



European  
University  
Institute

DEPARTMENT  
OF HISTORY  
AND  
CIVILIZATION

## The Uncertainties of Action

Agency, Capitalism, and Class in the Thought of  
Georges Sorel

Tommaso Giordani

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to  
obtaining the degree of Doctor of History and Civilization  
of the European University Institute

Florence, 09 January 2015



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to begin by thanking my supervisor, Martin van Gelderen, for his support and for the freedom with which he allowed me to conduct the research and the elaboration of the arguments, as well as for many important methodological conversations and opportunities to discuss my findings both in Florence and in Goettingen. For many years, Martin has represented intellectual history at the EUI, and without his willingness to support projects, such as mine, quite distant from his own research interests the intellectual offer of the department would have been much poorer.

Originally conceived as a study in the history of philosophy focussing on Sorel's pragmatism, this thesis has gone through two substantial rewritings, and for each of these rewritings there is a person to thank. I have to thank Antonella Romano for forcefully persuading me that experiences are concrete things and that backgrounds are never just backgrounds. It was in the thesis writing seminars that she animated that I began to understand how an historian thinks and to timidly try to think like one. For this and for much else, I am indebted to her. It was her who suggested to me to work with Laura Lee Downs, whose support through the last rewriting of the thesis has been beyond exceptional. It was thanks to Laura's guidance, expertise, and, most importantly her capacity to bring things to life, that I began to move beyond Sorel and to enquire upon wider questions in French history. She has opened my eyes to a whole new set of questions to which I hope to return in the future. The thesis, and my experience of writing it, would have been far worse without her involvement. Thank you. Also Dirk Moses is to be thanked for, amongst other things, steering the thesis away from philosophy and towards history. Despite their best efforts to historicize the thesis, this might be a case of *il lupo perde il pelo ma non il vizio*.

I have to thank Jeremy Jennings, not only for his initial encouragement, support, as well as criticism and hospitality during my stay at Queen Mary, but also for his advice, one of the best received in these years, to go to the EHESS. Months in Paris were of exceptional importance for the writing of this thesis, and not just in terms of research. Antoine Duval and his family, Guillaume, Martine, and Elsa, welcomed me warmly and inspired in me a love for France without which this thesis would be soulless. Gaëlle and Shona made me feel unexpectedly at home in the capital and in its social life by day and by night. Giulia, I have to thank for much-needed conversations on Bergson, as well as for equally important hourly lunch breaks at *Le Pipot*. Fulvio, Caterina, Claudio and Filo for providing that national community no Italian abroad can go without.

Paris, to an intellectual, is what an amusement park is to a 5 years old. Seminars and conversations with Heinz Wismann have been a beautiful reminder of why one chooses this profession. But those to whom I am more indebted are Anthony Lorry, Michel Prat and Willy Gianinazzi. Michel, in particular, has been a kind and discreet guide through the maze of Sorel's writings, and afternoons spent in conversation with him at the *Musée Social* have given me a concrete understanding of what an institution is and how it deals with that unfortunate circumstance that time is. Archivists at the *École Polytechnique* and the *École des Ponts et Chaussées* have been impressive and very helpful.

Writing and researching encourage solipsism and self-reference: I have to thank new and old friends for helping me deal with these side effects of doctoral research. Brian, Matti, Kaarlo, Stefan and the Intellectual History Working Group, I thank for engaging and useful discussions that allowed me to go beyond Sorel. Lorenzo, I thank for the musical breaks and much else. Bernardo, for his classical culture and analytical mind. Adam, Trevor, and Jeremy for, amongst other things, trying to make me musically literate; Tom and Steve for their friendship and their support in a London winter; Rachel, for many long emails; Naomi, for the

pleasure of her conversation; Keiva, for being wonderfully different from your typical law researcher; Donagh, for the misanthropy; Moritz and Joris, for many things, including improving my German with an unGerman sense of humour; Bannister, for still being unbeaten; Duvalinho, for losing to Sophie; and Sophie for still being my friend despite my inexcusable absence. Patrick (to whom I still owe a ticket for the Stadio Olimpico), Lukas, Jakob, Matteo, Maja, Marco, 'La Curva Shamrock' (Ale, Nicchio, Wario), Elena and Filippo, Giacomo and Torcio and many others have been important in these years as has been, in those before, Cici.

There are a number of people that have become daily presences in my Florentine life, and for whom I have developed a special fondness: Lorenzo Z., Lorenzo C., Elena, Elisa, Giovanni, and Mariaelena. Andrea, Mauro, and Valentina, despite the distance.

Last and most, I am grateful to my family: Anna, Antonio, and Costanza. Here, words are insufficient.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE MYTH OF SOREL

Despite his relative marginality in the history of European ideas, Georges Sorel is not an author that a reader approaches devoid of preconceptions. Every attempt to deal with him must thus start by acknowledging an important fact, namely that he is a thinker whose reputation as an irrationalist and as a theorist of political extremism overshadows more sober and accurate evaluations of his thought. Though most readers are barely acquainted with the complexity and the circumstances of Sorel's writings, few will fail to recognize Sorel in G.D.H. Cole's portrait of a 'pessimist moaning for blood'<sup>1</sup> outlining a theory of revolution for revolutions' sake coated in irrationalism and pseudo-mystical reveries whose central concept is that people are mobilized by 'a faith that [is] in essence non-rational'.<sup>2</sup> The fact that even as perceptive a commentator as Leszek Kolakowski partially falls into the caricatural trap – he writes that Sorel's 'unfulfilled ambition was to be the Luther of the Marxist movement'<sup>3</sup> – gives an idea of the force and pervasiveness of this dark legend. Still today, almost a century after the death of the Norman engineer and after the development of an important body of scholarship about his work, the definition of Sorel as 'un méconnu célèbre'<sup>4</sup> is the most accurate one: a famously misunderstood thinker, much talked about in passing references but more rarely the object of in-depth studies.

It is thus necessary to begin this introduction by addressing in some depth this legend: this will make the reader aware of the limitations of the received wisdom about Sorel and pave the way for the arguments developed in the thesis. What is, then, Sorel's standard caricature? John Burrow provides us with an excellent starting point:

'Revolution, which he deals with in the *Reflections*, in the form of the revolutionary General Strike, or perhaps more the myth of revolution, was important to Sorel not for anything specific it might achieve (to speculate on which was a form of pedantry) but for the moral rebirth, the revival of collective, fanatical zeal, beyond any rational intention, which bringing it about might kindle; he compared the revolutionary spirit sometimes to the fanaticism of the early Christians, sometimes to that of the armies of the French republic in the 1790s. Cherishing heroic values, usually in what he thought of as their rugged,

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<sup>1</sup> George Douglas Howard Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought. Volume III, part I: The Second International, 1889-1914* (London, Macmillan: 1956), p. 387.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>3</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism. Volume II: the Golden Age*, trans. by P.S. Falla (Oxford, Clarendon: 1978), p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Charzat, 'Avant-propos' in Michel Charzat (ed.), *Cahiers de l'Herne : Georges Sorel* (Paris, Éditions de l'Herne : 1986), p. 9.

peasant or proletarian forms, Sorel contemplated the contemporary world with the distaste of a moral aesthete: it was dead, grey, spiritless, tame, rotted with humanitarianism and pedantry...'<sup>5</sup>

The picture is a common one. Sorel is cast as a critic of a vaguely defined political rationality, to which he is said to prefer the emotional appeal of an equally vaguely defined myth. The non-rational appeal to myth, in turn, is put to the service of a revolutionary project devoid of any content but concerned with some sort of moral rebirth, which Sorel is said to crave in order to sate his frustration and anger against bourgeois civilisation and its values. The explanatory work, it should be pointed out, is done almost entirely by psychological assumptions: Sorel, the apocalyptic prophet of doom, is moved by 'the distaste of a moral aesthete'.

There are precise reasons for the consolidation of this standard image of Sorel, and it is worth noting that this portrait is *not* a recent invention. A few weeks after his death, an obituary in a popular Parisian publication already described him as a 'very dangerous man... as are those in which the passion for the absolute has killed the sense of the relative.'<sup>6</sup> In his review of the *Reflections on violence*, for example, a T.S. Eliot writing during the Great War elaborates a portrait substantially akin to that sketched by Burrow:

'He hates the middle classes, he hates middle-class democracy and middle-class socialism; but he does not hate these things as a champion of the rights of the people, he hates them as a middle-class intellectual hates... At the back of his mind is a scepticism which springs from Renan, but which is much more terrible than Renan's. For with Renan and Sainte-Beuve scepticism was still a satisfying point of view, almost an esthetic [sic] pose... But the scepticism of the present, the scepticism of Sorel, is a torturing vacuity which has developed the craving for belief... He is representative of the present generation, sick with its own knowledge of history, with the dissolving outlines of liberal thought, with humanitarianism. He longs for a narrow, intolerant, *creative* society with sharp divisions. He longs for the pessimistic, classical view. And this longing is healthy. But to realize his desire he must betake himself to very devious ways.'<sup>7</sup>

Once again, the image that emerges is that of a moralist disgusted with modernity and craving for a return to a barbarous but morally virtuous past: a romantic shouting abuse at the modern

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<sup>5</sup> John Burrow, *The crisis of reason. European thought 1848-1914* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press: 2000), p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Charles De Saint-Cyr, 'Quelques mots sur Georges Sorel', *La Semaine Parisienne*, 41, 1922, p. 1. 'homme fort dangereux... comme le sont souvent ceux en qui la passion de l'absolu a tué le sens du relatif.'

<sup>7</sup> τ [Thomas Stearns Eliot], 'Review of Reflections on Violence', *The Monist* 27, 1917, pp. 478-9. For the attribution of the review see Manju Jain, *T.S. Eliot and American Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1992), p. 310n.

world. Before outlining why ‘it is too easy to characterize Sorel’s tone and attitude as romantic’<sup>8</sup>, it is useful to reflect on the reasons of the persistence of this characterization.

## HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONFLATIONS

There is a virtually endless gallery of portraits of Sorel along these lines, all mostly due to the disproportionate editorial success of Sorel’s *Reflections on violence*, a complex and provocative text in which Sorel makes his most articulate case for revolutionary syndicalism and that, still today, enjoys the status as the standard Sorelian work. One of the unfortunate consequences of this success is that Sorel’s thought is often reduced to the ideas – or, in the worst but painfully common case, to the tone and prose – of a book whose arguments are taken in isolation both from the historical context and from Sorel’s wider intellectual trajectory. This leads to a number of rather serious interpretative mistakes. As Jacques Julliard correctly remarked in his 1990 preface to the *Reflections*, ‘Sorel and the *Reflections* constitute a unity... [Sorel] is condemned to be forever associated with a book which his best commentators do not necessarily consider to be his most noteworthy.’<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand, the *Reflections* is a text that should be understood in the light of its context and of Sorel’s previous philosophical and political trajectory. On the other hand, it is an uncompromising condemnation of parliamentary socialism and bourgeois democracy, a text that laments the absence in the bourgeois world of a ‘courage which Renan compared with that of a soldier at the moment of attack’<sup>10</sup> and that ends with the remarkable claim that ‘It is to violence that socialism owes those high ethical ideals by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world’.<sup>11</sup> The key to making sense of the Sorelian legend lies in understanding the effect of this often incendiary text not so much on Sorel’s peers, but on a younger interwar generation living in conditions much more unstable and open than Sorel’s own. The standard view of Sorel as an irrationalist theorist of violence derives from a number of interwar readings of the *Reflections*, and its origins can be traced to people such as Carl Schmitt, Edouard Berth, Benito Mussolini, and Thomas Hulme. Eliot’s review is, from this perspective, rather illuminating. Though the theme of a scepticism generating ‘a torturing

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<sup>8</sup> Natalino Sapegno, ‘Sorel e la disperazione eroica’, *La rivoluzione liberale* 37, 1922, p. 3. ‘È troppo facile definire romantici l’atteggiamento e il tono di Sorel.’

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Julliard, ‘Au risque de penser’ in Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence* (Paris, Seuil: 1990), p. i. ‘Sorel et les Réflexions c’est un tout un...[Sorel] semble pour toujours identifié à l’un des ses livres, que ses meilleurs connaisseurs ne tiennent pas toujours pour son plus remarquable.’

<sup>10</sup> Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. by Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1999), p. 229.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

vacuity which has developed the craving for belief' does somehow, partially, capture an aspect of Sorel's thought, anyone acquainted with Eliot will recognize in it a fundamental aspect of the poet's own religious trajectory. In the conclusion of his review Eliot revealingly presents Sorel as belonging to 'the present generation', forgetting however that this is not the case: Sorel was born in 1847, Eliot in 1888. This trans-generational appropriation of Sorel's concerns is indicative of a wider trend that is of fundamental importance in making sense of Sorel's legend.

The wider point being made here is that Sorel is a writer of the *fin de siècle* whose immediate reception and, arguably, canonization occurred at the hands of a younger generation that had experienced the Great War and that came of age in the tumultuous interwar years.<sup>12</sup> The salient aspects of Sorel's dark legend – for example his characterization as an enemy of the bourgeoisie more than as a socialist, or his supposed appreciation of violence as something good in itself – originate in these interwar readings, and the persistency of this legend results from the subsequent tendency to examine Sorel's ideas through the distortive filter of his first reception. There are two claims here: the first is that a specific Sorel – irrationalist, ideologically transversal, moralist, supporter of revolutionary activism for its own sake – emerged from a number of interwar readings. The second is that this interwar Sorel has been the point of reference for a surprisingly large number of subsequent readings. This inability to separate Sorel from his immediate legacy implies that Sorel has often been read, doubtlessly unconsciously, against a background and historical context that was profoundly different from the one in which he was writing.<sup>13</sup> Sorel's fierce criticism of parliamentary democracy, to name but one salient aspect, was developed in the post-Dreyfus context of a triumphant French third republic, but came to prominence in, and has generally been read in the light of, interwar years characterized by a Europe-wide crisis of parliamentary regimes.

It is in this latter context that Sorelian tropes found a welcome reception amongst a number of younger intellectuals and activists for whom the overthrow of the established order, whether political or cultural, was both a more urgent and, crucially, a more realistic possibility than it ever was for Sorel. In Great Britain, for example, Sorel's *Reflections on violence* were translated in 1915 by T.E. Hulme, who, in his introduction to the text, immediately enlisted

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<sup>12</sup> I owe this point about the significance of Sorel's immediate reception to Eric Brandom. See his *Georges Sorel, Autonomy and Violence in the Third Republic* (PhD thesis, Duke University: 2012), available at <http://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/6126>, last accessed 1/1/2014, pp. 456-7.

<sup>13</sup> Hence the frequent use of the term 'prophet', to suggest that Sorel had in some way foreseen, and in some way belonged to, an interwar era that, as a matter of historical record, did not shape his thought in the slightest.

Sorel in his own intellectual battle against the optimistic philosophy of ‘democratic romanticism’.<sup>14</sup> Predictably, it was Sorel’s moral pessimism, his disdain for the facile progressivism of the French bourgeoisie, and the critique of parliamentary democracy which were at the centre of Hulme’s introduction: it is significant that Sorel’s Marxism is mentioned only to be dismissed as ‘the part of his thesis that is concerned with facts, and it would be impertinent on my part to offer any commentary on it.’<sup>15</sup> In this way, a Marxist is transformed into a politically neutral critic of modernity. In Weimar Germany experimenting with parliamentarism and shaken by communist revolutionary attempts, Sorel’s *Reflections* caught the attention of both Walter Benjamin, who engaged with Sorel’s book in his 1921 ‘Critique of violence’<sup>16</sup>, and Carl Schmitt.<sup>17</sup> The emphasis of Schmitt’s reading fell on the revolutionary potential of the ‘irrationalist theories of the use of force’ that he took Sorel to represent.<sup>18</sup> The political myth, for Schmitt, has the advantage of never entering into the discursive frame that characterizes bourgeois parliamentarism, and thus its insurrectionary potential is greater, because it is the expression not of a specific understanding of historical development but of ‘the depths of a genuine life instinct’: it is capable of unleashing against the parliamentary order nothing less than ‘a new storm of historical life.’<sup>19</sup> Despite a number

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Ernest Hulme, ‘Reflections on violence’ [1915] in his *Speculations*, ed. by Herbert Read (London, Kegan Paul: 1936), p. 255.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259. Another interesting aspect of Hulme’s introduction is the recurring dichotomy between romantic modernity and what he refers to as ‘the classical attitude’ (p. 259). The distinction, for Hulme, can be defined as the difference between the belief in man’s natural goodness and the belief in original sin. It is a safe bet to identify in Hulme’s introduction the origin of Eliot’s reference to ‘the pessimistic, classical view’ in the poet’s review of the *Reflections*. Furthermore, it is an equally safe bet to see in Hulme’s Sorel the real target of Cole’s attacks.

<sup>16</sup> See Walter Benjamin, ‘Critique of violence’ [1921] in Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press: 1996), pp. 236-52. Benjamin’s highly obscure text failed to have a substantial impact in shaping Sorel’s reception, despite the tendentially sympathetic stance taken *vis à vis* Sorel’s ‘deep, moral, and genuinely revolutionary conception’ (p. 246). The article was originally published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, a sociology journal in which Benjamin’s highly philosophical text appeared together with essays by Roberto Michels, Max Weber, and Hans Kelsen and looked, according to Gershom Scholem, ‘quite out of place’. See Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin, the story of a friendship*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York, New York Review Books: 2001), p. 114. For a more detailed account of Benjamin’s reading, see Chryssoula Kambas, ‘Walter Benjamin lecteur des « Réflexions sur la violence »’, *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 2, 1984, pp. 71-89.

<sup>17</sup> On those readings, see Jan-Werner Müller, ‘Myth, law and order: Schmitt and Benjamin read *Reflections on violence*’, *History of European Ideas* 29, 2003, pp. 459-73. As Müller points out, his text is ‘not concerned with the adequacy of Schmitt’s and Benjamin’s interpretations of Sorel’, an enterprise that he dubs as ‘methodologically both dubious and fruitless’ (p. 460n). One of the fruits that such an enterprise would bear, however, would be the ability to distinguish between Sorelian ideas and their interwar interpretations. This would allow Müller to avoid mistakenly claiming that ‘any myth ensuring moral regeneration would have been attractive’ to Sorel (p. 464) or that Sorel wished ‘for a permanent struggle holding off moral degeneration’ (p. 467).

<sup>18</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The crisis of parliamentary democracy* [1923], trans. by Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA, MIT University Press), pp. 65-76.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

of important caveats that temper this ‘irrationalist’ and, in essence, politically blind reading<sup>20</sup>, the emphases of Schmitt’s analysis are indicative of the interwar concerns that animated him: cast essentially as a critic of parliamentarianism, Sorel is portrayed as a theorist whose force lies in his political blindness and insistence on the absolute, almost moral, necessity of action.

If in Germany and the United Kingdom Sorel’s immediate reception was thus predominantly intellectual and focussed either on the cultural critique of the bourgeoisie, or on the antiparliamentarian potential of a ‘theory of the use of force’, in Latin countries such as France and Italy the impact was more evidently political, and, importantly, ideologically transversal, appealing to both the left and the right. An indicative example of Sorel’s ambivalent political legacy in France is constituted by the writings of the ephemeral *Cercle Proudhon*, a group animated, amongst others, by two disciples of Sorel – Edouard Berth and Georges Valois<sup>21</sup> – and characterized by the attempt to refashion a number of important Sorelian ideas in a nationalist and proto-fascist key.<sup>22</sup> In Italy, if we leave aside Gramsci’s references in the *Quaderni*, the Fascist regime openly claimed Sorel as one of its intellectual fathers, making a strong contribution to the idea that Sorel’s texts were, after all, neutral with regards to political distinctions between right and left.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Despite the overwhelming emphasis given to the instinctiveness and blindness of the political and social energies released by myth, Schmitt’s reading is perceptive enough to understand that this is not the whole story. He cannot avoid, for example, but noticing that Sorel’s proletarians are defined in economic terms, and that this presupposes a commitment to what Schmitt calls ‘the economic-technical rationalism of the bourgeois economy’ (p. 73). Schmitt, moreover, has an intuitive understanding of the circumstantial role of myth in Sorel’s theory, revealed as he writes that ‘should this economic order develop even further, should production intensify even more, which Sorel also obviously wants, then the proletariat must renounce its myth.’ (p. 73). The fact that, despite this important caveat, Schmitt sees in Sorel essentially an irrationalist theorist of blind activism is a good indication of the importance of the distortive effects of interwar concerns in his interpretation of the French thinker.

<sup>21</sup> Originally named Alfred-Georges Gressent, Valois chose his new royalist family name after he became involved with the *Action Française* in 1906.

<sup>22</sup> In the words of Berth, ‘The *Cercle Proudhon* has been established to convince nationalists that the syndicalist ideal does not necessarily imply national abdication and to explain to syndicalist that the nationalist ideal equally does not automatically lead to a program of social peace.’ Jean Darville [Edouard Berth], ‘Satellites de la ploutocratie’, *Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon* 1 (5-6), 1912, p. 210. ‘Le *Cercle Proudhon* a été fondé pour essayer de persuader aux uns que l’idéal syndical n’implique pas forcément l’abdication nationale et aux autres que l’idéal nationaliste ne comporte pas non plus nécessairement un programme de paix sociale.’

<sup>23</sup> It was, in fact, Mussolini who bears perhaps the greatest responsibility for the association of Sorel with Italian Fascism. In the article, co-authored with Giovanni Gentile, on Fascism in the 1932 *Enciclopedia Italiana* we read that ‘...in the great stream of Fascism are to be found ideas that began with Sorel, with Péguy, with Lagardelle in the *Mouvement Socialiste*, and with the Italian syndicalist movement, which... was sounding a new note in Italian socialist circles... through Olivetti’s *Pagine Libere*, Orano’s *La Lupa*, and Enrico Leone’s *Divenire Sociale*.’ The syndicalist *Divenire Sociale* was one of the principal journals through which Sorelian ideas arrived in Italy – it is in this publication that the first drafts of the *Reflections on violence* were published. It is worth adding that in September of the same year Mussolini, in an interview to the French magazine *L’Illustration*, declared Sorel to have been his inspiration: ‘Georges Sorel a été mon maître. J’estime avec lui qu’à un moment donné la violence est nécessaire. La violence est morale. Toutefois, elle ne doit pas dépasser



When the *Reflections on violence* are read through the filter of their immediate interwar reception, and when they are taken in isolation from the rest of Sorel's work, they may indeed convey the impression of radicalism for radicalism's sake and of a revolutionary urge more concerned with the destruction of the bourgeois order than with the realization of socialism. But this conflation of Sorel's ideas with their interwar understanding produces, unsurprisingly, an historically distorted understanding of Sorel, not only because it is an understanding based almost exclusively on the *Reflections*, but mostly because it gives an historically problematic prominence to those aspects of the text that most resonated with its younger readers, such as the critique of parliamentarism, or the tone with which Sorel calls for uncompromising political militancy. It is, in other words, a conflation that is based on the inability to bring out the fact that Europe before and after the Great War were profoundly different.

To go against the tendency to read Sorel against the background of the European interwar and of the ensuing dictatorships, it is necessary to recognize the difference between the context in which Sorel's ideas were elaborated and the one in which they were first received, that is, the difference between Sorel's third republic and the traumatized and revolutionary Europe of the interwar years. What Sorel and his generation had witnessed were developments – such as the increasing need for the organization of exceedingly complex productive systems, the growth of the role of the state in economic and social life, the incorporation of the working classes and their organizations into increasingly solid national frameworks – that were to reveal their full consequences not only, or even principally, in the First World War, but also in the large organized economies characteristic of advanced capitalist and socialist countries of the 1930s and 1940s. The world in which Sorel lived and about which Sorel wrote was not the one in which these developments had fully come to their maturity. It is significant that Sorel himself seemed to have been aware of the historical break constituted by the war. Writing to Benedetto Croce at the beginning of the hostilities, he admitted that the latest developments were 'weighing me down' and that 'we enter an era newer than the one of the Revolution'. 'I

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une certaine mesure. Pour ma part, je ne donnerais pas la ciguë au philosophe... Beaucoup de livres qui sont contraires à la doctrine fasciste circulent librement en Italie.' Gramsci might have had something to object to the sentence about hemlock and philosophers, and I would suggest to take the Sorelian references with the same care with which one should welcome this public display of tolerance by a dictator. The original version of the Encyclopaedia article on Fascism is available at [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fascismo\\_\(Enciclopedia\\_Italiana\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fascismo_(Enciclopedia_Italiana)/) (last accessed 4/7/2014). For the interview see Émile Schreiber, 'Entretien avec Mussolini', *L'Illustration* n° 4672, 17 September 1932, p. 82.

am' he continued 'a man of the past, I have nothing more to say to men who will be able to loudly affirm their Jacobin principles...'<sup>24</sup>

The failure to separate Sorel from various interwar readings of the *Reflections* has continued to characterize interpretations of his work even after the Second World War. In the Anglophone world, this conflation gave birth to the view of Sorel as a precursor of totalitarianism. Taking as its starting point Sorel's ambiguous political legacy and connecting it to the supposed 'irrationalism' of his wider philosophical stance, a number of commentators read Sorel as a thinker responsible for paving the way for the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. An excellent example is provided by Edward Shils' introduction to a 1950 American edition of the *Reflections*:

'In France and Germany [in the late 1920s] there was an upsurge of those forces which Sorel had regarded as the signs of a moral renaissance. Both Fascism and Communism were separatist, they both believed in the need for internal purification and in the unredeemability of the outer world by the use of reason or through gradual modification. Both believed it could be saved only by conversion or conquest; both believed in the violent refusal to compromise and in the violent disruption of the institutions of compromise; both expected a total apocalyptic transformation and both proclaimed the guidance or manipulation of this transformation by an elite of consecrated warriors bound together in tense solidarity. (They differed in their explicit judgments of the intrinsic moral worth of violence and here the Fascists were closer to Sorel's own position). The fact that both were highly bureaucratic and that both schemed and pulled wires and used the whole bag of demagogic tricks compounded with the techniques of mass communications showed that in practice Sorel's politics, when brought into the presence of the actual problems of acquiring and exercising power, became, despite his devotion to absolute values, the politics of an intellectual dilettante. Sorel's type of apocalyptic utopianism ends more corruptly and diverges further from the right end of politics than the politics of piecemeal increments.'<sup>25</sup>

This extremely dense passage contains examples of virtually all the shortcomings of the received opinion on Sorel. It begins with the mistaken assumption that Sorel's understanding of the revolution is an insurrectionist one, capable of being carried through by a militant minority. Consequently, and just as mistakenly, it accuses Sorel of political dilettantism, arguing that the capture of the state by a militant minority will lead to the reproduction of the oppressive statist practices. It is ironical that Sorel should be accused of ignoring a dynamic

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<sup>24</sup> Georges Sorel, letter to Benedetto Croce on 22/9/1914 in Georges Sorel, 'Lettere di Georges Sorel a Benedetto Croce', *La Critica* 27, 1929, p. 51. 'Les événements m'accablent ; je sens que nous entrons dans une ère plus nouvelle que n'a été celle de la Révolution... Je suis un homme du passé, je n'ai plus rien à dire à des hommes qui vont pouvoir affirmer hautement leurs principes jacobins...'

<sup>25</sup> Edward Shils, 'Georges Sorel: Introduction to the American Edition' in Georges Sorel, *Reflections on violence*, trans. by Thomas Ernest Hulme (Glencoe, IL, Dover Publications: 1950), p. 23.

that he gave so much thought to. Equally problematic is the connection with ‘Fascism and Communism’. By 1950, Sorel’s legacy as an ambiguous figure able to be reclaimed by both the right and the left had been established by the impact of his first, ideologically transversal, reception. In America, it was the German reception of Sorel that exerted a decisive influence. Ten years before the publication of his introduction to the *Reflections*, Shils had translated into English Ernst Fraenkel’s *The Dual State*, an analysis of the National Socialist juridical system in which Sorel is cast as an anticipator of German Fascism. The picture painted of Sorel is the usual one:

‘Sorel stripped the class struggle of its visionary goal and approved it as a movement for its own sake. He transformed it into a myth because, to him, the movement was everything and the goal was nothing. Thus Sorel became the prophet of politics without ultimate goal – the advocate of action for the sake of action.’<sup>26</sup>

The consequence of this supposed renunciation to political rationality is a kind of political existentialism that will lead its practitioners to embracing whatever historical movement appears the strongest at a given moment. Fraenkel continues:

‘Whoever believes that political action is nothing more than acquiescence in the laws of social development will share the fate of Sorel. Like Sorel, he will pass from Syndicalism to *l’Action Française*; like Mussolini, a disciple of Sorel, he will shift from Socialism to Fascism; like Carl Schmitt, an admirer of Sorel, he will desert Political Catholicism for National-Socialism, as soon as he is convinced that integral nationalism is the order of the day.’<sup>27</sup>

The references to Schmitt, to Mussolini, and to the *Action Française* reveal the mistake highlighted above, namely the failure to separate Sorel from his interwar reception and appropriation. Fraenkel’s situation, that of a German-Jewish émigré to the United States, may explain and excuse his urgency to find intellectual ancestors to the German tragedy from which he had fled.<sup>28</sup> With these premises, it should be no surprise that in early Cold War America Sorel was brought up again and used as a warning against the dreadful consequences of departing too much from the principles of liberal democracy. If Shils’ treatment of

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<sup>26</sup> Ernst Fraenkel, *The Dual State. A contribution to the theory of dictatorship* [1941], trans. by Edward Shils (New York, Octagon Books: 1969), p. 130. The sentence about preferring the movement to the goal, in fact, is Eduard Bernstein’s, not Sorel’s.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Sorel never ‘switched’ to *l’Action Française*; Mussolini, as we have seen, once in power claimed Sorel as his intellectual master, but disagreed with him quite a bit in his socialist years. This whole passage thus appears to be almost entirely based on the reference to Schmitt who had, indeed, suggested, by using Mussolini’s example, that Sorel’s theory of myth could be cleansed of its proletarian integument and readapted in a nationalist key. See *Crisis of parliamentary democracy*, pp. 74-6.

<sup>28</sup> Machiavelli and Hegel are described, together with Sorel, as ‘spiritual ancestors of National-Socialism’. Ibid.

‘Fascism and Communism’ as kindred political forms, both in opposition to ‘the free society’, already signals this ideological use of Sorel, the educational and almost admonishing tone constitutes its best indicator. In justifying the republication of the text, Shils argues that *Reflections* is a text worth reading insofar as ‘it makes us more aware of the many ways in which the present political attitudes and actions of those who place themselves on the side of the free society are corrupted by the apocalyptic view of history and society.’<sup>29</sup>

### **NEW CURRENTS IN SORELIAN SCHOLARSHIP**

Despite the decline in popularity of the notion of totalitarianism, the toxic blend of philosophical irrationalism, aestheticizing but politically empty revolutionism and, above all, ideological ambiguity continued – and continues – to constitute the frame of reference for a large number of twentieth century readings of Sorel. Nonetheless, in spite of the persistence of these interpretative categories in the 1950s and 1960s, the increasing historical distance between Sorel’s writings and new generations of commentators allowed, somewhat subterraneously, a significant widening of the caricatural image, allowing the emergence of new elements capable, eventually and potentially, of subverting the consensus. Generally speaking then, the most important fact of those decades is the appearance of a number of works on Sorel that, without openly challenging the established interpretation, begin to probe more deeply Sorel’s writings, and not that rarely develop analyses whose consequences allow quite new conclusions.

Even in the Anglophone world, where the irrationalist and totalitarian interpretation of Sorel flourished and became canonical, we see already in the 1950s a number of works that, beyond the lip service paid to the established opinion, manage to do justice to the vastness and complexity of Sorel’s production and, in so doing, begin to highlight the limits of the Sorelian legend. Richard Humphrey’s 1951 *Prophet without honour* in spite of a title that obviously reflects the ideas that constitute Sorel’s dark legend, develops a sophisticated interpretation of Sorel’s thought on the basis of the epistemological opposition between artificial rationality

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 25. For a chronologically wider analysis of the development of and of some issues raised by this ‘totalitarian’ reading of Sorel see Brandom, *Sorel*, pp. 485-509. Brandom’s fascinating contention is that the main concern in the Cold War liberals’ engagement with Sorel was not principally that of constructing a genealogy of totalitarianism but, instead, that of utilising this genealogy to neutralize the New Left of the 1960s. Though the treatment of Jacob Talmon’s writings on Sorel is fascinating and rather convincing, the inclusion of Isaiah Berlin in this narrative appears more problematic, if only because his treatment of Sorel contains so much more than facile condemnations of the New Left and, crucially, because it identifies a number of philosophical traits of Sorel’s thought, anti-rationalism most saliently, to which Berlin was unambiguously sympathetic.

and natural chaos.<sup>30</sup> In the same year, James Meisel published his *Genesis of Georges Sorel*, a work that, in dealing with Sorel's work in its entirety from the first writings of the late 1880s until the posthumous interwar appropriations, is probably the first serious scholarly attempt in English to go beyond interpretations based on snippets from the *Reflections*.<sup>31</sup> Meisel brought up the important question of Sorel's political liberalism, tempered the Bergsonian influence and the irrationalist reading and, even more surprisingly, began to highlight the difference between Sorel and Sorelianism. But established ideas functional to ideological discourses are difficult to eradicate, as a surreal review of Meisel's work in *Political Science Quarterly* demonstrates. Though the reviewer enthusiastically agrees with every point made in the book, he refuses to accept the consequence of Meisel's arguments, and insists that, in spite of every point he has conceded, Sorel's argument in the *Reflections* remains at least partly 'revolutionary, increasingly authoritarian, and irrationalist'.<sup>32</sup>

It is the curious coexistence of such contrasting tendencies that characterizes the Sorelian scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, there is an established reading that is never openly or polemically challenged; on the other, thanks to the use of new sources and material, a deeper understanding of Sorel's complexity arises that makes such a reading more problematic. Even a book like Michael's Curtis' *Three against the Third Republic*, in which Sorel is presented as essentially a proto-totalitarian critic of liberal democracy, represented, in its awareness of the vastness of Sorel's oeuvre and in its avoidance of a reading based predominantly on the *Reflections*, progress in terms of scholarship.<sup>33</sup> Henry Stuart Hughes' treatment of Sorel in his *Consciousness and society* is exemplary of this bipolarity. Hughes produces a contextually precise reading which allows him to do justice to Sorel's epistemology and to his concern for the possibility of social sciences; and yet, perhaps because the focus of the book is not on Sorel, it ends up by giving a reading that, though

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Humphrey, *Georges Sorel: prophet without honour* (New York, Octagon Books: 1951). The book still constitutes one of the clearest expositions of Sorel's philosophical thought. The book appears to have been amongst Isaiah Berlin's readings for his own portrait of Sorel. See Isaiah Berlin, 'Georges Sorel' [1974] in his *Against the Current* (London, Hogart: 1979), pp. 296-333.

<sup>31</sup> James H. Meisel, *The Genesis of Georges Sorel* (Ann Arbor, MI, Wahr Publishing: 1951).

<sup>32</sup> Scott H. Lytle, 'The Genesis of Georges Sorel by James H. Meisel', *Political Science Quarterly* 67(1), 1952, p. 153.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Curtis, *Three against the Third Republic: Sorel, Barrès, Maurras* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press: 1959).

much more nuanced and kinder to Sorel, is still reconcilable with the established consensus of Sorel as an irrationalist and politically dangerous thinker.<sup>34</sup>

In Sorel's own country, in those same years, the discourse on totalitarianism was nowhere as developed as it was in Cold War America. Nonetheless, the experience of Vichy remained powerful, and Sorel's very real rightist legacy did not work to his advantage in such a context: he remained associated on the one hand, to an image of theoretical confusion leading to political mistakes, and on the other, to that of a critic of the third republic. Sorel's Marxism did not appear as worthy of examination. In 1965, Louis Althusser famously complained, in his introduction to *Pour Marx*, that while Italy could boast Labriola and Gramsci, Russia Plekhanov and Lenin, and Germany Marx and Engels, France's only Marxist theorist was Sorel. It was not meant as a compliment.<sup>35</sup> With such premises, it is unsurprising that, for different reasons, two major works on Sorel of the time failed to produce the consequences that they could have produced. Georges Goriely's excellent *Le pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel* – a philosophically-oriented work that remains an important reference for contemporary scholars, stresses the 'concrete rationalism' of Sorel and begins to give prominence to his liberal-conservative ideological roots – fell on deaf ears.<sup>36</sup> As for Pierre Andreu's *Notre Maitre, M. Sorel*, the reasons for its inability to reopen the question of Sorel's interpretation have to do with the fact that, as the title suggests, Andreu was a Sorelian himself, and a right-wing one too. Despite its clear though never excessive partiality, the book remains the most thorough biographical work on Sorel, and contains a number of important sources that have failed to find other ways to the printed and mass distributed page.<sup>37</sup>

The real turn in Sorel scholarship occurred, both in the Francophone and the Anglophone worlds, in the late 1970s and the 1980s. If, on the one hand, it is in those years that, thanks to

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<sup>34</sup> See Henry Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and society: the reorientation of European social thought 1890-1930* [1958] (New York, Random House: 1977), pp. 33-66.

<sup>35</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx* [1965], trans. by Ben Brewster (London, Verso: 2005), p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Georges Goriely, *Le pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel* (Paris, Marcel Rivière: 1962). As Goriely recalled in 1986, when *Pluralisme dramatique* came out it went unnoticed and had to wait over thirty years to be discussed. 'L'ouvrage passa... totalement inaperçu. Il ne se trouva pas un seul journal pour en signaler ne serait-ce que l'existence... Aussi, quelle ne fut ma surprise d'abord d'être invité au premier colloque consacré à Sorel... et, surtout, d'apprendre à cette occasion que non seulement l'ouvrage avait trouvé des lecteurs, mais même qu'il avait suscité quelques vocations de recherche.' Goriely also gives an interesting testimony of Sorel's reputation in the late 1930s, when he began to be interested in him: 'Il aurait inspiré Lénine et Mussolini, voilà ce que mes enseignants en avaient entendu dire, et c'était déjà bien trop. C'est une époque dont on ne peut garder qu'un sinistre souvenir. L'esprit autoritaire ne cessait de monter dans ce qui restait de démocrates en Occident. La bourgeoisie bien pensante m'avait qu'éloges pour Mussolini, pour Salazar, soutenait le soulèvement franquiste.' Georges Goriely, 'Liberté et rationalité' in Charzat (ed.), *Cahiers de l'Herne : Georges Sorel*, pp. 107-8.

<sup>37</sup> Pierre Andreu, *Notre Maitre, M. Sorel* (Paris, Bernard Grasset: 1953).

a number of French and Anglophone scholars, there is for the first time an open challenge to the orthodox interpretation, on the other hand this is counterbalanced by the rejuvenation of the canon at the hands of the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell and his disciples. In France interest in Sorel's socialism and in his relationship with Marxism began to arise in the late 1970s: studies such as Daniel Lindenberg's *Marxisme Introuvable* or Michel Charzat's *Georges Sorel et la révolution au XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle* highlighted the originality and importance of Sorel's engagement with Marxism and sparked a new interest in his work.<sup>38</sup> As a result of these readings, a new generation of historians began working on Sorel and marked the beginning of a new phase of Sorelian studies.<sup>39</sup> In 1982, an international conference on Sorel was held at the *École Normale*, and in the following year the journal of the newly established *Société d'Études Soréliennes*, the *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, was launched.<sup>40</sup> Despite their initial tendency to focus on Sorel's understanding of socialism and of Marxism, what characterized most profoundly this 'new school' of Sorelian scholars was not a choice of primary issues or themes but, instead, the awareness of the limitations of the existing historiography on Sorel.<sup>41</sup> This brought not only the enthusiasm that accompanies those who see themselves as scholarly innovators, but also a patient work of critical exchange with the representatives of the established opinion.

Whilst this Sorelian renaissance of the 1980s found its institutional base in France, it was not an exclusively French phenomenon. The new current could draw on a number of works that,

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<sup>38</sup> Whereas Charzat's book is a more complete work, Lindenberg's series of short essays, in dealing with the question of French Marxism, emphasize Sorel's role as an important mediator between the German theory and the French intellectual milieu. See Michel Charzat, *Georges Sorel et la révolution au XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle* (Paris, Hachette: 1977) and Daniel Lindenberg, *Le Marxisme Introuvable* [1975] (Paris, UGE: 1979).

<sup>39</sup> Together with the abovementioned Charzat, the most well-known exponents of this school are Jacques Julliard, whose role in the movement was that of a tutelary figure, and Shlomo Sand, whose 1985 *L'Illusion du politique* constitutes a landmark study of Sorel's Marxism. The book, a published version of his doctoral research, deals with Sorel's Marxism without even dedicating a chapter to the *Reflections*. The framework he sets up, however, constitutes a solid base from which to develop an alternative reading of that text. See Shlomo Sand, *L'Illusion du politique : Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900* (Paris, La découverte : 1985).

<sup>40</sup> The proceedings of the conference were published as Jacques Julliard and Shlomo Sand (eds), *Georges Sorel en son temps* (Paris, Seuil: 1985); the volume contains, at the end (pp. 425-66), the most complete bibliography of Sorel's works, prepared by Shlomo Sand.

<sup>41</sup> Highly revealing sources are both Jacques Julliard's opening of the *Cahiers Georges Sorel* and the review, in the same journal, of the conference proceedings by the late Colette Chambelland – former librarian at the *Musée Social* and key figure in the Sorelian renaissance of the 1980s. The review in particular shows this self-understanding as innovators. Chambelland explains summarily a number of reasons for the neglect of Sorel, and argues that 'after this conference, after the first two numbers of the *Cahiers Sorel*, with the *Cahier de l'Herne* dedicated to Sorel it appears clear that it is necessary to acknowledge what is established and begin working in new directions.' (p. 154). 'On sent bien, après ce colloque, après les deux premiers *Cahiers Sorel*, avec le *Cahier de l'Herne* sur Sorel qu'il faut prendre acte de ce qui est établi et travailler dans de nouvelles directions.' See Jacques Julliard, 'Présentation', *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 1, 1983, pp. 5-6 and Colette Chambelland, 'Georges Sorel en son temps, sous la direction de Jacques Julliard et Shlomo Sand', *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 3, 1985, pp. 153-5.

even beyond France, had begun to abandon or, at least, to set aside, the old interpretative categories of irrationalism, violence, and totalitarianism. The two main Anglophone representatives of this tendency are Jeremy Jennings and John Stanley, two historians who worked in association with the French group of the *Société Sorélienne* and, consequently, whose work on Sorel was characterized by the awareness of the shortcomings of the Sorelian legend. In order to overcome the legend, Colette Chambelland had argued that it was fundamental to ‘read Sorel and to make people read him’<sup>42</sup>: this is what John Stanley had been doing since the 1970s. For over 20 years, he worked to make accessible to the English reader a large number of Sorel’s writings, and his work culminated in the publication of two volumes of collected Sorelian works in 1976 and 1990.<sup>43</sup> In between these two volumes, Stanley published his own monograph on Sorel, in which he presented an extremely nuanced and source-rich examination of Sorel’s thought as a sociologist of morality.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to Stanley’s book, Jeremy Jennings’ *Sorel* is a much shorter work that does an excellent task of synthesizing the wealth of material in order to produce a portrait of Sorel centred on his pluralism.<sup>45</sup>

This insistence on pluralism is revealing of an important trait of the new Sorelian scholarship of the 1980s, especially its Anglophone version, namely the tendency to produce vast overviews of Sorel’s thought. We shall come back to this point later, but here we shall merely highlight that if, on the one hand, this approach has the merit of doing justice to the complexity of Sorel’s thought, on the other it runs the risk, especially if – as Jennings does – the emphasis is placed on pluralism, of being misunderstood and taken as an indication of Sorel’s, so to speak, systematic incoherence. If Jennings’ 1985 book, then, is still one of the two main sources for contemporary work in English on Sorel, this has only partially to do with its synthetic style and readable prose. It also has quite a bit to do with the fact that the

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<sup>42</sup> Chambelland, ‘*Georges Sorel en son temps*’, p. 154. ‘Pour aussi élémentaire que cela puisse paraître, il faut d’abord lire Sorel et le donner à lire...’

<sup>43</sup> John Stanley, *From Georges Sorel. Essays in socialism and philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1976) and John Stanley, *From Georges Sorel, volume 2. Hermeneutics and the sciences* (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers: 1990). As can be gathered by the titles, the first volume concentrates on socialism whereas the second on epistemology and the philosophy of science. In addition to those, Stanley also translated the *Illusions du progrès* and the incredibly important and generally neglected *Insegnamenti sociali dell’economia contemporanea*. Georges Sorel, *Social foundations of contemporary economics*, trans. by John Stanley (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers: 1984); Georges Sorel, *The illusions of progress*, trans. by John Stanley (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1969).

<sup>44</sup> John Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue*, (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press: 1981).

<sup>45</sup> Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel. The character and development of his thought* (Hong Kong, Macmillan: 1985).



insistence on pluralism can easily be understood as an indication of Sorelian incoherence, and consequently can be used within the framework of the Sorelian legend.<sup>46</sup>

The other main contemporary Anglophone sources of ideas about Sorel are the works of the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell and his school. Sternhell largely accepts the standard image of Sorel, and his reading is substantially a variation on the usual themes of irrationalism, political ambiguity, and heroic violence. What allowed his work to emerge from, and consequently renew, the aging consensus in the 1980s, is that this standard reading of Sorel was woven into an important and sophisticated intellectual genealogy of Fascism that cannot be dismissed as easily as the mistaken reading of Sorel.<sup>47</sup> For Sternhell, Sorel is responsible for transforming, through his irrationalist revision, the Enlightenment ideology of Marxism into ‘a neutral weapon of war that could be used against the bourgeois order not only by the proletariat but by society as a whole.’<sup>48</sup> Sorel’s revisionism essentially breaks the Marxian necessity of the link between proletariat and revolution, opening the space for the possibility of a ‘Marxism’ that sees the undivided national community as the agent of revolutionary change. This thesis, as already noted, is not devoid of value and most definitively captures important aspects of Sorel’s legacy. However, when reading Sternhell, one is often under the impression that the overall narrative is so important that the individual protagonists of the story being told are forced in the role in which they need to be. This is certainly the case of Sorel, whose interpretation is misleading and substantially incorrect.

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<sup>46</sup> This is, for example, what Jan-Werner Müller does in his abovementioned article on Schmitt and Benjamin’s readings of Sorel. Citing a passage in Jennings’ introduction that underlines the pluralism of Sorel’s thought, Müller takes this pluralism as an obstacle prohibiting the scholar from claiming anything about Sorel. Pluralism however is not absence of meaning; and a commitment to pluralism does not make a study of a pluralist thinker impossible. Müller himself, as we have seen, makes some assertive, though misleading, claims about Sorel. Pluralism, it appears, is an interpretative problem only in some cases. See Müller, ‘Myth, law and order’, p. 460n.

<sup>47</sup> Starting from his doctoral work on Maurice Barrès, published with Armand Colin in 1972, Sternhell has continuously widened and taken to higher levels of abstraction his interest into the intellectual world of the revolutionary right. So, from studies of Barrès’ nationalism, we move to ideological taxonomies of Fascism, from there we move to ‘intellectual revolts against liberal democracy’ and finally to the probably excessively ambitious attempt to write an intellectual history of the Counter-Enlightenment. See Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français* (Paris, Colin: 1972); *La droite révolutionnaire, 1885-1914. Les origines françaises du fascisme* (Paris, Seuil: 1978); *Ni droite ni gauche. L’idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris, Seuil: 1983); with Maia Asheri and Mario Sznajder, *Naissance de l’idéologie fasciste* (Paris, Fayard: 1989); (ed.), *The intellectual revolt against liberal democracy, 1870-1945* (Jerusalem, Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities: 1996); *Les Anti-Lumières* [2006] (Paris, Gallimard: 2010). With the exception of the work on Barrès and *Droite révolutionnaire*, the other works have been translated into English by Princeton University Press.

<sup>48</sup> Zeev Sternhell, Maia Asheri, and Mario Sznajder, *The birth of fascist ideology. From cultural rebellion to political revolution* [1989], trans. by David Maisel (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press: 1994), p. 37.

But the overall value of Sternhell's thesis on the 'revolutionary right' and on the French origins of Fascism, his ability to create 'a coherent historical object by connecting previously scattered data', shielded a mistaken reading of Sorel from excessively damaging critique.<sup>49</sup> The historians grouped around the *Société d'études Soréliennes* represented the only exception. The simultaneous presence of two conflicting readings of Sorel – both developed between the late 1970s and the 1980s – could not but generate skirmishes. Thus, if in the first numbers of the *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, Michel Charzat defined Sorel's association with Fascism as a 'coriaceous legend', and John Stanley, reviewing Sternhell's *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste*, spoke of the Israeli's 'arbitrary method', Sternhell, on his part, described the new tendencies in Sorelian scholarship as expressions of 'a clique of loyal followers, with one or two unbelievers' casting doubt on the novelty of their findings.<sup>50</sup> But Sternhell's thesis, because of its wider ambitions, essentially remained untouched, and its international success popularised a reading of Sorel that had important shortcomings. The result was a powerful rejuvenation of the Sorelian legend of the interwar, just at the time when this standard view of Sorel was being openly challenged.

It is thus still not uncommon to find a caricature of Sorel in – mostly Anglophone, it has to be said – perplexing genealogies of the dark and disruptive forces of unreason and, still to this day, totalitarianism.<sup>51</sup> But if we can amply excuse not only Fraenkel's search for the spiritual fathers of National Socialism, but also Edward Shils' eagerness to defend the 'free society' in 1950s America, Richard Wolin's more recent Sorel, who is claimed to view 'the regenerative potential of revolutionary violence as a sacrosanct end in itself'<sup>52</sup>, or Mark Antliff's thinker who is believed to see Bergson as 'the harbinger of a spiritual revolution opposed to the

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<sup>49</sup> Maurice Agulhon, 'Zeev Sternhell – *La droite révolutionnaire*', *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 35(6), 1980, p. 1308. '...mais surtout il crée un objet historique cohérent en regroupant des connaissances jusqu'ici dispersées...'

<sup>50</sup> See Michel Charzat, 'Georges Sorel et le Fascisme. Éléments d'explication d'une légende tenace', *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, 1, 1983, pp. 37-51 ; John Stanley, 'Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, Maja Asheri, *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste*', *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 7, 1989, p. 213; Sternhell et al, *Birth of fascist ideology*, pp. 263-4.

<sup>51</sup> See Richard Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism* (London, Palgrave Macmillan: 2012), pp. 224-34 and also Arthur Versluis' rather sweeping *The New Inquisitions. Heretic Hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2006), pp. 35-41. Despite some limitations, Versluis' book is to be welcomed because Versluis is a religious historian, and Sorel dedicated a great deal of time and energy to questions of religious history and theology.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Wolin, *The seduction of unreason. The intellectual romance with fascism from Nietzsche to postmodernism* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press: 2004) p. 244. Wolin's mistake is the one highlighted in the previous pages: rather than relying on Sorel, he relies on an interwar German reading of Sorel, in this case Walter Benjamin's, which he proceeds to cite straight after the passage quoted, as if this were reliable and unproblematic evidence of Sorel's ideas.

rationalist and materialist premises undergirding democratic ideology'<sup>53</sup> have no historical excuses. Whilst historical circumstances might explain why and how Fraenkel and Shils wrote about Sorel, more recent versions of the Sorelian legend would be unthinkable without Sternhell's work of the 1980s. A quick glance at the bibliographical references confirms it. With the exception of Versluis, Sternhell is central in virtually all of these readings of Sorel – from Antliff to Shorten, from Wolin to Jan Werner Mueller's pages on Sorel in his recent *Contesting Democracy*.<sup>54</sup> Sorel's legend, in other words, is still very much alive and well. It is thus necessary to highlight some of its shortcomings and, in doing so, to outline the two main argumentative lines of the thesis.

## **TWO CORE CONCEPTS OF THE SORELIAN LEGEND: VIOLENCE AND MYTH**

Despite their limits, it would be mistaken to suggest the caricature of Sorel is completely off the mark and based on a complete falsification of his thought. This is not the case. As with any caricature, this one too identifies important aspects of Sorel's oeuvre but, through the combination of decontextualisation and overreliance on the *Reflections* outlined above, misinterprets them and ends up with a severely distorted historical understanding of Sorel's ideas. Historical error, in this case, is not so much a question of factual inaccuracy, but of the misinterpretation of elements that are substantially correct. Even if, in other words, the individual traits are representative, the overall portrait is deceiving. It is thus pivotal to highlight what the standard understanding ignores, and to show how an historically accurate reading of Sorel diverges rather substantially from the historiographical legend. Rectification, in this case, is principally then a question of historicization: it must proceed by juxtaposing the caricatural and the historical Sorel and show that the divergence between the two warrants a substantially different reading, bearing in mind Skinner's maxim that no historical account of a thinker can 'survive the demonstration that it was based on criteria of description and

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<sup>53</sup> Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism. The mobilization of myth, art, and culture in France, 1909-1939* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press: 2007), p. 64. The idea that a Marxist should oppose materialism begs an explanation. More in general, Antliff's shortcomings derive from the excessive facility with which he deals with the 'antirationalist philosopher Henri Bergson' (p. 4) and with the Bergsonian aspects of Sorel's thought. At times, the oversimplification outgrows into factual error, such as when Antliff claims that Sorel's discovery of Bergson coincides with his syndicalist phase (p. 4). Sorel's first and most decisive engagement with Bergson, in fact, happens almost a decade earlier, in 1894. A meeting with the 'antirationalist philosopher' in the years preceding Sorel's elaboration of the concept of myth would fit well the simplistic and taxonomic narrative, but things are, as we shall see, more complex than this.

