” On a more historical level, Sorel questions basic conceptions about the institutional continuity of the Church. For instance, Bishop Newman’s theory of the Church’s linear development through history—the progressive revelation of better and higher truth—is wrong because it is historically impossible to find the original force that could be behind the new beginnings with which the Church confronts each successive crisis. “Might not the development be a result of these new beginnings?...This is how the problem should be posed, and there is reason to seek out what singular force exists in Christianity to produce these successive understandings,

each made with the idea of returning to the tendencies of early Christianity.”

For Sorel, from a historical point of view, it is impossible to argue that the Church really does successfully return to its initial inspiration each time it is faced with a challenge. Rather, what is special about the Church is that it is able to invoke its early moments as what we might now call a floating signifier in order to make necessary reforms in many different situations. Its institutional continuity is made possible by the very indeterminacy of its origin. There is no essence that history will eventually reveal, no force that can be traced back from the end to the beginning, but there is something special in the institution that allows material continuity in response to change. It is something like a subject, with its own categories and relative equilibrium.

One specific example from Church history is the early consolidation of theology by Saint Irenaeus against the Gnostics in the third century AD. This debate, Sorel believes, is of great contemporary relevance to Catholicism. The Gnostics were people who “hoped to govern the new tendencies [emergent Christianity] by giving them a literature that would bring success in the world of letters.” Their idea was the “sublimation” of genuine Christian feelings, into an abstract and therefore non-threatening set of general rules—“gnosticism would have led Christianity into a state of mind very like that of M. Ferdinand Buisson,” that is, to the minister of education who argued that the schools of the Republic were completely true to the real spiritual content

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160 Ibid. p 546.
of Catholicism and Protestantism alike, that morals were universal, and simply took
different forms in different religions. The Gnostics prefigure the enemies against whom
Sorel railed with greatest anger, the literary socialists who want to use the political
strength of the working class to propel themselves into wealth and political office. Their
common task is to make the emergent institutions palatable to the existing social order, to
render them non-threatening. Revolutionary institutions in Sorel’s time—the syndicats—
had to find a way to avoid being made palatable just as the Church had done.

Saint Irenaeus emphasized three things against the Gnostics. First, Jesus was at
once historicized and humanized—that is, his bodily existence was affirmed. Second, and
following from the first, the Eucharist was asserted as the link between bodily existence
and God. Third and finally, the millennium, the expected struggle with the antichrist, was
to be reaffirmed. “This last theory was finally given up within the Church, but the
essential part of it, which is to say the possibility of living an evangelical life, was not
given up: Christian mysticism brought the millennium down to earth.”\footnote{Ibid. p 547. Harnack had insisted that the kingdom of God was really to be found in each individual—this was the pure and protestant form of the Gospel, and a direct rejection of the temporal role of the Catholic Church. This tension between a material institution that would be the revolution, and the ethical work of the idea of revolution, is also something of which Sorel is very aware.} We see here all
the classic elements of Sorelian doctrine: the concrete being of the subject is able to live
toward a moral ideal by casting its relation to the material world in terms of a future
catastrophe—change the terms and you have the slogans of \textit{Reflections on Violence}.

We should not forget how odd Sorel’s position is here. As he reminded the reader
in the preface to the 1905 \textit{Système historique de Renan}, it was easy to read 1902 “Crise

\textit{Système historique de Renan}
de la pensée catholique” as a pro-Catholic, essentially obfuscating essay. Yet the central argument of *Système* is that Renan—the great apostate, the great apostle of reason—was not writing scientific history. The issue is not that Renan himself was sacred, but that neither modernists nor the orthodox nor the secular republicans could have accepted Sorel’s way of thinking. Loisy, the arch-modernist, thought of himself as profoundly a student of Renan’s.\(^{162}\) Of course orthodox Catholics would have found Sorel just as bad as the modernists, since he insisted on the historicity of religion. Yet the Republicans also rejected his sharp limiting of the ambit of scientific history and his demolition of the pretention to science of Renan’s historiography.

Sorel establishes a basic distinction between scientific history and psychological or generative history. Scientific history treats the regularity of institutions and of material necessities. Historical research is perfectly able to retrieve real facts from the past, and to array them in series the epistemological validity of which cannot be radically undermined. It is, for instance, possible to catalogue and compare laws or linguistic forms and their change over time.\(^{163}\) Economic data from the past presents all kinds of practical difficulties and uncertainties, but not real epistemic instability. One only has to match one’s conclusions to one’s evidence, and it is possible to make claims about large, regular structures of human life. This history of institutions is, however, incomplete. The historian must be extremely cautious about ascribing causality at all, and “must struggle

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\(^{163}\) An example was Jacques Flach. This is precisely the project he undertook and pursued in his lectures at the College de France, assiduously attended by Sorel. See Rolland, "Droit, sociétés primitives et socialisme: Lettres de Georges Sorel à Jacques Flach (1900-1913)."
continuously against the prejudice of total causality. However deep his studies…it will never be possible to know everything.”\textsuperscript{164} This modesty is impossible for the theologian, who “cannot accept this subjective limitation of history and this powerlessness before truth. He wants objective and complete truth…thanks to special devices [procédés] of theology and under the guarantee of faith.”\textsuperscript{165} In fact, Sorel believes that modern sociologists, by positing an essence in society and using it to explain everything—as he a decade ago suggested Durkheim did—in fact proceed in just this theological manner. They cannot admit, he says, effects for which they cannot rationalize a cause.

Psychological, or generative, history serves this purpose. First of all, one must recognize that certain things are simply lost in the past, unknowable in a fundamental way—“origins are hardly accessible to scientific method, because they present such disorder; at the passage from one regime to another, one must accept the existence of an abyss.”\textsuperscript{166} The radicality of this lost-ness is important. The point of the formulation of diremption is that certain things are not just unknown, and not even just unknowable. We cannot even assert that the universe is basically deterministic, so there is no fact at all about it. Into this abyss steps the literary talent, the historical sense of the writer. Histories that attempt to grapple with issues of origin, with the “deep reality” of history, provide a frankly literary reconstruction constrained only by plausibility, with the aim of provoking a certain psychological state in the reader.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{164} Sorel, \textit{Le système historique de Renan}. p 22.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid. pp 22-23.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid. p 20.
\textsuperscript{167} “réalité profonde” Ibid. p 7.
But Sorel adds a second meta-theoretical layer to this history, encapsulated in the label ‘generative.’ That which stands at the beginning of an institution is unknowable, but a reaction to it is necessary, possible, and in fact contains a certain *essence*—exactly what the sociologists are excoriated for bringing into the present. Consider the Church: did a literal historical Christ found the Church, or did the Church invent a certain historical figure of Christ as a self-justification? Which came first, Christ or the Church? Sorel says that the whole question is badly posed. The essence of the origin is the Catholic Church in its historical being. If the scholar strips away the husk of the Church, there will be nothing at all in the middle. The Church in the present is the reality of the origin in the past. This is Sorel’s response to the Newman-Loisy historicist theory of truth. Truth is neither past nor future, but constituted by striving in the present, with the resources of the past, toward the future.

Generative historiography steps into the gaps in objectivity. This is the same position that other pro-Catholic thinkers—above all Emile Boutroux—tried to reserve for human freedom. An important transition in Sorel’s work takes place when myth, as an act of aesthetic-intuitive creation, steps into this gap in place of generative historiography. Institutions, in this way, become subjectivities (or at least have a subjective moment) within an otherwise determined context. *There* is Sorel’s investment in the aesthetic. This new approach to historiography is allowed by diremption, and is a crucial step along the way from myth, the social science concept of *Introduction*—which, as we saw, also depends to a certain extent on the creative activity of the scientist to describe social reality—to myth as it appears in *Reflections.*
Benedetto Croce’s review of Sorel’s book helps us to see the stakes of this maneuver. Croce—politely, but firmly—rejected Sorel’s distinction between scientific and generative or psychological historiography. For Croce, the problem was to distinguish between history and theology, not two kinds of historiography.\footnote{This was a standard distinction—Loisy also makes it very clearly, Loisy, \textit{L'évangile et l'église}. p 56.} And he argues that Sorel has in fact translated this distinction—between history and theology—into one between science and politics. Here indeed is the difficult question. By looking to the moral and institutional structure of the Catholic Church, has Sorel indeed translated the work of theology into modern politics? It would be more accurate to say that Sorel is attempting something like a modernist revolution within the church of Marxism. For Croce, history cannot be scientific because history deals with specificities, with individualities. Sorel’s scientific historiography, as laid out in \textit{Système}, is something very like high social history of the 1970s. Large structures, institutional continuities, patterns that can be measures—all without denying that much depends on contingency, that causality will always give way in historiography to correlation. For Croce, though, real history writing must grasp in a creative act of sympathy the individual reality of the past, in all its unknowable specificity. This act of aesthetic reconstruction, for Sorel, has a limited, although by no means negligible, place in historiography. In a sense, Sorel agrees with Croce. It is not possible to write the scientific history of the life of Jesus. But it is possible to write the scientific history of the Catholic Church. The generative origin is inaccessible, but the institution that bears this origin is, as institution, in principle, accessible. Did Croce, in formulating his objection, push Sorel from his admission of an
aesthetic moment for social description, into thinking of this aesthetic moment in generative history as a subjectivity-producing moment of intuitive form-giving.\(^{169}\)

**Syndicat and Church**

The political perspective that informs *Reflections on Violence*, and which would become ‘Sorelian,’ is first evident in late 1905. Sorel has not yet taken up the theme of violence, but a scissionist intransigence which implies an acceptance of violence is already there. Sorel presents his position under the title of “Conclusions” to a long-pursued work on socialism. These conclusions are a compressed account of his thinking thus far.

Sorel begins by presenting his criticism of Marx. This concerns not Marx’s account of capitalism itself—with which Sorel basically agrees—but rather the “notions of necessity and liberty” that emerge from Marx’s analysis.\(^{170}\) Sorel argues that Marx’s reading of industrialization in England takes as assumed, “absolute social insolidarity, all-powerful capitalist initiative, and infinite productive capacity.”\(^{171}\) Given these conditions, Marx understands the economy itself to be a realm of necessity, and the proletarian organizations to be “the realm of liberty in formation.”\(^{172}\) But Marx’s presuppositions—his English example—meant that he had no concept of either “the

\(^{169}\) This text became the preface to the Italian edition of *Reflections*. But originally: Benedetto Croce, "Il Pensiero di Giorgio Sorel," *La Critica* 5(1907).


\(^{171}\) Ibid. p 290.

continual growth of the modern state, which goes along with that of capitalism,“\[173\] or the real difficulties of constructing and maintaining proletarian organizations committed to, entirely determined by, class struggle. Even so, he saw certain things better than many contemporary socialists: the State should not be allowed to take control of public education.\[174\] Moreover, as long as the basic conditions of industrial production—the arrangement of the workshop and the contract as a sale of labor-power—do not change, Marx’s central arguments remain in force. Even if, for larger structural reasons, the revolution will not happen in the catastrophic way Marx thought, “revolution…can be understood in the catastrophic form without the least difficulty. The catastrophic conception can be retained as a social myth, to which is joined the idea of the general strike.”\[175\] Yet the scientific labor of Marx and Engels has not always been understood in this way because readers were often unable to see beyond the utopian elements that remained, especially in works other than Capital.

This problem has been exacerbated by the sociology of reception of Marxism. The popularizing socialists present a Marx who “demonstrated irrefutably that capitalist wealth is stolen from the workers, and preached the necessity of a revolution…Marxism was adopted by many révoltés because it seemed the most violent of the socialist doctrines.”\[176\] Marxism was transformed into a neo-Jacobinism, becoming a “theory of the new ’93,” whose supporters saw “as essential an idea of the magical power of

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\[173\] Ibid. p 291.
\[174\] Ibid. pp 293-4.
\[175\] Ibid. p 294.
\[176\] Ibid. p 295.
governmental force. It became a matter of seizing this authority and using it to change the world.”¹⁷⁷ As soon as this new version of Marxism enters the electoral arena—as obviously it should if the goal is to seize state power—“the fatal catastrophe was replaced by a progressive revolution…finally it is said that the State can suppress capitalism…the conclusion to which we have arrived today is totally replacing Marx’s principles with a mix of Lassalle’s ideas and democratic appetites.”¹⁷⁸ With the support of the socialists, then, cartels are able to use the government to generate profits for themselves. Proposals abound for “projects that have the goal of introducing into the economy methods drawn from politics.”¹⁷⁹ The process of production—rather than a fight to the death with recalcitrant material, generating technological development and moral discipline—becomes horse-trading and psychology.¹⁸⁰ Marxism itself is rhetorically captured by mere neo-Jacobins (Jaurès, Briand), and its central insight becomes all the more difficult to assert.

The subject of Reflections on Violence will be the strike action. Here, however, in the “Conclusions,” the central problematic of this essay on the philosophy proper to the strike has already made its appearance. Certain ways of managing labor conflicts serve only, like Gnosticism, to make the revolution palatable: “too often strikes, which in the past issued in revolutionary ideas, bring about sustained relations between the leaders of

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p 295.
¹⁷⁸ Ibid. p 296.
¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p 297.
¹⁸⁰ This is a direct attack on government mediation in strikes, indeed on essentially the entire edifice of what would become the post-1945 labor regime in Europe and the US. It is this kind of analysis that should have interested the New Left in the late 1960s. See Jefferson Cowie, Stayin’ alive : the 1970s and the last days of the working class (New York: New Press, 2010).
the syndicats and the bourgeoisie, under the patronage of the government. Notions of economic fatality, insolidarity, and class struggle vanish in one stroke.”\(^{181}\) If this can be avoided, if the Bourse de travail can remain “organizations of revolt,” then “each significant strike could become a partial ricorso,” bringing about a partial renewal, a partial return to poetic form-giving of the kind Vico was the first to theorize.\(^{182}\) Here, Sorel has turned entirely away from the materialist, Marxist version of Vico, and toward Croce’s idealist Vico. But how is this organization—institution—of revolt to be sustained?

Sorel has three pieces of advice for the workers. First of all, in respect to democracy, workers should not attempt to win political office, “by organizing with the disgruntled of whatever kind.” A series of important prohibitions fall under the category of democracy: “do not take part in anticlericalism; do not present one’s self as the party of the poor, but as workers…do not pursue the extension of the domain of the State.”\(^{183}\) Second, in relation to capitalism, workers should reject, even if it seems to favor them in the short run, “any measure that could restrain industrial growth.” Third and finally, in terms of negotiation, “refuse to take part in any institution that would tend to reduce the class struggle to a rivalry of material interests…[rather,] shut yourselves up in the Bourses de travail and concentrate the life of the workers around them.”\(^{184}\) Sorel ends by comparing the strategies he has just outlined to those pursued by the early Christians.

\(^{181}\) Sorel, "Conclusion aux Enseignements sociaux de l'économie moderne." p 297.
\(^{182}\) Ibid. p 298.
\(^{183}\) Ibid. p 298.
\(^{184}\) Ibid. p 299.
“The intransigent [Church Fathers]…prevented the new religion from taking a normal place in Roman society,” Sorel says. “There was no shortage of people calling Tertullian and others who refused conciliation madmen. Today we see that it is thanks to these madmen that Christianity was able to form its ideas and become the master of the world when its time came.”\textsuperscript{185}

The difference between the Church, and its scissionism (exemplified by Tertullian or St. Irenaeus) and the civilization of the proletariat is important. The Church is able to sustain itself by looking backwards at its founding event, and forward to the apocalypse. The proletariat looks forward to the catastrophic revolution and the general strike. Each strike action, each bloody conflict, becomes a figuring of that future, becomes a founding event, a moment of intuitive creation aimed toward the future. The syndicat becomes an autopoetic institution, writing for itself its own generative history in each instance of resistance, each moment of intuitive political creation. The nature of this autopoesis, however, is unclear. What is its organizing principle? Is it found, as before, on the shop-floor, or is it rather now in the streets, on the barricade? This ambiguity is only sharpened as Sorel turns in a sustained way to consider this scissionistic dynamic in \textit{Reflections on Violence}.

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid. p 299.
Conclusion

The immediate effect of Dreyfus and Revision on Sorel had been to push him to articulate his ‘objectively liberal’ political position and social theory. However, the suites of the Affair into combisme led him, as it did for Bouglé and others, “to reflect on the principles of action” and to realize that “doctrinal differences had more weight than had been thought.” Sorel, together with many French philosophers, was therefore led to articulate his metaphysical position more firmly into his political one. To understand the Church as it confronted modernity was also to understand liberalism as it confronted democracy and the modern state. For both, this confrontation was a crisis. Sorel described the method adequate to these investigations as that of diremption. This term has a specifically anti-Hegelian, anti-dialectical connotation. It is implied by the seriousness of the fissures Sorel discovered in the French fin-de-siècle. This context does much to ameliorate what one recent scholar has called “the poor legibility of the concept” of diremption. Armed with this concept, Sorel drew on and attempted to overcome the problematics of the Modernist debate. To this end, Sorel’s major work from this period, the Système historique de Renan, makes a distinction between scientific and psychological, or generative, historiography. In the face of an increasingly assertive and powerful State, a State able to snuff out previously secure sources of alterity, generative history allowed Sorel to bring discursive dissent into institutional force. It is a crucial step

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187 Gianinazzi, Naissance du mythe moderne : Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889-1914. p 47.
toward the mode of political thought that would be codified in *Reflections on Violence*, typified by myth, scissionism, and intransigence.
5. Violence, the State, and the General Strike: *Reflections on Violence*, I

Dissemblingly conservative socialisms close in on all sides. They draw up plans to enslave human freedom and offer it up as a burnt offering to the new god, the State. This god’s days are numbered, as are those of all false gods.

Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, 1890.¹

A socialist must be violent, because he has a goal that the ruling class refuses absolutely. This idea seemed accepted by 1950.

Jean-Paul Sartre, 1972.²

A generation of scholarship has highlighted the breadth of Georges Sorel’s interests and the ambiguity of his position in the intellectual field. Translations into English of several of his books and selections of articles on diverse topics have been made. Still, *Reflections on Violence* remains by far the most famous and most read of his works.³ It is not without reason that this particular book of his became very quickly famous, was read and re-read over what is now more than a century since its first publication. It is also especially relevant at the present moment. Although *Reflections* is not the first text in which Sorel outlines his politics of scissionism and radical refusal, it is surely the best articulated and most fully developed of such texts.

¹ “Préface de la deuxième édition” Leroy-Beaulieu, *L’État moderne et ses fonctions*. p xv.
³ Lewis Coser, in his 1971 review of Stanley’s first translation, *The Illusions of Progress*, expressed what evidently remained scholarly common-sense on Sorel: “In contrast…to his masterpiece, *Reflections on Violence*, which is a decidedly original work, holding its place not only in the history of ideas but in political sociology as well, *The Illusions of Progress* does not have lasting merit,” Stanley’s edition of it would therefore be of interest only to “specialists.” Lewis A. Coser, “Review: [untitled],” *American Journal of Sociology* 76, no. 5 (1971). p 932.
My treatment of *Reflections on Violence*, for commodity of exposition, will be divided into two chapters. In the present chapter, I follow the “cinematics” of Sorel’s thought part way through *Reflections*. I treat roughly the first third of the book, and an additional two substantial articles that appeared at the same moment, which I will argue are intertexts crucial to understanding the movement of the work. My approach here is not that of genetic criticism (although such a project is possible), but rather one perhaps best called processual. That is to say, my reading of *Reflections* is profoundly shaped by the order in which Sorel wrote the book. As much as possible, given the imperfect information available about the composition of the book, I treat Sorel’s writing as a process, moving from problem to problem. The most important and interesting moves and connections that Sorel makes in *Reflections* will be badly misunderstood if we take the book as a polished and coherent whole. We must realize, for instance, that the letter to Daniel Halévy that serves as a preface was written nearly two years after the first chapter, and cannot be relied upon as a description of the contents of the book—particularly the idea of pessimism, so striking expressed there, results from, rather than informing the work of, the main chapters of the book. It is product, not prolegomena. More than this, we must look outside the articles that Sorel bound together into the *Reflections* in order to make sense of the larger project that Sorel was pursuing.

The publication history of *Reflections*—unfortunately somewhat confused—is therefore of the greatest interest, and worth outlining briefly. The articles that would become *Reflections on Violence* began to appear in Italian in *Il Divenire sociale* in October of 1905. The first three chapters, “Class Struggle and Violence,” “The
Decadence of the Bourgeoisie,” and “Prejudices against Violence,” were published in a nearly-complete form by the end of 1905. They would begin to appear in French, in *le Mouvement socialiste*, with only minor alterations, in January of 1906. They are a reflection on the relationship between bourgeois reformism, parliamentary socialism, and worker intransigence. The general strike—the great theme of the last part of the book—is mentioned only once in these earlier chapters, in a quote from Charles Guieysse, and receives no particular attention. Two major essays from Sorel’s pen appeared in French in November of 1905. “Les préoccupations métaphysique des physiciens modernes” came out in the *Revue de métaphysique et morale* and engaged in the debates surrounding Henri Poincaré’s *Science et hypothèse*. “Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire” appeared in the November 15th number of *le Mouvement socialiste*. This text clearly belongs to the same line of thought as do the writings which would become the first three chapters of *Reflections*, but it departs decisively from their tactical, strategic, and sociological preoccupations. The general strike occupies the center of this essay, not as propaganda or political tactic, but as a theoretical object and criteria of the first importance. Sorel did not include this essay in *Reflections*, but it is a crucial missing link between the first three chapters of that book and the last four. The material that would become the last four chapters of *Reflections*—“The Proletarian Strike,” “The Political General Strike,” “The

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In what follows, then, I first treat the socio-political sequence that Sorel presents to the reader in the first three chapters of the book, bringing forward especially the problems with which Sorel was left, and the concepts that had begun to emerge from this historical-empirical description. “Les préoccupations” provides an important frame for the epistemological issues with which Sorel continued to contend, while “Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire”—and its remarkable re-thinking of the general strike as a theoretical text—emerges as an attempt to solve the problems raised by the early chapters of Reflections on the ground of Sorel’s socialist-constructivist epistemology. At the very moment Sorel was composing the Reflections, he was also reaching back through the whole body of his philosophical work up to that point. These articles look back to Sorel’s first publications as a Marxist, as well as his foundational early investigations into the syndicat as an institution. They sum up, so to speak, all of Sorel’s thinking up to this point, and thereby open the way to the second, more philosophical, part of the Reflections.

The publication history of Reflections is somewhat complicated. The series of articles began publication in October of 1905 in Il Divenire sociale, with a new section appearing every two weeks, until April of 1906. The series began to run in Le Mouvement socialiste in January of 1906, and continued until a May-June double issue. The later chapters, therefore, were published in something like draft form or outline in Italian, since the series had already begun to appear in French, so there was the expectation that they would be reworked for publication in that language. Light but sometimes significant changes were made to the whole for publication in book form. What I present here is, obviously, only a small amount of what might be done with a more genetic approach to Sorel’s writings. The relative rarity of Le Mouvement socialiste, and the extreme rarity of Il Divenire sociale makes such a project prohibitively time consuming for the moment. The forthcoming critical edition of Reflexions sur la violence (Bouquins), under the stewardship of Michel Prat, will be an invaluable assistance in such work. I want to thank Michel Prat for sharing the results of his examination of the different versions of the Reflections with me.
Sorel’s social thought remained tied to a productivist approach to worker organizations, while at the same time taking as seriously as any in the liberal tradition the intellectual, moral, and physical danger represented by a growing state. He did not, as has so often been assumed, simply shrug off the fact of representative government and civil liberties—his whole project assumes the existence of these institutions and these freedoms. Sorel has long been called a moralist—this is a sin by omission. Reflections on Violence travels as far ahead of the proletariat up the road of social struggle as Sorel dares, and is able to return not with a plan for the proletariat, but with an ethics for the social theorist. Although Sorel continued to provide political commentary, to lend his prestige to various political groups, he stopped writing substantial works of social analysis after Reflections. He turned to the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy.

Max Weber famously said that politics means the strong and slow boring of hard boards. Sorel’s revolutionaries do not dispense with this labor in a flourish of cleansing violence, but the daily violence of their lives reminds them that the greatest revolutionary act is to invent a better drill. Sorel, as political commentator and philosopher, felt that the most he could try to do was give them the space to work. This conclusion, peculiar for a socialist at the time, has become familiar in the 21st century. To understand how and why he arrived at it is therefore a rewarding undertaking, pursued explicitly in my second chapter on Reflections. First, though, we must begin as Sorel did, by plunging into undigested sociological data.
Normal Violence

“Class Struggle and Violence,” the first-written part of Reflections on Violence, begins with a question: what does it mean that violence has become a normal part of the strike action? It proceeds through an investigation of social reality. The strike is not a negotiation over working conditions or pay, but is rather the assertion of a new and different juridical order. Violence ensures that this emergence is not to be comfortably co-opted by the existing order. That violence has become normal, then, is evidence that the syndicats are fundamentally anti-Statist, and are the institutions out of which the morality of the future will spring.

Sorel first considers violence from the perspective of the official and parliamentary socialists. Violence, from this perspective, is to be practiced in moderation. All those socialists who claim to represent the proletariat through parliamentary political life are basically in agreement about the tactical utility of well-controlled violence. Disagreements among the official socialists over how much violence to allow and how many concessions to demand are differences in degree, not kind: in all cases “a parliamentary group sells peace of mind to the conservatives, who do not dare use the force they command.” For such socialists, the proletariat is nothing but “cannon fodder.” These socialists must be able to turn the violence on or off in order to use it as a

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6 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 67.
7 Ibid. p 160.
political bargaining chip, so it is no surprise that Jaurès and others are always striving to get better control over the organizations of the proletariat.8

This kind of instrumental use of proletarian violence may be carried on in the name of Marxism by certain parliamentary socialists, but it was already well known to the ancient Greeks. In the language of parliamentary socialists, “the term ‘proletariat’ becomes synonymous with the oppressed; and there are the oppressed in all classes.”9 The model of the poor against the rich quickly imposes itself, so that official socialism fits into classical political models: “Aristotle has already laid down the rules of social peace; he said that the demagogues ‘should in their harangues appear to be concerned only with the interests of the rich, just as in oligarchies the government should only seem to have in view the interests of the people’…That is a text which should be inscribed on the door of the offices of the Direction du Travail.”10 Instrumental violence is as old as classical political philosophy. Yet social peace has not been achieved.

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8 Sorelian concepts have several times been applied to contemporary conflict in Israel and Palestine. Myth, for instance, has been used to analyze the idea of “The New Middle East” and its failure. Less elegantly, and with less historical sensitivity, the PLO’s rockets have been analyzed as successful instances of Sorelian violence. Yaacov Yadgar, "A Myth of Peace: The Vision of the New Middle East' and Its Transformations in the Israeli Political and Public Spheres," Journal of Peace Research 43, no. 3 (2006). Luis Fleischman, "Palestinian Rockets: A Tool of Mass Mobilization," The Jewish Policy Center, http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/337/palestinian-rockets-a-tool-of-mass-mobilization.

9 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence, p 50.

10 Ibid. p 54. Sorel cites this chapter of Aristotle’s Politics more than once in Reflections. Jennings, in his edition of Reflections, helpfully points us to Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire’s translation, the one Sorel used. However, Jennings provides the same English text of the passage that Hulme gave in his earlier translation, rather than re-translating from Saint-Hilaire’s French. Thus, we read, “in democracies where the crowd is above the law” (Jennings, p 48), although in French we find the somewhat different “dans les démocraties où la foule peut faire souverainement la loi” (Julliard, p 48). Later in this passage, Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire’s Aristotle says, “Selon l’opinion commune, les deux caractères distinctifs de la démocratie sont la souveraineté du plus grand nombre et la liberté. L’égalité est le droit commun; et cette égalité, c’est précisément que la volonté de la majorité soit souveraine” Aristote and Jules Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire, Politique d’Aristote, 3e Âed. rev. et corr. ed. (Paris: Ladrange, 1874), p 443. Jowett gives us, “For two principles are characteristic of democracy, the government of the majority and freedom. Men think that
The rise of the reformist spirit is not simply a reaction to increasing proletarian violence; in fact, the opposite is the case. “Since the government of the Republic and the philanthropists have taken it into their heads to exterminate socialism by developing social legislation and by moderating the resistance of the employers in strikes,” Sorel reports, “it has been observed, more than once, that the conflicts have become more acute than formerly.” The more the bourgeoisie seems willing to compromise, the worse the violence becomes. Reform, far from eliminating socialism, radicalizes the demands of the workers and makes them not only more violent, but revolutionary.

The reformist oligarchy of the Republic creates conditions which actively instill in workers the “axioms” of Marxism—or at least what Sorel has come to believe are the essential observations and formulations of Marx. The inexhaustibility of capital, for instance, is manifest every time the workers see the bosses make concessions that they claimed at first were economically impossible. More fundamental is the notion of the catastrophic revolution. Sorel gleefully quotes Clemenceau (briseur de grèves), “everything that lives resists; that which does not resist allows itself to be cut up piece-meal.” Clemenceau was encouraging France to resist the demands of Germany; Sorel suggests that according to Clemenceau’s logic, the bourgeoisie is chiseling its own gravestone: “A social policy based upon bourgeois cowardice, which consists in always 

what is just is equal; and that equality is the supremacy of the popular will” Aristotle and Everson, The Politics, and the Constitution of Athens. p 139. Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire’s Aristotle is considerably less hostile to democratic rule than Jowett’s.

11 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 54.
12 Ibid. p 58.
13 Ibid. p 62.
surrendering before the threat of violence, cannot fail to engender the idea that the bourgeoisie is condemned to death and that its disappearance is only a matter of time.”14

Added to this is the sense that there is a radical indeterminacy in this imminent collapse. “Every conflict which gives rise to violence thus becomes a vanguard fight, and no one can foresee what will come out of such skirmishes; the great battle never materializes, but each time that they come to blows the strikers hope that it is the beginning of the great Napoleonic battle (the one that will crush the vanquished definitively); in this way, the practice of strikes engenders the notion of the catastrophic revolution.”15 Marxism as the spirit of revolution arises out of the practice of struggle. Marxism as a way of understanding social reality arises in the space of indeterminacy opened by the social conflicts of capitalist society. Sorel is attempting to insert temporality, and therefore volition, into a self-conscious Marxism understood, after Labriola, as a philosophy of praxis.

Official socialism tries to defend the present from the future by controlling proletarian activities and institutions. In order to do this, parliamentary socialists need to remain in control of outbursts of proletarian violence. This violence must fit into the parliamentary game of exchange: “a proletarian violence that escapes all valuation, estimation and opportunism may jeopardize everything and ruin socialist diplomacy.”16 The syndicats encourage and are embodied by this violence beyond opportunism.

15 Ibid. p 63.
16 Ibid. p 68.
Sorel sees a constellation of three forces at work in society. First, within industrial capitalism, capitalists are driven to compete with one another to secure the highest rate of profit. They use force to extract productive labor from the proletariat. Second, the proletariat resists submission to the capitalists. Third, the state steps into industrial conflicts and mediates. In general, it softens the competition between capitalists. In practice, parliamentary socialists lead the way here. They leverage their control over the proletariat into an increased role in an expanded state. The very process of reform, however, increasingly fashions for the proletariat a worldview that allows for the possibility of, and even demands, revolution. Hence, the steady uptick of “normal violence” in the industrial conflict, despite the best efforts of the reformers, is an expression of the revolutionary destiny the proletariat is making for itself.

Moment of Crisis

These three forces—bourgeoisie, proletariat, and state—have their own histories and ideologies, although they also overlap with one another socially and politically. Sorel’s narrative is tangled and continually turns back over itself. Nonetheless, a relatively clear picture of Sorel’s understanding of a historically particular moment of crisis can be brought out from the first three chapters of Reflections. It requires, however, a somewhat broad view. Sorel’s analysis of industrial capitalism is Marxist. His historical vision of the French state and its significance is inspired by Alexis de Tocqueville. The collision of these two paradigms causes at least as much confusion as does the opacity of the emergent proletarian order. Worse yet, Sorel sees Marx’s conception of the
proletarian revolution that will overthrow capitalism as basically similar to Tocqueville’s description of the French Revolution. In order to understand the crisis that Sorel saw on the horizon in 1905, we must understand first of all what he thought had happened in 1793.\footnote{Cf: Jeffrey Mehlman, "Georges Sorel and the "Dreyfusard Revolution"," in The French Revolution of 1789 and Its Impact, ed. Gail M. Schwab and John R. Jeanneney (London: Greenwood Press, 1995).}

Here it is useful to introduce a distinction between the state as an empirical collection of institutions, and statism as a mode of thought. For Sorel, the Jacobin Revolution was above all a revolution of statists. In the “celebrated terrorist law” of 22 Prarial, “we have the strongest expression of the doctrine of the State.”\footnote{Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 98.} This is where he found Tocqueville’s analysis congenial.\footnote{Marco Gervasoni’s treatment of Sorel’s Tocquevillianism is useful, but finds at once too much and too little. As Gervasoni himself comes close to admitting, there is nothing uniquely Tocquevillian about arguing that it is only through collective action that individuals become free in a profound sense. This is an indication of a form of political thought that Gervasoni leaves entirely out of his analysis: republicanism. Tocqueville’s ‘strange liberalism’—and Sorel’s—is at least in part also a republicanism. That the border between the two traditions is blurred is all the more reason to approach Sorel more in terms of his late 19th century context. So much for the too much. Gervasoni sees too little in Sorel’s reading of Tocqueville also because of his focus on a certain kind of liberalism. A critique of the State, and of bad state-forms, is central both to Tocqueville and to Sorel. Such a critique must be fundamentally historical. As I argue here, Sorel reads Tocqueville’s analysis of the French state far into the 19th century, and into a statism that far outlived Tocqueville himself. Also problematic is Gervasoni’s attempt to present Sorel’s understanding of law as somehow akin to Tocqueville’s idea of mores. I remain unconvinced that Vico can be brought into Tocqueville’s tradition here, and would insist on Sorel’s idea of the fundamental inadequacy of law to practice. Law is always insufficient, and the gap between it and practice—democratic mores themselves, say, or the habits of liberty—is the space of ethics. This is not necessarily hostile to Tocqueville, but it has nothing to do with his notion of tradition and political culture. Gervasoni, "La liberté, l'Etat et les associations. Alexis de Tocqueville et Georges Sorel."; ———, Georges Sorel, una biografia intellettuale: Socialismo e liberalismo nella Francia della Belle époque.} Like Tocqueville, Sorel saw many of the ills of the Terror springing from the influence of \textit{philosophes}. He shared Tocqueville’s analysis of 18\textsuperscript{th} century philosophers who believed one could, “replace the complex traditional customs that governed the society in which they lived with certain simple, elementary
rules, which could be deduced from reason and natural law.”

He deplored the influence of “literary politics,” and agreed with Tocqueville’s observation that, “general theories, once accepted, are inevitably transformed into political passions and actions.” For Sorel, “the ferocity of the members of the National Convention is easily explained by the influence of the conception which the Third Estate derived from the detestable practices of the ancien régime.”

Sorel’s understanding of why it was that the 18th century was so susceptible to such ideas is close to Tocqueville’s, but importantly different. For Tocqueville, the basic cause is a lack of political freedom, and the concomitant absence of political education—absolutism had successfully removed the public from administration and government of the public. Those schooled in abstract theories, believed “that the total and sudden transformation of such an old and complex society could be achieved without disruption, with the aid of reason and by its force alone” and had no sense of the violence that such a transformation entails. An understanding of the movement of society, of the desires and capacities of the people, are necessary for successful and non-destructive interventions in society—and “statesmen can learn that aspect of their art – the principle part – only from

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the operation of free institutions.”24 Certainly it is only action and experience that can teach one to make realistic judgments, especially in the social realm. But if Tocqueville’s republicanism is aristocratic, Sorel’s is productivist and anarchistic. For Sorel, it is experience in production, in the technological struggle of man with material, not political liberty as such, that is most apt to yield prudent statesmen. The reformers of the 18th century, witnessing the capacity of the State to intervene productively in the economy, came to see it as the solution to all problems, “the State was the God of the reformers,” but only because at a certain moment it was an effective prop to production.25

Sorel also followed Tocqueville in arguing that the continuities across the Revolution were at least as significant as the ruptures. For instance, the Napoleonic order that replaced the Revolutionary one borrowed all its most effective parts from the centralized state built up under the ancien régime—“the Napoleonic regime may be looked upon as an experiment showing clearly the enormous part played by conservation throughout the greatest revolutions.”26 The notion of revolutionary conservation can be applied well beyond the 1789-1815 sequence of revolution. Sorel points to his own writings on the transition from Judaism to Christianity as a study of another example. Yet Tocqueville’s observations about the continuity in the form of the French state over the Revolution have a special status for two reasons. First, Sorel endorses Tocqueville’s conception of the relation between administration as a way of thinking, and democratic

26 Ibid. p 81.
despotism. Sorel could only approve of Tocqueville’s reading of the Terror: “what suddenly emerged from the entrails of a nation that had just overthrown the monarchy was a power more extensive, more minute, and more absolute than our kings had ever exercised.”27 Indeed, Sorel explicitly adopts Tocqueville’s notion of “democratic despotism” as the nature of the Revolutionaries’ statism.28 Tocqueville expresses perfectly Sorel’s nightmare: state socialism enforced by an electorally victorious socialist party.

Not all revolutions are fated to be like the Jacobin revolution. Not all revolutionary conservations are of oppressive state structures.29 The peculiar Jacobin belief that the state could successfully do anything it set out to do, sprang itself from the real role of the absolutist state in ushering in the beginnings of the industrial revolution just before the political Revolution. The ideas of infinite economic progress and infinite state power were thus born together. Sorel argued that the Revolution created the bourgeoisie, rather than the other way around, “power was never in the hands of manufacturers but in the hands of legal people.”30 These lawyers were hypnotized by the power of the state, and ideologically fashioned by a court system whose “essential aim was not the administration of justice but the welfare of the State.”31 They continued to pathologically apply this system in the name of an abstract general will, but all they did

28 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 99.
29 ‘Revolutionary conservatism’ should be distinguished sharply from the label, applied by Freund to Sorel, of ‘revolutionary conservatism.’ See the influential, Michael Freund, Georges Sorel, der revolutionäre Konservatismus (Frankfurt an Main.: V. Klostermann, 1932).
30 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 95.
31 Ibid. p 97.
was extend the state. However, their belief in the power of the state sprang from the observed fact that state intervention had set into motion unprecedented productive forces. These forces—the beginnings of the modern industrial system—were set free by the destruction of the feudal order.

The decades of recovery after Napoleon were thus an era of industrial progress. For Sorel, the story of the 19th century is the story of the victory of industry over the state—in this Sorel was close to many early sociologists, perhaps most notably Herbert Spencer. Citing Henry Sumner Maine’s observation that “the relationships between governments and citizens have been completely overturned since the end of the eighteenth century,” Sorel says that while “formerly the State was always supposed to be good and wise…the liberal system, on the contrary, supposes that the citizen, left free, chooses the best outcome and that he exercises the first of his rights in criticizing the government, which has passed from the position of master to that of servant.”

Economic development through industrial capitalism required non-statist, liberal freedoms, so that by the end of the 19th century, Sorel could say, “we are no longer dominated to the same extent that our fathers were by this superstition of the God-State.” It was this nascent capitalist world that Marx saw already in 1848, and it was a triumphant capitalism he described in Capital. From the perspective of the 1870s, it was possible to believe that Capital had defeated the State, and everywhere instituted the civil and economic freedoms it required.

32 Ibid. p 100.
33 Ibid. p 101.
On the basis of this young and vigorous capitalism, Marx, Sorel argues, understood revolutionary transformation from capitalism to communism in much the same way as Tocqueville had understood the Revolution of 1789-1815. The content of the coming revolution, to the extent that we can know about it, will be the conquest of the means of production by the proletariat. For Marx, says Sorel, this means that

Capitalism creates: the heritage that socialism will receive, the men who will suppress the present regime, and the means of bringing about this destruction; - at the same time, this destruction preserves the results obtained in production. Capitalism begets new ways of working; it throws the working class into organizations of protest through the pressure it exerts on wages; it restricts its own political base by competition, which constantly eliminates industrial leaders. Thus, after having solved the great problem of industrial labor…capitalism provokes the birth of the cause which will overthrow it.  

Just as the state machinery of absolutism overthrew the feudal order that had given birth to it, so the proletarian revolution will replace the legal and moral order of the bourgeoisie with a new law and new morals. The new order will develop out of the workings of the industrial plant that the proletariat has largely built itself, and that it will retain. Fire the boss, but keep the factory. This is revolutionary conservation, the necessary result of struggle between “the bourgeoisie and the proletariat…[which] oppose each other with all the severity they possess and all the forces at their disposal.”

Marx believed that this opposition was more or less inevitable—be it understood: in a political and empirical, rather than scientific sense. Sorel could look, for instance, to Marx’s speech on free trade to see this. Marx ended this speech saying that “in general,

34 Ibid. pp 73-74.
35 Although we will return below to the question of utopia as a contrast to myth, it is worth pointing out here that this acceptance of the technical work performed under capitalism was, for Sorel, the requirement for escaping utopianism. For Sorel, among Marx’s basic points is that we do not need, like Fourier, to imagine new ways of organizing production or our social lives: capital has already accomplished enormous revolutions in these areas.
the protective system of our day is conservative, while the free trade system is destructive…In a word, the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, that I vote in favor of free trade.” And so, too, it is in this revolutionary sense alone, that Sorel can be said to have ‘voted for’ the capitalist bourgeoisie. A vital and ‘free’ capitalism hastens and prepares the revolution. We cannot opt out of capitalism, but it can fail—and if it fails, the revolution to which it would give birth also fails.

**Varieties of Revisionism**

This relatively straightforward picture of the crisis of capitalism and the conservation of industry, however, broke down in the face of evidence. As Eduard Bernstein wrote, “The intensification of social relations has not in fact occurred as the Manifesto depicts it, It is not only useless but extremely foolish to conceal this fact from ourselves.” Society was not dividing increasingly into two classes. The capitalist class was not constantly reducing its political base by destructive competition. Sorel’s position is a development of Bernstein’s revisionism. Although Sorel is less explicit about it, he follows Bernstein in linking the progress of democracy and liberal freedoms to the working class. Bernsteinian revisionism tended to be equated with democratic reformism. Because capitalism does not seem to be destroying itself, better to rely on

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37 [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/01/09ft.htm#marx](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/01/09ft.htm#marx)
38 Bernstein and Tudor, *The preconditions of socialism*. p 2
39 See my discussion of the debate around Bernstein’s work, and the relation of socialism to democracy, in the pages of *Mouvement socialiste* around 1899 in chapter three of the present dissertation.
the mechanisms of representation to legally institute incremental reforms that would, eventually, also effectively abolish capitalism. Sorel, however, is excellent evidence that revisionism does not always mean reformism.40

Unlike Bernstein, he now sees the greatest adversary of this development in the same state that Tocqueville saw crossing the Revolutionary abyss. Sorel connects State power to reformism: moderation of the struggle with workers is the same movement as moderation of the struggle between capitalists. To the extent that bourgeois capitalists create anything, they do so under the sign of this competition. The state works to reduce this competition, and therefore also the tempo of technical progress. Thus, Sorel finishes by inverting Bernstein: the moderation of capital by the state is the real enemy of the liberal moral and civic sphere.

If the liberal economic order is a made thing, then so is the Marxist analysis of it. Sorel’s voluntarism was in a certain sense profound. Not simply the Revolution, but capitalism itself, as Marx understood it, must be brought about despite the overweening power of the state.41 Yet Marx’s understanding of the nature of revolution could still hold, “the more the bourgeoisie is ardently capitalist, the more the proletariat will be full of warlike spirit and confident of its revolutionary strength, the more the success of the

40 Indeed, James A. Gregor has recently argued, although perhaps not entirely plausibly, that the most dangerous of the radical political ideologies of the 20th century were born out of revisionist Marxism—even Nazism becomes a Marxism ‘revised’ onto racial categories. For a more historically specific and nuanced case against the equation of French revisionism with reformism, see Emmanuel Jousse, “La tentation révisionniste et la construction d’un réformisme français,” Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société 1, no. 13 (2011).
41 This should probably be understood as a variation on the Bolshevik problematic, in which bourgeois civil rights had first to be won, or imposed, before socialism could be made. See, for instance, Lars T. Lih, “The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism: The Debates of April 1917 in Context,” Russian History 38(2011).
movement will be certain.” Sorel is quite aware that such conditions are not themselves inevitable, “If… the bourgeoisie… returns to the ideal of conservative mediocrity, seeks to correct the abuses of the economy and wishes to break with the barbarism of their predecessors, then one part of the forces which were to further the development of capitalism is employed in hindering it, chance is introduced and the future of the world becomes completely indeterminate.” The proletarian revolution comes only when capitalism is itself perfected, which requires both industrial competition within the bourgeoisie and class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Standing in the way of capitalism and therefore proletarian revolution, is the state. The sociological tradition, as well as 20th century—perhaps it is best to say, post-fascist—Marxism generally, has made it difficult to imagine the state as other than a supplement of one kind or another to capital. Sorel’s perspective is that of the classical liberal: the state only gets in the way. This idea of the state is best understood in terms familiar from Tocqueville or, more recently, James C. Scott. States control, this is their nature. Capitalism is not driven to control, but to profit. Sorel believed that in a truly

42 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. pp 74-75.
43 Ibid. pp 75-76.
44 Ibid. p 76.
45 This is, perhaps, also a central observation of Foucault’s analysis of neo-liberalism. Power—which produces—is exerted over free subjects. This becomes biopower, which manages populations, rather than disciplining bodies. That Foucault should make this turn, as Michael Behrent has insisted, in the midst of a Second Left revival in the 1970s that included a return to Sorel and the revolutionary syndicalists is perhaps
capitalist system, consistent profit could only be achieved technologically (that is, profiteering or the glimmerings of present day finance capital, were signs that competition had been distorted). For Sorel, this means that, despite itself, capitalism generates the possibility of freedom—“capitalism plays a role analogous to that attributed by Hartmann to the Unconscious in nature, since it prepares the coming of social forms that it does not intend to produce.”46 These social forms are the new institutions of the proletariat, generated through the technological development required to sustain a profit. The state and those sections of society dependent on it tend to disrupt the vigorous operation of capitalism and therefore also the development of proletarian institutions. The state is static, not dynamic, and closes off the future.47

The Dreyfus Affair revealed the tenacity of statism to Sorel. Speaking of the great campaign for revision that developed over the course of 1898, as revelations of misconduct began to pile up, Sorel says, “the revolt of the enlightened public against the practices of the ministry of war was so great that for a moment it might have been believed that reasons of State would soon no longer be accepted”—that is, it seemed that legality would triumph over what a cabal of military officers claimed was necessity. “By cruel experience,” Sorel says, “we know now, alas!, that the State still had its high priests

46 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 74.
47 To insist on the sterility of the state was of course not unique to Sorel or to the syndicalists. Paul Leroy-Beaulieu is quite as insistent on the point, from the perspective of economic liberalism. Private—not necessarily individual—initiative is the creative force in society, the state is conservative. Leroy-Beaulieu, L’État moderne et ses fonctions. pp 57ff.
and its fervent advocates amongst the Dreyfusards.” In the end, victory belonged not to an ideal, but to a State with different masters. The cabal has changed, but the appeal to necessity beyond legality remains. This is how Sorel interprets the government’s reaction to Paul Déroulède’s 1899 attempted coup: “no serious person today can doubt that the great plot…was an invention of the police.” To condemn those who participated in it to ten years of banishment on the basis of a fabricated plot is judicial malfeasance of exactly the kind that Dreyfusards should have rallied against. But this time, since the corruption of justice would be electorally useful to those in power—was necessary to preserve the republican state—it was forgiven. Jaurès, who is able to pity the “frightful sacrifices” of “human tenderness” made in the name of Revolution by those who organized the Terror, should be able to see that “the executioners of Dreyfus…also sacrificed ‘human tenderness’ to what appeared to them to be the safety of the country.” The enemy here is not this or that government, but the willingness on the part of governments in general to destroy legality for ‘reasons of State.’