<sup>54</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy. Political Ideas in Twentieth Century Europe* (London, Yale University Press: 2011), pp. 93-101.

classification not available to the agent'.<sup>55</sup> In doing so, we shall also begin to outline the main claims of the thesis.

Even a superficial juxtaposition of the historical Sorel with the legendary figure created by decades of historiographical approximations leads to surprising results. Let us confront, for example, the idea of Sorel as a precursor of totalitarianism with Sorel's own views on the role of the state in political society. As noted, at the outbreak of the Great War Sorel lamented the dawning of an era that he thought would be dominated by 'Jacobin principles'. In Sorel's vocabulary, Jacobinism always refers to the excesses of a statist power that he characterizes as particularly perverse because it is informed by a substantial vision of the good. This state, which Sorel is fond of comparing not only to the Jacobins, but also to the Jesuits and whose intellectual genealogy he traces as far back as to Plato and his dangerous philosophical monism, is a recurrent target of Sorel's attacks, and, after 1902, becomes the ever-present enemy of the proletariat. The terms in which Sorel condemns statist power, in fact, remind one of twentieth century libertarianism and are highly surprising denunciations for a thinker of his generation. With this in mind, it is only by appealing to the very particular circumstances of Sorel's reception that it is possible to make sense of the fact that he has been cast as an anticipator of an all-embracing statist doctrine.

But if the totalitarian association can be dismissed relatively easily, other features of the received interpretation require a more careful treatment, precisely because they do, however unsatisfactorily, capture important aspects of Sorel's thought. Two elements deserve particular attention: Sorel's alleged irrationalism and his supposed belief that mobilization and violence are intrinsically valuable. Both of these claims are, as we stated, overwhelmingly based on readings of the *Reflections* and, at a superficial glance, they seem to be validated by Sorel's text. Does not Sorel argue that proletarian violence is based on myths, which he is careful to describe as devoid of indications regarding the transformation of society? Does he not claim that, precisely because proletarian violence is based on myth it cannot establish a new society but merely 'tends to the destruction of that [the bourgeois] order'?<sup>56</sup> Does he not suggest that the problem with bourgeois force is precisely that it is instrumental, i.e. that it is based on utopias, which are detailed plans of social transformation? Does he not, moreover,

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<sup>55</sup> Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas' [1969] in his *Vision of politics. Volume I: Regarding method* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2002), p. 77. Of course, historical meaning is also the diachronically-established significance of a text or author: error, in this case, lies in the conflation, the failure to distinguish between Sorel's legacy and significance and his ideas.

<sup>56</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 165.

speak with outrage of bourgeois timidity, and hope for a frontal clash between capital and labour? Indeed, he does. Does this not amount to a glorification of violence for its own sake and to a refusal to think of social evolution through rational categories? It does not.

The problem with this reading lies in its lack of historicity and in the fact that it downplays or completely ignores the key contexts and background arguments that inform the reasoning outlined in the *Reflections*. The first substantial shortcoming consists in the absence of a proper understanding of Sorelian epistemology, which leads to excessively facile interpretations of Sorel's attacks on a specific type of rationality as commitments to scientific nihilism *tout court*. Myth, in particular, is taken as the clearest indication of Sorel's scientific nihilism. But this is mistaken. Epistemological reflection on the natural and the social sciences is a central and constant aspect of Sorel's thought, and his highly sophisticated epistemology is not that of an irrationalist. In the *Reflections* Sorel attacks a certain kind of social science – he mockingly labels it 'la petite science' – that, set on the path of error by its belief in social determinism, attempts to predict the future. But since, for Sorel, the social world is not regulated by causal relations but is, instead, an historical product of free human agency, the future is not a legitimate object of social science. 'Marxism' as Sorel repeatedly underlines in the *Reflections*, 'condemns every hypothesis about the future'.<sup>57</sup> To understand why Sorel thinks this, however, it is necessary to stop reading his passages on social science in the *Reflections* as self-standing arguments and, instead, to start weaving them into a longer narrative describing Sorel's epistemological thought. What this enquiry uncovers is a sophisticated epistemology characterized most profoundly by activism and historicism and a temperament that, though conscious of the limitations placed by such an epistemology on what social and natural sciences can claim and know, unambiguously refuses to proclaim the bankruptcy of rationality. Thus, whereas 'utopias' are bad social science, myths are aspects of the historical agency of human actors that shape history: they are not Platonic noble lies whose emotive appeal is necessary to mobilize masses that cannot be activated by scientific arguments.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>58</sup> See Sternhell et al., *Birth of fascist ideology*, p. 49, where we read that Sorel's attacks on historical determinism derive from the fact that 'Sorel saw that science did not activate the masses.' Sorel, Sternhell often forgets, is an intellectual and neither a politician nor a militant. He is a person with virtually no active experience of socialist politics. The 'activation of the masses' is a concern that is distant from the thoughts of a sociologist and historian; on the other hand, it is a preoccupation that we can easily imagine being important for the caricatural misanthrope obsessed with the idea of a collapse of the bourgeois order. Masses, for Sorel, do not need to be mobilized. Instead, if they are revolutionary masses, they will mobilize themselves, autonomously.

The second substantial shortcoming of the received interpretation is the minimization or total absence of Sorel's Marxism. At a general level, as suggested above, the misreading of Sorel's epistemological thought generates a misunderstanding of his Marxism, which tends to be seen as sufficiently heterodox not to be called Marxism at all. Cole, for example, tells us that Sorel 'fancied himself a Marxist, which he neither was nor could have been.'<sup>59</sup> The reason for this, argues Cole, is that, though Sorel liked the idea of social conflict 'it was quite alien to his attitude to regard the proletariat as being carried onwards to inevitable victory by the advance of the powers of production.'<sup>60</sup> This is quite simply, and spectacularly, mistaken, just as much as the idea that Sorel's engagement with Marx's doctrines 'expunged materialism and even economics almost entirely from Marxism'.<sup>61</sup> When this mistaken general conviction is applied to the analysis of the *Reflections*, it produces interpretative disasters. If we abandon the idea of Sorel as a moralistic prophet of action we can begin to open our eyes to how steeped in Marxism is the argument of the *Reflections*. The opening of the book, in fact, is dedicated to a defence of a Marxian understanding of the proletariat as a social class defined in economic terms: Sorel laments the fact that present conditions lead to a loss of this class specificity, with the result that 'the term "proletariat" becomes synonymous with the oppressed; and there are oppressed in all classes'.<sup>62</sup>

This already should put in serious doubt that violence, and the combative spirit that it generates in those that practice it, are the goals pursued by Sorel. Instead, as a Marxist, Sorel's goal is the realization of what he calls the 'civilization of producers', i.e. the society resulting from the historical triumph of a social class which he is careful to define in very precise Marxian terms. The great problem that animates the *Reflections* is how to deal with social, political, and economic conditions that actively prevent the development of working class institutions. In other words, Sorel's central concern in the book is not, as has mistakenly been argued, the moral rejuvenation of France or Europe, but the reinstatement of conditions in which the proletariat and its institutions can flourish. It is for this purpose that violence is

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How will they do it? Partially, through the creation of myths, which are 'a spontaneous product' (*Reflections*, p. 140) and thus cannot be imposed upon the proletariat, but, instead, are *expressive* of their historical experience. Sorel, thus, neither suggests the creation of myths in order to mobilize the masses, nor does he argue that historical transformations occur as the result of a small group of people galvanized by one such myth. He does, however, remark that a social group whose time has come will produce, spontaneously, some such mobilizing image.

<sup>59</sup> Cole, *Second International*, p. 382.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, p. 99. The source of this claim is, as can be easily verified, Sternhell.

<sup>62</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 50.

required. And what are these conditions that proletarian violence can bring about? In spite of the much-emphasized heterodoxy of his Marxism, Sorel gives a standard Marxian answer:

‘The Marxist theory of revolution assumes that capitalism will be struck to the heart while it is still full of vitality, when it achieves its historical mission of complete industrial efficiency and whilst the economy is still advancing’<sup>63</sup>

This, it should be underlined, constitutes a rather clear formulation of the belief in the connection between socialism and the ‘advance of the powers of production’, which Cole had insisted was absent in Sorel’s thought. *Pace* Cole, this belief is not only present, but absolutely central in the argument of the *Reflections*. The point is, however, more complex. Though Sorel believes, following Marx’s sketch of the ‘historical tendency of capitalist accumulation’, that only a vital capitalism can generate the historical conditions for socialism, he is also aware of living in an historical context in which the Marxian scheme of productive expansion and social polarization has become problematic and questionable. A number of economic and social developments have brought Marxism, for Sorel, to face what he calls the ‘new and very unforeseen fact’<sup>64</sup> of a bourgeoisie that, for the sake of social peace, is prepared to abandon, or, at least, temper and moderate, the capitalist logic of competition and productive expansion. Under these conditions, however, no proletarian institution that would be a genuinely alternative to bourgeois civilisation can hope to flourish. It is here that violence becomes important:

‘Must we believe that the Marxist conception is dead? By no means, because proletarian violence comes upon the scene at the very moment when the conception of social peace claims to moderate disputes; proletarian violence confines employers to their role as producers and tends to restore the class structure just when they seemed on the point of intermingling in the democratic morass.’<sup>65</sup>

The point here is not to examine in depth the arguments of the *Reflections*, but to show how, by taking Sorel’s Marxist credentials even slightly more seriously than is generally done, the conventional interpretation of Sorel as a theorist of heroic violence becomes much less convincing. Violence has a precise role, which is that of bringing about the economic conditions required for the development of proletarian institutions.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>64</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 78.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Sorel’s rationale for proletarian violence in the *Reflections* constitutes an alternative answer to the same question that had confronted Eduard Bernstein a few years before, namely the question of how to carry on the socialist struggle in the face of a capitalist development that showed no sign of bringing about the expected social polarization.

## AIMS AND OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

Partly because of the enduring vitality of the Sorelian legend, this dissertation aims to build up on the new Sorelian scholarship of the 1980s in order to present a synthetic case for a reassessment of Sorel's thought. In order to do this, I try to situate Sorel and his work in two kinds of contexts, which are essential for the historical study of his thought and, consequently, necessary for overcoming the Sorelian legend. The first one is philosophical and epistemological, whereas the second is economic and political.

The importance of a recurring and protracted epistemological reflection in Sorel's thought prevents us from hastily classifying his philosophy in terms of the usual categories of 'irrationalism', 'vitalism', and 'Bergsonism'.<sup>66</sup> Such a hasty dismissal would imply not only letting go much of what is valuable in Sorel's writings, but would also mean, given the centrality of the epistemological thread, forfeiting the possibility of understanding most of what animates Sorel's Marxism. To do justice to Sorel's epistemology, it is necessary to examine the philosophical circumstances in which it developed in more detail than is generally done. This examination will show how problems of determinism, freedom, and scientific truth were crucial in putting human agency and its historicity at the centre of Sorel's

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<sup>66</sup> The problem with these terms is not that they are completely inaccurate, but rather that they are used as dismissive shorthands. For example, the approximation with which a large number of historians of Sorel deal with Bergson is worrying, and highlights a surprising and incredibly problematic philosophical gap. Very rarely an effort is made to understand the problems with which Bergson was dealing and, consequently his philosophy remains inaccessible and is explained through hollow phrases and formulas amongst which 'élan vital' is probably the most recurring. The question of time, to make an example, is *never* raised. Differentiations between various phases of Bergson's thought are virtually non-existent: *Données* and *Évolution créatrice* are treated as the same thing. Similarly, Sorel is a follower/admirer/disciple of Bergson *tout court*: there is no mention of the evolution of Sorel's attitudes towards the philosopher. The long critique of the *Évolution* that Sorel writes in 1907 and takes up again after the war is never mentioned: all that one needs to know, it appears, is that Sorel attended Bergson's lectures and did not dissent. The approximation with which Bergson is treated is, of course, problematic because it betrays an ignorance of the philosophical context from which he, and Sorel, emerged. To ignore this context, in other words, means not only misunderstanding Bergson, but also Sorel. As fond as these historians might be of the word 'Bergsonism', such an expression cannot replace an urgently needed historical and philosophical analysis. As might be expected, this is a problem that, with the important exception of Sternhell, is encountered most frequently in Anglophone historiography. The following passage is an excellent illustration of most such shortcomings, starting with the 'eighteenth century', sic, roots of Marxism and the silent but significant equation of Hegel with the *philosophes* of previous generations: 'Marxism was a system of ideas still deeply rooted in the philosophy of the eighteenth century. Sorelian revisionism replaced the rationalist, Hegelian foundations of Marxism with Le Bon's new vision of human nature, with the anti-Cartesianism of Bergson, with the Nietzschean cult of revolt, and with Pareto's most recent discoveries in political sociology. The Sorelian, voluntarist, vitalist, and antimaterialist form of socialism used Bergsonism as an instrument against scientism and did not hesitate to attack reason. It was a philosophy of action based on intuition, the cult of energy and *élan vital*.' Sternhell et al, *Birth of fascist ideology*, p. 24. See also Georges Sorel, 'L'évolution créatrice', *Mouvement Socialiste* 22, 1907, pp. 257-82 and 478-94, *Mouvement Socialiste* 23, 1908, pp. 184-94 and 276-94; Georges Sorel, *De l'utilité du pragmatisme* (Paris, Marcel Rivière: 1921), pp. 358-453. On Bergson, a good introductory text is Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* (South Bend, IN, St. Augustine's Press: 2001).



epistemology and how this concern for agency made its way into Sorel's understanding of historical materialism and contributed to shaping his vision of the socialist transformation as a *longue durée* process of proletarian institutional development. In order to understand how this concern for proletarian institutions became the syndicalism articulated in the *Reflections* it is necessary, on the other hand, to read Sorel's works, especially after 1898, in the light of a process of economic and social organization that, by incorporating various European working classes into increasingly organized national capitalisms, invalidated the Marxian scheme of capitalist development in terms of social polarization, thereby generating the first serious crisis of Marxism. When situated in this context, Sorel's syndicalism does not appear as a politically neutral call to heroic action, but instead as an attempt to provide a revolutionary and Marxist answer to the challenges posed by the new economic and social conditions.

It is these two contexts and the interpretative stances that they imply for the study of Sorel's thought that will be central to the thesis. Against the irrationalist and critic of the Enlightenment, we shall allow Sorel the epistemologist and philosopher of human freedom to emerge; to the moralistic prophet of action, we shall oppose Sorel the Marxist in a period of capitalist transformation.

The first four chapters of the thesis are dedicated to showing that there is a fundamental connection between Sorel's revision of Marxism and the epistemological problems with which he had struggled in his pre-Marxist years, and that this connection can be best understood in terms of a growing importance that agency assumes in Sorel's historical and social scientific thought. As is shown in the first chapter, Sorel, like many French philosophers of the 1880s and 1890s, was confronted by a choice between science and freedom: the commonly held assumption that the truth of scientific propositions depended on the existence of a deterministic world made it difficult to reconcile human freedom with substantial standards of scientific rationality. To vindicate the epistemic ambitions of science, one had to commit to an ageing determinism, whereas a defence of human freedom generally implied a relativisation of the claims of science. Unwilling to go in either of these two directions, Sorel elaborated a sophisticated epistemology that allowed him to square this difficult circle. In order to preserve a natural determinism to which he still subscribed, and which he needed in order to preserve the ability of science to make claims about the natural world, he rejected the idea of freedom as indeterminism – i.e. as a state of exception to the laws of nature – and reconceptualised it in terms of agency, of the human capacity to create

tools and concepts. Evidence of this agency, and hence of human freedom, could be observed, Sorel argued, by examining the activity of scientists, who, far from being passive observers of experimental data, need a vast range of collectively crafted and historically changing tools – which he labelled ‘expressive supports’ – in order to conduct scientific activity. Science thus became a social and historical activity, a set of plural research practices and traditions whose existence testified the capacity of humans to act creatively. In spite of its historicity, however, science remained objective insofar as it dealt with deterministic and unchanging phenomena.

Although it allowed Sorel to vindicate freedom without compromising the ability of science to make claims about the natural world, this reconceptualization of human freedom in terms of agency created a dualism in Sorel’s epistemology: on the one hand there was the historical world of mankind, the ‘milieu artificiel’, characterized by historically changing human creations, whereas on the other lay the ‘milieu cosmique’, a deterministic and ahistorical world of nature. The necessity of this dualism derived from the assumption that only deterministic phenomena were capable of being understood scientifically, because only deterministic phenomena could be explained in terms of unchanging laws. But if science – as opposed to mere systematized knowledge that Sorel called ‘empirisme’ – requires determinism, how is a social science possible? How can the human environment, characterized by creative agency, be explained in terms of laws and causal connections? It is revealing of the importance of the connection between science and determinism that Sorel’s initial attempts to conceptualize social science are based on the removal of agency from social phenomena. These early attempts were defined most strikingly by the search for structural and unchanging features of the social world, capable of being explained in terms of laws and without having to examine the problematic fact of agency. But eventually, the fact of agency proved too important and Sorel began to move in the opposite direction, i.e. towards an understanding of the social world as the product of human agency and in search of a conception of social science capable of making sense of this non-deterministic phenomenon.

It is crucial to stress that, as Shlomo Sand has argued, ‘what brings Sorel to Marxism is... science, and not politics.’<sup>67</sup> In other words, Sorel’s engagement with historical materialism was that of an intellectual animated by the necessity of finding a suitable manner of conceptualizing and studying a social world that he saw as characterized most profoundly by

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<sup>67</sup> Sand, *Illusion du politique*, p. 43. ‘Ce qui amène Sorel au Marxisme, c’est donc la science, et pas la politique.’

human creative agency. As I show in the third chapter, moreover, the marginality of Marxism in the France of the 1890s provided both the opportunity for and the necessity of an in-depth work of conceptual clarification and creative redescription of orthodox understandings of Marxism. A number of standard objections concerning historical and economic determinism needed to be addressed if Marxism was to become an intellectual force in France; at the same time, its marginality made this work of re-elaboration permeable to foreign influences which, in Sorel's case, were to prove decisive.

From a philosophical and epistemological perspective, Sorel's revision of Marxism, first sketched in an 1898 article and developed in the following years, consisted in a radicalization of the historicist and activist tendencies that had characterized his early epistemological thought. The freedom of human agency becomes the starting assumption of Sorel's reasoning, leading him to dismiss the idea of Marxism as a general, ahistorical, sociology valid for all times in order to replace it with a view of Marxism as the theoretical and ideological product of a precise historical agent, i.e. the modern industrial proletariat. Social scientific knowledge, more generally, is not the knowledge of deterministic causal relations but, following Vico's principle of *verum ipsum factum*, the understanding that a creator has of his own work. It is thus essentially a retrospective, historical knowledge, which implies the impossibility of general sociologies since the future cannot be a legitimate object of social scientific enquiry. There are, moreover, no general sociological rules regulating the interactions of various spheres of human historical activity, no structures and no superstructures. Spheres as different as economics, ethics, law, and politics continuously influence each other, and these interactions have to be examined empirically, on a case-by-case basis. Having abandoned the ideas of general laws regulating either the course of history or the structure of the social world, the fulcrum of Sorel's understanding of Marxism thus became the collective historical agent, i.e. the proletariat.

This refusal to see the deployment of human agency through history as an expression of general laws regulating interactions between deterministic phenomena gave to Sorel a specific understanding of the historical transition to socialism. It is through institutions that, according to Sorel, human agency deploys itself through history. Despite the vagueness with which he defines them, institutions are the environment in which human activities develop, and thus historical transformations are a question of institutional development. Only in new institutions can new economic, juridical, social, and political relations develop and grow. Borrowing from

the two great historical examples of Christianity in the Roman Empire and of the French Revolution, Sorel came to see the socialist transformation as a *longue durée* process of institutional development. Proletarian institutions are where the experiments that will generate the new society will take place: it is in proletarian institutions that new forms of economic ownership will develop, that new juridical and ethical views will arise, and, in short, that the socialist society will grow. The revolutionary upheaval thus becomes the sanctification of what is essentially a *fait accompli*: an historical detail, something that is merely an accessory to the long-term historical process through which a new society has come to exist. The role of violence is equally marginal. As early as 1896, Sorel had suggested that violence functions essentially as a negative indicator: when great amounts of violence are required, it means that the old society is still strong and the new one still weak.

The second part of the thesis is concerned with the question of how this understanding of Marxism, which stressed the gradual, slow, *longue durée* character of the socialist transformation, could give birth to the revolutionary syndicalism articulated in the *Reflections on Violence*. I argue that Sorel's syndicalism should not be seen as a theoretical departure from the Marxism outlined in the first part of the thesis, but instead as a response to a number of new economic and social phenomena that radically transformed the circumstances in which existing proletarian institutions operated. The imperative that had emerged, around 1898, as the result of Sorel's revision of Marxism was that of allowing existing proletarian institutions, most notably unions, to develop and gradually extend their sphere of influence. This imperative remained unchanged; what did change was the context in which proletarian institutions found themselves, as well as Sorel's awareness of it. Between 1898 and the writing of the *Reflections*, Sorel's highly theoretical Marxism was subjected to a particularly probing test of history, and the syndicalism that emerged from it can only be understood as a result of Sorel's new-found awareness of the difficult and unexpected conditions that confronted the workers' movement in France and elsewhere. What was becoming increasingly clear to many Marxists was that there was no necessary connection between the growth in complexity and productive capacity of capitalism and class struggle. Instead, to the increase in complexity of productive forms corresponded a process of integration, both political and social, of the working classes into capitalist economies set up along national lines. National states, through protectionist trade policies and social legislation, greatly moderated the class conflicts that accompanied the second industrial revolution and created a

number of national capitalisms capable of accommodating at least some of the demands of the working class, effectively dealing a severe blow to the revolutionary force of Marxism.

The emergence of this new managerial, welfarist, national capitalism is of crucial importance in examining Sorel's turn to syndicalism. This extremely complex historical transition constitutes the background against which Sorel's political transformations of the early twentieth century can be understood. The fact that, between 1898 and 1905, Sorel gave different answers to the question of how to further the progress of proletarian institutions should not be seen as a mere inconsistency, but, instead, as a sign of his progressive understanding of the new circumstances. It follows that, in order to make sense of the syndicalism of the *Reflections*, it is necessary to shift from intellectual to social, economic, and political history. If syndicalism is a response to a radically different context, it is necessary to examine, however partially<sup>68</sup>, the relevant political, economic, and social transformations in order to understand it.

For example, Sorel's advocacy of parliamentarism and reformism, as I show in chapter five, was based on the assumption that greater involvement in parliamentary politics would be conducive to reforms capable of accelerating the growth of proletarian institutions capable of eventually asserting their independence from bourgeois society. Sorel's belief in the compatibility between parliamentary reformism and the long-term revolutionary goal betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the process of working class assimilation outlined above. A study of Sorel's engagement with the Bernstein controversy is illuminating from this perspective, because it shows how Sorel misread, or ignored, issues as central as the question of capitalist development and social polarization, and how, instead, he exploited the polemical space of the controversy to make a number of highly theoretical points that characterized his own Marxism. Sorel's inability to see reformism as part of a wider trend towards national capitalism can partially be explained by pointing out France's backwardness *vis à vis* Germany in terms of industrial development, class structure, and political socialism. The fact that Sorel could, while advocating reformism, still pour venomous criticism over the party

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<sup>68</sup> It is clear that the transformation in question is an extremely complex one and that I shall not examine all, or even most, of its social, economic, and political articulations. It is a process that I will investigate from the very limited perspective of Sorel's understanding of it. Thus, though I shall examine the emergence of big business and of industrial systems coordinated at the national level, the growth of a modern industrial proletariat and its integration into the nation through social legislation, as well as the incorporation of socialist parties into the national mainstreams, I will limit myself to France and Germany, and only insofar as these developments can shed light on Sorel's political and intellectual trajectory.

structure of the SPD shows that he saw politics as a means, a mere instrument, even if he was to later realize that it was an instrument unfit for the task that he had conceived for it.

The political consequences of the Dreyfus affair opened Sorel's eyes to the fact that the evolution of advanced European capitalist societies was not conducive to the development of autonomous proletarian institutions capable of giving birth to a new society. It is in chapter six that I examine this emerging awareness, highlighting how, despite the fact that it was caused by political developments, it took the form of an economic and social analysis. I show how Sorel paid increasing attention to interactions between the state, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat on questions of industrial concentration, social legislation, and the politicization and parliamentarization of socialism. The conclusion to which he arrived was that the agency of the state was exerting a mitigating influence upon the pace of capitalist development, and that this was enormously damaging, not only for the institutional development of the proletariat, but for the general development of civilization. Protectionism and parliamentary socialism were the ideologies that were bound to arise in a context of productive decadence; *laissez-faire* and Marxism were those that characterized periods of economic expansion, and it was the former that were replacing the latter ones. If these analyses, expressed most eloquently in the *Insegnamenti sociali dell'economia contemporanea*, constitute Sorel's diagnosis of the problems of socialism in the new century, the prescription and cure – proletarian violence – is to be found in the *Reflections on violence*, to which the last chapter is dedicated. After an opening philological section that highlights the proximity between the analyses of the *Insegnamenti* and the argument of the *Reflections*, I try to show that the necessity of violence is dictated for Sorel by the exceptional and unexpected circumstances of a protectionist and statist capitalism, and how what can be expected from violence is not socialism but, instead, its historical precondition, i.e. the restoration of a healthy capitalism system.

As can be noticed, we are very distant from the Sorelian legend outlined in the opening of this introduction. The Sorel examined in this work is very different from the countless approximate portraits of an earlier incarnation of Ernst Jünger we have illustrated. We have shown before where exactly the problems with the Sorelian legend lie, and, consequently, on which points this work departs from these: on the facile relegation of Sorel's epistemology to the categories of 'irrationalism' and 'Bergsonism' and on the mistaken, though more

understandable, reading of the *Reflections* as an hymn to the cleansing virtues of heroic violence. Much like he was no Jünger, Sorel was no Marinetti.<sup>69</sup> But if the relationship of this thesis to that scholarship is a straightforward one of opposition, its relationship to the new scholarship of the 1980s is more complex. An obvious point of contact is the desire to go beyond the Sorelian legend and to show its shortcomings. More importantly, this thesis is heavily indebted to some of the innovations of the 1980s: a piece of work like the present one, for example, would be unthinkable had Sorel's Marxism not been rescued from obscurity by historians such as Lindenberg or Sand. Moreover, a number of issues treated in this work had been already highlighted by the two main Anglophone works emerging from the 1980s, those of Jennings and Stanley. Both Jennings and Stanley understood the importance of epistemology in Sorel's thought, with Stanley dedicating an entire chapter to Sorel's philosophy of science, and Jennings underlining with great insight the fact that the importance of Vico for Sorel was mainly an epistemological one.<sup>70</sup> Equally, the fact that Sorel, after 1898, embarked on a complex path that brought him from theoretical revisionism, through political reformism, to syndicalism, is well known and much discussed.

The recurrence of certain important issues, however, does not imply an identity of interpretation. There are, in other words, a number of both small and large differences between my readings of some aspects of Sorel's thought and those of, say, Jennings, Sand, or other historians. Most evidently, it seems to me that even the new school has generally neglected the economic analyses that constitute the background to the *Reflections*, with the consequence that the Marxist framework of the *Reflections* is given less importance than it should enjoy, and that Sorel's path to syndicalism is explained in excessively French terms, as a story of revulsion against the triumphant post-Dreyfus republic.

These differences, nonetheless, will be duly highlighted and explained as they occur throughout the thesis. Here, it is necessary to focus on what differentiates most evidently the present work from the Anglophone scholarship of the 1980s, namely the fact that it is not an overview of Sorel's oeuvre. As we have suggested above, this approach was particularly popular in the Anglophone scholarship of the 1980s, with Jennings and Stanley being the two

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<sup>69</sup> 'Papini a, cette fois, parlé de vous convenablement ; serait-il en voie de se guérir de son futurisme ?' Sorel, letter to Croce, 20/10/1916 in Georges Sorel, 'Lettere di Georges Sorel a Benedetto Croce', *La Critica* 27, 1929, p. 361. 'Papini has spoken well of you [Croce] this time ; could it be that he is recovering from his futurism ?'

<sup>70</sup> See Stanley, *Sociology of virtue*, pp. 56-75 and Jennings, *Sorel*, pp. 62-7 as well as his 1983 essay 'Sorel, Vico, and Marx' in Giorgio Tagliacozzo (ed.), *Vico and Marx: Affinities and constrasts* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Humanities Press: 1983), pp. 326-41.

most obvious cases. There were, to be sure, excellent reasons for preferring scope to analysis. Emerging after decades of substantial historiographical confusion, the new generation of scholars faced the need to illustrate Sorel's thought beyond the *Reflections* and at the same time to make sense of the truly exceptional multiplicity characterizing it. As a result, both Stanley and Jennings opted for extensive and mostly descriptive presentations of Sorel's work that tried to capture the multiplicity of his interests and writings. This approach has great merits: not only does it constitute the best antidote, in the short term, to the common stereotype of Sorel<sup>71</sup>, but also, in the longer run, allows new generations to have an alternative base from which to start.

But precisely because this work has already been conducted, it is now necessary to become more selective and, I believe, consequently, also broader in scope. This thesis, to start with, is more selective: it chooses to focus on an interpretation of Sorelian epistemology and to show how it gave rise to a specific understanding of Marxism which, when subjected to the constraints of the period, became the revolutionary syndicalism for which Sorel is known. This choice, as any choice, implies renunciations: to make but the most obvious example, Sorel's writings on the history of Christianity are never addressed in what is to follow. One clear advantage of being selective however is that it allows for greater analytical precision, especially when it comes to dealing with the Sorelian texts. What an overview, however wide, cannot but do with great difficulty becomes a necessity in a work that makes choices as to what is more important. Once this choice is done, Sorel's relevant texts become important not as evidence of his interests, but as evidence of his thought, of his way of framing issues and developing arguments. Consequently, close textual analysis will be a defining feature of this thesis.

But the greatest advantage of being selective consists in the ability to bring to bear much wider contexts and much larger fields of historiography on the examination of Sorel: the choice of a number of central issues in Sorel's thought allows, in other words, for a better contextualisation. For example, to understand Sorel's epistemology it is necessary to enquire upon the limits of Kantianism in late 19<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy, it is necessary to bring back that philosophical world. Equally, an understanding of Sorel's turn to syndicalism requires analyses of the social consequences of the second industrial revolution, of the

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<sup>71</sup> Not that further reminders are needed; however, it might be worth saying that the legend was in good shape even in the 1980s. When, in 1982, Pierre Andreu's biography was republished after almost 30 years, the title was changed to *Georges Sorel entre le rouge et le noir* (Paris, Syros: 1982).



emergence of welfare state measures and economic organization before the Great War, and of the history of French and German socialist parties in those years. These analyses, in turn, require the use of historiography that is not traditionally associated with Sorel: it should be clear that this work of wider contextualisation is only possible if we abandon the ambition of exhaustiveness. Moreover, it follows that although this work focuses on an individual figure, it believes that its intellectual trajectory cannot be satisfactorily accounted for without a substantial detour into a number of wider fields: after all, who would describe a journey without mentioning the landscape?<sup>72</sup> Weaving the figure of Sorel into wider historical and intellectual transformations not only allows for a better understanding of Sorel; arguably, it also allows a better understanding of these transformations. From this perspective, this work should be of interest not only to students of Sorel, but also to anyone keen on having a clearer view of late 19<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy and on some, admittedly minor, aspects of the historical processes that led to the Great War.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH UNTIL 1892**

Georges Sorel was born in Cherbourg, Normandy, in the autumn of 1847. The town was undergoing a transformation from a small provincial centre to a military port of medium importance: its large fortified harbour was completed only in 1853, despite works having begun under Louis XVI. What we know of his familial background is fragmentary, and what survives of his early years is largely anecdotal. He was the son of Pierre Gustave Sorel, an unsuccessful businessman, and Marie Nathalie Sulley, the daughter of the mayor of nearby Barfleur. His cousin, Albert Sorel, was to become a historian and president of the Senate.<sup>73</sup> Despite the fact that some of his writings seem to betray a protestant, almost Lutheran, sensibility – he is often benevolent towards the heritage of Jansenism – his religious background is solidly Catholic: one of his oldest letters unearthed shows that at least until 1872 he spoke and wrote as a person inside the Roman Church.<sup>74</sup> As his father switched from commercial storage to room renting, business took a turn for the worse, with apparently serious consequences for the family's finances.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, he studied at the Collège de

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<sup>72</sup> 'La nécessité de ce *détour* par la construction de l'espace paraît si évidente dès qu'elle est énoncée – qui songerait à évoquer un voyage sans avoir une idée du paysage dans lequel il s'accomplit ? – que l'on aurait peine à comprendre qu'il ne se soit pas d'emblée imposé à tous les chercheurs...' Pierre Bourdieu, 'L'illusion biographique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62, 1986, p. 72.

<sup>73</sup> See Stanley, *Sociology of virtue*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> See Sorel's letter to the bishop of Orleans, Monseigneur Dupanloup published in Patrice Rolland, 'Georges Sorel, la science et la religion', *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 22, 2004, pp. 207-15.

<sup>75</sup> Goriely, *Pluralisme dramatique*, p. 9.

Cherbourg, obtaining a number of prizes for his mathematical talent as well as both scientific and literary *baccalauréats*.<sup>76</sup> At an unknown date, his family moved to Paris, and in 1864 we find Sorel undertaking his *cours préparatoires* at the Collège Imperial Rollin, the same school his cousin Albert had attended, in order to prepare his *concours* for the admission to one of France's top scientific and technical institutions, the École Polytechnique.<sup>77</sup>

Admission to the Polytechnique was neither an uncomplicated nor an inexpensive business. Preparation for the entrance exam generally involved further years of study, and required, amongst other things, a certificate proving that the candidate had not previously engaged in subversive political activity. The yearly fees for this highly selective military school amounted to the not entirely negligible sum of 1600 francs annually,<sup>78</sup> and though some financial aid was available to those who needed it, Sorel did not receive any.<sup>79</sup> If we consider that not only Georges, but also his two brothers Anatole and Ernest attended the EP, we are brought to question the severity of the Sorels' financial troubles. The school, founded in 1794 and, after 1830, again under the control of the Defence Ministry, was a military institution whose mission was the training of military engineers. The atmosphere and traditions of the school were martial: pupils wore army uniforms and, having passed the two years, formally became army officers.<sup>80</sup> But this military dimension only gives half of the story, and not even the most important one: the Polytechnique gave to its pupils a first rate education that, despite the obvious prominence given to subjects relating to engineering, was in fact quite wide ranging. It was an institution, in other words, also capable of producing intellectual excellence: the mathematician Henri Poincaré and the economist Frédéric Le Play, for example, were two former *polytechniciens*.

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<sup>76</sup> Andreu, *Notre maître*, p. 27.

<sup>77</sup> On the Collège Rollin and Albert Sorel, see Gustave Dupont-Ferrier, *Les Écoles, Lycées, Collèges, Bibliothèques: l'enseignement public à Paris* (Paris, Libraire Renouard: 1913), p. 172.

<sup>78</sup> 'Le prix de la pension est de 1000 fr. et celui du trousseau de 600 fr. environ'. *Programme des conditions d'admission à l'École Impériale Polytechnique* (Paris, Jules Delalain et fils : 1865), p. 4. The figure of 1600 francs is confirmed by Terry Shin in his *L'École Polytechnique 1794-1914* (Paris, Presse de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques : 1980), pp. 49-50. To give an idea of the sum, the pension that Sorel could have obtained had he chosen to retire in 1907 would have amounted to 4000 fr. per year. There are, however, roughly 40 years between the the 1866 fee and the 1907 pension. See Sorel's letter to Agostino Lanzillo of the 20/2/1910 in Francesco Germinario (ed.), "*Cher Camarade...*": *Georges Sorel ad Agostino Lanzillo, 1909-1921* (Brescia, Fondazione Luigi Micheletti: 1993), p. 110.

<sup>79</sup> In the *Programme des conditions d'admission*, we read that 'Des bourses et demi-bourses sont instituées en faveur des élèves dont les parents sont hors d'état de payer la pension'. Sorel's personal file reveals that he did not benefit from this financial help. As most other pupils, however, his uniform was paid for by the École. See 'Registres des Matricules – Concours de 1865', Archives de l'École Polytechnique, cotes X2C/2.

<sup>80</sup> Hierarchical relations between students were, as they still are in many boarding schools, encouraged and formalized, with some students being given controlling duties over their peers and becoming 'sergents'. Despite his later distaste for the army, Sorel seemed to have adapted well to the rigid atmosphere of the École, becoming a 'sergent' in both his years at the École. See 'Registres des Matricules'.

During their first and second years (respectively the ‘deuxième’ and ‘première division’) students were examined through a combination of regular oral examinations, wider termly ones, exams and, for some disciplines, practical exercises.<sup>81</sup> Beyond the predictable disciplines of physics, chemistry, analysis, algebra, mechanics, technical drawing, and so on, Sorel also followed courses of French literature, German, history, and architecture – the latter subject becoming one of his lifelong interests.<sup>82</sup> His marks were very good, almost always above 15/20, with the exception of a 6 in German in his second year (he managed a still modest 12 in the exam), and a 9,75 and a 13,75 in the French literature essays of, respectively, his first and second year.<sup>83</sup> These results meant he was ranked 5th out of 114 pupils in his first year, and to exit the school 10th out of 133 the following year.<sup>84</sup> Classements were important, because they determined the kind of career that a *polytechnicien* could aspire to: the best students chose a specialization of their liking, while the worst ones had to choose amongst what was left, with some actually enrolling in the army.<sup>85</sup> With his tenth position, Sorel could choose to specialize at the prestigious *École des Ponts et Chaussées*, which he entered in

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<sup>81</sup> The regular ‘interrogations particulières’ were described as follows : ‘Le plus fréquemment possible et, en moyenne au moins une fois tous les cinq, six, ou sept leçons, les élèves sont interrogés par les répétiteurs sur les matières de chaque cours’. As for the termly oral examinations, ‘à la fin du premier trimestre, les élèves subissent des interrogations générales sur les matières des cours qui se terminent à cette époque. Ces interrogations sont faites par les professeurs aidés des répétiteurs.’ *Programmes de l’enseignement intérieur de l’École Impériale Polytechnique, arrêtés par le conseil de perfectionnement et approuvés par le Ministère de la Guerre* (Paris, Imprimerie Impériale : 1866), pp. 90-1.

<sup>82</sup> One should not be under the impression that, given their secondary status, the teaching of humanities was left in the hands of unqualified professors. Two examples will give an idea of how these professors, though marginal, still belonged to the French intellectual élite. François de Lomenie, who, starting in 1849 taught French literature at the *École Polytechnique*, had previously been a *remplaçant* at the *Collège de France* on numerous occasions. Jules Zeller, the history professor, arrived at the *EP* after seven years as *maître de conférences* at the *École Normale Supérieure*. See ‘Registres de service des fonctionnaires, employés et agents à partir du 1<sup>er</sup> Janvier 1843’ Archives de l’*École Polytechnique*, cotes X2C/26 and ‘Registre du personnel enseignant et administratif’, Archives de l’*École Polytechnique*, cotes X20/26.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Classement de passage 1865/66’, Archives de l’*École Polytechnique*, cotes X2C/4 and ‘Classement de sortie 1866/67’, Archives de l’*École Polytechnique*, cotes X2C/5.

As for architecture, this is a subject to which he continuously returned. When working in Perpignan, he borrowed an interestingly large number of books on it, most frequently volumes from Viollet Le Duc’s *Dictionnaire de l’architecture*. The classes on architecture at the *École Polytechnique* were imparted by a former *polytechnicien* and graduate of the *École des ponts et Chaussées*, François Reynaud – see ‘Registres de service des fonctionnaires’, p. 28. A number of interesting elements arise from the outline of the classes. In the first lesson, for example, students learnt that excessive use of ornaments and decorations is a problem, for ‘elle signale les époques de décadence’ ; that architecture is both an art and a science, and that its scientific aspect lies in its progressive historical character, i.e. in the fact that the architecture of the present builds on that of the past and is thus superior ; most strikingly, perhaps, that because it is historical ‘l’architecture n’admet pas de formules absolues ; les besoins changent ; les matériaux mis à sa disposition varient ; elle doit se proposer de satisfaisant de la manière la plus avantageuse , avec les ressources dont elle peut disposer, aux exigences des temps et des lieux...’. See *Programmes de l’enseignement intérieur de l’École Impériale Polytechnique*, pp. 71-2.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Classement de passage’ and ‘Classement de sortie’.

<sup>85</sup> On the careers of *polytechniciens*, see Shin, *L’École Polytechnique*, pp. 80-85. The first three students of Sorel’s year of graduation (1866/67) chose the *École des Mines*; the *Ponts et Chaussées* was the choice of students from the fourth position until the 21st, and those between the 22nd and the 25th went to the *Genie Maritime*. See ‘Classement de sortie’.

1867. The offer of the Ponts et Chaussées was similar, though naturally more specialized, to that of the Polytechnique: a core of scientific and technical subjects accompanied by languages and, more importantly, courses of law and economics. It is significant that the liberal economist Joseph Garnier taught the course on political economy: Sorel's economic education at the Ponts et Chaussées was based on the liberal doctrine popular during the Second Empire.

In 1869, Sorel left the Ponts et Chaussées and began his career as an engineer at the service of the French state. He was first posted to Corsica, where he remained until June 1871, then to various places in the south of France (Albi, Gap, Draguignan). He spent the years from 1876 until 1879 in Mostaganem in colonial Algeria: from there, he was assigned to Perpignan, where he settled down, remaining in the town until his retirement in 1892. Possibly because of his permanence outside of the hexagon, very little is known about Sorel's reactions to the events around 1870. We do not know, and can only guess, how he reacted to the French defeat, to the Paris Commune, and to the establishment of the third republic.<sup>86</sup> We do know that it was during his stay in Draguignan that, having fallen ill in a trip to Lyon, he got to know Marie David, a former factory worker turned hotel maid, who was to become his partner until her death in 1897. Though they were together for more than twenty years – Andreu dates the beginning of their relationship in 1875 – they never married, possibly because of the opposition of Sorel's family to what would have doubtlessly appeared to them as 'un horrible déclassement'.<sup>87</sup>

The years in Perpignan however do provide us with some initial hints regarding Sorel's intellectual activity. It was during his last years in the town that he began to publish his work: amongst the Perpignan writings we find not only some of his first epistemological attempts, but also no less than two books, one on Socrates' trial and one on the Bible.<sup>88</sup> Both are historical studies with quite a few present-centred concerns. The striking opening lines of the *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible* are illustrative of how far Sorel eventually departed from his conservative origins: in this early volume, the Bible had been described by Sorel as the perfect book for popular education since it could 'teach the heroic life, fight

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<sup>86</sup> The events of the Commune caused bitter divisions between the students of the École Polytechnique. See Shin, *L'École Polytechnique*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>87</sup> Andreu, *Notre Maître*, p. 56.

<sup>88</sup> Georges Sorel, *Contribution à l'Étude profane de la Bible* (Paris, Auguste Ghio: 1889) and Georges Sorel, *Le Procès de Socrate* (Paris, Alcan: 1889).

against nefarious utilitarian tendencies and stop the spreading of the revolutionary ideal'.<sup>89</sup> The purpose of the book is not that of assessing the historical credentials of the Biblical story, a typical nineteenth century project attempted amongst other by Michelet, Renan and, of course David Friedrich Strauss. Sorel stresses clearly that the intended audience of his volume was the university, the 'teacher of the people', rather than the 'small church of liberal protestants': the purpose is neither religious nor exegetical, but historical and educational.<sup>90</sup> Similar considerations apply to the *Procès de Socrate*, a book in which Sorel, despite occasional favourable remarks on Socrates' qualities, essentially condemns the philosopher for having subverted the moral environment of the polis. Based on an in-depth reading of Fustel de Coulanges' *La Cité Antique*,<sup>91</sup> the *Procès de Socrate* is an interesting work that displays a number of important anticipations of later Sorelian ideas; most notably, it is in this book that we first read of Sorel's fear of the state, particularly when ruled by philosopher kings.

Pierre Andreu managed to obtain a list of Sorel's borrowings from Perpignan's library during the period between 1884 and 1891. It is from this list that we can begin to understand Sorel's intellectual world. If we leave aside materials which have to be considered as mandatory preparation for the writing of the two books mentioned above, what is most striking is the philosophical scope of the retiring engineer's readings.<sup>92</sup> A regular reader of the *Revue Philosophique*, the key French forum for scientific and epistemological debate, Sorel sought to complement this regular reading with a number of philosophical classics: Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*, *Principia Philosophiae* and *Le Monde*, as well as a large selection of his letters, the natural philosophy of Aristotle - the *Metaphysics*, complemented by a commentary by Ravaisson, and sections of the *Physics* - and the works of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>93</sup> Engagement with positivism and nineteenth century philosophical classics was equally important: Comte's *Cours de Philosophie Positive* was borrowed four times between December 1886 and April 1887, after having borrowed what appears to be a collection of

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<sup>89</sup> Sorel, *Contribution*, p. i.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> See Marco Gervasoni, *Georges Sorel: una biografia intellettuale* (Milano, Unicopli: 1997), pp. 33-8.

<sup>92</sup> Amongst such 'preparatory readings' are the abovementioned *La Cité Antique* (borrowed in January 1887) and a series of books about the Bible by Ernest Renan: *Les Évangiles. Les Apôtres. L'Église chrétienne* (April 1884), *Vie de Jésus* (May 1886), *Nouvelles Études d'histoire religieuse* (June 1886), *Histoire critique des livres de l'Ancien Testament* (June 1886). See Andreu, *Notre Maître*, pp. 320-3.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Spencer's writings.<sup>94</sup> As we shall see in the first chapter, these readings will constitute part of the references for Sorel's initial epistemological attempts.

In 1892, as soon as this could be done 'honourably'<sup>95</sup>, Sorel quit his job at the Ponts et Chaussées. Instead of opting for an extended leave, a choice that would have granted him a solid pension, he resigned. He moved to Paris and, after a few months, to 25 rue Denfert-Rochereau, Boulogne sur Seine, where he remained for much of the rest of his life. Marie followed him. Free from professional obligations of any kind, he could now dedicate all his time and energies to his intellectual work.

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<sup>94</sup> The entry reads 'Spencer- *Philosophie Positive*' and might be either a collection of Spencer's works or a French translation of his 1864 *Reasons for dissenting from the philosophy of M. Comte*.

<sup>95</sup> Letter to Lanzillo, 20/2/1910, in Germinario (ed.), "*Cher Camarade...*", p. 110.

# **PART I: THE GENESIS OF SOREL'S MARXISM**





## CHAPTER ONE: SOREL'S EARLY EPISTEMOLOGY

‘Si jamais il nous est donné de pénétrer au sein des choses, ce sera, on peut en être sûr, par une autre voie que la science, et par une autre faculté que l’entendement. C’est pour cela que le déterminisme philosophique ou scientifique... rapetissant la nature afin de l’enserrer s’il se pouvait dans les cadres étroits et tout unis de nos catégories... est une doctrine qu’il est permis de trouver pauvre et stérile, et qui même devrait faire horreur à quiconque est tant soit peu pénétré de la présence de l’infini dans la nature et dans l’homme.’

Charles Dunan, 1886.<sup>1</sup>

‘C’est de quoi les Kantiens et même leurs adversaires ne paraissent pas d’être aperçus : dans ce prétendu monde phénoménal, fait par la science, tous les rapports qui ne se peuvent traduire en simultanéité, c’est-à-dire en espace, sont scientifiquement inconnaissables... Kant a mieux aimé placer la liberté en dehors du temps, et élever une barrière infranchissable entre le monde des phénomènes, qu’il livre tout entier à notre entendement, et celui des choses en soi, dont il nous interdit l’entrée.’

Henri Bergson, 1889.<sup>2</sup>

‘Nous pensons que, pour étudier à fond la thèse de la causalité, il faut procéder comme nous l’avons fait : interroger les sciences et leur demander par quelle méthode elles arrivent à la connaissance... Si nous ne nous trompons, la solution du problème du déterminisme dépend tout entière de ce genre de recherches.’

Georges Sorel, 1888.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter will be on Sorel’s writings on epistemology and the philosophy of science in the first period of his intellectual activity. It covers the period from 1886, the year in which he publishes his first article in an academic journal<sup>4</sup>, until 1894, the year in which

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dunan, ‘Le concept de cause’, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’étranger*, XXII, 1886, p. 523.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* [1889] in Henri Bergson, *Oeuvres*, ed. By André Robinet, (Paris, PUF: 1959), p. 153 [p. 176].

<sup>3</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘De la cause en physique’, *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger* XXVI, 1888, p. 480.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Sur les applications de la psychophysique’, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’étranger*, XXII, 1896, pp. 363-75.

his most important early epistemological text, the ‘Ancienne et Nouvelle Métaphysique’, appears in the newly established *Ère Nouvelle*.

The importance of these early epistemological attempts is not just that they are Sorel’s first productions of note but, more importantly, that they constitute, as it were, an intellectual apprenticeship. The writings we are going to examine are full of arguments and intellectual moves that recur abundantly in Sorel’s future output, and it is here that we find most of the issues that will characterize Sorel’s intellectual trajectory. The reason for this is that these are, for him, intellectually formative debates; that is, they are the debates that provide him with some of the fundamental questions around which his later writings will revolve. It is in these discussions on science that Sorel encounters one of the central problems of his career – the problem of determinism and human freedom – and formulates an answer – the idea that freedom ought to be conceptualized as production – that goes a long way to explain the peculiarities of Sorel’s later engagement with Marx. Thus, despite the fact that Sorel remains relatively marginal to these debates<sup>5</sup>, the debates are quite the opposite of marginal to Sorel’s thought. Their study reveals the way in which Sorel engaged with the central philosophical issue of his generation, the question of freedom and determinism, and thus, given the formative nature of this engagement with the problem, can illuminate the course of his thought.

The conceptual problem with which Sorel engages emerges, in the first instance, from a perplexity regarding the validity of scientific assertions. The urge to discuss critically upon the validity of scientific assertions is a widespread activity in the Europe of the late nineteenth century. What one witnesses throughout the continent is a tendency to problematize the previously easily accepted claims of science. Those voicing concerns about science are not only professional philosophers, but also, more significantly, scientists themselves, beginning to reflect critically on their disciplines and the foundations of their claims, thus giving birth to the philosophy of science in its contemporary form. For example, an important part of this current of scientific self-reflexion surfaces in the German-speaking world where, moving within a broadly speaking Kantian paradigm, Richard Avenarius’ and Ernst Mach’s epistemological works seek to purge scientific assertions from their metaphysical, and hence

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<sup>5</sup> With the exception of one article published in the Catholic *Annales de philosophie Chrétienne*, the other participants never reference, to my knowledge, Sorel’s contributions to these debates. This gives us a good idea of Sorel’s status as an outsider: despite the fact that he published in one of France’s leading academic publications, the *Revue Philosophique*, his position remains that of someone writing outside of an institution, unlike that of the other participants.

epistemologically illegitimate, aspects, attempting to ground the claims of science in nothing but experience.<sup>6</sup> And yet, irrespective of the specific problems detected and the solutions suggested by any given thinker, noteworthy is the general willingness to problematize claims that only a generation before would have seemed unproblematic.

We find, in Sorel's France, an excellent example of this mood of scientific uncertainty in Henri Poincaré. In his introduction to his courses on thermodynamics, he writes that the two principles of this branch of physics seem to promise a stable foundation for the future. And yet, he asks 'What is it that gives us the right to attribute to the principle more generality and precision than the experiences which allowed us to demonstrate it?'<sup>7</sup> The question concerns the legitimacy of inductive generalisation, and Poincaré states that he will not engage with this problem, but adds that, if induction were to be ruled out as epistemologically illegitimate, 'science could not exist or, at least, would be reduced to an inventory, the affirmation of isolated facts, and would have no value for us, for it could not give satisfaction to our need for order and harmony...'<sup>8</sup> It is, in short, the idea of science as a straightforward representation of reality that comes under heavy attack: the reflection on what scientists actually do gained momentum, and shattered the idea that scientific laws emerge unproblematically from the observation of empirical data. The challenge then becomes that of providing a more realistic and hence complex understanding of the activity of scientists.

This epistemological question about science could not, at least in France, be discussed in isolation from another, much weightier and closely connected, philosophical problem: that of freedom and determinism. The scientific worldview was thought to necessitate a mechanistic and deterministic world in which the space for human freedom was reduced to virtually naught. If the claims of science were correct descriptions of a reality of things, then they

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<sup>6</sup> Both Mach's and Avenarius' works bear some general similarities with Sorel's own writings about science. More precisely, they all have to deal with the problems generated by a Kantian conceptualization of science as a set of subjective claims about an objective reality of which, however, nothing can be said. Epistemological reflection then revolves around the problem of whether scientific assertions can be said to be about reality or not. Despite the similarities, whereas Mach and Avenarius essentially develop a phenomenalist epistemology, Sorel does not give up on the idea that science makes claims about the world. The difference in intellectual contexts means that these affinities cannot be explored in too great a depth here.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Poincaré, *Thermodynamique, cours de physique mathématique* (Paris, Georges Carré : 1892), p. vi. The book consists in a series of lecture notes dating back to the academic year 1888-9. 'Mais alors qui nous donne le droit d'attribuer au principe lui-même plus de généralité et plus de précision qu'aux expériences qui ont servi à le démontrer ?'