The ease with which such a reason can slide into mere corruption makes it farcical to protest that, in this case, those wielding the guillotine do so in the name of virtue. Abstractions hide corruption, and there is great danger in the moment when what had been concrete becomes abstract: in the Dreyfus Affair, what had been a concrete question

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49 Ibid. p 102.
50 Ibid. p 102. That is, the *would be* executioners.
51 Sorel is not a classical republican, because he does not believe that virtue should be built into the form of a state. He does believe, however, that the most important and interesting objects of sociological investigation are those that *generate virtue*, in particular new forms of virtue. For him, this is the same as the question of ethics.
of legality became an abstract one and began to justify new concrete illegalities. Sorel is here defending the rule of law against the rule of virtue. More to the point, his values and priorities have not changed since what I have earlier called his “liberal moment,” if his position is different, it is because the whole field seems to have shifted.

The statist tradition, which submits law to the interests of the state, covered by the rhetoric of virtue, has always been the most bloodthirsty one. It is worth emphasizing that, for Sorel, law is a concrete, rather than an abstract, phenomena. Justice, on the other hand, is an ideal—it has an important function for the individual, but can only distort collective activity.

At this point, one might well ask, what is so bad about a state-moderated capitalism? Why should we be afraid of the indeterminacy that will result from diverting some of the resources of capital out of accumulation and into, say, the maintenance of a basic living standard for unemployed workers? Here we begin to encounter the language of decadence. There is on the one hand bad decadence: the apocalyptic language of decline and regression, comparison to the dark ages after the fall of the Roman Empire. In a less world-historical vein, Sorel seems to believe that an equilibrium with the force of statism can only be reached through deep ethical engagement. One must struggle for revolution in order to keep the encroaching state at bay. However, the decadence Sorel fears most would be the result not of moderated capitalism per se, but rather of a revolutionary party that seizes a state apparatus prepared to control the industrial forces called up by capitalism.
We can say this differently: Sorel believes that in order for the workers to have a chance at capturing control of the forces of production, these forces must already be beyond the control of the state. Democratic institutions, or better, representative government, is useful to the degree that it allows workers to pressure the state to make room for new worker organizations. In effect, this means representative government is the force that is supposed to keep the prefects afraid to call in troops to end a strike. Decadence would be a willingness to call in troops on the part of the prefects, or, on the part both of the workers and the capitalists, to settle for certain money rather than autonomy.

At the dawn of the 20th century, then, the proletariat faced a double enemy, on the one hand the bourgeois capitalist and on the other the bourgeois statist. Fighting the capitalists is easy enough—but how to fight not just the state, but statism? It was quite clear already in 1905 that even the CGT was not inherently incompatible with the state. Sorel had before him the spectacle of the attempt to create syndicats of government employees. Would the schoolteachers join the CGT? What would this mean, not only for the state, but for the CGT? Union organizations could very easily come to function just like the state: a rigid and corrupt bureaucratic hierarchy imposing its will on a disenfranchised rank-and-file. For Sorel, the question of how to fight statism was also the

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52 Labor unions had only been legal since 1884. The bourses du travail were quite literally space made by the government for the workers. On the significance of this, and the possibility of seeing the Bourses as Althusserian ideological apparatuses of the state, see Jacques Julliard’s disagreement with Peter Schöttler, Jacques Julliard, "A propos d'un livre de Peter Schöttler. Les subventions dans le syndicalisme français ou beaucoup de bruit pour peu de choses," Cahiers Georges Sorel (1986).
53 On the debates around the meaning of this possibility, see Jones, The French state in question: public law and political argument in the Third Republic.
question of how to fight worker over-organization. It was a matter of institutionalizing the “habits of liberty.”

This task had practical implications for the form of the syndicats. It was, for instance, an argument in favor of the non-proportional nature of syndical representation. A centralized organization run by professional operatives, with significant resources at its disposal, is very easy for the parliamentary socialists to control. Even here, Sorel looks to the example of the Church earlier in the 19th century: “Gambetta complained that the French clergy was ‘acephalus’; he would have liked a select body to be formed from within it with which the government could discuss matters...Syndicalism has no head with which it would be possible to carry on diplomatic relations usefully.” Syndicalism is, from this perspective, pure opposition. The parliamentary socialists are right to be afraid of it because “revolutionary syndicalism cannot be controlled by the so-called revolutionary socialists of parliament.” This absence of control was part of the institutional nature of the syndicat, in sharp distinction to a state organized necessarily around hierarchy and control.

In a struggle between the proletariat and the capitalists, the capitalists are doomed for all the reasons that Marx set out, and that Sorel still endorses in at least a qualified sense. In a struggle between the proletariat and the state, however, there is no reason to

54 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 74.
55 At congresses or regional meetings, each syndicat had a vote. An organization of 150 people and one of 15 had technically the same weight. This has classically been understood as a radicalizing fact, since the smaller unions tended to be more aggressive. On some of the organizational dynamics of French labor, see Christopher K. Ansell, Schism and solidarity in social movements : the politics of labor in the French Third Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
56 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 68.
57 Ibid. p 71.
believe that the proletariat, as such, will prevail. Indeed, Sorel draws from the events of 1905 in Russia the conclusion that a state in control of a modern army will never be really vulnerable to violent popular uprisings. Violence, then, if it is not simply a tool deployed by those bourgeois calling themselves socialists in parliament, serves to disrupt the state as such, to clarify the division between proletariat and bourgeoisie, and thereby to place capitalism back on the path Marx believed it would follow. Why should violence from the workers not simply be met with yet more violence from the state?

Put differently, why should this disruption of the state return the bourgeoisie to their role as capitalists, and not simply weld them all the closer to the state? In the post-fascist era, this is above all the objection that Sorel must be able to meet. Sorel worked within a broadly democratic and liberal society. Reflections on Violence assumes this democratic context. The great challenge is to prevent representative government from becoming demagogy—not because representative government is so good, but in order to dismantle it in the future. The proletariat is the only social group capable of escaping statist capture by demagogy, because they are the only group able to build new social institutions on a material base outside the state—that is, in production. Sorel posits a strong link between organizational form and worldview—an important transposition of the excessively totalistic base-superstructure trap into which the excessive literalism of

58 “The recent events in Russia seem even to have shown that governments can count much more than was supposed on the energy of their officers…the Russian army, in the presence of rioting, did not display the weakness shown by the French army during our revolutions; nearly everywhere, repression was rapid, effective and even merciless. …the parliamentary socialists no longer count upon an armed struggle to take possession of the State” Ibid. p 66.
Marxist exegesis had fallen. In explaining the role of socialists vis-à-vis proletarian organizations, Sorel says,

> By ceaseless criticism the proletariat must be brought to perfect its organizations; it must be shown how to develop the embryonic forms of its organizations of resistance, so that it may build institutions that have no parallel in the history of the bourgeoisie and form ideas that depend solely upon the position of producer in large-scale industry, borrowing nothing from bourgeois thought. The aim must be to acquire *habits* of liberty with which the bourgeoisie are no longer acquainted.\(^59\)

Liberty can be discussed only in the context of institutions. To speak of liberty entirely abstractly is to fall into the logic of statism, which abrogates the abstract to itself. We are here on entirely Tocquevillian ground. But for Sorel these institutions must in the modern world be based on “large-scale industry,” that is on production. Neither tradition nor pure politics is an escape from abstraction. Tradition is no help, because the development of industry is continually rooting it up and destroying it. Sorel is certainly not scorning the constraints in which the past puts the present, but neither is he willing to make them the foundation of free institutions in the context of rapid social and technological change. Nor does Sorel see any way to return to a pre-Marxist idea that it could be possible for humans to meet stripped of their material conditions in the realm of pure discursivity, pure politics.\(^60\) The foundation of a free institution must rather be sought in the kind of social being most suited to this technological development. Yet this social being is determined not only by production, but by production against the state.

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59 Ibid. p 74.
60 In this sense, Hannah Arendt, for instance, is pre-Marxist. Her idealization of the polis (that is, its apotheosis as ideal political situation) is explicitly anti-Marxist. She is even able to more or less ignore the material conditions of the Soviets, and treat them as purely political gatherings. We need only look to Sorel’s discussions of Aristotle to see how aware he is at all times that the polis, its philosophy and its politics, are built entirely on the back of slave labor. Everything about classical civilization depends, he is well aware, on the distinction between the slave who labors and cannot speak, and the master, who gives orders and has plenty of free time to philosophize. Cf: Rancière and Parker, *The philosopher and his poor*. 354
War, Force, Violence

Sorel famously distinguishes between force and violence. The distinction is not a sophistry to excuse those Sorel believes to be heroic, but rather a conceptual clarification imposed by Sorel’s historical vision, in particular his theory of the state. The distinction appears first toward the end of the first chapter, in what I have been describing as the empirical part of the book: “prefects, fearing that they may be obliged to use legal force against insurrectionary violence, bring pressure to bear on employers.”\(^{61}\) Although this is a perfect encapsulation of the distinction as Sorel will later explain it, he does not here give any indication that a philosophical or theoretical point has been made. In the next chapter Sorel again speaks of how “capitalism drives the proletariat into revolt, because in daily life bosses use their force in a direction opposed to the desires of their workers,” saying that Marx did not imagine that the bourgeoisie had to be “incited to employ force,” but that “proletarian violence comes upon the scene at the very moment when the conception of social peace claims to moderate disputes.”\(^{62}\) Here we have two somewhat different distinctions, but oriented around the same problem.

In both cases, violence springs from the proletariat. It is insurrectionary and disruptive. Force, however, is first the simple pendant of ‘legal’—that is, it is quite literally the activity of the prefects, the representatives of the central state. In the second

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\(^{62}\) Ibid. p 78.
example, force is employed by the bourgeois factory owners in “daily life,” in order to discipline particular workers. Sorel will drop the use of ‘force’ to describe the coercion practiced by the bourgeoisie in the pursuit of production, in the extraction of labor from workers. This is not a historical problem, because Marx has already shown how a bourgeoisie bent on capitalist production will consume itself. The force of the prefect, however, is a serious disruption of the theoretical frame. The force of the prefect—the gendarmes, in particular the army—has the effect of disrupting the normal extractive relation between bourgeoisie and worker. The prefect, afraid of his own force, intervenes to moderate disputes and brings with him the apparatus of the state. He stands for the stasis of the bureaucracy, against the dynamism of production. In wrestling with this problem—the historical meaning of the intervention of the state in economic development—Sorel finds himself wrestling with the difference between insurrectionary violence and legal force, disruption and continuity.\(^{63}\)

It seems to me that Sorel had not formulated for himself the force/violence distinction while writing the first half of Reflections—he was working towards it rather than explaining it. The third chapter, entitled “Prejudices against violence,” is evidence of this. The whole point of the chapter is to argue that there is a particular quality to the use of violence by the state—that abstracted and centralized power is particularly noxious and bloodthirsty, where the bottom-up and un-planned violence of the proletariat is

\(^{63}\) We can see here how it is that we get to Walter Benjamin’s re-articulation of Sorel’s distinction, which he reverses and raises to a more abstract level: mythical and divine violence, law founding and law destroying. In a different historical vein although, as I will argue below, Bergson is not the most important referent here, it should also be plain why Bergson’s reflections on the continuous and the discontinuous, the durée of experience and the Cartesian space of cognition, would seem useful to Sorel.
restrained and ultimately socially useful. The chapter, this is to say, explores the idea that there are two kinds of violence without reference to the fact that earlier in the book the distinction between violence and force was already made. Only later, I want to argue, having arrived at the idea that the general strike could function as an interpretive and theoretical lens, is Sorel able to render this distinction philosophically explicit. In so doing, however, he smears together—or, it would be best to admit, confronts clearly the empirical fact of the confusion between—a moral universe dominated by production, and one dominated by resistance to statist abstraction. Both are generative of philosophical concepts, although one remains beholden to the non-generative abstraction, the non-freedom, of the state. Within Sorel’s idea of history, it remains the case that technical development in the means of production is the main driving force of historical change.

**Escaping Metaphysics**

“I have always been struck by the extraordinary scale of the problems that arise before me when I set myself to reflect on these subjects,” Sorel wrote in 1905 about revolutionary syndicalism. And indeed a broad view is necessary here. In order to understand the connections between the contradictory movements Sorel piles up in the first three chapters of *Reflections* and the concepts that he elaborates in the last four chapters of that book, we must look to two texts, both of which appeared in November of

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1905. The first is a work of epistemology, linking backwards to Sorel’s earliest Marxist writings from 1893-94; the second a new preface for his 1897 “L’avenir socialiste des syndicats.” Sorel brought more than a decade’s worth of reflection, study, and conceptual development to the new set of problems thrown up by the political situation of late 1905.

The stakes of Sorel’s epistemology seem to have been lost on his contemporaries. “Les préoccupations métaphysiques des physiciens modernes” appeared first in the *Revue de métaphysique et morale*, and was republished a few years later in Péguy’s *Cahiers de la quinzaine* with a short preface by Julien Benda. Benda, for reasons perhaps as much personal as political, is at least partly responsible for the aura of irresponsibility and superficiality that would surround Sorel in the postwar period. So Benda’s preface is worth pausing over in part to establish the common problematic of engagement with Henri Poincaré’s *Science et hypothèse*, but also because it suggests the kind of incomprehension Sorel’s position met—perhaps more with Benda’s generation than with Sorel’s own.

At issue in the debates around Poincaré’s work was the status of scientific language, and therefore of the claims science could legitimately make. Benda proceeds in an entirely rationalist manner. He first gives a definition of correspondence as such,

66 See here Coumet, "Écrits épistémologiques de Georges Sorel (1905) : H. Poincaré, P. Duhem, E. Le Roy."
which is simply two linked sequences of numbers. The temperature of a bar of metal and its length present a correspondence. We can then investigate this correspondence, and we may discover that some determinate relation exists between the length of the bar and its temperature. Certain correspondences turn out to be logical, and therefore mathematically accessible. We do not now need to experiment, for instance, to know how fast an object will be going after it has fallen for a certain amount of time. We are in the presence of a law, and Benda says that “to recognize logical correspondences and to clarify their laws is the whole object of mathematical physics.” This established, Benda presents the following question: “the correspondences presented by natural phenomena—that is by the exterior world that has not been modified by mankind—are these logical correspondences? The object of the following article by M. Georges Sorel is to show what response—conscious or unconscious—physicists of former times and modern times would give to this question.” In the past, physicists were certain that the answer was yes. Even correspondences in “natural phenomena not yet capable of logical correspondence (friction or other irreversible phenomena) owe this incapacity only to a wrong choice of scale or even to a false identification of a correspondence (Helmholz, Boltzmann); they are not in their essence incapable of laws. This position is called ‘scientific determinism’ (nothing in common with philosophical determinism).” More

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67 The definition of correspondence as a philosophical and scientific term was much discussed in the pages of the RMM. See Pierre Boutroux’s articles, which were part of a broader response to Bertrand Russell’s Principles of Mathematics. P. Boutroux, “Correspondance mathématique et relation logique,” Revue de métaphysique et de morale 13(1905).
69 Ibid. p 15.
70 Ibid. p 16.
recently, however, certain physicists have begun to suggest that perhaps astronomy is a special case, and that certain observed phenomena do not really fall under laws. This, says Benda, is as much as admitting the existence of miracles. From this perspective, the physicist is no longer investigating nature as it simply is, but rather as it has been modified by the hand of man in order to render it subsumable under laws, “and thus, from observer he becomes experimenter, ‘worker,’ M. Sorel shows.” For Benda, this means the scientist “abandons the possession of nature to the artists, the poet, the lover.”

Although these are indeed issues with which Sorel’s essay deals, the essence of the intervention is left out. Sorel argues specifically against the skepticism Benda implies he endorses. Sorel agrees entirely with Poincaré’s defense of the use of hypotheses in science against Comte’s injunction against them. His concern is that Poincaré gives away too much of science. Thanks to Poincaré, “one will no longer be allowed to say that the most admirable thing about Science is that it is useful for something…Science indeed appears in this book [Science et hypothèse] as quite an unsteady construction.” Sorel proceeds to deepen the question historically, making particular use of the history of thermodynamics and the atomist hypothesis. Rather than focusing on the conventionality of scientific language, Sorel argues that “the examination of hypotheses always leads us to consider, in place of reality, mechanisms [appareils] built by man and functioning like

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71 Ibid. p 18.
72 Ibid. p 18.
73 “Il ne sera plus permis de dire que la chose la plus admirable que présente la Science, est qu’elle puisse servir à quelque chose…la Science apparaît encore, dans son livre, comme une construction bien fugace.” ———, “Les préoccupations métaphysique des physiciens modernes.” p 866. I cite from the original publication here for reasons of availability. Light changes were made for the re-publication in the Cahiers—for instance in the above quote, ‘science’ was no longer given a capital, and ‘fragile’ for ‘fugace.’
those we use on a daily basis.” As he did more than a decade earlier, Sorel insists on the material link between laboratory science and industrial production, “in both cases, we see triumphant the art of the builder who knows how to set up tools functioning with the perfection of the figures considered by cinematics.” The technical aspects of experimentation have become primary in the practical activity of science. “The great fact that dominates all of modern science is this growing identification of the workshop, automatic production, and the physicist’s laboratory. It is from this great fact that one must begin in order to revise the principles that have, up to now, remained obscure in science.” Poincaré’s conventionalism, then, should be approached from the perspective of the mechanism.

Having posited this growing identification in the present, Sorel argues that it illuminates the past. Even astronomy, the science of observation par excellence, can be considered as a kind of experiment, indeed, Sorel says, “I consider it the first of the experimental sciences.” Redeploying Franz Reuleaux’s vocabulary for describing machines, Sorel explains that the hypothesis is materialized by the telescope, which is moved by human force across the sky, which in turn becomes the object worked by the machine. The origins of astronomy in Greek religion are only evidence of the correctness of this hypothesis. Precision came to astronomical instruments for the same

74 Ibid. p 873. Earlier, Sorel had called this enactment of science in the every-day the achievement of ‘social certitude.’
75 Ibid. p 875.
76 Ibid. pp 876-877.
77 On Reuleaux, see the first chapter of the present dissertation. For an interesting contemporary historiographic comparison, see Vatin, “Le 'travail physique' comme valeur mécanique (XVIIIe-XIXe siecles); Deux siècles de croisements épistémologiques entre la physique et la science économique.."
reasons that the Greeks brought it to their temples and statues; “science is thus first of all founded on luxury production [l’industrie d’art].”  
78 A more abstract way of saying this is that the goal of science is not—with Benda—to detect and explicate laws, but rather “to construct an artificial nature (if we can use the term) in the place of natural nature.”  
79 Science inheres in the material of the world humans have built, and only there. The affinity Sorel will later feel for American pragmatism makes sense in this context. For Sorel, natural nature is a non-human challenge to humans, but it is not, in and of itself, typified by implacable necessity—this is rather a result of the human conquest of parts of the natural world, their absorption into artificial nature. Objectivity is constructed, but deeply social. The strong suggestion here, as in Reflections, is that objectivity might be brought into the social world as well, that the mere possibility of this objectivity is a moral imperative of the same sort as is associated with the project of science.

Benda was right to highlight Sorel’s reconciliation of the scientist and the worker. However, he completely left out, first, the empirical claim about the relationship between theoretical science and technical development, and second, the meta-theoretical claim that the philosophy of science must take this relationship as its starting point. Third and finally, Benda ignores the constructivism—what we can almost call the will to the rational—that undergirds Sorel’s whole approach. Sorel closes his essay by turning to the problem of irreversible phenomena, but Benda misconstrues its significance. Friction is a problem for the modern mechanism, and therefore also for physics as such; this

79 Ibid. p 880.
historical—contingent?—fact has critical consequences, rather than the metaphysical ones Benda assumes. Modern physicists do not want to admit that “science and nature form two worlds separated by irreversible phenomena. They oscillate between an exaggerated skepticism and an excessive confidence in the results of science.” Benda exhibits without understanding this bad oscillation between logic and miracle that it is really Sorel’s goal to halt. “Scientists today,” Sorel says, “do not dare to admit the doctrine that corresponds to their scientific practice.” In science and philosophy, this failure leads to useless debates and a great deal of wasted ink, but not to any real destruction of knowledge or even reduction in the tempo of progress. Sorel, although a great critique of progress as dogma, in fact has great faith that the practical activity of scientific discovery will not be stymied by mere philosophical confusion.

Thinking with the General Strike

In political and social philosophy, however, especially when it is pursued in a democratic society, a deep rift between the nature of practice and theoretical reflection on it can have negative consequences. All the worse, then, that the nature of practical activity implied by the institutions of political and social existence completely escapes comparison to cinematic determinism. The great task of Sorel’s Introduction à

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80 Ibid. p 888.
81 For all Sorel’s reputation as a pessimist, he never wrote anything so apocalyptic as the closing pages of Benda’s Trahison des clercs. This is, it seems to me, because even when he speaks of the return of barbarism, Sorel has a healthy respect, unavailable to Benda, for material progress and its corollaries. Although it would probably be more fair to point out that the 1920s were very different, and no longer Sorel’s time.
l’économie moderne had been tracing the limits of economic determinism, and it is not by mere happenstance that the conclusion of this work—the moment at which Sorel crosses the border from the determinism of exchange into the obscurity of production—is also the moment at which, quite unexpectedly, he elaborates his first defense of the mythic nature of Marxism, and of myth in general as a way of approaching social reality.  

As Sorel argued in *Introduction*, and reiterates in *Reflections*, the most obscure and confused objects that social science encounters are those that stand closest to production. “Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire” is the beginning of an investigation of one such object, the syndicat. The syndicat, says Sorel, considered as a revolutionary institution, is not like other objects of sociology:

> Principles are entirely lacking here. It is therefore impossible to describe with precision and clarity. Sometimes one must even avoid bringing too much rigor into one’s language, because it would contradict the fluid nature of the reality and would lead one astray. One must proceed tentatively, trying likely and partial hypotheses, contenting one’s self with provisional approximations, in order always to leave the door open for progressive corrections.

Concepts must be coaxed out of the brute material of experience, as it is submitted to remorseless critique—a critique mounted entirely on the basis of experience itself. This is how Sorel understands true scientific inquiry of all kinds. In this sense, if in only this sense, the method appropriate to social science is no different than for any other science. The objects of social science, its problems and its data, however, are significantly more slippery and present many more difficulties. The fundamental new and problematic

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82 Although, see the 1901 preface to the *Saggi*—which is a use, rather than a defense. Sorel and Racca, *Saggi di critica del marxismo*.

83 This essay was written as a new preface for an Italian edition (which never appeared) of “L’avenir socialiste des syndicats.” It was included in French-language replications of “L’avenir,” in particular in the important late collection, *Matériaux d’une théorie du prolétariat*.

experience of the early 20th century, Sorel asserts, is the general strike as it is practiced by
the revolutionary syndicalists.

The grève générale had long been a part of French working class consciousness. Its modern origins can be traced back to English Chartist mobilization in the 1830s. A general strike had been proposed in France in 1851 as a means of unseating Louis Napoleon. The First International discussed the issue, with the Bakunists in favor and Marx and Engels militating against. Rosa Luxemburg, in “The Mass Strike,” a return to this question in the wake of the 1905 revolutions, wrote that in these debates the idea “exhausts itself in the following simple dilemma: either the proletariat as a whole are not yet in possession of the powerful organization and financial resources required, in which case they cannot carry through the general strike or they are already sufficiently well organized, in which case they do not need the general strike.” With this logic, the Marxists had indeed kept the general strike off the table for some time—in fact, it was the revival of the idea by the AFL in the 1880s that brought it back to the attention of European socialists.

In the wake of 1892’s May Day, Fernand Pelloutier and Aristide Briand together wrote a pamphlet called De la Révolution par la grève générale, which reinvigorated discussion of the general strike among certain French syndicalists. It was, following Jacques Julliard, “the most sustained effort in this period to imagine the most radical

86 Ansell provides an argument from within organizational theory’s account of symbolic processes for the discursive power of the general strike as, itself, a force unifying the French working class organizations in the early 1890s. Ansell, Schism and solidarity in social movements : the politics of labor in the French Third Republic.
social revolution possible attained by the most peaceful means…to destroy from top to
top the principle of property and bourgeois legality while conforming strictly to this
legality.”

Briand would go on to become an elder statesman of the Third Republic.
Pelloutier, on the other hand, devoted himself to constructing the Bourses du travail—
labor exchanges that served as geographically-based centers of communication and
organization—one of French syndicalism’s “most solid and original institutions.” He died
relatively young in 1901, “his body worn out by sickness and overwork.”
Pelloutier, while he lived, was one of Sorel’s most important connections to the practical life of the
labor movement.

The general strike, even in the 1890s, was more than a political ideal. In Belgium,
a general strike in 1893 had resulted in substantial electoral reform, opening the way to
the institution of universal (male) suffrage. This same strike, however, had initiated a
sequence in which the political leaders of the socialists, notably Emile Vandervelde,
carried by the strike into parliament, sought to moderate and control the workers’
demands. The Belgian example of worker radicalism co-opted by parliamentarianism
was clearly much in Sorel’s mind. Vandervelde himself—often a target of Sorel’s
sometimes heavy-handed irony, became in 1900 the president of the permanent bureau of

Seuil, 1971). p 67. See this same chapter for the above account of the history of the general strike. See also,
89 Sorel wrote a preface for his posthumously published *Histoire des Bourses du travail*. See Julliard for the
various reasons why Pelloutier was not better remembered in the years following his death.
90 See on Vandervelde and the Belgian worker’s movement, Janet L. Polasky, "A Revolution for Socialist
Reforms: The Belgian General Strike for Universal Suffrage," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 3
the Second International. The 1905 revolutions, principally in Russia, but also in Poland, obliged Socialist parties across Europe to reflect in new ways on the general strike. Luxemburg’s passionate defense of the autonomy of the workers, and in particular the mass strike as a mode of political education, is perhaps today the best remembered of these reflections, but it was part of a moment of generalized soul-searching and acrimonious debate. If, in the end, Luxemburg still believed that a separate party apparatus was required to provide conscious direction to the masses, she still went much further than most Marxists in defending the spontaneity of the strikes and their role in pushing forward the Revolution. A treatment of these debates leads into the heart of the Marxism of the Second International, and would take us too far afield. It should not be forgotten that, as they appeared serially in Mouvement socialiste alongside other pieces explicitly concerned with the Russian events, Sorel’s Reflections were contemporaneous with this debate.

In “Le syndicalisme revolutionnaire,” Sorel begins with three points about the general strike that he says can be simply observed. First of all, he asserts, the general strike “expresses, in an infinitely clear way, that the time of politicians’ revolutions is over and that in this way the proletariat refuses to allow the constitution of new hierarchies.” Rights-talk, the absolutization of justice, and the machinery of representation, are all foreign to the very notion of the general strike. The nature of the general strike “denies not only the government of the capitalist bourgeoisie, but any

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91 Ansell, Schism and solidarity in social movements: the politics of labor in the French Third Republic. p 59.
hierarchy more or less analogous to bourgeois hierarchy.”92 The general strike is not a simple denial of liberalism, but is rather explicitly its overcoming: “the partisans of the general strike mean to bring an end to everything that preoccupied the old liberals: the eloquence of tribunes, the manipulation of public opinion, the scheming of political parties.”93 The revolution must solve not only the problems about which liberalism refused to speak—the exploitation of wage labor—but also those about which it was most explicitly concerned. This is the radical change that socialism has always promised.

Second, as a development on this basic observation, Sorel argues that the general strike—despite Marx’s own rejection of it—is in fact the strategic line implied by Marx’s analysis of capitalism. Sorel cites no less an authority than Karl Kautsky to show that even according to contemporary Social Democrats, capitalism cannot be abolished piecemeal. Such a position is totally incompatible with the parliamentarianism to which the SPD is committed, which has as its essence incremental reform. “The general strike is a way of expressing Kautsky’s thesis in a concrete fashion,” Sorel suggests, “up to now no other formula has been able to do the same thing.”94 The general strike is a strategic imperative adequate to the axioms of Marxism in a way that parliamentary victory is not.

92 Sorel, Matériaux d’une théorie du prolétariat. p 60. Compare this to Luxemburg, who begins her pamphlet by recounting the old Marxist refusal of the general strike, and proceeds to argue that “it does not, of course, follow from this that the tactics of political struggle recommended by Marx and Engels were false…On the contrary, it is the same train of ideas, the same method, the Engels-Marxian tactics…The Russian Revolution, which is the first historical experiment on the model of the mass strike, does not merely provide no vindication of anarchism, but actually means the historical liquidation of anarchism.” Luxemburg and Scott, The essential Rosa Luxemburg : Reform or revolution & The mass strike. pp 112-113. To the degree that Sorel was no longer engaged in mainstream Marxism, he was able to ignore the debates about spontaneism that preoccupied Luxemburg. Still, Luxemburg and Sorel share a conception of political activity, and especially the general strike, as in a strong sense educational.

93 Sorel, Matériaux d’une théorie du prolétariat. p 59-60.

94 Ibid. p 60.
The third and final point that can be simply observed, Sorel says, is that “the general strike is not at all the product of profound reflections on the philosophy of history; it derives from practice.” The general strike is always already at least on the edges of the striking worker’s mind, “each strike, however local it may be, is a skirmish in the great battle that is called the general strike. The associations of ideas are so simple here that it is enough to indicate them to striking workers to turn them into socialists.”

The general strike as an idea arises from practice, and is as it were, just beneath the surface at all times. A few words are enough to call it up anywhere at the right moment in the struggle, bearing all its attendant consequences.

These three points are translations of more familiar Marxist slogans. First, the historical task of the proletariat is the overcoming of the antinomies of bourgeois liberalism. Second, the political economy that makes this thinkable is the capitalist crisis and catastrophic revolution. Third, the intimate connection of theory and practice is manifest in Sorel’s insistence that the notion of socialism is already implicit in the actions of the workers.

The coming socialist revolution will have important analogies with that great achievement of the bourgeoisie, the industrial revolution. As Sorel cites from the Manifesto, the bourgeoisie “has been the first to show what man’s activity can bring

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95 Ibid. p 60-61. It is here, and in similar language elsewhere, that Sorel comes to sound most like Frantz Fanon, for whom violence impresses the simplicity and necessity of the anti-colonial struggle on everyone—in a revelation of latent, suppressed knowledge. I will not discuss here the Sorel-Fanon comparison, but I will say that in addition to what they share with traditions of revolutionary and ethical thought more generally, Marxist and otherwise, certain commonalities have to do with the fact that both are drawing on—and modifying Marxism as revolutionary praxis with—French philosophical traditions going back to Ravaisson. That Sorel would owe something to Ravaisson is almost as surprising as saying that Fanon does.
about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades.” Bourgeois capitalists did not accomplish all these things through some kind of grand plan, and neither will the proletariat: “the revolution does not have the secret of the future, and it proceeds like capitalism, throwing itself into all the outlets offered to it.”

The bourgeoisie did not revolutionize the world through charity, but by fierce internecine competition. The competition of proletariat with bourgeoisie could serve the same purpose for the proletariat.

The groping and false starts of the revolutionary proletariat are not a simple waste of energy, but a necessary step in the development of a new mode of social being. We are in the presence of a Vichean ricorso, which takes place when “the popular spirit returns to its primitive state, so that everything in society is instinctive, creative, and poetic.”

Most theories of socialism are revealed to be simply extensions of bourgeois philosophy rather than genuine expressions of the new reality. Marxism alone, it turns out, contains a kernel of truth here. “With time, socialism will follow the evolution imposed on it by Vico’s laws,” says Sorel, “it must lift itself above instinct.” And this has already begun. It is the “glory” of certain socialist theoreticians in France and Italy—Berth, Lagardelle, Arturo Labriola—that they “do not pretend to march in front of the course of history, but that they seek to understand things as they take place.” Philosophy will be something

[^96]: Ibid. p 64.
[^97]: Ibid. p 66.
[^98]: Ibid. p 67.
[^99]: Ibid. p 68.
like the reflective consciousness of the new proletarian civilization—but it must wait for the fuller expression of this material reality.

If, indeed, class struggle—transformed by the general strike into class war—is the present-day manifestation of the revolution, a series of interpretive difficulties present themselves. We have already seen the problematic nature of war as an idea in the first chapters of *Reflections*. Crucial again is the gulf between syndicat and state. The difference is decisive, but so are analogies between the kinds of war these two organizations conduct. “Long wars have engendered or developed the idea of the nation,” within states, and within syndicats a generalized class war could have a similar effect: “local and frequent strikes continuously renew the socialist idea in the proletariat, reinforce feelings of heroism, of sacrifice and union, and keep the hope for revolution alive.”100 Class war of this kind is quite different from wars between states, which tend to shed their heroic quality and become a mere continuation of politics through other means. Large and centrally organized syndicats will fall into the same kind of calculating and instrumental use of violence that marks statist wars.

It is clear that war, even of this kind, is not enough of an organizing principle. “Former revolutions…have realized new juridical systems,” and so too must “neo-marxism.”101 Just as the proletarian revolution follows capitalism in its method of pragmatic prometheanism, so too the revolution will take its juridical principles from the workshop itself. Because socialism intends “to carry the regime of the workshop into

100 Ibid. p 69.
101 Ibid. p 69. ‘Neo-Marxism’ is not usually one of Sorel’s words. Possibly he uses the term here because of the Italian context.
society…the good practice [bons usages] of the workshop is…the source from which will come the law of the future.”

Sorel’s materialism is straightforward here: “socialism inherits not only the machines that have been created by capitalism and science springing from technical development, but also the cooperative processes that were constituted over the long term in factories in order to make the best possible use of time, forces, and posture.” This position is in line with what we have already seen of the idea of revolutionary conservation, but it is more deeply elaborated. It therefore casts in sharper light the potential political stakes of what is often called Sorel’s manchesterianism. Sorel writes before Taylorism, but is clearly familiar with the idea of disciplining the working body—in exactly what way will it be different to be a worker after Sorel’s revolution? It should be noted at least that where later theorists—particularly Gramsci—would take scientific management quite seriously, few go so far as Sorel in looking for the ethics of the future in the ideal laborer of today.

Just as the future proletarian society cannot spring entirely from war, but requires sources in production, so it is impossible to comport one’s self in the present entirely in the mode of war, even outside the factory. Society is too complex, contains too many links and connections between individuals, to reduce every person simply to isolated proletariat or isolated bourgeois. Perhaps following Tocqueville, Sorel’s conception of

102 Ibid. p 70.
103 Ibid. p 70.
104 This is a fundamental issue in Sorel’s conception of socialist revolution, and presents enormous interpretive issues, complicated by equally profound political ones. A substantial body of social history rises up against Sorel on this point: by way of example, Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.” And, more recently, Seidman, Workers against work : labor in Paris and Barcelona during the popular fronts.
the democratic order is at once political and sociological. “When one speaks of
democracy…political constitutions” are less important than “what takes place in the
popular masses: the diffusion of newspapers, the passion with which the public interests
itself in events, and the influence that opinion exerts on government.”¹⁰⁵ Members of the
working class participate as citizens and consumers in this movement, “one can therefore
say that democracy erases classes,” no more evidence is necessary than the passion with
which workers engaged in the defense of Dreyfus.¹⁰⁶ Reformism and the spread of the
idea of social duty have a similar effect, and also exist on an analytic field far removed
from class. All of this is exacerbated by the fact that “the modern proletariat is starved for
learning.”¹⁰⁷ Socialist literature is no match for bourgeois literature, which means that “it
is through the book,” rather than the school, “that the proletariat is above all placed under
foreign ideological direction.”¹⁰⁸ All of these fields present special problems, which must
be resolved by studying the movement itself.

Sorel’s paradoxical approach to social theory is nowhere more in evidence than
here. On the one hand, the workers must be protected from reformism. “To maintain the
idea of war seems today more necessary than ever, while so much effort is made to
oppose socialism with social peace,” says Sorel, emphasizing the voluntaristic nature of
this defense: “it is not impossible that socialism will disappear through a reinforcement of

¹⁰⁵ Sorel, Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat. p 71.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p 72.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p 73.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p 73.
democracy, if revolutionary syndicalism is not there to oppose social peace.”¹⁰⁹ Yet we also find a kind of hydraulic model of the production of conflict through attempted reform: “the most certain result of this experience [of the last few years] seems to me to have been that the instinct for war is reinforced in the same proportion as the bourgeoisie has made concessions to secure peace.”¹¹⁰ Does Sorel mean the reader to understand that a committed and active minority of syndicalists can make the revolution happen by instilling consciousness in the mass of the proletariat, or does he mean that in a mechanical way, as the bourgeoisie makes concessions, the proletariat will necessarily become more assertive? Quite different consequences flow from the two points of view. This cannot be an instance of Sorel changing his mind, since we find apparently contradictory analyses in the same paragraph. This very same apparently paradoxical assertion—of both voluntarism and hydraulic necessity—is reproduced in Reflections. It is not a simple oversight or confusion. Sorel really means to say both things: it is necessary to consciously propagandize for scissionism and the movement of society today of itself calls up all the warlike—which here is basically scission in its pure form—instincts in the masses. Today we might reformulate this by saying that discursive articulation is required although new forms and alliances are immanent in the social field.

The major theorectico-strategic problem that emerges from “Le syndicalisme revolutionnaire” is to identify the parameters of the relation between proletarian radicalization and bourgeois reformism within a society that is culturally democratic and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p 61, 74.
¹¹⁰ Ibid. p 74.
has the political form of representative government. This is a restatement and summary of the socio-historical frame of the first part of Reflections. The tentative answer given is that the general strike provides the intellectual resources to understand how an ethic of revolution can take hold in the proletariat over and against the ideological campaign of the bourgeoisie. The clarification of this answer, which must be accompanied by a further development of the question itself by investigation of the syndicats, is the concern of the second part of Reflections on Violence.

In late 1905, then, Sorel explicitly recalled the fruits of more than a decade of continuous application to the conceptual analysis of contemporary socialism, articulated historically and philosophically. He recalled and summarized not only epistemological work, but also his earliest attempts to grasp the nature of the syndicat as a revolutionary movement. He applied all of this to the problem of the violence of strike actions. This work of summation and application is useful to recall because it emphasizes that Sorel’s approach was always centered on identifying the movement of ethical commitment between a material and a discursive reality. If the socio-practical origin of critique, which slides into metaphysics, sometimes drops out of Sorel’s account in Reflections, it none the less is crucial to Sorel’s account of social change.¹¹¹ Let us now return—as Sorel did—to Reflections itself to see how Sorel attempted to work through the disjunctions

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¹¹¹ It seems to me that Willy Gianinazzi leaves this materialist-Marxist foundation for Sorel’s idea of myth too far behind in his emphasis on what has indeed been neglected—Sorel’s attention to brain science. Sorel was too much a materialist to believe that it would be possible to avoid either of the bourgeois sciences of sociology or psychology. As even marginally thoughtful neuroscientists today acknowledge, the human brain developed in a social situation—one must take account both of the radical contingency of the organic beginning and of the environment. To this must be added what comes to look like the determinist teleology of free will.
between his hydraulic and his voluntaristic models of proletarian scissionism, and how he sought to adjudicate between the logic of resistance demanded by statism and the new juridical order promised by the technics of production.

Il ne faut attacher aucune importance aux violences et aux déclarations révolutionnaires: plus on a cru devoir multiplier les précautions, aggraver les articles dogmatiques, donner de l’importance aux rites…plus on a constaté que la foi s’en allait.


Introduction

Revolutionary syndicalism was, at least for a time in the years before the First World War, a radically democratic practice of auto-emancipation. In the midst of the Second World War, Sidney Hook would lament that syndicalism had turned out to be a “fascist changeling,” just one more line on a long list of failed ideals. If Georges Sorel, revolutionary syndicalism’s most famous interpreter, can be said to bear any responsibility for this, or if, more plausibly, his work can help us to understand how and why syndicalism underwent the transformation it did, the pages of his most famous book, *Reflections on Violence*, are surely the place to look. If we want to form a general evaluation of Sorel’s political significance, it is in this part of his work—more by far than in what he produced while associated with the monarchist *Action française*, for instance—that his way of thinking about society and social change can be most sharply and productively questioned.

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The previous chapter on *Reflections on Violence* did two things. First, it reconstructed the historical and sociological situation in which Sorel presents himself as writing. He sought to reconcile potentially incompatible historical visions that we can call Marxian and Tocquevillian. Second, it demonstrated that Sorel had not forgotten or left behind his previous work. Rather, he carried it with him as a set of tools and worked-out conclusions to be applied to new problems. Of particular importance were Sorel’s epistemological thinking and his engagement with syndicalism. Out of these two strands of thought, I argued, came his particular idea of the general strike, which becomes effective only in chapters four through seven of *Reflections*.

The present chapter continues the work of the preceding one. I reconstruct the major points of Sorel’s arguments, the concepts that emerge from his analysis of social movement, and indicate the problems that he encounters. This chapter is different from the preceding one, however, in the same way that the last four chapters of *Reflections* are different from the first three. In these chapters, as Sorel himself tells us, he gives “much more space to philosophical considerations.” ³ Sorel is able, as it were, to stretch his legs and draw out the moral and philosophical conclusions of his analyses of the forces behind and the path ahead of revolutionary syndicalism.

In what follows, I argue that these chapters of *Reflections* show Sorel struggling and failing to escape a deep-seated philosophical dualism. The general strike, as well as the broader category of myth, is difficult to define or delimit because it is Sorel’s best attempt to bridge a basic dualism of matter and will. This dualism ramifies through

Sorel’s social thought, generating and insinuating itself into a series of logical breaks. The final pages of *Reflections*—in which Sorel moves from an analysis of Nietzschean morality to a remarkable endorsement of art as an anticipation of the production of the future—mark the climax of this attempt to push through dualism on the terrain of the institution. Sorel’s thinking in *Reflections* is dominated by two breaks, or logical cuts, which cross one another. The first and most important is that the institutions of the proletariat, given the contemporary world, are shaped by two forces. There is the logic of production, and the logic of resistance to the state. The relation between the two is contingent, but to fall too far into either one is deadly. The second break has been discussed in earlier chapters of this dissertation and is Sorel’s uneasy position as an intellectual, as a theorist, of the proletariat’s institutions. He wants to describe, but not prescribe; his object—the specifically proletarian institution—is in movement and is historically unprecedented, so he must be especially methodologically self-aware.⁴

Sorel is not a dualist in a vacuum. The dualisms that dog Sorel’s thinking, of which he is aware and which he is constantly trying to escape, are those that typify French philosophy in the 19th century.⁵ Each in their own ways, the three major

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⁴ Richard Vernon has written in a particularly effective way about this issue Vernon and Sorel, *Commitment and change : Georges Sorel and the idea of revolution*. See especially pp 70ff. Horowitz’s Sorel book was really a summation of Sorel for his generation of sociologists. Vernon’s book is Sorel for the political theorists, but for a generation, I think, that passed around 1990.

⁵ This paragraph condenses and simplifies a picture more fully drawn in the first chapter of the present dissertation, to which the reader is referred for the appropriate notes. But, broadly, see Gary Gutting, *French philosophy in the twentieth century* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Dominique Janicaud, *Une généalogie du spiritualisme français; aux sources du bergsonisme: Ravaissone et la métaphysique*, Archives internationales d'histoire des idées (La Haye,: M. Nijhoff, 1969); Alan D. Schrift, *Twentieth-century French philosophy : key themes and thinkers* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006). See also Fabien Capeillères, "Généalogie d’un néokantisme français à propos d’Emile
philosophical modes of the late 19th century sought to escape the dualism embodied in the sterile arguments between, for instance, Théodule Ribot’s materialism and Paul Janet’s spiritualism. One strand turned back to Kant in order to properly demarcate the border of material and the spiritual, of determinism and freedom. These neo-Kantians, for whom we can take Émile Boutroux as a figurehead, become powerfully institutionalized, dominating French academic philosophy by the 1920s. Henri Bergson is the great figure of an intellectually ambitious renewed spiritualism that looked back to Félix Ravaisson—the _Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience_ is after all first an attempt to break through the dualistic impasse of determinism and free will through a deepening of the treatment of consciousness. If Bergson did not found a school, or conquer the academy, his influence in the world of letters was enormous. Finally, Émile Durkheim surely represents a departure in French philosophy, although his legacy would be disciplinally distinct from academic philosophy, split off into sociology. Durkheim, too, sought to break through the old dualisms by looking to the material not of the brain, but of social life, in order to solve, or at least overcome, philosophical problems. If he looked back most explicitly to Comte, his sympathies were surely both materialist and, as he insisted, rationalist. Sorel, as I have shown, was engaged with all these strands of French philosophy. Bergson and Durkheim both have an important and explicit place in _Reflections._

Sorel did not abandon politics, but he did give up the attempt to ground his thought institutionally. Following *Reflections*, he turned increasingly from social theory to philosophy, because he sought to secure the values of a vigorous liberalism against an encroaching state. Revolutionary institutions must be at once free of statism and guided by the program immanent in the means of production itself—but since these two imperatives bear no necessary relation to one another, the very existence of a revolutionary institution is open to question. It becomes, this is to say, a matter of faith, rather than science. Engaged social theory becomes the practice of an ethics of the commentator.\(^6\) The philosophical and critical tools Sorel deployed in order to understand myth without distorting it in an intellectualist direction ultimately gave away too much of the institutional basis myth was supposed to have. Sorel placed increasing importance on the role of anti-state activity rather than productive activity, on myth as pure form-giving rather than socially embedded form-giving. In trying—as an intellectual—to protect the syndicat from the influence of the intellectuals, Sorel pushed his social theory into the realm of ethics.

The last four chapters of *Reflections* trace out an arc that is clearer, on the broad view, than an attempt to follow Sorel’s arguments paragraph-by-paragraph would suggest. The proletarian general strike is contrasted with the actually-existing political general strike (in chapters four and five). In the process we get the distinction between myth and utopia, which we will understand here by unweaving the elements of Crocean

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\(^6\) It seems to me that these issues are played out again in the postwar period, for instance by the Camus/Sartre debates. Differently put, Sorel acts out in *Reflections* the discovery of the autonomy of politics made by Mario Tronti and other Italian Marxists, among others, in the 50s and 60s.
and Bergsonian philosophy Sorel has brought together. “The Ethics of Violence” examines the meaning of violence as resistance to the kind of state structure embodied by the political strike, and develops explicitly Sorel’s infamous distinction between force and violence. The final chapter, “The Ethics of the Producers,” does its best to get at the ethic that arises not from resistance—and thus reaction to the state—but from the struggle of production.

In the end, Sorel does not bring together his parallel accounts of the ethics of resistance and the ethics of production. Both his analysis of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* and his presentation of art as an “anticipation” of future production should be read as attempting to straddle this conceptual gap. Sorel, however, is not a totalizing thinker. His construction of a diremptive philosophy is here unspoken, but crucial to understanding his position. Out of the gap between the logics of resistance and of production, Sorel rescues—or is captured by—an ethics for the social theorist. Sorel’s historico-philosophical pessimism, famously articulated in the letter to Daniel Halévy that serves as a preface for *Reflections*, is the product of this book, not its prolegomena, and should be contextualized in terms of the new project of ideology critique opened by Sorel in *Les Illusions du progrès*, written after *Reflections*.

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7 See the discussion of diremption in chapter four.
8 The letter to Halevy should in fact be read after *Les Illusions du progrès*. Significant confusion is generated by placing it at the front of *Reflections*. In the conclusion to the present chapter, I suggest how we can think about Sorel’s trajectory in 1907 and after.
Proletarian Strike vs. Political Strike

In “Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire,” the general strike appeared as a primitive expression of the truth of Marxism, rising out of the practical activities of the proletariat as it resists the bourgeoisie. On Vico’s authority—and also that of more recent experimental psychologists such as Ribot—Sorel argued that this early expression would, as socialism grows older, intellectualize itself into an explicit philosophy. As Sorel returns to Reflections, however, he changes the angle from which he considers the general strike. It becomes a way of understanding the social movement of the proletariat—a cannon or an analytic by means of which one can adjudicate theoretical debates and resolve interpretive questions within socialism. As the general strike is elaborated as a myth, a word Sorel has already used to describe certain elements of orthodox Marxism, it takes on yet a new character: an expression of a will to act, an affective charge in the individual bearing no conceptual relation to any future. Thus, I argue that Sorel conceives of the general strike as at once incipient social order, critical principle, and affective link between the individual and the movement or institution.

The scholar who has given the most attention to the contextualization of Sorelian myth is Willy Gianinazzi. His enormous rich scholarship situates Sorelian myth in terms of a generalized crisis of scientific knowledge, particularly on the border between the social sciences and experimental psychology. The investigation of the particular case of the general strike undertaken here leaves us with a picture of the conceptual structure

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of myth as it is deployed in *Reflections* that is somewhat different from the one we find in Gianinazzi’s more expansive work. I emphasize, for instance, the material social foundations that Sorel gives to the idea and its effective function in potential and potentiated collectives. Still, it is useful here to look for orientation to Gianinazzi’s long-meditated and erudite treatment of Sorelian myth.