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 'si cette faculté nous était refusée, la science ne pourrait exister ou, du moins, réduite à une sorte d'inventaire, à la constatation de faits isolés, elle n'aurait pour nous aucun prix, puisqu'elle ne pourrait donner satisfaction à notre besoin d'ordre et d'harmonie...'. The idea that the coherence of a body of scientific doctrines is related to a human need for harmony indicates the affinity between Poincaré and Avenarius. See Leszek Kolakowski, *Positivist Philosophy* (London, Pelican: 1972), p. 128.

implied a rather strong determinism that left no place for spontaneous human action. Let us not forget that this is the climate in which Henri Bergson's philosophical star rose and shone for decades. Indeed, a citation from Bergson's doctoral thesis – the text that was to become the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* – can give us a good idea of the centrality of the problem to the French philosophical scene.

‘We have chosen, amongst various problems, one common to both metaphysics and psychology, the problem of freedom. We try to establish that all discussion between determinists and their opponents implies a confusion of duration with extension, of quality with quantity: once this confusion has been dealt with, we shall, perhaps, see the disappearance of the objections against freedom’.<sup>9</sup>

The debate that Sorel enters then, very broadly put, is one on the epistemic status of scientific assertions as representations of nature. The truth of these assertions would ensure the validity and prestige of science; at the same time, this same truth would configure a deterministic world with no space left for human freedom. The alternative presented to Sorel is, bluntly put, one between science and freedom: either we live in a world whose determinism is described by science or we live in a world where freedom is possible. If the latter is correct, it follows that the scientific worldview is not true, at least in the traditional, strong sense. Either we understand the world, but cannot act in it, or we can act, but give up on the possibility of understanding the world. The writings with which we are going to deal here are attempts to square this circle, attempts to reconcile a vindication of science with the possibility of freedom.

On the epistemological issue, Sorel fully shares the idea that a more complex conceptualization of science is needed. Science is not, for him, the banal observation of empirical data, but an activity to whose complexity epistemology must do justice. And yet, this complexity cannot ensue in a reduction of the epistemic ambitions of science. In other words, science must be able to make claims about the world, and cannot be reduced to, say, a system of useful conventions. The picture is further complicated by the fact that Sorel wished to reconcile all of this with the possibility of freedom. The problem thus is as follows: to come up with a new conceptualization of science that safeguards its status of rational enquiry

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<sup>9</sup> Bergson, *Essai*, p. 1 [p. vii]. ‘Nous avons choisi, parmi les problèmes, celui qui est commun à la métaphysique et à la psychologie, le problème de la liberté. Nous essayons d’établir que toute discussion entre les déterministes et leurs adversaires implique une confusion préalable de la durée avec l’étendue, de la succession avec la simultanéité, de la qualité avec la quantité : une fois cette confusion dissipée, on verrait peut-être s’évanouir les objections élevées contre la liberté...’

upon the natural world and at the same time does not shatter the possibility of human freedom.

In order to even sketch Sorel's attempted solution, it is important to point out that the epistemological problems with which he is faced are typically representationalist and Kantian ones. The epistemological model is one in which the key problem is that of justifying objectively the validity of what are essentially subjective impressions, and thus the big question concerns the *possibility* of science: i.e. how can we claim to know? How neutral are our instruments for grasping the object of our enquiry? Might we be able to understand only through the distorting medium of these instruments? If so, are we faced with a structural inability to grasp reality, to reach the things in themselves, and are we condemned to see them merely as they are for us? Might we be trapped in a system of arbitrary scientific conventions? This, of course, is one of the recurring problems of modern philosophy. In the words of Juergen Habermas,

'The concept of subjectivity introduced a dualism between inner and outer that seemed to confront the human mind with the precarious task of bridging a chasm. With this, the way was cleared for scepticism in its modern form. The private character of my particular subjective experiences, on which my absolute certainty is based, simultaneously provides reason to doubt whether the world as it appears to us is not in fact an illusion'.<sup>10</sup>

Very much in line with Habermas' analysis, the response of an important part of the French philosophical community of the time moved in a sceptical direction. In other words, the immense epistemological problems engendered by the representationalist led many philosophers to give up on science's ambition to fully describe the world. But crucially, this sceptical move allowed such philosophers to safeguard the possibility of human freedom. The epistemic limits of science generated a sphere of the unknowable, free from scientific determinism and capable of protecting the possibility of freedom.

Dissatisfied on both counts by this solution, Sorel gives to the problem of science and freedom what we could call, with the due philosophical proportions, Hegelian answers. In extreme synthesis, his answer consists in abandoning the question on the *possibility* of science and replacing it with question about the *practice* of science. Instead of wondering whether knowledge is possible, we start from the fact that it *is* possible. Thus, the question becomes

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<sup>10</sup> Juergen Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn' in Robert Brandom (ed.) *Richard Rorty and his critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 38.

not *whether* we can know, but *how* we know: the emphasis is not on the possibility of knowledge, but on its practice. The actual way in which scientists operate, conceptually and experimentally, and the way in which scientific practice has developed – i.e. the history of science – thus become central elements of Sorel’s epistemology. The epistemology developed in these early writings, an epistemology to which Sorel will largely remain faithful, can be described as both activist and historicist. It is activist insofar as Sorel insists that the mind is active in its enquiring activity, elaborating instruments and concepts – what he calls ‘expressive supports’ – which are indispensable to science. It is historicist insofar as Sorel ascribes a temporal, changing character to these conceptual toolboxes required by science. The concepts, experimental abilities, traditions of enquiry, elaborated by scientists through the ages are subjected to the same changing historical conditions to which any human activity is subjected. But though expressive supports and scientific traditions are man-made, and hence historical, natural phenomena are not, because they function in a deterministic world in which things do not alter. The timeless laws that regulate natural phenomena, moreover, are discoverable experimentally by scientists. Experimental conditions, though they necessitate expressive supports that arise from the historical activity of scientists, constitute a real moment of contact with the deterministic world of nature, and thus are what guarantees the objectivity of scientific assertions, i.e. their ability to rise above the historical circumstances out of which they arise.

This dualistic epistemology, divided between a non-deterministic historical world and a deterministic natural one, allows Sorel to give an answer to the problem of freedom without endangering the objectivity of science. The artificial, man-made, character of expressive supports gives evidence of the freedom of human agency, a freedom not understood as a state of exception from natural determinism, but as the capacity to produce ‘sequences whose ordering is our decision’.<sup>11</sup> Expressive supports, in turn, through experimental practice, guarantee an access to the deterministic world of nature, and thus allow science to understand the natural world and to express this understanding in terms of laws. Though Sorel will eventually abandon the idea of science as the description of deterministic phenomena, both the historicist and activist aspects of his early epistemology are important. The concern for human agency and the activist theory of freedom force Sorel to enquire on how human

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<sup>11</sup> Georges Sorel, *D’Aristote à Marx* [1894] (Paris, Marcel Rivière: 1935), p. 264. ‘Nous sommes libres en ce sens que nous pouvons construire des appareils qui n’ont aucun modèle dans le milieu cosmique; non ne changeons rien aux lois de la nature, mais nous sommes maîtres de créer des séquences ayant une ordonnance qui nous est propre.’

agency deploys itself through history. It is, consequently, in the enquiries into the history of science elaborated by Sorel in these early writings that we can begin to see how Sorel thinks as an historian. At a more abstract level, the insistence on agency, seen by Sorel as an instance of human freedom, will profoundly and decisively influence his thinking on Marxism as a social scientific method, and hence constitute the lasting legacy of Sorel's early engagement with epistemology.

## 1.2 A DISCUSSION ON CAUSATION

As we have seen in the introductory chapter, the beginning of Sorel's life as an intellectual can be dated to his last years in Perpignan. Quite possibly already taking seriously the idea of early retirement, he dedicated, from the mid-1880s, considerable amounts of time to his self-education. If we look at the list of his borrowings from the Perpignan library, as well as at the corpus of his early production, we can see a great variety of fields to which he dedicated himself: from Biblical criticism to the history of the French revolution, from psychophysics to the philosophy of science. Despite this typically Sorelian tendency to work on many fronts, beyond two historical works, the *Contribution* and the *Procès de Socrate*, questions of epistemology and of science clearly dominate the earliest Sorelian production.

Sorel's first published article appeared in 1886 in the *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*. For a previously unpublished writer, this constituted an important debut in one of France's rising academic journals. Founded in 1876 by Théodule Ribot, who was later appointed in 1888 to the Collège de France's newly established chair in experimental psychology, the *Revue Philosophique* could boast, despite its young age, contributors of the calibre of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Hyppolite Taine, as well as a young Henri Bergson. As is shown by the borrowing list from the Perpignan library, Sorel was, at least since 1885, a regular reader of the review.<sup>12</sup> The main intellectual interest of the review, since its first years under the direction of Ribot, is psychology, and its pages are evenly split between empirical studies by eminent European psychologists such as Wundt, Binet, or Ribot<sup>13</sup>, a number of theoretical texts in which the tenets of experimental psychology are subjected to philosophical critique, and general philosophical essays only loosely connected

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<sup>12</sup> Andreu, *Notre Maître*, pp. 320-1.

<sup>13</sup> Binet and Féré's work on hypnosis was first published here. See, for example, Alfred Binet and Charles Féré, 'L'hypnotisme chez les hystériques: le transfert psychique', *Revue philosophique* XIX, 1885, pp. 1-25.

to psychology and dealing with general questions of epistemology and the philosophy of science.<sup>14</sup>

In line with the *Revue*'s editorial policy, Sorel's first article is on psychophysics, i.e. the empirical and quantitative study of sensations.<sup>15</sup> But it is not long before he is drawn towards more abstract territory and grander conclusions. In 1888 he publishes, still in the *Revue Philosophique*, what can be described as his first important article: 'De la cause en physique'.<sup>16</sup> Inaugurating what we can call a Sorelian tradition, the text deals with much more than the theory of causation in physics, and amounts to a general reflection on the defensibility of scientific claims. It is in this text that some interesting epistemological tendencies and inclinations – it would be premature to speak of positions – begin to emerge. The discussion on causation is a classic of modern philosophical thinking, insofar as it gives, or takes away, philosophical legitimacy to natural science. This is as true of the late nineteenth century as it was of the late eighteenth. The debate, and Sorel's participation in it, ought to be seen as part of a wider discussion on the purpose and limits of science. What is, however, peculiar to the late nineteenth century is the intensity with which this discussion is felt to have bearing on the issue of human freedom. The article then is the first episode of Sorel's engagement with a key problem, one with which he will address for most of his life, that of determinism and freedom: if the world as described by science is a correct picture of the world as it really is, it seems that the space for human freedom is reduced to zero.

### **1.2.1 'PAR UNE AUTRE VOIE QUE LA SCIENCE': DUNAN IN THE REVUE PHILOSOPHIQUE**

In order to get a richer picture of this debate, it will be useful to examine an article cited by Sorel in his own piece. Written by Charles Dunan and published in a previous issue of the

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth underlining that Charles Peirce, completely unnoticed by Sorel, published here the French translations of two seminal articles, 'The fixation of belief' and 'How to make our ideas clear', originally published in the *Popular Science Monthly* in, respectively, November 1877 and January 1878. Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Comment se fixe la croyance', *Revue philosophique* VI, 1878, pp. 553-69 and 'Comment rendre nos idées claires', *Revue Philosophique* VII, 1879, pp. 38-57.

<sup>15</sup> Sorel, 'Applications de la psycho-physique'. About the discipline, he modestly writes that '...la psycho-physique n'a pas la prétention de donner des formules du beau, grâce auxquelles on ferait de belles œuvres ...elle se borne à un rôle infiniment plus modeste ...elle cherche à déterminer nos sensations pour donner une base scientifique aux raisonnements esthétiques'. The issue of aesthetics and psychophysics was pursued by Sorel in the following articles: 'La psycho-physique', *Revue philosophique* XXV, 1888, pp. 462-3; 'Esthétique et psycho-physique', *Revue philosophique* XXIX, pp. 182-4.

<sup>16</sup> Georges Sorel, 'De la cause en physique', *Revue philosophique* XXVI, 1888, pp. 464-80.



*Revue Philosophique*, the piece does more than deal with the same issues as Sorel's 'De la cause en physique', for it allows us to get a clear view of the issues at stake in the debate.<sup>17</sup>

In the article, Dunan had arrived at some bold epistemological conclusions, arguing against the possibility of subjecting to rational analysis the web of causes that determine any given effect. The theory of causation attacked by Dunan is one in which an effect can be connected either to a single cause or to a determinate group of causes, what Dunan calls 'antécédents'. Against this conception, Dunan stresses that each effect is caused or determined by an unquantifiable number of 'antécédents'. Given the impossibility of enumerating the 'antécédents', the standard theory of causation falls apart. What matters here are the conclusions drawn from this by Dunan. After writing that induction, by which he means the correlation of phenomena in terms of cause and effect, is 'science itself', he continues:

'Induction consists in erecting to the status of law, i.e., universalizing in time and space, a relationship observed between two phenomena. If, then, every phenomenon depends not on a single precedent [antécédent], and not even on a determinate number of precedents, but on an endless, and hence uncountable, series of chronologically prior and spatially concomitant conditions, it follows that no phenomenon, and no group of phenomena can suffice to determine a consequent one [un conséquent]; but then, what is of induction, what is of science? On the other hand, it is incontestable that induction works and that science is done; and so, what is of theory?'<sup>18</sup>

The passage is clear: if we accept Dunan's theory of causation, we are no longer allowed to use words such as 'determines' or 'causes' in the traditional, strong sense. This, as highlighted by Dunan himself, appears problematic for our conception of science, which seems to require precisely this strong concept of causation. The way out of the dilemma consists in a redescription of the purposes and role of science. One must abandon, Dunan argues, the idea of being able to understand the causal generation of phenomena with 'ideal precision': if induction were to be a 'rigorous and total determination of phenomena... on the basis of their relationship to their antecedents, induction would be impossible.'<sup>19</sup> We must

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Dunan, 'Le concept de cause', *Revue Philosophique* XXII, 1886, pp. 497-524.

<sup>18</sup> Dunan, 'Concept de cause', p. 520. Original passage: 'Or l'induction consiste à ériger en loi, c'est-à-dire à universaliser dans le temps et dans l'espace un rapport constaté entre deux phénomènes. Si donc chaque phénomène dépend, non pas d'un antécédent unique, ni même d'un group déterminé d'antécédents, mais d'une série sans fin, et par conséquent non totalisable, de conditions antécédentes dans les temps et concomitantes dans l'espace, aucun phénomène ni aucun groupe de phénomènes ne peuvent suffire à déterminer un conséquent, et alors que devient l'induction, que devient la science? D'un autre côté, il est incontestable que l'induction réussit, que la science se fait, et alors que devient la théorie?'

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Original passage: '...si l'induction devait être quelque chose d'absolu, s'il fallait qu'elle consistât dans une détermination rigoureuse et totale des phénomènes... en vertu du rapport qui le lie à leurs antécédents...l'induction serait impossible'.

then accept that we can only establish the causes of phenomena with an unavoidable degree of approximation. We must be happy with a more pragmatic understanding of science, which, incapable of describing completely the endless pattern of causes leading to an effect, finds in model-making its defining activity.

On this view, scientific activity is characterized by the constant use of models and schemes whose purpose is that of *simplifying* the unmanageable complexity of nature, so that our practical needs may be satisfied. In accounting for the fact that most phenomena seem, as a matter of fact, to be subordinated to relatively simple and straightforward causal patterns, Dunan eagerly points out that this is ‘a favour done to us by nature, not a necessity of things.’<sup>20</sup> The truly significant conclusion, however, is stated in the following page: since it is in the very nature of scientific activity to reduce the infinite complexity of causes to workable schemes capable of satisfying practical purposes, it follows that ‘science does not have the right of presenting itself as an adequate and total expression of reality’, since it is ‘constrained, if it is to exist at all, to reduce, in a somewhat artificial way, this complexity [of nature] to unity’.<sup>21</sup> The epistemic status of science is then that of a human construction, reflective of reality only as long as this reflection, incapable of ever being completely accurate, is of some practical use: science, in other words, is ‘a projection of reality, with its depths and contours, on the flat surface of abstract thought.’<sup>22</sup> Before examining the wider conclusions that Dunan draws from this, it is worth underlining how the epistemological paradigm at work here is representationalist. There is a reality out there, and the task of science is that of securing a safe access to this reality so that we might represent it correctly. The problem is one of subjective access to an external reality: Dunan argues that we cannot aspire to a perfect representation, but he still moves within a representationalist paradigm.

Towards the end of the article he ventures into more general conclusions. Lamenting the fact that the nineteenth century has pushed ‘love of science to the point of idolatry’<sup>23</sup>, he draws a distinction between the artificial and pragmatic domain of science and the ‘real infinity of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 521. ‘Heureusement pour nous, les choses se passent d’une manière analogue dans une multitude de cas, et la plupart des phénomènes dépendant d’une façon extrêmement étroite d’un petit nombre d’antécédents que nous pouvons assigner, il nous est permis de les subordonner à des lois. Mais, ne nous y trompons pas, il n’y a là qu’une faveur de la nature, non une nécessité des choses.’

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 522. ‘...la science n’a pas le droit de se donner comme l’expression adéquate et totale de la réalité. Dans la réalité, la complexité des causes va jusqu’à l’infini ; la science, sous peine de ne pas être, est contrainte de ramener, d’une façon quelque peu factice, cette complexité à l’unité.’

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. ‘une projection de la réalité avec son relief et sa profondeur sur le plan uniforme de la pensée abstraite’.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

nature'<sup>24</sup> In a tone reminiscent of a caricatural Bergson he warns the reader that, if a contact with this real infinity is at all possible, it will be established by 'another way than science, and through another faculty than understanding.'<sup>25</sup> Given this unbridgeable separation between the world of scientific models dominated by a fictitious necessity and the 'real infinity' of nature, it follows, for Dunan, that determinism can be dismissed as a 'poor and sterile doctrine'.<sup>26</sup> Though our *intellect* must give up its ambition of coming up with a complete description of reality as it is, some other, as yet unnamed and undefined faculty might be able to solve what Dunan calls the 'universal problem': it would be a mistake to exclude what lies beyond the intellect and, by so doing, 'mistake the limits of a system for the pillars of Hercules of truth.'<sup>27</sup>

Not every step of Dunan's argument is impeccably argued: we might, for example, wonder whether his account of causation really does rule out determinism in the way that his conclusion seems to require.<sup>28</sup> The general picture, however, is sufficiently clear: nature is constituted by an infinite complexity which science reduces, artificially, to manageable cause and effect relationships in order to fulfil its eminently pragmatic purposes. The activities that define science are thus abstraction, model-making and above all simplification: science, incapable of providing a perfect representation of reality, aspires only to a sufficiently functional one. Contact with the actual stuff of nature, with 'real infinity', is consequently the purpose of philosophy rather than science. This goal can only be reached by abandoning altogether the intellect and science, and by relying on some other as yet undefined means.

On the one hand, this frankly irrationalist conclusion is a good witness to the climate of intellectual oppression that the dominance of positivism generated in the philosophical minds of the late nineteenth century. That this is the case can be grasped by leaving aside Dunan's argument and concentrating on his polemical targets: these are determinism, materialism, and, above all, science's ambition to describe the world accurately and completely. On the other hand, the problem is not just with the love of science pushed to the point of idolatry, but it is a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 523. It is worth quoting a longer passage '... prétendre enfermer... dans les catégories d'un entendement qui est ce qu'il y a en nous de plus limité... l'infinité réelle de la nature... est une entreprise vaine et qui ne saurait aboutir.'

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 523.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 524.

<sup>28</sup> The argument on the infinite complexity of causal patterns is, in fact, perfectly compatible with determinism: all it does is render invalid any claim to have discovered what actually determines a given phenomenon. It is, in other words a purely epistemological argument, compatible with an ontological determinism without however necessarily implying it. Again, the argument is typically Kantian, for it reduces the sphere of the knowable and leaves questions about things in themselves unanswerable, at least rationally. Epistemology replaces ontology.

more fundamental one. It must be appreciated how much Dunan's arguments move within a Kantian and representationalist paradigm, how, in other words, the problem he is trying to solve is the classically difficult one about the objective validation of subjective impressions. The whole first part of Dunan's text is, from this perspective, illuminating. It consists in a recap of the Hume-Kant discussion of causality, resolved by Dunan through a cautious acceptance of Kant's argument that causality is a necessary condition of experience, i.e. that it is impossible to experience anything in non-causal terms. The terms in which the problem of causation is stated are revealing. In commenting on the strength of the Humean position<sup>29</sup>, he writes, for example, that it poses the question of 'how to move, without petition of principle, from the subjective to the objective and erect the laws of our spirit [i.e. of our subjectivity] into laws regulating interactions between things themselves [i.e. objective laws]...'<sup>30</sup>

As we have mentioned, he opts for a Kantian solution, and concludes the section by apologising for having insisted so much on this point, but adding that 'it is the pivot on which rests the entirety of the arguments which are to follow.'<sup>31</sup> What must be underlined are the terms in which the problem of causality is examined: as a problem of subjective access to an objective reality: what in philosophy is known as the subject-object dichotomy. This difficult problem generates, in Dunan's article, the classical symptoms. On the one hand, it spells the impossibility of bridging this chasm between impressions and reality, and thus of grasping the objective, for science only produces useful simplifications and cannot represent reality fully. On the other, a yearning for this connection with reality that is satisfied through non-rational ways, 'par une autre voie que la science, et par une autre faculté que l'entendement.'<sup>32</sup>

If we look at Sorel's own piece on causation, partially formulated as a response to Dunan, we find that this first epistemological attempt happens in the same context of general opposition to determinism and materialism. But there is an important difference, namely, that Sorel, though willing to grant an important role to schemes and artificially constructed models in scientific practice, is not prepared to accept the modest and purely practical role that Dunan assigns to science. A superficial glance to Sorel's 1888 'De la cause en physique' could make us believe that he moves towards the same conclusions as Dunan. Quite apart from the fact

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<sup>29</sup> That is, that the *necessity* of the connection between cause and effect is a purely psychological, i.e. subjective, fact.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 505. 'Comment en effet passer sans pétition de principe du subjectif à l'objectif, et ériger les lois de notre esprit en lois des choses mêmes?'

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 507.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 523.

that he praises Dunan's treatment of the issue as full of 'boldness and originality'<sup>33</sup>, the article seems to underline the same points made by Dunan: an insistence on the role of schemes and models and a strong dismissal of the simplistic positivist connection between experience and scientific proposition. And yet, things are not quite this simple.

### **1.2.2 THE PRIORITY OF PRACTICE: SOREL ON CAUSATION**

In the opening of his own article, Dunan had written that the standard understanding of causation is generally challenged by 'dissidents, most of whom refer to the scholastic tradition or to Maine de Biran.'<sup>34</sup> Though he is no scholastic, Sorel, in this first period of his career, is an Aristotelian, or at least makes, as we are about to see, open use of Aristotelian references. This element already signals a fundamental difference with Dunan. Straight from the beginning of the article, Sorel attempts what we must call a radical *displacement* of the problem of causation. He begins by saying that the two most common understandings of causation must be rejected because they are either anthropomorphic, modelling their notion of cause on the experience of purposive action, or atomistic and materialist, basing it on the paradigm of physical contact and the transmission of movement. The Aristotelian alternative proposed by Sorel is the following. Using a somewhat obscure example from the realm of probability theory, he suggests that the problem of causation ought to be seen as a problem of the correct definition of the phenomenon with which we are dealing: 'in all purely scientific research, the problem of causation is identical to that of classification by genres.' He clarifies, adding that 'the modern problem of scientific causation is nothing else but the one which Aristotle articulated under the name of search for an *essential* (or *formal*) cause.'<sup>35</sup> The notion of formal – or ideal – causation is a difficult concept in the Aristotelian system. Without going into too much detail, we can say that Aristotle uses this notion to prevent science from becoming the mere study of individual empirical realities. In the Aristotelian view, science must culminate in the rational knowledge of unchanging universals: formal causation serves to connect single empirical elements to what we might call their universal aspect: their kind, idea, or form – hence formal causation. The Greek word used by Aristotle – *eidos* – betrays the Platonic roots of the idea and hopefully sheds some light on its meaning and function.

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<sup>33</sup> Sorel, 'Cause en physique', p. 478. 'M. Dunan a traité cette question avec beaucoup de hardiesse et d'originalité'.

<sup>34</sup> Dunan, 'Concept de cause', p. 497.

<sup>35</sup> Sorel, 'Cause en physique', pp. 467-8.

It is already worth noting how the problem is displaced, from one about the representational value of subjective impressions to one about the function of a concept in the practice of an activity. But what would an explanation in terms of formal causation amount to? Sorel tries to give an answer to this question for most of the article, and though his attempts are at times unclear or unconvincing, they nevertheless shed some light on the general direction of his thinking.

The first example he provides concerns opium inducing sleep in medical patients. The best way to approach this issue, for Sorel, is that of avoiding the why question. The problem is better dealt with by isolating the chemical elements causing sleep and identifying their essential trait as that of inducing sleep. The modern doctor proceeds then by separation and experimentation until he finds what it is in opium that causes sleep, ignoring the why question: 'old medicine' remarks Sorel 'would object that he hasn't done anything, since he has not stated *why* opium makes us sleep.'<sup>36</sup> Now, what this implies is that the quintessential scientific activity, i.e. that activity which marks the difference between the mere collection of experimental results and science, is classification: the definition of categories and schemes through which we can explain a given phenomenon. One might be tempted here to draw unwise parallels between Dunan and Sorel, in that they both insist on the great importance of the non-empirical elements of scientific activity. However, for the former, schemes are essentially functional simplifications of more complex realities, while for Sorel they are that which connects empirical data to rational categories.

To understand the distance between Dunan and Sorel, it is worth pointing out that Sorel outlines a difference between science and what he calls empiricism, a category under which would fall much of what Dunan calls science. This emerges most clearly in Sorel's short critical analysis of the role of experimental knowledge in science. Like Dunan, he attacks the idea that law-like correlations emerge unproblematically from the data of experimentation. His critical target is Auguste Comte commenting on the phenomenon of the fall of bodies:

'Even the person most alien to mathematical conceptions recognises on the field that the two quantities which it [the fall] presents [i.e. the height of the fall and the time employed by the object to hit the ground] are necessarily connected to each other.'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.467.

<sup>37</sup> Auguste Comte, quoted in Sorel, 'Cause en physique', p. 468.

For Sorel, this is far from being the case: the actual results of experimental activity, be it because of errors of measurement or the technical impossibility of isolating the relevant forces, never conform to a mathematical law. For Sorel, we are, nevertheless, allowed to simplify and slightly adjust our results, à la Dunan. This is a fully legitimate operation, provided that we know that what we will get are ‘*empirical* formulas, useful, perhaps, for certain applications, but without scientific value.’<sup>38</sup> In an emphatic reaffirmation of his dissatisfaction with excessively pragmatic understandings of science, Sorel writes that science ‘...does not work on the phenomena and the quantities measured by the experimenter, it works on other things, on *schemes*. Its field of action is outside of any possible material realization.’<sup>39</sup> The point Sorel is making, of course, is not that experimentation is a negligible aspect of scientific activity. The question he is addressing is that of how one can distinguish science from a mere generalization of empirical tendencies, and his answer is that science connects empirical results to general categories or schemes, i.e. that science classifies.

The precise epistemic status of these schemes remains unclear for most of the article: Sorel oscillates between considering them the grammar of any scientific discourse, and simple heuristic devices. But it is important to stress that, unlike Dunan’s schemes, they are not representations of reality in any meaningful sense. Indeed, the distinction between schemes and reality is always ‘very difficult to the human spirit’<sup>40</sup> and their confusion is an error which Aristotle himself committed in his treatment of the movement of celestial bodies: he mistakenly saw in their apparently regular movements the ‘realisation of pure schemes.’<sup>41</sup> Belief in the actual physical existence of atoms is another, less excusable, instance of confusion between schemes and reality. Sorel is not blind to the difficulties created by his own conception of science, and tries to accommodate the problems that arise by presenting his own conception as an ideal capable of describing the full maturity of a science, an ambitious end-point to aim at. This is followed, naturally enough, by a modest-sounding rejoinder:

‘In most cases (and in physics itself) one cannot reach this high level of knowledge. One must abide by a less exact (when not doubtful) classification and be less precise in one’s definition. The human spirit has no other path to

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. ‘Si on se bornait à chercher une loi traduisant simplement le produit de l’expérience, on parviendrait à des formules *empiriques*, utiles, peut-être, pour certaines applications, mais sans valeur scientifique’.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 470. ‘La science ne travaille pas sur les phénomènes et sur les quantités que l’expérimentateur mesure, elle opère sur autre chose, sur des *schémas*. Son champ d’action est en dehors de toute réalisation matérielle possible.’

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 471.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

knowledge than the analysis of genres. When it cannot grasp absolute truth, it constructs more or less artificial classifications.’<sup>42</sup>

The distinction here introduced between natural and artificial classifications is important, for it confirms the distance between Sorel and Dunan’s positions. Artificial classifications, for Sorel, given their ‘work-in-progress’ nature, contain a larger empirical element. These artificial classifications, drawing on experience, are never arbitrary as they always borrow some elements from the ‘observation of phenomena’.<sup>43</sup> They are of great utility in the natural sciences, since, thanks to experimentation, we are always in a position to correct our guesses were they to be proven wrong. It is even permissible, for Sorel, to express these artificial classifications through mathematical formulas, and proceed to further work on this basis. All this is well and good, provided that we respect a fundamental condition, namely, that we be conscious of the fact that ‘one is doing empiricism, not science.’<sup>44</sup>

It is at this point that Sorel finally provides a clear answer on what defines natural classifications, the schemes of rational science. It is a particular form of explanatory power: natural classifications allow the scientist to arrive at the description of conceptually autonomous causal chains. The idea is tricky, but clarified by Sorel through an example with the Newtonian law of attraction applied to the planet Venus. Given that law, a difficulty arises immediately as we try to apply it to any celestial body, since every planet is subject to the attraction of every other planet. But, and here lies the strength of a natural classification, we are able to isolate each causal nexus: we can first deal with the problem of the solar attraction on Venus and then, separately and autonomously, with that of the terrestrial gravitational pull on the same planet. We solve the problem of movement by integrating these different causal relationships through infinitesimal calculus. The mark of a natural classification, or a truly scientific scheme, is that it allows us to independently and autonomously examine each single causal relationship.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 472. ‘Dans le plus grand nombre de cas (et en physique même), on ne peut arriver jusqu’à ce haut degré de la connaissance. On doit se borner à une classification moins exacte (sinon douteuse) et définir avec moins de précision. L’esprit humain n’a pas d’autres moyens de connaître que l’analyse des genres. Quand il ne peut arriver jusqu’à la vérité absolue, il construit des classifications plus ou moins artificielles.’

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Incidentally, this leads Sorel to formulate an interesting and very un-Bergsonian conclusion: since these artificial classifications borrow from the data of observation, it follows that nature itself contains separations, otherwise the artificial classifications would be arbitrary. Nothing is more false, he writes, than the old maxim *natura non facit saluts*. See Sorel, ‘Cause en physique’, p. 475.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

<sup>45</sup> There are, to be sure, problems with this solution. If one is to be rigorous, as Sorel himself is, the mutual attraction of all bodies makes even the simplest application of the gravitational law to a concrete case a difficult business, and we might have to resort to approximation more often than desired. Sorel retorts that the



If we now move to the question of what this early piece tells us about Sorel's epistemology we can see a number of interesting tendencies already at work here. We can see quite clearly, for example, Sorel's desire to distance himself from both the naïve scientific position according to which scientific laws emerge unproblematically from the data of experimentation *and*, at the same time and more interestingly, from Dunan's position according to which the epistemic status of scientific assertions is that of human constructions, coherent and rational precisely because they are artificial. Against the naïve position, we have seen that he attacks Comte for suggesting that mathematical laws appear evident to the eye of the experimenter; against the conventionalist position, against Dunan, he develops the distinction between empiricism and science. His insistence on classification and his use of Aristotelian references are indicative of his uneasiness *vis-à-vis* the idea of science as a schematic simplification of the complexity of nature designed to satisfy our practical needs. As we shall see in the remainder of the chapter, this is an essential feature of Sorel's early epistemological attempts: he wants to safeguard the prestige of science while at the same time problematizing the simplistic assumption on which this prestige rested, i.e. the notion that scientific propositions, thanks to the experimental method, mirror straightforwardly the structure of reality.

But there is another, more important, indication emerging from this article. Let us remember how Dunan had approached the problem and to what conclusions he had arrived. He had begun with a preliminary discussion of Hume and Kant, he had dealt with the problem as one about the fit between our scientific assertions and objective reality and had concluded to the impossibility of this fit, relegating science to a purely pragmatic role. As an important rejoinder to this argument, he had castigated scientific pretensions to get rid of metaphysics, and argued that complete contact with the stuff of nature was perhaps possible through non-scientific and non-rational means. If we look at Sorel's text we find virtually no reference to this problem of representation, of how we can ensure that our scientific assertions mirror correctly things as they actually are, in themselves, in nature. We are witnessing, in other words, a fairly significant displacement of the problem. This is important, especially as we know, through the reference cited above, that Sorel had read Dunan's piece. Sorel does not start from the question of how it is possible that science correctly describes reality. Instead, he begins from the fact that science does describe reality and proceeds to examine how it does it.

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insufficiency of mathematical instruments in dealing with complex equations cannot be considered a valid objection to the scientific method. The problem would become conceptually insoluble, however, if the number of forces at stake were to be infinite, and it is because of this that he argues for a finite universe and writes that 'there are good reasons to think that the ancient conception of the limitation of space is required by modern physics.' Sorel, 'Cause en physique', p. 478-9.

Epistemology is not the preliminary philosophical interrogation upon the possibility of science, but, instead, the investigation upon the *practice* of science:

‘Science must not prove its possibility; this is the very starting point of all reasoning; it must say under what conditions it is possible. In our work we have followed rigorously the critical method. We have interrogated science, we have asked it what its methods are...’<sup>46</sup>

On the one hand, this amounts to a bold redescription of what epistemology consists in, as we have pointed out before the citation. The only correct epistemological methodology resides in a direct interrogation of the sciences. Scientific practices – what scientists actually do in laboratories – become the objects of epistemological enquiry and, fundamentally, the *conceptually prior element*. The only way to do philosophy of science is to fall back on scientific practice itself and articulate its reasons more thoroughly: ‘in order to avoid getting stuck in the realm of pure imagination, one has to base the critique of knowledge on the study of the procedures utilised for knowing.’<sup>47</sup> This principle, which we may call that of the *priority of practice* is, as we shall see, one of Sorel’s most fundamental ideas: it is the idea that reflection, systematization and philosophical thought are chronologically and conceptually secondary to practice. It is a philosophical intuition to whose articulation, we shall argue, Sorel dedicated most of his intellectual energies.

And it is an intuition that is first put at work in this 1888 article on causation, as what Sorel tries essentially to do is *articulate* the reasons that he sees embedded in the practice of actual scientists. Natural classifications, despite their misleading name, are, from this perspective, regulative conceptual elements: they allow us to conduct scientific activity according to certain criteria which we repute essential to our conception of science, such as, for example, the ability to isolate autonomous causal chains. What Sorel is saying is that scientists – physicists in our case – have a certain understanding of their activity, a conceptual apparatus which defines it and which we can call a conception of science. In this case, the conception of science places the isolation of autonomous causal chains at the centre of scientific activity. Now, given that this is a description of scientific practice, this element is essentially beyond the reach of epistemological critique, since the purpose of epistemological critique is merely that of articulating more thoroughly, and thus elucidating, the reasons embedded in various

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 478. ‘La science n’a pas à prouver qu’elle est possible ; c’est la base même de tout raisonnement ; elle doit dire dans quelles conditions elle est possible. Dans notre travail nous avons suivi rigoureusement la méthode critique. Nous avons interrogé la science ; nous lui avons demandé quelles sont ses méthodes...’

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 479. ‘A moins de s’enfoncer dans le domaine de la pure imagination, il faut baser la critique de la connaissance sur l’étude des procédés employés pour connaître.’

forms of scientific practice. Whether a particular scientific conception is incorrect cannot be shown by epistemology, but only by scientific practice itself. The necessary and essentially unquestionable starting point then is what we may call the fact of science: the existence of a form of human activity called science, concerned with the investigation of nature and carried on through a conceptual apparatus informing its practice, an apparatus that cannot be changed through epistemological critique but merely by the experience of its own shortcomings in the field of scientific practice.

The idea that scientific practices are conceptually prior to epistemological critique – the principle we have called the *priority of practice* – is a key Sorelian idea. It is important, here, to stress how it arises out of an attempt to solve a tricky conceptual problem concerning freedom. Like Dunan, Sorel rejects the view of a deterministic world entailing the loss of human freedom. Moreover, he finds the conception of science associated with determinism unappealing due to its excessive simplicity, knowing full well that scientific laws do not emerge self-evidently from the data of experimentation. Unlike Dunan however, he does not want to safeguard freedom by lowering the epistemic ambitions of science. A purely pragmatic science, Sorel tells us, is empiricism, not science. And so, he displaces the problem, arguing that the point of epistemology is not to wonder whether science is possible but to shed light on how it is possible. The question of freedom remains, as yet, unaddressed, but the defence of science as a practice is, as we are about to see, a first crucial step towards giving an answer to this question.

### **1.3 A PLURAL PRACTICE**

The principle of the priority of practice, however summarily sketched in the article on causation, is fundamental in Sorel's epistemology, and in the following writings Sorel begins to develop some of its consequences. One such consequence is epistemological pluralism. If the philosophical question of how we can assume that our individual and subjective impressions fit the state of affairs that actually exist is abandoned in favour of a conception of epistemology as an articulation of the reasons implicit in scientific practice, then the very concrete activities of actual scientists become the conceptually central element. From this to epistemological pluralism the step is indeed very small. It is a matter of fact that various sciences have different explanatory mechanisms, different techniques, different concerns and different ways of proceeding. What we shall highlight in this section is how Sorel turns this *de facto* plurality into an epistemological *principle* of pluralism. We shall also examine some of the political ramifications of this commitment to pluralism, showing how Sorel tends to

connect philosophical monism to political centralism and statism, and how he opposes to this political and philosophical tradition a liberalism based on pluralism and on limited government.

### 1.3.1 PLURALISM AND FRENCH LIBERALISM

Towards the end of 'De la cause en physique', Sorel warns against the illegitimate extension of the conclusions he has reached: such conclusions pertain to the domain of physics and should be considered valid only there. The temptation of unifying all different types of human enquiry under a single conceptual apparatus or explanatory mode is for Sorel a dangerous one, and amounts to, he writes, 'certainly a very coarse error.'<sup>48</sup> Determinism is a good example of the folly of this attempt at unification. The theory would be unassailable if everything could be reduced to space, time and mass. But since these concepts are insufficient even in the domain of physics, how can one justify their extension to other fields of enquiry such as biology or morality? The unification suggested by the determinists would do damage, for Sorel, both to the natural sciences, since it would reduce the precision of their language, and to the moral ones. Now, it is true that the moral sciences have been slower to develop than the natural ones: 'for a long time the human spirit has been left without guidance on this issue: one thought it possible to formulate, in the philosophy of history or of right, classifications of an absolute character.'<sup>49</sup> Auguste Comte's law of the three stages of history is given by Sorel as an example of these arbitrary and unscientific categories of the moral sciences. And yet, 'as the moral sciences progress, they tend to affirm their independence. The more rigorous their methods become, the more they move away from physics'.<sup>50</sup>

The illusion of unification, an error propagated by people 'not well versed in the critique of knowledge'<sup>51</sup>, supposes mistakenly that a few concepts are capable of explaining the near totality of observable phenomena. This, for Sorel, is the opposite of the truth: the scientific world is constituted by a plurality of explanatory modes and this makes unification, as well as any type of reductionism to a single explanatory principle, impossible. Of course, what Sorel has in mind as his target is, much like Dunan, determinism. More precisely, the mechanistic worldview according to which all phenomena, if duly analysed, will eventually be explainable in terms of matter and motion. Nevertheless, this pluralist epistemology is not a mere *ad hoc*

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 479-80. 'Pendant longtemps, l'esprit humain a manqué de guide sûr dans cette matière: on a cru pouvoir poser dans les philosophies du droit et de l'histoire des classifications ayant un caractère absolu.'

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 480. 'Au fur et à mesure que les sciences morales progressent, elles tendent à affirmer leur indépendance. Plus leurs méthodes deviennent rigoureuses, plus elles s'éloignent de la physique.'

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 480.

argument against determinism but, as we are about to see, an important aspect of Sorel's epistemological outlook.

In the year after the publication of 'De la cause en physique' Sorel gives to the press his first two book-length studies, the *Contribution* and the *Procès de Socrate*. As we have stated in our introduction, both are historical works animated by present-centred concerns about popular education and, in the case of the *Procès*, the dangers of certain types of public thinking. If we take this latter book, these concerns are evident from the beginning. Sorel makes a striking, and very interesting, comparison between the Socratic political ideal and the first protestant communities, Calvinists in particular: both mask their political impotence with appeals to freedom of expression, but, when given the chance to govern, they prove to be ruthless in the repression of dissent. Why is this the case? Because the 'Socratic state' writes Sorel 'is ecclesiastical... The citizen can only aspire to one type of liberty, the *liberty of the good*.'<sup>52</sup> For Sorel, the Socratic – though one might wonder whether Platonic is not a better adjective – political ideal consists in 'the state transformed into a church, public force at the disposal of sects... with such an organisation everything in the cities would tend towards the *good*, as understood by the leaders. "Fraternity or death!" shouted the madmen [les hallucinés] of [17]93.'<sup>53</sup>

It is not unwise to label political thinkers in terms of their fears, and such a strong fear of the state gives us an image of Sorel as a French liberal, worried by the development of a strong centralized authority. Sorel's worry for the totalitarian tendencies of the 'Socratic' state in which the purpose of public authority is a perfectionist pursuit of the good is partly occasioned by current political affairs. A few years before the publication of the *Procès*, in 1881 and 1882, Jules Ferry had developed his laws on public education, effectively instituting a free, compulsory and secular system of national education. 'The country' comments Sorel drawing unsubtle parallels between Ferry and Socrates 'launches itself into a risky [redoutable] experience.'<sup>54</sup> Sorel expresses concerns and reservations on the outcome of this educational programme, hoping only that the natural instability of democratic government

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<sup>52</sup> Georges Sorel, *Le procès de Socrate* (Paris, Alcan : 1889), p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. 'L'État transformé en Église, la force publique mise à la disposition des sectes, tel était l'idéal des Socratiques. Avec une pareille organisation, tout, dans les cités, tendrait vers le *bien*, tel que le comprendraient les chefs. « La fraternité ou la mort ! » hurlaient les hallucinés de 93.'

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

will prevent the state from oppressing individual consciences: if this were to happen, ‘France would become a branch of the old missions in Paraguay, a truly Socratic state.’<sup>55</sup>

Sorel’s hostility towards Socrates and his characterization of the Socratic state are of some interest. They are the first noteworthy expressions of a typical Sorelian attitude directed against the illusory certainties of philosophical schools and the dangerous consequences they produce when politically armed. This argumentative strategy, often hastily classified as mere anti-intellectualism, will recur when a more famous Sorel, in the opening years of the new century, will attack the theoretical bases of parliamentary socialism, and thus deserves some attention. What needs to be highlighted is the connection between the philosophical, speculative level and the political one: what makes an ‘ecclesiastical’ state possible are the certainties offered by a certain kind of philosophical thought. Sorel’s critique then moves at two levels: a political one, in which the risks of this style of government are highlighted, and a philosophical one, in which the impossibility of a comprehensive grasp of reality is shown.

### **1.3.2 THE THEORY OF THE AUTONOMY OF CAUSES**

It is this second line of reasoning, given the epistemological focus of the chapter that interests us here. At the end of the *Procès*, Sorel adds a short but important appendix, entitled ‘The theory of causes’, in which he comes back, after ‘De la cause en physique’, to the issue of scientific method. In a letter to Paul Tannery, reviewer of the book for the *Revue Philosophique*, Sorel mentions the appendix by admitting implicitly that the ideas voiced in the short text are his own ones: ‘I am not sure whether I lent to Socrates too many of my own ideas, but I believe they are Socratic, since it was Aristotle and Socrates who suggested them to me.’<sup>56</sup> As in the article on causation, Sorel displays an equal distaste for deterministic accounts of nature and from the opposing errors: in this case, teleological cosmologies, i.e. explanations of the universe in terms of final causation. Commenting on a passage by Paul Janet in which the author praises the cunning of nature explaining that ‘having created the eyes, it proceeded to create light, having created ears, it created sound’<sup>57</sup>, Sorel writes: ‘Mr Janet thinks his readers to be people of the middle ages.’<sup>58</sup> He proceeds to categorically state that, whereas for Socrates teleology was ‘a natural error’, ‘all modern teleological theories are

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to Paul Tannery, 10/5/1889, in A. Diès, *Paul Tannery – Mémoires Scientifiques* (Paris, Gauthier-Villars: 1943), vol XVI, p. 347. ‘Je crois que vous serez satisfait du deuxième appendice sur les causes : je ne sais si j’ai trop prêté à Socrate mes propres idées, mais je les crois socratiques, car c’est lui et Aristote qui me les ont suggérées.’

<sup>57</sup> Paul Janet, *Causes finales*, quoted in Sorel, *Procès*, p. 326.

<sup>58</sup> Sorel, *Procès*, p. 326. ‘M. Janet prend ses lecteurs pour des gens du moyen-âge.’

based on confusions which, in this day and age, are inadmissible.’<sup>59</sup> Given Sorel’s reputation as an irrationalist preoccupied with articulating the reasons of the heart against the coldness of reason, it is important to emphasize the tone with which he condemns teleology, which he clearly sees as a consolatory strategy against the soullessness of determinism:

‘Teleologists allow themselves to be guided by feeling, but we don’t admit feeling neither in the natural sciences, nor in morality, nor in law. Sentimentalism is a product of frenzy, a fantasy, the mover of anaemic and enervated souls. There still are intelligent people who imagine that the *heart* can *suggest* solutions to the jaded rationalist... We will never tire of protesting against such dangerous doctrines that reveal in their supporters either a profound hypocrisy or brain damage. And yet, we must ask ourselves what is the origin and cause of the vitality of these mythological conceptions.’<sup>60</sup>

Beyond the scathing, but noteworthy, tone, the crucial point comes with the last sentence. For all the outlandishness of teleological cosmologies and their roots in sentimentalism, there is a rationale to their success, which Sorel identifies with the unappealing materialist alternative to teleology. People embrace teleological cosmologies for ‘fear of falling into materialism, as they imagine there can only be two types of causality, a first one according to the principles of mechanics, and a second one based on the model of a free agent.’<sup>61</sup> The repulsion felt towards the mechanistic paradigm, he adds, is understandable. But, and here is the crucial step, there are many types of causality: one proper to the study of biological phenomena, one suited to the study of moral ones, and so on: ‘Teleologists clumsily confuse all these different causes; science must distinguish and define them rigorously.’<sup>62</sup>

We had seen how Sorel had concluded ‘De la cause en physique’ warning against the extension of his conclusions to fields of enquiry other than physics. Here, he is developing the same point. Sorel’s attack, it is worth spelling it out, is not directed against final or efficient

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59 Ibid. ‘Toutes les thèses téléologiques modernes sont fondées sur des confusions, qui ne sont pas admissibles aujourd’hui.’

60 Ibid., pp. 326-7. ‘Les téléologistes se laissent guider par le sentiment et nous n’admettons le sentiment ni dans la science proprement dite, ni dans la morale, ni dans le droit. Le sentimentalisme est un produit du délire, une fantasmagorie, le mobile propre aux âmes anémiées et énervées. Il y a encore des personnes éclairées qui s’imaginent que le *cœur* peut *suggérer* des solutions à l’homme blasé sur le rationalisme... On ne saurait trop protester contre ces doctrines dangereuses qui révèlent chez leurs apôtres une profonde hypocrisie ou une lésion encéphalique. Toutefois nous devons nous demander quelle est l’origine et la cause de la vitalité de ces conceptions mythologiques.’

61 Ibid., p. 326. ‘Quelques personnes s’y raccrochent, cependant, par la peur de tomber dans le matérialisme, s’imaginant qu’il ne peut y avoir que deux causalités, l’une suivant la mécanique, l’autre suivant la liberté d’un agent.’ Of course, this is the same analysis of causation with which he had begun ‘De la cause en physique’. See Sorel, ‘Cause en physique’, pp. 464-5.

62 Sorel, *Procès*, p. 327. ‘Toutes ces causes ont été amalgamées maladroitement par les téléologistes ; la science doit les distinguer et les définir rigoureusement.’

causation in themselves. Instead, his targets are the cosmologies, i.e. total explanations of the universe, erected uniquely on these explanatory modes, that is to say teleology and mechanicism. What Sorel is arguing against is, in other words, what we may call epistemological monism, and the attempt to ground the whole of science in a single explanatory principle, a single ‘type of causality’ to use Sorel’s vocabulary. By contrast, Sorel’s stance is a pluralist one in which different explanatory principles, different ‘causes’ fit to different types of phenomena and scientific fields.

To explain the universe in terms of final causation is mistaken and inappropriate: but this does not destroy the explanatory power of final causation. Its true domain, tells us Sorel, lies in the field of human production, for ‘it is in the works of human industry that final causation appears in all its clarity.’<sup>63</sup> The explanation, for example, of a work of art or architecture must take into account the way in which the author reached or failed to reach his goals. No account of a human production can be complete without a reference to the author and his intentions, and thus the study of human production ought to adopt the language of final causation and purposive action. The emphasis put on this question of production is important, not only because it helps in accounting Sorel’s later embracement of socialism, but also because, as we shall see in the next chapter, it is an important anticipation of his reflection on social science.<sup>64</sup> At any rate, the point to keep in mind here concerns pluralism: to different phenomena correspond different explanatory modes.

This pluralist principle, which Sorel baptizes the principle of the ‘autonomy of causes’ is central to his conception of scientific activity.<sup>65</sup> This centrality derives from the fact that pluralism follows naturally from the desire to put scientific practice at the centre of epistemology. By looking at the practice of science, we realize its plurality, and thus must enshrine this plurality in our epistemology. As he unambiguously writes:

‘We believe that the study of different methods brings us to recognize that causes are divided in as many classes as there are scientific classes, and that they cannot be brought back to a common principle. Without this great law, all science would become impossible... The platonic method is anti-scientific. Ancient philosophy, with its fixation for unity and deduction, did great damage to the progress of human

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 317. ‘La cause finale apparaît avec toute sa clarté dans les œuvres de l’industrie humaine.’

<sup>64</sup> The tone with which Sorel speaks of human production is almost a moral one. He speaks, in the same passage, with indignation of Gauthier’s ideal of *l’art pour l’art*. Art remains, for Sorel, human activity, and as such inextricably linked to an end, since human agency is purposive.

<sup>65</sup> It is so central that it brings Sorel to revalue Socrates. After having given him a very critical treatment throughout most of the book, he writes that he had understood the pluralist principle better than Aristotle.



knowledge [in the plural in French, *connaissances humaines*]. To create science, one must break up the monist conception and establish the distinction of causes'<sup>66</sup>

#### **1.4 HISTORY AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTATION: SOREL IN THE *ANNALES DE PHILOSOPHIE CHRÉTIENNE***

A second and more important consequence of the principle of the priority of practice is the historicization of science that it implies. It is in 1892, in a series of three articles published in the Catholic *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, that Sorel begins to develop the historicist implications of his epistemological preferences. The articles consist in a series of attacks on what are, given both Sorel's previous writings and the editorial line of the publication, predictable enemies: mechanism, atomism, and Cartesianism, all intellectual strongholds of the determinist worldview. What is most interesting about the articles in the *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* is however the argumentative strategy employed by Sorel. Rather than attacking the tenets of atomism or Cartesianism, Sorel argues historically, showing their scientific sterility and their marginality in past and contemporary scientific practice. The history of science, in other words, is used as a legitimate form of epistemological argumentation.

This reflection on the history of science is of course connected to Sorel's choice to reconceptualise the epistemological problem: if science is a practice, the history of this practice becomes a relevant argumentation for or against a given position. It is in the last of the three articles in the *Annales* that Sorel develops this point more thoroughly and illustrates it most clearly, in the context of a discussion on non-Euclidean geometries. Arguing against conventionalism, Sorel develops an embryonic conception of science as an historical activity in which the role of tradition is paramount, and in which nobody ever starts from scratch, but, through successive generations, contributes to the intellectual enterprise. Once more, Sorel shies away from addressing directly the question of freedom. Nevertheless, this exploration of the historicist implications of his epistemology of practice represents an important maturation

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66 Ibid., p. 331. 'Nous croyons que l'étude des méthodes conduit à reconnaître que les causes se divisent en autant des classes qu'il y a des classes scientifiques et qu'elles ne peuvent se ramener à un principe commun. Sans cette grande loi, toute science deviendrait impossible... La méthode platonicienne est anti-scientifique. L'ancienne philosophie, avec sa manie de tout ramener à l'unité et à la déduction, a fait un tort énorme aux progrès des connaissances humaines. Pour créer la science il faut briser la conception moniste et établir la distinction des causes...' Again, notice the methodological point: it is the study of scientific activity, 'l'étude des méthodes' that warrants epistemological conclusions of any kind.

of Sorel's thought, because it helps him in focusing on the human, artificial element of scientific activity. Arguing that the conceptual apparatus of any given science is essentially historical is a step in the direction of saying that it is something essentially different from a natural phenomenon.

Sorel contributing to a Catholic publication the year before his public conversion to Marxism might seem odd, and could appear as revealing of a personality whose path through life proceeds by ruptures. This impression is strengthened by pointing out that in the early 1890s the *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* were not the modernist publication that they became when, in 1905, Lucien Laberthonnière took over their direction. When Sorel wrote in the *Annales*, the editorial line consisted in a more canonical Thomism, the review was directed by the Abbé Joseph Guieu, Parisian tutor of a young Charles Maurras and, according to Philippe Boutry, an 'intransigent priest'.<sup>67</sup> A number of elements can however help us in tempering this judgement. Sorel's social extraction, let us not forget, is Catholic and bourgeois, and, equally importantly, in the early 1890s he is a newcomer to Paris. He had, of course, studied in the French capital while at the *École Polytechnique*, but, in 1892, he had abandoned the military world in which he had made his career. Thus, it is not surprising to see him – a new arrival in Paris – in contact with people from the Catholic milieu. Moreover, intellectually, Sorel's proximity to the thinking of the *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* is less puzzling than might seem. Sorel's attempt to argue against the mechanistic cosmology could only earn him the sympathy of the clerical intelligentsia, and his choice to do this through the use of an Aristotelian language could not but find a good reception amongst the Thomists of the *Annales*. The presence of common intellectual enemies makes the short but important collaboration between Sorel and the journal less of an enigma than at first might appear.

#### **1.4.1 AGAINST ATOMISM**

Sorel's first article in the *Annales* is, indeed, dedicated to an attack on one of these common enemies: atomism. The hostility towards atomism is dictated by the importance of this theory to any mechanistic cosmology, i.e. the attempt of explaining the universe in terms of interaction of particles. We see here at work the same dynamic animating the article on causation. Atomism and the mechanistic cosmology are attacked not because of their disenchanting features, not because they cheapen and distort what Dunan called the 'real

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<sup>67</sup> See Philippe Boutry, 'L'Action Française, la Révolution et la Restauration' in Michel Leymarie and Jacques Prévotat (eds) *L'Action Française : culture, société, politique* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion : 2008), p. 28.

infinity of nature', but in virtue of their small scientific value. Coherently with his principle of the priority of practice, Sorel argues that the poverty of atomism can only be shown by demonstrating the redundancy, or sterility, of its presuppositions to the actual practice of science. In Sorel's words, 'we want to know whether the materialist hypothesis is on a par with modern science. We hope to show that it is not...that, far from being a result of scientific enquiry, it is but old baggage, and that it is high time that we got rid of these *impedimenta*.'<sup>68</sup> Thus, arguing against atomism – or any scientific theory – means showing how its ideas are unnecessary in contemporary scientific practice. Epistemological critique can only consist in an examination of scientific practice.

The argument against atomism develops amongst the following general lines. The advantage of atomism is that it appears to promise a completely mechanical explanation of phenomena: if atomism is correct, and is applied thoroughly, it should allow us to reduce all science to kinetics, the interaction of physical particles, as well as to proceed to a redescription of all phenomena in terms of these particles. It is, however, one thing to postulate a general hypothesis, another one to base on it a properly scientific study of phenomena. The second instance is, in the case of atomism, rare for Sorel, suggesting that atomism in fact displays a certain scientific sterility. The crux of the argument comes when we look at scientific theories based on the atomist hypothesis, such as Clausius' atomic theory of gases. If, argues Sorel, we look at what his theory actually consists in, we shall see that instead of a mechanistic explanation, we end up with a probabilistic one. The impossibility of calculating the trajectories of atomic particles forces us to recur to probabilistic averages. 'Atomism promised to reveal to us the secret of the mechanism through which a body changes from A to B; it doesn't keep its promise: it throws a cloth on the object at the moment of transformation; when the cloth is taken away, by a sleight of hand, B appears.'<sup>69</sup>

In the article on causation Sorel had greatly insisted on the importance of concepts in the practice of science, placing Aristotelian 'schemes' at the centre of scientific activity. He returns to this question in the article on atomism, refining his thought on the issue. He

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<sup>68</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Les fondements scientifiques de l'atomisme (1)', *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*, XXV, 1892, p. 584. '...nous voulons savoir si l'hypothèse matérialiste est à la hauteur de la connaissance moderne. Nous espérons démontrer qu'il n'en est pas ainsi.... Que, loin d'être le résultat de la science, elle n'est qu'un vieux bagage, et qu'il est grand temps de se débarrasser de ces *impedimenta*.'

<sup>69</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Les fondements scientifiques de l'atomisme (2)', *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* XXVI, 1892, p. 21. 'L'atomisme nous promettait de nous livrer le secret du mécanisme par lequel un corps passe de A en B ; il ne tient pas sa promesse : on jette un voile sur le corps au moment de la transformation ; quand on retire le voile, il s'est fait un tour de passe-passe, et B apparaît.'

abandons the unitary Aristotelian concept of 'scheme' and replaces it with a distinction between two types of concepts through which we conduce scientific research, representations and hypotheses. Representations are characterized in the following way. They are, naturally enough, systematizations of empirical observations. Yet, in spite of their somewhat misleading name their purpose is not that of mirroring, of presenting in a faithful way, said observations. Instead, their purpose is that of systematizing them in such a way that they can be connected to other observations in a mathematical, geometrical, or other kind of model. Thus, when Coulomb conceptualizes electricity in terms of fluids, 'no one considers this construction as having the appearance of reality.'<sup>70</sup> Representations are put in the service of 'practical needs'<sup>71</sup> Sorel tells us. But these practical needs are, in fact, intellectual ones typical of scientists. Representations 'allow the discovery of relations... which would have been difficult to discover through direct observations, in virtue of their complexity.'<sup>72</sup> Thus, the 'practical' criterion by which scientists judge the worth of representations is their scientific fertility, the possibilities they open up for the discovery of new facts and relations. They are thus artificial, non-empirical, non-representational elements of scientific thinking: 'a purely logical artefact, without any pretension to explain anything, a linguistic device... without which it would be impossible to pursue our mathematical investigations.'<sup>73</sup>

Hypotheses, such as that of atomism, too have a certain practical value: they classify, choose which forces are to be considered as fundamental, and so on. Unlike representations however, they are of greater generality, as they aim at encompassing a larger number of elements. More importantly however, they possess greater epistemological ambitions, as they aim at representing some actual aspect of reality: though science might arrive at their verification only after decades and decades of work, they are, unlike representations, susceptible of being proclaimed true or false in the traditional sense. An hypothesis is given, writes Sorel, 'as having a real value'.<sup>74</sup> Or, in the words of J.S. Mill, quoted in Sorel's article, it is 'a condition

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<sup>70</sup> Sorel, 'Fondements scientifiques de l'atomisme (1), p. 578.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 579.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 578.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 582. 'Une représentation est une œuvre purement logique, n'ayant pas du tout la prétention d'expliquer quoi que ce soit : c'est un appareil de langage écrit et parlé, sans lequel il nous serait impossible de poursuivre nos investigations mathématiques.'

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 584.

of a genuinely scientific hypothesis, that it be not destined always to remain an hypothesis, but be of such a nature as to be either proved or disproved...’<sup>75</sup>

It is worth underlining this distinction between hypotheses and representations not only because it shows Sorel’s continued concern for the problem of the conceptual apparatus of any scientific discipline, but also because it shows his commitment to believing that sciences ultimately must make substantial claims about the natural world. We shall, at the end of this section, have a further and stronger confirmation of this. But for now, the fact that Sorel writes about hypotheses as falsifiable claims should serve as a reminder that despite his interest in the non-empirical elements of scientific activity, he is far from being a conventionalist. Beyond this, the article brings little innovation and shows, on the contrary, great adherence to the epistemological positions previously developed. The argumentative strategy is straightforward: given that scientific practice precedes epistemological critique, the only argument against atomism can be to show its futility in actual scientific research.<sup>76</sup>

#### **1.4.2 AGAINST CARTESIANISM**

This strategy is pursued further in the second article published in the *Annales*. ‘La physique de Descartes’ is an historical demolition of the Descartes’ importance to modern physics. Much in the same way in which the attack on atomism was an attack on a mechanistic cosmology, the attack on Descartes has as its real target the triumphalist interpretations of Descartes as the herald of scientific and philosophical modernity given by contemporary commentators. The reference, moreover, is explicit. Through the whole article Sorel refers to a little introductory book on Descartes written by the philosopher Alfred Fouillée.<sup>77</sup> According to Fouillée, Descartes is to praise for having liberated scientific thinking from scholastic and Aristotelian categories, from the ‘logic of “quality” and “essence”, rather than

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<sup>75</sup> John Stuart Mill, *A system of logic*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, John Parker and son: 1856), p. 14. Sorel quotes this passage from the French translation, published in 1866 in Paris by the Libraire philosophique de Ladrangue.

<sup>76</sup> Beyond these epistemological arguments, it is interesting to remark how Sorel explains the success of the atomistic hypothesis despite its scientific deficiencies. For him, it has to do with its intuitive appeal and its facility to the general public. ‘The mass prefers a confident error to the admission of ignorance. This crass logic will always be the best ally of materialism.’ (La masse... préfère l’erreur confiante à l’aveu de l’ignorance. Cette logique grossière sera toujours le meilleur auxiliaire du matérialisme’) Ibid., p. 29. Here we see the embryos of a sociology of science, i.e. the attempt to explain the success or failure of scientific theories through factors other than scientific ones. This element will recur and grow in importance in Sorel’s thought. Moreover, the rhetorical strategy is also worth underlining: arguing, in a Catholic and Thomist journal, against a scientific paradigm widely associated with modernity by suggesting that its success has little to do with science itself.

<sup>77</sup> The publication date of Fouillée’s book is 1893, whereas Sorel’s article is from the preceding year. From a cross-reading of Sorel’s article and Fouillée’s book, it appears that Sorel might have had access to the text before its publication. For example, on page 201, Sorel writes sarcastically that ‘Descartes saw or, at the very least, intuited everything; contemporary science is often backwards when compared to Cartesian conceptions’. On page 32 of his own *Descartes*, Fouillée writes that, as far as excluding from the scientific picture of the world all notions of essences and hidden natures, ‘Descartes is ahead of many contemporary doctrines’.

that of quantity and phenomena', the former being for Fouillée an obsolete logic to which 'classification appeared as the highest degree of science'.<sup>78</sup>

Given Sorel's Aristotelianism, and given that his understanding of physical causation drew on Aristotle's ideas on formal causation, it is unsurprising that he devotes energy to attacking the idea of scientific modernity as based on a complete Cartesian break with old Aristotelian categories. As with the previous article, the strategy is that of showing how Cartesian assumptions, far from being the bases of modern science are unnecessary and, in fact, burdensome to scientific activity. He opens sarcastically: 'Physicists have long stopped reading Descartes... One would think that admirers of Descartes would have accepted this situation; in all the classical volumes, in fact, there is a careful work of omission of all that could give a correct idea of the famous revolution that the *master* is supposed to have accomplished.'<sup>79</sup> In other words, Cartesians should be glad that no one remembers Descartes' physics anymore, for it is this oblivion that ensures the enduring reputation of their master.

Thus, he begins to rescue Descartes's physics from oblivion in order to attack him. According to Fouillée, Descartes had anticipated the wave theory of light. But Sorel, quoting from the French physicist Emile Verdet, suggests that Descartes' conception of light was of an incredible scientific sterility, insofar as it considered light as a movement transmitted instantly, rather than through successive waves. Did, asks Sorel, Descartes anticipate the mechanical theory of heat? Only in a very general and, consequently, virtually meaningless way: 'it is easy to find, in old books, passages in which heat and light are considered and movements; this is not a good reason to deny the merits of Huyghens, Young and Fresnel.'<sup>80</sup> Newtonian gravitation 'is a scandal to Cartesians'<sup>81</sup>, and the principle of mutual attraction of bodies is, suggests Sorel, closer to Aristotelianism and Thomism than to Cartesianism. Fouillée praises Descartes for having expelled final causation in terms of divinity from the system of physics: 'As for final causes, Descartes banishes them forever from the temple of

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<sup>78</sup> Alfred Fouillée, *Descartes* (Paris, Hachette : 1893), p. 26. 'La logique d'Aristote... c'était la logique de la « qualité » et de l' « essence », plutôt que de la quantité et des phénomènes... Après avoir déterminé les qualités, on les réunissait en genres et espèces, on les classait : la classification semblait être le plus haut degré de la science...'

<sup>79</sup> Georges Sorel, 'La physique de Descartes', *Annales de philosophie Chrétienne* XVI, 1892, p.200. 'Le physiciens ne lisent plus Descartes depuis longtemps... Nous pensions que les admirateurs de Descartes avaient accepté cette situation ; dans les ouvrages classiques, on élimine, en effet, avec soin, tout ce qui pourrait donner une juste idée de la fameuse révolution que le *maître* aurait accomplie.'

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

physics and natural history.’<sup>82</sup> It is easy for Sorel to quote Descartes’ *Traité de la lumière* in which Descartes writes, in Aristotelian fashion, that ‘Dieu... comme chacun doit savoir, est immuable’<sup>83</sup> and the *Principes de Philosophie* in which, justifying the laws of motion, he asserts that ‘Dieu ne change jamais sa façon d’agir et... il conserve le monde avec la mesme action qu’il l’a créée.’<sup>84</sup> Descartes, points out Sorel, is also an atomist, and atomism is a theory deeply at odds with modern science. The list of errors continues for a bit, until Sorel suggests that the success of Cartesianism, despite these problems, is due to the fact that Descartes ‘writes for society people, and he knows that they prefer approximation to the *difficult truth* of science.’<sup>85</sup>

A particularly interesting section of the article appears as Sorel examines Descartes’ opinion of Galileo Galilei. Descartes’ judgement on the Italian scientist is critical insofar as, for the French, Galilei limits himself to explaining a few experiments: ‘sans avoir considéré les premières causes de la nature, il a seulement cherché les raisons de quelques effets particuliers, & ainsy, qu’il a basti sans fondements.’<sup>86</sup> Both Sorel and Fouillée judge this opinion excessive<sup>87</sup> but Fouillée, writes Sorel, does not emphasize sufficiently ‘the dangerous sophism contained in this sentence.’<sup>88</sup> Stressing the importance of scientific practice, he writes: ‘The history of science offers us too many examples of wide ranging but useless and cumbersome systems. They will always find some support, for it is easier to speculate generally on the nature of things than to carry on a few good experiments.’<sup>89</sup> Sorel’s dismissal of the notion of first causes, in a Thomist journal, is interesting. On the one hand, a glance at the argument shows that Sorel, rather coherently, is arguing against foundationalism: it is problematic for science to enquire upon first causes because, as seen

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<sup>82</sup> Fouillée, *Descartes*, p. 39. ‘Quant au causes finales, Descartes les chasse pour jamais du temple de la physique et de l’histoire naturelle.’

<sup>83</sup> René Descartes, *Le Monde/Traité de la lumière* in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds), *Œuvres de Descartes* [1897-1913], vol. XI, (Paris, Vrin : 1996), p. 38.

<sup>84</sup> René Descartes, *Principes de philosophie* in Adam and Tannery (eds), *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. IX, pp. 87-8.

<sup>85</sup> Sorel, ‘Physique de Descartes’, p. 208. ‘Il [Descartes] écrit pour les gents du monde, et il sait que ceux-ci préfèrent l’à peu près à la *vérité ardue* de la science.’ Notice that it is the same rhetorical strategy utilized in the article on atomism.

<sup>86</sup> René Descartes, letter to Mersenne, 11/10/1638 in Adam and Tannery (eds) *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. II, p. 380. Cited in Sorel, ‘Physique de Descartes’, p.209 and Fouillée, *Descartes*, pp. 30-1. ‘...without having inquired on the first causes of nature, he only undertook to find the reasons of a few particular effects, and thus builds without foundations’. Translation mine.

<sup>87</sup> Further hint that Sorel had access to Fouillée’s manuscript before publication is the use of the same adjectives – ‘injuste’ and ‘sommaire’ – to describe Descartes’ opinion of Galilei. See Sorel, ‘Physique de Descartes’, p. 209 and Fouillée, *Descartes*, p. 31.

<sup>88</sup> Sorel, ‘Physique de Descartes’, p. 209.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. ‘L’histoire de la science ne nous offre que trop d’exemples de systèmes à grande envergure inutiles et encombrants. Ils ont toujours quelque vogue, car il est plus facile de dissenter a perte de vue sur la nature des choses que de faire de bonnes expériences.’

above, it cannot have an unproblematic grounding in reality. Taking an example from a contemporary, he cites Henri Poincaré's ambition of grounding the whole 'building of mathematical physics' on thermodynamics, and insists that the building metaphor is just that, a figure of speech, and that thermodynamics is 'a cunning interpretation of certain particular and well grouped phenomena' without any ambition of shedding light upon the 'first causes of nature'.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, the rejection of the notion of first causes shows that Sorel engages very creatively with the Aristotelian tradition, accepting something and rejecting other things. Much in the same way with which he will approach Marxism and pragmatism, Sorel essentially utilizes the conceptual apparatus of the Aristotelian tradition to give voice to his own intuitions. Put otherwise, Sorel is no Aristotelian nostalgic, but utilizes Aristotelian concepts to present new ideas.

### 1.4.3 AGAINST CONVENTIONALISM: SOREL AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SCIENTIFIC TRADITION

The final and most important article published by Sorel in the *Annales* is 'Deux sophismes sur les temps'.<sup>91</sup> Despite the title, the article deals only marginally with the philosophical issue of time; instead, it tackles issues of philosophy of science in the traditional sense. The starting point of Sorel's reasoning are the implications for physics, and for science in general, of the problem of the measurement of time. The first part of the text is dedicated to the examination of the ideas of Auguste Calinon<sup>92</sup> and Georges Lechalas: both argue, generally speaking, in favour of a relative conception of time as a variable necessary to our physical theories, but not susceptible of being measured in an absolute manner. Thus there are, in theory, as many times as there are relevant movements.<sup>93</sup> We might use a Newtonian time for some branches of physics and an electric one, i.e. one based on the movement of electricity, for others. 'The measurement of time' writes Sorel, disapprovingly, of Lechalas' theory 'is only an operation

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90 Ibid., pp. 209-10. '...la thermodynamique est une science fondée sur une sagace interprétation de certains phénomènes particuliers bien groupés... elle n'a pas la moindre prétention à remonter aux premières causes de la nature'.

<sup>91</sup> Reflection on the question of time was an increasingly important philosophical issue. In 1889 Bergson, a fellow contributor of Sorel to the *Revue Philosophique* had published his doctoral thesis, the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* with Alcan. Sorel's own reflection on time, permeated as they are by Bergsonian concepts, are a good indicator of the impact of this work. In 1892, for example, Sorel published a small article on the question of time and on Zeno's paradoxes, in which he suggests a quasi-Bergsonian interpretation of Aristotle's engagement with the paradoxes. According to Sorel, Aristotle already had a grasp of time as Bergsonian durée, i.e. continuous flow not susceptible of being broken down into analytical units. Aristotle 'was but a mediocre geometer, but had insights of genius in physiology' and thus conceived of time in physiological rather than geometrical terms. See Georges Sorel, 'Les sophismes de Zénon d'Élée', *Revue Scientifique* L, 1892, p. 143. '... il [Aristotle] n'était qu'un géomètre médiocre, mais il avait des vues géniales en physiologie.'

<sup>92</sup> In particular, see Auguste Calinon, 'Le temps et la force', *Revue philosophique* XXIII, 1887, pp. 286-98.

<sup>93</sup> That is to say that time varies according to the movement we use to measure it.



carried on for the simplification of human work, an operation with no foundation in the true nature of things and that can be modified at will, following the convenience of the moment.’<sup>94</sup> For Sorel, one of the problematic consequences of this relative conception of time is that it implies a relativity of force. He also suggests an ideal experiment that would realize a completely uniform motion, and thus give us theoretical justification for speaking of an absolute time. Despite the difference of opinion, however, he takes Calinon’s – though not Lechalas’ – arguments very seriously and accepts that the measurement of time is a problematic issue. Nevertheless, as Sorel himself states at the beginning, the interest in ideas about time resides not in themselves, but in what they say about current approaches to science. The important points are not the arguments, but ‘the study of the reasons that gave birth to them.’<sup>95</sup>

In the first part of the article Sorel insists on the fact that the relativity of time points towards a conventionalist conception of science,<sup>96</sup> which sees science as a coherent set of propositions without reference to reality. The poignancy of these conceptions owed a lot to the discussion of non-Euclidean geometries, a much-debated topic at the time.<sup>97</sup> The possibility of a coherent non-Euclidean geometry created a number of important philosophical and scientific questions: essentially, if such geometries are possible, then Euclidean postulates and axioms appear as *conventional*, though useful and practical, starting points, with no greater grounding in reality than their non-Euclidean alternatives. The intuitive preference one accords to the Euclidean variant is to be explained in terms of its efficiency in dealing with problems of physics, but its epistemic status as descriptive of reality is to be abandoned. In this debate, Sorel has a strong opinion to express: science is not a system of useful conventions, but rather the study of reality. What interests us, and what makes this article important, is that in his attack on

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<sup>94</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Deux nouveaux sophismes sur le temps (1)’, *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, XXVII, 1892, p. 263. ‘Dans tous les cas, la mesure du temps n’est qu’une opération constituée pour la commodité des travaux humains, opération qui n’a pas de fondement dans la vraie nature de choses et qui peut être modifiée au gré des convenances du moment.’

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 243. ‘...il s’est produit quelques sophismes dont l’intérêt réside moins dans les thèses proposées que dans l’étude des raisons qui les ont fait naître.’

<sup>96</sup> He labels this conception as ‘idealist’, term which he equates with subjectivism, disdain for experience, and arbitrariness. There is no evidence in favour of, and much evidence against, the view that he uses this term in its technical, philosophical meaning, in order to indicate the Hegelian tradition.

<sup>97</sup> A discussion on the plausibility and consequences of such geometries had occurred, for example, in the previous years in the *Revue philosophique*. See Auguste Calinon, ‘Les notions premières en mathématiques’, *Revue philosophique* XXVI, 1888, pp. 42-8 and ‘Les espaces géométriques’, *Revue philosophique* XXVII, 1889, pp. 588-95 ; Jules Andradé, ‘Les bases expérimentales de la géométrie’, *Revue philosophique* XXX, 1890, pp. 406-11 and ‘Les bases expérimentales de la géométrie euclidienne’, *Revue philosophique* XXXI, 1891, pp. 430-2 ; Georges Lechalas, ‘La géométrie générale et les jugements synthétiques *a priori*’, *Revue philosophique* XXX, 1890, pp. 157-69 and ‘Sur les bases expérimentales de la géométrie’, *Revue philosophique* XXX, 1890, pp. 639-41 ; Georges Sorel, ‘Sur la géométrie non-euclidienne’, *Revue philosophique* XXXI, 1891, pp. 428-30.

conventionalism he draws the historicist consequences implicit in his principle of the priority of practice.

He observes, to begin with, that conventionalist understandings of geometry and science all display a distrust of the epistemic credentials of experience and experiments. As an example, Sorel takes the work of François Saléta, an older colleague of Sorel at the Ponts et Chaussées and author of works on geometry and the philosophy of science. According to Saléta, empirical elements are a necessary evil in science, whose true rational core consists in a system of linguistic rules. We may *have* to rely on experience, conceived in terms of subjective impressions, but we enter the realm of science when we understand the importance of linguistic rules and their application.

‘All consideration relative to real things is absolutely to be ruled out. The question becomes one of being able to discern and distinguish between judgements, that is, combinations of words, in accordance with certain *conventional* rules from judgements incompatible with such rules. This is the whole edifice of deductive reasoning.’<sup>98</sup>

The conception of geometry championed here ought to be spelt out: postulates are given by convention, and the remaining geometrical propositions are simply deduced from these conventional givens. Against this view, Sorel comments that ‘those who see in geometry only a neat group of propositions, each deduced from the other ones, cannot but accept this prodigiously simplifying system.’<sup>99</sup> If geometrical postulates were purely linguistic conventions, i.e. definitions, scientific progress, remarks Sorel, would be impossible. Definitions ‘add nothing to everyday knowledge, they only limit the meaning of specific words’.<sup>100</sup> In other words, logical games are, by definition one might say, tautological and hence, crucially, sterile. They cannot enlarge a body of knowledge.

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<sup>98</sup> F. Saléta, *Principes de logique positive ou Traité de scepticisme positif*, (Paris, Germer-Baillièrre : 1873), quoted in Sorel, ‘Deux sophismes (2)’, p. 309. ‘Toute considération relative aux choses réelles se trouve écartée d’une manière absolue. Il ne s’agit plus que de savoir discerner, distinguer les jugements, c’est-à-dire les assemblages de mots qui sont conformes à certaines règles *posées par convention*, d’avec ceux qui n’y sont pas conformes ; et c’est là, en effet, tout l’office du raisonnement déductif.’ It is generally a good indication of the Kantian curse of things in themselves when we read expressions such as ‘all consideration relative to real things is absolutely to be ruled out.’

<sup>99</sup> Sorel, ‘Deux nouveaux sophismes sur le temps (2)’, *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* XXVII, 1892, p. 309. ‘Les personnes qui ne voient dans la géométrie qu’un bel ensemble de propositions bien déduites les unes des autres, ne peuvent manquer d’accepter ce système, prodigieusement simplificateur’

<sup>100</sup> Sorel, ‘Deux sophismes (2)’, p. 304. ‘celles-ci [definitions] n’ajoutent rien aux connaissances communes et restreignent seulement le sens de certains mots.’

If conventionalism, in its rigorous deductive form, were true, ‘it would be very difficult to make [scientific] progress; successive generations would cover the same ground, busy taking up the same studies again and again.’<sup>101</sup> Instead, ‘geometry can carry on its enterprise only by introducing propositions it does not demonstrate, propositions resuming what one learns about [geometrical] figures *through experience*: these propositions are what we call [geometrical] postulates.’<sup>102</sup>

But, and here comes the decisive point, this experimental origin of geometrical postulates does not come from an unproblematic appeal to a universal and *unchanging* experience, à la Comte, but has an *historical* dimension. The situation of Greek geometry, Sorel tells us, is radically different from the one in which modern science finds itself: whereas Greek geometers had to recur to their everyday experience of things, when modern science appeals to experience it must do this through a scientific tradition, i.e. a series of experimental rules and conceptual schemes. To use the classical expression, modern science stands on the shoulder of giants. The first Greek scientists ‘saw each science as having its own existence, working on determinate data, borrowed from the *general knowledge of real things*.’<sup>103</sup> Thus, the concepts which, say, Euclid utilizes, ‘have a reality known to all of his readers and possess properties which are easy to grasp...’<sup>104</sup> The situation of modern science is radically different: its starting points are not rooted in an everyday experience of things, but are the points of arrival of the scientific activity of previous generations. The result of a slow and laborious process of research is presented to the new generations under the guise of postulates: ‘students understand rapidly, thanks to well-chosen examples, the notions taught to them, and postulates are accepted unproblematically if one shows clearly their precise meaning through some of their most basic applications.’<sup>105</sup> It is in this way that science progresses, and ‘it is surprising to see with what eagerness the theorem of the conservation of energy is accepted [by the new generation] as being more or less self-evident.’<sup>106</sup> Once new discoveries have

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 305. ‘il serait bien difficile de progresser ; le générations piétineraient sur place, occupées à reprendre toujours les mêmes études.’

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 304. Emphasis added. ‘La géométrie ne peut faire son œuvre qu’en introduisant des propositions qu’elle ne démontre pas, qui résument ce que l’on apprend des figures par l’expérience : ces propositions sont les demandes.’

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 302. Emphasis added. ‘ils considéraient chaque science comme ayant une existence propre, travaillant sur des données déterminées, empruntées à la connaissance générale des choses réelles.’

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 303. ‘Les choses dont il [Euclid] parle ont une réalité connue de tous ses lecteurs et des propriétés dont on peut rendre compte’

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 305-6. ‘...les élèves arrivent rapidement à comprendre, à l’aide d’exemples bien choisis, l’introduction des notions don on leur parle ; et les demandes sont acceptées sans aucun embarras, pourvu qu’on en montre bien le sens précis par des applications élémentaires.’

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

become part of the body of current scientific knowledge, it is easy to see them as conventional starting points, originating in the obvious and self-evident observation of reality. But this, argues Sorel, is a mistake. Sciences hides under logical constructions the experimental origins of their concepts, but this ‘dissimulation’ is, for him, contrary to the principles of [scientific] method’<sup>107</sup>

The introduction of this historical conception of science in Sorel’s epistemology<sup>108</sup> fits rather well with the general approach outlined at the beginning of the chapter, namely that of treating science as a human activity. What it does is give scientific and epistemic traditions a decisive role in adjudicating the legitimacy of scientific claims. Science, thus, is an experimental practice with a history and a tradition, without which its progresses would become an unexplainable mystery. ‘Unfortunately’ he writes ‘very few people understand the importance of tradition in science; since Descartes, everybody imagines themselves able to reconstruct, through his own forces, the whole edifice of human knowledge’.<sup>109</sup> But scientists, he goes on, do not follow Cartesian rules of enquiry:

‘they do not deny anything, they do not know methodical doubt, they know they would be powerless if they neglected the works of their predecessors. Instead of rejecting all tradition in order to arrive at the clear and distinct ideas in him, the observer has little taste for innovations and a bold confidence in his conceptions.’<sup>110</sup>

Far from having revolutionary traits, the introduction of new theories is a slow work of accommodation of novelty into an accepted body of knowledge. ‘Once a new theory is ripe enough to be taught [i.e. ripe enough to reach the crucial moment of transmission to the new generations]... it fits so well with body of received doctrines that sometimes one wonders where the novelty is.’<sup>111</sup> Ignorance of the dynamic of scientific progress thus conceived produces a Cartesian impatience to tear the whole construction of science down, and to start anew: an urge which, for Sorel, reveals limited familiarity with the concreteness of scientific research.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 313. Though, of course, it might be a necessity linked to the transmission of knowledge.

<sup>108</sup> To be sure: the ‘historical’ element, for now, only concerns the fact that scientific activity has its own history and that this history is crucial in determining the present practice of science. There is, at this point, no systematized reflection on the fact that the concepts used by scientists are drawn from a more general historical context. There is no sociology of knowledge or of science, though there are hints in this direction, as we have seen.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

## 1.5 THE ANCIENNE ET NOUVELLE MÉTAPHYSIQUE

In order to complete our portrait of Sorel's early epistemology it is necessary to jump ahead a couple of years and devote some space to a long article entitled 'L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique'.<sup>112</sup> The article appears in the newly established Marxist journal the *Ère nouvelle*, a publication that, in spite of its short existence<sup>113</sup>, Pierre Andreu calls 'perhaps the first' Marxist journal in France.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, the focus of this section will not be on the Marxist references. Instead, we shall treat the text as an attempt by Sorel to systematize his own epistemological work from 1888 until 1894. This is not only a choice of focus, but also a claim on what really matters in the text. The Marxist references in the 'Ancienne et Nouvelle Métaphysique' are as scarce as they are superficial. There is, it is true, a certain conceptual affinity with a generally Marxist outlook. But the claim here is that these ideas, specifically those on the importance of what Sorel calls the 'artificial milieu' to scientific activity are not innovations derived by a reading of Marx, but the development of older Sorelian intuitions.

It is in this long and complex text that Sorel tries to reap the fruits of his previous engagement with the epistemological problem. A work of systematization, the text threads much old ground. Nevertheless, it contains some important developments. To start with, Sorel further elaborates his ideas on the origin of the conceptual tools indispensable to scientific activity. We have seen how he had argued that they originate in scientific traditions, and he now goes a step further by suggesting that they originate in a wider historical context, in what he calls, rather generally, an 'artificial milieu'. Thus, scientific concepts arise out of a host of human activities. They have, however, a precise function, which is that of allowing the scientist to enquire experimentally. They are indispensable tools whose unique purpose is that of allowing a direct confrontation with nature. The idea is that humanly constructed conceptual tools are indispensable to enquire scientifically upon nature, and to discover the deterministic laws that regulate its functioning.

A second important aspect lies in the fact that Sorel here finally engages directly with the decisive issue of freedom and determinism. Through an engagement with Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Sorel dismisses the idea of freedom as a state of exception from the determinism of nature, and develops a theory of freedom as creative

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<sup>112</sup> Georges Sorel, 'L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique', *L'Ère Nouvelle* I, 1894, pp. 329-51, 461-82 and II, 1894, pp. 51-87 and 180-205. In citing this work I will use the republication of the article in book form from 1935 entitled 'D'Aristote à Marx' cited at p. 50.

<sup>113</sup> The publication existed for little over a year, from July 1893 until November 1894. See Pierre Andreu, *Notre Maître*, p. 54.

<sup>114</sup> Andreu, *Notre Maître*, p. 52.

agency. This choice must be seen as the only possibility for safeguarding the possibility of freedom without destroying the natural determinism on which Sorel still bases the claims of science. If freedom is not an exception to determinism, then the experimental practice of science can claim to discover the causal laws that regulate nature. This solution, of course, establishes a distinction between a deterministic world of nature and a human world in which this determinism is absent. As we shall see more thoroughly in the following chapter, this distinction becomes immensely problematic for questions of social science. But for the time being, it allows Sorel to develop a solid theory of science as a human experimental practice without negating freedom. In fact, the historically constructed tools which are indispensable to science are an instance of the creative agency that characterizes human freedom.

For analytical reasons as well as for the sake of clarity, the text can be divided into roughly three parts. In the first one, Sorel examines the reasons as to why contemporary culture cannot come up with a satisfying conception of science. He points his finger at the twin evils of a science that has given up its truth-finding ambitions, and rests content with justifying itself in terms of its ability to solve practical problems,<sup>115</sup> and at an excessively abstract philosophical thought that has abandoned the terrain of scientific experience and has become unable to speak of it.<sup>116</sup> The way out of this situation consists in reclaiming the terrain of scientific experience, and examining the role, function and origins of what he calls ‘expressive supports’: the conceptual tools developed and used by scientists. In the second part, Sorel engages with the problem of freedom and develops, closely following Bergson, his theory of freedom as activity. Free will, on this view, becomes a special kind of determination, one springing from the depths of the individual subject. In the final part, Sorel develops his conception of science as an historical and collective activity. This allows him to outline a conception of science that is epistemically ambitious and at the same time not only compatible with, but an instance of human freedom.

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<sup>115</sup> Of course this is an old issue for Sorel, and the treatment here consists in a re-elaboration of the distinction between science and empiricism developed in ‘De la cause en physique’.

<sup>116</sup> These two evils are two sides of the same coin. If we burden ourselves with the task of giving to subjective impressions the status of objective descriptions of reality we arrive at these conclusions. Scientifically, we will believe in the impossibility of producing an accurate mapping of reality, and thus we will lower the epistemic ambitions of science. This, in turn, will produce a retreat of philosophical thought from the terrain of scientific experience, because its modest claims cannot satisfy its hunger for truth. Sorel’s text, and indeed his whole early epistemology, can be seen as attempts to overcome this situation.

### 1.5.1 BETWEEN EMPIRICISM AND METAPHYSICS: SOREL'S THEORY OF EXPRESSIVE SUPPORTS

The work opens with an all-too-familiar tirade against the impotence of traditional metaphysics, accused by Sorel of having become a science of nothingness where the arbitrary speculations of philosophers can develop unimpeded. Sorel's synthetic analysis of the troubles of contemporary philosophy sets up very well the context within which his own arguments move:

'Metaphysicians have attracted disdain on themselves through their bizarre pretensions to judge and direct natural sciences without having studied them; nowadays, they seem to have understood that their kingdom is not of this world, and they study the *moral space*: there, they find no resistance and their fancies can develop in the emptiness. But there is a real metaphysics, impossible to ignore if one wants to tackle correctly scientific problems and give to them true solutions',<sup>117</sup>

What Sorel presents here is a fracture between philosophical thought and scientific practice, a fracture that he will attempt to solve. Abstract and *a priori* ways of philosophizing have rendered philosophy incapable of speaking of science. Science thus has been abandoned to either simplistic or excessively modest understandings of it, while philosophy has retreated into the irrelevance of a moral world with little relation to reality.<sup>118</sup> This creates on the one hand what Sorel calls 'idealism', an abstract philosophy incapable of dealing with concrete problems as it ignores the philosophical importance of practice, while on the other, either staunch and scientifically-naïve positivism that supposes that scientific activity is an unproblematic discovery and representation of the structures of nature, or, more commonly and possessing greater sophistication, a modest conception of science as a problem-solving activity unwilling or incapable of making substantial claims about nature. Thus, the purpose of the 'real metaphysics' cannot but be the overcoming of this unfortunate dualism.

The first point to establish in order to vindicate the real metaphysics is that science remains capable of making serious claims about nature, i.e. that it is not a purely pragmatic activity whose justification is the satisfaction of our practical needs. This takes the form of a distinction between what Sorel calls 'la systématique', and true science. The difference between the two is that while the former is an eminently practical form of intellectual activity,

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<sup>117</sup> Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 95. 'Les métaphysiciens ont attiré sur eux le mépris par leurs étranges prétentions à juger et diriger les sciences de la nature, sans les avoir étudiées; aujourd'hui, ils semblent avoir compris que leur royaume n'est pas de ce monde et ils se lancent surtout dans *l'espace moral* : là ils ne trouvent aucun obstacle et leurs chimères peuvent évoluer dans le vide, tout à leur aise. Mais il y a une métaphysique réelle, qu'il est impossible de négliger si l'on veut aborder les problèmes scientifiques d'une manière correcte et leur donner de vraies solutions.'

<sup>118</sup> Though schematic, this is one version of the Kantian fracture illustrated previously in the chapter.

arising from concrete problems and having their solution as its goal, science's aim is that of arriving at the knowledge of the fundamental processes governing a given set of phenomena. '... science does not have as its direct objective neither [the] application [of its theses] nor prediction.'<sup>119</sup> These are the concerns of practitioners: they rely on empirical studies, traditions, and their activity often requires what Sorel calls a '*practical sense*, which we can acquire only through a long and detailed experience of things.'<sup>120</sup> Now, we have seen how Sorel does not deny the important role of tradition in science. But then, what is the point of this distinction between science and 'systématique'? It is to stress that science has a primary interest in the understanding of things, whereas practitioners are dominated by the urge to predict, control and find solutions to concrete problems: it is, in other words, a vindication of the high epistemic ambitions that science ought to entertain.

The building techniques of the Middle Ages are a form of 'systématique', and so too are, at a higher level of systematization, the attempts of contemporary social economists to come up with supposedly scientific labour legislation. What these economists do, according to Sorel, is to observe the situation of labour legislation in various countries, produce empirical studies, and finally elaborate prescriptions dictated by the practical goal of achieving social peace. This might be illuminating, but it is not a science of economics. As with any form of 'systématique', the application of these recipes for social peace requires a practical sense. Unlike in architecture or industry, when it comes to economic legislation, this practical sense 'arises mainly under the influence of political, moral, religious and literary prejudices. Often a mediocre but popular novel has more effect than the best scientific demonstrations.'<sup>121</sup> Again, this is not a science of economics: the establishment of such science is the task of socialists who, Sorel tells us in an excess of enthusiasm, 'substitute a vague and half-sentimental appreciation with a study of phenomena connected to their structural laws and fundamental causes.'<sup>122</sup> Beyond these deterministic excesses, one can recognise here the familiar Sorelian discomfort with the idea of science as a useful tool for solving practical problems and, complementarily, the insistence on the importance of science as a truth-finding activity.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 113. '...la science n'a point pour objet direct l'application et la prévision'

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 99. '... le *sens pratique*, sense qu'on ne peut acquérir que par une longue et minutieuse expérience des choses.'

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 105. 'mais ce sens [pratique] n'a pas la même origine que dans le domaine industriel : il se forme, en grande partie, sous l'influence des préjugés politiques, moraux, religieux, littéraires. Souvent un roman médiocre, mais bien lancé, a plus d'effet que les meilleures démonstrations scientifiques.'

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 113. 'A une appréciation vague, à demi-sentimentale, ils substituent l'étude des phénomènes rapportés à leurs lois structurales et à leurs causes fondamentales.'



If, on the one hand, science must not be confused with the excessively empirical and practical ‘*systematique*’, it must, on the other hand, be on its guard against the subjectivist excesses of traditional metaphysics. The attack on classical metaphysics reiterates the usual themes: metaphysics is governed by subjectivism and has become little more than a science of arbitrariness in which anything goes. Though it bears a certain resemblance to ‘*systematique*’, traditional metaphysics is, in fact, far worse: while the former is brought back to earth by the practical concerns that define it, ‘*metaphysicians erect their systems in the air, and display a disdain for experience which allows them to pontificate, for their whole life, about things they ignore*’.<sup>123</sup> The crucial element of Sorel’s critique is, of course, the *disdain for experience* displayed by philosophical thought. This disdain for experience has, for Sorel, a precise origin: it is born out of a misunderstanding of the use of conceptual tools – what Sorel here calls ‘*constructions*’ – in scientific activity:

‘*Metaphysicians affirm that it is necessary to construct and, on this, they are right; – they argue that science itself does this; from there, they move to the conclusion that there is no substantial difference between the supposed realities of science and idealist imaginings: in both cases, we are dealing with productions of the spirit... The metaphysical illusion rests mainly on an insufficient critique of constructions.*’<sup>124</sup>

As we have underlined repeatedly, Sorel is not comfortable with the idea that scientific propositions emerge unproblematically from the observation of pure data. Science is armed with a vast conceptual repertoire that allows it to construct, from the observation of data, scientific theories. The observer is not passive, but employs a host of tools as he engages in scientific activity. But this acceptance of the active role of the enquirer cannot lead to subjectivist conclusions: though we do need ‘*constructions*’, we need them in order to be able to make claims about the natural world.

In order to reconcile the necessity for conceptual ‘*constructions*’ with the objective character of science, Sorel ventures into a critical examination of the proper use of ‘*constructions*’ in scientific activity. ‘*To establish any kind of reasoning, one needs a construction, which I will call an expressive support (geometrical figures, mechanisms, living beings, collective*

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 115. ‘*Les métaphysiciens construisent en l’air et affichent pour l’expérience un mépris, qui leur permet de dissertar, toute leur vie, sur des choses dont ils ignorent le premier mot*’.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 117. ‘*Les métaphysiciens affirment qu’il faut construire et ils ont raison, sur ce point ; – ils soutiennent que la science elle-même ne fait pas autre chose ; de là, ils arrivent à conclure qu’il n’y a pas une grande distance entre les prétendues réalités scientifiques et les imaginations idéalistes : ce sont dans les deux cas des productions de l’esprit... C’est dans le défaut de critique que réside, en grande partie, l’illusion métaphysique...*’

bodies)... Logic should be defined as “*the set of rules regarding the use of supports in the demonstrative process*”<sup>125</sup> Though Sorel is at times imprecise in clarifying rigorously the role of expressive supports in scientific research,<sup>126</sup> an element emerges clearly: their status as tools of human reasoning for dealing with phenomena and their relations in the attempt to establish a scientific body of knowledge. This brings Sorel to a list of the three classical mistakes associated with the use of expressive supports. Firstly, we can use a support unfit to describe the phenomena under examination: this is the case of, for example, teleological cosmologies. These cosmologies use a support fit for the study of human production and apply it to the study of the universe.<sup>127</sup> Secondly, we can use an incomplete support and give rise to a large number of conceptual mistakes. Finally, and most importantly, we can ‘substitute supports for things, and confer to them an objective reality, thus going beyond the purpose for which they were conceived.’<sup>128</sup>

This is the most common type of mistake associated with expressive supports. Arguing against an unnamed critic, Sorel attacks the idea that ‘scientific socialism will remain an illusion as long as it will not equip itself with mathematical formulas’.<sup>129</sup> The error in this reasoning lies in mistaking an algebraic support for a reality of things: insurance company brokers often develop extremely complex mathematical formulas in their business. They use models ‘necessitating an important analytical apparatus’<sup>130</sup>. And yet no one would claim that theirs is ‘a *science* of human longevity’.<sup>131</sup> Mathematical supports are tools to deal with reality: they ‘contain nothing in themselves, and can only provide us with what we have already put in them’.<sup>132</sup> The confusion between states of affairs and the mathematical supports used to express them is an issue on which Sorel insists quite a bit. When this confusion between supports and realities occurs:

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. ‘Pour établir un raisonnement quelconque, il faut disposer d’une construction, que j’appellerai le *support expressif* (figures géométriques, mécanismes, êtres vivants, corps collectifs)... La logique devrait se définir « *l’ensemble des règles pour l’emploi des supports dans le processus démonstratif* ».’

<sup>126</sup> At times, such as in pages 141-143, he speaks of their utility in terms of fertility, i.e. the number of possibilities they open up, while other times he values clarity and their power of systematization as the decisive criteria.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 129-30.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 131. ‘On substitue les supports aux choses et on leur donne une réalité objective, dépassant l’usage pour lequel ils ont été construits.’

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 120. ‘...on oublie volontiers que les combinaisons mathématiques ne renferment rien per elles-mêmes et qu’elles ne peuvent fournir que ce qu’on y a mis.’

‘It is easy to see that here we operate, approximately, like peoples when they create mythologies with the help of degenerations of language [maladies du langage]; we create new entities by creating new expressions... It is in this sense that we can say that one creates a world in his own spirit.’<sup>133</sup>

The social sciences are not immune from this mistake: one creates an abstract model of society with a certain logical coherence and ends up mistaking it for the fundamental structure guiding social development. Instead of subordinating supports to the relations between phenomena, ‘we consider relations as the consequences of this hypothetical reality [the expressive support]’.<sup>134</sup> The confusion of supports with realities generates social utopias. The fact that their defenders ‘believe they have answered all objections when they have shown that things are logically connected’ is indicative of this confusion between support and reality.<sup>135</sup>

It might be useful here to offer a short recap of the context in which Sorel deploys these reflections on the role of expressive supports in order to understand both Sorel’s intentions and the force of his arguments. The dominant picture of the world is mechanistic and deterministic. If the objects of experience are overwhelmingly described in these terms, the space left for other kinds of explanations is greatly reduced. This forces philosophical thought to retreat from the terrain of scientific experience and look for other fields for its speculations. Thus it happens that, in Sorel’s words, philosophers ‘argue that science has boundaries, beyond which the human spirit meets the unknowable, at least in the scientific sense, and that our nature is made so that we cannot ignore this superior domain.’<sup>136</sup> For Sorel it is this dynamic that creates the tendency he labels alternatively ‘idealism’ or ‘spiritualism’, and that he conceives as a retreat from experience bound to result in philosophical subjectivism. It is

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 144. ‘Il n’est pas difficile de voir que l’on a ainsi opéré, à peu près, comme font les peuples, quand ils créent des mythologies au moyen de maladies du langage ; on fait naître des êtres par le seul fait qu’on produit de nouvelles expressions... C’est dans ce sens que l’on peut dire que l’on engendre le monde dans son esprit.’ In the footnote to this passage Sorel connects the rise of non-Euclidean geometry to precisely this form of fetishism.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 149. ‘...on donne le support comme le fond de la réalité et on considère les relations comme des conséquences de cette réalité hypothétique.’

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 151. ‘... ils [utopians] considèrent comme essentielle la description du support expressif et s’imaginent avoir répondu à toutes les objections, lorsqu’ils ont montré que les choses sont logiquement enchaînées.’ This type of argumentation, in which Sorel accuses utopians of basing their reasoning on a confusion between support and social reality, will recur in Sorel’s syndicalist writings, most notably the *Reflections on Violence*.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 152. ‘Les philosophes prétendent que leurs spéculations doivent s’élever au quatrième ciel ; ils soutiennent que la science a des bornes, au delà desquelles l’esprit aborde des inconnissables, au sens scientifique – que notre nature est constituée de telle sorte que nous ne pouvons nous désintéresser de ce domaine supérieur.’ Remember Dunan’s argument about the necessity of connection with the real infinity of nature.

noteworthy how Sorel, despite clearly rejecting the deterministic excesses of a materialistic cosmology, refuses to limit the scope of philosophical thought to what lies beyond the limits of science. The Kantian dualism between scientifically accessible phenomena and rationally inaccessible noumena is challenged.<sup>137</sup> The very idea that there can be a sphere of the unknowable is for Sorel a metaphysical mistake, the result of a confusion between reality and expressive supports. The category of the unknowable arises only when we give ‘pseudo-physical [para-physique] interpretation of the constructions made to explain things.’<sup>138</sup>

What Sorel is arguing is that the epistemological problems typical of Kantianism, problems that revolve around the question of what can be scientifically known and what cannot, arise when we mistake our conceptual instruments for descriptions of things. In scientific practice, i.e., in the concrete activity of knowing things, the epistemological problem of the unknowable is never encountered. As he had already done, Sorel recurs to practice in order to put forward a radically alternative solution to some problems of the dominant epistemological conception. Man’s intellectual life is an activity, and our conceptual tools are generated partly through this activity and entirely for this activity. Separating them from it and reasoning on them as if they were an independent and primary object of knowledge generates the conceptual errors of traditional metaphysics, but these errors can be avoided by remembering the instrumental nature of our concepts. In this sense, all conceptualisation is, for Sorel, eminently practical – linked to the dynamics and workings of intellectual and scientific practice. It is important however not to confuse this with the practical dimensions which characterize ‘la systématique’. The latter believes that the only legitimate goal of science is the resolution, through approximate solutions, of practical problems of human life. Sorel, as has amply been shown in this section, strongly believes in the epistemological legitimacy of a quest for truth: his only rejoinder is that this quest is itself a practice, and that this must be taken into account if one is to understand it correctly.

Despite the fact that they can generate confusions and conceptual mistakes, expressive supports are, for Sorel, indispensable to scientific activity. Confrontation with experimental evidence is always mediated by such supports, and the idea that science operates through a direct, unmediated appeal to experimental data is alien to Sorel’s thought. It is this

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<sup>137</sup> Sorel, in fact, lauds Aristotle for having suppressed the category of the unknowable altogether, and having argued that questions of what might be known beyond scientific experience are meaningless: ‘après le connaissable, le néant.’ (‘Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique’, p. 154).

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 155. ‘*Les questions sur l’au-delà de la connaissance scientifique ne sont pas données dans la nature, mais résultent de l’interprétation para-physique des constructions faites pour expliquer les choses.*’

fundamental importance given to expressive supports that brings Sorel to further reflection on this issue. We have seen how, in his final article in the *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, Sorel had argued that scientific concepts, including geometrical postulates, far from being conventional starting points are the inheritance of a scientific tradition. In the ‘Ancienne et Nouvelle Métaphysique’ he takes this argument a crucial step further, by arguing that these supports not only originate in the history of a given scientific field, but, more radically, that they emerge from a more general historical context. It is here that Sorel begins to elaborate on what we can call an historical sociology of knowledge. Expressive supports are not arbitrary or conventional starting points, but the crystallizations of forms of social life. Hence, ‘one must look to where these supports come from; each of them has a history, its authors took it, unconsciously, from their environment’.<sup>139</sup>

The conceptual horizon of a people, including its scientific concepts, arises from the activities that dominate its practical engagement with the world. The predominance of final causation and teleological cosmologies amongst the Greeks can be understood only by appreciating the central role that building and architecture had in the Greek world. What truly interested the Greek mind was ‘The practical end of the work, the harmony of parts and the spirit of the artist’. Thus, once Greek civilisation ‘came in full possession of itself, it was established that all knowledge of nature was to be conceived in terms of a directing, moving and organising intelligence. At this point, the evolution was completed: the physical world was definitively built and philosophers could now only disagree about details.’<sup>140</sup> The general idea is as follows: intellectual enquiry is an activity that necessitates a conceptual apparatus, and this apparatus has its roots in the activities through which people engage with the natural world. Philosophy inherits the conceptual apparatus of the milieu: ‘the clearest and better analysed explicative elements are those penetrated by our genius, those which we find in the artificial milieu’.<sup>141</sup> Here Sorel is anticipating what he will describe in a few pages as ‘the social principle of science’, namely the idea that to understand the conceptual apparatus of scientific research one must refer to its collective and historical dimension. This intuition is absolutely

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., pp. 164-5. ‘Il faut aussi chercher d’où viennent ces supports: chacun d’eux a une histoire ; les auteurs les ont pris dans le milieu, sans se rendre compte exact de ce qu’ils faisaient...’

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 160. ‘On se préoccupait de trois choses principales : la fin pratique de l’œuvre, l’heureuse ordonnance des parties et le génie de l’artiste... Lorsque la civilisation hellénique [sic] eut acquis une pleine possession d’elle-même, on proclama que toute connaissance de la nature devait être ramenée à la définition d’une intelligence organisatrice, directrice et motrice. A ce moment, l’évolution était pleinement accomplie : le monde physique était, définitivement, construit et les philosophes ne pouvaient plus différer, entre eux, que sur les détails.’

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., pp. 159-60. ‘...les éléments explicatifs les plus clairs, les mieux analysés, sont ceux que nous avons pénétrés de notre génie, ceux que nous trouvons dans le milieu artificiel...’

crucial to Sorel's thought, for it constitutes an anticipation of the more historicist direction in which his thought will eventually evolve. What needs to be underlined here is how it originates in the context of an epistemological reflection.

### **1.5.2 SOREL AND BERGSON ON FREEDOM**

Having established the importance of the 'artificial milieu', i.e. the general social and historical conditions, in furnishing not only science but also philosophy with its conceptual apparatus, Sorel moves on, in a somewhat tortuous manner, to a criticism of the central concept on which he believes the contemporary intellectual enterprise to be based: that of the individual subject, 'le moi'. The purpose of this critique of the individual subject is that of stressing the collective nature of scientific enquiry, much in the same way he had criticised the notion of the lonesome Cartesian enquirer in 'Deux nouveaux sophismes sur le temps'. However, what interests us here is the argumentative route taken, for it consists in Sorel's first direct and thorough engagement with the problem of determinism, as well as of a dialogue with Bergson's first work, the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*.