According to Gianinazzi, Sorel’s thinking on myth was doubled—or proceeded at once on two different registers—in a way not always clear to Sorel himself, never mind explicitly presented to the reader. Gianinazzi says that “in posing the problem of action, he [Sorel] did not know how to separate *exposition* with the assistance of myth and *designation* with the name myth of an ideal configuration. There, the myth speaks, here, it is spoken [énoncé]”\(^\text{10}\) In a more condensed formulation Gianinazzi identifies both, “myth as a mode of exposition (‘social poetry’), [and] creative imagination as a social fact (‘intellectual enthusiasm’)”\(^\text{11}\) He designated these two aspects of Sorelian myth as “mythe narré” and “mythe vécu,” which we can render as narrated and lived myth.

The presentation of the general strike as myth undertaken in this chapter fits broadly within Gianinazzi’s categories. To see the general strike as the stirrings of the new proletarian order and to use it as a sort of canon for criticizing and evaluating socialist action—these are related moves, and can both be thought of as “mythe narré” in Gianinazzi’s sense. What I describe as an affective charge binding the individual to the movement—which is really the institution—is Gianinazzi’s “mythe vécu.” Gianinazzi

\(^{10}\) Ibid. p 109.  
takes a much broader view of Sorel’s body of work than I do here. In order to clarify the process of Sorel’s thinking in Reflections itself, we are better served by more local categories than the ones Gianinazzi provides.

More recently, Gianinazzi has suggested that Sorel’s “social myth” can be “understood from three angles”: form, content, and impact or effect [portée].\textsuperscript{12} In form, myths are symbolic images, which are communicated by intuition and all at once. They spring from something like an unconscious popular wisdom—and in this “infra-rational” realm Gianinazzi suggests we see not only Ribot’s psychology, but also Vico and an idea expressed very early by Sorel that there exists a mysterious social ‘common sense.’ The content of the myth is an aspiration, a hope, a desire. This is not simply a reactive or irrational impulse, “myth is vitalizing and does not refer to fixed images of the past if, like tradition, it is worked by the liberty and reason that found the will to act.”\textsuperscript{13} The content of the myth is hemmed in on all sides by indeterminacy. Society is simply too complex to allow meaningful predictions to be made by any standardized mechanism. For this reason Györgi Lukács diagnosed the social myth as an empty form, an irrational leap into the unknown.\textsuperscript{14} Against this view, Gianinazzi emphasizes that, having ruled out prediction, Sorel insists on preparation—and here is the impact of the myth: “this preparation of the masses must be sought in an elevation of their level of consciousness, their technical capacity to manage production and, consequently, the suppression of imposed hierarchies.” The principles of “the syndicalists of direct action and self-

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{———}, “Images mentales et mythe sociale.” p 169.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p 170.
emancipation” are the concentrated essence of this preparation. To this internal preparation “Sorel joined the two supplementary mechanisms of class conflict: violence as a guarantee of autonomy and struggle for the conquest of worker rights.”\(^{15}\) If these conditions are lacking, any radical upheaval in the social order is more than likely to collapse into statist tyranny—Sorel’s vision of this was close, as Gianinazzi emphasizes, to the anti-totalitarian left of the later 20th century.

Gianinazzi’s account of myth is excellent. Still, it does not quite cover the general strike, which may not have been the only myth Sorel discussed, but was certainly a privileged one—even if this privilege was historically contingent. The general strike emerges from production, from the beating heart of the new institutions of proletarian life, growing always at the edge of the possible and the human. It is true that, for Sorel, in a certain sense, the telos of this growth can be said to be individual autonomy. However, it is only because the myth of the general strike has this special relation to social reality, or a piece of it, that it “cannot be understood as a political tool and has as a goal only effectiveness,” and for this reason that, as Gianinazzi says, “Sorel helps us to think through our need for utopias while putting us on guard against those tendencies destructive of human freedom that could threaten them.”\(^{16}\) This skeletal reconstruction of

\(^{15}\) Gianinazzi, "Images mentales et mythe sociale." p 171.

\(^{16}\) Ibid. p 172. One might further press Gianinazzi’s account: how can it be that Sorel at once rejects prediction and then in his next breath turns around to predict that without sufficient preparation, there will be statist tyranny? The term that imposes itself here is surely pessimism. Reflections on Violence is a study in the philosophy of contemporary history. The letter to Halevy that introduces it is not such a study. It is rather a conversation between intellectuals about being an intellectual. Pessimism is the intellectual posture that emerged for Sorel as necessary in the face of the heroic enthusiasm of the revolutionary syndicats. Sorel’s is not Nietzsche’s, but rather an individual stance, and although we can find certain presentiments
Gianinazzi’s discussion of Sorelian myth is useful to recall here because, despite its wide angle on Sorel’s thought, it leaves space for just the kind of struggle over and through dualisms that I argue runs through *Reflections*.

**Kinds of General Strike**

Chapters four and five of *Reflections on Violence* deal with “The Proletarian Strike” and “The Political General Strike.” Sorel’s differentiation of the genuinely revolutionary general strike from the merely political one operates simultaneously across levels of abstraction. The proletarian, or syndicalist, general strike does not enter into a means-ends calculation. It is not, like a political strike, ‘called’ by socialist leaders at a carefully chosen moment. It is, although Sorel avoids the word and the paradigm associated with it, spontaneous. The proletarian general strike is sufficient unto itself, an activity pursued for its own sake. In this it is like the kind of ‘noble’ war glorified by the ancient Greeks. Associated with the noble way of war are three ideas: those who make war are different from and better than other people, glory is their dominant value, and consequently, warriors always seek a test of strength at the risk of their life. 17

...Against it in the supposed social conservatisim of Sorel’s earliest works, in its more developed form it is a direct result of the social theory that emerges from *Reflections*. 17 Sorel and Jennings, *Reflections on violence*. pp 159-160. Although I discuss this issue elsewhere in the dissertation, especially in the introduction and conclusion, two points should be made here. First, the ‘noble myth of war’ outlined by Sorel in these pages is hardly unique to him. To point out that war has a noble face and a brutal one, even a beautiful and an ugly face, is no more than a truism. See, for instance, war reporter Chris Hedges’ discussion of ‘The Myth of War,’ in Chris Hedges, *War is a force that gives us meaning*, 1st ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002). Sorel’s description of war is not naïve, it would be naïve to pretend that war did not have this attraction. Second, although Sorel is nothing like the kind of
this, the fundamental historical meaning of the political general strike—one managed by politicians, like what had happened in Belgium in the 1890s, and what Sorel worried had happened in Russia in 1905—is to strengthen the state. This, in a word, is the difference between the political and the proletarian general strikes. The proletarian strike destroys the state—which, for all Sorel’s fulminations against democracy, means hierarchy and domination—the political strike fortifies it.

The process within which Sorel works out this meaning, however, depends on the famous notion of myth. It is important to recognize the precise moment in Sorel’s argument at which the mythic nature of the general strike first intervenes. The proletarian general strike emerges first of all as a reality principle. It cuts through the confusions inherent to language and encouraged by the rhetoric of politicians. We have something like a classic objection to obfuscating rhetoric. “Parliamentary socialists” make use of “a very confused language” in order to “impose themselves” on different social groups.18 “In the mouths of these would-be representatives of the proletariat all socialist formulas lose their sense,” Sorel laments.

writer who is careful about his rhetoric, and might therefore be blamed for glorifying conflict of any kind, it must not be ignored that he was not, in fact, in favor of real wars. Many, many people who had written against ‘conflict’ and ‘social dissention’ nonetheless participated to the best of their abilities in the First World War. Doubtless some did so out of duty and with sadness in their hearts. Others participated eagerly. We today claim to believe that we have left behind weltgeschichte als weltgerichte; few would claim that we have yet learned to do without historiography, at least, as moral judgment and rectification. If the scale of suffering of the First World War renders it meaningless, or at least deafens us to its meaning, surely the difference, however practically insignificant, between grudging participation in the war effort and a silent refusal, is not without moral significance. Contested here is the notion that to cheer for a war because it is prosecuted by one’s national community—because it is popular—is somehow morally neutral. If we are to pass moral judgment on the past—and we must—let us at least do so in the mode of a cosmopolitan respect for minorities that seems no longer really feasible in the present.

18 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 110.  

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The class struggle still remains the great principle, but it must be subordinated to national solidarity. Internationalism is an article of faith...but patriotism also imposes sacred duties. The emancipation of the workers must be the work of the workers themselves...but real emancipation consists in voting for a professional politician...In the end the State must disappear...but this disappearance will take place only in a future so far distant that one must prepare oneself for it by using the State...and the best means of bringing about the disappearance of the State consists in strengthening temporarily the governmental machine.\textsuperscript{19}

Over and against this dialectical cleverness, the “revolutionary proletariat” itself “made adherence to the general strike the \textit{test} by means of which the socialism of the workers was distinguished from that of the amateur revolutionaries.”\textsuperscript{20} Revolutionary syndicalism here appears as a struggle for clarity of vision. “Syndicalism strives to employ methods of expression which throw full light on things, which put them exactly in the place assigned to them by their nature, and which bring out the whole value of the forces in play.”\textsuperscript{21} In this full daylight of the general strike, “there is...no longer any place for the reconciliation of opposites...everything is clearly mapped out, so that only one interpretation of socialism is possible.”\textsuperscript{22} This is a sort of performative effect of the proletarian general strike—it identifies itself as genuine in accomplishing this task.

The clarity won by the general strike, however, is an ethical or moral clarity, not a cognitive one. Indeed, Sorel ruthlessly attacks bourgeois “little science” because it “believes that when it has attained clarity of exposition...it has attained truth.”\textsuperscript{23} This is far from so. “In every complex body of knowledge,” Sorel argues that we can distinguish,
“a clear and an obscure region, and…say that the latter is perhaps the most important.”

For instance, “the obscure part of morality is that which has reference to sexual relationships,” just as family law is the most obscure part of legal science, and production of economics. The positivists—and Sorel smears a wide range of universitaires and others with this brush—cover over their confusion with sophistries which “consist in putting very different things on the same plane from a love of logical simplicity.” Sorel, hobbled by no such affection, is free to distinguish the clarity of moral perspective granted by the general strike from scientific, or cognitive, clarity.

Further, the achievement of moral clarity must not be confused with taking a practical, or practically effective, stance. Indeed, the objection that the spontaneous proletarian general strike is ‘impractical’ appears, to Sorel, deliciously ironic. It is, Sorel implies, in itself a demonstration of the difference between myth and utopia. A particular temporality is bound up with this distinction, which it is worth unpacking. Sorel says, within the bounds of common sense, that “there is no process by which the future can be predicted scientifically,” and then, beyond these bounds, “nor even one which enables us to discuss whether one hypothesis about it is better than another.” The point here is that science cannot help us to make predictions about the social world. Science can construct situations in which prediction is possible—that is the point of an experiment or a precision machine. To want such prediction before acting is the essence of utopia: “and

24 Ibid. p 136.
25 Ibid. pp 136-137.
26 Ibid. p 139.
27 Ibid. pp 114-115.
yet we are unable to act without leaving the present, without considering the future, which seems forever condemned to escape our reason."²⁸ In the chaos of social reality, scientific reason is never sufficient to underwrite action—and generally distorts this action.

A myth is a collective ideation drawn from the past (itself highly mediated by historical knowledge), which allows us as individuals to act with moral clarity in the present despite the obscurity of objective knowledge about the future. History is the mediate but objective relation of the present to the past. Myth is the mediate subjective relation of the present to the past. Myths contain “all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party or of a class…which recur to the mind with the insistence of instincts in all circumstances of life, and which give an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action upon which the reform of the will is founded.”²⁹ This fashioning of the will through myth is not necessarily incompatible with an eminently practical approach to life—witness the fanatical protestants with their apocalyptic fantasies who none the less became quite successful businessmen.

The reasons we have for doing a thing have nothing to do with the good practical sense that tells us how best to go about doing it given the world as it is, and what is likely

²⁸ Ibid. p 115.
²⁹ Ibid. p 115. Those historians and cultural studies scholars who grant the most agency to the construct ‘memory’ come very close to remaking Sorelian myth. The simplified and presentist insistence of the past—shaping at every turn the field of political discourse in profound and ‘irrational’ ways—this is simply myth. These scholars do not take Sorel’s engaged perspective because they pretend to an objective study of myth/memory over time. Those who deploy memory most aggressively in the present do not call it memory, but history, and are called in turn ideologues. The US culture wars of the 1990s offer plenty of examples on both sides of this instrumentalization of history, and the Tea Party today an example of their success. Jill Lepore, The whites of their eyes : the Tea Party's revolution and the battle over American history, The public square book series (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).
to happen as a result of our actions—reason and sense are on two different logical plains. The relation of myth to volition is unclear. We have just seen that it is close to instinct, a concretization of pre-existing inclinations. Yet then, in an oft-cited passage, we read that “myths must be judged as a means of acting on the present.”30 Sorel goes on immediately to say that “all discussion of the method of applying them as future history is devoid of sense.”31 Although it is not necessary to call this ordering of temporality through volition Bergsonian, neither should this reference be ignored. Temporality here—past, present, future—is not understood as ‘clock-time,’ objective and measurable, nor as simply carried by the subject (this is a vulgar Bergsonism, but of course not only that). Temporality is stitched to the individual, but this individual is constitutively embedded in social relations, all of which have their own temporalities. Myth is one way of organizing the temporal relations that the individual must manage—but only one way. Although Sorel does not express it in these terms, the temporality of myth is an alternative to the metaphysical confusions Sorel has pointed out in the ‘atomic’ model of free will implied by materialism as well as in the idealist position.32

It is not obvious what myth is appropriate to what social movement or institution. The proletariat, Sorel argues, carries and is carried by the myth of the general strike. Therefore, Sorel spends pages trying “to show that there is a fundamental identity between the chief tenets of Marxism and coordinated aspects furnished by the picture

31 Ibid. pp 116-117.
[tableau] of the general strike.” This identity is understood in the sense that there is identity between elements of a coherent system, so that, “the fundamental principles of Marxism are perfectly intelligible only with the aid of the picture of the general strike and, on the other hand, the full significance of this picture, it may be supposed, is only apparent to those deeply versed in Marxist doctrine.” The visual aspect of the general strike is posed in explicit contrast to other ways of knowing: the general strike allows us “to obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness – and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously.” Here, there is no narrative, only immediate apprehension.

Along with the visual, totality becomes an important criteria. When Sorel says that the militants of revolutionary syndicalism “enclose the whole of socialism in the general strike,” he is describing a discursive form as much as a strategic decision. The focus on a symbolic construction emphasizes what would otherwise be an easily dropped word, whole: “the perfection of this method of representation would vanish in a moment if any attempt were made to resolve the general strike into a sum of historical details: it must be taken as an undivided whole and the passage from capitalism to socialism conceived as a catastrophe whose development defies description.” Indeed, this is a

33 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 120.
34 Ibid. p 122. Despite this mutually achieved intelligibility, the idea of the general strike does have a critical priority over Marxism as such: “it is not by diluting the phrases of Marx in verbose commentaries that the revolutionary idea can be kept intact; but by continually adapting the thought of Marx to facts which are capable of assuming a revolutionary aspect. The general strike alone can produce this result today” p 213.
35 Ibid. p 118.
36 Ibid. p 110.
37 Ibid. p 140.
principle of differentiation between the proletarian general strike, “which is an undivided whole” and “the political general strike, which combines the incidents of economic revolt with many other elements…In the first case no detail ought to be considered by itself; in the second, everything depends upon the art with which heterogeneous details are combined.” The proletarian general strike, then, is a picture of the catastrophic transition from capitalism to socialism—but perceived as a whole, as a unity, it can be applied to different social questions, and brings clarity to them. Its difference from the political general strike (of which all the pieces can themselves be analyzed and weighed) allows one to see the proletarian general strike as a method as well as a picture; hence the suggestion that we take it as an interpretive canon.

This intuition of socialism follows naturally from the idea that the revolutionary syndicats and their general strike represent the first stirrings of a new civilization. If this is so, then these tendencies become criteria with which to judge the import of immediate political action. This is useful for theorists and propagandists, but not only for them.

To bring clarity to political divisions is not to expose what already existed so much as to effect a powerful discursive re-articulation of the political field. Such a task requires a special means of communication. This re-articulation must have some purchase on the individuals who make up even those mobile collectives that are the syndicats. Discursive re-articulation, in order to be political (rather than merely philosophical), must also be affective—and this is not easily accomplished.

38 Ibid. p 150.
Ordinary language could not produce these results in any very certain manner; appeal must be made to collections of images which, *taken together and through intuition alone*, before any considered analyses are made, are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society. The syndicats solve this problem perfectly by concentrating the whole of socialism in the drama of the general strike.\(^{39}\)

Sorel’s language is strikingly visual and artistic. Image is placed before analysis. The general strike is a *drame* and a powerful method of representation because it corresponds not to static social facts, but to social movement. It stirs the affect carried within each individual: “the movements of the revolting masses are presented so as to make a deep and lasting impression on the souls of the rebels.”\(^{40}\) The leaders of the revolutionary syndicalists tell us that “the general strike is…the *myth* in which socialism is wholly comprised, i.e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society.”\(^{41}\) Here again, the general strike as movement, as affect, is working back and forth between the sides of the old dualistic debates about free will—it charges with affect and is itself charged. Sorel has, historically, been ranged with the anti-rationalists for just this line of reasoning. Clear and distinct ideas are all very nice, even in certain kinds of social science, but it must be admitted, Sorel says, that “we do nothing great without the help of warmly colored and sharply defined images which absorb the whole

\(^{39}\) Ibid. p 113. Sorel’s sometimes spectacular anger at the rhetorical manipulation he believes is inherent to democratic regimes is, as has often been noted, in non-trivial tension with this commitment to affective political symbols. How to distinguish between the genuine myth that is affectively powerful and escapes rational evaluation, and the merely rhetorical trick of the demagogue, that manipulates by whipping up the passions and destroying reason?

\(^{40}\) Ibid. p 112.

\(^{41}\) Ibid. p 118.
of our attention.” The general strike is not, however, pure affect, simply an amoral and non-rational emotional charge. It has specific ethical content.

The ethics that springs from the general strike is first of all heroic. For a comparison, Sorel looks back to the Revolutionary wars, to the grandiose language used to describe them and put in the mouths of participants. The language itself is doubtless fabricated, “but the content is real, in the sense that we have, thanks to the falsehoods of revolutionary rhetoric, a perfectly exact representation of the angle through which the combatants looked on war, a true expression of the sentiments that it provoked.” If the former combatants do not complain about the rhetorical liberties taken on their behalf, “that is because each rediscovered his own intimate soul beneath the fantastic detail.” The greatest exaggerations and the most bombastic vocabulary seem only appropriate. Like the wars of Liberty, the proletarian general strike “awakens in the depth of the soul a sentiment of the sublime proportionate to the conditions of a gigantic struggle.” Present-day strike actions, however, are the important reference point: “strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, the deepest and the most moving sentiments that they possess; the general strike groups them all in a coordinated picture and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum intensity; appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colors with an intense life all the details of the

42 Ibid. p 140.
43 Ibid. p 214.
44 Ibid. p 214.
45 Ibid. p 159.
composition presented to consciousness.”46 Here, the picture of the general strike acts as a sort of virtual monument, amplifying and concentrating memories of past devotion. Indeed, in the ringing final pages of Reflections, Sorel asserts that “there is today only one force which can produce the enthusiasm without whose cooperation no morality is possible, and that is the force resulting from propaganda in favor of the general strike.”47

This heroism is peculiar. The general strike engenders a distinctively modern, because individual, kind of morality. The comparison with the wars of the 1790s is again useful. In these wars, “each soldier considered himself as an individual having something of importance to do in the battle”—the free men of the Republic’s armies were always contrasted with the automatons of royal armies.48 The soldiers really felt that any individual failure would result in general failure, “all things are considered from a qualitative and individualistic point of view.”49 Everyone is individually responsible for the success of the whole, “the same spirit is found in the working-class groups who are enthusiastic about the general strike; these groups, in fact, picture the revolution as an immense uprising which can again be defined as individualistic: each one marching with as much fervor as possible, each acting on his own account.”50 After all, for a strike to succeed, every individual must take it upon themselves not to work, must wager their own livelihood and that of their families on the principles for which the struggle is prosecuted. Thus, says Sorel, “the general strike, like the wars of liberation, is the most

46 Ibid. p 118.
47 Ibid. p 250.
48 Ibid. p 240.
49 Ibid. p 242.
50 Ibid. p 242.
striking manifestation of individualist force in the rebellious masses.”\textsuperscript{51} The individualism of the Revolution was not anarchistic and degenerate (as Taine would have it), but was rather a highly moralizing and heroic social bond.\textsuperscript{52} However plausible we find this history, the evanescent collectivity of the general strike turns out to yield an ethics of individual autonomy and responsibility—indeed, of a surprising responsibility to exercise to the fullest one’s autonomy and intelligence. Here again the reference to the two kinds of war is instructive: individual responsibility is assumed in a war carried out with sublime morality, while the calculation of risk and collective responsibility is typical of statist war. Further, in the general strike, the ideal becomes materially effective—it compels, but morally—generating what Sorel will later call a morality not far from that deduced by Kant.

**Interpreting Myth and Method**

Given the above account of Sorel’s conceptualization of the general strike as myth, it becomes possible to suggest philosophical affiliations for Sorel’s work that have generally been ignored. Henri Bergson has long been associated with Sorel’s elaboration

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. p 243.  
\textsuperscript{52} This, Sorel suggests, is one reason that the average soldier was willing to see officers executed for losing battles: only treason can explain failure. Ibid. p 246. And here is the accusation that Sorel is preparing the ground for a totalitarian refusal of reality—although there is not much daylight, it might be said, between a refusal of reality, and the attempt to imagine radical change and a new mode of social being in the world. Sorel seems to suggest that it is in fact out of the explosion of individual creativity and egalitarian making, that the spirit of the bourgeoisie was born. Jacques Rancière is willing to see the wars as something like this crucible in Jacques Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster : five lessons in intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).
of myth. Some recent scholarship has tended to play down this connection. Gianinazzi in particular emphasizes Sorel’s early and enduring engagement with materialist psychology, most notably through Théodule Ribot and his journal, but also Alfred Binet and, at a somewhat greater distance, Fechner, Wundt, and other German researchers. Gianinazzi argues that “it is not so much Bergson’s intuitionism...as this psychophysiological problematic that Sorel mobilized to embody his concept of myth.”

The frame for the genesis of myth becomes the search for an object that can be scientifically grasped and that intervenes at the obscure springs of human motivation: “the question Sorel posed is therefore not ‘how to move the masses?’ but ‘what is it that moves them?’”

Although I do not disagree with Gianinazzi’s arguments about the contextual sources of Sorelian myth, it seems to me that he is somewhat too eager to jettison Bergson. We can take Sorel at his word that his method owes something to Bergson. I want to suggest, however, that Sorelian myth—as it appears in Reflections and in the form of the general strike—owes much to the philosophical aesthetics of his longtime correspondent and friend, Benedetto Croce. Croce—especially when read as Vichean—is a crucial, if unmentioned, referent for Sorel’s broader frame. Similarly, although Durkheim is mentioned only very briefly in Reflections, Sorel’s analysis of collectivity

53 See, for one recent example, the references to Sorel, Bergson, and intuition, in Jennings, Revolution and the republic : a history of political thought in France since the eighteenth-century. p 386.
54 Gianinazzi, “Images mentales et mythe sociale.” p 163. Although, it should be pointed out that Bergson himself was very much steeped in just this same psychophysiological problematic. Both Sorel and Bergson begin their philosophical projects in something like appreciative criticism of psychophysics.
55 Ibid. p 169.
and morality has a great deal in common with the perspective this most republican of sociologists was developing at precisely this moment.

There is, on the face of it, a great deal of plausibility to the long association of Sorel’s idea of the myth with Henri Bergson. Sorel had after all cited Bergson enthusiastically as early as 1894. He attended Bergson’s lectures at the Collège de France. The two met and discussed philosophy on numerous occasions. Sorel invokes Bergson several times in the “Letter to Daniel Halévy” that introduces Reflections, as well as in passing remarks and footnotes in the main text. In the passages where Sorel describes the special analytic and affective purchase of the general strike, he often uses the loaded term, intuition. And of this approach to socialism, he says, “this method has all the advantages that integral knowledge has over analysis, according to the doctrine of Bergson.” Yet it is reasonable to be cautious when things seem so straightforward. Gianinazzi shows quite conclusively that it would be wrong to take Sorel’s discussion of myth (either the general strike or another one) as a socialized or politicized version of Bergsonian durée. However, it would also being wrong to throw out the Bergsonian

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56 That Sorel’s work was in some sense a politicized version of Bergson’s philosophy, was a commonplace in particular of Anglophone writing on Sorel from the beginning. Many factors contributed to this. For instance, T.E. Hulme, who translated Reflections, was also Bergson’s ‘authorized’ translator into English. See, for an early and influential example, Arthur O. Lovejoy, “The Practical Tendencies of Bergsonism. I,” International Journal of Ethics 23, no. 3 (1913).
58 See Gianinazzi’s discussion of Sorel’s borrowings from Bergson around the time of Reflections. Gianinazzi, Naissance du mythe moderne : Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889-1914, pp 169-171.
59 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 113.
reference altogether. Sorel cites Bergson’s “Introduction to Metaphysics” in *Reflections*, so we look there first.\(^60\)

Intuition is a central term in Bergson’s “Introduction,” and one Sorel also deploys. Sorel’s use of the term intuition is not, except in a few cases, anything like Bergson’s. Bergson tells us that “by intuition is meant the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible.” Differently put, intuition is “the metaphysical investigation of what is essential and unique to the object.”\(^61\) This seems a reasonable description of how Sorel is attempting to think about the syndicats. However, the comparison rapidly breaks down. “Metaphysics,” of which for Bergson intuition is the proper method, “is the science that claims to dispense with symbols.”\(^62\) Sorel is certainly deeply concerned with the image, if not exactly the symbol. What Bergson gives Sorel is a way of talking about method, a set of precautions that a bourgeois theorist can take when approaching the obscurity of production. “If metaphysics is possible” Bergson writes, “it can only be a wearing, even painful effort to climb back up the natural slope of mental work, to place one’s self all at once, through a sort of intellectual dilation, inside the thing that is being studied in order to pass from the reality to the concepts, and no longer from the concepts

\(^{60}\) Bergson’s essay appeared first in *RMM*, Henri Bergson, ”Introduction à la métaphysique,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 11(1903).
\(^{61}\) Ibid. p 3, 8.
\(^{62}\) Ibid. p 4.
to the reality”—this difficult and un-natural action is intuition.  What for Bergson is a description of metaphysics is for Sorel a description of science in general.

From the perspective of the theorist, the general strike, meditated and lived—with as Bergson suggests is necessary in the last paragraphs of “Introduction à la métaphysique,” gives an intuition of socialism. But for the worker who gives form to the general strike through the practice of smaller particular strikes, the general strike is an affectively charged representation of—and therefore a spur to—ethical action. The general strike can be, for the theorist who recognizes in it an incipient civilization, an analytic. Yet any attempt to present Sorel’s analysis of myth from the perspective of the worker as a revelation of the Bergsonian durée of the working class is in violation of fundamental Bergsonian presuppositions: “Inner life…cannot be represented in images” We have seen the centrality of the image for Sorelian myth. An intuition for Bergson is not to be reproduced in images, but it nonetheless has a mimetic quality. From the perspective of the worker, the general strike as a drama or a picture is an expression, an act of intuitive form-giving that leaps between the materially-determined present consciousness of the proletariat and a future rent open into possibility by the infinite will.

That is to say, it is not a mimetic, but a creative act. The conceptual structure invoked here is not Bergsonian intuition, but Benedetto Croce’s aesthetics. In fact it

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63 “si la métaphysique est possible, elle ne peut être qu’un effort pénible, douloureux même, pour remonter la pente naturelle du travail de pensée, pour se placer tout de suite, par une espèce de dilation intellectuelle, dans la chose qu’on étudie, enfin pour aller de la réalité aux concepts et non plus des concepts à la réalité” Ibid. pp 21-22. Intuition as a term has obviously a much broader meaning and set of associations in the late 19th century. In particular, as is still the case, the status of intuitions in the philosophy of mathematics and science was a subject of much debate.

64 Ibid. p 6.
seems to me that Sorel underwrote much of his thinking about the syndicats and the generation of a new morality by drawing on the forms and concepts elaborated by Croce in his writings on aesthetics. For Sorel, I want to argue, Croce was a supplement to Vico, and a provided crucial resources for thinking about the compelling nature of the special kind of object that is a myth—that is, an aesthetic object. 65

Sorel and Croce came into contact through their mutual connections with Antonio Labriola. Their common project was to deepen Marxism as philosophy, as opposed to economics and politics. The revisionism debate split Sorel from Labriola over the course of 1898 in an extremely acrimonious way. Croce, for various reasons, was able to remain on cordial terms with both, and each wrote to him accusing the other of stupidity, arrogance, and willfully obscure prose. 66 Sergio Romano suggests that Croce and Sorel got along well because they could talk happily about Vico, Hegel, and a shared distaste for 18th and 19th century scientism. They had in common a certain way of thinking about morality, an “understanding of the intellectual vocation as a moral exercise,” and

65 One translator of Croce has this to say about his relation to Bergson: “the misunderstandings attending Croce’s lot in aesthetics have been due, in the main, to his having been found, through no fault of his own, guilty by association with that exceedingly influential French philosopher in contemporary thought, Henri Bergson…Still, despite this unfortunate association, there is a world of difference between Croce’s aesthetic concept of intuition in the Estetica (1902) and Bergson’s metaphysical concept in An Introduction to Metaphysics (1903). The difference may be stated succinctly as follows: Whereas Bergson appeals to intuition as the key to metaphysical truth, Croce appeals to it as the key to artistic truth. Thus, there is no fusion (or confusion) of the two in Croce, no Bergsonian ‘aestheticism,’ simply because there is no such self-contradictory thing as ‘intellectual intuition’ for him and, hence, no place for any metaphysic based thereon in his system. In contrast to Bergsonian intuition, Crocian intuition is restricted to the realm of art, where the distinction between reality and appearance, true and false in the ordinary sense, possible truth and actual truth, is irrelevant.” Cited by Bodei in, Benedetto Croce, Remo Bodei, and Hiroko Fudemoto, Breviary of aesthetics : four lectures (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). pp xxxi-xxxvii. It seems to me clear that this is a radical misunderstanding not only of Bergson, which can be forgiven in a preface to Croce, but also of Croce himself. Croce’s intuition is not restricted to the realm of what is normally called art, nor is there anything like what is meant here by ‘intellectual intuition’ in Bergson.

66 For a condensed account of this sequence, see Romano in Julliard and Sand, eds., Georges Sorel en son temps.
therefore an enthusiastic and thoroughgoing voluntarism. According to Romano, they diverged in their understanding of the irrational: “Croce sought to silence and exorcise the irrational by placing it at the service of thought or a higher historical rationality,” while Sorel saw the world as essentially irrational, with only pockets or islands of human-made rationality.\(^67\) This would seem a fundamental divergence, politely ignored by the interlocutors themselves for the sake of their other agreements.

Although this claim deserves a fuller development, it seems to me that Croce’s fundamentally liberal-universalist conception of reason, and Sorel’s pluralist and constructivist account of rationality, are able to find common ground along a temporal and ethical axis. For Croce, disagreements, inconsistencies, contradictions, are all either false or simply not-yet-resolved.\(^68\) All great philosophies are really in agreement on their essential points, only in some cases the philosophers do not yet know it, or perhaps are mistaken about which are the essential parts of their philosophy. Croce’s history of philosophy is therefore a history of salvage and reconciliation. It is a fundamentally cumulative project. If Sorel does not, in fact, believe there are fragments to be found in each great philosopher that can be assembled into Philosophy—he understands the desire, the constructive urge behind this will to historical coherence. More to the point, both are able to tolerate a freewheeling pluralism because, for Croce, it will all be resolved in the future, and for Sorel, because agonistic pluralism is how we get to the future.

\(^{67}\) For all this, see Romano in Ibid. especially pp 257-261.
Romano suggests that Vico was one topic over which Croce and Sorel could agree. The early text of Croce’s on Vico, later included in the historical section of the *Estetica*, is quite suggestive of the connections between Croce’s Vico and Sorel’s myth.  

For Croce, Vico is “the real revolutionary who…invented the science of Aesthetic.”  

In Vico’s ideal history, “the imaginative phase [il grado fantastico] is altogether independent and autonomous with respect to the intellectual, which is not only incapable of endowing it with any fresh perfection but can only destroy it.”  

For Croce, as for Sorel, Vico’s ideal history must be properly interpreted. Croce rejects any philosophy of history that attempts to deduce concrete reality from rational principles, so that for him Vico’s “ideal history…does not concern the concrete and particular history which unfolds itself in time. It is not history, but a science of the ideal, a Philosophy of spirit.”  

Thus, in Croce’s own philosophy the intuitive moment of the *fantastico* is logically or analytically prior to that of the *intellettivo*—although in practice they are nearly always mixed together. Sorel had made a similar claim in 1896, although he mapped Vico’s ideal history onto Ribot’s empirical psychological sequences as much as onto a metaphysical or critical principle.  

Croce, like Sorel before him, identifies Vico’s historical periodization as a problem, “the

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69 Sorel read Croce’s work as it appeared. He had the first parts of the *Estetica* in 1900, and the pages on Vico in 1901. Sorel protests to Croce at this moment that these are “questione sulla quale io non ho grande competenza.” (5 June 1900). Nonetheless he suggests Bergson’s *Rire*, as well as “le strane teorie di Ch. Henry.” Sorel and Croce, *Lettere a Benedetto Croce*. pp 91-96. For more on the importance of aesthetics to Sorel, see my “The Picture of the General Strike.”


73 See chapter two of this dissertation on Sorel’s earlier reading of Vico.
ideal priority of poetry cannot be materialized into a historical period of civilization.”\(^{74}\)

Nonetheless, Vico’s new way of thinking about poetry as a philosophically primary moment of imaginative form-giving does have consequences, “we gain an entirely new insight into mythology: it is no longer an arbitrary calculated invention, but a spontaneous vision of truth as it presented itself to the spirit of primitive man. Poetry gives an imaginative vision; science or philosophy intelligible truth; history the consciousness of certitude.”\(^{75}\)

This tripartite division—imaginative vision, intelligible truth, consciousness of certitude—can help us to understand Sorel’s ambiguities, as well as mapping onto the tripartite division I have given to Sorel’s account of the general strike: sign of the new civilization, analytic tool, affective spur to ethical behavior. The social poetry of the general strike rises up from the process of production. The philosopher approaches the social in an attempt to grasp it scientifically—normal violence is an object of intelligence. Finally—and this move will substantially complicate the reception of *Reflections*, and also provides much of its interest today—the philosopher of history is no longer engaged simply in intellection of a truth, but in consciousness and the quest for certitude. This final moment is the ethical moment of the philosopher of history. Croce’s formulation gives a Hegelian flavor to all this—before, in fact, he declared, “I am, and believe it necessary to be, an Hegelian”—in particular because each seems to follow from the other.

\(^{74}\) Croce, *Aesthetic as science of expression and general linguistic*. p 233.  
\(^{75}\) Ibid. p 224-225. “Di qui un’idea affatto nuova della mitologia, non più invenzione arbitraria e calcolata, ma spontanea visione della verità, quale si presentava allo spirito degli uomini primitivi. La poesia dà l’immagine fantastica; la scienza o filosofia, il vero intelligibile; la storia, la coscienza del certo.” Croce and Galasso, *Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale : teoria e storia*. p 283.
in a way that Sorel, in *Reflections*, makes it quite difficult to imagine.\(^7\) If we, in an attempt at historical understanding, reconnect them in sequence, we do so in the awareness, learned from Sorel himself if nowhere else, that a systematicity of exposition tends to generate an artificial systematicity in the material.

Croce’s aesthetics—really, his whole philosophy of spirit—rests on the distinction of intuitive knowledge from conceptual knowledge, and then the identification of intuition and expression. For Croce, form-giving activity—intuition—is the essential characteristic of the human.\(^7\) Bringing Crocean aesthetics into the discussion helps to explain how Sorel connected the general strike as an expression of an incipient civilization—after Vico, who after all is also crucial for Croce—with both its analytic and its affective aspects.

The question of intuition and knowledge should point us in this direction at the very outset. For Croce, as for Bergson, intuition is knowledge of the individual, of the particular thing. But, as is quite clearly expressed in the extraordinary first sentence of Croce’s *Estetica*, this kind of knowledge is *productive*:

Knowledge takes two forms: it is either intuitive knowledge or logical knowledge; knowledge obtained by means of our power to create mental representations [la fantasia].

\(^7\) Although Croce qualifies this rather spectacularly, “but in the same sense in which any one who has a philosophical spirit and philosophical culture in our time, is and feels himself to be at once: Eleatic, Heraclitian, Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Sceptic, Neoplatonic, Christian, Buddhist, Cartesian, Spinozist, Leibnizian, Vichian, Kantian; and so on.” Croce and Ainslie, *What is living and what is dead of the philosophy of Hegel*. p 216.

\(^7\) Isaiah Berlin argues, in his brilliant essay on Sorel, that the basic fact of Sorel’s thought is a definition of the human as a creative being. Berlin, who was certainly a reader of Croce, does not connect Sorel’s *homo faber* to Croce’s *homo poeticus*. It seems to me that Berlin’s work is an excellent example of a reading of Sorel that was blinded by politics, particularly the politics of postwar Europe. Few would have been better qualified to connect Croce and Sorel, but Croce was a respected, if failed, torch-bearer for moderate liberalism, while Sorel was an avatar of the antirationalist enemy. Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy, *Against the current: essays in the history of ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1980).
For Croce, “everything that is truly intuitive or representative is also expressive…the spirit only intuits by making, forming, expressing…it is impossible, in this process of coming to know, to distinguish intuition from expression.” For Bergson, the deep self, the self of the durée, perishes at the very moment of spatialized expression that is, for Croce, all we can grasp. The differences between Bergson’s and Croce’s ideas of intuition map well enough onto the different class positions we find in Sorel’s writing. Bergson’s intuition, which is mimetic and sympathetic fits well with the position of the bourgeois theorist that is Sorel’s.

Croce’s intuition, on the other hand, is at once expressive and creative; this is a new institution coming into being. It is an elemental humanness—“intuitive knowledge has no need of masters.” Croce’s system of the spirit begins at pure, inert material, and ends at pure spirit. Intuitive form-giving is the initial, the first, degree of spiritual activity. It is, therefore, the crucial moment in the overcoming of what Croce would regard as the false dualism of matter and spirit. The organization of form is the initial moment—and proof of existence—of the spirit. Thus there is a performative aspect to an assertion of

78 Benedetto Croce and Colin Lyas, *The aesthetic as the science of expression and of the linguistic in general* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). p 1. I give Lyas’ translation unless otherwise noted for the first, technical part of the *Aesthetics*, which is all his translation covers, but Ainslie for the rest. This sentence alone poses significant problems for those who have tried to put Croce into English—in particular the terms ‘fantasia’ and ‘immagine.’ The Italian, “la conoscenza umana ha due forme: è o conoscenza intuitiva o conoscenza logica; conoscenza per la fantasia o conoscenza per l’intelletto; conoscenza dell’individuale, o conoscenza dell’universale; delle cose, ovvero delle loro relazioni; è, insomma, o produttrice d’immagini o produttrice di concetti.” 79 Ibid. pp 8-9. 80 Ibid. p 2.
Crocean intuition that is much like the performative aspect of Sorelian myth. “There is a sure method of distinguishing true intuition, true representation, from that which is inferior to it: the spiritual fact from the mechanical, passive, natural fact. Every true intuition or representation is also expression. That which does not objectify itself in expression is not intuition or representation, but sensation and mere natural fact.”81 Together with this somewhat circular assertion (there is intuition if there is expression, because every real expression involves intuition), Croce emphasizes the freedom of intuition from intellect—its primacy over intellect:

intuitive knowledge is expressive knowledge. Independent and autonomous in respect to intellectual function, indifferent to any distinctions we subsequently make between the real and the unreal…an intuition or representation is to be distinguished from that which feels and endures…as form; and this form, taking possession, is expression. To intuit is to express; and nothing else (nothing more, but nothing less) than to express.82

If intuition is totally independent from concept, the reverse does not hold: “What is knowledge by concepts? It is knowledge of the relations of things, and things are intuitions. Concepts are not possible without intuitions, just as intuition is itself impossible without the matter of impressions.”83 Mere matter—the shackle, the enemy, of mankind—is given form by spirit, and only then abstracted into concept.

The totalistic elements of Sorel’s idea of myth are the same as those in Croce’s theory of intuitive expression. Paralleling Sorel’s descriptions of the difference between a

81 Ibid. p 8.
82 Ibid. p 11. Italian: “la conoscenza intuitiva è la conoscenza espressiva. Indipendente e autonoma rispetto all’intelletto; indifferente alle discriminazioni posteriori di realtà e irrealità…l’intuizione o rappresentazione si distingue da ciò che si sente e subisce…come forma; e questa forma, questa presa di possesso, è l’espressione. Intuire è esprimere; e nient’altro (niente di più, ma nient’altro di meno) che esprimere.” Croce and Galasso, Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale: teoria e storia. p 16. The Galasso edition, from which I cite here, has no emphasis. I have restored the emphasis in the 1902 printing, partially reproduced by Lyas and Ainslie.
83 Croce and Lyas, The aesthetic as the science of expression and of the linguistic in general. p 22.

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proletarian and a general strike, Croce emphasizes that for intuitive knowledge, “the whole determines the nature of the parts.”\textsuperscript{84} Moreover, “another corollary of the conception of expression as activity is the \textit{indivisibility} of the work of art. Every expression is a single expression...Expression is a synthesis of the various, or multiple, in the one.”\textsuperscript{85} The words of a poem, the lines and colors of a painting—the social elements going into the general strike—in the moment of expressive intuition take on a concrete connection. They are meaningful as a whole, and to pedantically insist on the interpretation of each word as historically specific entity is to destroy the meaning of the poem—just as to negotiate each element in the historical situation of the general strike is to destroy its meaning as myth.\textsuperscript{86}

Just as, for Sorel, the institutions co-constitutive of the general strike are the institution of human freedom in the world, so for Croce the form-giving activity of the spirit is the kernel of real human freedom. This begins at the level of the struggle with materiality. “By elaborating his impressions,” Croce says, “man \textit{frees} himself from them. By objectifying them, he removes them from him and makes himself their superior.” The emphasis here must fall on the agency of the maker, “the liberating and purifying function of art is another aspect and another formula of its character as activity. Activity

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. p 2.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. p 20.
\textsuperscript{86} In this way we can connect the activity of the abstracted scholar who does not really experience poetry to that of the professional politician who is no longer ethically committed to revolution.
is the deliverer, just because it drives away passivity. “Freedom is the activity of the
spirit, and it ramifies upwards in Croce’s system,

as aesthetic intuition knows the phenomenon or nature, and the philosophic concept the
noumenon or spirit; so the economic activity wills the phenomenon or nature, and the
moral activity the noumenon or spirit. The spirit which wills itself, its true self, the
universal which is in the empirical and finite spirit: that is the formula which perhaps
defines the essence of morality with the least impropriety. This will for the true self is
absolute freedom.”

Here, Sorel clearly separates himself from Croce’s ladder of increasing freedom as the
concept moves farther from the material. Still, Croce’s conception of the instant of
aesthetic form-giving as that of freedom—on this he and Sorel agree entirely. It is this
foundation of Croce’s system, this minimal definition of the spirit—or the subject—that
is useful in making sense of Sorel’s deployment of the aesthetic as a category of analysis
in Reflections.

For Sorel, the myth is intuitive knowledge to the degree that it springs from the
new—practical, productive— institutions of the proletariat. This makes it akin to Croce’s
art—which is really a kind of form-giving that all humans practice to some degree—even
if Croce separates off the sphere of what he calls the practical. Croce is not very
interested in economic activity, but even in the realm of the practical, he analogizes
economic activity and aesthetic—“the first practical level is merely useful or economic

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87 Croce and Lyas, The aesthetic as the science of expression and of the linguistic in general. p 21.
88 Ibid. p 67. Here, small but significant changes have been made to latter editions of the Estetica. The 1902
edition reads, “Come l’intuizione estetica conosce il fenomeno o la natura, e la filosofica, il noumeno o lo
spirito; così l’attività economica vuole il fenomeno e la natura, e quella morale il mouemento, lo spirito. Lo
spirito che vuole sé stesso, il vero sé stesso, l’universale ch’è nello spirito empirico e finito: ecco la formula
forse meno impropria per indicar l’essenza della moralità. Questa volizione del vero sé stesso è l’assoluta
libertà.” (p 63 of the 1902 edition). The Galasso edition makes a few changes, mostly clarificatory, in the
first part of the paragraph, but also, for instance, replaces “essenza” with “concetto” in the second to last
sentence. Compare Croce and Galasso, Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale :
teoria e storia. p 77.
89 Croce and Lyas, The aesthetic as the science of expression and of the linguistic in general. p 13.
activity; the second is moral activity. Economics is, so to speak, the Aesthetic of practical life; the Moral is, as it were, its Logic."\textsuperscript{90} For Sorel, production is necessarily practical.

Science—which is for Sorel a kind of making—is submitted to ‘social certitude.’ Science is not mimetic, but constructive. In this sense Sorelian science—in which the laws of nature are, and can only be, expressed in material constructions—has a great deal in common with Croce’s intuitive knowledge. And Croce would agree with this to a certain degree: even philosophy, although its subject matter is the concept and the relation, must be expressed, and if the expression fails, the thought has failed as well. Sorel can suggest that Bergson endorses the idea that the profitable manipulation of a concept is knowledge of it—but this only pushes Sorel further away from Bergson’s intuition, which is metaphysical precisely to the degree that it is not practical or goal-oriented.

The above excursion through Bergson and Croce allows us to say that although the general strike is not a work of art, it is what Croce described as an aesthetic phenomena, produced in an act of intuitive form-giving. It is \textit{like} a work of art. For Croce intuitive form-giving can only take place and can only be appreciated as a whole. The whole form is either there, or not. It works not on the rational intelligence—concepts and relations—but in the realm of affect. It is felt, rather than thought, existing as it does prior to the concept. Finally, the act of aesthetic production is both individual and individuating. On the one hand, we have seen how Sorel’s general strike is individuating (or, gives us an individuating ethics). Its creation is also an individual act in the sense that

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid. p 61.
it is generated by a sort of virtual or, as I have said, evanescent, collective subject—the syndicat and the proletariat constituted through the syndicat. There is a material existence here, and evanescence should not be confused with ideality. The revolution is not a work of art, but its essence is the transformation of workers into artists who have internalized their individual responsibility to an ideal that determines their relation to the socio-material world. Technical development is no longer cruel necessity, driven by Darwinian—or, rather, Spencerian—competition and destruction, but for the individual an aesthetic and for the institution an ethical imperative. People will become new by engaging themselves and their form-giving capacity in the social struggle to extend the realm of freedom—that is the revolution. It is not a utopia where human failings have been erased, but a newly oriented moral and juridical order.

Yet in adopting, as I have argued Sorel has done, Croce’s aesthetic framework for the myth, Sorel has introduced serious tensions into his way of understanding collective ideation. Vico’s ideal history may have been empirically wrong, but its apparently idealist fantasy in fact provided a strong material foundation for what Vico called poetic wisdom. For Vico making, creation, always took place on the basis of material conditions. Croce’s aesthetics specifically brackets the material content of the act of intuitive form-giving. The aesthetic fact, for Vico, is inseparable from its material basis—for Croce, it is only aesthetic, only revelatory of spirit, to the degree that it escapes this content. Sorel’s myth, as we have seen, uneasily covers over this gap by articulating it temporally. There is content to the myth, but it lies in the past, and can say nothing about the meaning of the myth for a postulated or virtual future. The temporal articulation of
the myth is supposed to keep it firmly attached to social reality. The general strike as
myth, after all, is intimately connected to the material conditions of production and the
syndicat’s anti-statist struggle. Sorel’s model for understanding this temporal articulation
of a social identification is, however, the early Church. As myth takes over this structure
from generative history, it also takes over the emphasis on scissionism—helped along,
after all, by Sorel’s increasingly frantic appraisal of the Tocquevillian state. Soon there is
no room for production in the myth of the general strike, it means being against the State,
and only that.

**Force, Violence, and the Sublime**

In the short introduction Sorel wrote for the publication of *Reflections* in *Le Mouvement socialiste*, he points to the “normal” violence of strikes.⁹¹ He declares that the
goal of his research is “not…to justify the perpetrators of violence but to enquire into the
function of the violence of the working classes in contemporary socialism.”⁹² In order to
do this, it is important not to focus too closely on individual acts or “immediate results.”
The question is not what is “directly advantageous for contemporary workers…but
rather…what will result from the introduction of violence into the relations of the
proletariat with society.” Sorel wants “to know what contemporary violence is in relation

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to future social revolution.”93 A long detour was required through the nature not just of proletariat institutions, but of the working classes’ relationship to the modern state and parliamentary system. The general strike encloses within it the ethics of the producers, but its external form is largely determined by the nature of the epic struggle in which syndicalism is engaged—a struggle against statism. It was in thinking through this struggle, in an effort to explain what it means to consider the world structured by this struggle, that Sorel arrived at his most famous distinction, between the force that belongs to the state and the violence that disrupts it.

It is only having mapped out the many traps of statism and its attempt to co-opt the general strike that Sorel explicitly sets down his distinction. “The terms ‘force’ and ‘violence,’” he says, sometimes “are used in speaking of acts of authority, sometimes in speaking of acts of revolt…The two cases give rise to very different consequences.” Therefore, to avoid “ambiguity,” it would be better to say “that the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order. The bourgeoisie have used force since the beginning of modern times, while the proletariat now reacts against the middle class and against the State by violence.”94 Sorel has argued, through a reading of Marx’s presentation of primitive accumulation, that Marx had never “examined any other form of social constraint except force.”95

93 Ibid. p 43.
94 Ibid. pp 165-166.
95 Ibid. p 166. Unusually, Sorel cites a lengthy passage from his own previous work, possibly because it had never appeared in French, the Saggi, 38-40. The relevant passages from Capital are from the eighth section,
Sorel understands Marx’s history of primitive accumulation as the history of the process by which force was used to institute the capitalist laws of motion as the natural laws of the economic world. Economists, who Sorel says are today perfectly conscious of the artificiality of the market system, were for a long time blinded to the truth that “this system…is the result of a series of transformations that might not have taken place, and which always remains a very unstable structure, for it could be destroyed by force, as it had been created by the intervention of force.” Marx himself, in London, had before him a great wealth of information about the history of capitalism, but very little about the history of the proletariat. Orthodox Marxists stick too closely to the letter of Marx’s writings, they do not investigate the proletariat as Marx investigated capitalism, and therefore “they have never suspected…that a distinction should be drawn between the force that aims at authority, endeavouring to bring about an automatic obedience, and the violence that would smash that authority.” These socialists, knowing only the force that made capitalism, assume that “the proletariat must acquire force just as the bourgeoisie acquired it…as the State formerly played a most important part in the revolutions that abolished the old economic systems, so it must again be the State that should abolish

chapters 26-31. Especially important is the interpretation of the passage from chapter 31, which in German reads, “Die Gewalt ist der Geburtshelfer jeder alten Gesellschaft, die mit einer neuen schwanger geht. Sie selbst ist eine ökonomische Potenz.” The French edition Sorel used translates this as, “Et en effet, la Force est l’accoucheuse de toute vieille société en travail. La Force est un agent économique.” (p 336 col.1) Sorel noted the difference between “Potenz” and “agent,” and himself suggests that Marx is using Potenz in something of a geometric sense: Force is an economic multiplier effect. (footnote 37, pg 168). Fowkes’ English translation reads, “Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power” (916).

Ibid. pp 168-169.

Ibid. p 170.
capitalism—their failure to understand violence is the same as their failure to understand that a state-enforced abolition of capitalism will not result in freedom from oppression, only in a differently oppressive state hierarchy without any of the dynamism of industrial capitalism. Violence, for Sorel, is a historically bounded phenomena. It emerges from the interstices of capitalism not as a hydraulic, emotive, reaction to capitalist exploitation, but as the social expression of the freedom capitalism requires in order to extract profit, but cannot forever contain.

Sorel’s analysis of proletarian violence, however, is dogged by parallels with the bourgeois revolutions. Sorel’s exegesis of Marx produced an analysis of the force of capitalist domination into a logical progression moving from the force of economic exploitation, raw use of state coercive power, to the bloody acts of primitive accumulation—which, we should notice, presents the logical form in the reverse of the historical appearance. The analysis of proletarian violence into an “ethics of violence” in the sixth chapter of Reflections begins with raw interpersonal violence and ends with the sublime, with Sorel’s attempt to fold the historical phenomena of proletarian violence into the new moral universe of the general strike. Borrowing examples from only the most impeccably Catholic and conservative writers, Paul Bureau and Paul de Rousiers, Sorel argues that there is no necessary contradiction between extra-state violence—vigilante violence, or bloody ends to personal quarrels, and immoral societies. The

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98 Ibid. p 170.
99 Both followers of Le Play—and not to be accused of anarchistic tendencies.
100 He quotes Bureau, for instance, writing about Norway. It isn’t clear that Bureau is even, in the grand scheme of things, doing more than claiming that in Norway, “a stab given by a man who is virtuous in his
emphasis here is not on violence, but on statelessness: “before the French conquest, Kabylie had no other means of punishment but private vengeance, yet the Kabyles were not a bad people.”¹⁰¹ In any event, the function of violence within contemporary capitalist society is “to induce the workers to look upon economic conflicts as the reduced facsimiles of the great battle which will decide the future,”¹⁰² that is, to emphasize the scission between proletarian and bourgeois. For this, no great bloodletting is necessary. Sorel turns here to precisely the historical terrain he had explored some years earlier, in his work on early Christianity around Renan.¹⁰³ Sorel sides with Harnack against Renan’s emphasis on the reality of martyrdom: the persecution was as much imagined as anything, and perhaps for just this reason morally effective. Just as it was possible for the early Christians to find the moral energy to found a new civilization in events too small for the historians of late imperial Rome even to notice, so acts of violence that might not even be sensational enough to make it into the newspapers could be sufficient “to evoke the idea of the general strike” so that “all the events of the conflict…appear under a magnified form and, the idea of catastrophe being maintained

morals, but violent, is a social evil less serious and more easily curable than the excessive profligacy of young men reputed to be more civilized,” never mind that Sorel, in quoting this passage from Bureau, is endorsing it as his own belief. Nonetheless, Jacob Talmon cites this passage as Sorel’s own opinion, see the discussion in chapter seven of, J. L. Talmon, “The Legacy of Georges Sorel,” Encounter (1970).
¹⁰¹ Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 177. Parallels to the moral universe of Pierre Clastres and James C. Scott should be obvious here.
¹⁰² Ibid. p 178.
¹⁰³ See above, chapter four.
the cleavage will be perfect.”¹⁰⁴ Violence, which has no density outside of its sociohistorical context, is therefore also not in and of itself immoral.¹⁰⁵

Sorelian violence, like Sorelian myth, has the specific function of bridging the gap between the collective and the individual. Both are historically bounded phenomena that make sense only given specific contexts and histories, but which also reach deep into the individual and adjust the springs of their actions. And here, Sorel looks to the contemporary work of Émile Durkheim on the sacred in order to explain how the glimmerings of a new society are manifest in individual action. Specifically, Sorel cites Durkheim’s presentations on “La détermination du fait moral” to the Société française de la philosophie in February and March of 1906.¹⁰⁶ It is here that Durkheim made perhaps his most full-throated defense of his sociological notion of morality: “One must choose between God and society […] from my point of view, this choice is indifferent,

¹⁰⁴ Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 182.
¹⁰⁵ This point is not without its larger importance in evaluating Sorel’s significance. This issue is discussed at more length elsewhere, but here it can be pointed out that the specificity of violence is not always treated in this way. Most famously, Simone Weil argued that there is a kind of phenomenology specific to violence, that it by its very nature turns human beings into objects, both those on whom violence is inflicted and those who inflict this violence. Weil would surely not agree with Sorel’s basic line of argument that there is no incompatibility between scattered acts of violence and profound morality. More recently, and less beautifully, others have made somewhat similar attempts to give violence its own, as I have said, density. See Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force." And, among many others, Willem Schinkel, "The will to violence," Theoretical Criminology 8, no. 1 (2004).
¹⁰⁶ Sorel often attended these meetings, and even presented at one. Sorel’s name is not among those recorded as having been present at the first of the two meetings, at which Durkheim gave his presentation, but he is recorded among those present at the second meeting, when it was discussed. It is certainly possible that he was present at both, and would at the very least have had access to the summary program provided for the first meeting. However that may be, Durkheim was questioned with some sharpness about his treatment of the sublime by M. Jacob at the session for which we have a record of Sorel’s presence. On the Société more generally, see Soulié, Les philosophes en République: L’aventure intellectuelle de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale et de la Société française de Philosophie (1891-1914).
because in the divinity I see only society transfigured and thought symbolically.\textsuperscript{107} Here, famously, moral life begins where collective life begins. Sorel follows this proposition to its logical conclusion: where there is a morality, there must be a collectivity—where there is a new morality, so there must be a new collectivity. Despite Durkheim’s general difficulty thinking about change and contradiction internal to a given social structure, he explicitly makes room for just the sort of intervention Sorel effects. The moral fact—rigorously to be distinguished from consciousness of this moral fact, just as the facts of physics are distinguished from our awareness of them—depends on social structure, on organization. As the organization of society changes, so must the facts of moral regulation.

The sublime, which appears as the eruption of a Kantian moral of autonomy and duty with Durkheim—where it might have been least expected—is for Sorel as it is for Durkheim, social. Sorel is energized by Durkheim not only because this is a way of explaining deep moral compulsion, as Gianinazzi says, “without the dross of the religious,”\textsuperscript{108} but just because of Durkheim’s tautological reasoning. The sacred \textit{is} the social bond, and so when Sorel can see proletarian violence giving rise to the most moral impulses to be found in the working class, it is evidence that indeed a new society is being born in the belly of the old.

Jean Jaurès, perhaps Sorel’s central political enemy in Reflections, wrote against the use of violence by socialists in 1904, “la force, c’est la nuit, car c’est l’inconnu.” Better to walk in the full light of parliamentary deliberation and the legal power of representative democracy. For Sorel, the force/violence distinction attacks exactly this position. Force, legal force, always strengthens the state. It is knowable—Marx understood much about it in Capital—and will bring only perversions of the revolution. Revolutionary activity must be violence against force. It must, to a certain extent, be a willing embrace of the unknown. Indeed, the value of Sorelian violence is largely to provide the moral energy that will propel society into the unknown. But this is not enough; it must also develop the logic of production. Gianinazzi calls this the preparation that Sorel demands of the proletariat. Certainly this is how Sorel articulated his position around 1900—most forcefully in the preface to Merlino—but by 1905, and the writing of Reflections, preparation was already a dangerous way of thinking. We turn next to Sorel’s attempt to bring his antiauthoritarian violence in line with production.

**Ethics of the Producers**

Sorel has long been associated with Friedrich Nietzsche. Julien Benda’s Trahison des clercs, through sheer repetition as much as argument, brings the names

together.\textsuperscript{110} The \textit{Cambridge Modern History} of 1962 called Sorel “probably the first important heir” of Nietzsche’s thought.\textsuperscript{111} Sorel himself did not write much about Nietzsche. Indeed \textit{Reflections} is the only one of Sorel’s books in which he is mentioned. Of Nietzsche’s books, Sorel refers briefly to \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, but discusses only \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals} at any length. This is not the place for a global comparison of Sorel’s work with Nietzsche’s, nor for speculation on how much or how little of Nietzsche Sorel might have read.\textsuperscript{112} As Christopher Forth has shown, Nietzsche was an enormously polyvalent signifier in the French \textit{fin-de-siècle}.\textsuperscript{113} Certainly Sorel was surrounded by people interested in him. Daniel Halévy was a ‘Nietzschean,’ and published a biography of the German philosopher in 1909.\textsuperscript{114} Charles Andler, another of Sorel’s circle and a major intellectual influence, arguably the founder of the academic discipline of German studies in France, was deeply influenced by his study of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{110} See for instance Benda and Aldington, \textit{The treason of the intellectuals}, pp 127-135.

\textsuperscript{111} David Thomas writing in F.H. Hinsley, ed. \textit{The New Cambridge Modern History, Volume XI, Material Progress and World-Wide Problems, 1870-1898}, vol. 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1962). p 113. Here, Sorel is taken to show how close Nietzsche’s thought really is to Marx’s thought. “Study of Sorel reveals unexpectedly numerous points of contact between Marx and Nietzsche: like them he is convinced of the decadence of bourgeois society, he believes in violence as the only cure for its evils, he glorifies war, he despises liberal democracy. He blends the two moralities of Marx (proletarian and bourgeois) with the two moralities (master and slave) of Nietzsche.” Sorel’s path from Marx to Nietzsche is taken to be indicative of a single political pathology common to both, that is, although the word isn’t used, totalitarianism. See chapter seven, below.

\textsuperscript{112} For such speculations and comparisons, see Gianinazzi, \textit{Naissance du mythe moderne : Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889-1914}. pp 167-174. Marc Crépon is useful in orienting attention toward the commonalities in Nietzsche’s criticisms of socialism, and Sorel’s criticisms of parliamentary socialism. It might be suggested, however, that much of what Crépon points out—a suspicion of the state, of statism, concern for the individual and the springs of moral virtue—is the inheritance of an aristocratic liberalism running throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. See Frédéric Worms and Bruno Antonini, eds., \textit{Le moment 1900 en philosophie} (Villeneuve d’Asq: Presses universitaires du septentrion,2004).


\textsuperscript{114} Halévy had co-translated as early as 1893 Nietzsche’s \textit{le Cas Wagner}. Together with Robert Dreyfus.
\end{footnotesize}
Nietzsche.¹¹⁵ Edouard Berth, Sorel’s self-described disciple, wrote about Nietzsche in the pages of Mouvement socialiste. But then so too had one of Sorel’s early interlocutors, Alfred Fouillée, written about Nietzsche and about comparisons between his nephew Jean-Marie Guyau’s and Nietzsche’s moral philosophies.¹¹⁶

The question for us here, however, is how to fit Nietzsche, or rather Sorel’s presentation of Nietzsche, into the problematic of the general strike as the myth that spans the gap between an ethics of anti-statist resistance and an ethics of production, as a historical object that allows the social theorist to escape philosophical dualism. Sorel turns to Nietzsche near the end of Reflections, in order, as he says, to “analyse the component parts of morality.”¹¹⁷ Against bourgeois moralists who make all kinds of excuses and prevarications in order to avoid admitting “the fundamental heterogeneity of…civilized morality,” Sorel believes “that any group of ideas in the history of thought is best understood if all the contradictions are brought into sharp relief.”¹¹⁸ Nietzsche’s famous distinction, formulated in The Genealogy of Morals, between master and slave morality, will help Sorel bring into full daylight the (non-dialectical) contradictions between various modern systems of morality.

Looking to Nietzsche’s roots in classical philology, Sorel establishes that although the master type for Nietzsche appears in different places and times, its most perfect example is the Homeric hero. This ideal encompasses Achilles, but also Napoleon

¹¹⁵ See Christophe Prochasson’s introduction to Andler, Civilization socialiste.
¹¹⁷ Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 230.
¹¹⁸ Ibid. p 230.
Bonaparte and other, less personally violent individuals. “If Nietzsche had not been so
dominated by his memories of being a professor of philology,” says Sorel, he would have
recognized that his master type “still exists under our own eyes…he would have been
struck by the singular analogies that exist between the Yankee, ready for any kind of
enterprise, and the ancient Greek sailor.” In particular, following Paul de Rousiers, he
suggests that the outsized characters who conquered the American West would have been
familiar to Nietzsche as modern-day versions of the Greeks, “the profound contempt
which the Greek had for the barbarian is matched by that of the Yankee for the foreign
worker who makes no effort to become truly American.” It is worth noting that Sorel’s
examples have at least as much to do with struggle against the material world as they do
with struggle against other people.

It is important to recognize that Sorel is not calling for a generalization of
Nietzsche’s master type, or even for its implantation in the proletariat. He is not, he says,
“among those who consider Homer’s Achean type, the indomitable hero, confident in his
own strength and putting himself above rules, as necessarily disappearing in the

119 Ibid. p 232.
120 Ibid. p 232-233.
121 In a footnote, Sorel cites Bourdeau citing an unprinted lecture by Jean Jaurès, who reportedly argued
that Nietzsche’s superman was really the proletariat. Sorel says, “I have not been able to get any
information about this lecture of Jaurès; let us hope that he will some day publish it, for our amusement.”
Ibid. p 233, note 39. My goal here is not to contextualize Sorel’s reading of Nietzsche, but it should be
emphasized that Sorel is not doing anything daring simply in writing about Nietzsche in the context of
socialism. The chapter on Nietzsche in Jean Bourdeau’s book from which Sorel cites contains a section
labeling the philologist “a socialist despite himself,” and the un-sourced citation of Jaurès is flanked by
references to two recent books that explicitly and at length attempted to recuperate Nietzsche for socialism.
One of these, de Roberty’s thesis, is discussed at some length. See the discussion of Bourdeau and Sorel in
Alcan, 1904). pp 139-146.
Those who have been led to believe this, Nietzsche included, fall prey to a basic misconception about morality, believing that these Homeric values were “irreconcilable with other values which spring from an entirely different principle.”

Although Sorel does not use the word, diremption is clearly the frame here: “all those who believe in the necessity of unity in thought” will make the same mistake. In a particularly associative passage, Sorel says,

> It is quite evident that liberty would be seriously compromised if men came to regard the Homeric values (which are approximately the same as the values of Corneille) as suitable only to barbaric peoples. Many moral evils would prevent humanity from progressing if some hero of revolt did not force the people to examine its conscience; and art, which is after all of some value, would lose the finest jewel in its crown.

Liberty, which is the central value here, is not embodied by the masters, but is the result of the coexistence of this morality with other moralities. It is in periodic revolt from a given morality that one finds liberty, not in the acceptance of a single morality of predator and prey. Art, here, is a realm of freedom that escapes the “dull systems of

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123 Ibid. p 233.
124 Ibid. p 233.
125 Ibid. p 233. Benda, in his 1947 review of the *Lettres à Delesalle*, singles out this passage. He says, not entirely unjustly, “On remarquera: ‘il est tout fait évident’ et l’extraordinaire conception de la liberté qui s’affirme en ce dictat. Qu’un tel livre ait été le bréviaire de tout un monde d’intellectuels français, c’est une des hontes de la France.” In the same review, Benda asserts that, in the wake of *Reflections’* success, and particularly given Paul Bourget’s enthusiasm for it, if Sorel had played his cards right he could well have been inducted into the Académie française. This strikes me as implausible, and perhaps an exaggeration of Sorel’s influence in order all the more firmly to condemn a whole intellectual milieu. Still, the picture of Sorel that Benda paints with the goal of discrediting him is in some ways enormously appealing—“ Sorel était de la race de ceux qui ne sont sensibles qu’aux idées et [sont] totalement indifférents aux hochets de ce bas-monde. Il est certain qu’au lendemain des *Réflexions sur la violence*, avec la panique d’enthousiasme que l’ouvrage suscita chez Bourget, il eut pu facilement entrer à l’Académie. (On ne voit guère Sorel faisant ses visites.)” Benda, *L’ordre*. Nov 1947. IMEC Fonds Grasset, GRS 348.
126 Sorel was not a friend of Zola’s, but surely the defense of art as moral revolt in the last sentence is nothing but the self-image of the novelist as the moral conscience of the nation that emerged not least from Zola’s intervention in the Dreyfus affair.
Sorel explicitly encourages Marxists, in distinction from bourgeois critics, to see “art as a reality which begets ideas and not as an application of ideas.” Art, like production, works the edge of the known and the systematized.

Sorel is less convinced that Nietzsche’s account of so-called slave morality, described as that ascetic ideal created by the priestly class, is relevant or useful. Sorel declines to examine the “psychological reasons” for Nietzsche’s interest in this ideal, and further believed that “he certainly makes a mistake in attributing a preponderant part to the Jews; it is not at all evident that antique Judaism had an ascetic character.” Until the Christian era (the destruction of the temple by the Romans), “the Jews looked to revenge by arms” and anyway were always too focused on family life for any sort of ascetic ideal to make sense. Sorel allows that by the middle ages, European Jews might have fit Nietzsche’s ascetic ideal much better, but “the resigned Jew of the Middle ages

127 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 234.
128 Ibid. p 234.
129 Scholarly treatments of Sorel’s views on art, his aesthetics, or his association with artists, have tended to divide according to evaluations of Sorel’s political significance. Mark Antliff’s work on fascist neoclassicism, for instance, takes as a starting point Sorel’s association with the Action française, and ultimately draws Sorel into an account of right-wing nationalist mythmaking and regenerative violence. Antliff, Avant-garde fascism: the mobilization of myth, art, and culture in France, 1909-1939; ———, “Bad Anarchism: Aestheticized Mythmaking and the Legacy of Georges Sorel.” Others, who take a different view of Sorel’s politics, have preferred to focus on his anarchist associations. They connect Sorelian violence to anarchist violence, and ultimately to literary expressions of anarchism. See for instance Paul Redding’s plausible attempt to “argue that this primitive, revolutionary violence, adumbrated by Sorel in his myths, found uneasy sanctuary in an emerging modernist fiction, whose very techniques—perspectivism, the unreliable narrator, stream of consciousness—can be understood as both a textualized evasion and accommodation of a political violence that ‘history’ has refused to shelter...Modernist fiction continues to rehearse and redefine the battles of mythic, anarchist violence.” Arthur F. Redding, Raids on human consciousness: writing, anarchism, and violence (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998). p 70. However, the reading given to Sorel by the likes of Hulme and Wyndham Lewis—and by extension other modernists less familiar with his work—should not be allowed to slide into an account of what Sorel actually thought. See also Cerullo, “A Literary Sorel: ‘Disreempting’ a Fin de Siècle Moralist.”
130 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 234.
was more like the Christians than his ancestors.” Rather than following Nietzsche, Sorel argues that the ascetic ideal in the modern world has been entirely replaced by a morality derived from the family.

Sorel’s sexual politics deserve a full treatment on their own terms, and in the broader context of discourses of masculinity in the Third Republic. For the moment it is enough to say that he was able to stand with Proudhon, for the family as a moral center, and against the Catholic Church. “The values to which the contemporary world clings most closely, and which it considers the true values of virtue, are not realized in convents, but in the family; respect for the human person, sexual fidelity and devotion to the weak constitute the elements of morality of which all high-minded men are proud; — indeed, very often morality is made to consist of these alone.”

For Sorel, contemporary debates on divorce show that what the reformers really want is to strengthen this morality: it is considered obscene for union to retain legal force when sexual fidelity no longer exists. Sorel is entirely in line with republican anticlerical rhetoric in arguing that the practices of the Church work against a genuine respect for marriage: “[the Church] sees in marriage, above all, a contract directed by financial and worldly interests; it is extremely indulgent towards love affairs; it is unwilling to allow that the union be dissolved when

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132 Central to such an undertaking would be Surkis, Sexing the citizen : morality and masculinity in France, 1870-1920.
133 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 234.
the household is a hell.”

Yet this is not even a principled stand, “when it is heavily recompensed, the Church finds... means of annulling inconvenient unions for ridiculous motives.”

Sorel concludes that for contemporary social thought, the family should be regarded as the institution out of which moral theories grow, and that the Church no longer has any authority in this field. If it was surprising to learn that art is a productive realm of freedom, so we may be surprised to read here that “love, by the enthusiasm it begets, can produce that sublimity without which there would be no effective morality”—surely not a vulgar Nietzscheanism.

Sorel then turns to a field that he says escapes Nietzsche’s classifications, the field of “civil relations.” Again, for reasons that perhaps have as much to do with Nietzsche as anything else, Sorel turns to the history of the Jews, among whom

until recent times, one finds a mixture of hygienic principles, rules about sexual relationships, precepts about honesty, benevolence and national solidarity, the whole wrapped up in magical superstitions; this mixture, which seems strange to the philosopher, had the happiest influence on their morality as long as they maintained their traditional way of life; and one notices among them even now a particular exactitude in the carrying out of contracts.

134 Ibid. p 235.
135 Ibid. p 235. Although it is hard to draw any very material connections, it should at the very least be remembered that the entry for the word diremption in the Littré is illustrated by an example from Proudhon—who Sorel cites all through these pages—dealing with precisely this issue. Diremption is what the Church performs on a marriage they wish to negate. Could it be that marriage as an institution turns out to be a central topos for Sorel’s social thought? This would support Cerullo’s brilliant but rather undiremptive reduction of Sorel’s motivation to the containment of sexual desire. For my treatment of diremption, see chapter four above. And, Cerullo, "A Literary Sorel: 'Disrempeting' a Fin de Siècle Moralist."
136 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 236.
137 To what extent is this sphere supposed to fit into a Hegelian ‘civil society’? We began with the masters, who were pure individuals, grasping and striving. We passed through the family, the seat of modern morals. And we arrive at the civil field, where needs are satisfied by contract and negotiation. How much does this or doesn’t it look like the Philosophy of Right?
138 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 236.
Philosophical writing on morals, however, springs from a different and much less vital source. Contemporary moralists, says Sorel, draw on Aristotle, who himself represents a decadent period in Greek life. This is especially notable in his treatment of labor—slaves perform labor, and there is nothing philosophical about it. For Aristotle, one is able to philosophize because one does not have to labor. Aristotle’s views on laborers have been, says Sorel, those of most modern philosophers: laborers “must be given orders; they should be corrected with gentleness like children; they ought to be treated like passive instruments who do not need to think.” Although state socialism could accommodate itself perfectly well to this view of the worker, “revolutionary syndicalism would be impossible if the world of the workers were under the influence of such a morality of the weak.” Religion will clearly no longer serve to pacify the workers, but other moralities that revolve basically around the passivity of the workers are being fashioned and tested in the lecture-halls of the Sorbonne among “the official moralists of the Bloc” on a daily basis.

If Sorel began with Nietzsche’s categories, he has significantly revised them. Sorel, this is to say, accepts Nietzsche’s presentation of the morality of the strong, but sees it active in many more social locations. The morality of the masters is not just Homeric, it is also typical of the greatest capitalists of the age, the Yankees. Sorel rejects with some firmness the notion that the Christian ascetic ideal is a trick pulled by the

139 Ibid. p 237.
140 Ibid. p 238.
141 That is, the Bloc républicain or the Bloc des gauches. An alliance between more progressive republicans and socialists, anticlericals, springing out of the Dreyfus Affair, and dominating the period through to the fall of the Combes ministry in early 1905.
crafty Jews on vigorous Gentiles. More than remaining unconvinced by Nietzsche’s historical account of the ‘morality of the weak,’ Sorel simply refuses the de-valorization of these virtues. First of all the ideals of the masses—not to be scorned by the great—come from the family, which is not ascetic but fundamentally earthly. The morality of the weak is not the morality of the ascetic, but of the consumer. This morality is defined quite specifically as the acceptance into social practice of a division between ideal (spoken command) and material (production itself). A morality of the weak, for Sorel, is a morality that accepts the ideology of the division of labor into masters and servants. It both degrades and ignores the creativity that is essential in labor. Sorel takes Nietzsche to believe that one or the other morality must ‘win out.’ Leaving aside the correctness of this reading, Sorel does not agree. The morality of the strong, operating across the social field, is compatible with the rise of a new morality that directly counters consumerist morality—a new morality linked to production.

**Art and the Revolution**

This Nietzschean analysis of the various competing and clashing moralities present in society is, says Sorel, preparatory to the great task of *Reflections*. This is “to ask how it is possible to conceive of the transformation of the men of today into the free producers of tomorrow working in workshops where there are no masters.”142 This formulation has the advantage of focusing our attention on two points. First, Sorel is very

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clear that *people must be different*—which is to say that a transformation must take place in the material and moral worlds people inhabit. The old saw that the revolution does not take account of human nature is directly rejected. Second, this transformation cannot be imagined apart from a newly organized workplace, one without masters. “The question must be expressed accurately,” Sorel says, “we pose it not for a world that has already arrived at socialism, but solely for our own time and for the preparation of the transition from one world to the other; if we do not limit the question in this way, we shall find ourselves straying into utopias.”  

Nietzsche helps Sorel to do this because his framing of two moralities is legible within the socio-economic field. The rising proletariat forges its own heroic morality within the workshop, through the family, in struggle with the masters—but also and more fundamentally against the morality of the consumers, which is really the morality of the state, of the master who commands labor without performing it, who can think only in abstractions.

Turning again to Kautsky as the ideologue of the honest but blinded Marxists, Sorel comes close to identifying explicitly the problem with which he has been struggling throughout the book. For Kautsky—and we return to the problematic of the general strike—

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143 Ibid. p 238. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin arguably strays into just this utopia. Consider the following passage: “only in communist society, when the resistance of the capitalists has been completely broken, when the capitalists have disappeared, when there are no classes (i.e., when there is no difference between the members of society as regards their relation to the social means of production), only then does “the state...cease to exist,” and it “becomes possible to speak of freedom.” Only then will really complete democracy, democracy without any exceptions, be possible and be realized. Only then will democracy itself begin to wither away owing to the simple fact that, freed from capitalist slavery, from the untold horrors, savagery, absurdities and infamies of capitalist exploitation, people will gradually become accustomed to observing the elementary rules of social life that have been known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years in all copy-book maxims; they will become accustomed to observing them without force, without compulsion, without subordination, without the special apparatus for compulsion which is called a state.” Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Henry M. Christman, *Essential works of Lenin* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966). p 338.
as Luxemburg explained it—it must be the case that if the syndicats are strong enough to call a work stoppage broad and deep enough to bring the revolution, then they are strong enough also to lead the proletariat back to the factories after the revolution. At this, Sorel hoots that even Kautsky himself “does not seem to feel much confidence in the excellence of his solution.”\textsuperscript{144} The problem is obvious, and not one that Marx or a real student of Marx would have fallen into: “evidently no comparison can be made between the kind of discipline which forces a general stoppage of work on workers and that which will induce them to handle machinery with greater skill.”\textsuperscript{145} It seems clear to Sorel that the kind of discipline which exists in capitalist workshops “is greatly superior to that maintained by the police,” which is to say that the kind of force exerted by any state, even a democratic one, will never run an effective factory.\textsuperscript{146} Kautsky is not entirely confused, however. He is right that “the motive force of the revolutionary movement must also be the motive force of the ethic of the producers.”\textsuperscript{147} Still, Kautsky is wrong to believe that “the action of the syndicat on work is direct…the influence will result from complex and distant causes.”\textsuperscript{148} The syndicat must be at once an institution of resistance to the current order of things and must be shaped, in however mediated a fashion, by a morality of production.

Sorel’s comparison of this new morality to that which animated the soldiers of the Revolutionary Wars has been discussed above. Its great defining feature is its

\textsuperscript{144} Sorel and Jennings, \textit{Reflections on violence}. p 239.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid. p 239.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid. p 240.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid. p 240.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. p 240.
individuality, so that just as in these wars, so in action informed by the idea of the general strike, “each [person] marching with as much fervor as possible, each acting on his own account, and hardly troubling to subordinate his conduct to a carefully drawn up overall plan.”149 Even in the protests of the politicians against this way of proceeding, Sorel believes we can hear the truth: “the revolutionary syndicalists wish to extol the individuality of the life of the producer.”150 And in so doing, as the official socialists protest with perfect validity, “they undermine the foundations of the State.”151 In this it should be freely admitted that the syndicats are anarchist. The moral development of the individual worker is correlative with the development of the new institutions of the proletariat. This movement, at the least, makes the state irrelevant and at the most actively dissolves it.

The wars of the 1790s, however, are an imperfect analogy because they do not approach the question that is after all at the heart of the matter: production. With remarkable aplomb, Sorel tells us, “the free producer in a highly progressive workshop must never measure his efforts by an external standard; he finds all the models presented to him to be mediocre and wants to surpass everything that has been done before him. Production is thus assured of constant improvement in both quality and quantity; the idea of indefinite progress is realized in such a workshop.”152 We must look, to understand

149 Ibid. p 242.  
150 Ibid. p 242.  
151 Ibid. p 243.  
152 Ibid. p 244.
this phenomenon, to art and artistic production. Sorel, taking care to bracket
bohemianism as a holdover of aristocratic pretentions, says that

Every time...we approach a question relating to industrial progress we are led to regard
art as an *anticipation* of the highest form of production...This analogy is justified by the
fact that the artist does not like to reproduce standard models; the *infinite nature of his
will* distinguishes him from the ordinary artisan, who is mainly successful in the unending
reproduction of models which are not his own. The inventor is an artist who exhausts
himself in pursuit of the realization of ends that ordinary people generally regard as
absurd or mad; -- practical people resemble artisans. In every industry one could cite
significant advances which originated in small changes made by workers endowed with
the artist’s taste for innovation.\footnote{153}

Sorel is ready to assimilate the “ever-increasing concern for exactitude” that typifies
modern industry to the history of artistic development. The point of art is not to please a
public, but to develop with integrity the demands internal to the task of creation. Here,
Sorel cites with approval Nietzsche castigating Kant for having “like all philosophers,
meditated on art and the beautiful as a *spectator* instead of looking at the aesthetic
problem from the point of view of the artist, the *creator*.”\footnote{154} Even the willingness to labor
without the thought of precise, or vaguely commensurate, remuneration is to be found in
the field of artistic production.\footnote{155} Here, like Ruskin, Sorel points to the gothic cathedral,
long a favorite topic of his.\footnote{156} We know nothing of those who designed and built them,
nothing of the master stone-carvers who made the statues that are now so admired. This is
not an accident of history, “it seems very probably to me that the cathedrals were only

\footnote{153} Ibid. p 244.
\footnote{154} Ibid. p 245. This is from the *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p 78, says Jennings. And in French, p 178.
\footnote{155} Although also, of course, in the military. There the point is even sharper: “When a column sets forth on
an assault the men who march at its head know that they are sent to their death and that glory will fall upon
those who, passing over their dead bodies, enter the enemy’s position; however, they do not reflect upon
this great injustice but march forward.” Ibid. p 247.
\footnote{156} Among the earliest of Sorel’s aesthetic writings focused on gothic cathedrals, especially Notre-Dame de
Paris. Here, he followed Viollet-le-Duc. See above, chapter one.
admired by artists” even at the time.\textsuperscript{157} “This striving towards excellence, which exists in the absence of any personal, immediate or proportional reward, constituted the secret virtue that assures the continued progress of the world”\textsuperscript{158}—it is as though the accumulation of capital must come from somewhere, and the essence of morality is this setting-by of such capital, taken out of the pride of the work, invested in the material complexity of society.

\textit{Reflections on Violence} is a monument of revolutionary literature if only because it so effectively poses the fundamental problem of Marxist revolution. Transforming Renan’s question, ‘on what will the future live?’ Sorel says, “we need to know if there exist, in the world of the producers, forces of enthusiasm capable of combining with the ethics of good work in such a way that, in our days of crisis, this ethic may acquire all the authority necessary to lead society along the path of economic progress.”\textsuperscript{159} We must beware being too quick to identify these forces, and we must further beware finding them in the great movements and traditions of the past. “How absurd…is the idea of borrowing from some previous social structure a suitable means for controlling a system of production whose principle characteristic is that every day it must become more and more opposed to all preceding economic systems?”\textsuperscript{160} Morality is a “sovereign force” that “is not doomed to perish because the motive forces behind it will change.” Today, “only one force…can produce the enthusiasm without whose cooperation no morality is

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Sorel and Jennings, \textit{Reflections on Violence}. p 248.
\item Ibid. p 248.
\item Ibid. p 249.
\item Ibid. p 250.
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\end{footnotesize}
possible, and that is the force resulting from propaganda in favor of the general strike.”

“Constantly rejuvenated by the sentiments provoked by proletarian violence,” the general strike “produces an entirely epic state of mind and, at the same time, bends all the energies of the mind towards the conditions that allow the realization of a freely functioning and prodigiously progressive workshop.” Free workers, engaged in progressive production without the oversight of bosses; this is an almost—but not quite—unimaginable society.

All of this, however, remains possible. It is the potential that Sorel believes he has found in the present. It is actuated not by institutional reform, but by the ethical commitment of the individual proletarian to his work, a commitment that is annealed with violence carried out under the sign of the general strike. Myth and violence, although Sorel casts both as necessarily material and then institutional at their foundations, refocus attention on the individual, really on the body of the individual worker. The worker, caught up by the mythic expression of his material conditions, is supposed to overcome the dualisms inscribed in the class structure. Only the commitment to production, only the ethic of the producers, creates historical movement, by changing, eventually, its own conditions. It requires a dualism (of the masters) against which it can struggle. Violence has precisely the function of sharpening class conflict, that is, dualism. The insidious dualism of the state provides nothing against which production could struggle—the two are not on the same logical plain. Policing the gap between these logical plains becomes

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161 Ibid. p 250.
162 Ibid. p 250.
the task of the theorist. In the balance here hangs the capacity of production to overcome
the temptations of force, and therefore, potentially, to generalize itself as a morality. This
potential places an extraordinary ethical pressure on the theorist—and this is how Sorel
came to the pessimism so forcefully articulated in the “Letter to Daniel Halévy.”

Pessimism and the “Letter to Daniel Halévy”

Sorel’s resolution—on the field of the social generation of ideas—of the string of
conceptual dualisms that confronted him was a frankly ethical one. Across Reflections on
Violence, politics fades into the field of individual ethics. At the end of 1906, Sorel wrote
a review of a book in which Edouard Dolléans had cited him in support of the idea that
modern socialism is something like a replacement for religion. Sorel insisted first that
there was nothing necessarily religious about the idea of faith:

To take a side in social struggles is an act of faith [c’est faire acte de foi]…the republican
who resisted the Second Empire had faith in the virtue internal to republican institutions,
the legitimist believes that the prosperity of States depends on respect for the principles
of heredity; and these things cannot be demonstrated. Each of us chooses one among the
postulates and attaches ourselves firmly to it.

All sense of historical movement is gone here—leaving only existential commitment. The
terms under which Sorel defends syndicalism have also undergone a distinct shift. He
explicitly rejects the suggestion that “the proletariat can regenerate humanity” because of
its status as the productive class. Rather, he says, “it is only because it is the only class

163 Dolléans would go on to become an important historian of the labor movement, as well as serving in
different ministries during the Popular Front.
287-288.
currently possessed by a warlike spirit and, therefore, the only that is virile and capable of progress."165 Dolléans has brought forward Sorel’s writings on myth as evidence for the religious character of socialism. So Sorel reiterates his position, and in this reiteration there is an expansion of the field of myth,

the proletarian revolution appears to workers today as all great revolutions appeared to their proponents, as a drama the whole of which is clearly drawn. When we have to make decisions in everyday life [la vie commune] we also proceed by representing to ourselves the future in a dramatic form able to direct our feelings [sentiments]. These constructions are of the same nature as social myths, but they disappear quickly, while myths can acquire a solidity that gives them the appearance of historicity.166

The myth, then, is that ideal projection of a self into the future that overcomes both the dualism between free will and determinism (it shapes sentiments) and the dualism of the ideal and the material (it acquires solidity). Once the imperative of production drops out of Sorel’s picture, and resistance to the state in the form of class struggle swallows the entire discursive space of revolution, the difference in kind between the individual worker and the institution of the syndicat dissolves. The syndicat has been reduced to an aggregation of abstracted individuals, has lost its institutionality.

We can see this victory of the state over production also in the restatement Sorel gives of his argument in the “Lettre à Daniel Halévy.” In this document, written in the middle of 1907, but affixed as an introduction to Reflections, Sorel reports that it is only over the last ten years or so that he has really educated himself, as opposed to merely working to eliminate the traces of his previous education. This, we might say, is the period during which Sorel was engaged with actually-existing syndicalism. Reflections

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165 Ibid. p 287.
166 Ibid. p 288.
and its success mark the end of that period. After, Sorel threw himself into the composition of *Les Illusions du progrès*. This was a work prepared for many years—traces of the critique he mounts of bourgeois ideology there can be found throughout his work—but it is none the less a departure. In it, he abandons analysis of—and for—the proletariat in favor of working “to ruin the prestige of bourgeois culture,” as he famously writes to Halévy.167

This epistolary introduction returns to and clarifies the key points of *Reflections*: the myth/utopia distinction, the force/violence distinction, and even the question of art as an anticipation of the production of the future. The differences are therefore especially interesting. First, Sorel discusses his own methods for writing and thinking. Second, he outlines a doctrine of pessimism, which he says had informed the whole of *Reflections*. Third, he deploys Bergson in order to understand the social myth much more explicitly and in a more sustained way than in the main text.

Sorel is reticent enough about his own methods that the passages in which he discusses them have received perhaps too much attention. Sorel calls himself “neither a professor, a popularizer…nor a candidate for party leadership; I am a self-taught man exhibiting to other people the notebooks which have served for my own instruction.”168 This is interesting less as a rejection of the university than it is as a rejection of the very idea of collective knowledge. Sorel, of course, is quite aware of inquiry as a collective project, as a political project—the whole point of a magazine like *Le Mouvement*.

168 Ibid. p 5.
socialiste or, earlier, *Le Devenir sociale* was after all to collectively explore and clarify problems. Still, even in his self-framing, Sorel has begun to make social theory a gratuitously pursued project of personal betterment—an art. His autodidactic practice, his refusal to write except for “a few studious people,”¹⁶⁹ at least guards him from the trap, into which fell Hegel and Marx, of becoming his own disciple.

Disciples expect their masters to close the era of doubt by providing definitive solutions. I have no aptitude for a role of that kind: every time that I have approached a question…my enquiries have ended up by giving rise to new problems, the further I push my investigations the more disquieting the results. But perhaps, after all, philosophy is only a recognition of the abysses which lie on each side of the path that the vulgar follow with the serenity of sleepwalkers.¹⁷⁰

In this oft-quoted passage, Sorel claims the task of navigating between dualisms for the philosopher. Everyday life, not revolutionary praxis, is the successful navigation of philosophical danger.¹⁷¹ And Sorel’s task becomes individual; it is his “ambition to be able occasionally to awake a personal vocation,” to stir up the ashes and reignite the “metaphysical fire” that each person “probably” carries in themselves. Sorel has become a pedagogue—hence the ‘Socrates of the Left Bank’ sobriquet reportedly applied to him. And he teaches not despair or resignation, but pessimism.

Sorel elaborates his pessimism by returning to his critique of revolutionary optimism. Those who are certain that the world can be changed at one stroke are those

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p 6.
¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p 7. Compare this passage to one of the dithyrambs on the Party in Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*: “The Party’s course is sharply defined, like a narrow path in the mountains. The slightest false step, right or left, takes one down the precipice. The air is thin; he who becomes dizzy is lost.” Arthur Koestler and Daphne Hardy, *Darkness at noon* (New York: Macmillan, 1941). p 44. The transformation of Sorel’s view—in which the narrow path is that walked commonly by everyone without any trouble, and which philosophical consciousness renders all the more dangerous—into the one described by Koestler—in which discipline and philosophy are all the prevent catastrophe, is surely the difference between revolutionary syndicalism and the 20th century revolutionary party.
¹⁷¹ It is easy to see why, given this, Sorel will find William James so congenial a few years later.
who do the most damage: “during the Terror the men who spilt the most blood were precisely those who had the strongest desire to let their equals enjoy the golden age…optimistic, idealistic and sensitive, they showed themselves to be the more unyielding the greater their desire for universal happiness.”¹⁷² Pessimism has generally been confused with disillusioned optimism. Far from embodying the bitterness of disappointed expectations, “pessimism is a metaphysics of morals rather than a theory of the world.”¹⁷³ Sorel’s Reflections, as we have seen, began life emphatically as a theory of the world—pessimism does not characterize the work, but was generated by the process of writing it.

This metaphysics of morals is a frame for the interpretation of the world so as to facilitate right action. That is, pessimism appears as a frame for ethics, “it is a conception of a march towards deliverance that is narrowly conditioned: on the one hand, by the experimental knowledge…of the obstacles which oppose themselves to the satisfaction of our imaginations (or, if one prefers, by the feeling of social determinism) -- on the other, by a profound conviction of our natural weakness.”¹⁷⁴ Pessimism, although not disappointed optimism, is yet a kind of reversal of optimism. For the pessimist, “social conditions” are understood as “a system bound together by an iron law which cannot be evaded, as something in the form of one block, and which can only disappear through a catastrophe which involves the whole.”¹⁷⁵ The catastrophic revolution is the same as the

¹⁷² Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 10.
¹⁷³ Ibid. pp 10-11.
¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p 11.
¹⁷⁵ Ibid. p 11.
optimist’s, but where the optimist can only understand its failure as the result of a few evil individuals, who one is justified in eliminating for the greater good, the small group on which the pessimist focuses are those who band together in struggle for the revolution. The energies of the pessimist, we might say, become private rather than public.\footnote{There is an interesting parallel between pessimism and the myth of the general strike. Might we take pessimism as the myth of the intellectuals? Sorelian pessimism deserves to be investigated in terms of the broader history of 19th century pessimism, particularly as regards the philosophy of history and moral philosophy.}

Sorel looks to his favored example of early Christianity, but also, and significantly, to Calvinism. Indeed we might say that the transformation in Sorel’s thought is marked by the difference between the example of early Christianity and the Roman Empire, and Calvinism and the Renaissance. Early Christianity did not mobilize itself militarily against Rome. It rather converted aristocrats and others who lived for generations with the contradiction of their exalted social and economic position and their sense of spiritual persecution as Christians. Eventually, the economic and juridical system of the Roman Empire collapsed, but nonetheless deeply influenced the eventually triumphant Church. The Calvinists, in sharp contrast, “organized themselves militarily wherever this was possible…the Protestants, nourished on the reading of the Old Testament, wanted to imitate the exploits of the earlier conquerors of the Holy Land; they therefore took the offensive…In each locality that they conquered, the Calvinists brought about a real catastrophic revolution, changing everything from top to bottom.”\footnote{Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 14. Here Sorel joins what has become an exalted tradition of socialist readings of the 16th century Protestant explosions, including not only Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch, but also the novel Q, by the Italian collective Wu Ming.}

The radicalism of the Protestants was undermined by the ideas of progress and humanism of
the Renaissance. Sorel’s historical narration of revolution, then, has also shifted from defeat by institutional inertia to defeat by ideological failure.

Thus, recounting his idea of the general strike, Sorel recasts it, too, as a sort of existential drama. Pouring scorn on the idea that morality should be remade to fit the mediocrity—literally in the sense of compromising by splitting in the middle—of parliamentary procedure, he says,

I can understand that this myth of the general strike offends many wise men because of its infinite quality…As long as socialism remains a doctrine expressed entirely in words, it is very easy to deflect it towards this happy medium; but this transformation is obviously impossible when the myth of the general strike is introduced, as this implies an absolute revolution. You [Halévy] know, as well as I, that all that is best in the modern mind is derived from the torment of the infinite.178

The general strike is increasingly presented as a device for orienting one’s self morally, for allowing a certain radical stance. Sorel does not entirely lose sight of the question of production, asserting that he has indeed shown “that a general strike corresponds to sentiments which are closely related to those that are necessary to promote production in a very progressive form of industry, that a revolutionary apprenticeship may also be an apprenticeship as a producer.”179 Even here, however, the connection is tenuous, possible rather than necessary. And Sorel mentions it only in passing, giving the bulk of the letter over to analysis of ethics and moral orientation.