The conceptual apparatus through which much modern scientific and philosophical research is done is dominated, for Sorel, by the notion of the individual, 'le moi'. This generates for Sorel an unfortunate 'invasion of emotions in the realm of representations.'<sup>142</sup> But what does this mean? It means that the excessively subjectivist stance through which epistemological problems are dealt with is, for Sorel, the cause of many misunderstandings and conceptual mistakes. More precisely, these mistakes arise from this 'invasion of emotions'. To clarify this point Sorel goes to the root of the epistemological problem by referring to Bergson's *Essai*, that he here labels a 'vigorous tree rising amidst the desolated steppes of contemporary philosophy.'<sup>143</sup> Sorel's characterization of emotions largely relies on the Bergsonian distinction between the immediate data of consciousness and their quantitative, mediated, counterparts. Synthetically put, the internal immediacy of subjective consciousness is not amenable to measurement and quantitative differentiation; external reality, being mediated, is. Let us try to clarify this point by exploring the epistemological stance required by the Bergsonian distinction.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 166. 'Representations' here is to be understood in the light of the distinction outlined above in this chapter between representation and hypotheses.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., pp. 167-8. '...ce livre offre un intérêt majeur ; c'est comme un arbre vigoureux qui s'élève au milieu des steppes désolées de la philosophie contemporaine.'

Bergson's epistemological stance is fundamentally one in which the world that we can understand and measure through scientific tools is not a given, but rather emerges through a *confrontation* between the subject and external reality.<sup>144</sup> Given the world as perceived scientifically is the result of the interplay between the two elements, the subjective and the external, the Bergsonian stance, as Sorel is keen to underline, is not a completely subjectivist one.<sup>145</sup> The quantitative element indispensable to science, for both Bergson and Sorel, emerges from an *active* and *collective* engagement with the external world. This is Bergson, quoted by Sorel in the 'Ancienne et Nouvelle Métaphysique':

'As the conditions of social life realize themselves, the current which takes our states of consciousness from the inside to the outside gains strength: little by little these states become objects or things; they separate not only from each other but from ourselves too. At this point, we can only perceive them in the homogenous [i.e. measurable and discrete] environment in which we have fixed [figé] their image and through a world that lends them its own everyday character. In this way, a second self [un second moi] covers of the first one, a [second] self whose existence is made of distinct moments, whose states are separated one from the other and can be described without effort through words.'<sup>146</sup>

Paraphrasing: as our collective needs grow, as society develops, we increasingly tend to, as it were, solidify our fluid impressions – the immediate data of our consciousness – into discrete objects and things, until we create the measurable world that science describes. Emotions, to come back to Sorel, are what pertains to the internal and undifferentiated world. Incorporating them into a scientific study, means making a conceptual mistake, namely failing to understand that the world that science can describe must by definition exclude these undifferentiated and

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<sup>144</sup> Sorel, it is important to stress, lauds Bergson for conceiving the question of epistemology in an anti-subjectivist way and conceding that consciousness receives stimuli from the external world. This, however, should not be interpreted as a commitment to an epistemology in which the human mind is purely receptive. Instead, here Sorel lauds Bergson for refusing the excessively subjectivist solutions to the problem of freedom and determinism. The fact that Bergson recognizes that 'the external world leaves an imprint on us' is to be understood as a compliment for a philosopher who avoids the retreat from experience which Sorel believes to be the main weakness of the philosophical thought of his time. See *ibid.*, p. 168. 'He [Bergson] recognises that the external order leaves an imprint on us' - 'Il reconnaît bien que l'ordre extérieur s'imprime sur nous'.

<sup>145</sup> In the conclusion to the *Données*, Bergson writes: '[we can] affirm that the forms applicable to things could not possibly be entirely our work; that they must arise out of a compromise between matter and spirit; that if it is true that we [perceiving subjects] lend a lot to this matter, we also receive something back...'. Bergson, *Données*, p. 146 [p. 168].

<sup>146</sup> Bergson, *Données*, pp. 91-2 [pp. 103-4], cited, in an abbreviated version and with the words 'conditions of social life' highlighted, in Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 169. 'Mais à mesure que se réalisent plus complètement les conditions de la vie sociale, à mesure aussi s'accroît davantage le courant qui emporte nos états de conscience du dedans au dehors : petit à petit ces états se transforment en objets ou en choses ; ils ne se détachent pas seulement les uns des autres, mais encore de nous. Nous ne les apercevons plus alors que dans le milieu homogène où nous en avons figé l'image et à travers le mot qui leur prête sa banale coloration. Ainsi se forme un second moi qui recouvre le premier, un moi dont l'existence a des moments distincts, dont les états se détachent les uns des autres et s'expriment sans peine par des mots.'

fluid elements. But what is more significant and should be retained is that the world of science, characterised by its measurability and ‘homogeneity’ arises from a certain *engagement* with the world, from a practical and active stance, rather than being either an uncomplicated given or a completely subjective creation. It is a form of *engagement* with a reality outside us: it is on this that Bergson and Sorel are in agreement.<sup>147</sup>

Sorel continues his engagement with Bergson’s *Données*, and grapples for the first time directly with the problem of freedom and determinism. The connection between the problem of freedom and that of science is highlighted explicitly in Sorel’s text: ‘It is clear that, if there is liberty, then no knowledge is possible, even in the shape of an empirical study [systématique]; all men, being independent, would be a species of their own... and there would be no general relation’<sup>148</sup>

In order to solve this problem, Sorel makes use of the Bergsonian epistemology. The paradoxes linked to free will are another example of the conceptual mistake just outlined in the discussion of ‘emotions’. What is a free act? Surely not an act that is taken in the absence of determination: it is, following Bergson, an act that expresses our inner self. As we have just seen in the long citation from the *Données*, this self is essentially alien to the discrete categories through which we examine the world scientifically. A free act is an act that springs from a realm that knows no discrete entities, no causal relationships, but only fluidity and immediacy, *durée*. Thus, it is impossible to try to examine it through categories fundamentally alien to it. In short, the attempt to apply to inner states the analytical criteria fit for the study of the external world of science generates the paradoxes linked to free action. If a free act is an act determined in the depth of our consciousness, it springs from what Sorel had previously called ‘emotions’, i.e. parts of the psyche not susceptible to analysis.

‘It is true that [in freely willed acts] determination appears as having no intelligible cause, that there appears to be a gap between the examination of the motives and the outcome of the act; it is not difficult however that the gap is produced by

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<sup>147</sup> According to Sorel, Bergson always borrows his concepts from the realm of representations. He comments by saying that ‘it is impossible to do otherwise. We only think with relations borrowed from the physical world.’ (Sorel, *D’Aristote à Marx*, p. 171). Here the word thinking has to be equated with rational enquiry, and the gist of the argument is the following: in order to rationally, scientifically, examine a given phenomenon, we must conceive of it in a certain measurable way. And this is also why, in short, scientific studies of our interiority, of emotions, are an impossibility.

<sup>148</sup> Sorel, *D’Aristote à Marx*, pp. 177-8.



emotion. We hear that there is the irruption of an indefinable power in the conflict between motives: emotion possesses this indefinable character.’<sup>149</sup>

On this view, free agency is not the absence of determination, but the presence of an internal type of determination that is, by definition, impossible to analyse. It is important to underline the fact that Sorel refuses to dismiss determinism. The deterministic laws that regulate the natural world do not magically disappear inside the human subject; it is only that, here, they are impossible to examine rationally. One of the difficulties of this, however, is that the depths of the individual self, the *locus* from where human action springs, is beyond the reach of scientific analysis, at least insofar as science understands deterministic causal relations. But this question will be explored in the following chapter.<sup>150</sup>

This treatment of freedom is of some importance for Sorel, in that it helps him to conceptualize the problem of freedom in a way that opens the way to its solution. The conception of free agency as undetermined agency is, for Sorel, paradoxical and problematic. This Bergsonian treatment of the ‘mystery of free will’<sup>151</sup> allows him to change the terms in which the problem is set up. Agency is determined, all the time, and certain acts are called free because it is impossible for us to examine the factors that determine them, since these factors are internal ones that spring from our inner self. Having explained why what we call free agency seems to have no apparent determination, Sorel has paid his dues to the problem of determinism in its classical guise. This allows him to put forward another conception of free agency, one that avoids the paradoxes of indetermination. Using Bergson, Sorel essentially dismisses the idea of freedom as indetermination, and can now develop a theory of freedom as creative activity.

### **1.5.3 FREEDOM AS ACTIVITY: SOREL’S ‘NEW METAPHYSICS’**

It is indeed in the development of the text that the idea begins to take a more precise shape. After having shown the shortcomings of an excessively empirical and pragmatic science – ‘la systématique’ – and the equally erroneous subjectivist fallacies of classical metaphysics, it is

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 179. ‘Il est bien vrai que la détermination apparaît souvent comme étant sans cause intelligible, qu’il semble exister une lacune entre l’examen du motif et l’acte ; mais il n’est pas difficile de voir que cette lacune est produite par l’émotion. On nous dit qu’il y a irruption d’une puissance non définissable au milieu du conflit des motifs ; c’est qu’en effet l’émotion à bien ce caractère indéfini.’

<sup>150</sup> Sorel notices this and writes, for example, that this places human action outside of the realm of science (p. 188). Nevertheless, he maintains that while individual motivations might be unamenable to scientific analysis, the larger trends of human society are not. Even more radically, science is a precisely this study of larger, non-individual trends. Science is the ‘social adaptation of the individual to physical nature. What was personal disappears, and only that which is objective and scientific remains.’ (p. 169). More on this in the following chapter.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

time for Sorel to illustrate the tenets of the ‘new metaphysics’. It is here that the systematization of which we have spoken before is at its most obvious, since this last part consists essentially of repetition and further elaboration of ideas already expressed in previous texts. But it is also the part in which, as we are about to see, the intuition of freedom as creative activity begins to emerge more clearly. According to the new metaphysics, science is a collective engagement with the natural world. In Sorel’s terminology, science is ‘social’ and ‘industrial’. It is social in the sense that it is collective and historical, and it is industrial in the sense that the purpose of the vast array of expressive supports used by scientists is not that of creating a logically coherent system, but that of confronting nature experimentally.

Sorel begins the constructive part of the text by reminding us of his anti-subjectivist stance. ‘I consider knowledge in the Greek way: I believe that reality penetrates in us from the outside and leaves an impression.’<sup>152</sup> As should be clear by now, this is not a commitment to an epistemology in which the mind is passively receptive, but a way of reclaiming the terrain of scientific experience for philosophical thought. It is the necessity for expressive supports which rules out the passivity of the enquirer. Far from being the exclusive business of a perceiving subject and his sense impressions of an external reality, science requires a socially constructed and historically inherited artificial environment. This unavoidable intellectual inheritance is constituted by forms of explanations, conceptual divisions, schemes, as well as ‘the enormous influence exerted by the expressive organism of society, language.’<sup>153</sup> It is in this sense that science is social. Crucially, there is nothing fixed or natural about this artificial environment, which is, on the contrary, essentially dynamic and historical: ‘The milieu is incessantly reworked, fabricated and cleansed by his [man’s] activity, and any science of man which neglects this milieu is an imaginary anthropology.’<sup>154</sup> To characterise more precisely this artificial environment, Sorel essentially re-elaborates the arguments against conventionalism he had first expressed a few years before in ‘Deux nouveaux sophismes sur le temps’.

The image of the lonesome scientist coming up with insights of genius is, according to Sorel, a very misleading one. It took a great deal of hesitation for Newton to claim the ambitions of universality of his own law: in his time, movement was predominantly conceptualized as

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 190. ‘j’ai déjà eu l’occasion de dire, plusieurs fois, que je considérais la connaissance à la manière grecque : j’estime que la réalité pénètre en nous de l’extérieur et s’y imprime.’

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 193. ‘... l’influence énorme exercée par l’organisme expressif de la société, la langue.’

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. ‘Le milieu est fabriqué, travaillé, continuellement épuré par son activité et toute science de l’homme qui néglige ce milieu est une anthropologie fantaisiste.’

resulting from shock, and attraction at a distance was considered ‘an occult quality bringing science back to anthropomorphic mythologies.’<sup>155</sup> In general, for a scientific doctrine to become established, an ‘enormous evolutionary work’<sup>156</sup> has to be accomplished: the reciprocal adaptation of the milieu and the doctrine to each other. While, at the beginning, new doctrines are quite alien to a body of science, when they are fully incorporated they ‘become social’, they ‘blend in such an intimate way with the old that one struggles to understand that a discovery has actually taken place: it appears that all that has happened is an ordering and a better exposition.’<sup>157</sup> This is because

‘...the sage, the inventor, the philosophers are never solitary characters in the manner of *transcendental geniuses*; they operate on materials prepared for a long time by a reasoned empiricism, and they work on them using the tools furnished by the science of their time. The isolation of the innovator is more apparent than real and does not rest on a separation between him and contemporary thought, but on the difficulty of introducing into current usage certain new constructions, certain new formulas which at the beginning appear obscure but that become very simple once one has the habit of using them.’<sup>158</sup>

The importance of the social dimension of science brings with it a necessary critique of the Cartesian picture of the isolated enquirer, a critique that, as we have seen, is not new for Sorel. Having followed Descartes, we imagine ‘that each of us can be the *individual judge of science*... If this were so, there would be no scientific certainty, science would be rebuilt everyday in front of us and would be under the yoke of the whims which depend on our emotions and interests.’<sup>159</sup> The point being made here is that science, given its necessity of expressive supports, cannot be thought of as an a-historical confrontation between the enquirer and empirical evidence. Science has a conceptual apparatus that is historical both in

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., pp. 194-5. ‘l’attraction semblait être une loi occulte ramenant la science aux mythologies anthropomorphiques.’

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 199. ‘les nouvelles connaissances, une fois devenues sociales, s’unissent d’une manière si intime aux anciennes qu’on a peine ensuite à comprendre qu’il y ait eu vraiment une découverte : il semble qu’il y a eu seulement arrangement et meilleure exposition.’

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 197. ‘En fait, le savant, l’inventeur, le philosophe ne sont jamais solitaires, à la manière des *génies transcendants* ; ils opèrent, en effet, sur une matière préparée de longue main par l’empirisme raisonné et ils la travaillent, en utilisant l’outillage que leur fournit la science de leur époque. L’isolement du savant qui innove est plus apparent que réel ; il ne repose pas sur une séparation entre lui et la pensée contemporaine, mais sur la difficulté de faire entrer dans l’usage certaines constructions nouvelles, certaines formules qui paraissent, tout d’abord, fort obscures, mais qui semblent ensuite très simples, lorsqu’on a pris l’habitude de s’en servir.’

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 199. ‘On est si peu habitué à tenir compte du milieu dans les questions scientifiques que l’on s’imagine que chacun de nous est *juge individuel de la science*... S’il n’était ainsi, il n’y aurait aucune certitude scientifique et la science se referait chaque jour devant chacun de nous et serait soumise à tous les caprices qui dépendent de nos émotions et de nos intérêts.’

that it is inherited from a scientific tradition and in that it results from the society in which a given scientific idea develops.

This insistence on the artificial milieu and expressive supports, conceived both in terms of scientific traditions and of a general historical context could make us attribute to Sorel what in contemporary analytic philosophy is known as a coherence theory of truth: the idea that the truth of beliefs is dependent on the degree to which they fit with an existing system of beliefs. More plainly put, the idea that consensus is truth. But this interpretation would be off the mark, and not just because Sorel constantly reminds us of his antipathy towards subjectivism, and of his preference for what he calls the ‘Greek’ conception of knowledge. More decisively, the interpretation would be wrong because Sorel explicitly rejects it. ‘I did not only say that science is social; for one could conclude that I give the name of science to a number of widespread prejudices held by everyone; I have no intention of going back to the old mistake [bêtise] of universal consensus.’<sup>160</sup> Science is not merely social, it is also based on what Sorel calls here the ‘economic milieu’, so that ‘its certainty is grounded in its industrial origin, or at least in its participation in industrial life.’<sup>161</sup>

The enigmatic expression concerning the ‘industrial origin’ of science fundamentally means that expressive supports by themselves are not sufficient, but that the moment of actual confrontation with the forces of nature – the experimental moment – is equally decisive, for in an experimental setting we can witness the laws of nature at work and thus verify and falsify our hypotheses. This experimental moment occurs, of course, in laboratories, but it also occurs, on a much wider scale, in the industrial world, which is, according to Sorel ‘an immense physics laboratory in which we let natural energies deploy themselves according to artificial models.’<sup>162</sup> Machines constructed by engineers are ‘*devices which put nature to experience*’.<sup>163</sup> They are expressive supports of a practical and collective type that, by engaging with the forces and laws of nature, allow us to see them at work and thus, eventually, to understand them. Great inventors ignore the mathematical expressions of laws of nature, but ‘they replace this abstract expression with a concrete one: every movement

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 217. ‘...j’ai pas seulement dit que la science était sociale ; car on pourrait conclure que je donne le nom de science à certains préjugés répandus dans un pays et acceptés par tout le monde ; je n’entends pas revenir à la vieille bêtise du consentement universel.’

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. ‘J’ai ajouté que la science était dans le milieu économique, affirmant ainsi que sa certitude est basée sur son origine industrielle ou, tout au moins, sa participation à la vie industrielle.’

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 205. ‘On peut donc dire que le monde industriel est un immense cabinet de physique où l’on fait agir les énergies naturelles suivant des modes artificiels’.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 203. ‘...ce sont *des appareils mettant la nature en expérience*’.

produced by a machine, since it derives from a causal law, can be said to express this law under a particular form...'<sup>164</sup>. Thus, '*To invent a mechanism is to discover a theorem and represent it through material means*'<sup>165</sup>.

The fact that machines enter into direct relation with the forces of nature also explains the polemic that Sorel engages with mathematics. Mathematical formulas are, like machines, expressive supports but, in light of their abstract nature and their distance from the forces of nature, they lend themselves more easily to misinterpretations. When asked about what their theorems correspond to, mathematicians, according to Sorel, answer '*the laws of [the human] spirit*. But this expression has a meaning only in the doctrine... of the artificial environment. External relations create the current paradigm and the current law of the spirit.'<sup>166</sup> Mathematical propositions then do not express the structure of the human mind, but are a set of conceptual tools whose function is to help us deal with nature in our effort to understand it. More radically, given their status of expressive supports, they do not express the laws of an a-temporal human spirit, but are scientific concepts with their historical origin, much like machines have their own history. Mathematics then is an empirical science with its own history<sup>167</sup>, and essentially an accessory of physics. Believing that mathematics was the only 'properly constituted science', Kant concluded that therefore all experience ought to be placed 'in a temporal and spatial framework; this conclusion is unassailable. Nowadays we know that mathematics is only an auxiliary knowledge... which had as its object the solution of *some* problems of mechanics.'<sup>168</sup>

The insistence on the industrial origin of science then serves to remind the reader that, though expressive supports are indispensable, they can only serve us experimentally. The moment of active engagement with the forces of nature remains unavoidable and industry does on a larger scale what laboratories do in a smaller one: it engages experimentally with the forces of nature. In this realm, there is a certain objectivity, for things either work or they do not. This

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 207. 'Quant aux lois naturelles, ils [inventors] n'en connaissent pas l'expression mathématique ; mais ils remplacent cette expression abstraite par une expression concrète ; car tout mouvement machinal, produit en vertu d'une loi causale, peut être considéré comme exprimant cette loi sous une certaine forme, qui est parfaitement déterminée, si l'appareil est bien construit.'

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 208. '*Inventer un mécanisme, c'est découvrir un théorème que l'on représente au moyen de grandeurs sensibles.*'

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., pp. 200-1. '... ils croient que la dignité de leur science les oblige à lui donner pour principes *les lois de l'esprit*. Mais que faut-il entendre par cette expression, c'est ce qu'il est impossible de comprendre, sauf dans la doctrine... du milieu artificiel. Les relations externes créent le cadre actuel et la loi présente de l'esprit.'

<sup>167</sup> Of course, this is the same argument expressed in 'Deux nouveaux sophismes sur le temps'.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., pp. 265-6.

is why a scientific theory becomes truly established only when it has become applied, because the number of successful verifications that industrial application can offer to a theory is immensely superior to the one offered by scientific experiments. There are many doubtful theories in many sciences, and these are the theories that ‘have been stated only by laboratory people and have not penetrated into industrial life.’<sup>169</sup>

Highlighting that the sole purpose of expressive supports is that they make possible experimental confrontation with nature allows Sorel to safeguard the objectivity of science and its ability to make claims about the world. This is a concern that, as we have seen in this chapter, animated his epistemological efforts from the beginning. But beyond the objectivity that experimental practice conveys to science, the more fertile part of Sorel’s epistemology is the theory of expressive supports: a large category in which Sorel includes concepts, mathematical representations and industrial machines. What is crucial about expressive supports is that they are, quite simply, *human creations*. They originate in an historical and collective ‘artificial environment’, which, though at this time this element is not emphasised, is for Sorel the natural habitat of human freedom. Human freedom, to repeat, is not a state of exception from the laws of nature but the possibility of creating tools, concepts and combinations that have no natural model. In the conclusion to the text Sorel writes emphatically that ‘the fundamental condition of our freedom is the existence of the artificial milieu’<sup>170</sup> This is because this milieu is the result of a collective, at times unconscious, but essentially human work. More precisely, in the artificial milieu, ‘We are free in the sense that we can construct tools [appareils] that have no model in the cosmic [i.e. natural] environment; we do not alter the laws of nature, but we are capable of creating sequences *whose ordering is our decision*’.<sup>171</sup> The thorny problems associated with the notion of freedom as indetermination thus are swept away. The question as to whether there might be an sphere of human psychology free from natural determinism is replaced by a simpler one: ‘whether individuals can exert a social influence’<sup>172</sup>, i.e. whether the artificial milieu in which all human activities develop is susceptible of being altered by human work. The answer is an affirmative one.

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp 212-13. ‘Il y a donc, dans les sciences physico-chimiques, des choses douteuses; ce sont celles qui sont restées individuelles et j’entends ce mot dans le sens le plus général, comprenant par là celles qui n’ont été énoncées que par des hommes de laboratoire et n’ont pas pénétrée dans la vie industrielle.’

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 264. ‘C’est l’existence du milieu artificiel qui est la condition fondamentale de notre liberté’.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added. ‘Nous sommes libres en ce sens que nous pouvons construire des appareils qui n’ont aucun modèle dans le milieu cosmique; non ne changeons rien aux lois de la nature, mais nous sommes maîtres de créer des séquences ayant une ordonnance qui nous est propre.’

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

## 1.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have seen how Sorel dealt with two closely connected philosophical problems that were central to his generation: the epistemological one about science, and the more philosophical one about freedom. Epistemologically, a mood of uncertainty challenged philosophers and scientists alike to reconceptualise the activity of science. Philosophically, this was seen as an occasion to create space for human freedom – something difficult to defend in a determinist and mechanistic world. The representationalist and Kantian terms in which the problem was put, as one about the fit of our subjective impressions to the external world, greatly helped philosophers in adopting a specific strategy: reducing the epistemic ambitions and credentials of science in order to make space for freedom. Science appeared more uncertain, the rigid mechanistic world appeared more as human construct capable of explaining efficiently certain experiments than as an accurate description of the universe. But this Sorel could not accept, for it implied, precisely, that science was uncertain. The slope was slippery: it was but one small step from recognising that science makes use of humanly constructed conceptual tools to believing that science was arbitrary convention, justifiable because of its usefulness, and not because of its truth. A strong conception of science was needed, a nuanced one that problematized the claims of science without shattering them and, at the same time, one that left space for human freedom.

Sorel's solution to the epistemological problem is the conception of science outlined in the 'Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique': a social, historical, and experimental conception of science, whose core is in the interplay between man-made expressive supports and the experimental data that they allow us to gather. Expressive supports thus, on the one hand, are the proof of the human capacity for invention, and thus of human freedom, while on the other they are what allows scientists to deal with the data of observation, to construct experiments, and to discover the deterministic laws that regulate the natural world.

A crucial step in arriving at this conception was the reconceptualization of epistemology as the study of a practice rather than as a question of accuracy of representations. Like Sorel, Bergson too was trying to explode the dichotomy between a deterministic world of science and an unknowable world of freedom. In possession of greater philosophical education, Bergson lucidly recognises the Kantian origins of the problem and dedicates much of his conclusions to pointing out Kant's errors. To recall the initial citation of this chapter, 'Kant chose to place freedom outside of time, and erect an impassable barrier between the world of

phenomena, which he delivers in its entirety to our understanding, and the world of things in themselves, which he renders inaccessible.’<sup>173</sup>

The conceptualization of epistemology as the study of a practice necessarily led Sorel to think in historical terms about science. Partly this has a polemical origin, as Sorel understood that he could argue, historically, against atomism or Cartesianism. Nevertheless, the discovery of the historical dimension of expressive supports did not remain confined to purely polemical use. The enquiry upon the origins of various kinds of expressive supports made Sorel aware of the importance of scientific traditions, and eventually brought him to the conclusion that a scientific concept is an historical product much like any other, deriving from a series of historically situated activities: Greek architecture, he argued, is responsible for the teleological bent of Greek cosmology. Science is a form of human activity that must be studied like any other form of human activity, i.e. historically. The historicization of the conceptual apparatus of sciences partly allowed him to come up with the conception of science outlined above. More importantly for our study, however, it gave to him the idea that there is a sphere of human action – the ‘artificial milieu’ – in which tools are created that have no model in the natural world. This idea of an artificial environment, the reign of a freedom understood as creative activity, long developed through the course of his epistemological work, was Sorel’s attempt to safeguard freedom without rejecting a determinism in which he still partly believed and that he needed in order to sustain his strong conception of science. To preserve human freedom and to safeguard the ability of science to make strong claims about the natural world and not to be demoted to the status of a useful convention, Sorel however had introduced a difference between the deterministic world of nature, and a human environment in which determinism did not hold.

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<sup>173</sup> Bergson, *Essai*, p. 153 [p.176]. ‘...Kant a mieux aimé placer la liberté en dehors du temps, et élever une barrière infranchissable entre le monde des phénomènes, qu’il livre tout entier à notre entendement, et celui des choses en soi, dont il nous interdit l’entrée.’



## CHAPTER TWO: THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL SCIENCE (1892-1895)

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In examining the question of freedom and determinism in the ‘Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique’, let us remember, Sorel had clearly ruled out the idea that freedom consists in a state of exception from the deterministic laws of nature. Following Bergson, he had argued that the indetermination that appears to characterize human agency stems from the fact that a free act springs from inner emotive states, and that these are, by definition, not examinable through the rational categories through which we understand the natural world. This dismissal of the idea of freedom as indetermination should alert us to the importance of determinism in the early Sorel’s understanding of science. Despite acknowledging both the importance and the historicity of expressive supports in scientific activity, Sorel, until 1895, still held to the idea that it was, in the last instance, the determinism of nature that allowed our knowledge of it to be *scientific* knowledge. It is, in other words, determinism that separates most clearly ‘science’ from ‘la systématique’. Whereas any kind of phenomenon can be subjected to empirical organization of data, only deterministic ones can be explained in terms of laws, i.e. scientifically. This is why Sorel needed to characterize human freedom in terms of creative agency rather than as indetermination: if the causal necessities of the natural world did not apply to human agency, the whole edifice of the natural sciences would be endangered. Thus, in the early Sorelian epistemology, though our cognitive access to the deterministic world of nature is necessarily mediated by our expressive supports, constructions that are historical and that change, science discovers laws, through experiments, because the phenomena it deals with are deterministic, i.e. regular and unchanging.

With this idea of science in mind, it follows that a *science* of society is only possible if the human world is determined in a way that is substantially analogous to the determinism regulating the natural world. But is this the case? Despite rejecting the idea of freedom as exemption from natural necessity, Sorel, as shall be outlined more in depth in this chapter, did believe that human agency was in some way free. This freedom was not conceptualized in terms of an exemption from the laws of physics, but in terms of the possession of a creative power. Human agency is characterized by the power of creating tools, concepts, or, to use Sorel’s language, ‘combinations’, which have no model in the natural world. It is easy to see

how this makes the question of social science difficult: if the human world is constituted, even only partially, by human agency, then society cannot be an object of scientific knowledge, since it does not function entirely on the basis of unchanging, and hence rationally knowable, causal laws. And thus, a rational science of society is impossible.

It is true that, in dealing with the social sciences, Sorel, along with many others, was venturing into new territory. On a personal level, whereas his technical and scientific erudition put him in a privileged position to discuss the philosophy of natural science, his knowledge of the social sciences was substantially more limited, meaning that he was unable to draw on the wealth of examples from the history of physics or chemistry that had characterized his discussions of natural science. On a more general level, sociology, economics, and psychology were all relatively young sciences, and thus Sorel entered a livelier and more contested field of intellectual debate, characterized in some cases by methodological cleavages about the very object of study of the new sciences. Sorel's fundamental difficulty, nonetheless, remained that of reconciling a conception of science requiring determinism with the conviction that human agency is creative. If human agency is free, in the sense of possessing a creative power, then society cannot be the object of scientific knowledge. Conversely, if a science of society is possible, then it becomes unclear in what sense human agency can be called free. This difficulty appears in Sorel's writings of the period under the form of a question: how much space ought to be accorded to human agency in the study of society? If we exclude human agency, is there enough material left to construct a science? Are there, in other words, structural or systemic aspects of society that can be studied scientifically? Could these be the mechanisms of circulation of capital and merchandise as suggested by Marx? Can these be studied without involving the agency of historical and social actors?

This initial attempt to make sense of the tension between a deterministic conception of science and a theory of creative human agency is, so to speak, a structuralist one. What Sorel initially tries to argue is that if social science is to be truly scientific it must exclude all considerations regarding human agency. It is from this perspective that we can make sense of his preference for Durkheim's sociological holism over Tarde's approach grounded in individual psychology. But the period under examination is one of intellectual transformation for Sorel, and as the tension outlined above became increasingly obvious, his going became more tentative and hesitant. Slowly but surely, he began to doubt that a meaningful study of

the human world could avoid talking about agency, and began to abandon his structuralist ambitions, without however yet being in possession of the conceptual tools needed to conceptualize the social sciences as explanations of human agency. What we examine in this chapter, then, is how reflection on the question of social science brought Sorel's early epistemology to its breaking point, by revealing the impossibility of explaining human agency in terms of laws. It is the realization of this impossibility that eventually brought Sorel to draw a sharp distinction between the natural and the social sciences. It is in the encounter with the works of Labriola, Croce and, most importantly, Vico, that Sorel will elaborate a completely different conception of what social science is and what kind of knowledge it can produce. But the period under consideration, between 1892 and 1895, is one of questioning and transition, in which Sorel holds that social science must produce the same type of knowledge of natural science, i.e. laws explaining the functioning of deterministic relations. And thus, in all his attempts at social science, he is faced by the stubborn and essentially unanswerable question of agency.

In the first part of the chapter we examine Sorel's attempt to erect a science of society through the removal of the problematic fact of human agency. We begin by examining an important Sorelian text, the 'Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon', in which Sorel outlines very clearly his theory of human agency as creative and proceeds to argue that a science of economics must be based on a systemic analysis capable of ignoring this agency. We then examine the parts of the 'Ancienne et Nouvelle métaphysique' in which Sorel further elaborates the same strategy for the scientific study of society. In the second part of the chapter we contextualize a little more and examine Sorel's engagement with some of the debates surrounding the emergence of sociology in the France of the 1890s. We show how Sorel's preference for Durkheim's sociology over Tarde's can be explained by the more systemic and holistic approach of the former. For Sorel, the advantage of Durkheim's approach over Tarde's consisted in the fact that, by excluding psychology, Durkheim shrunk the scientifically unfathomable sphere of human agency. We conclude by examining Sorel's engagement with Durkheim's *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, and we argue that in this text we see the first signs of a different approach to the study of social questions, i.e. an approach that abandons the importance of determinism and sees the social sciences as explanations of human historical agency.

## 2.2 PRODUCTION, FREEDOM AND THE SCIENCE OF ECONOMICS: THE ‘ESSAI SUR LA PHILOSOPHIE DE PROUDHON’

It is in 1892, with an essay on Proudhon appearing in the *Revue Philosophique*, that Sorel starts to deal with the epistemological problems involved in the project of a social science.<sup>1</sup> It is true that Sorel had already engaged in historical analyses, both in his two early books, the *Procès de Socrate* and the *Contribution*, and in the early epistemological writings focused in the history of various sciences. Nonetheless, what he does in the study on Proudhon is substantially different, for he deals with epistemological issues: in other words he interrogates himself and Proudhon about the possibility of a scientific study of a number of specifically human phenomena. The focus then is not historical, but epistemological: it is on what can make the study of economic phenomena such as production, exchange, and consumption a scientific one. At the outset of the article, Sorel warns the reader that much of Proudhon’s work will not be dealt with in his short study. Nonetheless, one of the key tasks will be that of ‘explaining how he [Proudhon] reduced problems of economics to questions of psychology’.<sup>2</sup>

The French debate on political economy had, in the nineteenth century, largely been animated by two cleavages: a methodological one opposing individualism to holism, and a political one between *laissez-faire* and various attempts to incorporate societal needs into economic planning. Generally speaking, the individualist methodology, drawing, through the work of the Ideologues, on the sensationalist psychology of the Enlightenment, and conceptualizing society as the sum total of interactions amongst utility-seeking individuals, was adopted by liberals in their advocacy of *laissez-faire*, free trade, and as little governmental interference with the economy as possible. Owing much to the writings of Cabanis and Destutt de Tracy, this tradition of liberal economics counted Jean-Baptiste Say and, closer to Sorel’s generation, Frédéric Bastiat and Joseph Garnier, Sorel’s economics professor at the *Ponts et chaussées*,<sup>3</sup> as its most illustrious representatives.<sup>4</sup> Critics of liberal economics had generally pointed to

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon’, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’étranger* 33, 1892, pp. 622-38 and 34, 1892, pp. 41-68

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622.

<sup>3</sup> See ‘Annuaire du ministère de l’agriculture, du commerce et des travaux publics pour l’année 1867’, p. 135 and ‘Annuaire du ministère de l’agriculture, du commerce et des travaux publics pour l’année 1868’, p. 185, in Archives de l’École des Ponts et Chaussées, cotes 1972. In both years, Garnier is listed as full professor of political economy.

<sup>4</sup> Its proudly proclaimed association with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, as well as its insistence that collective welfare depends on individual self-interest, made this intellectual school suspect in Restoration France, and created opportunities for its opponents. The positivistic school of Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte represented the most sophisticated critique of this social scientific stance. This consisted in the development of a logic of the social to oppose to the individualist and psychologist starting point of the liberal economists.

the potentially socially destructive consequences of its atomistic and individualistic starting points. Sorel, however, unconvinced by these accusations of ‘materialism and immorality’<sup>5</sup> directed at the liberal school, joined Joseph Garnier in mocking the ambitions of those ‘naïve’ critics who would like to establish a political economy ‘more supportive of the suffering classes, a more *spiritualist*, Christian, charitable, socialist and French political economy.’<sup>6</sup>

Sorel’s objections to the liberal school then are not of a political or social nature, but instead raise doubts about the scientificity that this school attributes to its own approach. Liberal economists, argues Sorel, are convinced that Smith, Ricardo and Say have created ‘a science, based on principles, and arriving at *definitive* [certaines] conclusions. One must admit that this pretension does not seem to be very well demonstrated.’<sup>7</sup> Contrasting the facility with which liberal economists turn a series of observations into a body of science with Proudhon’s caution, Sorel endorses the latter’s opinion and argues that the claim to have established a *science* of economics is ‘...“possibly the boldest ever upheld by a philosopher”’.<sup>8</sup> The problem with economics is, for Sorel, the lack of a proper conceptual apparatus: ‘to establish a science one cannot be happy with common-sense notions; one must extract from them the *schemes* proper to the new science.’<sup>9</sup> Of course, the word *scheme* is not a casual one. Let us remember how Sorel had used this word in his 1888 article on causation: schemes were conceptual tools allowing the enquirer to isolate causal relationships. Now, following both Proudhon and the classical political economists, Sorel sees in the notion of value the starting point for the establishment of a science of economics. However the notion is notoriously difficult, burdened by the distinction between exchange value, use value, and an elusive real value of the objects of production and exchange. For Sorel, as well as for Proudhon and

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Politically, notions of solidarity – the word ‘altruism’ was coined by Auguste Comte – were meant to replace the older notions of socially useful self-interest. See Cheryl B. Welch, ‘Social science from the French Revolution to positivism’ in Gareth Steadman Jones and Gregory Claeys (eds), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2011), pp. 171-99.

<sup>5</sup> Sorel, ‘Philosophie de Proudhon’, p. 623.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. ‘M. J. Garnier se moque, avec raison, des naïfs qui croyaient possible de créer « une économie politique plus élevée, plus philosophique, plus morale, plus religieuse, plus démocratique, plus sympathique aux classes souffrantes, une économie politique *spiritualiste*, chrétienne, charitable, socialiste, française ». The citation comes from Joseph Garnier, *Notes et petits traités* (Paris, Frères Garnier and Guillaumin : 1865), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. ‘Les économistes classiques sont persuadés qu’A. Smith, Ricardo, J.-B. Say, ont créé une science, fondée sur des principes et aboutissant à des conclusions *certaines*. Il faut avouer que cette prétention paraît bien peu démontrée.’

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 623-4. ‘Proudhon affirme qu’il existe une science économique ; mais il comprend la chose tout autrement que ses prédécesseurs; il se rend parfaitement compte de il se rend l’importance de cette affirmation, « la plus hardie peut-être qu’aucun philosophe ait jamais soutenue ».’ The quotation comes from Proudhon’s 1846 *Système de contradictions économiques ou philosophie de la misère*, the book famously attacked, a year later, by Karl Marx in his *Misère de la philosophie*.

<sup>9</sup> Sorel, ‘Philosophie de Proudhon’, p. 624. ‘Pour constituer une science on ne peut se contenter de notions vulgaires; il faut en extraire des *schèmes* propres à la science nouvelle’.

Smith, the way forward consists in connecting value to labour, even though Adam Smith's attempt to do this is, for Sorel, unsatisfactory because it is 'entirely intuitive'.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.2.1 HUMAN PRODUCTION AND FREEDOM

It is here that Sorel's reasoning becomes interesting. What is needed to establish an economic science is a strong conceptualization of work: a precise definition of this notion on which it will be possible to erect a science of economics, a usable concept not different from that defining work in physics. And so, what is work? In agreement with Proudhon, Sorel sees work as the distinctively human activity, that which differentiates our species from the rest of the natural world. The necessity of work is, it is true, imposed on us by our necessity to consume, but it is far more than a mechanical process of satisfaction of needs: 'the faculty of work, distinguishing humans from brutes, has its sources in the highest depths [les plus hautes profondeurs] of our reason'.<sup>11</sup> The definition of work, taken from Proudhon and warmly endorsed by Sorel, is that of '...the exercise, intellectual and physical, of a being composed of body and spirit'<sup>12</sup>. It is, in other words, the production of a being endowed with will. Sorel and Proudhon are at one on this point:

'Only mankind works; "the animals which, metaphorically, we call labourers, are but machines... they *conceive* nothing, and thus *produce* nothing... From the perspective of consciousness, what difference can we find between the silkworm's digestion and his construction of his web? What, then, is work? Nobody has defined it yet. Work is the emanation [émission] of spirit."<sup>13</sup>

Now, a moral and almost sacred conception of work, generally accompanied by a negative characterization of the unproductive idler, is typical of nineteenth-century socialist rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 625.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Joseph Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques*, cited in Sorel, 'Essai sur Proudhon', p. 626. 'La faculté de travailler, qui distingue l'homme des brutes, a sa source dans les plus hautes profondeurs de notre raison.'

<sup>12</sup> Proudhon, *Guerre et Paix*, cited in Sorel, 'Essai sur Proudhon', p. 626. '...l'exercice à la fois physique et intellectuel d'un être composé du corps et d'esprit'.

<sup>13</sup> Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques*, cited in Sorel, 'Essai sur Proudhon', p. 626. 'L'homme seul travaille; « ... les animaux que nous nommons travailleurs, par métaphore, ne sont que de machines... ils ne *conçoivent* rien, partant ils ne *produisent* pas.... Quelle différence, au point de vue de la conscience, pouvons-nous découvrir entre la digestion du ver à soie et la construction de sa toile ?... Qu'est-ce donc que le travail ? Nul encore ne l'a défini. Le travail est l'émission de l'esprit ». Of course this is exactly Marx's view as expressed in the seventh chapter of *Capital*: 'A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.' It is unclear whether Sorel had read *Capital* by this time, though it is plausible to suggest that he was in the process of reading it, given that his public embracement of Marxism dates from 1893.

<sup>14</sup> Though it may be perhaps superfluous to recall the following verses from the *Internationale*, they are, with their reference to 'the idler' (l'oisif), a good illustration of this tendency: 'Ouvriers, paysans nous sommes/ le

But there is more in this passage than just this: there is an epistemological point about the purposive nature of the productive phenomena studied by economics. To clarify, Sorel continues to quote Proudhon, this time from *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'Église*: 'Movement alone, applied to matter, does not give to it the desired form, does not constitute work; it is necessary that this movement be related to a goal to be reached.'<sup>15</sup> In short, the characterization of what Sorel had suggested ought to be the central scheme of economic science, i.e. work, is that of purposive action, moreover action of a being endowed with will and intention. But if this is so, it follows that economics must adopt an explanatory mode capable of incorporating the purposive nature of production. This is what Sorel means when he states that Proudhon explains economics in terms of 'psychology'. It is not a commitment to an individualist methodology denying the existence of social, i.e. collective, phenomena, but an insistence on the type of agency that characterizes the phenomena studied by economics.

The point towards which Sorel moves is the impossibility of reduction of the human realm to the natural one: economic phenomena are not particular and very complicated instances of physical ones, but are altogether different, given that production is purposive action. We had seen, in the previous chapter, the importance of pluralism to Sorel's epistemology. It is also partly in the name of this pluralism that Sorel here insists on the distinction between natural and social sciences. One of the merits of Proudhon is, for Sorel, that he had understood the importance of pluralism at a time in which the 'notion of the autonomy of causes was unfamiliar to philosophers and completely unknown to economists'.<sup>16</sup> But the key point is the separation between natural and social sciences or, more precisely, the impossibility of examining human agency through the expressive supports of the natural sciences. After having written that Proudhon's connection of work with agency is 'irrefutable', he continues

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grand parti des travailleurs/ la terre n'appartient qu'aux hommes/ l'oisif ira loger ailleurs.' In the essay under consideration, we see Sorel himself approvingly quoting Proudhon on this issue, and speaking of the consumption of an unproductive person as 'detestable', as well as leading the idler, precisely in virtue of his inactivity, to perennial dissatisfaction. See Sorel, 'Philosophie de Proudhon', p. 631. The insistence on the moral worth of work will be a central element in Sorelian rhetoric.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Sorel, 'Philosophie de Proudhon', p. 626n. 'Le mouvement seul, imprimé à la matière, ne lui donne pas la forme volue, ne constitue pas le travail; il faut que ce mouvement soit en rapport avec le but à atteindre'.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 627. 'En 1846, à l'époque où paraissent les *Contradictions*, la notion de l'autonomie des causes était bien peu familière aux philosophes et totalement inconnue aux économistes, qui embrouillaient tout dans leur « littérature peu distrayante »'.

by stressing that ‘if this is so, questions of value and labour have to be dealt with through psychological methods.’<sup>17</sup> In other words:

‘...industry is a psychological phenomenon, the laws of psychology are independent from physics. Work, as an economic concept, being a moral phenomenon, is not susceptible to entering any equation representing material elements.’<sup>18</sup>

To understand why Sorel was so keen to establish a separation between the natural and the social sciences it is necessary to connect the discussion to the wider epistemological problem examined in the previous chapter. The important issue at stake here is, once more, that of freedom and determinism. By characterizing human agency as purposive and intentional, Sorel is suggesting that the realm of human production is in some way above the deterministic laws that regulate the natural world: spider-webs and factories are different phenomena, for spiders act unconsciously while humans act purposively. It is the possession of this specific and unique type of agency, at this stage defined in terms of purposiveness, that characterizes humanity and sets it apart from the natural world.

But how is this agency conceived in more concrete terms? How does it function, and how can it escape determinism? In order to answer these questions Sorel has to deal directly with the issue of determinism, and this he does in the third section of the essay. The arguments used will be repeated in the ‘Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique’: this is why he begins with a reasoning that the reader of this study will recognize. The problem of determinism, he writes, is made insoluble by the way in which it is approached. The classical exposition of the question is asking whether the ‘soul... a *psychological point*’ is ‘inert like a material point’ or has a ‘reactive force’ against the solicitations it receives.<sup>19</sup> The geometrical analogies are sarcastic, and indicate where Sorel believes the problem to reside: in the reification of what he will later call expressive supports. The argument is simple. Though certain concepts are nothing more than useful scientific tools, we mistake them for objects of enquiry, and end up creating a series of insoluble problems. Metaphysics thus conceived is ‘a mirage of physical

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<sup>17</sup> Sorel, ‘Philosophie de Proudhon’, p. 626. ‘Le travail se trouve ainsi placé dans la sphère des concepts psychologiques; et le raisonnement de Proudhon nous semble, ici, irréfutable. S’il est ainsi, les questions sur la valeur et le travail doivent être abordées par des méthodes psychologiques.’

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 627. ‘...l’industrie est un phénomène psychologique, les lois de la psychologie sont indépendantes de la physique. Le travail entendu, au sens économique, étant d’ordre moral, ne peut entrer dans aucune équation où se trouvent des grandeurs matérielles.’

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 635-6. ‘La difficulté du problème, dans la philosophie classique, résulte du point de départ : l’âme, le moi, un *point psychologique*, est sollicité par diverses forces ; s’il est inerte comme le point matériel, il y a déterminisme ; s’il possède une certaine force de réaction, il y a liberté.’



reality' and a 'mythological physics'.<sup>20</sup> The solution to this problem consists in recognizing the purely instrumental value of certain concepts, and understanding that they are tools, rather than objects of knowledge. Sorel here calls them 'absolutes', and describes them as the working assumptions of a given science. Until this background misunderstanding has been resolved, the epistemological problem of freedom remains insolvable, since:

'it is quite difficult to understand free will; for one must choose between one of these two options: either we transfer to this imaginary world the determinist thesis of mechanism; either, to allow for free will, we disfigure science...'<sup>21</sup>

It is only when we establish various 'absolutes', and separate the different sciences that we can begin to deal with the question of freedom. Once we understand that there is no overarching explanatory mode we can approach the question of freedom as an empirical question linked to a scientifically studied realm of human experience: we transform, in the words of Proudhon, the question of free will from a 'metaphysical question' into one of 'pure observation'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, instead of arguing philosophically, on the basis of conceptual mistakes, we appeal to history, to the realm of experience, in order to establish the existence of freedom. We postulate human freedom as an epistemological absolute and see if it manages to make sense of the historical experience of mankind.

For Sorel, the answer is a positive one: history shows that human agency is indeed creative and thus, free. What is freedom? It is the 'individual power to construct ideas and act in conformity with ideas. The power and the reality of this capacity appear very clearly in history'.<sup>23</sup> We have here a definition of freedom in terms of activity and in terms of construction. Human agency is then characterized by two aspects. To start with, we have the possibility of creating elements that have no referent in the natural world, what Sorel will later call 'sequences whose ordering is our decision'.<sup>24</sup> There is, in other words, a creative power. Secondly, human agency is constituted by the ability to follow these artificially constructed models, to act in accordance with them. Though Sorel does not go to the bottom of the issue and provides neither detail nor explanation as to how this agency happens, he nonetheless

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 636.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 'Dans un pareil système, il est bien difficile de comprendre le libre arbitre ; car de deux choses l'une : ou bien on transporte dans ce monde féérique la thèse déterministe du mécanisme ; ou bien, pour rendre le libre arbitre possible, on défigure la science et on affirme la contingence des futurs, c'est-à-dire l'absurde.'

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Sorel, 'Philosophie de Proudhon', p. 637. 'ramener ainsi la démonstration de la liberté à une simple classification des faits; d'une question de métaphysique à faire une question d'observation pure'.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 638. 'Nous pouvons définir la liberté : le pouvoir individuel de construire des idées et d'agir en conformité des idées. La puissance et la réalité de cette fonction apparaissent très clairement dans l'histoire.'

<sup>24</sup> Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 171.

establishes some important points. By attributing purposive agency to human beings he establishes the existence of freedom. This, in turn, puts him in a somewhat awkward position, for it seems to require him to set up the epistemological question of social science in a very precise way: specifically, the social sciences must be those sciences that study the realm of human productions, understood in the wide sense of elements whose existence is linked to a purposive human agency.

### 2.2.3 SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL PRODUCTION

Given Sorel's understanding of science as an activity concerned with the discovery of deterministic, i.e. unchanging, causal relationships, this particular conceptualization of human agency creates huge problems for the establishment of social sciences. If human work is to be conceptualized as creative activity, and if it is to be the object of knowledge of economic science, it should follow that such a science is impossible. What deep causal nexuses can be discovered between phenomena whose essence is creativity, and hence unpredictability? The problem, which Sorel notices and addresses, can be stated in more general terms: if human agency and production are not deterministic, and if science requires deterministic objects of study, how can there be a science of economics and, more generally, of society?

After having offered his definition of work as a 'psychological phenomenon', Sorel notices that Proudhon's argument is problematic, since 'one cannot see what can be the common measure of products'.<sup>25</sup> The problem is, if work is to be linked to agency, then it becomes an individual and subjective phenomenon, and it is difficult to see how one can establish a science on a phenomenon that is affected by so many variables and circumstances. The solution offered by Proudhon, but highlighted and followed by Sorel, is to consider production as a social phenomenon rather than as an individual one. In other words, the solution is to exclude agency from the domain of social science. Here is Sorel commenting on passages from Proudhon's *Système des contradictions économiques*:

'...society is a living being whose personality is as sure as that of the individual being. The social being is both producer and consumer: each member pours in his share of work and exchanges with all the others. Seen from the perspective of the social being [l'être-société], products are capable of being measured.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 627. 'Mais on ne voit pas encore quelle sera la commune mesure des produits'

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 628. 'Mais la société est un être vivant, dont la personnalité est aussi certaine que celle de l'être individuel. L'être social est à la fois producteur et consommateur : chacun des membres apporte son contingent

The argument is clear: though work might be an individual phenomenon, it is possible to take the economic apparatus of a society in its entirety. In fact, only this operation is capable of guaranteeing the scientificity of a study of economic phenomena. ‘The work of an individual’, writes Sorel, ‘is something incommensurable: everyone values it according to their own fancy and everyone feels entitled to an exceptional reward.’<sup>27</sup> No science is possible if we treat work from this perspective. ‘In the notion of value, Proudhon gets rid of all these anti-scientific elements: products are classified not according to fancies and individual claims, but according to their position in social production.’<sup>28</sup> The establishment of an economic science, in short, requires that we adopt a holistic perspective and carry on a systemic analysis of the social apparatus of production, consumption, and exchange in its totality.

Before proceeding, it would be wise to clarify the scope of this argument. It might appear that what Sorel is doing is simply setting limits to what the social sciences can aspire to know. This is partially true. The idea that the social sciences are unable to penetrate the intricate territory of individual agency and individual events is at work here and, moreover, it will be an idea that we will encounter again in Sorel’s later writings. He will remain faithful to the idea that scientific enquiry into the human world can examine with some profit collectivities and general historical trends but is powerless in dealing with individual phenomena. Nonetheless, this is not the only, or even the most important thing that Sorel is trying to establish here. The question is not mainly one of scale, but one of agency. Sorel’s idea, or, perhaps more correctly, hope, is that a systemic analysis of society can avoid dealing with agency: if we take society in its entirety we can avoid dealing with the non-deterministic phenomenon of human agency. This is why individual work is tellingly labelled as an ‘anti-scientific’ element.

It is hard to avoid this interpretation, especially if we think that when Sorel speaks of science he is not speaking merely about a systematized body of knowledge<sup>29</sup>, but about the discovery of causal relations, and that this presupposes determinism. The conceptualization of human agency as creative is, quite simply, irreconcilable with science, and thus it appears correct to

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de travail et entre en échange avec tous les autres. Les produits considérés au point de l’être-société sont susceptibles d’être mesurés.’

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. ‘Le travail de l’individu est quelque chose d’incommensurable : chacun l’apprecie à sa fantaisie et chacun prétend avoir droit à une rémunération exceptionnelle.’

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 228-9. ‘Dans la notion de la valeur, Proudhon fait disparaître tous ces éléments antiscientifiques : les produits se classent, non plus d’après des caprices et des prétentions individuelles, mais d’après leur place dans la production sociale.’

<sup>29</sup> A systematized body of knowledge is ‘la systématique’, not science.

say that the rationale behind the choice of a systemic analysis is the elimination of the problematic fact of human agency.

## **2.3 THE SCIENCE OF SOCIETY AND THE TEST OF AGENCY**

The conceptual problem thus put is a difficult one for Sorel to solve, essentially for the reason that social science must produce a scientific knowledge of an object of study, the human world, characterized by the presence of freedom. This is problematic for Sorel because he believes that only phenomena regulated by causal necessity are open to scientific study, and whereas the natural world is ruled by necessity, the human world is, at least partially, characterized by purposive agency. Given that by definition no science of human agency is possible, Sorel attempts, in the 'Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon', what we could perhaps call a structuralist solution. The hope is that by treating holistically a social or an economic system, one can somehow remove the necessity for the social scientist of taking agency into consideration. The problem, of course, is not merely that human agency is difficult to analyse, but that it is not regulated by the strict causal relationships that alone for Sorel can constitute a body of scientific knowledge. In short, the possibility of social science depends on the question of whether there are causal relationships that regulate the global functioning of society, i.e. on the issue of whether human agency can, or cannot, be ignored.

### **2.3.1 A HESITANT CONVERT**

Despite, or perhaps in virtue of, the difficulty involved in the quest for social-scientific knowledge, Sorel continued to engage in it, albeit in a tentative way, attempting to find lasting intuitions upon which to develop his thought.