178 Ibid. p 24. James Kloppenberg has argued that there is a close relationship between the philosophy of the via media so aggressively parodied here by Sorel, and reformist, social democratic politics. Sorel, therefore, would fit perfectly into his panorama of social thought across the Atlantic in this era. I do not disagree, but have sought to show in this dissertation that, when Sorel’s career is considered in motion, he appears most interesting not as a simple enemy of this left-liberal via media (which Kloppenberg has recently argued is in fact the philosophical heritage within which Barack Obama functions), but as a development of and within this field. Reflections on Violence is a demonstration of how the via media breaks down, not a rejection of it. See Kloppenberg, Uncertain victory: social democracy and progressivism in European and American thought, 1870-1920; James T. Kloppenberg, Reading Obama: dreams, hope, and the American political tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

179 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on violence. p 30.
It is, similarly, in the letter to Halévy that Sorel makes his most explicit use of Bergson to understand myth and its specific difference from utopia. Looking now to the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* rather than the “Introduction à la métaphysique,” Sorel makes at more length the comparison of the individual Bergsonian consciousness to the social myth. It is not, he says, that the soul should be thought of as something in motion, but rather something creative. To act is to project a world into the future—and there are analogies with the world of determinism science tries to project into the future. Following the same arguments he did in response to Dollèans, Sorel says, “these artificial worlds generally disappear from our minds without leaving any trace in our memory; but when the masses are deeply moved it then becomes possible to describe a picture which constitutes a social myth.”\(^{180}\) The social myth has thus become the sign and also the means of collective subjectivity.

In 1908, Sorel wrote a condensation and defense of the arguments of the now-infamous *Reflections*, which appeared in *Le Matin*, among the highest-circulating daily newspapers in France. These short paragraphs are completely dominated by the question of violence, and focus attention from the beginning on the question of honesty, pure communication, and moral seriousness. The institution is gone. The piece begins by evoking the “high standards of sincerity” for those who speak to “the people,” required because “the workers understand these words in their exact and literal sense and never indulge in any symbolic interpretation.”\(^{181}\) Sorel speaks of the “grave responsibility” he

\(^{180}\) Ibid. p 27.

\(^{181}\) Ibid. p 279.
felt as he began to write about violence in 1905.\textsuperscript{182} The strike—its violence—is not a mere interruption of normal commerce, but an event in which “the proletariat asserts its existence;” it is “a phenomenon of war.”\textsuperscript{183} The bourgeoisie and the state will be eliminated, “the social war, for which the proletariat ceaselessly prepares itself in the syndicats, may engender the elements of a new civilization.”\textsuperscript{184} There is no longer a sense that production is anything other than the distinguishing feature of this new civilization—all its values come from struggle, from war. “Today a philosophy is being elaborated…which would hardly have been imagined a few years ago; this philosophy is closely bound to the apology of violence.”\textsuperscript{185} Sounding a recognizably Nietzschean note, Sorel goes on, “jealousy and vengeance” are the strength of democracy, “social war, by making an appeal to the honour which develops so naturally in all organized armies, can eliminate these evil feelings.”\textsuperscript{186} The specificity of production itself has dropped out of Sorel’s account. He simplifies for effect: “the idea of the general strike, engendered by the practice of violent strikes, entails the conception of an irrevocable overthrow. There is something terrifying in this – which will appear more and more terrifying as violence takes a greater place in the mind of the proletarians. But, in undertaking a serious, formidable and sublime work, the socialists raise themselves above our frivolous society and make themselves worthy of pointing out new roads to the world.”\textsuperscript{187} Just as the legend of the \textit{Grande Armée} is all that remains of Napoleon’s Empire, so the “epic of the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{182} Ibid. p 279.
  \item \textsuperscript{183} Ibid. p 279.
  \item \textsuperscript{184} Ibid. p 280.
  \item \textsuperscript{185} Ibid. p 280.
  \item \textsuperscript{186} Ibid. p 280.
  \item \textsuperscript{187} Ibid. p 281.
\end{itemize}
strikes” is all that will remain of contemporary socialism.\textsuperscript{188} Socialists have replaced proletarians as the moral ideal, and the ethical impulse of the epic is all that remains of the revolution.

Sorel had retrieved the notion of the institution from his reading of Vico, had elaborated it, thickened it, by drawing on materialist psychology, Croce’s aesthetics, and Durkheim’s sociology. He had made out of it a structure—a palace—in which the dualism of material and ideal could be contained. The process of writing \textit{Reflections on Violence} brought an end to this containment. Myth tore apart and escaped from its institutional dwelling. The imperative to combat the state became an ethical rather than a social project. Sorel’s period of engagement in social theory is over. The qualitative difference between an individual and collectivity—the definition of an institution—is gone. Tocqueville’s state, despite Sorel’s best efforts, has won.

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid. p 281.

…the scientist came to regard himself as independent of society and science as a self-validating enterprise which was in society but not of it. A frontal assault on the autonomy of science was required to convert this sanguine isolationism into realistic participation in the revolutionary conflict of cultures.


We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically underequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum. Once we had seen these children, we could no longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend that the society’s atomization could be reversed.

Joan Didion, 1967.

Georges Sorel’s name is often invoked as a weapon. According to John Gray, in a 2012 review in the New York Review of Books, Slavoj Žižek’s adoption of “the communist hypothesis” and his apology—or enthusiasm—for redemptive violence can be understood as a mere echo of Sorel, who also “argued that communism was a utopian myth.” By analogy with Sorel, Žižek is understood to elide the difference between left and right, and end up in antisemitism. In 1946, Eric Voegelin cited Sorel in a similarly off-hand way: “The paths that lead from the Communist class-war to Fascism […] are not so obscure. Anybody who cares to study the intellectual biography of Georges Sorel will

recognize the transitions. Both Gray and Voegelin deploy Sorel’s name as shorthand, as a rhetorical figure with definite, negative, political significance.

The intensive attention given to Sorel’s work and positionality in the previous chapters puts us in a position to interpret such uses and deployments of Sorel in a fruitful way. Martin Jay has recently suggested that intellectual historians must accommodate themselves to the evental nature of their texts. If a text is an event, then its meaning can only be constituted over time and retrospectively. This raises serious methodological and epistemological problems. For Jay, such problems are ultimately resolved in the experience that the historian has of the text. I prefer a methodologically pluralist and rather less experiential solution than does Jay. There is, first of all, no choice between contextual and evental—or, for that matter, dialogic—analysis. One must pursue them all. More importantly, historiography rather than the experience of the historian should be the motive spring of evental analysis. It is in this spirit that the present chapter proceeds.

The tensions that can be observed between Sorel as he has been understood over the previous six chapters and Sorel as he was understood by, for instance, James Burnham or Jacob Talmon, can tell us much about Burnham and Talmon. The larger gambit of this

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5 See Jay, "Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization."
6 Several recent reception studies pursue this strategy. That is, in addition to showing what was obviously ideological useful, they show how the confusions or ambiguities of the works in question worked to improve their reputation. See for instance Lionel Gossman, "Jacob Burckhardt: Cold War Liberal?,” *The Journal of Modern History* 74, no. 3 (2002). See also, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: a history of an icon and his ideas* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Martin V. Woessner, *Heidegger in America* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). A slightly different and perhaps even more ambitious approach is taken by François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed The Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
chapter, however, is that working through reception history—constituting a figure of ‘Sorel’ distinct from an objectively existing Sorel—is a necessary step in coming to a genuinely contemporary understanding of the significance of his work.  

Sorel ceases to be merely a point of continual misunderstanding and becomes a challenge when he is grasped firmly, as this dissertation has sought to do, within the problematic of liberalism, republicanism, and modern democracy. A good baseline here is the entry on Sorel written by Sigmund Neumann for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* in 1930. Neumann placed Sorel in terms of a larger Marxist tradition, and suggested that Henri Bergson plays in Sorel’s work something of the same role that Hegel plays in Marx’s. Neumann concludes his short sketch by suggesting that many “contemporary” phenomena which might superficially appear to be Sorelian in inspiration—resting on violence and myth—“may be interpreted according to Sorel as manifestations of the despised mass democratic movements, which in the hands of demagogues become forms of Bonapartist Caesarism. Sorel…was rooted in a liberal

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7 Significant reception work on Sorel has already been done. Sorel’s legacy in the interwar has received the most attention, together with his Italian readers. See below for a discussion of the German reception. Attention to the reception of Sorel in North America has been minimal, but see K. Steven Vincent, "Georges Sorel in North America," *The European Legacy* 1, no. 4 (1996).

8 That the left continues to grapple with these issues is evidenced not only by the arguments around violence and Occupy, but more by the lessons drawn from it. Chris Hayes, for instance, asserts that Roberto Michels was right, but that the objective fact of the oligarchic tendencies of democracy can have a leftist interpretation—without, apparently, realizing that the observation came from the Sorelian left to begin with. See the interview: [http://jacobinmag.com/summer-2012/meritocracy-chris-hayes/](http://jacobinmag.com/summer-2012/meritocracy-chris-hayes/)

9 Sigmund Neumann, “Sorel, Georges (1847-1922),” in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934). A clarification: Franz Neumann was the Frankfurt School affiliated author of *Behemoth*; Sigmund Neumann, although also a refugee from the Nazis, and also the author of an influential book, *Permanent Revolution*, on the new political forms arising in Europe, was not a Marxist. He was rather affiliated with the *Hochschule für politik.*
republican aristocracy which was the source of his political faith.”

Neumann is right that Sorel would probably have detested the interwar dictatorships, and he is further right to place Sorel in a tradition of liberal republicanism (which I have argued is in fact a liberalism), which is also, importantly, anti- or at least non-democratic. As Lionel Gossman has shown in the case of Jakob Burkhardt, and Annelien De Dijn for Bertrand de Jouvenel, postwar America was well prepared to ignore, or even translate into more acceptable form, the antidemocratic aspects of aristocratic liberals from previous generations if they seemed useful weapons against communism and statism more generally.

Clearly Sorel’s Marxism and his association with Lenin ruled out any kind of adulation along the lines of Burkhardt or Jouvenel. An interesting series of questions then emerges—why, in the 1940s and 50s, did a scholarly consensus emerge against Neumann’s Sorel? Why did Sorel become an arm in the Cold War Liberal’s rear-guard action against the radicals of the 1960s? This chapter seeks to answer such questions.

This chapter reconstructs and investigates the Anglophone reception of Sorel from the Second World War through the 1970s. After a brief account of the later part of Sorel’s writing career, it pays particular attention to two related constellations. First is the construction of totalitarianism as a social science concept in the early 1950s. That Sorel should be fit into this rubric was, we might say, over-determined. Second is the role that Sorel took on in the ideological conflict between the New Left and the aging generation

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10 Ibid. p 263. The entry was written in 1930, and remained at least through 1937, and I believe until the encyclopedia was radically revised in the 1960s as the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, at which time an entry written by George Goriely replaced Neumann’s text.

11 And, in the case of Burkhardt, antisemitism. Annelien de Dijn, "Bertrand de Jouvenel and the Revolt Against the State in Post-War America," Ethical Perspectives 17, no. 3 (2010); Gossman, "Jacob Burckhardt: Cold War Liberal?."
of those we can call Cold War Liberals. In both cases, but in different ways, Sorel was said to confuse the correct relation between means and ends, to draw the wrong line between the rational and the irrational. Sorel was a pre-totalitarian in the 1950s because he rejected reason, was too Machiavellian—by 1970 he was a pre-totalitarian because he could not recognize the distinction between means and ends, because he was not Machiavellian enough.

My contention is that Sorel was an attractive historical object for these intellectuals to hurl at the New Left not only because of the clear parallels that existed between a vulgarized Sorel and a vulgarized Fanon, say, but also because Sorel in fact worked within a basically liberal political framework. Sorel, for all his commitment to the proletarian revolution, also shared many political values with what is sometimes called aristocratic liberalism. His approach to reason and rationality was much more like Berlin’s and Arendt’s than they wanted to admit. Particularly for Berlin, judgment of Sorel came therefore down to virtue. Sorel, like Berlin and other Cold War Liberals, was pessimistic. He was suspicious of State Socialism before there was such a thing.

The reading this cohort provided of Sorel is symptomatic. Cold War liberals could themselves only provide a negative vision of politics. In the end, they founded practical political action, when they deigned to do so, on what amounted to personal virtue. As they were eventually forced to admit, they accepted the nation as the necessary ground for politics. Their thinking was anti-historicist, but profoundly enmeshed in history and its contingency—just as much in situation as Sartre or Sorel. They stood accused, after 1968, of being unable to escape the traumas of the interwar years, unable to adapt to the
new configuration represented by decolonization. These kinds of considerations are exactly what they cannot see in Sorel’s work, and what it would have profited them to see.

Sorel Becomes his own Disciple

Sorel’s two most famous works, the Reflections and The Illusions of Progress, both appeared in serial form in Mouvement socialiste in 1906. Over the course of 1908, both of these texts appeared as stand-alone volumes, as did his programmatic and long-meditated Decomposition of Marxism. We should date from this year his visibility in the popular Parisian press.\(^\text{12}\) It was an important date in his political evolution as well. After 1908, Sorel broke with the Confederation Générale du Travail, a federation of revolutionary labor unions. He renounced socialism (as he had already once before in 1903), and this time turned to the right. By 1910, he was publishing occasionally in the Action française newspaper—that is, with antisemites and monarchists. It was in this period that Sorel presided over an attempt to reconcile syndicalism and monarchism, the two great antidemocratic movements of the period.\(^\text{13}\) A project for a new review—to be called La Cité française—undertaken together with a few of the younger members of the Action française fell apart rapidly. Sorel would later claim that this connection was

\(^\text{12}\) In May, for instance, an editorial from his pen defending the violence of the revolutionary syndicalists appeared in Le Matin, one of the highest-circulation dailies of the time. This short text would be included as an appendix in later editions of Reflections.

always superficial, but it has been enormously controversial. The move took many of his contemporaries by surprise—in as much as they were aware of it. Sorel wrote to the neo-Catholic and neo-Classical Paul Claudel in 1910, requesting his collaboration at *Indépendance*, another review organized by younger Maurrasians. Claudel wrote to André Gide for more information, “I was very surprised by this letter. Who is Sorel? I thought he was a revolutionary anarchist?”

As early as 1910, conservative literary doyen Paul Bourget wrote what he declared to be a Sorelian play, *La barricade*. The real hero was not the proletarian Languoët—driven by sexual jealousy and ultimately duped by his bourgeois boss—but Breschard, the boss himself. By steadfastly holding to his class status and values Breschard beats a strike and successfully teaches his erstwhile son that reformism and sympathy for the working class will only, in the end, hurt everyone. It was a misunderstanding to conclude from Sorel, self-described “serviteur disintéressé du prolétariat,” that the bourgeoisie as a social force was morally equivalent to the proletariat—but the mistake was an attractive one and therefore easily made. More dammingly, it would prove easy after Sorel’s death for his disciples to make a yet more radical substitution, replacing class with nation.

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14 And is held up as evidence of the French origins of fascism, even of National Socialism, by Sternhell and his school.
17 Bourget, *La barricade, chronique de 1910*.
This position was certainly available to Sorel himself, and it is important that he did not occupy it. Not only did he indeed break with the *Action française* and their progeny relatively quickly, but the great nationalist event of his time failed to move him. Sorel experienced 1914 as a “catastrophe.” He wrote to Benedetto Croce in September: “I feel that we are entering into a period more new than was that of the Revolution…I am a man of the past.”19 Less than a year later: “intellectual nullity is prodigious in France: Boutroux and Bergson spout childishness about the war; the emptiness of Bergson’s thinking frightens me in this moment”20 He believed from the outset that the *Entente* would win, and that this would mean the victory not of a plutocratic and corrupt democracy.

He, like many others, found a few rays of hope later in the war. News of the Turin factory occupations—in which a young Antonio Gramsci participated—as well as, and above all, the 1917 Russian Revolution, renewed his fighting spirit. He was enthusiastic about the Bolsheviks, although it was difficult to get good information about what was happening in Russia. His last years were marked by political commitment to the Egyptian nationalist movement against British occupation. On the occasion of Saad Zaghlul Pasha’s delegation to London, Sorel wrote several articles in support of the Egyptian independence movement, suggesting that the oppressed colonial masses could replace the European working class as a source of anti-capitalist action.21

20 Ibid. p 215.
21 See Jennings, “Georges Sorel and Colonialism: The Case of Egypt.” See also the 2009 “Pensée coloniale” issue of *Mil-neuf-cent.*
Post-mortem claims to the contrary notwithstanding, Sorel cannot be said to have endorsed Mussolini. Although Sorel was certainly aware of the street-fighting of the Italian fascists, and even of Mussolini’s rapid rise to political importance, he died on August 29, 1922, and so did not live to see the March on Rome (which took place in October), and so had no particular reason to take a strong pro- or anti-fascist stance. Rather, with Jeremy Jennings, we can say that, “at the end of his life it was not the proletariat of Europe, nor Mussolini’s fascists, but the people of Russia and Egypt that sustained” Sorel’s revolutionary energy. Several of his fellow theorists of syndicalism, as well as his admirers among the bourgeois intellectuals, made what Jacques Rancière would later call the transition from “Pelloutier to Hitler.” Sorel’s reputation came to be determined by this double political radicalism. The situation is well summed up with Daniel Halévy’s parable about how, in the 1930s, emissaries from both the Russian Soviets and the Italian Fascists petitioned to be allowed to sponsor a monument in his memory.

We can say in general that contexts of production and of reception are importantly different for Sorel’s writings. Sorel began his thinking in conversation with writers of his own generation or older, for whom the Republic was an aspiration or a fragile project, or perhaps a looming danger—but then came into prominence together with a group

22 For many years, understandings of Sorel’s late political opinions were shaped by the book of interviews with him published by George Valois in the 1930s. They have been the source for the idea that Sorel, in his last years, had his eyes on a promising young leader who had also made the transition from socialism to a kind of nationalism—Benito Mussolini. On this, see Sand, “Legend, Myth, and Fascism.”
24 Rancière, “De Pelloutier à Hitler: Syndicalisme et collaboration.”
significantly younger than himself, for whom the Republic was an accomplished fact, which wanted either elaboration and reform or called forth heroic resistance. Sorel and his work had become available for appropriation across the political spectrum. The afterlife of Sorel’s writings was different across national contexts. If after his death many fascists in France adopted him as, in the words of Alice Kaplan, a “slogan text,” it is true that on the left the 1920s saw the rise of the communists and an eclipse of the kind of leftism for which Sorel had, at least intermittently, come to stand. In Italy, despite Mussolini’s appropriation, Sorel remained a living part of the heritage of a much more open left—Gramsci’s uncomfortable and searching returns to Sorel across his Quaderni are evidence of this. The two great early readers of Sorel in German were exceptional: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. But the national differences should not be allowed to obscure the point that it was in an interwar context—and above all in Germany and Italy, even in a self-consciously interwar context—that Sorel was read and began to be assimilated into a broader European intellectual culture. This means that his fulminations against the ideological strength and adaptive capacity of parliamentary government were read most productively in a context where parliamentary government was at its weakest.

26 My suggestion here is that if Sorel’s context had been understood as I do here, it would have been GDH Cole and Harold Laski, or other interwar pluralists, who read Sorel with care, and not Benjamin and Schmitt. I do not pursue this pluralist connection. For some suggestion of how it might work: Laborde, "Pluralism, syndicalism and corporation:Léon Duguit and the Crisis of the State (1900-1925)."; Cécile Laborde, "Syndicalism against the State: Libertarianism in the Works of Edouard Berth and his Contemporaries," European Legacy 3, no. 5 (1998); ———, Pluralist thought and the state in Britain and France, 1900-25, St. Antony's series (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

27 Kaplan, Reproductions of banality: fascism, literature, and French intellectual life.

28 Gramsci’s reading of Sorel in the context of Labriola and Croce deserves more attention than it has received. See, however, Darrow Schecter, "Two Views of the Revolution: Gramsci and Sorel, 1916-1920 " History of European Ideas 12, no. 5 (1990).
Sorel was not, as Schmitt suggested, a symptom of the crisis of parliamentary democracy. The popularity and successes of Sorel’s writings in the interwar, however, surely was such a symptom.

This point is particularly salient in terms of nationalism. Sorel wrote and thought in a context dominated by what was in fact a powerfully centralized democratic, liberal, and representative state—although hardly all of those things perfectly—which really had successfully contained and coopted nationalism. 1914-1918 is surely proof at least of that.29 The anti-Dreyfusards had lost, and this is why Sorel could take their side against the Republicans. Sorel found his greatest echo in an interwar political outlook marked by weak and illiberal parliamentary systems—Weimar, for instance—overrun with nationalism and helpless in the face of street-level political violence.30 Sorel wrote in the belle-époque, but was read and became politically significante on Mark Mazower’s Dark Continent. This compounded the postwar understanding that Sorel had been, in some sense, a precursor of this antiliberal nationalism, a critic of these parliamentary systems before they existed. To see the consequences of this, let us turn to what can more properly be called the historiography on Sorel, although some of it remains appropriative rather than scientific, as it began to emerge after the Second World War.

29 This can be said, I think, without judging the Third Republic a ‘success’ based on its capacity to fight the war. Such judgment is unfortunately common. See for instance Philip Nord’s short piece on the Third Republic in Berenson, Duclert, and Prochasson, eds., The French Republic : history, values, debates.
The Anglophone Sorel: Modernism to Social Science

Sorel never read or wrote in English. He came into this language heavily mediated by English modernism, particularly its vitalist strains. The first translation of Sorel into English was undertaken in 1912 by T.E. Hulme, who was already an authorized translator of Henri Bergson. It was thus as a sort of political or social pendant to Bergson’s “antirationalism” that Sorel was first read. In 1913, both A.O. Lovejoy and Walter Lippmann wrote about Sorel in such terms. 31 Bergson, although his own politics were liberally republican, was of a piece with such dubious figures as William James in downplaying the importance of reason (in the name of a healthy skepticism of rationalism), and thereby making room for a fundamentally antidemocratic apotheosis of the will. 32

During and after the Second World War, Sorel’s work was presented as a tributary into totalitarianism. If this was a break from Neumann’s Sorel, it was not surprising given his association with literary modernism as understood by the likes of Wyndham Lewis. Sorel’s myth and violence were said to be openings to the antirationalism and refusal of reality typical of totalitarian regimes. This approach to Sorel has important roots in German-language debates on totalitarianism, and was

materially supported in the US by émigré scholars busy transporting the legacy of German sociology and critical theory onto American soil.33

One wartime example is Franz Borkenau’s essay on fascist philosophers published in *Horizon* in 1942. Borkenau explained Sorel’s basic problem-situation thus: “if…inflicting pain (and by implication also suffering pain) is the worst of all possible evils, and…nothing is regarded as more important than to preserve life, it is the last stage before the end. A society is vital precisely to the extent that it believes there are many things more important than the preservation of life.”34 From this basic position—which, incidentally, casts Sorel as a sort of proleptic critic of Judith Shklar’s re-invention of a fundamentally anti-cruelty “liberalism of fear”—it was supposed to be not many steps to the fascist eagerness to sacrifice life in the face of an ideal. Borkenau provides a stark version of what would be a common trope in the wartime and immediate postwar period of Sorel reception, commenting on Sorel’s idea of a myth:

> The definition of a myth is that its believers do not regard it as a myth, but as supernatural reality. There is no valid truth, these Neo-Conservatives might say, not at any rate any truth for which it would be worth while to lay down one’s life and sacrifice other lives. But without such truths life, individual and social, is bound to disintegrate. So let’s act the other way round. Let’s start being ruthless and prejudiced to excess. The faith which used to inspire ruthless [sic] and prejudice will then be given unto us.35

For Borkenau, Sorel encouraged not just violence in the hope of meaning, but also hypocrisy. Myth is taken to be the latest, most conscious form of ideological self-manipulation. It is a theory that justifies the mystical idea that a sufficient degree or special kind of belief will in fact change the world. Thus, Borkenau argues that Sorel is at the root of totalitarian ideological delusion.

During and just after the war, it became common to cast Sorel as explicitly enabling ‘the big lie’ in the service of an elite. According to E.H. Carr in 1947, Sorel had “blended” the moralities of Marx and Nietzsche.\(^\text{36}\) Myth was a “necessary imposture,” and would necessarily be at the service of the “audacious minority” which, as he had learned wrongly from the Dreyfus Affair, was the only real source of change in society.\(^\text{37}\)

The readers of *The New York Times* were for instance being told in 1948 by historian Hugh Trevor-Roper that the Nazi party would have likely gone nowhere without Goebbels, who “knew the works of Sorel and Pareto and understood how the irrational beliefs of men can be canalized and exploited for political purposes.”\(^\text{38}\) This would therefore be Sorelian myth: a tool for the effective manipulation of people’s beliefs by an elite.

Along these same lines, one popular writer, James Burnham—who made the not-uncommon transition at the end of the 1930s from Trotskyism to conservativism—enlisted Sorel into a grand and popular project of politico-historical reinterpretation. Burnham


\(^{37}\) Ibid. pp 153-4, 156. Carr also, rather improbably, asserts that “French nationalism was at this time scarcely thinkable outside the framework of Catholicism.” p 160.

would go on to become a major intellectual of American neoconservatism, serving as senior editor of the *National Review*.⁴⁹ Sorel got a chapter in his 1943, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom*. This book is a companion volume to Burnham’s earlier *The Managerial Revolution*—published in and taking its general tone from the period, between 1939 and 1941—longer than we like to remember—during which Hitler and Stalin seemed to have reconciled with one another.⁴⁰ Burnham argued that the world crisis evident since 1914 was really the result of the struggle for supremacy of the managerial class—which can briefly be defined as those who specialize in the organization of production (which is both a technical and a social task). Leninism-Stalinism, Nazism, and New Dealism, were all political expressions of this managerial class. His prognosis over the coming decades for basic civil liberties was not good.

In *The Machiavellians*, Burnham briefly tours the history of a ‘science of politics,’ (Machiavelli) which he contrasted explicitly with a more or less utopian ‘formal’ approach (Dante) described as “politics as wish.” Sorel has a peculiar position among the various new Machiavellians discussed by Burnham. The others were out and out theorists of the failure of the masses, and the need for an elite. Sorel and his two signal notions, myth and violence, were rather understood to provide a tool and a moral justification for Burnham’s larger position. One of Sorel’s central insights was taken to

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⁴⁰ George Orwell discusses these two books, and some of Burnham’s other writings, in a review essay from 1946. “It will be seen that at each point Burnham is predicting a continuation of the thing that is happening. Now the tendency to do this is not simply a bad habit, like inaccuracy or exaggeration, which one can correct by taking thought. It is a major mental disease, and its roots lie partly in cowardice and partly in the worship or power, which is not fully separable from cowardice.” [http://www.k-1.com/Orwell/site/work/essays/burnham.html](http://www.k-1.com/Orwell/site/work/essays/burnham.html).
be “this seeming paradox, that the frank recognition of the function of violence in social conflicts may have as a consequence a reduction in the actual amount of violence.”

Thus, Sorelian violence became a moral warrant for the whole practice of the theory of the elite. Burnham concluded that it was possible, and desirable from a moral point of view, to conduct political action scientifically. Further, the masses would never be capable of so doing, which is to say that democracy is basically impossible or not desirable. Happily, in the end Burnham allows that an elite might possibly rule in a scientific manner, using myths to control the masses. It is difficult always to be saying one thing publically (the myth) and believing entirely another thing (the science), but this is a psychological problem, and with sufficient virtù, might be overcome. Indeed, must be overcome if the catastrophes since 1914 are to be stopped. For Burnham, Sorel is a theorist who supports elite rule and mystification, practices essentially well worked out by the Nazis and the Soviets, and which must be emulated in the US as soon as possible if we, as a nation, are to defeat the Nazis and the Soviets. Here, again, it should be pointed out that Sorelian myth has the function of disrupting ‘normal’ means-ends relations.

Lest this seem to be entirely a wartime phenomenon, it should be mentioned that Burnham, in his 1964 *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism*, returns to Sorel at the end of a chapter staging the rigged fight: “Liberalism

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Burnham’s larger contention in this book is that ‘the West’ is contracting, killing itself, in fact, and that ‘the liberal syndrome’ is best understood as a symptom of that imminent death. Liberalism is regarded as basically ‘formal,’ in the sense given to Dante’s political writings, rather than ‘realist.’ It is idealist and optimist. Liberals are thus unable to use enough violence to really solve problems or defend Western civilization, but are also, because of their idealism, more likely to advocate apocalyptic violence (total victory against Hitler was a liberal idea) and therefore perhaps also more likely to push the nuclear button (this is 1964, the memory of Kennedy may still be a target here). Burnham deploys a long quote here from Sorel on the bloody consequences of political optimism. Sorel continues to be a warrant for anti-liberalism.

In the years just following the war interest in Sorel surged. This did not constitute an endorsement by the Anglophone left. George Woodcock, a pacifist and anarchist, felt that he need to repeat the disavowal of Sorel earlier voiced by Emma Goldman. Woodcock reported that Sorel had no influence on syndicalism, that although he had taken ideas from it, he “mingled them with all the philosophical ideas he had imbibed from an extensive but ill-digested reading of Marx, Bergson, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. All his writings oozed with nineteenth century romanticism, and every idea he put forward was tinged with the atheistical mysticism of the philosophers he followed.”

Academic work on Sorel was encouraged, including an MA thesis by Arthur Danto at

A new paperback edition of Reflections appeared in 1950, this time with an introduction by Edward A. Shils (who had translated Karl Mannheim’s Ideology and Utopia into English in the 1930s)—but, tellingly, when Shils wrote his introduction, he still felt himself obliged to point readers to the notoriously pro-Hitler English modernist Wyndham Lewis for “the fullest discussion of Sorel in English.”

Academics did not allow this gap in the scholarship to go unfilled for long.

One aspiring historian, Scott Lytle, interrupted his graduate work at Cornell in 1942 to enter the US Army as an intelligence officer, and returned in 1945 to write a dissertation on Sorel. The dissertation attempted to show how Sorel’s interpretation of historical materialism was linked to his idea of myth. Lytle ultimately falls back on psychological explanation: "His philosophy…was extremely personal. With the passage of time it becomes increasingly an 'apologia pro sua vita' in which the psychological experience of an almost solitary idealist are identified - and thereby endowed with significance - with the historically-creative psychological experience of isolated groups within contemporary society." The dissertation ends by evaluating the various ‘Sorelian’ elements of the major political powers of the day. Lytle concludes—in 1948—that it is the political movement lead by Charles de Gaulle that most nearly fulfils the

\[\text{44 Arthur C. Danto, Georges Sorel: unreason, moral sublimity and the philosophy of violence (New York: Columbia University, 1949).}\\ 45 Georges Sorel, Reflections on violence (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950). p 24.\\ 46 Scott Lytle, "Historical Materialism and the Social Myth: A Study of Georges Sorel's Conception of History" (Cornell University, 1948). p 435. Carl Becker directed the thesis. Lytle relies on Michael Freund—there was after all no good treatment at this time in English, and little that had made it out of the periodical press in French. Freund’s book probably exerted a disproportionate influence for this reason in the immediate aftermath of the war. It was thus, perhaps, an act of remarkable historical sympathy not to see Sorel, after Freund, as an interesting predecessor of the Nazi revolution.\]
totalitarian tendencies in Sorel’s political philosophy; these people claim to support parliamentary democracy, but will happily make their morally regenerative revolution in a party-based totalitarian fashion if they are given the chance. But this dissertation was not published—Lytle seems to have left Sorel behind, going on to publish on the French Revolution.

Soon, several scholarly works would examine Sorel in English, and a consensus emerged about the significance of his work. The best of these books was also from a German émigré—James Meisel’s 1951 *The Genesis of Georges Sorel*.\(^{47}\) In association with Franz Neumann, who seems to have used his post at Columbia to promote interest in Sorel, Meisel had in 1950 sought without success to publish a volume of Sorel’s selected writings in English. The edition was not to be expensive or pointedly scholarly, and a substantial quantity of text would have been collected in it. Although one cannot say for certain why the volume never appeared, it seems that Meisel had difficulty securing the

\(^{47}\) See the obituary: [http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/12/obituaries/james-h-meisel-90-political-scientist-dies.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/12/obituaries/james-h-meisel-90-political-scientist-dies.html) Also in 1951 was Richard Humphrey’s *Georges Sorel: Prophet Without Honor, A Study in Anti-Intellectualism*. Humphrey’s book is synthetic, philosophical, and uneven. It sees Sorel as a sort of minor accompaniment to Nietzsche and Freud as a ‘philosopher of energy.’ Despite the title, Humphrey is relatively sympathetic to Sorel. A review of the book in *Commentary* showed the resistance this approach would meet: “Georges Sorel, the hero of Mr. Humphrey's volume, is chiefly remembered today as the advocate of physical violence and of irrational myths as the instruments of a superior type of politics. Was he not, then, the intellectual ancestor par excellence of present-day totalitarianism? Mr. Humphrey says no, all appearances to the contrary; and those who study Sorel at first hand will tend to agree that he has a valid case.…Sorel was a pathetic, great, lonely figure. Absurd in his petulance and his enthusiasm alike, he was a “pure fool,” he was single-minded in his devotion to the ideal of regenerating mankind through greatness. The last thing we can say about him is that he had insights about political reality that were valid for his time and ours.” The main point is plain, either Sorel is a totalitarian, or he isn’t interesting. For cultural context: the review appeared immediately after a review of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Paul Kecskemeti, “Georges Sorel, Prophet Without Honor, by Richard Humphrey,” *Commentary* (1952).
rights from Sorel’s French language publisher. By the end of the 1950s, Sorel’s position in the historiography had been substantially established. H. Stuart Hughes’ classic *Consciousness and Society* gave him an important place—if, after Freud and Weber, as a thinker of the second rank—in the intellectual turmoil of the *fin-de-siècle*. Hughes also gives the following apt, unflattering, image of Sorel: “his mind was a windy crossroads by which there blew nearly every new social doctrine of the early twentieth century.” Still, Hughes’ treatment is generally nuanced and more sensitive to context than most of the work in this period.

*Three Against the Third Republic: Sorel, Barrès, and Maurras*, Michael Curtis’ 1959 monograph, essentially accepts the polarization of politics into liberal democratic and totalitarian dispensations. The Third Republic embodied in a relatively

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48 It is possible that Meisel did not succeed in securing the rights to Sorel’s work because he insisted in writing to the publishers in English. IISH, Fonds Marcel Rivière, 499.24. Sorel was once of Marcel Rivière’s best-selling authors, particularly *Reflections*. It seems that for this reason the publisher wanted both more money than was reasonable for translations, and was resistant to producing an inexpensive paperback in French—see the correspondence around the attempt to put *Reflections* out through the 18-10 series in the late 1960s. Irwin Pomerance, whose work was often cited, also did his dissertation work on Sorel at Columbia, through the philosophy department. He says, “‘Sorel's confessed impatience with logically connected discourse, his conception of the written word as a devitalized representation of its living and vibrant counterpart, the process of thought, whose overflowing, restless exuberance is often so inadequately channeled through the written symbol, his emphasis on the organic and aesthetic features of metaphysical speculation, these and many other witnesses of a basic anti-rationalistic bias serve to indicate that Sorel believed that a man's thought was never completely revealed in its verbal expressions. From which it follows that a psychological reconstruction alone can penetrate to its core. This principle serves as a fundamental postulate of Sorel's philosophy.” Irwin Pomerance, *The moral utopianism of Georges Sorel* (Columbia, 1950), p 174.


50 Hughes, *Consciousness and society; the reorientation of European social thought, 1890-1930*. p 161. The anecdote about the Soviets and the Fascists both wanting to care for Sorel’s grave comes from Daniel Halévy (via the preface to Andreu). This august source, combined with its inherent neatness, has given it remarkable staying power. At this point, rather than calling it an anecdote, it would perhaps be better to call it a parable.
unproblematic way the democratic, rational, and progressive legacy of the French Revolution (good); those who criticized it, Sorel among them, essentially prepared the way for the elitist, anti-rational, fascism of the 20th century (bad). Sorel’s equivocations and ambiguities (and those of Barrès and Maurras) are also those of totalitarianism: toward the state, economic policy, democracy. History has two sides, and Sorel was on the wrong one—end of story. Written, perhaps, in support of the weak 4th Republic, this book was doubtless read in the context of the transition from the 4th to the 5th Republics.

It is thus possible to say that certain empirically wrong ideas became quasi-official over the course of the 1950s. The New Cambridge Modern History took over wholesale E.H. Carr’s hasty bringing-together of Sorel with Nietzsche. This reference work maintained that Sorel “was probably the first important heir” of Nietzsche’s thought. Sorel, indeed, “reveals unexpectedly numerous points of contact between Marx and Nietzsche.”51 The linkage between Sorel and Nietzsche rested on the idea of myth, Sorel’s formulation of which had the virtue of allowing Marx to be painted with the same brush as Nietzsche.52 If Neumann’s encyclopedia entry is measured and productive, this treatment of reference is distilled ideology.

Irving Louis Horowitz’s 1961, Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason is a more focused evaluation of Sorel’s political and social thought. Horowitz, a sociologist, is political aware and theoretically ambitious. Sorel, for Horowitz, fits basically into the tradition of authoritarian political theory that takes the irrational as its fundamental

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52 On connection between Sorel and Nietzsche, see the discussion in chapter six of the present dissertation.
datum, and therefore remains unable to distinguish between empirical data, emotional response, and the data of a specific emotional response. At issue here is Sorel’s ability to think about myths, having posited them. For Horowitz, Sorel’s own theoretical confusions made him an “unwitting source-book of fascist ideas concerning the pathology of political power.” In the end, “what is living, what is genuine in Sorel’s thought, is the presentation of the real choices which men have in this world.” In short, Sorel is valuable because, having framed the question (of myth: why do people act irrationally?) in a correct manner, he so clearly made the wrong choice. This is a fundamental post-war interpretation of Sorel, which sets the ground for later accusations that the New Left has made the same wrong decision. Horowitz provided a translation of Sorel’s “The Decomposition of Marxism”—the first new writing of Sorel’s to appear in English in nearly 50 years. Horowitz’ book would be reissued twice, once in the late 1960s with a new appendix connecting Sorel to the turmoil of that period, and then again in 2009. Horowitz’s book should alert us to an entirely different and more specialized line of interpretation than the one I have pursued here. This is the reception of Sorel within sociology as an academic discipline in the postwar decades. I have mentioned Edward Shils already—Lewis Coser would be the next person to think about here, but

53 Irving Louis Horowitz and Georges Sorel, Radicalism and the revolt against reason; the social theories of Georges Sorel (New York,: Humanities Press, 1961). p 172. In this same passage, incidentally, Horowitz suggests that one of Sorel’s most important blind spots was to the necessary relation between certain means and certain ends. You cannot, Horowitz implies, pursue the aims of a tolerant and just society with the means of violence.

54 Ibid. p 195.
this takes us too far afield, and would require a discussion of German-language
scholarship from Hans Barth and others.\textsuperscript{55}

If Horowitz stands for sociology, let Judith Shklar stand for political philosophy.
In 1958, following in the footsteps of Lovejoy’s essay, she dealt with Sorel as part of a
careful evaluation of the consequences for political thought of Henri Bergson’s
philosophy. She argues that Bergson’s philosophy is an aestheticising response to
excessive scientism, and that while as philosophy it is merely confused, bad things
happen when it becomes political. Shklar takes as given that Sorel is essentially Bergson
transposed into social theory.\textsuperscript{56} She sees Bergson’s defense of human freedom as resting
on a notion of indeterminacy—“at its worst this notion means that the very absence of
rational purpose is the true mark of freedom.”\textsuperscript{57} Hence, when Sorel transposes this idea
into collectivity, he makes “action…the social representation of intuitive knowledge.”\textsuperscript{58}
This is a definition of Sorelian myth. For Shklar, though, this way of thinking about
collective action immediately rules out any such action that might be proceeded by
reflection. What this turns out to mean here is that Shklar indict Sorel, above all, for
collapsing the political distinction between means and ends—no reflection, no purposive

\textsuperscript{55} The German reception begins with Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin (but there is also strong interest
from the Hochschule für politik group), and goes up to the more recent present with, for instance, the
surprisingly sympathetic account of Sorel in Axel Honneth’s \textit{The Struggle for Recognition}. For a good
overview of the early part of the German reception, See Michael Buckmiller, ”Sorel et le « conservatisme
révolutionnaire » en Allemagne,” \textit{Cahiers Georges Sorel} (1985); Chryssoula Kambas, ”Walter Benjamin
Sand, eds., \textit{Georges Sorel en son temps}.

\textsuperscript{56} Lovejoy was more nuanced. He sees Sorel’s Bergsonism as a more or less opportunistic appropriation of
a philosophical language by a pre-existing political idea. Yet he recognizes the convergence as real, and
points to some common source in the zeitgeist. Shklar has also borrowed Lovejoy’s elaboration of
romanticism as an analytic tool applied to Bergson.


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. p 649.
action, no capacity to separate a means from an end. This is the negative consequence of Sorel’s political Bergsonism.

By the end of the 1950s, then, there is something like a consensus version of Sorel as, in various ways a pre-totalitarian. Sorel has been boxed, as a thinker who refused to accept that irrationality could be simply eliminated from politics, with the great critics of democracy and liberalism (which the Cold War allowed one to pretend, at least for a while, were the same thing). Those who criticize him most strongly say that his appreciation for the non-rational—that is, his idea of myth—actively aided and abetted the rise of cynical totalitarian manipulation of the masses. The 1950s were an era in which the appeal to rationality had a powerfully integrative effect within the American academy, and Sorel’s antirationalism was easy to read as an attack on precisely the kind of acceptance that a generation of scholars sought. Sorel’s more sympathetic readers hold him up as an example of the philosophical mistakes and blind alleys that can lead even those who pursue them honestly into bad political mistakes. Remarkably, we have not yet heard very much at this point about his violence. For certain ex-leftists such as Burnham, Sorel obviously exerted a sort of terrible fascination. His realism is attractive, but can obviously not be fully endorsed—perhaps we may hazard the suggestion that given the rhetorical impossibility of suggesting any longer that there was anything to be learned from either of the actually existing totalitarian regimes, Sorel made a convenient object onto which the expression of this attraction to raw power might be transferred. But

one should be careful here, and not allow an analysis of rhetorical/intellectual strategies and obligations to slide into psychology—this is, after all, just what Sorel’s critics do to him.

It would not, however, be the German and social-scientific Sorel that proved most influential as the totalitarian paradigm faded and it became increasingly urgent, in the United States, to understand the emerging New Left. Jack J. Roth in 1963 ended his first substantial essay on “Sorel and the Sorelians” by claiming that “their work is symptomatic of a profound intellectual and moral disturbance—the desertion by intellectuals of the democratic idea. And their story is something of a tragedy. They sought to evoke the sublime. But they helped, rather, to unleash the beast.”  

Roth’s work on the Italian reception of Sorel continued in this vein, presenting Sorel’s desire for a ricorso (a term borrowed from the 18th century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico) as a quest for authenticity. This was a recapitulation of the analysis offered in the 1930s by Sorel’s friend and correspondent, Benedetto Croce—it would turn out to be central to the account of Sorel offered in analogy with the New Left.

62 Roth writes, “It was born of violence in pursuit of the sublime. It was, wrote Croce, “the construction of a poet thirsting for…austerity,…sincerity…stubbornly trying to find a hidden fount from which the fresh pure stream would well forth; and tested by reality, his poetry vanished even in his own eyes.” Croce’s full paragraph is worth giving: "Revolutionary minds, scornful of accommodating reformism and impatient of the flabbiness into which orthodox socialism had fallen, devoted themselves in Italy also to seeking new formulas, better fitted to them; and one was supplied by Sorel with his syndicalism. Sorel assimilated socialism, as he conceived it, to primitive Christianity, assigned to it the aim of renewing society from its moral foundations, and therefore urged it to cultivate, like the first Christians, the sentiment of 'scission' from surrounding society, to avoid all relations with politicians, to shut itself up in workmen's syndicates and feed on the 'myth' of the general strike. It was the construction of a poet thirsting for moral austerity,
Was Sorel really a Weatherman?

The day after the assassination of Robert Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. gave a commencement speech at CUNY in which he decried what he saw as the growing willingness to accept violence in American politics, especially on the far left. He warned that, “in the footsteps of Sorel, the New Leftists believe in the omnipotence of the deed and the irrelevance of the goal.” Schlesinger drew a line of descent from Sorel to Herbert Marcuse and Frantz Fanon. He feared that the New Left had begun to follow Sorel in excluding “freedom and reason” from politics. The consequences would be dire: “if we abandon this, we abandon everything.” For Schlesinger, Sorel was a cautionary example reminding young leftists that admitting violence into political struggle vitiated noble aims, and especially that “if the left, through the cult of the deed, helps create an atmosphere which destroys the process of democracy itself, the winners will be those

thirsting for sincerity, pessimistic with regard to the present reality, stubbornly trying to find a hidden fount from which to the fresh pure stream would well forth; and tested by reality, his poetry quickly vanished, even in his own eyes. But when the World War broke out, the official Socialist party, which had detached itself from reformism in the Congress of Reggio Emilia in 1912, and had wavered irresolutely between moderate and revolutionary tendencies, did not show a spirit equal to the occasion and, unable to and perhaps unwilling to prevent Italy's taking part in the war, remained among those who hung in the air, cutting themselves off from national and even international life.” Benedetto Croce, History of Europe in the nineteenth century, ed. Henry François Amédée Furst, Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimomono. English (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934). p 306.

who use violence best, and they will be on the right.”

Neither Schlesinger nor later commentators suggested that the students or other radicals had, in fact, read Sorel. Rather, what was being suggested was a sort of psychological kinship.

A focus on individual psychological motivation on the part of the older generation of liberals was in line with the basic orientation of social thought in the period, and also with the most radicalized elements of the younger generation. Recent scholars have highlighted the degree to which the Weather Underground, given a fundamental belief that revolution would come from the Third World or from African-Americans, could only imagine revolutionary activity on their own part as a total personal investment, an authentically ethical commitment—and therefore without regard to means-ends calculation—on one side of a Manichean struggle dividing the good movement from the bad system. How to understand this eruption of militantism, of frankly anti-liberal revolutionary activity? Conservative critics would eventually connect the pleasure-protest of the American 1960s with the totalitarianism of the past generation in a radical way—Allan Bloom’s tag is only the most notorious: “Nuremberg or Woodstock, the principle is

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64 Although, he does admit, sounding rather like Sorel himself, that “a limited amount of violence may stimulate the process of democratic change.”
the same.”⁶⁷ Sorel and his left-right ambiguity helped to make this case in its softer and less polemical forms.

Sorel’s body of work can be usefully compared to American New Left radicalism and its development from, as it were, Selma to Saigon. It is wrong, however, and polemically so, to focus on the question of violence. Rather, the question is better asked in terms of longer traditions of left-libertarianism with ambiguous or hostile relations to ‘orthodox’ Marxism and Leninism. Take for instance the introductory paragraph to Richard Flacks’ contribution to a forum on the Left and the “Road to Power,” published in mid 1967. Wondering over the title of the forum, he says, “the achievement of revolutionary change in advanced industrial societies requires that radicals refuse to compete with the established elites. Instead, if freedom and a democracy of participation are our goals, we have to learn how to undermine the established structure of power while simultaneously striving to initiate new patterns of social relations that maximize individual autonomy, responsibility, and dignity.”⁶⁸ The interesting and rarely posed question to ask of Sorel’s trajectory is how a person who would more or less agree with the above evaluation of the goals and means of radical activity came to be, as Horowitz put it, an “unwitting hand-book” for fascism. As we shall see, the liberal critics who engaged with Sorel as a proxy for engagement with the New Left, because they were seeing Sorel through the already anti-liberal elements of the New Left, never posed this

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question. Because these writers did not understand Sorel as presenting a solution to problems basically internal to liberalism, they could only apply lessons drawn from a historical understanding of his trajectory to the New Left as a fantasy projection. Croce had been too close to Sorel’s abandonment of the democratic ideal to see that it was really a defense of this ideal—and the Cold War liberals who turned back to Sorel to understand the New Left could themselves not see that his own refusal of democracy was more like their own than not.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many politicized younger Anglophone intellectuals and academics were ‘rereading’ Sorel, along with other figures in the non-Leninist Marxist tradition, but he cannot be said to have a wide reception at this time. It is safe to say that neither the SDS nor the Black Panthers were reading Sorel. However, Marcuse and Fanon—who were certainly influential—the two writers most often accused of Sorelianism, do stand in a meaningful intellectual relation to him.