In order to grasp both the importance that Sorel attributed to the question and, perhaps more importantly, his lack of clear answers we must turn to an open letter written in 1893 to the *Revue Philosophique*. In the letter, aptly entitled 'Science et socialisme', Sorel protests against the superficial critiques with which the French academy is greeting the work of Karl Marx.<sup>30</sup> For Sorel, Marx's approach ought to be taken more seriously, for it appears to be able to break the stalemate between idealism and empiricism in which the French intellectual

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<sup>30</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Science et socialisme', *Revue Philosophique* XXXV, 1893, pp. 509-11. This letter is conventionally considered as the beginning of Sorel's involvement with Marxism. We shall speak more thoroughly of this issue in the next chapter. But one point can be anticipated, namely that Sorel's discovery of Marx is a scientific rather than a political one. The Marx defended and studied by Sorel in 1893 is a sociologist, a philosopher and an historian rather than a political leader. More specifically, for Sorel, he is a writer whose thought seems to promise a solid and truly scientific conceptualization of the human world.

world is stuck. More precisely, Marx appears to offer a potentially scientific approach to the study of economics and social science in general. The letter is interesting because it reveals that for Sorel the question of social science is a very open one: despite the vocal defence of Marx at a general philosophical level, Sorel's tone is hesitant when he speaks of the science of economics that Marxism claims to have established.

The general structure of Sorel's defence of Marx echoes the ideas examined in the previous chapter: Marx essentially is to be studied and defended because he represents a solution to the dichotomy paralyzing the French epistemological debate, divided between metaphysicians unconcerned with science and reality, and scientific thought that, being excessively empirical, has become relativistic and sceptical. 'Contemporary philosophy' writes Sorel 'is busy fighting windmills and wanders in the clouds; if the holders of the official chairs cannot produce anything more than idealistic reveries... Marx's new metaphysics will triumph against the subtle refutations offered against it.'<sup>31</sup> The ambition of Marx and of his socialist project is, for the Sorel of the time, to establish a science, a rational knowledge of economics, and this clashes with the *Zeitgeist*, as eloquently illustrated in this short passage:

'I know that such an absolute formulation can appear out of fashion today: we only want to hear about empiricism and what is relative. We easily treat socialists as dreamers; we compare them to Plato and Thomas More. Rational science and utopia are two different things; according to current opinion, however, they resemble each other, science being a mere construction of our spirit, approximately, though never completely, fitting with reality [adaptée aux choses réelles]: all absolute conclusions would then be forbidden to man.'<sup>32</sup>

However, despite this general philosophical defence of Marx, the situation is more complex. Sorel approves of the scientific ambitions of Marxism, for he believes them to be healthy correctives to the sceptical or idealistic tendencies of the present.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, he does not

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 509. 'La philosophie contemporaine bataille contre des chimères et navigue dans l'empyrée ; la nouvelle métaphysique réelle de Marx triomphera des réfutation subtiles qu'on lui oppose si les détenteurs des chaires officielles ne parviennent point à produire autre chose que des rêveries idéalistes...'

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 510. 'Je sais bien qu'une formule absolue peut sembler bien démodée aujourd'hui : on ne veut plus entendre parler que d'empirisme et de relatif. On traite volontiers les socialistes de rêveurs ; on les compare à Platon et à Th. Morus. La science rationnelle et l'utopie sont choses quelque peu différentes ; suivant l'opinion courante elles se ressemblent beaucoup, la science n'étant qu'une construction de notre esprit, plus ou moins adaptée aux choses réelles, mais jamais complètement adaptée : toute conclusion absolue serait donc interdite à l'homme.' Had it not been clear enough already, so long to Sorel the irrationalist. Commenting on 'Science et socialisme' Shlomo Sand writes : 'Celui que les historiens ont caractérisé et intégré dans le courant antirationaliste de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et des débuts du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle est attiré par Marx... du fait de l'insatisfaction qu'il éprouve face à l'empirisme et au relativisme qui dominent son époque...'. See Sand, *Illusion du politique*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> The issue of scientific certainty is, for Sorel, something that has a bearing on the wider well-being of society. It is worth citing this long passage in order to illustrate what Sorel believes to be the social consequences of

yet know whether the social scientific project is practicable or not. From this perspective, Sorel's letter is full of precautions. In fact, the closer we get to the issue of social science, the more Sorel becomes prudent.

Marx attempts to establish a science of economics, and has 'placed social science on the only ground fit for it', but only 'if we admit that a social science exists'.<sup>34</sup> As he illustrates the ambition of the Marxist project the tone becomes progressively less assertive and more interrogative. 'Modern socialism believes that there exists a science, a true economic science. Is this thesis well grounded? Here we have something that ought to be examined a little more closely than has been done until now.'<sup>35</sup> A few lines below, he restates the question in the same interrogative terms. 'Is it true that exchange contains an element capable of being incorporated into a rational science, as held by K. Marx, or is it a phenomenon escaping all possible scientific categories as Aristotle appears to believe?'<sup>36</sup> Sorel defends Marx on the general philosophical level, and asks for the French to take seriously the social scientific ambitions of Marxism. However, the question of whether the social scientific project can be realized is very much an open one, as he makes abundantly clear. The question is essentially epistemological and philosophical, and it is a question about the kind of knowledge that can be attained of a series of essentially non-deterministic phenomena. 'The problem is a philosophical one, only philosophers used to studying principles can deal with it seriously. It

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philosophical and scientific scepticism. The beginning is sarcastic. 'Isn't it a nice sight to see the plebs remain faithful to the old principles, believe in right and *absolute* truth, while those supposed to lead them have lost this faith? Day after day, scientific scepticism worsens the separation of the classes from a moral point of view. The wisest lose all grip on the course of people's minds because their direction is, almost everywhere, left to agitators. People go to them as they imagine these agitators to be animated by their same faith.' See *ibid.*, pp. 510-11. 'N'est-ce pas un spectacle admirable que de voir les plèbes rester fidèles aux vieux principes, croire encore au droit et à la vérité *absolue*, quand ceux qui devraient les diriger n'y croient plus ? Le scepticisme scientifique aggrave, tous les jours, la séparation des classes, au point de vue moral. Les plus savants perdent toute action sur la marche des esprits et la société court le plus grand danger, parce que la direction des âmes est, presque partout, abandonnée à des agitateurs. Le peuple va à eux, parce qu'il suppose chez eux la même foi qui l'anime.'

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 509. Emphasis added. 'L'un des mérites de l'auteur allemand a été de placer la science sociale sur le seul terrain qui lui convienne (en admettant qu'il existe une science sociale).'

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 511. 'Le socialisme moderne croit qu'il existe une science, une vraie science économique. Cette thèse est-elle fondée ? Voilà ce qu'il faudrait examiner d'un peu plus près qu'on ne l'a fait jusqu'ici : je ne crois pas que l'on ait réellement réfuté à ce point de vue les théories de Marx.'

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 'Est-il vrai que l'échange renferme un élément susceptible d'entrer dans une science rationnelle comme le soutient K. Marx, ou bien n'est-il qu'un phénomène échappant à toutes les catégories scientifiques possibles, comme semble le croire Aristote. Si le Stagyrite a raison, toutes les thèses socialiste s'écroulent...'

is long that I seek, in vain, a solution to this important issue, and I have still not found anywhere an answer'.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.3.2 THE SCIENCE OF ACTIVITIES AND THE SCIENCE OF SOCIETY

The hesitant tone can be explained by recalling what the fundamental problem of social science is for Sorel. Science is rational knowledge of deterministic phenomena, while the human world is constituted by creative human agency. Thus, the establishment of a body of social scientific knowledge remains an open question, and the strategy pursued by Sorel in the years between 1892 and 1895 is that of establishing the sciences of society on the elimination of the problematic fact of human agency. It is in the 'Ancienne et nouvelle métapsique' that we see a more thorough articulation of this attempt.

The first reference to social science appears in the context of the distinction between rational science and 'systématique'. One of the differences between the two is that while the 'systématique' is interested in producing practical solutions to a given problem, the primary aim of science is to understand causal relationships. It is important to underline that Sorel discusses social sciences overwhelmingly in terms of 'systématique'. Thus, he comments on the fact that sociologists are fascinated by historical examples, be they classical or medieval, and that there is much talk of 'old corporations and other things that one would like to reinstitute, with adjustments to adapt them to modern times.'<sup>38</sup> Sorel is keen to deny the status of science to these endeavours: 'all attempts made to establish an experimental sociology based on historical generalizations belong to comparative systématique'.<sup>39</sup> It is, for Sorel, on the one hand a question of method of enquiry. Systematized and comparative empirical observations are useful, but they represent a level of knowledge prior to scientific knowledge, a sort of pre-science. Works on labour legislation, for example, proceed in this manner:

'As soon as there is a large enough number of facts of the same kind, they are presented to the public in a descriptive monograph in which one states how the law has been created and applied... When enough of these monographs have

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 'Le problème est d'ordre philosophique, il n'y a que des philosophes habitués à étudier les principes qui puissent sérieusement l'aborder. Voilà longtemps que je cherche, en vain, la solution de cette question capitale et je n'ai encore trouvé de réponse nulle part.'

<sup>38</sup> Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 102. 'On a beaucoup disserté, et on disserte encore, dans un certain monde, sur le Moyen-âge, le temporel et le spirituel, les vieilles corporations, et autres choses qu'on voudrait restaurer avec quelques accommodations aux besoins modernes.'

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 102-3. 'Toutes les tentatives faites pour constituer une sociologie expérimentale fondée sur les généralisations de l'histoire, appartiennent à la systématique comparative et leur valeur doit être discutée comme la valeur des méthodes canoniques de construction.'

been published over the course of time a more or less distinct current of opinion is established, which is a vague form of systematization...'<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, it is a question of goal and ambition. The ambition of these social scientists is social reform. Sorel takes the example of social economists, who criticize their liberal colleagues in virtue of the latter's excessive adherence to principles. Social economists, however, start and aim at a practical perspective that is fundamentally alien to scientific thought, as we have seen in the previous chapter. What they can establish are general solutions designed to take into account of as many different instances as possible. But, once more, this is not science. These are 'constructions skilfully crafted to replace, with greater or smaller success, the real processes: these constructions' value resides in the number of experimental elements they contain and, from this point of view, they are often of great interest.'<sup>41</sup> But they remain solidly in the realm of the pre-scientific, empirical 'systématique'.

The main problem facing the attempt to establish a scientific study of the human world is the one Sorel had highlighted in the study of Proudhon: namely, the peculiar and essentially non-deterministic fact of human agency. And thus, in the last instance, the problem remains one of freedom and determinism. The issue comes up rather clearly in the eighth section of the 'Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique', and thus it is necessary to go back, briefly, to Sorel's treatment of Bergson's arguments on freedom in order to highlight once more how central determinism is to Sorel's conception of science. A free act, let us recall, was one that seemed to spring from no obvious determination. According to Sorel, who follows Bergson, this 'illusion'<sup>42</sup> of free agency depends on the fact that such supposedly free acts spring from the depth of our consciousness, from our emotional self, and that these depths are impossible to examine rationally: thus, we cannot see what determines the act.

'Indeterminism is emotional action in life; I have already explained that all serious study of man must be based on the impossibility of representing our

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 103. 'Lorsqu'on a un assez grand nombre de faits d'un même genre, on les présente au public sous forme de monographies descriptives, où l'on dit comment la loi a été faite, comment elle est appliquée ; on énonce les opinions que les auteurs précédents ont émises sur les effets. Lorsque des pareils mémoires ont été lancés durant plusieurs années, il se forme un courant plus ou moins marqué, c'est une forme vague de systématisation ; on finit par déclarer que la situation actuelle est absurde et qu'il est ridicule de conserver un appareil législatif suranné.'

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 104-5. 'De même qu'il y a pour chaque problème industriel plusieurs théories, de même il y a foison d'économies sociales : ce sont des constructions adroitement faites, pour remplacer, avec plus ou moins de bonheur, les processus réels ; ces constructions valent par la quantité d'éléments expérimentaux qu'elles renferment et, à ce point de vue, elles offrent souvent un intérêt considérable.'

<sup>42</sup> Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 179.



affective states; when these intervene, the logical flow of representations is broken and the illusion of free will arises.’<sup>43</sup>

In other words, Sorel is unwilling to allow for exceptions in the determinism of nature. This rejection of freedom as indeterminism is dictated by the fact that if the laws of nature were to lose their necessary and universal character, then science would be impossible. The following formulation is a little excessive, but it shows very clearly the connection between the fact of determinism and the possibility of science:

‘It is clear that if there is freedom then there is no possible knowledge, not even in the form of a systématique; all humans, being independent one from the other, would form each their own kind, like angels in the Thomist doctrine, and there would be no general relation.’<sup>44</sup>

The reason as to why Sorel is so keen to avoid conceptualizing free will as freedom from the deterministic laws of nature is that this would imperil the whole scientific edifice which necessitates determinism.

The issue is tricky because, though Sorel rejects the idea of freedom as indeterminism, he still nonetheless believes that human agency is constituted by the creative power of which we spoke before. There are two conceptions of freedom at work here: one, which he rejects, as indeterminism, and another, which he subscribes to, as creative activity. The fact is, however, that both create problems for the establishment of a science of the human world.

So, tackling the problem directly, Sorel asks whether a science of ‘human activities’ is possible. What is this science of human activities? It is the attempt to ground social science on the classification of different human types. Sorel had already explored this possibility in the previous years. In 1893, a year before the ‘Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique’, he had published a few articles discussing the work of Cesare Lombroso.<sup>45</sup> These works, dealing essentially with the question of political crime and whether it is possible to identify the social type prone to be an agent of violent social change, indicate a certain interest in the possibility

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. ‘L’indéterminisme, c’est l’action émotionnelle dans la vie ; j’ai déjà expliqué que toute étude sérieuse de l’homme doit être basée sur l’impossibilité de représenter les états affectifs ; lors donc que ceux-ci interviennent, le cours logique des représentations est rompu et l’illusion du libre-arbitre se produit.’

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 177-8. ‘Il est clair que s’il y a liberté, il n’y a pas de connaissance possible, même sous forme de systématique ; tous les hommes, étant indépendants les uns des autres, formeraient chacun une espèce, comme les anges dans la doctrine thomiste, et il n’y aurait aucune relation générale.’

<sup>45</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘La position du problème de M. Lombroso’, *Revue scientifique* LI, 1893, pp. 206-10; Georges Sorel, ‘Le crime politique d’après M. Lombroso’, *Revue scientifique* LI, 1893, pp. 561-5 and finally, and probably best exemplifying the tendency to do social science on the basis of human types, Georges Sorel, ‘La femme criminelle d’après M. Lombroso’, *Revue scientifique* LII, 1893, pp. 463-7.

of establishing human types on which to base a social science.<sup>46</sup> A science of human activities would then neatly solve the problem, for agency could be explained through classification. But Sorel's conclusion is a negative one. Human activity does not develop in a void, but in a changing environment. Individuals are educated to act in accordance with their social role, but no education is perfect, and moreover, these social roles are subject to change. In short, the science of human activities is an impossibility: 'all one can hope to establish is a series of descriptive *systématiques*, taking into account the changes in the [social] environments.'<sup>47</sup> Of course, the impossibility of establishing a science of activities is an indirect confirmation that Sorel believes human agency to be free. The fact that a social environment changes indicates that the human world is transformed by human agency.

And so, how is social science possible, given that human agency cannot be classified in types and that the science of human activities is impossible? The solution given in the '*Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique*' is the same one sketched in the '*Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon*': social scientific analysis must exclude agency. Unable to deal with the tricky problem of human agency and its ability to rise above the deterministic laws of nature, Sorel argues that only a systemic analysis of an economic or social whole can be scientific, and that this is because the systemic analysis gets rid of what he had called, in the study on Proudhon, subjective and 'antiscientific elements.'<sup>48</sup> Now, it is true that Sorel had already argued, and will continue to argue, that the knowledge that a science of society can hope to produce will necessarily exclude particular events, individual personalities and, more in general, the micro level of analysis. Nevertheless what is being argued in the concluding sections of the '*Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique*' is altogether far more radical, for it essentially amounts to an attempt to establish a scientific study of society on the removal of human agency. The unspoken intuition is that while human agency exists and breaks the determinism of nature, a social and economic system can be examined scientifically only by ignoring this fact.

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<sup>46</sup> In one of them, for example, Sorel had dealt with the question of political crime, examining the social and geographical conditions favouring the emergence of political criminals. According to Lombroso, political crime was the expression of a socially progressive tendency that he had labelled 'philoneism'. According to Sorel, philoneists can be divided in two general categories: geniuses and what he had called 'les mattoïdes'. See Sorel, 'Crime politique', pp. 563-4.

<sup>47</sup> Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 188. 'Je crois que de tout ce qui précède on peut conclure qu'il n'a jamais été possible et qu'il ne semble même pas possible de constituer dans l'avenir une science des actes humains ; tout ce que l'on peut espérer faire, c'est un ensemble de *systématiques* descriptives, qui doivent être révisées de temps à autre, en tenant compte des modifications des milieux.'

<sup>48</sup> Sorel, '*Philosophie de Proudhon*', p. 628.

The prime example of a social scientific argument given by Sorel is Marx's analysis of capital circulation. In describing the process in which capital becomes commodity before returning to the state of capital, Marx successfully manages to abstract himself from the circumstances in which this circulation happens, and thus produces a scientific knowledge of the phenomenon of circulation. It is worth quoting a long passage here:

'This reasoning is truly noteworthy; one does not try to establish under what influences the contracting parties operate, what are the representations directing the development of their thoughts; in a word, all the psychological apparatus disappears. We take a relation, that of capital and usury, excluding every individual phenomenon and we ask what this relation is, rationally. To answer this question, we do not need to take into account people, with their passions and incidents; we only have to imagine a machine-like support [un support machinal] capable of producing the original effect that we are examining.'<sup>49</sup>

The machine-like support here is essentially equivalent to an algorithmic abstraction, a conceptual mechanism allowing us to isolate a specific relation in the object of our study. But the important aspect here is the exclusion of agency, the exclusion of 'people, with their passions and incidents'. It is true that, partially, this is also a methodological point: given that it is impossible to treat scientifically individual acts, social science must examine the social origins and consequences of given acts.

Sorel is, in other words, also arguing that it is impossible to deal scientifically with society as methodological individualists. 'Classical philosophers deny', according to Sorel, 'the existence of social elements; all there is are individuals and collectivities.'<sup>50</sup> Mill, for example, denied that men become something altogether different when assembled in society. For Sorel, this means that, since 'no science of individual human acts exists', it follows that there are no laws 'in the true sense of the word [law]' that apply to them. However, 'Stuart Mill is not very demanding and only asks for the possibility of constructing a useful *systématique*'.<sup>51</sup> Barthélemy de Saint-Hilaire, French translator of Aristotle's *Ethics*, commits

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<sup>49</sup> Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 233. 'Ce raisonnement est bien remarquable ; on ne s'occupe pas de chercher sous quelles influences les contractants opèrent, quels sont les cours des représentations directrices de leur pensée ; en un mot, tout l'appareil psychologique disparaît. On prend une relation, qui ne comporte aucun phénomène individuel, celle de l'usure et du capital, et on demande ce qu'elle est rationnellement. Pour résoudre la question, nous n'avons pas besoin de faire intervenir des hommes avec leurs passions, leurs accidents ; nous n'avons qu'à imaginer un support machinal, produisant l'effet primitif sur lequel nous raisonnons.'

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 245. 'Les philosophes classiques nient l'existence des caractères sociaux; il n'y a que des individus et des collectivités.'

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 'J'ai montré plus haut qu'il n'existe aucune science des actes humains individuels ; il n'y a donc pas de lois pour eux, au sens vrai du mot ; mais Stuart Mill n'est pas exigeant et il demande seulement qu'on lui accorde la possibilité de former une *systématique* utile.'

a similar error when he asserts that morality is the first amongst the sciences of man since it is individual.<sup>52</sup> Men do not alter when assembled in society according to Mill, ‘but where do we find man outside society?’<sup>53</sup> What one must do is avoid discussions on individual agency and concentrate on social activity.

Social activity is not necessarily the activity of collectivities. Individual acts too have a social dimension, but ‘As a result of certain mental habits, we see more easily the social dimension in the acts of a group than we do in the acts of an individual’.<sup>54</sup> For Sorel, the object of knowledge of the sciences of man must be the acts of individual and collectivities taken in their social perspective. Whereas the decision-making process remains firmly in the individualist perspective, and thus cannot be examined scientifically, the ‘objective outcome’ of an act creates the object of knowledge of social science.<sup>55</sup> The objectivity of this outcome derives, of course, from the social point of view adopted by the social scientist: ‘human works are easily comparable [between each other] once they are seen as produced by the collectivity itself.’<sup>56</sup> It ought to be noticed that this is the same point that Sorel had made in the study of Proudhon, arguing that ‘products [of human work] must be classified not according to individual caprice and pretensions, but according to their role in social production.’<sup>57</sup>

In short, Sorel is trying to establish the possibility of a science of the human world. For a start, a science cannot be the systematized exposition of empirical data, but must be the knowledge of causal mechanisms regulating the given phenomena. But here comes the problem, for the human world is also partly constituted by human agency, and Sorel clearly believes human agency to be somewhat above the deterministic laws regulating the natural world. Sorel conceptualizes the fact of freedom in terms of creative agency, the ability to

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<sup>52</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251. ‘Stuart Mill dit que l’homme ne change pas, quand il est en société ; mais où donc l’homme est-il autrement qu’en société ?’

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250. ‘Par suite de certaines habitudes d’esprit, nous voyons plus facilement ce qu’il y a de social dans les actes d’un groupe que dans les actes d’un individu : c’est là un simple accident subjectif : mais on finit par confondre social et collectif, parce que ce sont des groupes qui nous ont fait connaître d’une manière sensible les relations sociales.’

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 253-4. ‘... nos *actes* peuvent être examinés à un double point de vue. Les processus personnels n’ont aucune commune mesure et ne peuvent être considérés que dans l’individu ; les effets objectifs, traduits par des transformations matérielles, constituent des choses qui sont toutes de même nature et qui peuvent être comparées comme des œuvres anonymes.’

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254. ‘Les œuvres humaines sont facilement comparables, dès qu’on les regarde comme faites par la collectivité pour elle-même.’

<sup>57</sup> See Sorel, ‘Philosophie de Proudhon’, pp. 628-9. ‘Le travail de l’individu est quelque chose d’incommensurable : chacun l’apprecie à sa fantaisie et chacun prétend avoir droit à une rémunération exceptionnelle. Dans la notion de la valeur, Proudhon fait disparaître tous ces éléments antiscientifiques : les produits se classent, non plus d’après des caprices et des prétentions.’

produce artefacts, concepts and tools that have no model in the natural world. This creative power, however, generates a serious problem for it puts human agency beyond the reach of scientific analysis: how can there be a scientific knowledge of that which is mutable? Sorel tries to solve this problem by reducing the space for agency in the explanation of social phenomena. Social phenomena have to be examined in terms of the social system in which they occur. If seen from this systemic, global perspective, then social phenomena become potential objects of scientific study, removing, by way of abstraction, the actors involved in the creation of these phenomena. On the one hand there is the idea, articulated somewhat tentatively by Sorel, that the whole possesses a logic that is not reducible to that of its component parts.<sup>58</sup> On the other, however, the insistence on this logic of the social as the only possible foundation for a science of the human world, derives much of its necessity from the problem just highlighted, namely the contradiction between a theory of human freedom as creative agency, and one of science as the knowledge of deterministic objects of study.

## 2.4 SOREL AND THE NASCENT SOCIOLOGY

The difficulty encountered by Sorel in his conceptualization of the sciences of man did not, naturally, happen in a cultural void, but profited much from the flourishing of a number of relatively new social sciences in the opening years of 1890s France. We have mentioned in the previous chapter how the *Revue Philosophique* promoted the establishment of experimental psychology. Criminology too was a blossoming science or, perhaps more correctly, a field of study and an issue that was attracting interest. Economics, though a more established discipline, was discussed and attracted a large deal of attention. From this perspective, Sorel's interest in a science of man is rather typical of the period.

One of the reasons for this interest in social sciences was that they were perceived as being potentially able to offer political guidance to the French nation: the study of society, if proven to be scientific, could help the politician steering the country in a phase of economic and social transition. We had seen how Sorel had insisted, in his defence of Karl Marx in the *Revue Philosophique*, on the negative social effects of scientific uncertainty, thereby suggesting that social science ought, eventually, to be employed to guide economic policy:

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<sup>58</sup> Commenting on Stuart Mill's individualist methodology, Sorel writes that we find 'a curious application of the metaphysical errors concerning the *simple*. One tries to decompose society into elements and lets oneself be guided by the crassest appearances that belong to empirical knowledge...'. Ibid., pp. 251-2. 'On trouve ici une curieuse application des erreurs métaphysiques sur le *simple*. On cherche à décomposer la société en éléments et on se laisse guider par les apparences les plus grossières de la connaissance empirique.'

‘What does socialism demand? That public force act in conformity to the rules of a rational state’.<sup>59</sup> If we read the opening declaration of the *Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, established in January 1893 by René Worms, we find similar, as it were, technocratic ideas. After having stated that sociology is still young and consequently still unable to provide scientific policy guidelines, we find a revealing medical analogy. Before establishing laws, one must examine facts: ‘Isn’t this what must be done for the social organism, in the same way in which it has already ably been done for the human organism? Medicine only became a science after anatomy revealed in detail the structure of the human body.’<sup>60</sup> The relevant analogy is not that between organism and society, typical of Worms’ sociological thought but, instead, that between sociology and medicine, since it shows the practical policy consequences that social science was eventually thought to imply.

One of the elements characterizing this flourishing of the social sciences was the lack of clear disciplinary boundaries. Indicative of the vagueness which characterized the boundaries between the new social sciences is the fact that Alfred Espinas could obtain, at the expense of Émile Durkheim, what was essentially a sociology chair at the Sorbonne in 1893 on the basis of his publications in the history of economics.<sup>61</sup> We have stated above that the *Revue Internationale de Sociologie* was established in 1893, and Worms in the same year established the *Institut International de Sociologie*, whose first congress, held in 1894, was dedicated to the question of ‘What is sociology?’.<sup>62</sup> Institutions and initiatives were

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<sup>59</sup> Sorel, ‘Science et socialisme’, p. 510. ‘Que demande donc le socialisme? que la force publique agisse conformément aux règles d’un État rationnel.’ Later on, more emphatically, Sorel insists on the connection between science and policy by paraphrasing Hegel. ‘Socialism aims at establishing, today, an economic *science*; if this claim is grounded, then it has the right to demand a legislative change from the state: its theorems must be applied; *what is rational and demonstrated must become real*.’ ‘Le socialisme prétend établir, aujourd’hui, une *science* économique ; si sa prétension est fondée, il a le droit de réclamer la refonte législative de l’État ; ses théorèmes doivent être appliqués ; *ce qui est rationnel et démontré doit devenir réel*.’ The idea of a scientific direction of society will decidedly disappear as Sorel deepened his knowledge of Marx.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Notre programme’, *Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 1, 1893, pp. 2-3.

<sup>61</sup> The ambiguity over whether the chair holder was going to teach the history of economics or sociology, as well as the final outcome displeased Durkheim greatly. On the ‘Espinas affair’ see Marcel Fournier, *Émile Durkheim: a biography*, trans. by David Macey (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2013), pp. 163-7. At the time of the events, Espinas’ major work had been a history of economic thought that had been given a cautiously favourable review in the *Journal des Économistes*. See Alfred Espinas, *Histoire des doctrines économiques* (Paris, Armand Colin: 1891) and its review Gustave du Puynode, ‘Alfred Espinas – Histoire des doctrines économiques’, *Journal des Économistes* 51, 1892, pp. 112-16. The review praised the historical erudition but urged the author to take the science of economics as a real science rather than as a mere craft. The reviewer ended on a somewhat awkward note, if we consider that the book is about the history economic thought, as he encourages Espinas to ‘re-read or read’ the classics. ‘Bien plus, il ne regarde au fond l’économie politique qu’ainsi qu’un art, et il finit par le dire à peu près en propres termes. Sans doute, c’est un art dans ses applications ; mais c’est une science et une pure science dans ses principes, ses doctrines et ses enseignements. Que M. Espinas relise ou lise Rossi, Mill, Courcelle-Seneuil, et de Molinari, et il s’en convaincra facilement.’

<sup>62</sup> See Fournier, *Durkheim*, p. 170.

flourishing: besides the abovementioned chair at the Sorbonne, the Comte de Chambrun also financed, in 1895, the creation of the *Musée Social*, a research institution dedicated to the scientific study of social phenomena, an initiative that benefitted from the patronage of the then prime minister Léon Bourgeois.<sup>63</sup> The 1895 international exhibition of Bordeaux dedicated a space to the new science of sociology.<sup>64</sup> This lack of disciplinary limits was, for a number of emerging and, as it were, neighbouring sciences, unsurprising. However, coupled with the fast institutional development it became a cause for concern for some practitioners who saw potential risk in a generalized but unfocused enthusiasm. Émile Durkheim, for example, worried in 1895 that ‘all this activity will go in a dangerous direction if it does not have a method to guide it’.<sup>65</sup> In the same year, he wrote to his rival Tarde that the excess of amateurs and self-proclaimed sociologists were ‘compromising a science that is already too easily compromised’.<sup>66</sup>

#### 2.4.1 SOREL, DURKHEIM, TARDE

The question of method was thus becoming an important one. A convincing methodological statement would have not only allowed sociology to define its field of enquiry and distinguish itself from the other sciences, but would have vindicated, in a context in which sociology was becoming a fashionable discourse, its scientific credentials and prestige. Many practitioners were aware of this problem. We had seen how the methodological question was central to Sorel’s writings on the social sciences and we have to look no further than the opening lines of Gabriel Tarde’s *Les lois de l’imitation* to find the interrogation about the scientific

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<sup>63</sup> This political patronage indicates well what kind of political use the nascent sociology could potentially serve: that of providing a discourse capable of dealing with the ‘social question’ without embracing the Marxist doctrine of class struggle embraced by the socialists that had, as we shall see in the following chapter, just obtained their first electoral victories. Bourgeois, prime minister and, in 1920, Nobel peace prize laureate, embodied well these anti-socialist collectivist ambitions. In 1896 he published *La Solidarité*, outlining a political course that was supposed to be alternative both to liberal *laissez-faire* and to socialism. ‘On la [the solidarist doctrine] trouve professée par des socialistes chrétiens, et pour eux c’est l’application des préceptes évangéliques ; par certains économistes, et pour eux c’est la réalisation de l’harmonie économique. Pour quelques philosophes, c’est la loi « bio-sociologique » du monde ; pour d’autres, c’est la loi « d’entente » ou « d’union pour la vie » ; pour les positivistes, c’est, d’un seul mot, « l’altruisme ». Mais pour tous, au fond, et sous des noms divers, la doctrine est la même, elle se ramène clairement à cette pensée fondamentale : il y a entre chacun des individus et tous les autres un lien nécessaire de *solidarité* ; c’est l’étude exacte des causes, des conditions et des limites de cette solidarité qui seule pourra donner la mesure des droits et des devoirs de chacun envers tous et de tous envers chacun, et qui assurera les conclusions scientifiques et morales du problème social.’ Léon Bourgeois, *La Solidarité* (Paris, Armand Colin : 1896), pp. 14-15.

<sup>64</sup> See Fournier, *Durkheim*, pp.207-9.

<sup>65</sup> Émile Durkheim, ‘Lo stato attuale degli studi sociologici in Francia’, *La Riforma Sociale* 3, 1895, pp. 607-22 and 691-707, cited in Fournier, *Durkheim*, p. 173.

<sup>66</sup> Durkheim, letter to Tarde 31/3/1895, cited in Fournier, *Durkheim*, p. 208.

credentials of the social sciences.<sup>67</sup> Examples of this sort could be abundantly multiplied. It was one of the most brilliant representatives of the new sociological school, Émile Durkheim, who successfully managed to produce one such methodological statement, with the publication of four articles in the *Revue Philosophique* in 1894.<sup>68</sup> These articles, later to become *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, are a seminal work in the developing of sociological thought, and raise a large number of issues with which we shall not deal. All we need to underline here is that their main ambition was the establishment of a *science* of sociology, the definition of a field of enquiry and of a methodology capable of separating sociology from other sciences and of legitimating its scientific ambitions.

Durkheim's attempt to establish a methodological canon for sociology was bound to encounter various types of resistance. Some came from Sorbonne professors uncertain as to whether sociology could be admitted into the educational institutions of the country.<sup>69</sup> Another type, more interesting for us, came from fellow sociologists, uncertain as to whether Durkheim's characterization of social facts – the object of knowledge of sociology – stood up to scrutiny. We have stated that one of the ambitions of the nascent sociology was to define its field of study. This implies a clear definition of the object of study, what Durkheim calls a 'social fact':

'The question is all the more necessary because the term [social fact] is used without much precision... under this heading there is, so to speak, no human occurrence that cannot be called social... If therefore these facts were social ones, sociology would possess no subject matter peculiarly of its own, and its domain would be confused with that of biology and psychology.'<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation* (Paris, Alcan: 1890), p.1. 'Y a-t-il lieu à une science, ou seulement à une histoire et tout au plus à une philosophie des faits sociaux ?'

<sup>68</sup> Émile Durkheim, 'Les règles de la méthode sociologique', *Revue philosophique* XXXVII, 1894, pp. 465-98 and 577-607 and XXXVIII, 1894, pp. 14-39 and 168-82. The articles were immediately collected and published as a volume in 1895. Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris, Alcan: 1895).

<sup>69</sup> Durkheim's doctoral thesis on the division of labour had already encountered such resistances. For an account of Durkheim's thesis defence that shows this, see Fournier, *Durkheim*, pp. 152-6.

<sup>70</sup> The translation comes from Émile Durkheim, *The rules of sociological method and selected texts*, ed. by Steven Lukes and trans. by W.D. Halls (London, Macmillan: 1982), p. 50. The original is in 'Les règles de la méthode sociologique (1)', *Revue Philosophique* XXXVII, 1894, p. 466. 'Avant de chercher quelle est la méthode qui convient à l'étude des faits sociaux, il importe de savoir quels sont les faits que l'on appelle ainsi. La question est d'autant plus nécessaire que l'on se sert de cette qualification sans beaucoup de précision. On l'emploie couramment pour désigner à peu près tous les phénomènes qui se passent à l'intérieur de la société, pour peu qu'ils présentent, avec une certaine généralité, quelque intérêt social. Mais, à ce compte, il n'y a pour ainsi dire, pas d'événements humains qui ne puissent être appelés sociaux... Si donc ces faits étaient sociaux, la sociologie n'aurait pas d'objet qui lui fut propre, et son domaine se confondrait avec celui de la biologie et de la psychologie.'



It is the differentiation of sociology from biology, and mainly psychology, that interests us here. The reference to psychology had as its target the work of Gabriel Tarde, who had, partly also in the above cited *Les lois de l'imitation*, attempted to establish sociology on individualist terms and had conceptualized its field of enquiry as those phenomena resulting from the interaction between psychological selves tendentially explained in terms of imitation.<sup>71</sup> Mostly concerned with the separation of sociology from biology and biological explanations, Tarde saw in psychology the key to establishing this separation. 'It was believed' he wrote in 1890 'that the only way of giving to *sociology* a scientific character [tournure] was giving to it a biological, or, even better, a mechanical air'.<sup>72</sup> Instead of reasoning in analogy with biology, sociology ought to take advantage of its 'exceptional privilege':

'In social matters, we have under our eyes, through an exceptional privilege, the real causes, the individual acts that make up the facts, something which is hidden to us in all other fields of study. It seems then that we are exempted from having to recur, for the explanation of social phenomena, to the so-called general causes that physicists and naturalists are forced to set up and label forces, energies, conditions of existence and other verbal palliatives for their ignorance of the transparent bottom of things.'<sup>73</sup>

If individual acts are the 'transparent bottom' and the 'real causes' of social phenomena, it follows that the explanation of society ought to be framed in terms of interactions amongst individuals. Moreover, it follows that psychology, the science studying individual minds, conceptually precedes sociology. In 1895 Tarde wrote a preface to the second edition of the *Lois de l'imitation* in answer to his critics, and insisted in defending his approach. The imitative interaction amongst individuals is so important that 'the psychological is explained by the social [i.e. by imitative interaction] precisely because the social is born out of the psychological.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> For a concise and analytically sharp examination of the debate between Durkheim and Tarde see Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim. His life and work* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press: 1985), pp. 302-13.

<sup>72</sup> Tarde, *Lois de l'imitation*, p. 1. 'On a cru ne pouvoir donner à la sociologie une tournure scientifique qu'en lui donnant un air biologique, ou, mieux encore, un air mécanique.'

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2. 'En matière sociale, on a sous la main, par un privilège exceptionnel, les causes véritables, les actes individuels dont les faits sont faits, ce qui est absolument soustrait à nos regards en toute autre matière. On est donc dispensé, ce semble, d'avoir recours pour l'explication des phénomènes de la société à ces causes, dites générales, que les physiciens et les naturalistes sont bien obligés de créer sous le nom de forces, d'énergies, de conditions d'existence et autres palliatifs verbaux de leur ignorance du fond clair des choses.'

<sup>74</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation*, 2nd edition (Paris, Alcan: 1895), p. 8n. 'Le psychologique s'explique par le social, précisément parce que le social naît du psychologique.' By this Tarde means that, given that social facts are imitative interactions, the individual psychology of a man can be explained through the imitative influences it endures, and this is what he calls 'le social'. This is radically different from Durkheim's 'social'.

Durkheim's *Règles* moved in the opposite direction, and tried to establish a fundamental difference between social and psychological facts. In a footnote to the first part of the *Règles*, the part in which he defines the social fact, Durkheim had acknowledged 'how far removed this definition of the social fact is from that which serves as the basis for the ingenious system of Tarde.'<sup>75</sup> For Durkheim, Tarde inverts the causal relationship between imitation and social character of a fact: 'its capacity for expansion is not the cause but the consequence of its sociological character.'<sup>76</sup> The indefinite multiplication of individual facts, moreover, does not constitute a social one, for they are altogether different phenomena: 'an individual state which impacts on others, none the less, remains individual.'<sup>77</sup>

The question essentially amounted to whether social action could or could not be explained in individualistic terms, i.e. whether the social whole possessed a logic that was not susceptible to being examined through the explanatory modes that we employ in the case of individual agency. For Durkheim, the independence of sociology could be asserted by showing the impossibility of reduction of social facts to individual ones: much like Sorel, he opposed methodological individualism. Thus, can society be examined more fruitfully in terms of its atomic component parts? Can sociology be grounded in psychology?

'...it will be argued that since the sole elements of which society is composed are individuals, the primary origin of sociological phenomena cannot be other than psychological. Reasoning in this way, we can just as easily establish that biological phenomena are explained analytically by inorganic phenomena. It is indeed certain that in the living cell there are only molecules of crude matter. But they are in association, and it is this association which is the cause of the new phenomena that characterize life, even the germ of which is impossible to find in a single of these associated elements. This is because the whole does not equal the sum of its parts; it is something different, whose properties differ from those displayed by the parts from which it is formed.'<sup>78</sup>

In the context of the passage just cited, the reference against which Durkheim is arguing is Spencer, but the closer target is Tarde, whose first substantial reaction to the *Règles* came at the first congress of the *Institut international de Sociologie*, held in October 1894 in Paris.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Durkheim, *Rules*, p. 59.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* The conceptual affinity with Sorel's insistence on the 'social' character of science ought to be obvious. For a precise reference, see *D'Aristote à Marx*, pp. 244-6. 'Les philosophes classiques nient l'existence des caractères sociaux ; il n'y a que des individus et des collectivités.'

<sup>78</sup> Durkheim, *Rules*, p.128.

<sup>79</sup> According to Fournier, the reason as to why Durkheim refused to be involved in the *Institut* and the *Revue internationale de sociologie* partly had to do with his low esteem of Worms' scientific abilities. See Fournier, *Durkheim*, pp. 170-1.

According to Sorel, at the congress ‘Tarde pushed the absence of tact to the point of acrimoniously attacking Durkheim’s theses; - it is true that any institute is incompetent when it comes to judging a man of the value of the eminent professor from Bordeaux.’<sup>80</sup> In that opening congress Tarde stood by his methodological individualism and, indeed, dedicated a number of pages to the critique, at times carried out in a mocking tone, of Durkheim’s ideas. He asserted, against Durkheim, that there was no way of making sense of social facts beyond their individual occurrences, and accused him of doing metaphysics. How could a social fact ‘replicate itself before existing, and how could it, let us speak clearly, exist *outside* of every individual?’<sup>81</sup> Durkheim was victim of an ‘ontological illusion’<sup>82</sup> and his sociology was based on ‘transcendental social facts that M. Durkheim erects to the rank of resuscitated Platonic Ideas’.<sup>83</sup>

How did Sorel deal with this debate? How did he react to the shaping up of these two different positions on the question of social science? The first part of the answer consists in saying that he agreed with Durkheim rather than with Tarde. It will be sufficient to recall the arguments examined in the first part of the chapter to establish that Sorel rejected methodological individualism. Not only does society have, for Sorel, a character that cannot be reduced to that of its component parts, but, moreover, the analysis in terms of individuals is the result of a conceptual abstraction from a reality that is essentially social.

‘Stuart Mill states that man does not change when he is in society; but where is man except than in society? If we can consider man in its individual state, it is through a scientific abstraction; but this division cannot determine a change in the nature of things. We find here a curious application of the metaphysical errors concerning the *simple*. One tries to decompose society into elements and

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<sup>80</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Annales de l’Institut international de Sociologie’, *Le Devenir Social* 2, 1896, p. 64. ‘Les divers membres ont lu des mémoires sui des sujets très variés et M. Tarde a poussé l’absence de tact jusqu’à venir attaquer avec acrimonie les thèses de M. Durkheim; il est vrai que tous les instituts possibles sont incompétents pour juger un homme de la valeur de l’éminent professeur de Bordeaux.’

<sup>81</sup> Gabriel Tarde, ‘Les deux éléments de la sociologie’ [1894] in Gabriel Tarde, *Études de psychologie sociale* (Paris, Girard et Brière: 1898), p. 67. It is worth quoting the longer original passage: ‘Mais comment pourrait elle se réfracter avant d’exister, et comment pourrait-elle exister, parlons intelligiblement, en dehors de tous les individus? La vérité est qu’une chose sociale quelconque, un mot d’une langue, un rite d’une religion, un secret de métier, un procédé d’art, un article de loi, une maxime de morale, se transmet et passe, non pas du groupe social pris collectivement à l’individu, mais bien d’un individu -parent, maître, ami, voisin, camarade à un autre individu, et que, dans ce passage d’un esprit dans un autre esprit, elle se réfracte L’ensemble de ces réfractions, à partir d’une impulsion initiale due à un inventeur, à un découvreur, à un innovateur ou modificateur quelconque.’

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 69. ‘...ces faits sociaux transcendants que M. Durkheim érige au rang des Idées ressuscitées de Platon.’ The accusation of illegitimately postulating metaphysical entities was a recurring one in criticisms of Durkheim’s theory of social facts. As we shall see, Sorel too used this argument.

lets oneself be guided by the crassest appearances that belong to empirical knowledge',<sup>84</sup>

We have also seen why this rejection of methodological individualism makes sense in Sorel's thought, since he believes that the individual psyche is not susceptible to scientific study. For Sorel, 'there is no science of individual human acts; there is no law, in the proper sense of the word, for them'.<sup>85</sup>

The aversion towards methodological individualism and, consequently, the preference for Durkheim over Tarde surfaces in some of Sorel's writings of the period. For example, in 1895 he wrote an article on Durkheim and Tarde's views on crime for the Italian *Archivio di psichiatria, scienze penali ed antropologia criminale*, the criminology journal established by Cesare Lombroso.<sup>86</sup> In the article Sorel, in fact, defends Lombroso against *both* Durkheim and Tarde, arguing that the physiological basis of crime, as well as the economic conditions within which it occurs, are factors that ought to be given importance. Nonetheless, a preference for Durkheim over Tarde emerges clearly.<sup>87</sup> Thus, Sorel lauds Durkheim for having taken sociology out of its previous state, in which it was little more than 'a set of declamations in an obscure and barbaric language'.<sup>88</sup> As for Tarde, he is the object of mockery. When he retorts to Durkheim that his conception of science is 'a cold product of abstract reason',<sup>89</sup> he is met by Sorel's sarcastic dismissal: 'Mr Tarde is highly suspicious of reason; this is easy to see.'<sup>90</sup> Further on, Tarde is accused of 'anti-scientific tendencies',<sup>91</sup> and when he claims, citing J.S. Mill, that, contrary to what Durkheim asserts, a normal social state

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<sup>84</sup> Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 251-2. 'Stuart Mill dit que l'homme ne change pas, quand il est en société ; mais où donc l'homme est-il autrement qu'en société ? Si on le considère à l'état individuel, c'est par une abstraction scientifique ; mais cette division ne peut opérer un changement dans la nature des choses. On trouve ici une curieuse application des erreurs métaphysique sur le *simple*. On cherche à décomposer la société en éléments et on se laisse guider par les apparences les plus grossières de la connaissance empirique.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244. 'J'ai montré plus haut qu'il n'existe aucune science des actes humains individuels ; il n'y a donc pas de lois pour eux, au sens vrai du mot...'

<sup>86</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Les théories pénales de MM. Durkheim et Tarde', *Archivio di psichiatria, scienze penali ed antropologia criminale* XVI, 1895, pp. 219-28.

<sup>87</sup> The article comments on yet another, though minor, disagreement between Durkheim and Tarde, occasioned by Durkheim's affirmations, in the *Règles*, about the normality of crime. Tarde's attack was published in the *Revue Philosophique*. Gabriel Tarde, 'Criminalité et santé sociale', *Revue Philosophique* XXXIX, 1895, pp. 148-62.

<sup>88</sup> Sorel, 'Théories pénales', p. 219. '...la sociologie était un ensemble de déclamations en langue obscure et barbare, une variété de cette *blaguologie déliquescence*, que nos contemporains prennent, si aisément, pour science. Avec M. Durkheim la question change complètement...'

<sup>89</sup> Tarde, 'Criminalité et santé sociale', p. 161, cited in Sorel, 'Théories pénales', p. 219. '...la science, ou ce qu'il [Durkheim] appelle ainsi, froid produit de la raison abstraite, étrangère, par hypothèse, à toute inspiration de la conscience et du coeur...'

<sup>90</sup> Sorel, 'Théories pénales', p. 219. 'M. Tarde se méfie beaucoup de la raison; on s'en aperçoit facilement.'

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

is characterized by the ‘complete extermination of crime, vice, ignorance, misery and abuse’<sup>92</sup> Sorel mocks him again: ‘But this is an otherworldly existence! Our author still holds by the naïve optimism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: he believes in the natural goodness of man and the healing of all human ills through good will.’<sup>93</sup>

In the following year Sorel reviewed, for the *Devenir Social*, Théodule Ribot’s *La psychologie des sentiments*.<sup>94</sup> In the book, Ribot offers a vast overview of a number of feelings, examining the simplest ones at first, and gradually evolving towards more complex social feelings.<sup>95</sup> It is on the latter part that Sorel concentrates. This engagement with the work of France’s most established psychologists<sup>96</sup> allowed Sorel to return briefly to the question of sociology and psychology. Having found the book reasonable but lacking in decisive insight, Sorel questions the possibility of establishing sociology on psychological bases. His targets are ‘psychologists [who], not finding the human heart interesting anymore, begin to analyse society.’<sup>97</sup> In order to show that their scientific ambitions are illusory, continues Sorel, ‘it is not bad to compare their vain and pretentious theories’ with the findings of ‘the undisputed master of psychology in France’.<sup>98</sup> In short, Ribot’s book reveals the provisional and evolving character of the discipline of psychology. But if this is the case, how can sociology be grounded on such a young discipline?<sup>99</sup>

## 2.4.2 THE WORK ON DURKHEIM

Overall, Sorel’s intellectual preference for a holistic approach over methodological individualism is difficult to dispute, while his sympathy for Durkheim and antipathy towards Tarde emerges rather clearly. And yet, despite the clarity of his preferences, Sorel never gave

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<sup>92</sup> Tarde, ‘Criminalité et santé sociale’, p. 160, cited in Sorel, ‘Théories pénales’, p. 222. ‘Le normal, donc, pour une société, c’est la paix dans la justice et la lumière, c’est l’extermination complète du crime, du vice, de l’ignorance, de la misère, des abus.’

<sup>93</sup> Sorel, ‘Théories pénales’, p. 222. ‘Mais c’est l’existence paradisiaque! Notre auteur est, encore, au naïf optimisme du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: il croit à la bonté native de l’homme et à la guérison de tous les maux humains par la bonne volonté.’

<sup>94</sup> X. [Georges Sorel], ‘Les sentiments sociaux’, *Le Devenir Social* 2, 1896, pp. 673-95.

<sup>95</sup> See Théodule Ribot, *La psychologie des sentiments* (Paris, Alcan: 1896).

<sup>96</sup> Ribot, let us recall, was the director of the *Revue Philosophique* and had been appointed in 1889 to the first chair in experimental psychology at the *Collège de France*.

<sup>97</sup> Sorel, ‘Sentiments sociaux’, p. 694.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. The full passage reads as follows: ‘Cette indigence était utile à constater, alors que la littérature entreprend de traiter les questions sociales par des procédés analogues à ceux qu’elle a pratiqués depuis longtemps pour le roman les psychologues, ne trouvant plus d’intérêt à analyser le cœur humain, se mettent à analyser la société. Il n’est pas mauvais de mettre en face de leurs théories vaines et prétentieuses, l’inventaire des connaissances scientifiques dressé d’après le maître incontesté de la psychologie en France.’

<sup>99</sup> Sorel cites Jean Bourdeau approvingly as he writes that ‘we cannot contemplate the establishment of sociology as long as scientific psychology will not be fully constituted.’ Ibid., p. 695. ‘...on ne pourra songer à fonder la Sociologie tant que la psychologie scientifique ne sera pas constituée dans son intégrité...’

to Durkheim more than a qualified approval, and always remained relatively marginal to the sociological debate. This fact can appear quite surprising if we consider that, as we have seen, Sorel thought and wrote about essentially the same issues with which Durkheim, Tarde, and other sociologists dealt.<sup>100</sup> The situation can be explained by underlining Sorel's adherence to Marxian socialism and understanding that, as we shall see in the next chapter, this put him in a particular intellectual position that prevented him from fully embracing sociology.

Both Marxism and sociology were, in the France of the 1890s, social scientific attempts to make sense of 'la question sociale', of the phenomena of industrialization and the rise of the working classes. It was the notion of class struggle that separated sociologists from the rather small community of French Marxists: whereas the latter framed the issues in terms of social conflict, sociologists tended to shun this view and argue in favour of social unity. Sorel's vitriolic account of Espinas' opening lecture at the Sorbonne is a good example of this fundamental disagreement. For Sorel, Espinas 'seemed to [ministerial bureaucrats] the person most suited to destroy socialism, anarchy, demagoguery and all the monsters preventing respectable family men from sleeping at night.'<sup>101</sup> The arguments in favour of social solidarity remind Sorel of the 'theology of the positivist church, and we have heard a hundred times this refrain from Bonapartist metaphysicians.'<sup>102</sup> Durkheim was moderately sympathetic to the workers' plea but, much in the same way in which he could not accept the conceptualization of society based on the conflict of utility-maximizing individuals put forward by liberal economists, he could not see society as the *locus* of a struggle between classes.<sup>103</sup>

Durkheim, moreover, was sceptical about the scientific credentials of socialism, and went as far as saying, in a course on socialism that he gave in Bordeaux in 1895/96, that 'there can be

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<sup>100</sup> Partly, this has to do with the fact that Sorel was a writer whose institutional affiliations were feeble when compared to those of other participants to the debate. Durkheim, Bouglé, Halbwachs and Worms were all *normaliens*, Espinas was professor at Bordeaux and then at the Sorbonne, while Tarde was a public official, whereas Sorel's connections were limited to the politically and socially marginal socialist camp. Nonetheless, this does not really explain too much, especially if we consider the fact that the group revolving around Worms and the *Institut international de Sociologie* was also animated by amateur sociologists. See Lukes, *Durkheim*, p. 393.

<sup>101</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Espinas- Leçon d'ouverture d'un cours d'histoire de l'économie sociale', *L'Ère Nouvelle* 1, 1894, p. 415. 'M. Espinas leur a paru l'homme le mieux indiqué pour pulvériser le socialisme, l'anarchie, la démagogie et les autres hydres qui empêchent les bons pères de famille de dormir.'

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417. 'M. Espinas nous offre un socialisme organique, supérieur, qui fait disparaître toute antinomie entre l'état et l'individu... cela sent bien un peu la théologie de l'église positiviste et nous avons entendu cent fois chanter cette antienne par les métaphysiciens bonapartistes.'

<sup>103</sup> This seems to suggest that Durkheim's sociological vision revolved around the phenomenon of social solidarity and collaboration. This was the *idée fixe* and the phenomenon he repeatedly sought to explain. It is this, I believe, that explains his instinctive hostility towards theories of social conflict like *laissez-faire* or Marxism. Raymond Aron makes this point in his *Les étapes de la pensée sociologique* (Paris, Gallimard: 1967), pp. 373-5.

no scientific socialism'.<sup>104</sup> More precisely, he argued that socialist thought is not a science, but a 'cry of pain and, sometimes, of anger, raised by those who feel most acutely our collective malaise.'<sup>105</sup> But if so, asks Durkheim, 'what would we say about a doctor that took the desires and answers of his patient as scientific propositions?'<sup>106</sup> This short argument expresses well Durkheim's proximity to a mild socialist ideal as well as his distance from socialist theory. Though he sympathized with the idea of a reorganisation of production, he could not endorse the very Marxian idea that class conflict is a fertile historical phenomenon. As Raymond Aron points out, Durkheim 'refuses to consider class struggle... as an essential element of present society, or even as the essence of the historical movement. For Durkheim, as a good disciple of Auguste Comte, conflicts between workers and capitalists are proofs of a lack of organisation, of a partial anomaly of modern society that must be rectified.'<sup>107</sup>

Thus, though he was intellectually attracted to Durkheimian sociology, as a Marxist Sorel could not fully embrace it. Nonetheless, he dedicated a long article to Durkheim's *Règles* in the Marxist *Le Devenir Social*. The text consists in a thorough examination of Durkheim's method in which Sorel's focus is firmly on the epistemological difficulties involved in the establishment of sociology.<sup>108</sup> Sorel's stance throughout the article is one of very respectful dissent: though he has some strong objections to make, he never loses an occasion to underline Durkheim's intellectual superiority when compared to the sociological standard. Nonetheless, he begins by declaring very clearly the political differences between socialists and Durkheim, a thinker that claims scientific objectivity but that, for Sorel, has not distanced

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<sup>104</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Le socialisme. Sa définition – Ses débuts – La doctrine Saint-Simonienne* [1928] (Paris, PUF: 1992) p. 36. 'Voilà pourquoi, à parler exactement, il ne peut y avoir de socialisme scientifique.' According to Marcel Mauss, the course on socialism was the beginning of a projected history of socialism that Durkheim, in the end, never wrote. See Mauss' introduction to the volume, pp. 27-8.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 37. 'Le socialisme n'est pas une science, une sociologie en miniature, c'est un cri de douleur et, parfois, de colère, poussé par les hommes qui sentent le plus vivement notre malaise collectif.'

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 'Or que dirait-on d'un médecin qui prendrait les réponses ou les désirs de son patient pour des aphorismes scientifiques?'

<sup>107</sup> Aron, *Les étapes*, p. 375. 'D'abord, il ne croit pas à la fécondité des moyens violents et il se refuse à considérer la lutte des classes, en particulier les conflits entre ouvriers et entrepreneurs, comme un élément essentiel de la société présente, voire comme le ressort du mouvement historique. Pour Durkheim, en bon disciple d'Auguste Comte, les conflits entre ouvriers et entrepreneurs sont la preuve d'une inorganisation ou d'une anomie partielle de la société moderne, qui doit être corrigée.'

<sup>108</sup> Contrary to what Fournier claims, Sorel's main interest is not political, but epistemological and methodological. According to Fournier, 'The Durkheim who interested Sorel was, for political reasons, not so much the author of the *Rules* as that of *The Division of Labour in Society*.' In fact, the exact opposite is true. See Fournier, *Durkheim*, p. 185.

himself from ‘the passions and prejudices of his own political side’.<sup>109</sup> What is this political side to which the new sociology lends an intellectual hand?

‘... M. Durkheim does not belong to the old school of J. –B. Say, a school whose shortcomings he has seen. He is in favour of state intervention, and he deals with problems animated by a very progressive spirit. The new ideas of conservative democracy, that demand more justice in economic relations – favouring the intellectual and moral development of the people, pushing industry towards more scientific paths – have finally found a theorist who is at the same time a metaphysician of rare subtlety and an erudite perfectly equipped for the fight.’<sup>110</sup>

After these, as it were, political preambles, Sorel jumps immediately to the question that interests him most, the one concerning the possibility of a sociological science. Bearing in mind that for Sorel science is concerned with the explanation of deterministic causal mechanisms, it is significant that he begins by writing that ‘It is not always easy to know what idea Mr. Durkheim has of science’.<sup>111</sup> Through a bizarre but interesting comparison between sociology and meteorology he makes two initial points. First, he remarks that both sciences are observational rather than experimental, that is to say, both sciences lack the possibility of constructing experimental conditions allowing them to isolate the relevant variables and causal connections. Secondly, and consequently, this means that both sciences work on statistically constructed theoretical objects, what Sorel calls ‘type moyen’, or ‘état moyen’.<sup>112</sup> These preliminary considerations already make Sorel doubt whether Durkheimian sociology can really be called a science. The causal relations holding together two social phenomena are to him ‘empirical relations based on the knowledge of *facts corrected* in order to erase eccentric individualities’.<sup>113</sup> In these conditions, he adds, it is impossible to separate ‘craft

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<sup>109</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Les théories de M. Durkheim’, *Devenir Social* 1, 1895, p. 2. ‘Il me semble que M. Durkheim ne se dégage pas assez complètement des passions et des préjugés de son parti politique’.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 2. ‘... M. Durkheim n’appartient pas à la vieille école de J.-B. Say, dont il a vu, de suite, l’insuffisance ; il est pour l’intervention de l’État, l’organisation ; il aborde les problèmes dans un esprit très progressiste. Les nouvelles idées sur la démocratie conservatrice, assurant plus de justice dans les rapports économiques, favorisant le développement intellectuel et moral du peuple, poussant l’industrie dans des voies plus scientifiques – ont enfin trouvé un théoricien, qui est, à la fois, un métaphysicien d’une subtilité rare et un savant parfaitement armé pour la lutte.’

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. ‘Il n’est pas toujours aisé de savoir quelle idée se fait M. Durkheim de la science’.

<sup>112</sup> The latter is defined as follows: ‘Quand on parle d’un état moyen on entend toujours un groupement dont tous les éléments diffèrent de la moyenne mathématique, mais n’en diffèrent que dans une certaine mesure acceptable, pour que tout le groupement puisse être pris comme une chose homogène.’ Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 3. ‘Les relations sociologiques, telles que les cherche M. Durkheim, sont donc des relations empiriques fondées sur la connaissance des *faits corrigés* en vue de faire disparaître les individualités excentriques... Dans ces conditions, on peut dire que l’art et la science sont inséparables.’



from science.’<sup>114</sup> In other words, without the possibility of experimentation, the role played by expressive supports becomes problematically central.

However, the crux of the question continues to be the issue of freedom and determinism, and it is here that Sorel delivers his strongest argument against Durkheim. It will be recalled that for Sorel the possibility of a science of society is inextricably linked to whether there are phenomena in society that are linked by causal relations similar to those that we find in the natural world. So it is not surprising that he takes issue with the passage in the *Règles* in which Durkheim asserts that, though sociology offers causal explanations, it avoids taking a stance on the question of freedom and determinism. For Durkheim sociology has no need ‘to affirm free will rather than determinism’.<sup>115</sup> But his agnosticism is very problematic for Sorel, for the possibility of social science depends precisely on the existence of some form of social determinism. Consequently, Durkheim’s argument ‘appears extremely weak’.<sup>116</sup> Durkheim’s agnosticism on the question of free will means that he cannot legitimately speak of causation.

‘...very clearly, in sociology, the word *cause* has a completely different meaning than in physics... Physics and chemistry do not imply a loosening of the deterministic chain: their laws either hold or do not hold, and apply to each individual. But how can we talk of causes (similar to those of physics) in sociology where the elements connected are fictions devoid of individual reality?’<sup>117</sup>

Durkheim’s refusal to engage with the question makes Sorel doubt that sociology can ever be a real science. And his conclusion follows in a linear way. Sociology can aspire, in the best cases, at being a systematized body of empirical observations, a ‘système’. ‘In sociology we do not, thus, reach real causal relations (in the way we do in physics), but only general vectors of transformations [ordres de changements principaux].’<sup>118</sup> Further on, he is even more explicit in rejecting the idea that something akin to the strong causation of the natural sciences can ever be established in sociology: ‘we must say that in social history there are

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. It is interesting to see that Sorel treats the medical analogies present in Durkheim’s *Règles* as an argument against the scientific nature of sociology. ‘Nobody ignores the fact that in medicine science and craft are deeply intertwined’. ‘Personne n’ignore que dans la médecine l’art et la science se pènètrent profondément’. Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>115</sup> See Durkheim, *Rules*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>116</sup> Sorel, ‘Théories de Durkheim’, p. 7 ‘Cette argumentation me semble d’une grande faiblesse’.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 7. ‘Ce deux phrases signifient très clairement qu’en sociologie le mot *cause* a un tout autre sens qu’en physique... Le physique et la chimie ne comportent aucun relâchement du lien déterministe : leurs lois sont ou ne sont pas et elles s’appliquent à tout individu concevable. Mais comment peut-on parler de causes (analogues aux causes physiques) en sociologie, alors que les choses mises en relation sont des fictions manquant de réalité individuelle ?’

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 8. ‘Dans la sociologie on n’atteint donc pas de vraies causes (au sens de la physique), mais seulement des ordres de changements principaux.’

phenomena capable of being linked by empirical formulas similar to those used by empiricism to attain knowledge of certain domains of the natural sciences.’<sup>119</sup> Sorel goes on to discuss various aspects of Durkheim’s *Règles*. He further explores the problems that derive from the impossibility of sociological experimentation. He deals with the question of methodological individualism and, despite a number of reservations he makes about Durkheim’s definition of social facts, essentially ends up agreeing with him.<sup>120</sup> Throughout the article he continues to maintain that sociology cannot aspire to proper scientific status in virtue of its inability to speak of causes.

Of course, this is problematic. If there is no determinism there can be no causation, and without causation there can be no social *science*. So, if Durkheimian sociology, despite all the praise that Sorel heaps upon it, cannot be called a science, what can? How can, in other words, one speak of causation in the social sciences? Interestingly, Sorel gives to this question two contradicting answers, and bases both on Marxism.

There is, of course, a standard Marxist answer to this question, and it is that economic phenomena constitute the structure of the social world. Economic phenomena are phenomena about which it is possible to speak of causal relations, much in the same way one does in physics. Thus sociology, in order to become scientific, must deal with such phenomena. At times, Sorel gives this answer, suggesting Marxist materialism as the necessary corrective to Durkheim’s approach. Thus, Durkheim’s difficulty classifying different types of familial unions would be resolved if he, like Jacques Flach, choose to examine them by taking into account property relations and the influence they exert on the family structure.<sup>121</sup> Further on, Sorel is more direct. He argues that ‘non-socialist sociology’ is incapable of examining social reality according to a ‘truly scientific principle, based on the theory of knowledge.’<sup>122</sup> The principle invoked is Marxist economic materialism. After having declared that all juridical relations possess a formal and unchanging aspect, as well as a substantial one that determines their evolution, he generalizes the point made: ‘*the substance of sociology is, in Marx’s*

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 9. ‘On doit dire qu’il existe dans l’histoire sociale des phénomènes susceptibles d’être liés par des formules empiriques analogues à celles que l’empirisme emploie pour la connaissance de certains ordres de sciences naturelles.’

<sup>120</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 16-22.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156-8.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160. ‘A ces procédés empiriques de distinction et de classification, il est nécessaire d’opposer un principe vraiment scientifique, fondé sur la théorie de la connaissance. C’est ce que la sociologie non socialiste a été toujours dans l’impossibilité de faire.’

philosophy, *the system of production and exchange.*'<sup>123</sup> In short, what Sorel appears to suggest is that Durkheim's sociology could become truly scientific if it understood social facts as superstructural manifestations of essentially economic phenomena. Only by taking this approach sociology can hope to deal with strong causal relations and thus become scientific. As indicated above, this is a standard Marxist position, and Sorel articulates it without much originality.

Parallel to this argument, however, Sorel develops another line of reasoning that goes in a different direction. Instead of looking for deterministic causal connections based on the economic structure of society, he sketches a theory of social analysis centred on human agency. In examining the concept of social milieu, Sorel remarks that it necessitates a, as it were, relational approach to the study of society: the concept of milieu 'has a great value in the history of thought, for it allows one to move from the philosophy of entities to that of relations: an object is examined in an incomplete and mistaken way if it is not put in its milieu, and a milieu is defined by the relations that it entertains with the object it contains.'<sup>124</sup>

The proper understanding of this concept implies, for Sorel, that society is far from being a static object of study, but that, on the contrary, '*the consideration of a milieu is inseparable from that of movement*'.<sup>125</sup> In other words, social structures are historical, i.e. they undergo transformations. What generates these transformations? The answer is social conflict: 'What is most striking in modern society' is 'the furious clash of interests, the anarchy of competition, the absence of all coordination.'<sup>126</sup> It is here that the value of Marxism emerges most clearly, for 'the new philosophy [Marxism] perceived as fundamental the division that older theories saw as accidental.'<sup>127</sup> This, of course, is part of the Marxist attack on sociology as an approach incapable of conceptualizing conflict. But what ought to be remarked is that a society that changes, whether through conflict or otherwise, constitutes an awkward object of

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 161. 'Dans toute science de la nature les différences sont basées sur la définition matérialiste : c'est là un principe métaphysique applicable à toute connaissance scientifique. *La matière sociologique est*, dans la philosophie de K. Marx, *le système de production et d'échange.*'

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 151. '...le concept du milieu a une valeur considérable dans l'histoire de la pensée, car il a pour objet de nous faire passer de la philosophie des entités à la philosophie des relations : l'être n'est considéré qu'à un point de vue incomplet et faux quand on ne le met pas en relation avec son milieu et celui-ci n'est *milieu* que par les relations qu'il entretient avec l'être contenu.'

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 154. '*...la considération du milieu est inséparable de celle de mouvement...*'

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 153. 'Ce qu'il y a de plus frappant dans la société moderne, au point de vue économique, c'est la lutte acharnée des intérêts, c'est l'anarchie de la concurrence, c'est l'absence de toute coordination.'

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. '... la nouvelle philosophie aperçut la division fondamentale que les anciennes théories avaient considérée comme accidentelle.'

study for a science concerned with the discovery of deterministic causal relations. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the agents of this change.

Marxists explain historical change through conflict, but how do sociologists explain it? Spencer appeals to the vague notion of a 'need for greater happiness',<sup>128</sup> whereas Comte to a 'basic tendency "which directly impels man continually to improve his condition in all respects" ',<sup>129</sup> These, to Durkheim and Sorel, are not satisfying explanations. For the sociologist, 'to demonstrate the utility of a fact does not explain its origins, nor how it is what it is.'<sup>130</sup> Durkheim argues that although social phenomena might serve useful functions, such functions cannot straightforwardly be the causes of these phenomena.<sup>131</sup> Sorel wholeheartedly agrees but notices that in order to say this Durkheim must take into account the actors that bring forth social transformations and their struggles. In this respect, the Marxian concepts of class and class struggle can add much to Durkheim's analysis:

'Thanks to the doctrine of class struggle we can follow the real historical process, whereas the one described by our author [Durkheim] is merely schematic and logical. Thanks to the theory of classes, socialists do not connect ends to imaginary entities, to the needs of the collective soul and other sociological absurdities, but to real humans collected in groups acting upon social life.'<sup>132</sup>

The definition of classes as the agents of social change brings psychology back into the picture: 'put in its proper place' psychology can 'equip sociology with explanations, more or less like chemistry with the natural sciences.'<sup>133</sup>

It is noteworthy that what brings Sorel to underline agency are considerations on the historicity of the social world. At any rate, agency is conceptualized here as the central phenomenon of the human world. Whereas professional sociologists are too easily tempted by the regularities that statistical analysis can suggest, amateurs, and Marxists, see the distinctive trait of the human world: 'what is striking in the human milieu is that which is human, that is

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<sup>128</sup> Cited in Durkheim, *Rules*, p. 119.

<sup>129</sup> Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, cited in Durkheim, *Rules*, p. 119.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

<sup>131</sup> For Durkheim 'when one undertakes to explain a social phenomenon the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfils must be investigated separately.' Durkheim, *Rules*, p. 123.

<sup>132</sup> Sorel, 'Théories de Durkheim', p. 24. The process is question is the emergence of the division of labour. 'Grâce à la théorie des la lutte des classes, on peut suivre le vrai processus historique, tandis que celui de notre auteur est seulement schématique et logique. Grâce à la théorie des classes, les socialistes ne rapportent point les fins à des entités imaginaires, à des besoins de l'âme collective et autres niauderies sociologiques, mais aux hommes réels groupés en groupes agissants dans la vie sociale.'

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* 'La psychologie, ainsi mise à sa véritable place, fournit à la sociologie des éléments explicatif, comme (à peu près) la chimie en fournit aux sciences naturelles.'

to say *action considered from the perspective of the agent.*'<sup>134</sup> Institutions, continues Sorel, do not emerge mysteriously, but are human works, they result from human activity. Thus, the Marxist theory of class struggle is a helpful way of conceptualizing agency:

'So we have a way of recognizing what is truly human in sociology; we can correctly define the active groups and see the economic conditions of their formation. Their movements must be described by psychological terms and every analogy drawn from physics can only lead us to errors...'<sup>135</sup>

The sociology sketched here is very distant from a science looking for deterministic causal patterns. The picture painted by Sorel is historical, diachronic, since evolution and change are fundamental elements, and conflictual, given that transformations come from the clashes between social agents. In virtue of all this, it is a picture focused on the question of agency. Human agency, '*ce qui est vraiment humain*', becomes the central social phenomenon to examine. It is unclear how much Sorel sees the tension between the determinist social science based on economic phenomena and the social science concerned with agency and conflict that he sketches at the end of the article. He never addressed the tension in the text. In the coming years, however, his Marxism will develop in the second direction.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have essentially examined a tension in Sorel's thought, one resulting from a conception of science permeated with determinism and characterized by a strong notion of causality, and a theory of human agency as possessing a creative power. The terrain where these two Sorelian ideas meet is that of social science. In order to be scientific, social science must deal with deterministic causal relations, but since it deals with the human world, it must take into account human agency, and this agency is creative rather than deterministic. The circle is difficult, if not impossible to square. Sorel's first reaction consisted in attempting to establish social science on the exclusion of agency: his suspicion of psychology and insistence on structural analysis point in that direction. Nonetheless, as the text on Durkheim shows, Sorel could not envisage a social science that took no interest in the question of human

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 168. '*...et ce qui est frappant dans le milieu humain est ce qui est humain, c'est-à-dire l'action considérée dans l'agent.*'

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 169. '*Ainsi nous possédons le moyen de reconnaître ce qu'il y a de vraiment humain dans la sociologie ; nous pouvons définir correctement les groupes actifs, voir les conditions économiques de leur formation. Leur mouvements devront être décrits avec des qualificatifs psychologiques et toute analogie tirée de la physique ne pourrait que nous induire en erreur...*'

collective agency. The insistence, in 1895, on the notion of class struggle shows Sorel's inability, or unwillingness to square the circle.

As we shall see in the following chapters, Sorel increasingly moved away from his conception of science as the investigation of causal relationships and developed his Marxism along the lines sketched in the article on Durkheim. In order to do this, however, he needed a different theory of knowledge, an epistemology capable of explaining human production, which he found in a number of Italian thinkers. But in order to show what he absorbed from the works of Vico and Labriola, it is first necessary to examine through what circumstances and in what conditions he read them.

## CHAPTER THREE: MARXISM IN 1890S FRANCE

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Sorel's turn to Marxism, as we have seen, dates back to 1893, year in which he sent his 'Science et socialisme' letter to the *Revue Philosophique*. Any examination of an intellectual encounter between two thinkers must take into account the context within which this encounter occurs. This is even more so in cases, such as ours, in which the distance between Marx and Sorel is both geographical and chronological: this distance generates a large amount of mediation between the two that it would be unwise to ignore. In fact, this mediation constitutes the principal factor of explanation of Sorel's engagement with Marxism: in other words, the main features around which Sorel's Marxism developed can be better explained by a number of contextual factors rather than through a direct reference to Marx's work. In the last two chapters, for example, we have outlined a conceptual problem regarding social science, human agency and determinism that would be impossible to ignore when examining Sorel's engagement with Marxism, for it would amount to ignoring the deep theoretical questions that Sorel was trying to solve through such an engagement. But it would be equally wrong to ignore context understood in a narrower way, namely in terms of what consequences, in terms of constraints and opportunities, derived from the public embracement of Marxism in the France of the 1890s. It is with this question that we shall deal in this chapter.

Synthetically put, the particularity of Sorel's turn to Marxism consisted in the fact that it was animated by an eminently intellectual attraction to Marx's theories in a context in which such theories were, optimistically, marginal and generally misunderstood – or more negatively – virtually unknown. Sorel, let us recall, saw in Marxism a 'new metaphysics', a method and a philosophical stance capable of resolving the stalemates that, in his opinion, paralysed French intellectual life. But the Marxism that circulated in the France of the time was far from having the complexity and articulation needed for such a task. Marxism was a marginal doctrine that was understood in very simplistic terms, and thus was incapable of becoming an intellectual force in the French context. Both the wealth of French socialist and revolutionary traditions, and the fact that the political organizations of the working class – important *loci* for a potential implantation of Marxism in France – were weaker and more fragmented than their German counterparts, contribute to explain this marginality. Moreover, the only thoroughly

Marxist party in the landscape of French socialism – Jules Guesde’s Parti Ouvrier Français (POF) – displayed a certain indifference to questions of doctrine and of theoretical elaboration. The consequence was that Marxism was often reduced to a caricature: deterministic, shallow, excessively concerned with conflict and with the basest economic motivations that agents might entertain, Marxism was seen, by political enemies as well as by a number of socialists, as a ‘German’ theory, the intellectual expression of a land devoid of juridical culture and obsessed with violence and barbarity.

Sorel’s engagement with Marxism was profoundly conditioned by this context. To start with, the modesty and indifference to theory of socialist parties meant that intellectuals could develop the theory in conditions of relative freedom. To appreciate this, it is sufficient to underline the fact that someone without any political affiliations like Sorel could have a central role in the implantation of Marxism in France. Moreover, the activity of such intellectuals could not be limited to the usual task of, so to speak, spreading the gospel: Marx’s theory had to be understood and woven into the fabric of French intellectual life, and this necessitated a work of conceptual clarification, of redescription of Marxism in terms that were compatible with the French context. The two tasks, dissemination and theoretical elaboration, were, in fact, deeply connected. If the intention was that of vindicating the scientific credentials of historical materialism, of convincing the established intellectual authorities that they ignored Marx at their peril, then the political slogans of the POF would not be sufficient. A more elaborated Marxism was needed, one capable of addressing the two main objections directed against it: that of determinism, and that regarding Marxism’s excessive reliance on economic explanation at the expense of right and ethics. But France lacked the resources needed for this work of re-elaboration, and this is why this process was extremely permeable to foreign influences, which in Sorel’s case proved decisive.

In the first section of the chapter, in part with the help of a comparison with Germany, we are going to deal with the question of the place of Marxism in the French intellectual field of the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With what was Marxism associated? How was it understood? On what grounds was it attacked, and how was it generally defended? In the second part of the chapter we shall focus on how this context influenced Sorel’s engagement with Marx. We shall spell out how Sorel’s attempts to implant Marxism in France required a work of theoretical elaboration capable of answering the objections of determinism and of indifference to right that were routinely directed at Marxism. We shall also highlight how the



poverty of French Marxism meant that foreign influences were very important in this process of theoretical re-elaboration, and we shall begin examining the decisive encounter between Sorel and two Italian thinkers, Antonio Labriola and Benedetto Croce.

### **3.2 BACKGROUND**

The place of Marxism in the France of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a marginal one. This marginality, to a large extent, derived from the political and theoretical fragmentation that characterized the French socialist movement. If we compare it to the German one, the differences are striking: while on the German side of the Rhine we had an organised mass party, on the other we find a fragmented socialist front, composed of many currents and parties often entertaining conflictual relationships even between themselves. Whereas in Germany the necessities of such an organisation implied an effort of coherence and doctrinal systematization that produced a coherent Marxist ideology, the French fragmentation allowed each current and organisation to frame the theoretical discourse with greater freedom, generating a corresponding theoretical fragmentation. Moreover, whereas in Germany the theoretical hegemony of Marxism was, by the 1890s, largely beyond question, France had a rather different situation, characterised by the presence of a strong and rich autochthonous tradition of socialist reflection, offering many theoretical options and thus reinforcing the fragmentation. If we add to this the theoretical shortcomings of the main Marxist party, Jules Guesde's POF, we can understand the extent of the obstacles that prevented Marxism from taking hold successfully in France.

Beyond the political and doctrinal fragmentation of French socialism, however, a further and more fundamental element must be highlighted in accounting for the marginality of Marxism, and that is the complex relationship between the republican ideal and socialism. The strong autochthonous French socialist tradition saw itself as continuing the legacy of 1789, a legacy that was also embodied in the republican institutions of the time. Thus, a doctrine like Marxism, with its emphasis on economic conflict and on the 'bourgeois' character of said institutions, was bound to be met with resistance not only by figures of the republican establishment, but also by some fellow socialists. This emerges rather clearly if we focus on the standard objections that were directed at Marxism in the France of the 1890s. If we exclude the accusation of historical determinism, we see that Marxism is seen, first of all, as a 'German' theory, and thus as fundamentally alien to the French tradition. More interestingly, this distance from the French tradition is understood in terms of an inability to make sense of

the importance of rights. Marxism understands history as the almost mechanical unfolding of conflicts understood in purely economic terms, and this, to republicans and to socialists alike, was unsatisfactory, as it ignored the juridical conquests of 1789.

### 3.2.1 SOCIALIST PARTIES AND MARXIST DOCTRINE: GERMANY AND FRANCE

The theoretical and political light of European socialism was, in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the German SPD. In 1890 the party had been allowed, for the first time since 1878, to fight for electoral success in the federal elections without the restrictions imposed on it by Bismarck's anti-socialist laws.<sup>1</sup> The 35 seats and almost 1,5 million votes obtained<sup>2</sup> represented, for a party coming out of 12 years of semi-clandestine existence, an outstanding success proving its popular appeal, resilience and, above all, organisational strength. The party, despite the severe restrictions that had hampered its development between 1878 and 1890, could rely on a wide network of unions, clubs and publications – amongst which we ought to mention *Der Sozialdemokrat*, printed in Zurich and edited, from 1881, by Edouard Bernstein, and the more theoretical *Die Neue Zeit*, established and managed by Karl Kautsky – that ensured its development in the years of underground existence.

From a theoretical perspective, the SPD was also the more markedly Marxist organisation in the landscape of European socialism. In 1891, under the aegis of Kautsky, Bebel and Bernstein, the party had adopted a new programme at the Erfurt congress, a programme that was strongly coloured by a Marxist analysis of social development. It forecasted the increasing polarization of capitalist society into the 'two hostile camps' of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and the increase 'of misery, of pressure, of oppression, of degradation, of exploitation' for the latter.<sup>3</sup> The success of the Marxist line in the SPD, as well as the weight that the party had in the wider European context, can partially be explained by the fact that the German party could count, until his death in 1895, on the immense work of systematization of Marxism conducted by Friedrich Engels. In entering the political struggle, the space for

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<sup>1</sup> Though the repression that followed the *Sozialistengesetze* can in no way be compared to analogous cases from the twentieth century, the laws nonetheless outlawed the party, forcing members to stand for elections as independents, and aimed at crippling the organisational structure of the SPD through the closing down of publications and the requirement of more authorisations for the organisations of public meetings. In January 1890 the Reichstag rejected a fifth renewal of the laws, which consequently expired. In February the SPD obtained a spectacular electoral result. In March, Bismarck resigned.

<sup>2</sup> See Dieter Nohlen and Philip Stöver (eds), *Elections in Europe: a data handbook* (Baden-Baden, Nomos Verlag: 2010), p. 774.

<sup>3</sup> *Erfurt Program* [1891] available at [http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=766](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=766), last consulted 17/1/2014.

theoretical reinvention shrinks as the doctrine must find its canonical form, and the SPD could rely on nobody less than the co-author of the *Manifesto* for this task.

We shall come back more than once to the SPD and to its hegemonic role in European socialism in the period from 1890 until the First World War. For now, we shall briefly point out that these political and theoretical strengths ensured its role, in the years in question, of guardians of the theoretical orthodoxy. The defence of a body of doctrine manifests itself in publications, congress attacks, participations in debates and the like, and we shall deal more thoroughly with some such episodes in what is to follow. But the schoolteacher tone of the following remark by Engels on a text by Labriola renders very well the extent of this German hegemony: ‘All very well, only a few factual misunderstandings and too scholarly in prose. I am eager for the rest.’<sup>4</sup> Years later, commenting on the accusation of ‘dilettantism’ directed at Labriola by Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci concluded that the only way to make sense of the judgment was to see it as ‘an unconscious reflection of the pseudoscientific pedantry of the German intellectual group, that had so much influence in Russia.’<sup>5</sup>

While, then, the German workers’ movement could rely on a solid doctrinal codification and a strong and successful mass party, the situation was different in other European countries: not only the political organisation lacked the unity that characterized Germany, but also the theoretical landscape was more heterogeneous. These two traits describe particularly well the situation of France. Unlike Germany, France had pre-existing revolutionary traditions of considerable importance and, compared to Germany, it displayed a much richer field of socialist reflection. Whereas in Germany the only real theoretical antagonist to Marxism was represented by the statist socialism of Ferdinand Lassalle, in France reflection on socialism was much older and spanned from the utopianism of Fourier to the positivism of Saint-Simon, without forgetting the important presence of Proudhon. Thus, whereas the domination of Marxism was, by the 1890s, virtually unchallenged in Germany, the situation was rather different in France.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Giuseppe Bedeschi’s introduction to Antonio Labriola, *Del materialismo storico: dilucidazione preliminare* (Roma, Newton & Compton: 1972), p. 11. The citation refers to Labriola’s ‘En mémoire du Manifeste du Parti Communiste’, *Devenir Social* 1, 1895, pp. 225-52 and 321-44. ‘Alles sehr gut, nur einige kleine tatsächliche Missverständnisse, und anfangs eine etwas zu gelehrte Schreibweise. Ich bin sehr begierig auf den Rest.’ It must be added that the letter was sent to Labriola a few weeks before Engels’ death.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Bedeschi, ‘Introduzione’, p. 12. The original citation comes from Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. 2, ed. by Valentino Gerratana (Torino, Einaudi: 1975), p. 1507. ‘Non si capisce questo giudizio (a meno non significasse il distacco tra teoria e pratica nella persona del Labriola, ciò che non pare il caso) se non come un riflesso inconsapevole della pedanteria pseudoscientifica del gruppo intellettuale tedesco che ebbe tanta influenza in Russia.’

Any analysis of the situation of French socialism in the second half of the nineteenth century must start from the *semaine sanglante*, the brutal repression that ended the Paris Commune in May 1871. Though it certainly hampered the organisational development of the French proletariat, whose first party, the ephemeral Parti Ouvrier, was set up only in 1879 at the Marseilles congress, the true significance of this repression was that it widened the gulf separating the working class from republican institutions. The events of May 1871, in other words, were later narrated by a number of French Marxists as formidably weighty examples of the intrinsically bourgeois character of the republic, a republic whose true nature, behind the egalitarian façade, was that of class oppression. The ideology that seemed to be able to do more justice to this fact was, of course, Marxism, with its insistence on the fundamental role in society of class conflict, and the Commune was the perfect example to invoke when one had to vindicate this point. At least until 1892-93, this was perhaps the defining feature of Guesdist theory and practice: the Marxist theory emphasized the class basis of institutions, while the political practice consisted in an oppositional stance towards the Republic. If we look, for example, at the 1880 programme of the Parti Ouvrier, a programme adopted at the Le Havre congress and elaborated in London by Guesde, Lafargue, Marx and Engels, we find ample confirmation of this. The programme is filled with Marxist formulas regarding the ‘revolutionary action of the productive class’<sup>6</sup> and, even more importantly, on two points – the confiscation of Church property and the empowerment of workers in factory legislation – there is a direct reference to the legislative activity of the Commune.<sup>7</sup>

And yet things are more complicated. Though the experience of the Commune certainly contributed to alienating the working class from the republican tradition, the extent of this alienation is at times overestimated. In his *Marxism and the French left*, Tony Judt goes as far as to say that one of the legacies of the Second Empire was that it gave to the French proletariat the awareness that ‘the political power which accompanied the rise of a capitalist bourgeoisie would *always* be used at the expense of the working population’.<sup>8</sup> This might be, as we shall see, an overstatement. The doctrine that expressed most forcefully the separation between the working class and the bourgeois republic was, we have said, Marxism. The many

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, Jules Guesde, Paul Lafargue and Friedrich Engels, *Programme du Parti Ouvrier Français* [1890], available at [http://www.marxists.org/francais/inter\\_soc/pof/18800700.htm](http://www.marxists.org/francais/inter_soc/pof/18800700.htm), last accessed 12/12/12. Introductory section.

<sup>7</sup> The sections in question are A2, in which the definition of Church property is taken from the Commune decree of 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1871, and B10, on factory legislation, in which the reference is to the Commune decree of the 27th April 1871.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French left* (Oxford, Clarendon: 1986), p. 96.

difficulties it experienced in establishing itself in the French context, as well as the nature of these difficulties, might indicate that, after all, the essentially ‘bourgeois’ character of the republic was not such an uncontested given amongst socialists and proletarians. We shall examine this point more thoroughly in the next section. But for now, even a summary examination of the sources relating to the Marseilles and Le Havre congresses testifies the weight of the French revolutionary tradition and of its republican heritage: ‘...we are in the land of the Revolution that proclaimed the *rights of man and citizen*; we possess civil equality and enjoy universal suffrage! Why have we not conquered yet our rightful place in our democratic society?’ asked the general report of the Le Havre congress.<sup>9</sup> Notice how the disenfranchisement of the working class is seen as the failure of a worthy ideal, and not, as Marxism would have it, as the logical consequence of a process of bourgeois development. Moreover, a superficial glance at the working-class members of the organizing committee of the Marseilles congress shows the conspicuous absence of anything resembling the proletariat of large industrial agglomerations and, instead, displays the presence of professional profiles that could perhaps better be characterized as artisans.<sup>10</sup>

As stated above, we shall come back later to the fundamental relationship between French socialism and the republic. For now, it is important to underline two points. Firstly, that French socialism, unlike the monolithic SPD, was characterized by a high degree of political fragmentation that was frequently accompanied by internal conflict. In the previous paragraphs, we have called the Parti Ouvrier ephemeral. The party was established in 1879, and already in 1881 it endured a first split, with the followers of Edouard Vaillant exiting in

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Rapport général présenté par la commission d’organisation du congrès. Suite et fin’ in *Le Congrès du Havre : compte rendu officiel des séances du congrès socialiste* n. 2, 16 November 1880, p. 3. ‘Et cependant nous sommes dans le pays de la Révolution qui a proclamé *les droits de l’homme et du citoyen* ; nous possédons l’égalité civile et jouissons du suffrage universel ! Pourquoi n’avons-nous pas encore conquis la place que nous devons occuper dans notre société démocratique ?’. It is worth noticing that in the documents relating to both the 1879 Marseille and the 1880 Havre congresses, people are addressed as ‘citoyens’ rather than ‘camarades’.

<sup>10</sup> In the minutes of the congress we find a list of the members of the Executive Council of the organisational commission. It reads as follows: ‘Citoyennes GRAVES, couturière ; Louise TARDIF, couturière. Citoyens BASSET, cordonnier ; BESSE, maçon ; BONNIFAY ANDRÉ, serrurier ; CASTAN EMILE, boulanger, vice-trésorier ; CUBISOL, chapelier ; DURAND PAUL, boulanger, trésorier, GATIER JEAN, coupeur cordonnier ; GUINDON CASIMIR, doreur sur Métaux ; GASILLIER HENRI, tonnelier ; GRAVES, cordonnier ; DUPAY JOSEPH, forgeron ; JEAN LOMBARD, bijoutier, secrétaire-délégué à la correspondance générale du Congrès ; LEVIN MARIUS, colleur de papier peints ; MICHEL MARIUS, caissier-layetier ; MOMETOUT, rhabilleur ; MOUTTET LOUIS, secrétaire-délégué aux procès-verbaux du comité exécutif, ajusteur-mécanicien ; PASSET LOUIS, bijoutier, vice-trésorier ; REYNIER ELZÉARD, boulanger ; ROUX AUGUSTIN, tourneur sur métaux ; ROUX FRÉDÉRIC, menuisier, secrétaire-délégué aux procès-verbaux des Assemblées plénières, SIMIAN, ajusteur-mécanicien ; TRESSAUD JEAN-BAPTISTE, tailleur de pierres ; VÉDEL FERDINAND, colleur de papiers peints.’. *Séances du Congrès Ouvrier Socialiste de France, troisième session* (Marseille, Imprimerie Générale J. Doucet : 1879), pp. xiii-ix. For a synthetic overview of French labour history in the 19th century see Judt, *Marxism and the French left*, pp. 26-51.

order to establish the *Comité Révolutionnaire Central*. In 1882 a further, politically more relevant, split occurred: that between Jules Guesde's Marxists, that went on to set up the POF, and their more moderate enemies, Paul Brousse's 'possibilists', a faction asserting, significantly, that 'the time of "all or nothing" appears to be behind us'.<sup>11</sup> The split between the Guesdist *Parti Ouvrier Français* (POF) and Brousse's *Fédération des Travailleurs Socialistes* deployed itself over a number of socialist congresses<sup>12</sup> and French political events,<sup>13</sup> and culminated in the debacle of 1889 over the organisation of the International Socialist Congress in Paris.<sup>14</sup> Very generally, it was a division over whether political participation in the 'bourgeois' republic was to be pursued or not. In any case, the story of splits and divisions could be continued for a while, and also partly in virtue of this fragmentation the political force of French socialism never quite equalled that of the SPD.

The second point to keep in mind concerns the aforementioned wealth of French socialist reflection on socialism. The richness of the French tradition meant that the position that Marxism could occupy in the French context was far more marginal and, as we shall see, contested, than the one it enjoyed in Germany.<sup>15</sup> Of all the currents and organisations that animated the socialist front only Jules Guesde's POF, admittedly the strongest and most important one, declared its allegiance to Marxism. But in what sense could the Guesdists be called Marxists? This is an important, though complex, question to tackle. Their insistence on class, on the importance of economic factors, as well as their hostility towards parliamentary activity in the republican institutions that they saw – in true Marxist fashion – as a tool of the bourgeoisie<sup>16</sup>, seems to suggest a positive answer, as it is incontestable that their political

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Brousse, 'Encore l'Union Socialiste', *Le Prolétaire*, 19 November 1881, p.2. Cited in Claude Willard, *Le Mouvement socialiste en France (1893-1905): Les Guesdistes* (Paris, Éditions Sociales: 1965), p. 21. 'Le temps du « tout ou rien » paraît passé...'

<sup>12</sup> The split was finally sanctioned at the Saint-Etienne congress of 1882 when the Guesdist minority decided to abandon the unitary congress and set up its own one in Roane. See Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, pp. 23-6.

<sup>13</sup> One of the dividing issues was the attitude to avoid *vis-à-vis* the Boulanger crisis. Whereas the Guesdists, in a rehearsal of their future stance in the *affaire* Dreyfus, preached indifference in the name of class purity, the possibilists rallied to the defence of the republic, joining the fight with the progressive bourgeoisie.

<sup>14</sup> Though the International had given the mandate to organize the congress to Brousse's party, the Guesdists, with Engels' backing, refused to join in and instead organised a second congress. When international attempts to reconcile the two factions failed, two parallel congresses took place in Paris. See Michel Winock, 'Les congrès internationaux ouvriers socialistes de Paris, Juillet 1889' in *Histoire de la IIème Internationale*, vol. 6-7. (Geneva, Minkoff Reprint: 1976), pp. i-iv.

<sup>15</sup> By way of anecdotal evidence, we can say that at the Le Havre congress we find the intervention of at least one positivist. See 'Rapport du citoyen KEUFER, délégué de la Bibliothèque Positiviste Populaire de Paris' in *Le Congrès du Havre : compte rendu officiel des séances du congrès socialiste* n. 7, 21 November 1880, pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> '...la bourgeoisie, qui ne défend sa propriété volée, qu'à l'aide de l'État occupé par elle...'. Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue, *Le programme du Parti Ouvrier, ses considérants & ses articles* [1893], 5th edition (Lille, Imprimerie Ouvrière : 1899), p. 25. '...the bourgeoisie, that defends its stolen property only thanks to the state, which it occupies...'

activity was shaped by a Marxist analysis of society. And yet, doctrines are not merely tools of political mobilization, they are also interpretations of the world that are articulated in historical and philosophical terms. If we take Marxism in this latter sense, the question becomes more complex.

It is one thing to base political activity and to understand history through broadly speaking Marxist categories, but quite another to establish Marxism in France, in that the former is essentially a political endeavour, while the latter an intellectual one. In his *Marxism at work*, Robert Stuart argues that the exclusion of Guesdists from the Marxist pantheon is the consequence of historiographical approaches dominated by what he calls ‘scholarly “intellectualism”’.<sup>17</sup> But it is important here not to conflate the two dimensions – the theoretical and the political. If we look at the theoretical elaboration of the POF, the record is dire. We can agree that Marx’s famous remark concerning them – ‘If this is Marxism, then I am no Marxist!’<sup>18</sup> – is too extreme to be taken as a faithful representation of their theoretical weaknesses. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship seems to confirm Sorel’s intuitions of the time: namely that ‘... many socialists who invoked the authority of Marx and Engels did not care whether one studied the texts of their prophets too closely.’<sup>19</sup> Guesde, after all, used to declare in public that he had become a Marxist before he even read Marx.<sup>20</sup>

Reviewing Claude Willard’s work on the Guesdists, Michelle Perrot comments on the extent to which they contributed to the development of French Marxism. Willard’s book, according to Perrot, ‘confirms what we already knew: the complete absence [la nullité] of Guesdist contributions to research in all the fields of what we call human sciences: political economy,

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Stuart, *Marxism at work: Ideology, Class and French Socialism during the Third Republic* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1992), p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Stuart, *Marxism at work*, p. 26 and 26n. The original is from an 1893 letter by Engels to Bernstein, quoted in *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 1, 1900, p. 523.

<sup>19</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Mes raisons du syndicalisme’ [1919] in his *Matériaux d’une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris, Marcel Rivière : 1921), p. 251. ‘Beaucoup de socialistes qui invoquaient l’autorité de Marx et d’Engels, ne se souciaient pas du tout qu’on étudiait de trop près les textes de leurs prophètes...’

<sup>20</sup> This quip is relatively well-known. Sorel cites it in the abovementioned autobiographical text, see Sorel, ‘Mes raisons’, p. 252. ‘Diamandy, le fondateur de l’*Ere Nouvelle*, a rapporté... un propos de Jules Guesde... « Jules Guesde me disait avoir conçu le Marxisme avant d’avoir rien connu de Marx ».’ Stuart comments on this in an unsurprisingly sympathetic way: ‘...thousands of militants have become “Marxists” without reading Marx, sometimes without awareness of his existence’. Stuart, *Marxism at work*, p. 28. Michelle Perrot offers a different reading: ‘the tranquil assurance with which Guesde declared of having discovered Marxism at the same time as Marx shows the extent to which he was ignorant of it’. See Michelle Perrot, ‘Les guesdistes : controverses sur l’introduction du Marxisme en France’, *Annales : économies, sociétés, civilisations* 22, 1967, p. 707. We can see, of course, what Guesde means by this, namely that he had become aware of the fundamental role of social classes, defined in economic terms, before he had had a chance of reading Marx’s work. Still, one would agree that it is a rather odd way of being Marxists.

philosophy, sociology'<sup>21</sup>, before adding that 'if they did little to make Marx's work known, it is because they did not know it well themselves.'<sup>22</sup> The judgment of another French historian, Daniel Lindenberg, though going in the same general direction, adds an explanation. Lindenberg acknowledges the theoretical weakness of the Guesdists, but insists that focusing on this weakness misses the point: 'To think that they intended to develop theory, to implant Marxism but failed, would be to anachronistically lend them the preoccupations of other years such as 1930 or 1965.'<sup>23</sup> The point, for Lindenberg, is that the Guesdists did not try to develop and implant Marxism, but rather that they adopted Marxism for the purely political purposes of placing themselves under the aegis of the SPD and having thus the possibility of 'crushing all other sects' with the help of their ideological weaponry.<sup>24</sup> For Lindenberg, the Guesdist adoption of a Marxist discourse amounts to a 'means in the pursuit of the goal of constituting a powerful workers' lobby, capable of defending their material interests.'<sup>25</sup>

### **3.2.2 A 'GERMAN' DOCTRINE: FRENCH OBJECTIONS TO MARXISM**

Many factors thus prevented Marxism from becoming the dominant ideology of the French workers' movement, ranging from the political and theoretical fragmentation of the forces of socialism to the complex relationship with the republican tradition, without forgetting the indifference to theory displayed by that most important of Marxist organisations – the POF. But, more in detail, how was Marxism understood? How was it conceptualized? For the Guesdists, we have seen, being Marxists meant insisting on the importance of classes, on the clash between the productive class and its bourgeois exploiters, on the intrinsically bourgeois nature of the republic, but also on the eventual collectivisation of the means of production. The prevalent mood towards Marxism in France, however, was one of hostility. Of course, a large part of this hostility derived from the fact that Marxism, in its Guesdist guise, was an ideology of social subversion: the republican enemies of socialism could point out to the fact that Marxists tended to deny any political legitimacy to the republic.<sup>26</sup> But what is more

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<sup>21</sup> Perrot, 'Les guesdistes', p. 705. 'En tout cas, son livre confirme ce que l'on savait déjà : la nullité de l'apport guesdiste à la recherche, dans tous les secteurs de ce que nous appelons sciences humaines : économie politique, philosophie, sociologie.'

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 707. 'S'ils ont peu fait connaître l'œuvre de Marx, c'est qu'eux-mêmes la connaissaient mal.'

<sup>23</sup> Lindenberg, *Marxisme introuvable*, p. 76. 'Penser qu'ils tentent de développer la théorie, mais qu'ils n'y parviennent pas serait leur prêter par anachronisme des préoccupations qui peuvent être celles de 1930 ou de 1965.'

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 'Mais il ne s'agit que de moyens pour atteindre un but qui est de constituer un lobby ouvrier puissant, capable de défendre les intérêts matériels des travailleurs.'

<sup>26</sup> Though parliamentary activity, by 1893, was a possibility accepted and even welcomed by the Guesdists, the faith in the transformative power of assemblies remained low. Here are Guesde and Lafargue explaining what



interesting is to see how a number of non-Marxist socialist shared the same reservations about Marx's doctrines, and how the main objections directed at Marxism at the time were, so to speak, indifferent to the political spectrum. The perplexities of political friends and political foes, in other words, were remarkably similar: they saw in Marxism an excessively deterministic tinge and an inability to understand historical phenomena such as rights and ethics, elements that the Marxists reduced invariably to shadowy manifestations of more fundamental economic phenomena. These two objections, moreover, were couched in a wider interpretative framework that saw Marxism, especially the doctrine of class struggle, as a 'German' doctrine, an intellectual expression of the barbarity and taste for violence that characterized that country.

Hostility to Marxism, to start with, arose from various figures of the republican *status quo*, worried mainly by the subversive and revolutionary message of the 'German' ideology. We have seen in the last chapter how the nascent sociology could be put to political use, by suggesting a non-conflictual interpretation of the social question. Durkheim's patronising rebuttal of Marxism is telling in this regard: Marx's work cannot be treated as scientific, since it is animated by an excessive proximity to the plea of the working class, and as such, can be reduced to the 'cry of pain' of a patient, something that a doctor should not mistake for medical science.<sup>27</sup> The conflictual element in Marxism was thus seen not only as politically dangerous, but also as intellectually weak. But we get a more interesting articulation of these perplexities regarding Marxism in a short book, a collection of two speeches, by Léon Say, aptly titled *Contre le socialisme*.<sup>28</sup> An interesting initial aspect arises in Say's speeches, that the German origin of Marxism functions as an argument against it. Envisaging a future socialist dictatorship, Say tells his socialist interlocutor that, at that point, 'you will recognize,

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aims socialist members of parliament ought to realize: 'Et si, par hasard, quelques-uns des nôtres devaient forcer les portes des assemblées représentatives, ce ne serait que pour continuer de plus haut leur propagande expropriatrice et collectiviste ou communiste, et mettre au pied du mur – de leur propre mur parlementaire – nos bourgeois dirigeants qui ne font qu'un avec nos bourgeois possédants.' Guesde and Lafargue, *Le programme du Parti Ouvrier*, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Le socialisme*, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> As his name suggests, Léon, whose full name was Jean-Baptiste Léon Say, was part of the same Huguenot family to which the liberal economist Jean-Baptiste Say, Léon's grandfather, belonged. Banker, journalist and then director of the *Journal des Débats*, Léon went into politics in 1869 and was four times Minister of Finance with various governments of the Third Republic. An establishment figure with impeccable and never abandoned liberal convictions, he was elected to the Academie des Sciences Morales et Politiques in 1874, after his first spell as finance minister, and to the Academie Française in 1886. Léon Say, *Contre le socialisme* (Paris, Calmann Lévy: 1896). The book is a collection of two speeches, both given in November 1895, to the *Academie des sciences* and in the *Chambres des députés*.

but it will be too late, that you have intoxicated the country with German inventions.’<sup>29</sup> Marxism, further on, is associated with class struggle, which in turn is seen as the natural expression of a country devoid of an ethical and juridical culture such as Germany. ‘If sheer numbers [i.e. the working class]’, concludes Say, ‘have in France the power to dispose of property and of the bodies of a minority, which it crushes under its weight, then France would cease being the soldier of right. Force would have overcome right, and we all know that, until now, no one has dared foreseeing the day in which this maxim will become a French maxim.’<sup>30</sup>

Even more indicative is the following synthetic appraisal of Marxism, taken from Say’s speech to the *Chambre des députés*.

‘In history there have only been struggles amongst classes fighting over economic interests; what has occurred in the past will occur in the future; the most numerous class – that is to say the workers – being facilitated, by virtue of numbers, in the oppression of the other classes, will triumph in this struggle and, after its victory, in the impossibility of turning against itself, will be absorbed in a great unitary State. I believe that such a doctrine, even when it does not push people to the fight, encourages this fight by claiming its inevitability. When you [the socialists] tell the people that the battle is inevitable, you push them towards the battle... Now, this evolution theorized by Karl Marx, ending up in brutality and barbarity, seems to me to be an evolution towards decadence.’<sup>31</sup>

This characterization of class struggle is revealing, and not only because it betrays the rather real fear of social conflict and the consequent condemnation of anything that might, however indirectly, further it. It is also interesting because it ascribes to Marxism an understanding of social conflict that is purely economic, i.e. understood in exclusively economic terms.

As we have stated, it is unsurprising that figures of the republican *status quo* would voice concerns and objections against the revolutionary doctrine of Marxism. What is far more

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<sup>29</sup> Say, *Contre le socialisme*, p. 251. ‘Vous reconnaîtrez, un peu tard, que vous avez inutilement grisé le pays avec des inventions allemandes.’

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 252-3. ‘Si le nombre en France a... le pouvoir de disposer d’une minorité qu’il peut écraser sous son poids, la France ne serait plus le soldat du droit. La force aurait primé le droit, et chacun sait que jusqu’à présent personne n’a osé entrevoir le jour où cette maxime serait devenue française.’

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-2. ‘Il n’y a jamais eu dans l’histoire que des luttes de classes se disputant pour leurs intérêts économiques ; ce qui s’est produit dans le passé se produira dans l’avenir ; la classe la plus nombreuse, – c’est-à-dire celle des ouvriers – ayant les moyens, par le nombre, d’opprimer plus facilement les autres, aura le dessus dans la lutte des classes, et après sa victoire, elle sera bien obligée, ne pouvant pas se retourner contre elle-même, de se laisser absorber dans le grand tout de l’État. Je crois qu’une doctrine philosophique de cet ordre, si elle ne provoque pas la bataille, l’excuse au moins en nous la montrant inévitable. Quand vous dites au peuple que la bataille est inévitable, vous le poussez à cette bataille... Or, cette évolution de Karl Marx, qui aboutit à la brutalité et à la barbarie, me paraît être une évolution dans le sens de la décadence.’

interesting is to see remarkably similar concerns voiced in a long article by a socialist, Gustave Rouanet<sup>32</sup>, written in 1887 for the ecumenical<sup>33</sup> *Revue Socialiste*. In the article we see clearly that, in order to implant itself in France, Marxism had to struggle with a strong and well-developed autochthonous socialist tradition, and that the main points of contention regarded the relationship of socialism, be it Marxian or not, with what we might call the revolutionary and republican heritage of 1789. In assessing the relationship between Marxism and French socialism, Rouanet paints a picture that is mildly negative at best: a ‘Purely materialist, final evolution of the German historic-fatalistic school that was a reaction to the [French] philosophy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; Marx’s thought is essentially anti-French.’<sup>34</sup> More precisely, the target is the, so to speak, un-juridical doctrine of class struggle, which Rouanet sees as a direct derivation of a supposedly Hegelian philosophy of history, in which whoever is victorious in the historical struggle is *ipso facto* vindicated: ‘... for Hegel... war is the great judge.’<sup>35</sup> The key point is, again, about rights and juridical considerations, these constituting the great heritage of the revolution of 1789. The interpretative framework is nationalistic: the ‘German historical school’ from which Marxism arises is, for Rouanet, characterized by its tendency of ‘opposing fact to right’ in virtue of its more general opposition to the juridical, as opposed to historical, rationalism of the French Revolution.<sup>36</sup>

And the French Revolution is, indeed, a central point of contention. Rouanet, seeing socialism as a continuation of the ideals of 1789, cannot accept the Marxist characterization of ‘the most glorious event not only in French history, but in world history’<sup>37</sup> as a ‘bourgeois’ revolution. The indignant tone with which he comments on Engels’ comparison between Babeuf, Thomas Muntzer and the English levellers is revealing of a deep belief in the historic

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<sup>32</sup> A secondary but nonetheless important figure at the *Revue Socialiste*, Rouanet incarnates well the reformist, anti-Marxist and anti-Guesdist tendencies of French socialism. Born in a working-class background in the Hérault, he began his socialist militancy in 1875, after coming back from a military experience in Africa. Politically close to Jaurès, he always saw socialism as the logical consequence of France’s republican heritage. He contributed to the establishment of the *Société des études robespierristes* and wrote, from 1916 until 1919, in its journal, the *Annales Révolutionnaires*. See Justinien Raymond, ‘Gustave Rouanet’ in Jean Maitron (ed.), *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier Français* (Paris, Éditions Ouvrières: 1977), vol. 15, pp. 91-4.