Marcuse wrote occasionally about Sorel, drawing on the understanding of him developed in left-wing interwar German sociology. For Marcuse in the 1930s, Sorel was essentially a bourgeois authoritarian—here, in fact, Marcuse is close to asking the right questions about Sorel, as when he suggests that “Sorel’s work is a typical example of the transformation of an abstract anti-authoritarian attitude into reinforced authoritarianism.” By the middle 1960s, Marcuse wanted to inquire into the proper role

69 Beetham, for instance, explicitly engaging this question, comes to the conclusion that Sorel is not really of the left at all David Beetham, “Sorel and the Left,” Government and Opposition 4, no. 3 (1969).
of violence in revolutionary activity. In this context, Sorel’s problem—pushing the historical meaning of his violence out of the revolutionary tradition—was his “attempt to free the class struggle from all ethical considerations.” For Marcuse, revolutionary violence was necessary and, if grounded within a correct interpretation of historical movement taken as a total process, could be morally acceptable.

The realm of politicized aesthetics in fact provides the most interesting line of comparison between Marcuse and Sorel. Where Marcuse could write of the revolutionary force of a “New Sensibility” under the influence of which “[t]echnique would…tend to become art, and art would tend to form reality,” Sorel spoke of the development of a new ethic of the producers, according to which the worker would approach his work with the moral seriousness, sense of duty, and attention that an artist brings to their art. For Marcuse, “the quality of the productive-creative process in an environment of freedom” would be aesthetic, “technique, assuming the features of art, would translate subjective sensibility into objective form, into reality.” Indeed, Marcuse’s suggestion that something of the aesthetic relation must be brought into actual life in order to make revolutionary praxis—this could easily be assimilated to the Bergsonism with which Sorel was associated. What Marcuse really wanted from art, what he meant by bringing art into life, was the transcendent aspect of artistic vision—this is what had to be captured, what was captured, in the New Sensibility. Sorel, in Reflections, speaks of the

anticipation of future production by artistic practice—what interested him was the moral energy that the artist channels into the art. This is also a kind of transcendence, but not so much epistemological (seeing more deeply, seeing anew, seeing truly) as ethical (or even vitalistic, because it is the energy to pursue Right).\textsuperscript{73}

Frantz Fanon’s connections to Sorel are subtle and cannot be fully explored here, but a few indications both of obvious similarities and less obvious commonalities will be useful.\textsuperscript{74} The only time Sorel’s name appears in \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} is when Sartre explicitly dismisses his writings as mere ‘fascist prattle.’ This explicit rejection has sometimes been taken as a sort of admission of guilt.\textsuperscript{75} And indeed, it is easy to point to Fanon’s scissionism—“[t]he colonized world is a world divided in two,” to challenge it “is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints…The colonial world is a Manichaean world”\textsuperscript{76}—as a newer and grander version of Sorel’s subtractive and antirationalist workerism. If Sorelian violence was understood as revolutionary action in and of itself, then of course one could point to Fanon’s description of violence as “absolute praxis,” arguing that, like Sorel, he had shifted the mark of the revolutionary subject from labor to authentic violence. After all, Fanon says that “[t]o work means to work towards the death

\textsuperscript{73} Compare to Jacques Rancière’s recent politics of aestheticization—according to the division made here, his art is political in an epistemological way—because it redistributes the sensible, which is really the knowable.

\textsuperscript{74} Sorel and Fanon drew on similar philosophical resources—Bergson and his penumbra would be the relevant point of contact. In order to make this connection, however, we would need to rescue first Sorel from the caricature of Bergsonism to which he is usually attached, and then, more problematically, assert that the ‘break’ of French Hegelianism and existentialism in the 1930s—itself problematically enclosing Fanon—was not, in fact, so great a break as all that.


\textsuperscript{76} Frantz Fanon, \textit{The wretched of the earth} (New York: Grove Press, 2004). p 3, 6.
of the colonist…Violence can thus be understood to be the perfect mediation. The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end.”

By eliding labor and violence, Fanon could even be read as performing just the same terrifying synthesis of Marxism and Nationalism that Sorel did: “Violence is invested with positive, formative features because it constitutes their [the colonized] only work. This violent praxis is totalizing since each individual represents a violent link in the great chain, in the almighty body of violence rearing up in reaction to the primary violence of the colonizer. Factions recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible” Violence anneals the class into the nation, guaranteeing unity of purpose. All of this, however, is a tendentious reading of both Fanon and Sorel.

Perhaps the most politically salient difference between Sorel and Fanon—and, by extension, the whole anticolonial New Left—is that for Fanon the entire colonial world is constituted by radical and originary violence on the part of the colonizer. Sorel’s problem

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77 Ibid. p 44.
78 Here—where he gives “almighty body of violence” for Fanon’s less loaded “grand organisme violent”—Philcox’s enthusiasm runs away with him, Ibid. p 50. Compare Frantz Fanon et al., Les damnés de la terre (Paris: Découverte/Poche, 2002). p 90.
79 A more subtle reader of Sorel might point to the existentially clarifying function that Fanon ascribes to violence as, also, Sorelian: “The colonized subject [Le colonisé] discovers reality [le réel] and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda [projet] for liberation” p 21. One might even point to a few word choices, such as Fanon’s vaguely Bergsonian description—and masked by Philcox’s translation—of anticolonial violence: “Qu’est-ce donc en réalité que cette violence? Nous l’avons vu, c’est l’intuition qu’ont les masses colonisées que leur libération doit se faire, et ne peut se faire, que par la force.” Fanon et al., Les damnés de la terre. p 72. Philcox significantly alters the meaning by smoothing the syntax into English: “What in fact constitutes this violence? As we have seen, the colonized masses intuitively believe that their liberation must be achieved and can only be achieved by force.” Fanon, The wretched of the earth. p 33. One might go further, and point to similarities between the past-present-future structure of Sorelian myth (see chapter four of this dissertation), and the Fanonian slogan, “the plunge into the chasm of the past is the condition and the source of freedom” Frantz Fanon, Toward the African revolution; political essays (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967). p 43. To justify and explore these comparisons, however, is beyond the scope of the present chapter.
is the quite different one of a State that masks its violence as law and has effectively
coophted public morals. Fanon’s analysis is situated firmly within the colonized world,
Sorel’s within the metropole. One might go so far as to say that Sorel was much closer to
those whose problem was organizing effective dissent within postindustrial society than
to those whose problem was to build a new world on the wreckage of colonial violence.

But it was also an available discourse on the radical edge of the American New
Left. The Weather Underground really did, at least rhetorically, bring together vitalist and
Marxist discourses on the basis of anti-colonial struggles. “This is a deathly culture,”
announces the final pages of Prairie Fire, the Weather Underground’s political
statement. “Our movement must discard the baggage of the oppressor society and
become new women and new men…revolution is…a risky business and ultimately a
decisive struggle against the forces of death…Commitment and engagement must be
continually renewed.”80 One could even find in this document just the same revolutionary
disruption of means and ends that seemed typical of Sorel, but is really deeply embedded
in the logic of revolution: “We create the seeds of the new society in the struggle for the
destruction of empire…Revolution is the midwife bringing the new society into being
from the old…The culture of our communities, the people we try to become, are forged
in the process of revolutionary war – the struggle for liberation.”81 Means and ends
become the same, to struggle for liberation is to be liberated, the revolution is the
revolutionary. And enormous moral urgency builds behind this appeal to be differently:

80 Weather Underground Organization, Prairie fire : the politics of revolutionary anti-imperialism (San
81 Ibid.p 146.
“People are already dying. Lives are wasted and worn. Life itself depends on our ability to deal a swift blow to the monster.” There was perhaps no one better equipped to approach with a little sympathy this ideological loop—where means becomes ends that are only means, and life becomes itself only in dying against death—than Hannah Arendt. To her analysis we now turn.

**On Violence and Revolution**

One possible space for misunderstanding between Sorel and his readers can be illustrated by Saul Bellow’s 1969 novel, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*. Sammler, an anglophile Polish-Jewish intellectual, spent time in Britain in the 1930s as a young man, but then returned to Poland just before the war and escaped death by the narrowest possible margin—he literally hid in a tomb. The novel depicts him, now in his 70s, in and around Columbia in New York. One of his freewheeling younger acquaintances invites him to give a lecture, really, Sammler is told, just to reminisce about the 1930s in London to a small seminar as part of a charity project for “the black children.” Sammler is taken to a crowded lecture hall, where he begins to speak about Bloomsbury, Orwell, and H.G. Wells (about whom he is vaguely pretending to write a book). He arrives to find a crowded lecture hall—surprised, he nonetheless begins his remarks. At a certain point, he is interrupted. A man from the audience shouts at him, “Orwell was a fink. He was a sick counterrevolutionary. It’s good he died when he did. And what you are saying is shit.’

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82 Ibid. p 146.
Turning to the audience, extending violent arms and raising his palms like a Greek dancer, he said ‘Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He’s dead. He can’t come.’” Sammler retreats, surprised and confused rather than offended or afraid. Later, he discovers that the students had assembled in order to hear a lecture about “Sorel and Modern Violence.”

How did émigré intellectuals respond to the increasingly materialist, decadent, violent, sexualized, American 1960s? Hannah Arendt’s On Violence was written as a direct response to increasing violence on both sides of the various political and social conflicts of the late 1960s. The opening pages assert that the means-ends structure implied by all acts of violence has been radically altered in the 20th century. Violence as means—nuclear weaponry—has finally arrived at the capacity to destroy the entire human species, which is to say that “the technical development of the implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably…justify their actual use.” The implication is that violence can no longer play a role in conflict between major states. Arendt’s whole analysis takes place under this nuclear umbrella.

Arendt makes the usual criticisms of Sorel: his worldview was organized around antique heroism, and he was basically a Bergsonian vitalist. Once social struggle is

83 Saul Bellow, Mr. Sammler’s Planet (New York: Viking Press, 1969). p 42. He discovers, without comment, the topic of the speech somewhat later, p 109. See also the passage at pp 149ff.
85 These are both somewhat odd criticisms to come from a person who organizes her own thought around the model of the Greek polis and the idea of natality. Arendt consistently links Sorel to Bergson as, we have seen, do many other scholars. Sorel is mentioned several times in The Human Condition, every time as a politico-revolutionary corollary to Bergson. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt in passing diagnoses Sorel as one among a number of writers who, working before WWI, were taken up by the younger ‘front generation’ for their savage critiques of bourgeois society; lost in this generational transfer were the
conceived in biological terms, violence becomes mandatory, even a positive virtue: “nothing, in my opinion, could be theoretically more dangerous than the tradition of organic thought in political matters.”

Fanon, somewhat surprisingly, is wedged into this same box with Sorel. Arendt’s basic diagnosis of the political moment of 1968 is fairly straightforward: real politics (the exercise of power) is no longer on the table, and all that is left is more or less violent refusal—“I am inclined to think that much of the present glorification of violence is caused by severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world.” The blockage of real politics means that the basic struggles over material existence are elevated into ideology. Hence the attraction of Sorel’s and Fanon’s quasi-vitalistic approach to political struggle. The fundamental danger, however, of this vitalist approach to violence is that it confuses the true nature of violence in social conflict, which is basically instrumental. That is, it is in fact “more the weapon of reform than revolution.” Not only will Sorel and Fanon encourage the use of violence in the hope of revolution, but the spoils will in fact go to reform, and probably not ‘rational’

positive programs of this generation: Sorel’s moralism, for instance, and Nietzsche’s transvaluation. Perhaps because Arendt is not focusing too much on this, she makes a cogent and uncomplicatedly perceptive historical point.

Arendt, On violence. p 75.

Arendt, On violence. p 79.
reform either, since the use of violence was not rationally planned.\textsuperscript{90} Ultimately Arendt objects that Sorel confuses violence as a means with violence as an end—we aren’t far here from Schlesinger’s point of view.\textsuperscript{91}

At several points in her book, Arendt cites from the writings of Barbara Deming on nonviolence. Deming’s differentiation of nonviolent refusal from violent resistance has clear resonances with Arendt’s key distinction between power and violence. Deming, who is today unjustly neglected, is helpful in clarifying the points of confusion here. In an essay on nonviolence published in a pamphlet form by \textit{Liberation} (together with a Régis Debray text), Deming argues that Fanon himself is better read as an advocate for nonviolence, because his central concern is the remaking of man.\textsuperscript{92} Deming’s notion of nonviolence is ultimately a way to focus the power of resistance on peeling \textit{individual humans} away from their function within the repressive apparatuses of the state. Although she does not articulate her point in this way, what really interests her is the moment that soldiers choose \textit{not} to fire on protestors. Put differently, Deming’s nonviolence is a theory of the articulation of the individual and the collective in action. This is precisely

\textsuperscript{90} In fact, among the most interesting aspects of \textit{On Violence} is Arendt’s ambiguous attitude toward the turn civil rights action had taken in the universities. That is, to Black Power, to African American Studies programs, and all things Africana. She repeatedly mentions, with derisive and sometimes pedantic sarcasm, courses in ‘Soul’ and Swahili. Elsewhere, however, she suggests that Black Americans are engaged in a basically legitimate struggle. This commentary on American racial politics from a German-Jewish female intellectual whose fundamental experience is National Socialism, is, indeed, the sharp edge opening the culture wars.

\textsuperscript{91} It would be interesting to know how much of Arendt’s discussion here comes from Barbara Deming’s writing on non-violence, which Arendt cites at several points in \textit{On Violence}. Deming, who was on the editorial team of A.J. Muste’s journal \textit{Liberation}, had written to Arendt, supporting her during the controversy that followed the publication of \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}, asking about the possibility of doing an interview, or at least talking things over. See, \url{http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mharendt_pub&fileName=03/030030/030030page.db&recNum=1}

\textsuperscript{92} Deming and Debray, "Revolution: Violent and Nonviolent."
the point at which Sorel’s work should find its greatest relevance. Whence the ethical
investment of individuals in institutions? How does this investment change? How can it
be understood without on the one hand resorting to facile psychologism, and on the other
dissolving the condition of the individual into sociological abstractions?

Arendt does not mention Sorel in her earlier and consummately American *On
Revolution*, but a Sorelian criticism of it is telling. The argument she presents there
amounts to a particularly sophisticated example of a common assumption. On the one
hand, there is pure politics—the coming together of human beings qua speaking beings,
individuals or souls—which for Arendt is council communism, was the Greek polis, and
is a fleeting and beautiful ideal. On the other hand there is the materialist version of
revolution, the one that puts class and the social question at the center of revolution. This,
for Arendt, will only ever lead to the elimination of whole groups of people, to the
devaluing of real politics in favor of technocratic administration, with its own terrifying
host of violences. We can see a recapitulation of this distinction in more recent attempts
on the part of Alain Badiou and others to differentiate between Nazi and Communist
revolutions—the one is positive—evil—and the other open to the void, negative and
open.

The reason Sorel’s philosophy of science and his reading of Vico are important is
that they give him the resources to argue that it is *only* on a material basis that it is
possible to have the kind of equality, the kind of political virtue, that Arendt wants. There
is the very obvious—but no less serious—point to make against Arendt that, after all,
someone had to build the forum, and it wasn’t the citizens who cut and set the marble
slabs…But Sorel’s point is past this. Just as the Hegelians say that there is only freedom in constraint, so says Sorel. But he is able to explain why this constraint cannot be just any kind of constraint. The struggle with what is confronted as a non-human reality, like a scientific experiment—although, for Sorel, this too is ultimately something we have made—is a necessary precondition for an autonomous individual. Arendt is an exceptional, not to say eccentric, figure. However these and similar issues echo through a more broadly influential often misunderstood discourse—Cold War Liberalism—to which we now turn.

Cold War Liberalisms

Cold War Liberalism can be given both a biographical and an analytic definition. Malachi Hacohen identifies the cohort of Cold War Liberals with a common problem situation. This cohort emerged out of a broadly left interwar milieu, went to war against Nazism and continued to support the United States and NATO against Communism. Jacob Talmon and Isaiah Berlin, but also Karl Popper and Raymond Aron “saw strong parallels between fascism and communism and dubbed both systems ‘totalitarian.’ The student revolutions caught them by surprise. Responding to generational and cultural rifts, the welfare state crisis, and détente, their politics grew conservative in the 1970s.”

This historical situation left them with a strong, but a negative agenda. Most importantly,


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“the threat of totalitarianism left postwar liberals with no means of forging a liberal public,” since the usual institutions of civil society seemed to have been successfully perverted by totalitarian regimes into instruments of repression. 94 Marxism was regarded as an incipiently totalitarian “secular religion.” Furthermore, the Cold War Liberals “were suspicious, to use Isaiah Berlin’s terminology, of any “positive aim” of liberalism, any vision of ideal citizenship, any consensus beyond welfare.” Even the secular civil religion of the French Republic seemed to them dangerous. These liberals resisted such impulses to unity, “their pluralism was radical, and had its costs: inability to articulate a vision for the formation of a liberal public. They became ever more aware of the unique conditions enabling liberal democracy in the West, ever more pessimistic about its prospect elsewhere.” 95

From a compatible, but somewhat different perspective, Jan-Werner Müller argues that Cold War Liberalism should be understood through its position in an intellectual field. Berlin and others, he argues, positioned themselves as antifoundationalists between the foundationalism of the technocrats—those interpolated by Bell’s end-of-ideology—and the Straussians. Müller is struck by the oddity of such historically educated and cultured individuals as Berlin and Karl Popper both believing, implausibly, that they were the first to ever really understand that values could be in conflict with one another—that the Good was plural, not singular. Especially through the 1960s, these abstractions tended to be articulated around the concrete and pressing issue

95 Ibid. p 187.
of Israel’s place in the world. Arguably, it was the question of antisemitism and Israel that most profoundly soured relations between the older and the younger generations.96

Neither the classical rationalists nor the social scientists had any serious difficulties in making sense out of the eruption of radicalism of the 1960s. The Cold War Liberals offered a number of explanations—and here Aron’s revolution-as-psychodrama is exceptional—but turned particularly to history. Sorel was a perfect figure for the CWLs to use in understanding the student radicalism—particularly given their distance from the civil rights context in the US—his left-right ambiguity, his vitalism, and his incipient antisemitism, all recommended him. What interests me here, and for the remainder of this chapter, is the strange fact that his philosophical position, even his pessimism, resonated deeply with that of the CWLs in a way it did not with the younger radicals. 1968 was indeed a psychodrama, but I suggest at least as much for its older spectators as for its younger participants.

Interest in Sorel around 1968 was part and parcel of the CWL’s rejection of the new political idiom—a political idiom constructed not out of the wreckage of world war and the threat of ideologically generated global nuclear apocalypse, but out of decolonization and consumer capitalism. Yet Sorel shared their rejection of positive and state-directed politics, their radical pluralism, and their pessimism. If he associated himself with nationalists later in his life, and became associated with radical nationalism,
he also articulated a profoundly non-national vision of political belonging—his relationship to the nation was thus just as ambiguous as that of these émigré liberals. Moreover, the central theme of his work was to investigate the relation of institutions to individual autonomy—that is, the articulation of liberalism under the conditions of modernity.

Cold War liberals looked to Sorel in the wake of 1968 to make historical sense by analogy out of the apparently senseless turn of the student protestors to violence and radicalism. Sorel’s struggle to understand the institutionality of individual autonomy and his slide into irrationalist violence could also have been resources for Cold War Liberals struggling to understand the late 1960s—not for the prosecution of the young, but for a reflection on their own blind-spots and trajectories. Berlin and Talmon read Sorel against the New Left so strongly as to miss what they themselves give evidence of—Sorel’s social and political thought was a struggle with the dilemmas that modernity presented to the liberal tradition to which Sorel belonged together with Talmon and Berlin.

**Jacob Talmon’s Myths and Visions**

Jacob Talmon’s 1951 *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* was a major contribution to the intellectual history of totalitarianism, and by far the most sophisticated argument linking the political pathologies of the 20th century to the legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Jacobin phases of the French Revolution. Although the book met with substantial success, his reputation in the English-speaking academy declined
over the next decades. Each successive volume of what was to be a history of European political radicalism met with a less enthusiastic reception. Talmon’s political location—eventually a prominent liberal critic of Ben-Gurion within Israel, but always internationally a defender of Zionism—found no natural constituency. Although the notion of totalitarian democracy seemed to fit the Soviet case quite well, as Talmon over the course of the 1960s followed the history of European radicalism into the later 19th and the 20th centuries, the complexity of right-wing totalitarianism was increasingly evident. Talmon suggested that after 1848, the messianic impulse separated into, on the one hand, a ‘vision of revolution’ (the left, the Bolshevik, pathology) and on the other a ‘myth of the nation’ (the right, Mazzini, Mussolini, Hitler). But how then to understand the apparent unity of the totalitarianisms of the middle-20th century? This historical difficulty was compounded by the interpretive challenge presented by the resurgent New Left. It might be suggested that the upheavals of the later 1960s pushed Talmon to consider Sorel as at once a precursor to an otherwise anomalous sequence of events, and also as a demonstration of the essential unity of left and right messianism.97

Talmon confronted Sorel in an essay with a whole narrative arc in its subtitle: “The Legacy of Georges Sorel: Marxism, Violence, Fascism.” This essay appeared first early in 1970 in the magazine Encounter, and was reprinted in largely the same form about a decade later as a chapter in Myth of the Nation and Vision of Revolution. It reconstructs Sorel’s thought with the goal of showing its place in the evolution of fascism and totalitarianism. There is also an ulterior motive: “it is impossible not to be struck by

97 I thank Malachi Hacohen for this suggestion.
similarities of thought and speech between the young New Left radicals of today and the author of the Réflexions sur la violence seventy years ago.”

In the earlier publication, the original impulse behind the treatment of Sorel is made yet plainer in an introductory paragraph that is worth quoting at length:

At a time when words like violence, “direct action,” “confrontation,” “the bourgeois world,” “cleansing,” “total destruction,” etc. are shouted into our ears with obsessive persistence, there is every justification for…taking another look at the most famous European apostle of violence—Georges Sorel. The more so, if one wishes to examine the view…that the terrorist totalitarian régimes of both Left and Right so characteristic of this century, should not be seen as two primary, self-sufficient, and all-embracing alternatives pitted against each other, but as two different versions of the same phenomenon, the urge for violence. And it is surely legitimate to go on asking whether the present wave of defiant and intransigent extremism should not also be classified as the latest variety thereof?"  

The idiom is totalitarianism; the accusation is that the New Left’s “defiant and intransigent extremism” is in essence another iteration of the same movement incarnated in National Socialism and Soviet Communism. The pointed attempt here—by an historian and public intellectual writing from (if perhaps not for) an Israel reshaped in its national aspirations by the Six-Day War in 1967—is to fold the militancy of the New Left into the categories of the Cold War. The Manichean intellectual framework of the 1950s is to subsume the attempts of the New Leftists themselves to insist on a clear division into good and bad that, manifestly, no longer exists. Sorel will allow Talmon to do this.


99 Talmon, “The Legacy of Georges Sorel.”
Perhaps because Talmon has no space for either dense context or sensitive close textual analysis, the explanations slide into psychology: “Sorel was a seeker.”

Sorel, for Talmon, is a person deeply concerned with social disintegration, and desperately seeking new spiritual foundations for society. Sorel’s pessimism is an important and basically religious element of his thought, “decadence fascinated Sorel…Civilisation was a most precarious possession…Any sign of relaxing was soon followed by rot, collapse and ruin.” In this pessimistic worldview, constant vigilance was required, “what gave meaning and grandeur to our life was the state of tension and unyielding struggle to ward off the forces of decay and destruction, and above all the yearning and striving for deliverance.”

We have in Talmon’s Sorel spiritually charged secular messianism, suspicion and elitism, the certainty of dissolution matched with the moral imperative of re-foundation at any price.

In Talmon’s narrative, Marxist revisionism follows along directly and in an obvious way from the Dreyfus Affair. The lessons about violence and propaganda

\[\text{\textsuperscript{100}}\text{Myth of the nation and vision of revolution: ideological polarization in the twentieth century. p 452.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{101}}\text{Ibid. p 554.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{102}}\text{Ibid. p 554}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{103}}\text{It is not a coincidence that at several points in these pages, Talmon cites Michael Freund’s 1932 work on Sorel. If Freund—the scholar who did the most to bring Sorel’s work into the canon of Nazi writing—was a major source for Talmon, it is unsurprising that Sorel ultimately appears to him as foundational figure for the Right. Michael Freund is not to be confused with Julian Freund—who also, after the war, also wrote on Sorel. Michael Freund, who was himself working in a German tradition of Sorel reception that went back to Carl Schmitt, in 1936 sought to get his own book on Sorel translated into French, arguing that the political moment was propitious. Freund also in this year succeeded in getting the rights to translate a selection of Sorel’s texts into German (although it did not, apparently, actually appear at the time). There was even some suggestion that a re-translation of Reflections on Violence would be made. The previous one had been done by a Professor Salomon, associated with the University of Frankfurt. See the Archive d’Edition Marcel Rivière, 499.25, IISG, Amsterdam. See Julien Freund, L’essence du politique, Philosophie politique (Paris: Sirey, 1965); Freund, Georges Sorel, der revolutionäre Konservatismus.}\]
learned from Dreyfus simply applied to the newly open Marxism, “Sorel’s reaction to the revisionism heresy should be considered alongside the violent responses of Lenin, Mussolini…Rosa Luxemburg and Parvus-Helphand. Theirs was a passionate reassertion of revolutionary voluntarism and élitisme.”

Talmon observes that, “unlike the above-mentioned anti-revisionists, Sorel accepted the whole of Berstein’s social economic critique of orthodox Maxism, but drew diametrically opposite political conclusions.”

Talmon argues that for Sorel revolution never had anything to do with ‘improving the lot of the poor.’ Difficult questions are therefore opened up. Talmon says,

Fundamentally, we are faced here with a problem which has never ceased to perplex mankind—the question of the very legitimacy of politics. Its utter vagueness and elusive character, the mixture of abstract principles and crass ambition, of objective goals and sheer histrionics, of rational argument and squalid bamboozling; its seeming remoteness from the concrete, measurable, and truly necessary things—all this leads to the despairing conclusion that whatever the politicians, men of no particular training, ultimately dilettanti, say or do is only a mask and pretense for the desire for power, power for its own sake.

Politics is at its worst in a democratic state because the hypocrisy is greatest.

Demagogues—the sickness of democracy since Aristotle—compete to convince the great mass of people that they are their real representatives, all the time simply angling for

104 Talmon, Myth of the nation and vision of revolution: ideological polarization in the twentieth century. p 457. Sorel is also put in a ‘contrasting pair’ with Lenin by Berlin in the late 1940s, see again the narrative sketched out in Isaiah Berlin, Four essays on liberty, Galaxy book (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp 13-14.

105 Talmon, Myth of the nation and vision of revolution: ideological polarization in the twentieth century. Laclau and Mouffe make the same point, “Sorel, starting from the revisionism debate, accepts en bloc Bernstein’s and Croce’s critiques of Marxism but in order to extract very different conclusions. What is striking in Sorel is the radicalism with which he accepts the consequences of the ‘crisis of Marxism.’” Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics. p 38. That Laclau and Mouffe find Sorel so congenial to their larger anti-foundationalist leftism is probably to be taken as evidence that Talmon is broadly correct in his assessment of the affinities between Sorel and the New Left—although, as I will argue, for the wrong reasons.

106 Talmon, Myth of the nation and vision of revolution: ideological polarization in the twentieth century. p 459.
personal power. There is nothing heroic there, nothing moral at all. Hatred of hypocrisy—a position that has about it a strong whiff of naïveté—becomes the central fact. That Sorel accepted Bernstein’s critique of Marx’s deterministic political economy is taken as evidence that Sorel eliminated economic analysis entirely from his moral and political thought.

Sorel, if we follow Talmon, has not perhaps gone to the heart of politics, but he has indicated the emptiness there, the fundamental indeterminacy that is the condition of collective human action. Given that, for Talmon, Sorel is a man desperately in search of foundations, it stands to reason that he will now attempt to fill this newly-discovered void with something. That something will be irrationalist violence, mythic energy. Sorel’s personality comes into the analysis in a somewhat crude way at this point,

The facile optimism of the rationalists rouses Sorel to a fury of contempt. He takes a malignant pleasure in the resistance, recalcitrance and intractableness of things; he is hypnotized by insoluble contradictions and conflict...Sorel is scathing about the social Catholicism of the Modernist movement in the church of Leo XIII, and its attempt to explain away the mysteries, absurdities and irrationalities of revealed religion as parables and symbols of rational truths and liberal social ethics. Needless to say, he prefers a tough, wholly indigestible religion. 107

Sorel is credited with observing the perplexing emptiness at the heart of political activity, and then he is chastised for demanding that others recognize it as well. His insistence on the indeterminacy and ‘risk’ of politics is colored by a “malignant pleasure,” rather than a liberal reasonableness. All that separates Sorel from a liberal quasi-opportunist politics is that he espouses revolution—but then the fact that he rejects any group that seems likely to achieve success or to take power is held against him. Rather than evidence that he does

107 Ibid. p 461
not want a revolution of the usual kind, this is assumed to be evidence of his basic personal instability.

The force of Talmon’s evaluation of Sorel’s personality comes forward if we compare his portrait of Sorel’s reaction to the dilemma of politics to a remarkably similar dilemma that Talmon himself confronted, and had spoken about, some years earlier.

What is it about Jewishness?

We are here confronted with that supreme difficulty which Chaim Weizmann used to call Jewish “ghostliness.” The world is scarcely large enough to contain the Jews and they are said to possess all the wealth of the earth, and yet when you strain every nerve to fix them in a definition they elude you like a mirage. It seems impossible to lay a finger on anything tangible and measurable in the Jew’s Jewishness; yet an ailing, all-devouring self-consciousness comes like a film between him and the world. Not taken into account when things are normal and prosperous, he is seen as ubiquitous, all-powerful, sinister when there is blame to be apportioned. I believe the links holding Jews together—in the words of Edmund Burke—to be as invisible as air and as strong as the heaviest chains, and the Jewish ingredient to be as imperceptible to the senses yet as effective in results as vital energy itself. Such things, however, are too subtle for the historian’s customary crude techniques and his far from subtle instruments.  

The quiet intellectual courage with which Talmon himself faced this ghostliness, which is at once illusory and inescapable, is what he wanted from Sorel. Here, ‘liberal democracy’ is not so much a philosophical position as a practical position taken after a particular emotive response to the discovery that politics has no foundation and yet cannot be avoided. Talmon says, “I have come to the conclusion on somewhat closer study that it was to a large extent the Jewish Messianic vision of history that made the industrial revolution appear, not merely as another crisis and another bad spell, but as an

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apocalyptic hour leading to some preordained final denouement.”

Sorel is not supposed to be one of the messianic socialists in the mode of Saint-Simon about whom Talmon is speaking, rather, something like their reverse image. Where they founded political action on a definite utopian vision of future harmony, Sorel founded it on the heroic mission of the proletariat, whose arrival “presages a purifying ricorsi. The proletariat comes to bring war and not peace.” But a reverse image is still an image, and so although it brings war, Sorel’s proletariat also “struggles on in the full consciousness of its destiny to inherit the earth: not to come to an accommodation with the existing establishment, but to eradicate it entirely.”

In this way, Sorel becomes a pathological derivation of the form of socialism he hated more than any other: Saint-Simonism.

Sorel’s attitude in the face of the imperious indeterminacy of the political is not so different from Talmon’s in the face of his own Jewishness. Talmon is even ready to admit that the ‘ghostly’ bonds of Judaism are unavailable to the methods of normal social science. They demand the response not of science but of ethics. Their existence is historical and personal, not rational—yet, Talmon always believed as a Zionist, to avoid this ground for political action would be catastrophic. Talmon wants to see in Sorel an iteration of positive political messianism between Saint-Simon and Mussolini. He wants to make of Sorel another figure in the chain of those attempting to assert the plenitude of the political realm, in short a totalitarian. Sorel is in fact more in line with liberalism, or a

109 Ibid. Talmon was at work at this moment on Political Messianism: the romantic phase (New York: Praeger, 1961).
110 Talmon, Myth of the nation and vision of revolution : ideological polarization in the twentieth century. p 462.
certain strain of attenuated republicanism. He accepts indeterminacy, he accepts the emptiness constitutive of the political. But he also, like Talmon and unlike certain other sorts of liberalism—most saliently that of Karl Popper—accepts the bonds ‘invisible as air and as strong as the heaviest chains’ that constrain human action in ways impossible to fix scientifically. The emptiness of politics and the plenitude of the social (we might say) are held in tension for him. The tension is not dialectical, but in Sorel’s own philosophical vocabulary, should perhaps be regarded as a continual act of diremption.111 The two are always together, and yet belong to “different worlds,” perhaps like Talmon’s liberalism and his Zionism.112

It was perhaps because the real differences between them were reducible to temperament, could not be called profound, that Talmon at every stage attempts to turn Sorel’s great enemy into hypocrisy. Of course, Sorel was a Marxist, and was never willing to entirely sever the political and the social—but for Talmon this becomes a gesture at authenticity, nothing more. Sorel’s distinction between force and violence—perhaps the object of excessive attention, since it is one of the rare explicitly made distinctions in his unsystematic body of work—is reduced to this. Talmon says that in contradistinction to the “cunning and make-believe” that upholds the force of the bourgeois state, “Sorel proclaimed the violence preached by him to be noble and chivalrous because it was open and direct and constituted a full and unequivocal

111 For the Hegelian overtones of this term, and its significance in Sorel’s oeuvre, see chapter four of the present dissertation.
112 See Hacohen, “Jacob Talmon between Zionism and Cold War Liberalism.”
commitment.”\textsuperscript{113} We are left with a vulgarized existentialism of commitment and authenticity that precludes any notion of responsibility to larger ideals or goals, and forgives any act of violence performed ‘in truth.’ Yet further, “violence was the token of authenticity,” Talmon asserts, claiming that for Sorel, “Surely a knife-thrust by an honest but violent man would have less serious moral consequences than theft and deceit, or the excess of lust.”\textsuperscript{114}

Sorel’s refusal to discuss how things would look on the day after the general strike is held against him. Talmon suggests that this unwillingness to plan for a post-revolutionary society is the same as holding that politics will no longer be necessary in it. Sorel, for Talmon, here combines a terrifyingly naïve anarchism with the discipline and mission of the Napoleonic army—which formulation allows Talmon once again to link Sorel to the Terror and state executions in general. Talmon’s assumption that Sorel’s silence implies that the postrevolutionary world will be golden, perfect, allows him to connect Sorel firmly to the vulgar-Rousseauian Jacobin tradition. Talmon says, “where unanimity…is considered inevitable, any dissent must seem arbitrary and selfish…The road from perfectionist anarchy to democratic centralism (perhaps better called totalitarian democracy) is not a very long one.”\textsuperscript{115} To accuse Sorel of ‘perfectionist

\textsuperscript{113} Talmon, \textit{Myth of the nation and vision of revolution: ideological polarization in the twentieth century}. p 465.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid. p 466. Talmon cites Sorel here, but neglects to mention that he is actually citing Sorel’s own citation of an account of life in an isolated village in Norway (and, in the same section of \textit{Reflections}, in the American West). In both cases, Sorel is pointedly drawing on the social science work of Le Playesian social scientists—Catholics and social conservatives—in order to make the point that even these people seem to think that it is possible to have at once very moral individuals and a high level of ambient interpersonal violence.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid. p 468.
anarchy’ is quite a stretch—if he could be called an anarchist, he was surely a deeply pessimistic one. To suggest that this leads him easily into ‘democratic centralism’ is much worse. These are indeed the tendencies against which Sorel railed most consistently and famously in his *Illusions of Progress*.\(^{116}\)

Sorel concluded from the history of the French Revolution that the ideas of the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century Enlightenment were deeply linked to the practice of the Revolutionaries. He held Enlightenment responsible for the Jacobins—that is, for totalitarian democracy. In this anxiety about the excesses of Enlightenment he was no different from Talmon or Berlin. For Talmon, Sorel was on a quest for authenticity in politics—and this already sounds like Rousseau. In fact, Sorel sought frantically to ground an understanding of political practice in an understanding of social reality. He understood politics to be empty in the sense that it is a willed human activity, and has no content beyond what it is given in its very instantiation. But, contrary to Talmon’s diagnosis, this is not especially what bothered him. Politics is not empty in the sense that all human activity is embedded in social relations that extend both vertically into the past and horizontally out to other people. The material world in which we move and the concepts with which we think are equally products of the social world. A demand for authenticity is not at all the same as a demand for the awareness of contingency. Honesty, yes; but Sorel never sought transparency because he did not believe any such thing existed. It was a ghost, an apparition, any attempt to fix it would result in terrible destruction.

So, Talmon’s reading is here at its most perverse—at no point does he demonstrates an awareness of the fact that the greatest target of Sorel’s ire is essentially identical to the totalitarian democracy diagnosed by Talmon himself. Talmon and certain of his Cold War Liberal cohort were ambivalent, not to say hostile, to the excesses of democracy. They were concerned about the strong possibility that democratic polities would, either through hyperactivity or atrophy, destroy individual freedom. Why is it that Sorel’s very similar ambivalences in the face of democracy and its often false promises are taken to mean simply that he feared the masses?

The payoff of Talmon’s analysis comes in understanding the generation after Sorel. Having established that “Sorel’s earliest concern was with authenticity, certainty and social cohesion,” it is easy enough to see that after his critical Nietszchean fire has leveled all else, his followers—and Talmon picks out George Valois in particular—could easily raise “the instinctive will-to-power of the individual and the visceral ties of the community of blood…to absolutes.”117 Easy enough, that is, if like both Valois and Talmon, you are not interested in Sorel’s explicit and implicit refusals of race and nation as worthwhile foundations for political activity. Valois was indeed (at least for a time) an antisemitic proto-fascist, and introduces in a sustained way the link between anti-democratic and antisemitic politics: “behind the anti-elitist of democratic and socialist politicians, a loose congeries of adventurers who come and go, there stood an anti-elitist acting from behind the scenes, but of the most distinct identity, cohesion and

continuity—the Jews.”\textsuperscript{118} Talmon links all this back to what he says is Sorel’s comparison of the anarchy of the stock market to that of the democratic parliamentary system. Sorel also, although Talmon does not mention it, had argued that parliamentary government as such was not possible except under capitalism—a position that is, to say the least, differently problematic. It is, however, the antisemitism that interests Talmon, “the Jew thus appears as the lynchpin of the whole theory, resolving the contradiction between socialism and nationalism.”\textsuperscript{119} Talmon refuses to see that Sorel, far from a mirror image of the Saint-Simonians, is a mirror image of Talmon himself.

That was the last sentence of the chapter in \textit{Myth of the Nation and Vision of Revolution}. In \textit{Encounter}, however, the message was made yet more explicit, with a closing paragraph entitled, ‘A Cautionary Tale.’ Talmon makes clear the politically pernicious elements he finds in Sorel. First, there is the critique of hypocrisy and the quest for authenticity, which transform into “a glorification of instinct and direct action.” Second is a “condemnation of arbitrariness and the craving for certainty” that becomes elitism and the justification for violence. Third Talmon objects that “the existential situation or collective myth has as its corollary the denial of individual judgment and personal decision, for it raises abstract sentiments to the level of absolutes.” Fourth, the “populist apotheosis of primary and all-embracing experience—in contrast to analytical reasoning” tends strongly in the direction of racism. Finally, the reduction of social

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.p 473.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.p 474. A footnote to this passage in the \textit{Encounter} piece admits, at least, the complexity of Valois’ character—his political allegiances also shifted wildly, which Talmon would no doubt take as evidence for his deep similarity to Sorel.
conflict to a “Manichean confrontation” between forces “both taken to be indivisible
totalities…easily becomes a warrant for violence without end.”120 In this condensed form,
it is most clear that Talmon’s target is not really Sorel—who would have agreed with
Talmon—but the New Left. Sorel’s slide into racism, and the embrace of it by some of
his followers, seems entirely natural to Talmon, because he can see nothing supporting
what appears to him to be Sorel’s edifice of spleen and moralism. And Talmon is quite
concerned that the New Left will slide (further) into anti-Zionism and antisemitism for
just the same reasons.

Yet there was something supporting Sorel’s politics. Sorel unmoored himself
from the reigning Marxist class analysis of his time, in order to stay closer to what we
might now call an anti-foundationalist sociological approach to political action. Talmon
is alarmed by Sorel’s insistence on the enormous importance that an essentially non-
rational and contingent framing has on the possibilities of a situation, revolted by the wild
veering of his explanatory framework and language from religion, to production, to war.
Talmon certainly does not believe that politics must have a rational foundation. Neither,
although perhaps it is the same thing, does he believe that a single language can explain
human action. For Sorel—as for some contemporary liberals—no essential foundation
exists for politics as such. No human nature can reliably be called in to anchor the
political. However, specific political actions are always grounded, always related to local
and concrete realities. Not least because Talmon rejected out of hand Sorel’s attempts to

120 ———, “The Legacy of Georges Sorel.” p 60.
retain a materialist method (which was in fact essentially sociological), he was unable to see that while the political was empty, politics itself was always full.

A more serious reason for the covering-over of this distinction in Talmon’s reading of Sorel is that Talmon, as Hacohen argues, always retained the reality of the nation as a backstop and boundary for politics. Sorel consistently refused to do so—although his open mode of conceiving of the possibilities and dangers of political action was such that it allowed a generation of younger and less thoughtful individuals to take his work as an endorsement of nationalism, antisemitism. The difficulty was that although the political as such was always empty, political mobilization did indeed require some sort of psychological content. Sorel’s enthusiasm for the syndicats was not brought on by their authenticity, as Talmon would have it, but by an analysis of the history of economic change. Capitalism was not for Sorel a phase of the world-spirit, inevitably to be replaced by communism; it was a real and definable form of social organization, with a specific dynamic that could, in limited ways, always with an associated risk, be predicted.

Sorel’s wager that the syndicats would be agents of freedom and moral uplift is not so different, only more explicit and daring, than the wager of the generic liberal—even, perhaps especially the cosmopolitan one—that for all its dangers, the nation as physical and juridical space would remain the best guarantee of freedom. If Frantz Fanon argued that the colonized individual was the most authentically global political subject, 

121 A comparison might be made to Arendt, and how she always, implicitly, assumes a certain physical arrangement of human bodies—the polis—for politics to take place. See David L. Marshall, "The Polis and Its Analogues in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," Modern Intellectual History 7, no. 01 (2010).
he also very clearly prioritized liberation on the level of the nation. Here, Talmon and Fanon would both have done well to use Sorel not as a whipping-boy, but as a provocation to think through precisely what Talmon accused Sorel of failing to see—that a national politics becomes a politics of authenticity, and if history-as-problem is subtracted from it (as, differently, both rationalist liberals and existentialist revolutionaries tend to do), then it becomes either consciously or not, ethnic.

Talmon’s reading of Sorel is so partial and distorted because Sorel’s ideas cut at the very joints of Talmon’s political universe. Sorel is Talmon’s bad conscience. In line with Talmon’s liberalism, Sorel has the goal of moral improvement and like him does not believe that political action by the state can generate this improvement. Such a goal is nonetheless tied to politics, but always in a complex and contingent way: it is related in the mode of possibility, not necessity. Sorel was deeply critical of the nation as a frame for politics. Nationalism, for him, was always already a lie. Yet social formations did have a real institutional ground, even if their political actions need not. Sorel believed in civil society, but he did not believe in the nation. Hacohen argues that “Cold War liberals” faced a particular dilemma regarding the boundaries of certain forms of political action. They

relegated certain spheres—international relations, above all—to Real Politics where liberal rules did not apply. This threatened to make liberalism irrelevant to politics, and the careful circumcision of those spheres as lying beyond the nation state was crucial. Postwar European nationalisms never put liberalism to the test by bringing war home but Talmon, who lived the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and had to argue about Zionism with both foreign critics and domestic chauvinists, did. The dissonance between liberalism and nationalism became pronounced, and the limits of liberalism exposed.122

As Hacohen points out, “for Talmon, the nation was both a myth and a reality, and he never resolved the tension between the two...Whereas Talmon rejected revolution on liberal grounds, his disposition toward the nation was ambivalent.” Sorel’s insistent rhetoric of revolution masked his anti-nationalism for Talmon. Sorel’s anti-nationalism needs to be pieced together from comments in various places, and as an implication of his broader viewpoint. Talmon never went looking for it.

**Isaiah Berlin’s Liberalism of Style**

If Talmon’s intellectual star had, to some degree, set in the Anglophone world by the time he wrote on Sorel, Isaiah Berlin’s was still quite high. The great liberal philosopher and historian turned to Sorel also as an indictment of the New Left. In his essay, originally published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Berlin presents us with the bewildering variety of Sorel’s political positions and then, in a characteristic move, postulates an underlying unity of anthropology: “man is a creator, fulfilled only when he creates, and not when he passively receives or drifts unresisting with the current...Man...at his most human, seeks in the first place to fulfill himself, individually and with those close to him, in spontaneous, unhindered, creative activity, in work that consists of the imposition of his personality on a recalcitrant environment” From the

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123 Ibid. p 155.
124 Berlin and Hardy, Against the current : essays in the history of ideas. p 298, 299. This was not, it should be pointed out, an entirely original observation. Georges Goriely ends his groundbreaking 1962 work *Le pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel: “L’homme, nous enseigne en fin du compte Sorel, ne vit que pour créer, que pour instituer historiquement sa volonté et pourtant aucune création particulière ne constitue sa*
beginning it is clear—Sorel stands on the side of positive freedom, and thus is essentially anti-liberal.

Berlin is one of very few commentators to allow any intellectual connection at all between Sorel and Benedetto Croce, but here Berlin sees Croce’s influence to have been in line with a philosophy of praxis that could also come from William James: “our categories are categories of action…they alter what we call reality as the purposes of our active selves alter.”

Berlin quotes Sorel asserting that the human will constitutes even the categories of matter (what we cannot change at will) and form (what we can). Sorel

fin derniere, il n’a d’autre fin que l’élan créateur lui-même.” Goriely, Le pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel. p 222.

125 Berlin and Hardy, Against the current : essays in the history of ideas. p 302.
126 Berlin cites from the 1902 Saggi. This is an excellent example of the problems presented to scholars by Sorel’s texts. The Saggi is a collection of essays that Sorel had written over the previous few years. The text Berlin cites originally appeared in 1898 in German, in Bernstein’s Sozialistische Monatshefte. The version—even the passage—that Berlin cites is substantially different. Berlin gives us, “we consider as matter, or as the base, that which escapes, less or more completely, from our will. The form is rather what corresponds to our freedom” (302). The full passage, with a little context, from Berlin is citing in the Saggi, reads, “Passando dall’econome al diritto e alla politica, il nostro spirito realizza la sua libertà in una certa misura; e noi sentiamo perfettamente che sarebbe impossibile dedurre il diritto e la politica dall’economia. Noi consideriamo sempre come materia o base ciò che sfugga, in modo più o meno completo, alla nostra volontà; la forma à ciò che più corrisponde alla nostra libertà; l’ordine secondo il quale la libertà si realizza è imposto alla filosofia dell’azione dall’esame dei fatti” (44). In the earlier German version, “Wenn man von der Oekonomie zum Recht und der Politik übergeht, fühlt sich der Geist von dem Joch der zwingenden Bedingungen befreit. Er verwirklicht seine Freiheit in einem gewissen Maasse: das Recht end die Politik lassen sich eben unmöglich auf rein ökonomische Gesetze zurückführen. Wenn wir irgend etwas schaffen, dann betrachten wir als Marerie, als Unterbau Alles, was sich unserm Willen mehr oder weniger vollständig entsieht. Wir können also sagen, dass die Ordnung, in her sich die Freiheit verwirklicht, auch die Ordnung ist, die durch die Philosophie der menschlichen Handlungen gegeben ist, und dass also die Oekonomie sehr wohl der Unterbau der sozialen Wissenschaft ist.” (Betrachtigung II, 371). The German includes a long footnote engaging in debates about the correct interpretation of Marx’s views on this matter, citing Charles Andler. The Italian version includes a short footnote, “la libertà è supratutto ciò che Hegel chiama manifestazione dello spirito.” Of course, Sorel really does believe that historically legal and political forms are closely related to—although always in tension with—economic forms. The point is that we experience in an uncritical way the economy as given and inescapable and politics as somehow chosen. Sorel and Racca, Saggi di critica del marxismo. Georges Sorel, “Betrachtungen über die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung.” Sozialistische Monatshefte 2, no. 8 (1898).
thus evades rationalism of any kind, however constrained: “Sorel’s uncompromising voluntarism is at the heart of his entire outlook.” The notion of the human will becomes central for Berlin’s Sorel—and this is a far cry from Bergson, never mind from the idealists of the later 19th century who, against the more vulgar materialists, and for both religious and political reasons really did put the free human will at the center of their cosmologies.

Against the backdrop of this anthropology Berlin takes Sorel to be, at his best, a moralist—for this reason his writings transcend their particular day-to-day inspirations and remain fresh and compelling. Sorel’s is the “moral fury of perpetual youth”—this “fiery, not wholly adult, outraged feeling may in part account for his affinity with the young revolutionaries of our time.” Sorel’s ideas still “come at us from every corner” because the experience against which he and a few other small circles of intellectuals reacted in the later 19th century is today broadly felt. Sorel’s writings “mark a revolt against the rationalist ideal of frictionless contentment in a harmonious social system in which all ultimate questions are reduced to technical problems, soluble by appropriate techniques. It is the vision of this closed world that morally repels the young today. The first to formulate this in clear language was Sorel.” For Berlin, Sorel’s appeal and his significance are essentially as a moralist of youth and energy. In this vein, Sorel “might have approved of the Croix de Feu, but never of Poujadism.” This is a question of style—

127 Berlin and Hardy, Against the current : essays in the history of ideas. p 310.
128 Ibid. pp 321-322.
129 Ibid. p 331.
130 Ibid. pp 331-2.
Berlin likens him to Karl Kraus or even George Bernard Shaw—and therefore of psychology.\textsuperscript{131}

Berlin sees Sorel as concerned with collective action, perhaps, but not with materially grounded collectivity, not, that is, with institutions. Alienation, yes, but essentially understood as an individual experience, and therefore a basically theological notion, because it refers necessarily to a time when the individual could be something other than at tragic variance with the world as it exists. Sorel would therefore, says Berlin, have been entirely at home with Marcuse’s perverse notion of “repressive tolerance, the belief that toleration of an order that inhibits ‘epic’ states of mind is itself a form of repression.”\textsuperscript{132} It is telling that, for Berlin, Sorel’s “symbol of creation was the cut stone, the chiselled marble.”\textsuperscript{133} From the beginning, the ideal of creation for Sorel was mechanical creation—and this was inherently social, just as the activity of carving stone might be thought of as inherently individual.

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\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. pp 310, 315. The question of style was surprisingly salient. For instance, Sorel’s appearance in the enormous \textit{Utopian Thought in the Western World} is shot through with this discourse, indeed it is even literalized. The authors write that the “exponents of the existential philosophy of European intellectuals in the period after the Second world war would blush to be identified with so turgid and inelegant a figure as Sorel—Albert Camus, in accepting his Nobel Prize, called upon the shades of Nietzsche, not Sorel, as his hero—but the Sorelian creed fits well into the anarchist critique of Marx, and in the Paris uprising of 1968 the staid Sorel, who had been forgotten by all political parties when he died in 1924 [sic], was briefly resurrected. In 1968 members of a generation far removed from the corrupt politics of the Third French Republic somehow turned to this middle-class dreamer of heroic violence for sustenance—a symbol of the growing impoverishment of the utopian imagination among middle-class radicals” p 748. And, quite literally, “Sorel’s desire to clothe the working classes of Paris in monkish habits is one of the more extravagant acts of utopian transvestism.” p 751. Frank Edward Manuel and Fritzie Prigohzy Manuel, \textit{Utopian thought in the Western World} (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979).
\textsuperscript{132} Berlin and Hardy, \textit{Against the current : essays in the history of ideas}, p 328. That Berlin connects Sorel to Marcuse should leave us in no doubt as to how sympathetic Berlin ultimately was to him—not at all. On Berlin’s disgust with Marcuse, see Michael Ignatieff, \textit{Isaiah Berlin : a life}, 1st American ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998). p 252-3. According to Ignatieff, this hostility had a great deal to do with Marcuse’s irresponsibility in speaking about and around the Shoah. Yet Berlin is not very agitated by Sorel’s antisemitism.
\textsuperscript{133} Berlin and Hardy, \textit{Against the current : essays in the history of ideas}, p 331.
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Berlin, in what is a brilliant and insightful reading of Sorel, nonetheless assimilates him to a vulgarized Frankfurt-school critique of a fully administered world. Sorel is one more dangerous apostle of positive freedom. As Ignatieff emphasizes, Berlin was driven by a deep sense of the tragic fact that values are incommensurable, that rationality, which after all is all we have, simply cannot decide between values.\(^\text{134}\) If he recognized this in Sorel, if he agreed with Sorel that individuals take political action through moral impulsion rather than rational analysis, he also saw in Sorel a prolepsis of the fanaticism of the “grimmer dynamiters of the present.”\(^\text{135}\) Berlin reads Sorel through the New Left rather than the other way around. The conscious abandonment on the part of many students of the factory-centered politics of the old left in favor of a morality of authentic commitment, this blinded Berlin—who was otherwise by far the best-equipped to see it—to Sorel’s essential concern with the foundations of moral action in material collectivity. Berlin, who is as alive as any reader to the meaning of Crocean liberalism and Durkheimian collectivism, failed to see that Sorel’s central intellectual project was to find an answer to the problems of liberalism left unsolved by Durkheim’s nationalist collectivism on the one hand, and Croce’s elitist idealism on the other. Problems that Berlin and his cohort still had.

Talmon’s Sorel—and, differently, Berlin’s—is a warning about the danger of filling an empty politics with demands for authenticity and purity. A more interesting conversation could have taken place between these Cold War Liberals and Sorel. Talmon

\(^\text{134}\) Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: a life*. And also, Muller pointing out that practically all of the CWLs seem to have believed they were the first to ever realize that values could come into conflict with one another. \(^\text{135}\) Berlin and Hardy, *Against the current: essays in the history of ideas*. p 329.
could have sought in Sorel’s mistakes and in the doors he rashly opened a lesson not for young radicals but for anyone attempting to hold together a consciousness of the radical contingency of politics and the necessity for grounding concrete political action. He could have seen in Sorel’s suspicion of democratic enthusiasm and bureaucratic fossilization a lesson about political institutions. He could have found, that is, a lesson for liberals. Berlin and Talmon, who in different ways demand our respect both as scholars and as politically engaged intellectuals, were in a sense pre-determined in their general approach to Sorel—the cover he had provided for antirationalist radicalism in the interwar would not be forgiven.

**Aftermath**

The anti-New Left figure of Sorel that we see in the 1960s and 70s did not completely eliminate the older, social science Sorel that emerged from the 1950s. Especially for cultural critics who felt that theories of the elite needed to be taken seriously—from Roberto Michels to Christopher Lasch and, more recently, Chris Hayes—this other Sorel remained salient.\(^{136}\) An examination and accounting of the work of John Stanley, a scholar of Sorel particularly attentive to his importance for the theory of social science, will be a useful conclusion for this chapter. The goal here is not to

\(^{136}\) Christopher Lasch deserves far more attention in this regard than I have been able to give him here. Lasch discusses Sorel at some length in his *True and Only Heaven*, giving a sympathetic account of his critique of progress. It would be well worth exploring the extent to which Lasch understood how similar his position vis-à-vis the American left—even his trajectory toward a superficial conservatism—was to Sorel’s and the French left. Christopher Lasch, *The true and only heaven : progress and its critics*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1991).
criticize Stanley’s understanding of Sorel, but rather to suggest why his heroic scholarly work of reconstruction seems not to have brought Sorel to the audience both deserved.\(^\text{137}\)

Stanley is an example of the constitutively transdisciplinary and transnational nature of interest in Sorel. He took his PhD in government at Cornell in the 1960s, writing a thesis entitled “Majority Tyranny in Tocqueville's America: The Failure of Negro Suffrage in New York State in 1846.” Why, after work scrutinizing antebellum voting patterns, a turn to Sorel? Cornell’s history department had produced a thesis on Sorel in the late 1940s, and it is possible that Mario Einaudi, a refugee from Italian fascism, was the link—he taught a great deal at Cornell in the 1940s and again in the 1960s.\(^\text{138}\) In addition to intellectual connections to Sorelian problematics (through theories of law as well as experience with Carl Schmitt and others in Germany), Einaudi was married to the daughter of Roberto Michels—the theorist of elites who by proclaiming Sorel’s influence on himself, and taking a hand in later translations, did much to shape Sorel’s international reputation in the interwar.\(^\text{139}\)

However Stanley became interested in Sorel, in 1969 he and his wife Charlotte published a full translation of Sorel’s *Illusions of Progress*—the book written immediately after *Reflections*, and his next most-read work—together with a substantial introduction locating Sorel in the history of theories of progress. The effort met with respect, but was ultimately not much appreciated by, among others, Lewis Coser, who in

\(^\text{137}\) Which is not to say that Stanley went unnoticed. See the essays in the 1998 memorial issue of *The European Legacy* on Stanley and Sorel.

\(^\text{138}\) Lytle, "Historical Materialism and the Social Myth: A Study of Georges Sorel's Conception of History".

\(^\text{139}\) On Michels and translations, see correspondence collected in 499.25 *Archive d’Edition Marcel Rivièr*, IISG, Amsterdam.
one prominent review allowed that Sorel might appeal “to dour and stern Western followers of Mao,” but insisted that, in any case, *Reflections* was really the only thing worth reading. Three volumes of translations (in 1977, 1984, and 1990) followed, as well as a monograph (in 1981). Stanley’s Sorel is a creative and widely-read Marxist, who has valuable insights for any social science that wants to be methodologically self-aware, that wants to take the irrational—really, the moral—into consideration. For Stanley, Sorel was ultimately useful as a critic of Marxism itself, and resonated to a great degree with the debates that had fractured the theoretical left over the course of the 1970s. Stanley’s Sorel was a critical theorist of social science.

By the early 1980s when Stanley’s book on Sorel finally arrived, such a social science was in full collapse. Daniel Rodgers’ *The Age of Fracture* has recently sought to describe the intellectual sea-change that tore apart the social science paradigm at which Stanley’s heroic reconstruction and translation efforts were aimed. This language—the struggle between moral evaluation, objectivity, and the objective evaluation of morality—had ceased by 1990 to be the language spoken by most self-identified social scientists.

Varying degrees of polemic can be used to describe the transformation of American academia in the late 20th century, similarly the political culture at large.

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140 Coser, "Review: [untitled]." p 932.
141 The 1977 and 1990 volumes are selections of essays and extracts, which, together with the *Social Foundations of Economics* in 1984 (which has half in jest been referred to as Sorel’s *Grundrisse*, and which was published in Italian in Sorel’s life, not making it into French until 2007), constitute a wide range of writings. Stanley provided substantial introductions to all these translations, and his *Sociology of Virtue* in 1981 narrates and contextualizes them.
Containing ourselves to academia, we can say that if Rodgers is conservative and
descriptive, Timothy Brennan argues that a veritable counter-revolution took place. For
Brennan, the turn from the 1970s to the 1980s saw the installation of bourgeois
Heideggerian crypto-conservatives everywhere in the name of radicalism—these pseudo-
radicals were in perfect synergy with the rising neo-liberal order, and their reflexive anti-
Hegelianism eliminated any possible contribution that academia could have made to
genuine political resistance.¹⁴³ Rodgers, it seems to me, offers a more measured account
of the same decomposition of the master narratives and the universalism that Brennan
argues are requisite for progressive political action. Historians interested in the broader
transformations of the late 1960s and early 1970s emphasize the breakdown of the old
liberal consensus and the reconfiguration of the political parties. Although large macro-
economic factors can clearly not be swept under the rug, Rick Perlstein and others
convincingly argue for a sort of experience of polarization, a dynamic of radicalization
that bound the two sides together in their mutual antagonism.¹⁴⁴ If the Anglophone world
did not have an equivalent for André Gorz’ *Adieux aux prolétariat*, there nevertheless
was a very real breakdown in the national political power of organized labor.¹⁴⁵
These are all major themes of Sorel’s work. The polemical force of assigning him to the
genealogy of totalitarianism, however, precluded any serious consideration of Sorel in

University Press, 2006). See also Walter Benn Michaels, *The shape of the signifier : 1967 to the end of
¹⁴⁴ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland : the rise of a president and the fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner,
2008).
¹⁴⁵ Cowie, *Stayin’ alive : the 1970s and the last days of the working class; Andre Gorz, Farewell to the
terms of the dilemmas of the 1970s. He was perhaps the first important anti-Hegelian Marxist. He was concerned with nothing so much as the dynamic of radicalization outside the master narrative, and the false radicalism of the merely academic. His legacy—for good or ill—has been that of thinking Revolution without Revolutionary Subject. The next chapter of this dissertation explores some of the engagements that have taken place with Sorel’s work—particularly around post-Marxism—as well as those that could have taken place.
8. The Sorelian Moment of Post-Marxist Theory

Introduction

This chapter explores affinities between the central problems, dichotomies, and
values that this dissertation has identified in the work of Georges Sorel, and a body of
recent theory that can be broadly defined as post-Marxist. Rather than casting too-wide a
net, I focus on the notion of divine violence, with reference to Walter Benjamin, Jacques
Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek, as well as on some central and Sorelian issues in one of the
most sustained projects of post-Marxist theory, the collective work of Michael Hardt and
Antonio Negri.

The goal is twofold. First, I hope to show how productive and relevant the
theoretical positions elaborated by Sorel remain today. Second, I argue that this relevance
is not entirely positive. Sorel’s political legacy is sulfurous. Although he was very much
on the left, Sorel was an important player in the great confusion of ideologies in the
period just before 1914 out of which fascism was born. His work was available and
attractive to a variety of political radicalisms in the interwar period. Having seen various

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points of intersection and overlap between Sorel’s problems and those of contemporary theory, one is authorized to ask about the solutions found to these problems. It will be suggested that some of the solutions at which Sorel arrived have been unwittingly reproduced in recent years. Sorel—but only correctly understood—can be both a warning and a resource today.

The previous chapter was reception history, and was therefore interested in misreading and failed reading. This chapter, although certainly attentive to the readings of Sorel that have taken place, is concerned with missed connections, resonances, and implicit conversations. It is speculative rather than reconstructive. But it relies, just as much as chapter seven, on the work of reconstruction done in the first six chapters. The bulk of this dissertation has been spent arguing that if there are unifying themes and movements in Sorel’s work, it is also complex and shifting. It has sought to reconstruct in some detail both continuity and change into a body of work that repays close reading and defies easy summary. Here, in contrast, I will often invoke a sort of ideally-constructed Sorelian system.

The term ‘post-Marxist’ is by now a well established one, but a brief discussion of it will clarify how it is being used to frame my arguments here.² It refers to theorists who self-consciously attempt to work in the tradition of Marxism, but who have accepted on some level the critiques of Marxism presented in various practical and theoretical forms between 1970 and 1990. Post-Marxists all remain deeply indebted to Marx, although this

debt is often said to be to his method, rather than his specific analysis. The spirit, rather than the letter, is invoked. Post-Marxists may prefer to speak of emancipation than revolution, and are generally suspicious of the Leninist party. Such a spirit-letter distinction usually means arguing that what has really changed are the conditions that ground critique. Laclau and Mouffe’s use of the term in the introduction to their 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,

We should state quite plainly that we are now situated in a post-Marxist terrain. It is no longer possible to maintain the conception of subjectivity and classes elaborated by Marxism, nor its vision of the historical course of capitalist development, nor, of course, the conception of communism as a transparent society from which antagonisms have disappeared. But if our intellectual project in this book is post-Marxist, it is evidently also post-Marxist. It has been through the development of certain intuitions and discursive forms constituted within Marxism, and the inhibition or elimination of certain others, that we have constructed a concept of hegemony which, in our view, may be a useful instrument in the struggle for a radical, libertarian and plural democracy.\(^3\)

Leaving aside the accuracy, or even legitimacy, of the description of Marxism implied by these lines, it is fair to say that the basic intellectual orientation they describe—one profoundly shaped by its escape from Marxism—remains an important one within leftist Anglophone academic theory.\(^4\) My own use of the term is heuristic rather than analytic. Thus, it seems to me, we can safely call Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri post-Marxist, and even, perhaps with pleasing irony, Slavoj Žižek. It does not apply, however, to certain neo-Leninists such as Raymond Geuss, or those such as David Harvey who seek to remain very much within Marxism. In another way, we can also exclude those who, for

\(^3\) Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy : towards a radical democratic politics*. p 4.

\(^4\) I believe that we can use this terminology without declaring either for or against Timothy Brennan’s interpretation of the years 1975-1980 as a counter-revolution of Theory. Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*. 516
instance like Simon Critchely, have taken a sharp ethical turn, or who do no more than occasionally cite Marx.

Three orienting historical point should help to frame what follows. First, perhaps Sorel’s most consistent political commitment was his anti-Jacobinism. This put him at odds with much of the 20th century’s revolutionary tradition that was, arguably, focused on seizing control of the state. Laclau and Mouffe could simply assert in 1985 that “today, the Left is witnessing the final act of the dissolution of that Jacobin imaginary.” At issue here is really the notion of a vanguard party of committed and ‘professional’ revolutionaries. Although Sorel’s syndicats were in a sense vanguardist, they were above all not professional politicians. It is safe to say that in the late 20th century many theorists shared Sorel’s rejection of the centralized party as a viable way to make revolution. On the other hand, important figures today, particularly Alain Badiou, defend the 20th century’s interpretation of the Jacobin legacy in the form of the political militant—but for him this is a Maoism and not a Marxism.

Second, on an entirely different level, there is the issue of the basic epistemological foundations on which political thought takes place, and which structure Stefanos Geroulanos’s recent reinterpretation of the generation of French philosophers that straddle the Second World War. This is the generation—Sartre, Kojève, Wahl, Koyré, Blanchot, Merleau-Ponty—that formed the background philosophical field within which the theorists discussed in this paper functioned. Althusser, Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, make no sense without them. Geroulanos places a great deal of weight on the

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interaction in the 1920s and 30s of the new phenomenology with philosophy of science. He calls the result of this interaction “antifoundational realism.” The basic “tenets” of this worldview are, first to conceive of reality itself as non-deterministic, essentially statistical, and so not amenable to ‘mirror-of-nature’ science or philosophy; second, the rejection of progress, either political or scientific, in history—in particular through historicization of the philosophy of science and an anti-teleological reworking of Hegel; third, a thorough-going critique of individualism and subjectivism, rejecting notions such as ‘interiority,’ and problematizing the thinking subject. Geroulanos is convincing when he argues for the determining importance of these re-conceptions for 20th century French philosophy. Yet much of the philosophy of science to which he points was already elaborated two decades earlier. It is true that the theological perspective was quite different, and further that the philosophers associated with this sort of thinking were staunch Republicans, inside rather than outside the establishment. Yet Sorel himself was involved in a re-thinking of the nature of science that issued in what could justly be called “antifoundational realism.” Sorel’s points of reference were Poincaré and Bergson, not Einstein and Heidegger, but the consequences for political thought were not so different.

All of this is to say that the epistemological and even metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical)

7 The interesting story here would be how the radical implications of the fin-de-siècle were covered over by the political schisms and thunderheads of the 1920s. The period is again today being mined for intellectual resources, for instance Bruno Latour’s recent return to the debate between Gabriel Tarde and Emile Durkheim—taking Tarde’s side. See Latour’s website for a literal re-staging of the debate, and the small volume, Bruno Latour and Vincent Antonin, The Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to Gabriel Tarde’s Economic Anthropology (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009).
presuppositions with which late 20th century ‘poststructuralist’ philosophers work are in fact not so different from Sorel’s.

Third and finally, the argument that I make in the following pages remains largely on the ground between politics and ethics in the late 20th century. In recent years, one of the dominant historical narratives of French intellectual politics has argued that the problems uncovered in the wake of 1968, and really the attempt to translate the energy of ‘68 into sustained politics over the course of the 1970s, drove many who had been revolutionaries into essentially liberal positions. Julian Bourg’s richly documented history examines specific instances, such as GIP, the prison reform movement with which Michel Foucault associated himself. Another powerful example is the split within activist groups concerned with discrimination based on sex and sexuality over the question of legal consent—really, between those feminists willing to use the power of the state to protect women from sexual violence, and those queer activists who believed that allowing the state to enforce sexual normality, even with regard to underage sex, was a fundamental vitiation of the revolutionary potential of the movement. Bourg’s general

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8 The relation of politics to ethics is to be distinguished, I think, from a parallel movement to reassert the role of historiography as moral inquiry. See the review essay, Robert B. Westbrook, “History and Moral Inquiry,” Modern Intellectual History 9, no. 02 (2012). Westbrook seems able to bring “moral inquiry” into historiography—which he tellingly conflates with historians themselves—only at the cost of ignoring the politics of historiography.
9 This—irresponsible Maoists despite-themselves contribute to reasonable democratic process—also frames Richard Wolin’s new work on French Maoism. It is contested less on historical than on political grounds, for instance by Kristin Ross. Bourg, From revolution to ethics : May 1968 and contemporary French thought; Kristin Ross, May ’68 and its afterlives (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Richard Wolin, The wind from the east : French intellectuals, the cultural revolution, and the legacy of the 1960s (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
position, however, is a celebration of the return to ethics, to individual responsibility, forced by the experience of the *années de plomb*.

Although the post-Marxists I discuss here all see themselves as set fundamentally against this transformation, they nonetheless in recent years have themselves been obliged, in various ways, to make Bourg’s turn *From Revolution to Ethics*. That they did so on much the same ground as Sorel himself suggests that it will not be useless to compare his turn to theirs, and that we may, through attentive historical reconstruction of an apparently distant past, gain a new perspective on our present moment—however rapidly it seems to be changing.

**At the origins of Post-Marxism**

Sorel is not a popular figure of reference in contemporary theory. It is therefore useful to begin with one of the few major texts in which he is discussed positively and at length. This is Laclau and Mouffe’s already-mentioned landmark 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Their careful and generous discussion of Sorel is all the more interesting because Mouffe’s later ‘decisionist’ turn, and Laclau’s program in his 2004 *On Populist Reason*, run right up to the edge of the same political chasm into which Sorel is widely regarded as having thrown himself. Laclau and Mouffe, together with many other Althusserian Marxists, felt over the course of the 1970s that the categories of class analysis provided by Marxism were no longer adequate either to social reality, political mobilization, or even social theory.
The task that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* set for itself was to introduce the notion of hegemony and argue that it must play a role in any attempt to think about the contemporary (1980s) situation and prospects of left action. The book begins by tracing the genealogy of the notion of hegemony to the *fin-de-siècle* Revisionist crisis. This means, essentially, the work of Luxemburg, Kautsky, Bernstein, Labriola, Lenin, and Sorel. The authors say, “the concept of ‘hegemony’ will emerge precisely in a context dominated by the experience of fragmentation and by the indeterminacy of the articulations between different struggles and subject positions. It will offer a socialist answer in a politico-discursive universe that has witnessed a withdrawal of the category of ‘necessity’ to the horizon of the social.”¹⁰ This means, essentially, that the monist conception of history according to which it is possible to derive immediate political rules from the laws of motion of the economic infrastructure, has ceased to make sense. Neither capital nor the working class any longer behaved, by 1900, in the way they theoretically should have behaved. Laclau and Mouffe find the clearest expression of the dilemma in Luxemburg, and they trace three historical responses to it. First is Kautsky’s orthodoxy, second is Bernstein’s revisionism, and third is Revolutionary Syndicalism. The problem faced by all positions was that “the economic base is incapable of assuring class unity *in the present*; while politics, the sole terrain where that present unity can be

¹⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy : towards a radical democratic politics*. p 13. It is worth pointing out that the very inescapability of the distinction between political and social spheres is historical in nature. Arguably, this distinction is itself a signal victory of explicitly bourgeois and liberal ideologists. From this perspective, it might be argued, the very premises from which Laclau and Mouffe proceed have already given up the game to bourgeois technocracy. See Donzelot, *L'Invention du social : Essai sur le déclin des passions politiques*. 521
constructed, is unable convincingly to guarantee the *class* character of the unitary
subjects."

It is at this point that Sorel enters the genealogy. More than either Bernstein or his
orthodox critics, Sorel was “conscious…of the true dimensions of the crisis…We find in
Sorel not only the postulation of an area of ‘contingency’ and ‘freedom’, replacing the
broken links in the chain of necessity, but also an effort to think the specificity of that
‘logic of contingency’, of that new terrain on which a field of totalizing effects is
reconstituted.” The most radical elements of Sorel’s thought, for Laclau and Mouffe,
are his acceptance at multiple levels of the contingency of the revolutionary project.
Sorel’s contribution, we are told, is the notion of the historical *bloc*, a contingently
constructed political actor. Collective struggle creates, in an inherently unpredictable
way, a political subject that in its very constitution divides the whole field into an ‘us’
and a ‘them.’ Sorel says, essentially, that there is no reason at all for this political subject
to be a class. The general strike, the myth of socialism, is simply the *will* that it should be.
This, say Laclau and Mouffe, is really the aftermath of the collapse of Second
International economism.

Sorel’s break with economism was so radical that many of his followers, and
perhaps at times he himself, turned to nationalism to fill the void of the political subject.
Laclau and Mouffe are sensitive readers here, “this was the avenue through which a *part*

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am not going to spend time here with critiques of Laclau and Mouffe—but a much more convincing
philosophical exposition of the basic dilemmas of Marxism is to be found in Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra
12 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy : towards a radical democratic politics*. p 37
of Sorel’s intellectual legacy contributed to the rise of fascism…this is merely one of the possible derivations from Sorel’s analysis, and it would be historically false and analytically unfounded to conclude that it is a necessary outcome.”13 Sorel’s ideas—in particular the break with class thinking—do not lead directly to fascism, but they do also lead there.

For Laclau and Mouffe, Sorel fails to go beyond the contingency of the political field and arrive at a conception of politics as the construction of necessity. Hegemony means the re-articulation of a series of positions around a new particularity. Sorelian myth, they charge, was always a way of re-creating the monolith of class in new ways, rather than a device for admitting the contingency and plurality of political agency, “successive versions of this myth sought to secure a radical line of partition within society, and never to construct, through a process of hegemonic reaggregation, a new integral State.”14 That is, according to Laclau and Mouffe, although Sorel grasped the political necessity—but historical contingency—of partitioning society into two antagonistic blocs, he never escaped the idea that one of them should essentially be the working class. He never arrived at the idea that political struggle had as its goal the creation of a new contingent bloc that should none the less have the unity to create a new state. They charge Sorel, that is, with never getting back to the state. To the degree to which this is a legitimate accusation, Sorel would regard it as a virtue rather than a failing. He clung to the working class because new forms of political organization could

13 Ibid. p 41.
14 Ibid. p 71.
arise only alongside the ever-changing process of production. Although Sorel did at times allow every bit as much contingency and alliance-building into his conception of politics as might Laclau and Mouffe—Sorel’s willingness to listen to and work with integral nationalism has just this meaning—at his best, at his less pessimistic moments, he remained committed to the notion that the bourgeoisie would be buried by the forces of capital that had brought them into power. This is a legacy of Marxism entirely abandoned by Laclau and Mouffe—but not by everyone.

**Commonwealth’s Biopolitics and Sorel’s Revisionist Marxism**

In a 2007 interview, Žižek commented that “every decade or so” a new model for theorization emerges on the left in order to respond to the practical organizational needs of the moment. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was one such model. A more recent one, which he identified with the ‘moment’ of Porto Alegre, is Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s trilogy, *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009). An investigation of the arc of these three books set against the transformations in the political culture of the US and Europe in that decade would perhaps teach one a great deal about the way in which the American academy mediates politics. But this would take us far afield. For the moment, although I will look back at the earlier books, I want to focus on *Commonwealth*, which is by far the most Sorelian of the three.

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16 And not only because Sorel is mentioned more often in this most recent work. In *Multitude*, Sorel appears together with Juan Donoso Corté as a thinker that Carl Schmitt helps us to diagnose as perverting notions of representation in a fascist direction (254-5). In *Commonwealth*, Sorel’s *grand soir* of the general
The central similarity between *Commonwealth* and Sorel’s body of work is the sustained attempt to link the organizational forms taken by productive labor, to revolutionary activity aimed at overthrowing capitalist society and power structures. For Sorel, the syndicat is, or at least can be, the white-hot creative moment of industrial capitalist production. There, through a process that is as much intellectual as it is moral and physical, the worker invents and produces. The syndicat trains and builds up workers along many fronts that have nothing at all to do with the bourgeois society surrounding it. The worker becomes a new sort of person. The syndicats become revolutionary to the extent that they develop beyond the need for the moral and intellectual guidance of the bourgeoisie. Eventually, the bourgeois owners will no longer be necessary for technical, moral, or political reasons—they will remain only through naked power. This is the realm of pure antagonistic politics. This is the revolutionary moment. Revolution is nothing other than the successfully won autonomy of the syndicats, producing at once more than they had under capitalist management, and also generating new juridical regimes, new ways of being human.

Hardt and Negri have a different image of capital before them. They argue that biopolitical production and a new enclosure of the commons are the two horns of the crisis and contradiction of contemporary capitalism. Biopolitics is productive, in

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strike is contrasted unfavorably with Lenin’s more sustained reflections on transforming the revolt of indignation at mistreatment into sustained revolutionary action (239). Sorel, this is to say, is a minor and negative point of reference for Hardt and Negri. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2009).
particular of new forms of subjectivity, through the common. Its essence is self-direction—decision making through networks and collaboration. Capital seeks immediate profit through privatizing—enclosing—the common, thereby depriving itself of the ultimately productive biopolitical forces of this common. Revolution is the emancipation of the biopolitical productivity of the common from the vampiric forces of capital—revolution is the institution of the insurrectionary practice of biopolitical production of new subjectivities. The basic problem, then, is to “explore the technical composition of the proletariat in relation to its political composition.”

In terms of this very rapid sketch of what constitutes a revolution, two notions stand out immediately as worthy of closer attention: the institution, and subtraction.

As I have argued at length over this dissertation, Sorel’s central subject—from his first writings on Athens and Israel to his last book on pragmatism—was the institution. Although Marx and Durkheim provided important resources for this line of thought, Giambattista Vico was ultimately Sorel’s crucial reference. The word translated into English as ‘institution’ in Vico’s *New Science* is generally the Italian *cosa*. Its refers back to the Latin *res*. At issue here, as this etymology suggests, are the foundations of republicanism as a discrete mode of political organization. It is not by coincidence that Hardt and Negri mine the traditions of early modern Republicanism their political

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17 Ibid. p 351.
18 This observation is important for understanding the force of Sorel’s distinction between ‘matière’ and ‘materiaux’ in his “Étude sur Vico.” On Vico, see for the useful discussion of this term in Fisch’s introduction to the Bergin and Fisch translation of *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Cornell University Press: 1968). pp xliii-xliv. On Sorel’s Vico, see chapter two of the present dissertation.
19 See Naddeo, *Vico and Naples: the urban origins of modern social theory*. If Vico was, himself, not any sort of political rabble-rouser (arguably, rather, he was the worst kind of academic sycophant to established power), the larger significance of his work for political thought is more difficult to establish.
concepts (corruption, for instance). For Hardt and Negri, the institution is the material context in which the event of the revolution is made durable without being betrayed. They give us the following definition,

Institutions are based on conflict, in the sense that they both extend the social rupture operated by revolt against the ruling powers and are open to internal discord. Institutions also consolidate collective habits, practices, and capacities that designate a form of life. Institutions, finally, are open-ended in that they are continually transformed by the singularities that compose them.20

Thus, the institution, “does not reduce the multiplicity of singularities but creates a context for them to manage their encounters,” and is therefore “a necessary component in the process of insurrection and revolution.”21 Importantly, their institution is not an aggregation of empirical individuals, but rather of singularities. The institution is therefore something like a subject itself, not a collective subject—this is just how Proudhon’s and then Sorel’s federalism begins, with the family and the workshop, rather than the property-owning individual.22 The institution, thus conceived, is already the revolution at least in potential: “the extension of insurrection in an institutional process that transforms the fabric of social being is a good first approximation of revolution.”23 Revolutionary activity is simply the extension of institutions constituted through the self-management of singularities.

This point of view explains the more obscure issue of the temporality of revolution. The foundational work here is that of Ernst Bloch, who described the political

20 Hardt and Negri, Commonwealth. p 357.
21 Ibid. p 357.
22 Thus, if Durkheim begins his thinking with all, and Tarde with one-two, Sorel begins with several. On Proudhon, see Vincent.
23 Hardt and Negri, Commonwealth. p 359.
conflicts of Weimar Germany as the friction between so many contending temporalities, all of them indexed against that of capital and the conscious proletariat. For Hardt and Negri, “revolution is no longer imaginable as an event separated from us in the future but has to live in the present, an ‘exceeding’ present that in some sense already contains the future within it. Revolutionary movement resides on the same horizon of temporality with capitalist control.” This is a collapse of Bloch’s temporalities and utopias into revolutionary immanence. It meshes well with Sorel’s often frustrating refusal of futurity—which is to say, his dismissal as pejoratively utopian of nearly any discussion of specific characteristics of post-revolutionary society. The revolution is right here, right now.

Hannah Arendt provides a useful point of comparison. For Arendt, revolution is the successful institution of the political. Arendtian temporality is complex, but we can say that politics, as the realm of speech, is something like pure contemporaneity, always in danger of being crushed between the weight of the past (that would differentiate speaking voices based on bodies) and the demands of the future (that would flood the political with the claims of the social). If Arendt can be thought of as a thinker of republicanism in modernity—and her preference for the American to the French revolutions is an argument for, rather than against this way of understanding her—then we can see in the difference between her elaboration of the political and Sorel’s or Hardt and Negri’s elaboration of the revolutionary, the short distance that separates these post-

\[24\] Bloch, The spirit of Utopia.
Marxists from republicanism. In short, it is careful attention to the materiality of the speech-situation. This is the important content of the attempt to base politics on the mode of production. Arendt was attracted to the Soviets to the degree that they represented direct democracy—the rule of a group of people by a group of people. Sorel was attracted to them to the degree he understood them to be the generalized political rule of the means of production (as opposed to its capitalist form). The neo-Republicanism of Hardt and Negri is not Arendt’s neo-Republicanism because it insists that the real of democracy is the realm of production—Arendt’s careful distinctions between labor, work, and politics are, depending on one’s perspective, either completely erased or transposed onto a larger systemic analysis.

The orientation of the revolutionary institution, or the institution of revolution, in the face of the structures of capital, is subtractive. Revolutionaries are those who want to subtract themselves from capital. The notion of revolutionary subtraction is of course also to be found in Žižek and others. In the French context, it can be compared to the workerist tradition sometimes identified with Proudhon, exemplified in the 1906 Chartes d’Amiens, and explicitly worked into Marxism by Sorel as early as 1897. Hardt and Negri formulate their hypothesis thus, “class struggle in the biopolitical context takes the form of exodus. By exodus here we mean, at least initially, a process of subtraction from the relationship with capital by means of actualizing the potential autonomy of labor-

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This is a transformation of, or addition to, the standard point that the revolution is made by seizing the means of production. The point here, in fact, is to refuse the kind of negative purity that is sometimes invoked in discussions of transgression in today’s context. Agamben, this is to say, is not the answer. “[E]xodus does not mean” the authors specify, “getting out as naked life, barefoot and penniless. No; we need to take what is ours, which means reappropriating the common—the results of our past labors and means of autonomous production and reproduction for our future.” Although Sorel’s notion of the collective must be sharply distinguished from that of the common, he certainly had the same idea that the essence of the class struggle was separation of the productive elements of society from the unproductive ones.

The great point of reference for Sorel is state socialism. Major strands of 19th century socialism—paradigmatically, Blanquism—held that the goal of revolution was to seize state power. This is consistently rejected by Sorel as Jacobin. There are two problems here. First, what has been called Sorel’s sociology of virtue leads him to argue that any corps of professional administrators or bureaucrats develops a particular sort of self-defensive idealism. Governments, this is to say, are always working in their own best interests. Administration perpetuates itself and in so doing snuffs out the difference and creativity that is always tied directly to the material basis of life. As bad as the capitalists are, Sorel believes that the history of the French Revolution teaches us that the Jacobins

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29 Ibid. p 164.  
30 It seems to me that the difference between Sorel’s collective and H&N’s common is the difference between the industrial and the digital. The model of the collective is the factory floor, machine production, and industrial science. The model of the common is the biosphere, the internet meme, and open source programming.
were worse. Secondly, Sorel simply does not believe that the state is capable of abolishing the social structure of capitalism at will. For Sorel, the socialists who think that it will be possible to seize control of the state, and thereby the means of production, and thereby bring about a redistributive paradise, have simply not been paying attention. Even if the political party that seized the state managed to stay virtuous, to be selfless in its pursuit of the good, it could still not change the economy at will. The essential point of Sorel’s fidelity to Marx is that only capitalism can revolutionize itself. The revolution will be built out of materials manufactured by capital itself, or it will not be built at all.

This critique of Jacobinism has interesting resonances and parallels with both Cold War anti-totalitarian rhetoric (Hayek), and also 1970s-era French Marxist critiques of bureaucracy. This is to say that it meshes well with the post-1968 autonomist ideas that are the unspoken support of much contemporary theory. After all, it was scholars such as Jacques Julliard associated with the second left of the 1970s who turned back to Sorel in this period and began the historical excavation of his thought. If certain of these critiques lines up with the right, it is because there is a left as well as a right libertarianism.31

Subtraction is the concrete political corollary of the analysis of capital contained in Commonwealth. Freeing the means of biopolitical production does not mean storming the Pentagon; it means creating, occupying, and defending new spaces outside the capitalist command and control system. Revolution is building a new world, here. As will

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31 See the discussion of Rosanvallon and others around the ‘second left’ in Michael Behrent’s article on Foucault, which is valuable not only for its treatment of this aspect of Foucault’s context but also for a radically different interpretation of Foucault’s politics than, it is safe to say, one finds in mainstream theoretical discussion of Foucault. Behrent, "Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free-Market Creed, 1976-1979."

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quickly be pointed out, it is one thing to create a new social space, another to live one’s life in it, and quite another to defend it from the incursions of, say the US government. Property rights are enforced, when necessary, by the police. Having been accused of a sort of messianic quietism in the wake of *Empire*, it is remarkable how far the authors of *Commonwealth* are willing to go down the road to violent revolution. Subtractive politics, for them, is thought under the term ‘exodus’ with all its catastrophic connotations. The notion of exodus has the interesting implication that all the spectacular violence inflicted upon the persecutors is divine. The notion of divine violence is troubling for obvious reasons, and cannot help but raise ethical questions.

**Divine Violence and Ethics**

An understanding of the conceptual and rhetorical structure of divine violence will help us to understand Hardt and Negri’s newfound apparent willingness to see physical annihilation visited on the heads of the firstborn of the ruling class. Walter Benjamin’s 1921 “Critique of Violence” is the most useful place to begin. We will also consider Derrida’s subsequent reading of it, and then its re-articulation by Slavoj Žižek. My focus will be on Benjamin and Žižek, although it seems to me that Derrida had a crucial historical role in causing this particular text of Benjamin’s to be re-read. This will help to think through the theoretical consequences of ‘subtractive’ revolution. One consequence is, I argue here, that the central task of revolutionary activity is no longer to

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32 The point here is obviously not to provide any global review of Benjamin’s influence. This would be an enormous project. I want to remain here within the frame of post-Marxism. Agamben, for instance, as important and Benjaminian as he is, does not, fall under this category.
get others to act in a certain way, but rather to be certain that one’s self acts in a certain way. That is, it is basically an ethics, not a politics.

Perhaps responding to the instability of the immediate postwar period, Benjamin begins his 1921 “Critique of Violence” by probing the limits of natural and positive law. What, Benjamin asks, is the meaning of the fact that it is even possible to ask if violence is legitimate or illegitimate? Is this difference in fact related to that between means and ends? Can violence be an end, or only a means? Benjamin explicitly limits himself to the field of modern Europe in order to approach these questions. The central movement of the essay is opened with “the surprising possibility that the law’s interest in a monopoly of violence vis-à-vis individuals is not explained by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by that of preserving the law itself.” Benjamin returns several times to the example of the ‘great’ criminal who exerts fascination on the public not for breaking the law, but for containing the possibility of a new law. In turn, Benjamin examines the right to strike, military violence, capital punishment, and the police in terms of the relation of each institution to violence and the possibilities inherent in it for critique.

Most relevant here is his discussion of the right to strike. From the beginning, this discussion is a bit peculiar—especially if we follow Derrida and the English translator of

33 The German title is “Zur Kritik der Gewalt.” Derrida does not fail to claim that the German ‘Gewalt’ does not allow for the same sort of differentiation between force and violence as is available in both English and French. The 1928 German translation of Reflections renders the violence/force differentiation with Gewalt/Macht. Thus, “La violence prolétarienne…ne la force organisée par la bourgeoisie” becomes “Die proletarische Gewalt…verneint…die Bourgeoisie organisierte Macht.” This seems to me, in fact, a perfectly reasonable translation. Georges Sorel, Über die Gewalt (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1928). p 21.
34 Benjamin and Demetz, Reflections : essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings. p 281.
35 Ferragus or Marcel Duchamp?
the essay in reading Gewalt as referring mostly to ‘real’ violence rather than state or collective force. The right to strike is treated as exceptional and interesting as an example of violence permitted by the state. Even when no literal violence takes place, Benjamin says, still there is violence in a strike. If a strike is considered as the collective omission of labor, “the moment of violence, however, is necessarily introduced, in the form of extortion, into such an omission, if it takes place in the context of a conscious readiness to resume the suspended action under certain circumstances that either have nothing whatever to do with this action or only superficially modify it.”36 It is hard to see how it could be said that a strike is extortionary, and thus violent, in a way that, for instance, the dismissal or threat of dismissal of an individual worker would not be. But this isn’t Benjamin’s concern. The real point here is to introduce the notion of a revolutionary strike in which all work is stopped in all industries—this is a violence that cannot be subsumed into the normal workings of the law and so must be met with state violence. This is a form of active conduct—violence—that “exercises a right in order to overthrow the legal system that has conferred it.”37 This sort of conduct “reveals an objective contradiction in the legal system, but not a logical contradiction in the law.”38 Benjamin goes on, “in a strike the state fears above all else that function of violence which it is the object of this study to identify as the only secure foundation of its critique,” that is,

37 Ibid. p 282. Relevant here are Paul Livingston’s arguments about the strange attraction that the Russell Paradox has exerted on much recent political philosophy. It would be worth pursuing the extent to which Sorel, via the notion of diremption, is an example of the kind of paradoxico-criticism for which Livingston militates. Paul M. Livingston, The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism (New York: Routledge, 2012).
38 Benjamin and Demetz, Reflections : essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings. p 282.
violence that founds a new law by using the old law to outrage justice.\textsuperscript{39} To be clear, it is what will later be named \textit{mythic} violence that provides solid ground from which critique can proceed. Logically paradoxical, but in fact merely

Having analyzed various instances of conceptually complex violence in modern society, Benjamin then suggests that it is, in fact, possible to resolve certain sorts of conflict in a non-violent way. This is possible through “unalloyed means of agreement,” the “subjective preconditions” of which include “courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust.” Benjamin’s brilliant stroke, however, and one that should be bourn well in mind by those partisans of pure political relations, is his introduction of technique as the essence of nonviolence. This is also the most Sorelian moment of the text:

\begin{quote}
these unalloyed means are never those of direct but always those of indirect solutions. They therefore never apply directly to the resolution of conflict between man and man, but only to matters concerning objects. The sphere of nonviolent means opens up in the realm of human conflicts relating to goods. For this reason technique in the broadest sense of the word is their most particular area. Its profoundest example is perhaps the conference, considered as a technique of civil agreement. For in it not only is nonviolent agreement possible, but also the exclusion of violence in principle is quite explicitly demonstrable by one significant factor: there is no sanction for lying…This makes it clear that there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of “understanding,” language.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

Violence is the confrontation of human with human in the absence of any stable mediation—this is the significance of the introduction of objects and the broad use of ‘technique.’ We will return to the remarkable notion that nonviolence is guaranteed, or at least signaled, by the lack of penalty for a lie when we discuss briefly Derrida’s reading of this essay. In a sense, this vision of nonviolence, which applies to the thingly realm, is parallel to divine violence in the human realm.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. p 282.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. p 289.
Benjamin turns at this point to discuss again the idea of class struggle and the two possible kinds of strike: the political and the proletarian. Sorel is first mentioned in this context, as having “the credit—from political, rather than purely theoretical, considerations—of having first distinguished them.” Crucially, these two sorts of strike are “antithetical in their relation to violence.”\(^{41}\) The political strike essentially seeks to seize and strengthen state power, while the proletarian strike refuses all constituted power. If violence was located within the extortionary strike as the attempt to close the space between two situations that are, we might say, visible to one another, a strike that has no visible goal therefore escapes violence. It is nonviolent in that it resides not in unstably mediated relations between humans, but in objects and pure understanding, where there is no penalty, and therefore no meaning, to the lie. Benjamin says,

> while the first form of interruption of work is violent since it causes only an external modification of labor conditions, the second, as a pure means, is nonviolent. For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes as consummates.\(^{42}\)

This is something that is formally equal to violence (the work-stoppage, or omission, is the same), but that manages to be means, rather than ends. As the goal becomes more distant, the violence in its service becomes, in fact, ambiguous. The purification of means from ends is self-defeating. This, violence as function, is the only grounds on which critique of violence can stand. Following Sorel, Benjamin rejects the idea that a consequentialist argument can be made against this sort of “deep, moral, and genuinely

\(^{41}\) Ibid. p 291.
\(^{42}\) Ibid. p 291-292.
revolutionary conception.” He says, “even if it can rightly be said that the modern economy, seen as a whole, resembles much less a machine that stands idle when abandoned by its stoker than a beast that goes berserk as soon as its tamer turns his back, nevertheless the violence of an action can be assessed no more from its effects than from its ends, but only from the law of its means.”  

Benjamin seems to accept Sorel’s “ingenious arguments” to the effect that such a “rigorous conception of the general strike” would reduce the amount of actual violence in a revolutionary situation. Benjamin contrasts the moral nature of this sort of strike to the patent immorality of a doctor’s strike, which he compares to a blockade.  

After this careful, if gnomic, elaboration of a theory of non-violent violence, Benjamin suggests that all the previous discussion should be understood to have taken place within the field of legal theory. And so, given that “every conceivable solution to human problems, not to speak of deliverance from the confines of all the world-historical conditions of existence obtaining hitherto, remains impossible if violence is totally excluded in principle, the question necessarily arises as to other kinds of violence than all those envisaged by legal theory.”  

Justice here re-enters Benjamin’s text. Its function is as a sort of idealist window outside of both reason and history: “[I]t is never reason that decides on the justification of means and the justness of ends, but fate-imposed violence

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43 Ibid. p 292. Imagine the doubling, in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, of the factory-machine into Moloch—which eventually, when the workers fight back, explodes catastrophically.  
44 Although Benjamin doesn’t say it, the Allied blockade of Germany in the months following the end of hostilities would surely have been on his and everyone else’s mind.  
45 Benjamin and Demetz, Reflections : essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings. p 293.
on the former and God on the latter.”\textsuperscript{46} Benjamin has worked through with us—until they collapsed—the distinctions between legal and illegal violence, lawmaking and lawbreaking violence, violence as means or as end, even between violence and nonviolence. He now introduces the distinction between mythic and divine violence.

Mythic violence is continually engaged in making and remaking law. Between violence, law, and justice, we now have a new term, power, “Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical lawmaking.”\textsuperscript{47} There is a temptation here to think that as we strip away layers of accreted interpretation and law from founding mythic violence, we might get to a pure realm of power and transparency—perhaps where things and thoughts exist without confusion. It isn’t so, “far from inaugurating a purer sphere, the mythical manifestations of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence, and turns suspicion concerning the latter into certainty of the perniciousness of its historical function, the destruction of which then becomes obligatory.”\textsuperscript{48} That is to say, as one becomes aware of the fundamental and inescapable immediate violence that continually re-founds legality, one feels that one is obliged to root out violence as such. Already, though, we have seen in Benjamin’s discussions of the conceptual weakness of anti-militarism, of protests against the death penalty, that it will not be easy to simply reject—or destroy—violence. Benjamin goes on, “This very task of destruction poses again, in the last resort, the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. p 294.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. p 295.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid. pp 296-297.
question of a pure immediate violence that might be able to call a halt to mythical violence. Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects."  

We have here, in another mode or on another level (depending on how one would like to metaphorize Benjamin’s text), a recapitulation of the ‘antithesis’ between the political and the proletarian strike.

One would be tempted to say that here Benjamin descends (or ascends) into mystical, mystifying, paradox and incoherence. We can map for a little while from the previous distinction between kinds of strikes onto the new mythic/divine one: law-giving/law-destroying, boundary setting/boundary destroying, even threat/deed. As has been the case with every displaced, or reposed, distinction, the map only takes us so far, “if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates.”

It is also at this point that Benjamin introduces a veiled and difficult distinction between mere life and life. The point at which it happens is crucial, and points us back to the previous use of ‘justice.’ Divine violence,

in annihilating…also expiates, and a deep connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of the violence is unmistakable. For blood is the symbol of mere life. The dissolution of legal violence stems…from the guilt of more natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to a retribution that ‘expiates’ the guilt of mere life—and doubtless also purifies the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law. For with mere life the rule of law over the living ceases. Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it.

I want to suggest here that we take divine violence to indicate the minimal existential difference that constitutes us as human subjects. Our consciousness of ourselves as

\[\text{\textsuperscript{49} Ibid. p 297.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. p 297.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. p 297.}\]
historical consciousness: ‘understanding,’ therefore also nonviolent. In just the same way the divine injunction, “thou shalt not kill,” is not so much an iron law, or law of nature, as the firm foundation against which one makes an ethical judgment—after all, in some situations, you do kill. The injunction is really the gap between law and law, between law and justice.

What can it mean, Benjamin asks, to say that life is sacred? To say that “existence stands higher than a just existence”? It is an “ignominious” thing to say, if one means by life “mere life.” It is a deep truth, however, “if the proposition is intended to mean that the nonexistence of man is something more terrible than the (admittedly subordinate) not-yet-attained condition of the just man.”52 At just this point, where messianic futurity is invoked in the not-yet-just, Benjamin falls back on an empirical or scientific language. “It might be well worth while to track down the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life. Perhaps, indeed probably, it is relatively recent”—as though philology has anything to say to the impassive face of divine annihilation—so that we might be lead to believe that what is really sacred is also that which can bear guilt, “life itself.”53

The final paragraph of the “Critique,” famous and obscure, begins by telling us how we were to have read everything that came before. That is, “the critique of violence is the philosophy of its history.”54 Benjamin speaks of the oscillation of the forces of lawmaking and lawbreaking mythical violence. A break in this oscillation would be, is,
the foundation of “a new historical epoch.” And in fact we see evidence of this, Benjamin suggests. In a fully subjunctive mood, Benjamin says, “if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and by what means.” Yet we will only be able to verify the existence of mythic, non-revolutionary violence. We should not even try to find concrete examples of divine violence because “the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men,” certainly it will be visible only later, after. There is yet another distinction here, one that is often elided—divine violence is not simply equal to revolutionary violence. The existence of divine violence has been in some sense transcendentally deduced from the dynamic of mythic violence. Revolutionary violence is its man-made equivalent; divine violence proves that it must be possible, and cannot therefore be equal to it.

By philosophy of history here, it seems to me that Benjamin must be speaking of the retrospective knowledge, or rather the knowledge that only in retrospect will it be knowable what violence has meant. Crucial, then, is the discussion of “thou shalt not kill.” After all of Benjamin’s brilliant distinctions and restatements, we are left with an ethics that inserts the individual into an uncertain position in history, an unknowable position, and demands that one choose between violences, knowing that it is possible, but never certain, that some will have been divine, will have served to break open, rather than just break and remake, the law. This is consciousness, this is the gap between self and self, between law and justice. It is a sort of Hegelian philosophy of history, but an

55 Ibid. p 300.
anarchistic Hegelianism, in that a whole philosophy of history is built around the gap that is our freedom, rather than, as in *The Philosophy of Right*, passing through and beyond our subjective freedom to the objectivity of the state, indeed ending in the law-affirming violence of international war. Hence the references to the insufficiency of Kant’s categorical imperative. Each individual is not just end, cannot only be treated as end. A pure means must be found in order that the human as such can become end. The last words of the “Critique” point in this same direction, by equating unalloyed extra-legality with sovereignty: “divine violence, which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution, may be called sovereign violence.”56

**Benjamin Through Derrida**

Jacques Derrida provides one of the more influential interpretations of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.” Derrida read Benjamin’s essay against at least three interpretive fields. The first, the one in which ‘historically’ Derrida began to think seriously about the “Critique,” is the idea that Jewish German philosophy might present some special and durable logic.57 In such straightforwardly historical terms, for Derrida, Benjamin’s essay is “at once ‘mystical’ (in the overdetermined sense that interests us here) and hypercritical,” and “can be read as neo-messianical Jewish mysticism (*mystique*) grafted

56 Ibid. p 300.
57 In a note, Derrida says that over the course of a seminar he “became very interested in what I then called the *Judeo-German psyche*, that is, the logic of certain phenomena of a disturbing sort of specularity…that was itself reflected in some of the great German Jewish thinkers and writers of this century.” Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law,” *Cardozo Law Review* 11(1990). p 977.
onto post-Sorelian neo-Marxism (or the reverse).”\textsuperscript{58} I myself would suggest that contemporary readings of Benjamin such as Žižek’s are indeed better thought as the reverse: neo-Sorelian post-Marxism, that is, the general rubric this paper attempts to elaborate. For Derrida, in this context, Sorel’s central contribution is the distinction between the merely political and the proletarian or revolutionary strike.

Second, Derrida admits or asserts that this 1921 text falls into the force field thrown out by the “final solution.” Crudely, how do Benjamin’s notions of mythic and divine violence look when brought up to and past 1945? Derrida is at first ambiguous here. The temptation, of course, is to see the Shoah as un-interpretable, as a rupture in the cycle of lawmaking and lawbreaking violence Benjamin calls mythic. But, Derrida is quick to say, one cannot but “shudder” in calling gas chambers and crematoria “bloodless annihilation.”\textsuperscript{59} In the general contemporary re-appropriation of divine violence as a way of thinking revolutionary violence, one is often confronted with exactly this problem which is, again put crudely, what about the Nazis? Bearing in mind, of course, Benjamin’s claim that looking for ‘specific instances’ of divine violence is not so important, I am myself a little surprised that Derrida and others have not suggested that if there is some unrepresentable revolutionary violence to be found ‘after’ the Shoah, it is not in the thing itself, but in the attempt an ethical response to it. In this sense, the originary event itself is shrouded, obscure. The event of divine violence, then, is not the final solution, but the attempt to remake the moral coordinates of life around it. Law as a

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. p 979.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. pp 1044-1045.
whole, Enlightenment itself, may be rejected as complicit, leaving a vast emptiness to be filled by immediate, phenomenal, ethical commitment. There is no law founding here, just the violence of a radical self-remaking as one stands naked before the other—the dissolution and re-composition of subjectivity in lived historical time. A contingent relationship prevails between this vast re-making of the moral universe and the actions of the National Socialists. This annihilation of tradition is surely a better candidate for divine—bloodless and expiatory (of the law)—violence than Auschwitz. What is more, we can give this event of revolutionary violence historiographical content. Derrida helps us to do it.

Third, Derrida is implicitly, and finally at the end explicitly, contrasting along ethical lines Benjaminian and Heideggerian ‘destruction,’ which he assimilates to one another, with his own deconstructive project, “this text, like many others by Benjamin, is still too Heideggerian, too messianico-marxist or archeo-eschatological for me.” Derrida does not turn to read and contrast himself with Benjamin and Heidegger in this way at the beginning of his career, rather he does so at a specific historical moment. This interpretive field is the well-worked one of post-Shoah end-of-metaphysics talk. Is Heideggerian philosophy somehow implicated in the Nazi catastrophe? Certainly it is historically—is there some deeper level of complicity? If so, what about Derrida’s own work? In the final note appended to the long essay, Derrida says,

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60 There is an obvious reference missing here: trauma.
62 Sam Moyn has argued that Levinas’ ethical philosophy—widely regarded as meaningfully ‘post-holocaust,’ in fact finds its origins much earlier. This is evidence that one must be precise about the nature of ‘the event’ in question. Samuel Moyn, Origins of the other : Emmanuel Levinas between revelation and ethics (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).
I do not know whether from this nameless thing called the final solution one can draw something which still deserves the name of a lesson. But if there were a lesson to be drawn, a unique lesson among the always singular lessons of murder…the lesson that we can drawn today—and if we can do so then we must—is that we must think, know, represent for ourselves, formalize, judge the possible complicity between all these discourses and the worst (here the final solution). In my view, this defines a task and a responsibility the theme of which (yes, the theme) I have not been able to read in either Benjaminian ‘destruction’ or Heideggerian ‘Destruktion.’ It is the thought of difference between these destructions on the one hand and a deconstructive affirmation on the other that has guided me tonight in this reading. It is this thought that the memory of the final solution seems to me to dictate.  

This might be summarized: Benjamin and Heidegger are unable to think their own complicity with physical violence, while Derrida’s affirmative deconstruction is so able to do. Derrida’s work, then, is an ethical project. The context in which we should place this self-placing is that of the post-1968 ethical turn in French philosophy, which should itself be seen as the closing of a multi-generational sequence that begins properly in the 1920s. These generations have been described previously as a sequence of Heideggerian reception, but I think they are better described, in fact, as the several attempts of French philosophers (here in step with their time) to escape normal politics—on the one hand through revolutionary engagement, on the other through Heideggerian ethics. These should not be dissociated from one another, neither can be given precedence over the other. 

Liberalism, which was certainly alive (if not well) in Third Republic France, is said finally to have returned as a respectable intellectual politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Its return rested not in principle but in fact on the new-found solidity of the state. The wave of revolutionary violence (mostly, but not entirely, symbolic) in and following 1968 was turned and broken by the solid resistance of the state, which by

jailing some and giving way to some, successfully transformed Maoists into TV personalities and *focos* into reading clubs.  

Rather than overthrow the state, press it on specific issues. Derrida is only slightly eccentric to this general movement. It is, further, not a coincidence that the battles over Holocaust memory and denial took place in earnest in the decade after the collapse of political radicalism in France, the ‘discovery’ of the Gulags, and so forth. Derrida’s essay rescues and re-grounds a sort of liberalism (a politics of responsibility) out of the ashes of a sequence of European radicalism that was, if nothing else, messianically anti-liberal. He, unlike Benjamin, follows Sorel’s conceptualization of political violence out of politics and into ethics.

**Divine into Revolutionary Violence**

Žižek’s short book *Violence*, like Benjamin’s essay, begins with a series of distinctions and delimitations in order to bring into view his proper object. He distinguishes first between subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence is the immediate physical, physiological, experience of “violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent.” In contradistinction to this is objective violence, which is distinguished into symbolic and systemic varieties. Symbolic violence includes hate speech, the various hierarchies inscribed into our daily language (of gender, for instance),

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64 This is not exactly Julian Bourg’s argument, but it is manifestly part of the story he is telling. Bourg, *From revolution to ethics: May 1968 and contemporary French thought*.


but also the “more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such.”

Systemic violence is the apparently straightforward designation for “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.” Ecological damage is included here, as would be the instability brought about by sudden transfers of capital from one part of the world to another. The whole point of the book, we are told, is to get away from the “inherently mystifying…direct confrontation” with specific acts of subjective violence. The crude politico-interpretive point is that acts of violence, bombings on American soil or genocides committed in a far away African country, are mediatised in such a way as to demand a subjectively immediate, and therefore partial, insufficiently cognitive, response. Žižek’s goal, then, is to examine the background against which the ‘subjective’ violence is rendered subjective in such a way as to preclude understanding of its objectivity.

Žižek does not mean (only or centrally) to show, once again, that capitalism is built on the violence of expropriation, or that certain categories of individuals are systemically excluded from equal access to certain resources. As he has argued at length elsewhere, it is the inescapable gap between the objective and the subjective that is the space of the subject. So the point here is to examine the mutual positioning of objective and subjective violence in order to understand what kind of a subject is situated there, and how a different one might arise.

67 Ibid. p 2.
68 Ibid. p 2.
69 Ibid. pp 3-4.
Put differently, Žižek is interested in sites of resistance. For instance, in his discussion of tolerance, and the critique of it that sometimes emerges from postcolonial studies, his view of cultural difference is ruled by the consideration of political possibility. He says,

The self-reflexive sensitivity to one’s own limitation can only emerge against the background of the notions of autonomy and rationality promoted by liberalism. One can, of course, argue that, in a way, the Western situation is even worse because in it oppression itself is obliterated and masked as free choice…Our freedom of choice effectively often functions as a mere formal gesture of consent to our own oppression and exploitation. However, Hegel’s lesson that form matters is important here; form has an autonomy and efficacy of its own. So when we compare a Third World woman, forced to undergo clitoridectomy or promised in marriage as a small child, with the First World woman ‘free to choose’ painful cosmetic surgery, the form of freedom matters—it opens up a space for critical reflection.71

The point that Žižek wants to make goes beyond the notion that a rhetoric can become a reality, that an appearance to be maintained can become a positive force for change. He remains attached to the level of the subject. Without formal freedom, there will be no concrete freedom—but entirely in relation to the individual, not the society.

This allows us to enter into the terrain that is generally most difficult for generous readers of Žižek. For Žižek, the subject becomes concretely free only in the moment of terror. This moment is the juncture between subjective and objective. The position is in some sense a Hegelian one, of course, and a Lacanian one. The strong point to make, however, is that talk of the terror of freedom is in fact Žižek’s way of suturing ethics, work on the individual subject, into politics, work on the collective subject.

Žižek relies on Benjamin’s authority to elaborate the notion of divine violence. Although Žižek is never quite willing to say it, it seems to me that he identifies divine

violence ultimately with the abyss of human freedom, or we might say more in his own terms, with the terror of the radical emptiness of the subject. Although this is certainly not Derrida’s reading, it is consistent with the interpretation I have given above of Benjamin’s discussion of the biblical injunction, “thou shalt not kill.” Here, Žižek follows Lacan against Kant: “What is truly traumatic for the subject is not the fact that a pure ethical act is (perhaps) impossible, that freedom is (perhaps) an appearance, based on our ignorance of the true motivations of our acts; what is truly traumatic is freedom itself, the fact that freedom IS possible, and we desperately search for some ‘pathological’ determinations in order to avoid this fact.” Divine violence is Žižek’s way of discussing this same fact of freedom and possibility on the objective level.

This is clear enough, but then Žižek’s attempt to explain sovereignty in terms of the distinction between mythical and divine violence confuses the situation. Žižek cites a long passage from Benjamin’s “Critique,” and then asserts that divine violence is to be understood as the “domain of sovereignty.” Divine violence is not law-making, but beyond law. Without law, no crime. Hence, Žižek says, “It is mythical violence that demands sacrifice, and holds power over bare life; whereas divine violence is non-sacrificial and expiatory. One should therefore not be afraid to assert the formal parallel between the state annihilation of homini sacer, for example the Nazi killing of the Jews, and the revolutionary terror, where one can also kill without committing a crime and

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72 Ibid. p 196.
73 Ibid. p 198. This is not quite what Benjamin says. The word ‘sovereignty’ appears only in the last sentence of the essay: “Die göttliche Gewalt, welche Insignium und Siegel, niemals Mittel heiliger Vollstreckung ist, mag die waltende heißen.” Walter Benjamin, Rolf Tiedemann, and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Gesammelte Schriften (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991). B I. p 29.
without sacrifice.” As we have seen, this is precisely what Derrida is too prudent to do. Žižek goes on, quoting Benjamin, “Less possible and also less urgent [than performing revolutionary/divine/pure violence itself] for humankind, however, is to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases…” He concludes from Benjamin’s warnings that the instance of divine violence (now fully elided into revolutionary violence) is not really of the order of Being, but rather of the order of Event. That is, it can be fit neatly into the metaphysics of revolution that Žižek has on loan from Badiou.

In the end, though, divine or revolutionary violence comes to have a fairly banal meaning for Žižek. Divine violence is that which comes from those who are the constitutive outside of the capitalist system. And here is where the split within the field of objective violence returns. Divine violence is that which takes place when a subject has risen from subjective freedom into the simultaneous necessities of the symbolic and the structural. The agent of divine violence is existentially, or subjectively, free (inside the imperious terror of baseless, necessary action), and also objectively free (crushed by, but outside of, the wheel of capital):

Divine violence should thus be conceived as divine in the precise sense of the old Latin motto *vox populi, vox dei* not in the perverse sense of ‘we are doing it as mere instruments of the People’s Will,’ but as the heroic assumption of the solitude of sovereign decision. It is a decision (to kill, to risk or loose one’s own life) made in absolute solitude, with no cover in the big Other. If it is extra-moral, it is not ‘immoral,’ it does not give the agent license just to kill with some kind of angelic innocence. When those outside the structured social field strike ‘blindly,’ demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is divine violence. Recall, a decade or so ago, the panic in Rio de Janeiro when crowds descended from the favelas into the rich part of the city

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and started looting and burning supermarkets. This was indeed divine violence…They were like biblical locusts, the divine punishment for men’s sinful ways.\textsuperscript{75}

This last sentence is a bit over the top, forced on Žižek by the example, and not entirely in keeping with the theoretical frame. Or perhaps it suggests that underneath it all, the content inherited from Marx is in fact just an approach to the moral content of the global economy. It bears noticing that the locusts also come from Exodus. In the end, it seems to me that Žižek’s attempt to bring Benjamin’s divine violence into a Marxist frame is not successful—Žižek wants this violence to retain a certain objective meaning related to the capitalist system, and this is not really compatible with Benjamin’s purer messianism.

It does, however, bring us back to Sorel. Recall that one of Benjamin’s models, or perhaps one of the first ‘moments’ of divine violence, is the revolutionary violence of Sorel’s proletarian strike. If divine violence shares with Sorel’s proletarian strike the character of event, it in no way has the same relation to law. Of course there is the terminological issue. Benjamin was well aware that for Sorel the general strike was precisely a myth, a moment, always repeated, in which the breaking of law would be tied up in the making of new law. The Evental character of this law making is clear in Sorel as well—political subjects are generated around the strike. Žižek’s image of divine violence is also one in which subjects are generated, and, it seems to me, a new law is in fact laid down. It is true that Žižek’s Evental violence and its subjects are constituted negatively, that is, they are the outside of a positive system, capitalism, and its remainder. Yet the Event, in Žižek’s Badiouian frame, requires fidelity, which is to say the militant

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. p 202.
operation, which is surely a law. So in re-appropriating Benjamin’s divine violence, Žižek makes it mythical again, and is in this much closer to Sorel.

The very last move of Žižek’s book is remarkable, and I think suggests a more serious and perhaps significant convergence between him and the authors of Commonwealth. Žižek goes to Robespierre and Che Guevara, and the notion of revolutionary love. Commenting on Robespierre, “divine violence belongs to the order of the Event: as such, its status is radically subjective, it is the subject’s work of love,” and then further at the end of the chapter, “the notion of love should be given here all its Paulinian weight; the domain of pure violence, the domain outside law (legal power), the domain of the violence which is neither law-founding nor law-sustaining, is the domain of love.”76 Here is the subjective, I think we must say ethical, side to the more familiar and comprehensive, the supposedly provocative, claim of Žižek’s that Hitler was not violent enough. The subject is asked to embrace their own radical brokenness, to assume the gap constitutive of others in an act of terribly violent love. If this ethical act is accompanied by a genuinely radical politico-economic reconfiguration—if, to emphasize, the twin terrors of both symbolic and systemic objectivity can be assumed in the freedom of the subject—then we will have made—as least Žižek’s—revolution.

In defending the positions he has staked out, Žižek has in fact pushed them further.77 Although a few examples are operative here, a central one is Haiti. He follows

76 Ibid. p 203, 205.
77 The second, 2009, edition of In Defense of Lost Causes contains an afterword entitled “What is Divine about Divine Violence?” It is essentially a clarification and restatement of the ideas presented in

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Susan Buck-Morss in her Hegelian reading of the Revolution a certain distance, but stops at what he calls her “liberal limit.” Her liberalism—and this is not a wrong definition of liberalism—amounts to a pessimistic rejection of (most) revolutionary activity on the grounds that it will simply make things worse than they already are. Revolution is thus to be avoided, to be treated as a fearful last resort. Žižek firmly rejects this. We must “distinguish as clearly as possible between two types of violence; radical emancipatory violence against the ex-oppressors and the violence which serves the continuation and/or establishment of hierarchical relations of exploitation and domination.” From this perspective, “we should thus condemn the elimination of all whites in Haiti not out of humanitarian compassion for the innocent among them, but based on the insight that the true strategic goal of this process was to establish a new hierarchical order among the remaining blacks, justified by the ethnic ideology of blackness.” Žižek has here the great virtue of stating his position in a clear and unambiguous manner.

He is simply drawing necessary conclusions from his premises when he says that it is entirely possible and necessary to distinguish between the acts of violence committed by the *Tonton Macoutes* (Duvalier) and the *chimères* (Lavalas). Precisely the same act, **Violence**—indeed certain sections are word-for-word the same. It is also, incidentally, a venue for the continuation of Žižek’s polemic with Simon Critchley.


80 Žižek, *In defense of lost causes*. p 471.

81 Ibid. p 472.
the same mode of inflicting painful death on a human being, has objectively different meanings. When a murder is committed by the chimères, for Žižek,

these desperate acts of violent popular self-defense are again examples of divine violence: they are to be located ‘beyond good and evil,’ in a kind of politico-religious suspension of the ethical. Although we are dealing with what, to an ordinary moral consciousness, cannot but appear as ‘immoral’ acts of killing, one has no right to condemn them, since they are the reply to years, centuries even, of systematic state violence and economic exploitation. 82

He thus arrives at a “minimal definition of divine violence,” that is, “the counter-violence to the excess of violence that pertains to state power.” 83 Then, framing a distinction that is significantly different from the earlier one between emancipatory/repressive violence, he says, “if mythic violence serves the state, divine violence doesn’t serve another, better, purpose (such as life) – it doesn’t serve anything, which is why it is divine.” 84 It is not clear how this divine, purposeless violence, lines up with a revolutionary violence that is anti-repressive. Perhaps the relationship is one of inclusion. In any case, Žižek has worked his way back to Sorel’s force-violence distinction, even including its particular articulation of the means-ends relation and its reflexive antistatism.

Struggle for freedom does not have a specific goal but must be by nature anti-repressive. It is empty rather than full, negative rather than positive. In this sense it is divine, even though Žižek also sees Nazi genocidal violence as basically divine, but not therefore revolutionary. So some objective element must enter into the evaluation of purposeless and pure violence, to distinguish that which is revolutionary from that which is not. And here again, Žižek is at least very clear. I think we can assume that the

82 Ibid. p 478.
83 Ibid. p 483.
84 Ibid. pp 484-485.
objective element that intervenes to assign violence into the mythic or the divine is the same as that which distinguishes divine-revolutionary from simply divine-sovereign violence. He says, returning to the Haitian example, “chimères and Tonton Macoutes may perform exactly the same act—lynching an enemy—but where the first act is divine, the second is only the ‘mythic’ obscene and illegal support of power. The risk involved in reading or assuming an act as divine is fully the subject’s own” (485). What has happened here is that although Žižek appeals to objectivity, almost in the same breath he asserts that this appeal itself is an ethical act. He himself is clear about his own commitments: based on an analysis of global capitalism, he is on the side of the objective anti-capitalists, and against the capitalists. But this is an ethical commitment, not a philosophical position or even a political one. For Žižek, the objective findings of analysis of global capital have no binding normative force. He is unwilling to forgo the subjective moment.

The commitment being discussed here, of course, is Žižek’s commitment, or that of some other observer. We are not talking about the individual who forces a gasoline-filled tire around another human being’s body and sets it on fire (the specific practice Žižek says we have no right to condemn, objectively). Žižek’s way of thinking about revolutionary violence gives us no access at all to the revolutionary subject itself. This subject is simply determined by their place in the totality, that is, global capital. Žižek allows the ethical to be controlled entirely by the cognitively grasped totality. Of course this is a well-worn revolutionist’s position, one that ranges in sophistication from the fin-de-siècle anarchist for whom all members of the bourgeoisie were criminals and therefore
legitimate targets, to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Humanism and Terror*. Žižek can take this position because of his dialectical understanding of the subject.

Sorel roundly rejected what he saw as the idealist Hegelian remains in Marx, starting with the presupposition of a unified history of philosophy and reaching all the way into a certain understanding of the dialectic. Sorel’s rejection of the dialectic in fact pre-dated his supposed Bergsonian re-description of Marxism, but it none the less has some similarities to Hardt and Negri’s Deleuzian Marxism. To get a sense of the stakes of articulating a revolutionary project in time, rather than dialectically, let us return to their immanent concept of revolutionary social change.

**Immanent Ethics**

By way of conclusion to this chapter, let us return to *Commonwealth*. In this book, Sorel’s distinction between force and violence is reproduced in the notion of subtractive violence. I also want to suggest that the notion of love as a political concept, proposed by Hardt and Negri, given its Spinozan foundations, is a movement in the direction of a political concept that is given a special, if implicit, formulation in Sorel’s work—autonomy. Corruption, a broader idea introduced to explain failure and negativity, also has a Sorelian analogue with which it shares serious ambiguities.

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85 Sorel was not the kind of anti-Hegelian who did not read Hegel or dismissed him out of hand. As early as 1896, Sorel had been reading Hegel’s lectures on religion, and in the years after *Reflections on Violence*, perhaps in tandem with Croce’s renewed interest and presentation of Hegel as a sort of practical philosopher, Hegel’s name begins to appear with greater frequency in Sorel’s writings.
My goal here is limited. I want only to draw out the Sorelian moments within this work. A fuller evaluation could only begin, as I have already suggested, with the political economy that undergirds their project. Further, their preference for governance over government would have to be evaluated in raw political terms in the present. Sorel would be an interesting comparison to make along both lines of investigation. For the moment, however, it is best to remain within the frame suggested by the remainder of this chapter.

The Sorelian distinction between force and violence seems almost of necessity to throw one into the realm of ethics. This distinction remains operative, although curiously inverted, for Hardt and Negri, who are explicit that their project is not least an ethics. For Sorel, in its crudest formulation, force is what the state or the bosses employ against striking workers, and violence is what striking workers employ against the state or their employers. Violence is revolutionary, force is repressive. In Commonwealth, violence is identified both with repressive action, and the reactive, “boomerang” response to it.

Revolutionary pedagogy is necessary to educate these spontaneous reactions, transforming refusal into resistance and violence into the use of force. The former in each case is an immediate response, whereas the latter results from a confrontation with reality and training of our political instincts and habits, our imaginations and our desires…resistance and the coordinated use of force extend beyond the negative reaction to power toward an organizational project to construct an alternative on the immanent plane of social life.

This contains at least an element of what proved to be so politically ambiguous in Sorel’s discussion of violence. How does one relate the construction of alternatives on the immanent plane of social life through the practice of forceful resistance to power, to the

86 The use of this idiom is perhaps over-determined by two factors. First, of course, is the importance of Spinoza’s ethics to their project. Second, it seems to me, is the pervasive post-68 invasion of contestatory politics by ethics. Paradigmatic is Foucault’s preface to the Anti-Oedipus.
87 Hardt and Negri, Commonwealth. p 16.
on the face of it quite different project of freeing the energies of biopolitical production to
construct a new world of open and loving subjectivities? Sorel was never able to
convincingly link his workerist theory of the syndicats to his theory of violence. This was
his great theoretical and political failure. The rising generation of post-1918 Europeans,
not so committed to the proletariat as such—an idea the empirical usefulness of which
Sorel had himself done much to discredit, as morally central as it remained for him—
happily mobilized his theory of violence and subjectivity in the service of nationalism
and ultimately of fascism. One central question that Hardt and Negri must answer as they
and others return to the confrontation with the constituted power of the state—that is, to
Sorel’s great problem in the period after about 1904—is how to make the positivity of
production genuinely indispensable to the negativity of resistance. In other words, it is to
explain how, as they say, “what people do at work and the skills they exercise
there…contribute to their capacities in the field of political action.”88 One answer to this
question, the one provided by Empire, starts with the argument that the state itself has
fundamentally changed.

This fundamental change has often been tracked or identified with sovereignty.
As capitalist command and control changes shape, so too must resistance to it. The
centralized state gives way to the de-centered power of empire—the sovereign logic of
the exception is generalized—so the Leninist party must give way to the multitude.
Indeed, Empire was a major resource and goad to a large body of theoretical work done
on the nature of neo-liberal sovereignty. The later lectures of Foucault on

88 Ibid. p 351.
governmentality and the Heideggerianism of Agamben were crucial. But in 2009 Commonwealth begins by rejecting this analysis of sovereignty. Hardt and Negri object to a sort of apocalyptic language that they say permeates political theorizing, “the scholarly version of this apocalyptic discourse is characterized by an excessive focus on the concept of sovereignty.” Sorel, too, rejected discussion of sovereignty, arguing that they were essentially idealist illusions designed as part of an ideology that, as Hardt and Negri put it, “eclipses and mystifies the really dominant forms of power that continue to rule over us today.” According to Hardt and Negri, “we need to stop confusing politics with theology”—this is about as clear a rejection of the left-Schmittian analytic framework as one could wish.

Subtraction—or exodus—is a conceptual reposition, or re-description, intended to jump outside the game of sovereignty and the logic of decision and into that of political economy. If the fundamental nature of biopolitical production is to increase productivity through autonomy, then its natural political corollary is to subtract itself from the control structures of capital. Subtractive violence, then, can be distinguished from controlling state violence.

Of course there is an obvious rhetorical advantage to calling the subtractive action of revolution an exodus. Pharaoh did not let his slaves go without a fight. In just the same

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89 There is a larger intellectual-historical argument to be made here about the generational sequence of the many crises of Theory in the late 1980s, the hegemony (vacuity) of the liberal market idea in the 1990s, and the sigh of relief that is just audible under the return to outraged radicalism and deep political theory made possible by 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror.
80 Hardt and Negri, Commonwealth. p 4.
81 Ibid. p 4.
82 Ibid. p 5.
way, the escape from capitalism would be peaceful if it could be—just as Etienne de La
Boétie imagined that perhaps tyranny could be dissolved with a simple, collective, refusal
to be tyrannized—but will no doubt be difficult and costly. Of course the narrative of
exodus is a tendentious one for a book to adopt that also wants to be anti-theological.
After all, Pharaoh didn’t die in battle: he was swallowed up when the waters,
miraculously parted for the flight of the Jews, returned to their usual state. That is, the
annihilating (divine) violence of a newly achieved normalcy will destroy the opposition.
Is this really the model of revolutionary force that Hardt and Negri want? It seems to me
not. If subtraction is the tactical political concept under which the revolution is to
institute itself, love is the organizing strategic principle.

Love is the political concept Hardt and Negri wish to use in order to think
through, or think to, intersubjectivity in the mode of non-domination. Love, in fact, will
be the political concept adequate to a biopolitical, subtractive, revolution. It is related to
the new forms of production that determine the nature of the multitude; it is “a process of
the production of the common and the production of subjectivity.” 93 Hardt and Negri
write that “Love is able, traversing the city, to generate new forms of conviviality, of
living-together, that affirm the autonomy and interaction of singularities in the
common.”94 Love is closely related, indeed seems to be coextensive with, Spinozan joy,
which is “that passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection,” or more

93 Ibid. p 180.
94 Ibid. p 380.
generally, “joy is a man’s passage from a lesser to a greater perfection.”

Perfection is power to act. One might look to Nietzsche here—joy as increasing power—and Nietzsche famously felt that he had a kindred spirit in Spinoza. Here, however, joy and love are clearly at least intended to be outside the game of domination. Even for Spinoza, your power does not increase as you become more able to coerce your fellow humans into doing things for you. Rather, as your reason increases and your ideas become more adequate, your perfection, and thus your joy also grow.

Love, here—and not, I think, for Žižek—is supposed to stand in for emancipation or freedom, neither of which have the requisite relation to political economy. Laughter replaces the divine violence Benjamin or Žižek might see as the revolution. The second to last paragraph of Commonwealth exhibits what we might call a messianic Spinozism:

Ours is also a laugh of creation and joy, anchored solidly in the present. Our free and equal access to the common, through which we together produce new and greater forms of the common, our liberation from the subordination of identities through monstrous process of self-transformation, our autonomous control of the circuits of the production of social subjectivity, and in general our construction of common practices through which singularities compose the multitude are all limitless cycles of our increasing power and joy. While we are instituting happiness, our laughter is as pure as water.

Love, then, serves to link conceptually the new mode of biopolitical production to the form of revolutionary activity. The link between production and revolution is not just conceptual, it is affective, and—still following Spinoza—therefore also ethical. At this point again, Hardt and Negri come very close to Sorel’s notion of autonomy.

For Sorel, the discipline and practice of the productive syndicat were a training ground for the new “ethic of the producers.” In the syndicat, engaged in industrial

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production, the worker learns several basic—more or less enduring—moral values. The worker learns first of all at the machine the practical and technical realities of life. This means the real limits of the possible, but also and more importantly the not inconsiderable capacity every individual has to extend these limits through innovation. The worker is constantly learning, based on concrete needs, at the very edge of the technical science of the day—it is not for nothing that Sorel was friendly with Paul Delesalle, a skilled worker turned bookstore owner and activist, who later claimed to have had a hand in the invention of cinema. 97 Building on this shared basis of practical reason, the worker engaged in strike action motivated by a certain conception of catastrophic revolution is really engaged in revolutionary ethical pedagogy. One’s own life may well be laid down for one’s fellows. One must be strong and not break ranks, not only so as not to fail one’s comrades, but also in the name of an ideal. This, for Sorel, was the highest form of ethical engagement. Institutions are at every stage the material ground of intersubjective rationality. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Sorel might be called an “antifoundational realist.” Science is real, but neither it nor philosophy is a mirror of nature. Science constructs the intersubjective truths to which it refers. Autonomy, for Sorel, is the increasing capacity to act achieved through scientific progress—the construction of mechanisms (formula, scientific ideas) that have no

97 Delessale worked in the machine shop commissioned to manufacture the Lumière brothers’ first machine—the gears for feeding the film did not work quite right, and he adjusted the design so that they did. Or so he claimed later in his life. See the clippings and the manuscript, 12 AS 14 Fonds Delesalle. ANF. On Delesalle more generally, see Jean Maitron, Paul Delesalle, un anar de la Belle Époque, Inconnus de l’histoire (Paris: Fayard, 1985).
analogue in nature. Through this engagement in technique, ethics is knotted into the revolutionary institution of expanding human capacity.

Sorel could not be more concerned with failed revolutions even had he lived through the 20th century. The failure of a revolutionary project to live up to its promise is not often enough a serious topic of conversation for left theorists today. The authors of *Commonwealth* nonetheless approach this question by introducing another term from classical political philosophy: corruption. Corruption of the common is privatization. When love is corrupted, it becomes in one way or another exclusive—limited, say, by ethnicity or religion. Corruption might thus be called the introduction of negativity into the social. The ambiguity of this expansionary concept links it into Sorel’s political problematic. In as much as a political concept of love can remain linked to Benjamin’s non-human technique, or to biopolitical production, it could find purchase in concrete situations. But corruption, if indeed it is to be linked to negativity, is always present. It could hardly help but become a standing accusation and cover for power. Sorel, as we have seen, is at his best when he is able to articulate the gap between group and political will as filled by technical, or economic, organization. That is, technical productive organization constitutes the group as political subject. When he allows this technical aspect to drop out, he loses his political bearings.

In sum: what Žižek (and Badiou) lack, what Laclau and Mouffe explicitly disavow, what Hardt and Negri have been attacked for attempting to rescue, is precisely the connection between the revolutionary institution of human freedom and the technical

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process of production. This was always Sorel’s most generative and powerful theoretical position. Contemporary anarchism—as is quite clear from the debates around Occupy—is no longer able even to articulate this position. \(^{100}\) Žižek can think only in Hegelian terms of a structurally determined working class—not even in the Marxist terms that Hardt and Negri attempt to recover of a proletariat defined by its position in the mode of production. In this, and in their slide into a politics of resistance, of anti-statism as such, Hardt and Negri reproduce much of what was best in Sorel’s earlier post-Marxism, and run some of his risks as well.

**Conclusion**

No effort of historical recovery and reconstitution can extract answers to today’s problems from Sorel’s work. His most productive years are now more than a century gone. Yet he can highlight theoretical and rhetorical blind-alleys. Certainly he indicates a counter-tradition within revolutionary thought that has been, for most of the 20th century,  

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\(^{99}\) See the remarkable and hostile review of Empire by Timothy Brennan. – There are other issues there, but it seems to me that the question of revisionism is the really central one, and this the heart of that. Timothy Brennan. “The Empire’s New Clothes,” Critical Inquiry 29(2003).

\(^{100}\) We can take here as an extremely articulate spokesperson for contemporary anarchism the anthropologist David Graeber. He is opposed to the sprouts of neo-Leninism visible everywhere today, but he at least understands, as Sorel did, that the force that makes the revolution must also be the force of the society to come—you can’t make a free society out of an authoritarian revolution. The process—the only obligatory thing is to accept the egalitarian rules of discourse within an assembly, the actual consensus is not binding—concretizes the desired future autonomy. But it has no relation to material existence. It is an Arendtian paradise of pure discourse. It is quickly reduced, as Sorel eventually was, to pure resistance. Its productive aspects are limited to making highly disruptive puppets—non-alienated production, conceived of as autonomy, is an excellent goal, but it is meaningless if the only existence it can have in the present is as some kind of Bataillian pure expenditure. These anarchists are surely right that engagement is necessary—the subtractive commune is not impossible, but fundamentally conservative. They are wrong that engagement in the realm of pure politics—resistance for its own sake—can ever do anything but reproduce the logic of the state. That a logic of resistance within production has been made almost unimaginable is the great triumph of that much-abused term, neoliberalism.
obscured. He clarifies the questions that those who seek substantial social change should ask. Sorel’s work, taken as an trajectory of engaged theorization, with all its political missteps, is one long argument that in order to hold the economic and physiological materiality of our individual lives together with the discursive reality of the political sphere and retain any hope for radical social change, the plurality of productive institutions that engage and shape us as moral beings must be retained in the face of resistance to the (very real) force deployed in the name of the (imagined) discursive monolith of the state. Perhaps paradoxically, a Sorelian analysis of the contemporary political conjuncture, at least on a cultural level, suggests to me that we badly need a renewed politics of expertise. Autonomy, Sorel argues, can only begin in the collective pursuit of a non-human project. The logic of exchange and profit must not be allowed to dominate. But it is most vulnerable to critique not at the intuitive level of raw human being. Human life, Benjamin’s suggestions aside, has never been sacred as such—indeed in the sense intended by contemporary human rights discourse, has perhaps never even really existed. Equality—which is a practice, not a fact—can itself only even be an effect of autonomy. Autonomy, in order not to collapse in on itself, in order to have the effect of human equality, must be pointed out into the world that is unambiguously non-human. Here would be a politics of the technical, of expertise, that could be both egalitarian and revolutionary.
9. Conclusion

In the panic of the first days of the Great War, Parisians were encouraged to leave the city in case the German advance could not be stopped sooner. Georges Sorel was among those who fled. Returning in September of 1914 to a city that no longer seemed immediately threatened, an exhausted and ill Sorel wrote to Benedetto Croce: “we enter an era more new than was that of the Revolution…I am a man of the past.”¹ And yet, for us on the other side of the 20th century, as a thinker of radicalism and radicalization within a liberal democratic polity, Sorel is a contemporary. Over the course of this dissertation, I have charted how and in what particular contexts his thinking emerged. This demonstration enriches our understanding of Sorel, but also and more importantly it suggests that a new picture is required of the intellectual resources and limits of the Third Republic.

The attention given in the preceding chapters to the process and social location of Sorel’s writing allows the simultaneous assertion of what would otherwise appear to be contradictory claims: Sorel was rooted in his context, in conversation with his contemporaries, attuned to the politics of his time, but he also moved laterally through his context, made unusual and provocative connections, and thought ahead to problems that few others yet saw on the horizon. His long engagement with Marxism was not a rejection of French republicanism, even if it reinforced his refusal of Jacobin political culture. His formation, the problems he believed himself to face and the tools he knew to

¹ Sorel and Croce, Lettere a Benedetto Croce. p 203.
be at his disposal in solving them, were familiar to a cohort of broadly liberal and republican intellectuals. Yet his inquiries pushed in new directions.

In this dissertation, I have emphasized Sorel’s concern with epistemological issues common to a broad swath of European philosophers of science. I have shown how his writings on social science grew through engagement with Alfred Fouillée and Émile Durkheim—both of whom explicitly sought to give the Republic strong philosophical and moral foundations. At the center of Sorel’s social thought was the institution, developed particularly through his reading of 18th century Neapolitan professor of rhetoric Giambattista Vico. Sorel’s engagement with Marxism was—as any serious engagement would have to be—transnational. Both philosophy and politics split him from Antonio Labriola and pushed him toward Eduard Bernstein. The Dreyfus Affair saw Sorel take active part in promulgating liberal political and moral culture, just as in the Revisionist crisis he sided with the reformists. Without ever really belonging to it, Sorel nonetheless participated actively in what can only be called established and mainstream French intellectual life. He did not publish in the major dailies or weeklies (such as the Revue des deux mondes), but he did publish frequently in the most important professional philosophy journals.

Like many liberals of the time, he thought that individual moral autonomy could be safeguarded by a mild state that would defend rule of law and allow a representative parliament to act as an arena for the arbitration of social conflict. I have shown that Sorel’s commitment to worker self-management radicalized in tandem with what he perceived to be the growing power and assertiveness of the state as such. Sorel’s
longstanding interest in the history of Christianity led him to engage actively in debates around Catholic Modernism underway even as, in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, a new push toward laïcité eventually led to the 1905 separation of Church and State. In this context, he saw the state (Republican though it was), actively suppress competing institutions and take more control over economic matters. The state was trying to claim dominance over matters of l’esprit—education and morality—against its insidious power, extreme measures were justified. Politics had to be spiritualized, if only defensively.

Representative democracy, far from functioning as the open and public working-through of social conflicts, seemed to Sorel to become a mere cover for the supremacy of a logic of state. Sorel developed his critique of the state on the basis of liberal insistence on autonomy, tempered by a republican care for the institutional context that makes autonomy meaningful. His theories of violence and myth were the result of his struggle with a nominally democratic and liberal state that, he believed, had been entirely corrupted by plutocracy. He believed himself to be fighting for the values—autonomy, equality, civic participation—legally enshrined in but practically denied by the French Third Republic. It was this situation that pushed him to elaborate what we might call his scissionistic theory of social movements.

Placing Sorel together with the academic philosophy of his time allows us to argue for greater continuity in the history of French philosophy than is usually allowed. Sorelian myth should be understood as participating in a long history that places the theory of knowledge in tension with a theory of action or activity. Sorel thus calls for a framing of French philosophy that would look more seriously at Auguste Comte, Félix
Ravaisson, and Charles Renouvier in order to draw continuities forward across the
supposed rupture caused by the arrival of German phenomenology. Particularly important
here is Sorel’s continual struggle to historicize philosophical activity together with
scientific knowledge.

I have chosen to emphasize these aspects of Sorel’s thinking—and so their related
contexts—rather than other ones. I have not focused on, for instance, debts Sorel might
be said to owe to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon or Ernest Renan. I have not gone into great
detail comparing Sorel’s positions to Marxists (other than Antonio Labriola), such as
Paul Lafargue, Rosa Luxemburg or, to look at a later period, György Lukács or Antonio
Gramsci. Rather, for reasons partly of space, partly of interest, and partly because it
seems to me to be the core of the work, I have focused on the interaction of Sorel’s
liberal republican values and his social philosophy of revolutionary productivism.

I have argued that Reflections on Violence is Sorel’s key work because it exhibits
the fractures and contradictions central to the movement of this radicalization. It is
embedded in its time, and I paid close attention to the order of its composition and its
paratexts in order to map the changes in Sorel’s viewpoint and priorities across its pages.
There, I have argued, in addition to the explicit engagements with Alexis de Tocqueville,
Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Émile Durkheim, a subterranean borrowing,
particularly of an aesthetic construction of individual subjectivity, can be detected from
Benedetto Croce. This borrowing had the effect of undermining Sorel’s previous
insistence on the institutional context of what we might today call political subjectivity. It
was part of a longer movement on Sorel’s part from institutions to discourse, from
collective practice to individual ethics. I show how, over the course of writing *Reflections*, Sorel came to place less weight on the fact of workerist *syndicats* engaged in the struggle of production, and more on the dynamic of resistance to the state as such. Myth, which had been developed as a concept adequate to the understanding of political mobilization in a liberal and open society, lost its moorings in practice. Myth comes close to an experimental practice of discursive subject construction. Violence emerged as the pure negation of a state that was, itself, increasingly reduced to rationalism. Politics slid into an individual ethics. This dynamic made Sorel’s social thought easily available as pure radicalism, belonging to neither left nor right.

The same movement is also, I contend, recognizable in more recent far-left tendencies across the 20th century, which often began from an analysis of the material reality of a given situation but eventually fell into a dynamic of radicalism and resistance for their own sakes, which had the effect not of challenging but of re-enforcing the very state logic they sought to break. I have tried to show that Sorel’s difficult position at the knife-edge between liberal tolerance and radical intransigence—the tip of the iceberg—proved a constant irritant to his interpreters over the second half of the 20th century.

Interest in Sorel revived as this dissertation was being written. Most recently, Sorel’s name is among those tossed around at the highest levels of American politics. Paul Ryan stands accused not only of citing Sorel without realizing that he is someone who “admired Lenin and Mussolini” but worse, of giving the Wikipedia version of his
The highest level of electoral politics is perhaps the lowest level of intellectual history. The Occupy movement put Sorelian questions—violence and anarchism, a political ethic in which means and ends collapse together—quite squarely back on the table. Sorel’s analysis of the galvanizing power of violent confrontation in some ways seems perfectly applicable to recent clashes between protestors and police. Yet we must not be too fast to draw comparisons. Sorel has, to chose just one salient point, little that is new to say about the simultaneous privatization and militarization of American police forces. Sorel’s thought is not irrelevant, but neither does it apply directly to a neoliberal world order that, following Loïc Wacquant, we can say is typified by the use of state force to impose the logic of the market onto that of citizenship.\(^3\)

Still, Sorel’s writings, in all their complexity and self-contradiction, do challenge us today. Most immediately, Sorel might serve as an important forerunner to Michel Foucault’s critical theory of governance—Sorel is an object lesson in what happens when one tries, as Foucault suggests, and fails, to behead the State. More problematically, how, under the conditions that are ours, can we conceive of a politics of collective production? That is, an emancipatory politics of production rather than distribution or, as is the more usual 21\(^{st}\) century strategy, consumption. To do so would certainly entail the re-capture of the economy as a realm of freedom—almost unimaginable today, when whole states are

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2 Leon Wieseltier: “[when Ryan] cites Sorel it is as “Georges Eugene Sorèl,” which is the Wikipedia usage (except for the misplaced accent, which is Ryan’s contribution). When he cites Sorel, he seems unaware that he is appealing to a thinker who admired Lenin and Mussolini and advocated the use of violence by striking unions. (Scott Walker has no greater enemy than Georges Sorel.)” Leon Wieseltier, “His Grief, and Ours,” The New Republic, August 24 2012. Ryan cites both Sorel and Paul de Rousiers, a Catholic sociologist also cited by Sorel, on the greatness of America and American entrepreneurs—although Ryan elides Sorel’s emphasis on the Yankee. Paul D Ryan, “A Roadmap for America’s Future. Version 2.0. A Plan to Solve America’s Long-Term Economic and Fiscal Crisis.” (2010). p 21.

3 Loïc Wacquant, “Three steps to a historical anthropology of actually existing neoliberalism,” Social Anthropology 20, no. 1 (2012).
unable to do more than sustain a tiny field for their freedom of action—and what is yet more difficult, to conceive this from the beginning as collective. For Sorel, emancipatory politics must originate at the edge of the *milieu artificiel*, that is, the non-human. Such a Sorelian politics would then begin from expertise, profession, technical capacity. Sorel found his organizing principles in the practice of the syndicats. Where are such institutions to be found today? Sorel’s problematic is, in significant ways, once again our own. This dissertation has hoped to make the similarity legible.
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Biography

Eric Wendeborn Brandom was born on July 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1982, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He attended Oberlin College, graduating in 2004 with honors in history and a minor in Latin language. In 2005, he entered the doctoral program in History at Duke University. He earned a master’s degree in 2008, and pursued a certificate in European studies. In the summer of 2010 he attended the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell and in the spring of 2012 was a Duke junior fellow at the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften in Vienna, Austria.