<sup>33</sup> By this we mean that this publication was characterized by the attempt to become a *forum* for all the various socialist currents. On the *Revue Socialiste* see Madeleine Réberieux, ‘La Revue Socialiste’, *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 5, 1987, pp. 15-38.

<sup>34</sup> Gustave Rouanet, ‘Le matérialisme économique de Marx et le socialisme français’, *Revue Socialiste* 5, 1887, p. 396. ‘Purement matérialiste, dernier terme de l’évolution accomplie par l’école historico-fataliste allemande qui fut une réaction contre la philosophie du xviieme siècle, la pensée de Marx est essentiellement antifrançaise.’

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 399. ‘Pour Hegel, en effet, la guerre est le grand juge.’

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398. ‘Après la défaite de la Révolution en France même, quand l’influence française surmenée par Napoléon commença à fléchir, l’école historique surgit en Allemagne, opposant le fait au droit, la légitimité du passé aux conceptions arbitraires d’une prétendue raison réfléchie.’

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 583. ‘...le plus glorieux événement, non seulement de l’histoire de France, mais de l’histoire du monde’.

significance of the events of 1789, as well as of the profound continuity that he tries to establish between those events and the workers' movement. 'The French Revolution put on a par with the English one, and with German religious wars! Babœuf, who opens the era of contemporary social struggles, compared to a visionary [un illuminé], and his comrades to hysterical English puritans!'<sup>38</sup> It is from these premises that Rouanet can accuse the Marxist Guesdists of being unable to mobilize the masses: if there are no considerations of rights, of ethics, but merely economic clashes, if the POF is merely the 'parti du ventre', how can one hope to mobilize workers? 'The theory [Marxism]' writes Rouanet 'appeals to motivations that have never determined vast social upheavals: contrarily to the French socialism of 1848, which never ceased invoking the idea of rights and the feeling of fraternity [not a casual word] to support its demands...'<sup>39</sup> In short, for Rouanet, the introduction of Marxism into the political experience of the French proletariat was not, ultimately, a step forward:

'Our conviction is... that in trying to avoid an evil we have worsened our situation. We have merely substituted the clearly exaggerated sentimentalism of the generation of 1848 with a materialism that, under the guise of scientific rigour, is equally simplistic; to an incomplete theory we have substituted its equally narrow opposite, with the difference that the latter has the immense inconvenient of being a German import, thus of not taking into consideration neither French temperament nor the French context.'<sup>40</sup>

In conclusion, Marxism was not only marginal in the France of the 1890s, but also viewed with a substantial degree of suspicion. It was understood as simplistic, as excessively preoccupied with the narrow economic interest of historical actors, and consequently incapable of accounting for ethical or juridical factors in the historical process. From this narrow 'German' anthropology, derived a deterministic theory of social development based

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 601. 'Mais pour le marxisme, tout ce qui est antérieur à lui est suspect, de bourgeoisisme ou de réaction. La conspiration des Égoux elle même, ne trouve grâce ni devant Engels ni devant Marx. Engels y voit un simple accident sans importance: « On vit se dresser durant la réforme allemande, dit-il, Thomas Münzer; durant la grande révolution anglaise, les niveleurs ; durant la grande révolution française, Babœuf. » La Révolution française mise au rang de la révolution anglaise et des guerres religieuses allemandes ! Babœuf, qui ouvre l'ère des revendications sociales contemporaines; comparé à un illuminé, et ses compagnons aux puritains hystériques de l'Angleterre !' It should be added that religion appears to be a crucial factor in separating 'hysterical Puritans' and German Protestants from the secular revolutionaries of 1789.

<sup>39</sup> Rouanet, 'Le matérialisme économique' (2) in *Revue Socialiste* 6, 1887, p. 531. '... la théorie fait appel à des mobiles qui n'ont jamais déterminé les vastes explosions sociales : -au contraire du socialisme français de 1848, qui ne cessa d'invoquer l'idée du droit et le sentiment de la fraternité à l'appui de ses revendications...'

<sup>40</sup> Rouanet, 'Le matérialisme économique' (1), p. 580. 'Notre conviction est, comme nous l'avons déjà dit, qu'évitant un mal pour tomber dans un pire, nous n'avons fait que substituer au sentimentalisme évidemment exagéré de la génération de 1848, un matérialisme non moins simpliste sous son apparence, de rigorisme scientifique; a une théorie incomplète, une théorie inverse, mais non moins étroite que la première et qui a, en outre, l'immense inconvénient, étant une importation d'outre-Rhin, de ne tenir compte ni du tempérament, ni du milieu français.'

on conflict, understood as motivated by the basest economic motivations of man. The politically transversal nature of these objections, shared by political friends and foes alike, testifies to how rooted they were in the French context, and how much of a point of contention was Marxism's, so to speak, indifference to the events of 1789. As we shall see in the following section, this climate of general suspicion implied that any attempt to radicate Marxism in the hexagon would have had to address these objections.

### 3.3 CONSEQUENCES OF MARGINALITY

In assessing Sorel's engagement with Marxism we must not forget that, as Shlomo Sand has written, it was 'science, and not politics' that brought him to the German thinker.<sup>41</sup> This not only means that Sorel was quite outside the polemics that characterized the relationship of Marxism to the French socialist tradition and to the heritage of 1789, but also, more generally, allows us to understand how peculiar was his predicament when, in 1893, he entered the scene of French socialism. Far removed from the battles for the control of proletarian allegiance and, indeed, from political activity *tout court*, Sorel embraced Marxism animated by eminently intellectual motivations, as a thinker embraces a new and promising body of doctrines. In his 1893 letter to the *Revue Philosophique* he had, after all, spoken of Marxism as a new metaphysics, and even the choice of the forum in which to declare his allegiance to Karl Marx betrays rather unequivocally the intellectual focus of his Marxist conversion. More than in the emancipation of the working class, Sorel was interested in overcoming the dichotomy between idealism and scientific positivism and, more than the bourgeois expropriators, Sorel's targets were the 'holders of the official chairs' at the Sorbonne.

However, as the earlier examination of the context reveals, this new metaphysics was not faring too well in the France of the time. Mostly known through its Guesdist version, the Marxism circulating in France at the time was reduced to its theoretical bone. With a few exceptions amongst which we must count Sorel, the Sorbonne Germanist Charles Andler and Paul Lafargue, few people were interested in an in-depth theoretical examination of Marx's work, and even fewer engaged in the task of tackling the main scientific and intellectual problems of the time from a Marxist angle. Academically non-existent, politically marginal, viewed with equal suspicion by friends and foes alike and accused of being deterministic, teleological, alien to the French juridical tradition and, above all, excessively German,

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<sup>41</sup> Sand, *Illusion du politique*, p. 43. 'Ce qui amène Sorel au Marxisme, c'est donc la science, et pas la politique.'

Marxism was not a blossoming doctrine in France at this time. This situation had, for an intellectual that, like Sorel, saw in Marxism a number of intuitions capable of unlocking the conceptual stalemates of French intellectual life, a number of important consequences.

The first of these consequences was that a work of propagation of Marxist ideas was necessary, and a type of propagation whose targets were radically different from the usual ones. If one wanted to establish Marxism as an intellectual force in France, it was not sufficient to educate the working class to key concepts such as the class struggle, but it was necessary to enter into a critical dialogue with the established intellectual authorities. It was necessary, in other words, to weave the Marxist perspective into the main debates characterizing the French intellectual life of the time, it was necessary to conduct operations such as those attempted by Sorel in his long essay on Émile Durkheim, or to write letters such as the one written by Sorel to the *Revue Philosophique*. If, in that text, Sorel had spoken polemically and had talked of Marxism as a ‘new metaphysics’ capable of triumphing over the ‘idealistic reveries’ of the ‘holders of the official chairs’<sup>42</sup>, it is obvious that the very fact of writing to the *Revue* meant wanting to engage in dialogue with the much-despised holders of these chairs.

The theoretical poverty of French Marxism examined above heavily conditioned the modes through which such an operation could be conducted. To start with, it is clear that in order to engage in a debate with the intellectual mainstream, the Guesdist repertoire was largely insufficient. Slogans and general ideas would not do if one wanted to vindicate the *scientific* credentials of Marxism. But the problem with the available Marxism was not just one of theoretical under-elaboration. A further difficulty emerged from the fact that, however underdeveloped, the Marxism of the POF did not address the key objections that were voiced in France against Marxism at the time, i.e. those of historical and economic determinism. This meant that a simple work of propagation would have resulted insufficient to implant Marxism in France. What was called for was a much more substantial effort of creative re-elaboration of Marxism, which, in turn implied a preliminary work of conceptual clarification of a number of key Marxian concepts. Precisely because this need of conceptual clarification and creative re-elaboration arose out of the necessity of establishing a critical dialogue with the French intellectual mainstream, it followed that it could not afford to ignore the main objections directed at Marxism, namely those regarding economic and historical determinism.

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<sup>42</sup> Sorel, ‘Science et socialisme’, p. 509.

If Marxism was to succeed in France, in other words, it could not ignore French perplexities. And thus, the questions of determinism and, more importantly, that of ethics and right, became important axes around which this work of conceptual clarification developed.

Though the absence, in France, of a party like the SPD – concerned with theory and capable of equipping its intellectuals with a reasonably solid Marxism capable of engaging in dialogue with bourgeois economists or historians – put all the burden of implanting Marxism on the shoulders of intellectuals, this absence also meant that they were able to carry on this task in conditions of substantial freedom from party directives. This means that the circumstances favoured ambitious attempts to reformulate Marxism. The absence of a strong mass party capable of dictating a theoretical line generated a lot of free space within which intellectuals could move, while the extent of the theoretical work that had to be done pushed them to a thorough investigation of Marx's theories. The highly unorthodox Marxisms of Sorel and Jean Jaurès are legacies of a climate of intellectual effervescence, a climate in which the engagement with Marxism could be rather creative, precisely in virtue of the theoretical limitations of what was available in the hexagon.

### **3.3.1 THE *ÈRE NOUVELLE* AND THE *DEVENIR SOCIAL***

As Sorel wrote in 1919 in one of his rare autobiographical texts, 'Between 1894 and 1897 I devoted virtually all of my time to two Marxist publications, the *Ère Nouvelle* and the *Devenir Social*'.<sup>43</sup> These journals are excellent examples of the spaces in which this work or re-elaboration and implantation of Marxism in France took place. They marked their difference from the existing Marxist publications by focussing on theory and doctrine far more than on politics, and they differentiated themselves from publications such as the *Revue Socialiste* by openly and exclusively adopting a Marxist point of view. Their ambition was, in short, that of establishing Marxism as a force in French culture, and this was done through a number of editorial strategies, ranging from cultural and intellectual polemic to the translation and dissemination of texts by Marx, Engels, and other notable European Marxists.

The relationship of these publications with the POF, though not a tenuous one, was characterized by a substantial degree of independence. The short-lived *Ère Nouvelle*, for example – the first Marxist publication with which Sorel collaborated – was set up by a

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<sup>43</sup> Sorel, 'Mes raisons', p. 249. 'De 1894 à 1897, je consacrai presque tout mon temps à travailler pour deux revues marxistes, l'*Ère Nouvelle* et le *Devenir Social*...'

Romanian student, Georges Diamandy, and arose out of a radical Parisian university milieu: the *Étudiants socialistes révolutionnaires internationalistes* (ESRI), and out of their attempts to make sense of the work of Marx and Engels.<sup>44</sup> Despite the fact that the journal did entertain close contacts with the POF, as is testified by a number of articles by Guesde and Deville<sup>45</sup>, it is noteworthy that one of the first French journals of theoretical Marxism could be set up by the initiative of socialist students, without formal control by the POF. In its first and only year of publication, we find a number of Marxist *summaries* by Lafargue<sup>46</sup> as well as the first translation of Engels' *Origin of the family*, for it was 'regrettable that a French translation has not yet been published to allow our proletariat and intellectuals to appreciate the immense value of this analysis of the historical development of humanity'.<sup>47</sup> But it is by looking at the *déclaration*, the customary introductory text that French journals of the period published in their first issue by way of manifesto, that we appreciate more clearly the journal's intention to act as a broker between French culture and Marxism. The text, written by Diamandy in a flamboyant and almost literary style, mentions Marx and Engels only once, crediting them with the discovery of 'economic materialism', while the bulk of the text is occupied by a very French discussion of Zola and Taine.

Similar considerations apply to the *Devenir Social*, in a way the successor, on a grander scale, of the *Ère Nouvelle*. If we look, for example, at its first year of publication, we become immediately aware of the theoretical ambitions of the journal: we find Plekhanov writing on Augustin Thierry, Sorel on Durkheim and Brunetière, Labriola on historical materialism as well as a translation of Marx's *Critique of Hegel's philosophy of right*.<sup>48</sup> Though we shall not deal in great depth with those two publications, it is important to examine, however

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<sup>44</sup> See Lindenberg, *Marxisme Introuvable*, pp. 152-3.

<sup>45</sup> See Gabriel Deville, 'Socialisme, Révolution, Internationalisme', *Ère Nouvelle* 1, December 1893, pp. 491-529 or Jules Guesde, 'La journée de huit heures', *Ère Nouvelle* 2, July 1894, pp. 229-39. Despite his sympathies for a different, less Marxist, kind of socialism, also Alexandre Millerand wrote in the *Ère Nouvelle*. See Alexandre Millerand, 'La situation politique', *Ère Nouvelle* 1, November 1893, pp. 445-9.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Paul Lafargue, 'Le matérialisme économique de Karl Marx', *Ère Nouvelle* 1, July 1893, pp. 46-58 or 'Le milieu naturel, Théorie Darwinienne', *Ère Nouvelle* 1, August 1893, pp. 125-38 and 'Le milieu artificiel, Théorie de la lutte des classes', *Ère Nouvelle* 1, September 1893, pp. 240-252. This last combination of articles, with the connection between Darwinian selection and class struggle, gives, incidentally, a good idea of Lafargue's Marxism.

<sup>47</sup> Anon, 'Barbarie et Civilisation', *Ère Nouvelle* 1, July 1893, p. 11n. 'Il est regrettable qu'une traduction Française n'en ait pas encore été publiée pour permettre à notre prolétariat et à nos hommes d'études d'apprécier l'immense valeur de cette analyse du développement historique de l'humanité.'

<sup>48</sup> Georgij Plechanov, 'Augustin Thierry et la conception matérialiste de l'histoire', *Le Devenir Social* 1, 1895, pp. 694-709; Antonio Labriola, 'En mémoire du Manifeste du Parti Communiste', *Le Devenir Social* 1, 1895, pp. 225-52 and 321-44, Georges Sorel, 'La métaphysique évolutionniste de M. Brunetière', *Le Devenir Social* 1, 1895, pp. 579-93; Karl Marx, 'Critique de la philosophie du droit de Hegel', *Le Devenir Social* 1, 1895, pp. 501-15.



summarily, one of the strategies through which they pursued their attempt to establish Marxism in France, namely what Madeleine Réberieux has called the ‘critique militante des livres’, and which consisted in an intense and at times vicious activity of militant book reviewing from a Marxist perspective.<sup>49</sup> The necessity of examining this activity of book reviewing does not merely arise from the fact that it shows the intellectual ambitions of such publications and that it gives evidence of their attempt to establish a critical dialogue with the French intellectual mainstream, nor does it simply spring from the fact that book reviewing was a genre that Sorel was fond of and in which he excelled.<sup>50</sup> Those are all good reasons, but they point to a more important one, namely that these book reviews are excellent sources for understanding how a new body of doctrines makes its way into a hostile environment. In other words, it is by looking at these reviews that we can understand how a host of Marxist intellectual outsiders, and Sorel in particular, responded to the accusations of historical and economic determinism that were routinely directed at Marxism.

In the case of Sorel, this response changed over time. His first text for the *Ère Nouvelle*, a review of a book by the liberal economist Gustave Courcelle-Seneuil, displays intransigence and a stubborn self-confidence in Marxism. Sorel mockingly introduces the author as a ‘remarkable man: distinguished economist, collaborator of the *Journal des Economistes*, of the *Nouvelle Revue*, of the *Temps*, [and a] member of the Institute.’<sup>51</sup> Sorel’s engagement with the many issues raised by Courcelle-Seneuil is minimal, and limits itself to ridiculisation and sarcasm. When Courcelle writes of a rationally unknowable yet real God Sorel replies as follows: ‘This is surely very profound, but, in my common sense judgment [ma modeste jugeote], I do not hesitate to translate it in vulgar language as “God! Think what you will of Him; I do not take this seriously; but do not deny Him, for this would upset the Institute.”’<sup>52</sup> The short review continues along these lines, touching on the issues of freedom of contract, the political economy of Smith and Marx, and Courcelle’s elitist views on democracy. Sorel’s conclusion is eloquent: ‘We now know what principles he opposes to our ones, and we say to

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<sup>49</sup> Réberieux, ‘La Revue Socialiste’, p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> In 1894 we find 11 book reviews by Sorel published in the *Ère Nouvelle*, and many more in the coming three years in the *Devenir Social*. See Sand, ‘Bibliographie des écrits de Sorel’, pp. 429-34.

<sup>51</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Courcelle-Seneuil – La société moderne’, *Ère Nouvelle* 1, January 1894, p. 138. The *Journal des Economistes* was the chief organ of French classical liberalism, in which had written figures such as Jean-Baptiste Say and in which, in 1897, Sorel will publish an article in which he voices his perplexities on Marx’s theory of value.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* ‘... n’hésitons pas à lire la page suivante, nous y verrons qu’il faut croire en Dieu, mais entendre par ce mot tout ce qu’on voudra, parce que « la démonstration... et la science... n’ont aucune prise sur l’Inconnu, précisément parce qu’il est inconnu ». Voilà qui doit être profond, mais, dans ma modeste jugeote, je n’hésite pas à traduire cela en langage vulgaire : « Dieu ! pensez-en ce que vous voudrez ; je m’en moque ; mais ne le niez pas, car cela ferait de la peine à l’Institut »’.

those not convinced by socialist propaganda: “Buy Courcelle-Seneuil’s volume, read it, and, if you possess philosophical spirit you shall come to our side.”<sup>53</sup>

But of course, scathing attacks would not be sufficient to advance intellectually the cause of Marxism. What was needed was a theoretical elaboration capable of vindicating scientific socialism, and of showing that Marxism could not be reduced to an uncomplicated historical teleology based on the almost mechanic struggle between conflicting economic interests. This, as we have pointed out, required an answer to the objections of economic and historical determinism that were constantly directed at Marxism. Now, it is fundamental to highlight that Sorel was not at all indifferent to such objections. If we look at his review of the Léon Say’s abovementioned *Contre le socialisme*, we see to what extent he was convinced that the accusations of economic and historical determinism highlighted serious problems in Marxist doctrine. When, for example, Say ridiculed the economic determinism of the Marxists, Sorel accused him of having ‘a very restrictive interpretation’ of the theory of class struggle and of believing that according to Marxism historical evolution is determined ‘by the mere pursuit of economic interests.’<sup>54</sup> However, significantly, he conceded that such simplistic interpretations of Marx’s historical materialism were common amongst socialists too, and, indeed, reproached his fellow socialists for making themselves vulnerable to such criticisms.<sup>55</sup> When Say accused Marxists of venturing into scientifically doubtful predictions of social development, Sorel, instead of countering that capitalism was bound to generate a self-destructive social polarization, answered in the following way:

‘...since when has science had the ambition of prediction? This could be possible, technically, with an idealist conception of history; but this is incompatible with Marx’s system. Marxists have as much disdain as our author [Say] has for the inventors of fairy tales.’<sup>56</sup>

The defensive strategy adopted here is radically different from that employed against Courcelle-Seneuil: instead of ridiculing Say, Sorel essentially accepts his objections but

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 141. ‘Nous savons maintenant quels principes on oppose aux nôtres et nous disons à ceux que la propagande socialiste n’a pas convaincus : « Achetez le volume de Courcelle-Seneuil ; lisez le et, si vous avez l’esprit philosophique, vous viendrez à nous. »

<sup>54</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘L. Say – Contre le Socialisme’, *Devenir Social* 2, 1896, p. 466. ‘La théorie de la lutte des classes est interprétée par M. L. Say dans un sens très restrictif : l’histoire serait déterminée par la seule poursuite d’intérêts économiques...’

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. ‘Cette doctrine n’est pas celle de K. Marx : mais il faut reconnaître que cette manière de comprendre la lutte des classes et le matérialisme économique est fort répandue. Il est important de ne pas donner prise à des critiques de ce genre.’

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 466. ‘... depuis quand la science a-t-elle la prétention de prédire ? Cela pourrait se concevoir, à la rigueur, avec une conception idéaliste de l’histoire ; mais cela est inconciliable avec le système de K. Marx. Les Marxistes ont autant de mépris que peut en avoir notre auteur pour les gens qui inventent des contes de fées...’

defends Marxism by claiming that the socialism known to Say has little to do with the one which he is prepared to defend, that of the ‘workers’ parties, inspired by Marx’s *Manifesto*’.<sup>57</sup> But in fact, this was something of a bluff: the references to ‘Marx’s system’ or to ‘Marx’s doctrine’ pointed to a non-deterministic Marxism that was still nowhere to be found in France at that time. The Marxism that circulated was, as Sorel implicitly admits, very much vulnerable to these objections. But Sorel’s willingness to accommodate for these objections gives us a clue as to the direction in which he will, a number of years later, re-elaborate Marxism.

### 3.3.2 SOREL, LABRIOLA, CROCE

It is important to highlight how much the work of conceptual clarification and re-elaboration was connected to the theoretical shortcomings of French Marxism. In fact, it is quite easy to define with precision what this connection amounted to: it was precisely the theoretical poverty of French Marxism that made the work of conceptual development and clarification necessary. This poverty of French Marxism had a further important consequence, in that it made the whole theoretical debate extremely permeable to foreign influences. If intellectuals had to build up a theoretically sophisticated Marxism, and if French Marxism was not up to the task, it was natural that other conceptual and philosophical sources were employed in this task. Sorel, for a number of reasons, could not refer to people like Guesde or Lafargue for counterarguments against the objections of historical and economic determinism. On the one hand this was because either the theory was underdeveloped, as in the case of Guesde, or it was not to Sorel’s liking, as in the case of Lafargue. On the other, this was because the belief in economic and historical determinism was central to the French Marxism of the time. In fact, the emphasis on economics and the belief in an imminent and inevitable collapse of the capitalist order were common currency at the time even beyond the French borders, and particularly on the other side of the Rhine. Though the level of theoretical elaboration attained by the SPD was vastly superior to what could be found in France, German Marxism remained anchored in the two forms of determinism and, in virtue of the hegemonic role of the German party, constituted the model to which other European Marxisms, Guesde and Lafargue included, looked for guidance.<sup>58</sup> This meant that the work of re-elaboration had to draw on

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 468. ‘... les partis ouvriers, fondés sur la base du *Manifeste* de Marx...’

<sup>58</sup> A small point on the language of historical determinism must be made here, even if it would require much more elaboration. The impression conveyed by the sources is that the deterministic language of European Marxists of the time, i.e. the talk of the inevitable collapse of capitalism, reflected a certain *optimism* much more than it spelled out the belief in *actual determinism*. It appears to me, in other words, that the language of

other sources, and whereas Jaurès drew extensively from distinctly French ones, Sorel found in Italy the concepts that he needed in order to make sense of historical materialism.

Partly in virtue of French theoretical shortcomings, partly in virtue of the internationalist character of the socialist movement of the time, Marxist publications collected contributions from all over the continent, and sometimes even beyond. If we look at both the *Ère Nouvelle* and the *Devenir Social* we are struck by their markedly international ambitions and authorship. If Diamandy, in his *déclaration*, had insisted that the journal was going to be ‘international and eclectic’<sup>59</sup>, it is by looking at the first year of the *Devenir Social* that we see the international dimension more strikingly: in it, we find Marxists from all over the continent, from the British atheist Edward Aveling to his unlucky partner Eleanor Marx, from Plekhanov to the positivist criminologist Enrico Ferri.<sup>60</sup> As a contributor to and reader of these publications Sorel was exposed to these foreign influences, and it is in his capacity as a member of the editorial board of the *Devenir Social* that Sorel made the encounter with the Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola and with his younger friend Benedetto Croce.<sup>61</sup> The encounter was to prove decisive for Sorel’s elaboration of his take on historical materialism.

We can detect, in this encounter, an important symmetry between Labriola and Sorel. Both came from contexts in which both the working class movement and Marxist doctrine were in a less advanced state than in Germany, and, moreover, the excessively deterministic understanding of Marxism that they saw developing in the respective countries perplexed both. Much in the same way in which Sorel was beginning to be aware of the necessity, in France, of a less deterministic and economic understanding of historical materialism, Labriola, in a much more exasperated tone, poured spite over what passed as Marxism in Italy. With a nationalistic self-flagellation typical of a certain Italian intellectual class he

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inevitability was used as a way of reinforcing the belief not so much that capitalism was *bound to* collapse, but that it was *about to* collapse. The difference between the two is not insignificant, and further research would be needed into this topic.

<sup>59</sup> Georges Diamandy, ‘Déclaration’, *Ère Nouvelle* 1, July 1893, p. 9. ‘Notre revue sera internationale et éclectique.’ The eclecticism is striking: in the first number we find, aside from the articles cited above, part of a play on the conditions of German textile workers, an article on Polish literature and one on the political situation of Bohemia.

<sup>60</sup> The heartache from the relationship with Aveling eventually caused Eleanor to commit suicide upon the news that Edward had secretly married another woman – a younger actress.

<sup>61</sup> Born in 1843, Labriola was a philosophy professor at the University of Rome, and he had embraced the workers’ cause in the late 1880s. After having begun a correspondence with Engels in 1890, he met him, along with much of the leadership of the SPD at the International’s conference held in Zurich in 1893. Philosophically a Hegelian, he had lectured on Marx and Marxism in Rome since the beginning of the 1890s, but until 1895, he had never published on the subject. He had met Croce, 23 years his junior, in Rome and the two had become close friends.

complained to Croce of the Italian confusions over Marx's materialistic conception of history: '...that *charlatan*, Loria' writes Labriola 'has made the issue so confused that, in this land of approximators and cultivated ignoramuses [di arruffoni e di dotti analfabeti], it is difficult to see how one can put things right.'<sup>62</sup> Without digressing too much, it is important to stress that Achille Loria, an economist, had popularized in Italy a heavily deterministic version of Marxism, characterized by the automatism with which entire historical periods and spheres of human activity derived from the economic phenomenon.<sup>63</sup> The point to stress is that, much like Sorel, Labriola was looking for a corrective to the excessive insistence on historical and economic determinism.

It is necessary to examine the beginnings of the interactions between Sorel, Labriola, and Croce, in order to understand why their collaboration proved so fruitful, and so important to the shaping of Sorel's own ideas on historical materialism. It is worth underlining, to start with, that despite Labriola's age and the maturity of his reflections on Marxism, he had never published anything on the subject and, what is more, he was quite reluctant to do so, despite Croce's constant solicitations and offers of financial support. It was only when Sorel entered into the scene that Labriola began to change his mind, attracted by the possibility of publishing in a French journal. In April of 1895, Labriola wrote to Croce telling him that he will publish an article on Marxism in the *Devenir Social*, encouraging Croce to subscribe to the journal which he describes as 'a true journal, not like Turati's *Critica Sociale*'.<sup>64</sup> The French publication of the essay 'En mémoire du Manifeste du parti communiste' must have pleased Labriola, because after it he became much more open to the idea of publishing a more general work outlining his views on Marxism.<sup>65</sup> Finally, he yielded to Croce's solicitations and accepted his younger friend's offer, also explaining that he had been reluctant to do so before because of his unwillingness to be associated with a socialist movement – the Italian one – from which he felt alienated.

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<sup>62</sup> Antonio Labriola, letter to Croce 20/12/1894 in Antonio Labriola, *Lettere a Benedetto Croce. 1885-1904* (Napoli, Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici: 1975), pp. 61-2. 'La interpretazione materialistica della storia è un problema troppo intricato: e poi quel *ciarlatano* del Loria ha ora talmente imbrogliata la matassa in questo paese di arruffoni e di dotti analfabeti, che non si sa più come cavarne le mani.' Achille Loria (1857-1943) was an Italian economist, whose markedly deterministic theories had exerted a certain influence over the Italian workers' movement.

<sup>63</sup> Loria had also been accused of plagiarizing Marx. In 1894, with the publication of the third volume of *Capital*, Engels had dedicated some pages to attacking Loria on this question.

<sup>64</sup> Labriola, letter to Croce of 27/4/1895, in *ibid.*, p. 65. The long article was Antonio Labriola, 'En memoire du Manifeste du Parti Communiste', *Le Devenir Social* 1, 1895, pp. 225-52 and 321-44.

<sup>65</sup> The text that will come out as the result of these Crocean solicitations is Antonio Labriola, *Del materialismo storico: dilucidazione preliminare* (Roma, Loescher: 1896). The details of the story emerge quite clearly in Labriola, *Lettere a Croce*, pp. 61-124.

‘I would not know what to do with what I have learned and thought if I did not accept an offer such as your one... I have lost my desire to be seen as an Italian socialist and politician: above all, I do not want to be seen as associated with T., A., C., and P., all more or less impostors. And what a meagre consolation it is for me to know that someone in Vienna or London sees me as the champion of Italian socialism.... an inexistent socialism! On the other hand, I do not want to print my lectures, as was suggested to me... So your generous proposal takes me out of a delicate situation I had not quite acknowledged, and opens up an unexpected possibility.’<sup>66</sup>

A few months after the publication of Labriola’s ‘En mémoire’ Sorel, looking for contributors to the *Devenir Social*, wrote for the first time to Benedetto Croce. As he declared in the opening of the letter, it was Labriola who had put him in touch with Croce. The staff at the *Devenir*, he complained to Croce, ‘find it difficult to obtain articles regularly’<sup>67</sup> and thus a collaboration by the young philosopher – Croce was 29 at the time – would have been welcome. What was Sorel looking for? ‘Good’ articles ‘capable of showing to the sceptics (and there are many) that socialism is worthy of belonging to the modern scientific movement.’<sup>68</sup> The foes of socialism, continued Sorel, are ‘always ready to criticize, with disdain, the weak parts of our work.’<sup>69</sup> The letter constitutes, *inter alia*, a perfect example of the intellectual nature of Sorel’s concerns about Marxism as well as of the fact that he had to look outside of France to address them.

As a response, Croce sent him two texts, which Sorel read ‘with the greatest interest.’<sup>70</sup> The expression conveys, as over two decades of future friendship between the two testify, more than mere politeness. In fact, Sorel’s enthusiasm for Croce’s writings was barely mellowed by the fact that they could not be published, since they contained too bold an attack on Lafargue’s work. Sorel thus regretted that this ‘creates for us an uncomfortable situation’ for

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<sup>66</sup> Labriola, letter to Croce 15/5/1895, in *Lettere a Croce*, pp. 67-8. ‘Io di fatti non so che farmene di quello che ho imparato e pensato, se non accetto una proposta come la vostra. I mei appunti di lezioni (nudi scheletri e note inintelligibili a tutt’altri che non a me) io li stileggio a voce; e poi non dopo non ci penso più, specie nelle vacanze. Di figurare in Italia come un socialista ed un uomo politico me n’è passata la voglia; e soprattutto non voglio figurare in iscena accanto a tanti T... ed A... e C... e P... che sono più o meno imbroglioni. E sapete che bella consolazione è per me di sapere che quel tale mi tiene a Vienna od a Londra per un campione del socialismo italiano... che non esiste! D’altra parte io non voglio stampare le mie lezioni, come mi fu proposto... Dunque la vostra generosa proposta viene proprio opportuna a togliermi da un imbarazzo del quale non mi rendevo pienamente conto, e ad aprirmi una via da me non sperata.’

<sup>67</sup> Georges Sorel, letter to Croce 20/12/1895, in *La Critica*, 25, 1927, p. 38. ‘Nous avons quelque peine à obtenir des articles arrivant régulièrement...’

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. ‘Les bons articles sont rares, surtout ceux qui peuvent démontrer aux incrédules (et ils sont nombreux) que le socialisme est en état de figurer dans le mouvement scientifique moderne.’

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. ‘Nos adversaires sont, en effet, aux aguets, toujours disposés à critiquer, avec mépris, les parties faibles de notre œuvre.’

<sup>70</sup> Sorel, letter to Croce 14/1/1896, *La Critica* 25, 1927, p. 39. ‘Je vous remercie de vos deux brochures que j’ai lues avec le plus grand intérêt...’. The two volumes were *Concetto della storia nelle sue relazioni col concetto dell’arte* and *Intorno al comunismo di Tommaso Campanella*, as told by Croce himself in a footnote to the letter.

the attack was so conclusive that it meant that ‘Lafargue and you cannot write for a same publication, especially for one in which he is one of the founders!’<sup>71</sup> But the fact which should not go unnoticed is that Sorel agreed more with a young philosopher that he had never met than with Lafargue, a central figure of French Marxism: ‘reading what Lafargue had to say about Church Fathers and Jewish philosophy, it had occurred to me that his article could be the work of an incompetent man; but I did not think he was as incompetent as you establish in such a conclusive manner.’<sup>72</sup>

These early exchanges were the beginning of a fertile collaboration between the three thinkers that would last until the end of 1897. During these years the three were engaged in what can only be described as a common project of conceptual clarification of Marxism. Again, it is important to underline the contextual symmetries that set the conditions for such a fertile and intense period of collaboration, symmetries that apply in particular to Sorel and Labriola: both thinkers wrote in a context in which Marxism was underdeveloped, and in which the dominant understanding of the doctrine remained fixed along deterministic lines. So both looked for a theoretical corrective to essentially the same problem. We shall examine more in detail in the next chapter how the interaction with Croce and Labriola played a fundamental part, at a conceptual and philosophical level, in the development of Sorel’s Marxism. For now, we shall be happy with illustrating the sheer amount of interaction between the three by showing how all of the important Marxist texts of Labriola and Croce in the relevant years arose out of the dialogue between the three.

We have seen how Labriola’s first important Marxist text, ‘En mémoire’, was published in France thanks to Sorel and to Croce’s continuous invitations to publish something on Marxism. The second important Labriolan text – the abovementioned ‘Del materialismo storico’, a more theoretically oriented essay on the materialist conception of history – equally bears the mark of Sorel and Croce. We have seen how Croce paid for the publishing expenses

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<sup>71</sup> Sorel, letter to Croce 14/1/1896, in *La Critica*, 25, 1927, p. 39. ‘Votre note est si irréfutable qu’elle nous crée un gros embarras pour vous demander une collaboration... M. Lafargue et vous ne pouvez facilement écrire dans une même revue, surtout dans une revue où il est un des fondateurs !’

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. The text sent to Sorel was Croce’s ‘Intorno al comunismo di Tommaso Campanella’. ‘...je me doutais bien, en lisant ce que disait M. Lafargue des Pères de l’Eglise... que son mémoire était l’œuvre d’un homme incompetent ; mais je ne croyais pas qu’il fut aussi incompetent que vous l’établissez d’une manière si irréfutable.’ Lafargue’s work on Campanella was originally intended for a history of socialism edited by, amongst others, Bernstein and Kautsky (V.A., *Vorläufer des Neueren Sozialismus. Zweiter Teil: von Thomas More bis zum Vorabend der französischen Revolution* (Stuttgart, Dietz: 1895), pp. 469-506 ) and had been republished in the *Devenir Social* in 1895. See Paul Lafargue, ‘Campanella’, *Devenir Social* 1, 1895, pp. 305-20, 465-80 and 561-78.

of the publication, and we must add that one of Croce's Marxist texts, the 'Sulla concezione materialistica della storia'<sup>73</sup>, consists of a review of Labriola's 'Del materialismo storico'. Croce's review, of course, was not merely based on the reading of the text, but also on the close reading of its drafts, and on the constant dialogue about it with Labriola.<sup>74</sup> As soon as the text was published in Italy, Sorel reviewed it for the *Devenir Social* and when it came out in France, he wrote an enthusiastic preface for it.<sup>75</sup> As for the third important text on Marxism by Labriola, *Discorrendo di socialismo e filosofia*, it consists of a series of fictional letters addressed to none other than Sorel.

Similar considerations apply to the main Crocean texts on Marxism. If we examine Croce's bibliography, we see that, pre 1898, there are three important writings on Marxism: 'Intorno al comunismo di Tommaso Campanella', dating from 1895, 'Sulla concezione materialistica della storia', in 1896, and, in the same year, 'Le teorie storiche del prof. Loria'.<sup>76</sup> All of the essays bear the mark of the three three-way discussions with Labriola and Sorel. We have seen how the text on Campanella was one of the first things sent to Sorel by Croce, and how it could not be published in the *Devenir* because of the critique of Lafargue's work. The second work, as we have seen, is a review of Labriola's 'Del materialismo storico'. It is a text that Sorel thought should be published in the *Devenir*, only to later change his mind, since the attack on Plekhanov it contains was bound to make the publication 'truly impossible'.<sup>77</sup> As for the attack on Loria, it was a text insistently requested by Labriola: 'Why do you not

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<sup>73</sup> Benedetto Croce, 'Sulla concezione materialistica della storia', *Atti dell'accademia Pontaniana* 26, 1896, pp. 1-16.

<sup>74</sup> See Labriola, *Lettere a Croce*, pp. 61-124. On the 20/12/1894, for example, Labriola thanks Croce for the offer but tells him to give him more time to think the whole project through, telling him that his thoughts on historical materialism are still in course of elaboration: see *Lettere a Croce*, p. 61. On the 15/5/1895, Labriola profusely thanks Croce and accepts the offer for a series of publications of his thoughts on historical materialism: 'facciamo la prova e cominciamo' he writes (see *Lettere a Croce*, pp. 67-8.) *Del materialismo storico* will be the first of these publications and, for the next year, until the 6/6/1896, Labriola keeps Croce updated about the progress of the book and sends him drafts to read and amend – see, for example, the letter of 25/5/1896, in *Lettere a Croce*, p. 120. The exchange is bilateral, evidence of the fact that, though solidly Labriola's work, the text was developed with Croce's intellectual assistance. See, for example, Labriola's letter of 24/5/1896, in which he comments positively on the constructive nature of Croce's criticism in *Lettere a Croce*, p. 121. This, by showing that Croce had an access to the text before its publication, also explains why Croce's review could come out virtually simultaneously with the publication of Labriola's little volume.

<sup>75</sup> For the review, Georges Sorel, 'Labriola – Del materialismo storico', *Devenir Social* 2, 1896, pp. 761-66. As for the preface, it can be found in Antonio Labriola, *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire* (Paris, Girard et Brière: 1897). The volume consists in Sorel's preface, the two essays by Labriola – 'En memoire du manifeste du Parti Communiste' and the French translation of 'Del materialismo storico, dilucidazione preliminare' under the title 'Le matérialisme historique' – and Laura Lafargue's translation of the *Communist Manifesto*.

<sup>76</sup> All of the essays are reprinted in Croce's *Materialismo storico ed economia Marxistica*, 5th ed. (Bari, Laterza: 1927),

<sup>77</sup> Sorel, letter to Croce 1/3/1897, *La Critica* 25, 1927, p. 43.



prepare for that journal [the *Devenir Social*] a (- first -) text on the illustrious Loria's nonsense?'.<sup>78</sup> 'Remember about Loria'.<sup>79</sup> 'Sorel himself begs me to ask you to write an article [for the *Devenir*]. Will you? Could you not begin with a series of *notes* on the illustrious Loria's nonsense?'.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, not only was the article first published in the *Devenir Social*,<sup>81</sup> but Sorel had read it in its first draft in Italian, prior to publication.<sup>82</sup>

This wealth of bibliographical informations omits to mention how Labriola and Croce influenced Sorel, or how they were involved in his own re-elaboration of Marxism. The content of the interaction will be examined in the following chapter. Here, it was necessary to highlight the intensity of the conversation that the three entertained on the question of historical materialism between 1895 and 1897.

### 3.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have addressed the question of which consequences followed for an intellectual who, like Sorel, chose to embrace Marxism in the France of the 1890s. We have highlighted that Marxism was a marginal doctrine in the French intellectual and political context, and we have also insisted on the fact that what was available, in terms of Marxism, was theoretically rather weak and thus unable to establish itself as a legitimate intellectual option. These conditions spelled out a number of consequences. For a start, there was a need to diffuse and propagate Marxist ideas by targeting the established intellectual authorities and the main debates animating the French intellectual life of the time. But precisely because the ambition was to establish Marxism as a legitimate force within French culture, it followed that it was necessary to develop Marxism beyond the usual Guesdists generalities: the rudimentary character of French Marxism imposed a work of conceptual clarification and re-elaboration. The disinterest of the POF towards questions of theory meant that this work of clarification and re-elaboration was carried on in a context of relative freedom, while the need to engage in a critical dialogue with the opponents of Marxism meant that the re-elaboration revolved around two central points: historical and economic determinism. These were the two

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<sup>78</sup> Labriola, letter to Croce 28/2/1896 in Labriola, *Lettere a Croce*, p. 99. 'Perché non prepari per quella rivista uno scritto (- primo -) su gli spropositi dell'illustre Loria?'

<sup>79</sup> Labriola, undated letter to Croce, presumably March 1896, in Labriola, *Lettere a Croce*, p. 100. 'Ricordati di Loria'.

<sup>80</sup> Labriola, letter to Croce 23/4/1896 in Labriola, *Lettere a Croce*, pp. 109-10. 'Lo stesso Sorel mi prega e straprega che tu gli faccia un articolo. Vuoi? Non potresti cominciare da una serie di *note* su gli spropositi dell'illustre Loria?'

<sup>81</sup> Benedetto Croce, 'Les théories historiques de M. Loria', *Devenir Social* 2, 1896, pp. 881-905.

<sup>82</sup> See Sorel, letter to Croce 9/10/1896, *La Critica* 25, 1927, p. 42.

main objections directed at Marxism, and no attempt to implant Marxism in France would have succeeded by ignoring them. As can be perhaps guessed, the conditions were favourable for a rather creative engagement with Marx: no party was either capable or interested in imposing a theoretical orthodoxy, the doctrine was largely unknown in its details and, most importantly perhaps, the work of elaboration had to take into account a series of specific objections. The attempt to theoretically elaborate Marxism necessitated an engagement with those elements of the French tradition that offered greater resistance to it. Thus, we can say that the context necessitated the creation, if not of a French Marxism, then of a Marxism capable of engaging with the central features of the French intellectual tradition.

And yet, beyond these intellectual constraints and possibilities determined by the context, it is important not to forget what Sorel was trying to do through his engagement with Marxism, which was to develop an approach and method capable of engendering a truly scientific study of the human world. As he had indicated to Croce in 1895, the purpose of an operation like the *Devenir Social* was that of showing ‘that socialism is worthy of belonging to the modern *scientific* movement’.<sup>83</sup> As we have seen, Sorel had struggled with this question for some time, and his greatest difficulty was that of incorporating the fact of human agency into social science. The Marxism that Sorel developed, which we shall examine in the next chapter, thus responded to these two features. On the one hand, it was the attempt to develop and implant in France a doctrine that was still largely marginal and misunderstood, and from this he derived both the thoroughness of his theoretical work and its engagement with the typically French questions of ethics and right. On the other hand, Marxism was an attempt at social science, and as such needed to solve the central problem that for Sorel confronted any such attempt: that of the incorporation of the non-deterministic phenomenon of human agency into a body of knowledge that, in order to be scientific, had to possess the ability to make strong causal claims. It is from the blending of these two kinds of constraints, both contextual and conceptual, that Sorel’s re-elaboration of Marxism emerged. It is to this re-elaboration that we now turn.

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<sup>83</sup> Sorel, letter to Croce 20/12/1895, p. 38. Emphasis added.

## CHAPTER FOUR: SOREL'S MARXISM

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter we have shown that the French context was highly favourable to a creative and thorough engagement with the doctrines of Karl Marx: the general ignorance surrounding them and the indifference of political parties to questions of social science and theory left to intellectuals the task of making sense of Marxism and of elaborating it more thoroughly. This also meant that this engagement was bound to, in some way, transform and re-elaborate Marx's doctrines in order to establish them in a very different context. As we shall see in this chapter, Sorel's work of conceptual clarification of Marxism did not ignore the main French objections and tried to offer a convincing Marxist reply to the accusations of historical and economic determinism. At the same time, we must not forget that Sorel saw historical materialism as an answer to the question of social science, i.e. as a method capable of producing a scientific study of the social world. As shown in the first two chapters, the question of social science was problematic for Sorel, because it brought the tension between a 'strong' conception of science based on causality and determinism and the belief in the creative character of human agency to its breaking point. The dualism between the historical and contingent human world and a natural one understood deterministically – in Sorel's vocabulary, the dualism between the 'natural' or 'cosmic' *milieu* and the 'human' or 'artificial' one – could sustain a satisfying conceptualization of the natural sciences. These were human activities, permeated by the creativity and historicity typical of human agency, that nonetheless, through experimental practice, dealt with the deterministic causal relations that regulated the natural world. But the question of social science, i.e. of a scientific study of non-deterministic phenomena, short-circuited this dualism of Sorel's early epistemology. A *scientific*, as opposed to merely empirical, study of the human world was a conceptual impossibility with such premises.

Sorel's early 'structuralist' attempts at social science, based on the relegation of all aspects pertaining to the agency of individuals or groups to the unflattering category of 'antiscientific elements'<sup>1</sup>, have thus to be seen as attempts to hold on to the hope of explaining the human world deterministically, in terms of laws. It is worth underlining that Sorel never tried to

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<sup>1</sup> Sorel, 'Philosophie de Proudhon', p. 628.

explain *agency* in such a way. Instead, he argued that society could be explained in terms of laws precisely when agency is set aside. Already by the time of his essay on Durkheim, however, he had begun to doubt the validity of this approach and, in fact, began to timidly move in the opposite direction, convinced that social science could not, in the end, ignore the fact of agency, 'ce qui est vraiment humain.'<sup>2</sup> In the following years, formative ones for his Marxist engagement, Sorel moved even further in this direction, increasingly putting human agency at the centre of the historical process. From what has been said just above it should result clearly how problematic, from an epistemological point of view, this incorporation of agency into the field of enquiry of the social sciences was. Sorel's understanding of science was unable to deal with a phenomenon defined in non-deterministic terms, and thus the only solution to the problem was to abandon that conception of science and replace it with a different one, capable of making sense of human agency. In other words, what was needed was essentially an epistemological revolution.

The first question that Sorel needed to address was an epistemological one: if scientific knowledge presupposes deterministic causal relations, and if the human world is defined by the absence of these relations, how can one study it scientifically? Put in this way, the problem is unsolvable, and this is why Sorel managed to solve it by altering one of the variables, i.e. his conception of knowledge and science. This new understanding of science and knowledge Sorel found in the reading of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, and specifically in his principle of *verum ipsum factum*, according to which knowledge is not the representation of an external reality, but rather the enquiry into the genesis of the relevant phenomenon. It is the creator of something, the agent, that, according to Vico, can truly know what that thing is, and thus humans can understand the human world precisely because they make it, i.e. because the historical world of mankind is a series of human productions. This theoretical breakthrough allowed Sorel to both see the social world as constituted by human agency and as rationally understandable precisely in virtue of its human origin. The sense in which this knowledge was 'scientific' was, clearly, utterly different from what Sorel had called science before. In particular, the criteria of *verum ipsum factum* radicalized the historicist tendencies that had always been strongly present in Sorel's epistemology. Sorel had always insisted on the historical, human, genesis of the totality of our scientific concepts, but he had also argued that they allow us to discover deterministic relations that are neither historical nor humanly generated. With Vico, this latter aspect fades

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<sup>2</sup> Sorel, 'Théories de Durkheim', p. 169.

away, and science is conceived entirely in terms of its practice, and thus in terms of its history. Experimentation, that once guaranteed contact with the forces of nature, are now seen as human creations, with the result that science, both natural and social, becomes one of the many activities that humans engage with in their historical existence. As such, it loses all aspirations to universality and atemporality. Like all the rest of the human world, science too is historicized. Though the adoption of Vico's epistemology allowed Sorel to make sense of the phenomenon of agency, it resulted in a radically different conception of both what science is and of what kind of knowledge it produces.

The kind of knowledge produced by the social sciences, in particular, is of a *genetic* kind, i.e. it is the historical knowledge of the origins of various human institutions and creations. This follows rather straightforwardly from the Vichian epistemology of *verum ipsum factum*: knowledge is the knowledge of the process through which a thing came to be what it is, and thus it is essentially historical knowledge. But the Vichian epistemology had another important implication, namely that it allowed – in fact, required – Sorel to finally affirm the human genesis of the social world, i.e. to affirm that the human world was the product of human agency. The conceptualization of the social world in terms of agency, in turn, amounted to a rejection of determinism. Because the human world is created by agency, and since human agency is creative, it results that its development does not follow laws, that it, and the knowledge that one can have of it, is essentially *historical*, i.e. that the human world is a temporal phenomenon that unfolds in terms of past, present, and future. Whereas the deterministic world of nature is atemporal, in the sense that laws either apply to it or do not, in the human world time is real. This means not only that only the past can be the object of social scientific knowledge, but that the future, because it will result from the actions of future agents, and because their actions will be creative and non-deterministic, becomes an illegitimate object of enquiry for the social sciences. Predictions, in simpler words, do not belong to the social scientific discourse.

The acknowledgment that the social world is the result of human agency and that this fact confers to it its intelligibility still left, however, a number of questions unanswered. More precisely, it left unanswered the huge question of how this agency deploys itself through history, and whether there are general criteria regulating its unfolding. How do, in other words, humans produce the social world in which they live, composed of juridical, ethical, economic and political relations? How do these social relations arise? Already in his writings

on Vico, Sorel had begun to develop the notion of institutions, arguing that they constitute the *loci* in which social relations develop. But the big question as to whether there are general criteria regulating the relationships amongst institutions and spheres of human activity remains. The importance of this question was that there was, in France, what was perceived as a standard Marxist answer: the structure of the social world is an economic one, and social relations that are not economic ones can always be reduced to this fundamental phenomenon. Sorel, however, refused this answer. Taking his cue from Labriola, he insisted on the impossibility of a general criterion regulating the interactions amongst institutions and forms of human activities: potentially, in the social world, everything interacts with everything, and thus it is impossible to establish a general hierarchy of social forms. Marxist social science, for Sorel, can only proceed on a case-by-case basis, precisely because it is aware of the constant interactions between the juridical, economic, political spheres in society.

The Marxism that Sorel came to elaborate then insisted greatly on the rejection of determinism in all its guises, whether it be the belief in a necessary evolution of the historical process or the belief in a necessary structure of the social world. The historical world of mankind was, in the end, the product of human agency embedded in institutions, and thus essentially a non-deterministic world. Beyond the rejection of economic and historical determinism, a third important point characterised Sorel's revision of Marxism, namely the understanding of social science, Marxism included, as historically conditioned and historically embedded rationality. Marxism could not represent an exception to the principles of historical materialism, and this implied that it could not understand itself as an unsituated, detached, social science. Increasingly, despite still clinging on to the language of 'science', Sorel came to see Marxism less as a general, unhistorical, sociology, and more as the theoretical production of an historically situated subjectivity, i.e. as the expression of the proletarian movement.

Having stripped Marxism of its predictive ambitions and having declared the fundamental absence of laws in the historical process, Sorel came to see, coherently with his understanding of the historical process, agency – the agency of the working class, more precisely – as the central and most fundamental aspect of Marxism. Everything in Marxism, from the theoretical elaboration to the political struggle, received its legitimacy from the vitality of the proletarian movement, and socialism consequently came to be seen as the historical triumph of the modern proletariat. The transformation from capitalism to socialism was conceived

accordingly as the development and eventual victory of a new set of social relations whose birthplace could only be the institutions of the workers' movement. Detaching himself from the catastrophist understanding of the transformation in terms of an inevitable collapse of the capitalist system, Sorel, despite his insistence on the impossibility of prediction, put much thought into the question of how a post-capitalist society could emerge. He conceptualized the transformation in a nuanced way, asking himself what would replace the old order, and his answer was that a new society could only arise through a process of proletarian institutional development, through what he called the 'work of preparation' of the proletariat. The revolution was not conceived in terms of merely an economic transformation, but as a more wide-ranging historical transformation of all sorts of social relations: economic ones of course, but also juridical, political and moral ones. The revolution, moreover, was not conceptualized as necessarily violent and insurrectional: in fact, Sorel believed that the presence of violence signalled the untimeliness of the revolutionary transformation, for it showed the strength of the old order. The revolution, more importantly, was not something that was bound to happen. Its possibility depended on the vitality of the new social force – the proletariat – and this historical vitality was a question of institutional development.

## 4.2 VICO AND THE HISTORICIST TURN

The conceptual difficulty that Sorel had not yet resolved by the time of his study of Durkheim was the following one: how does one understand, *scientifically*, human agency? We have seen that Sorel was partially dissatisfied with some of Durkheim's answers, and that he had remarked that 'in sociology, the word *cause* has a completely different meaning than in physics...'<sup>3</sup> In this passage, Sorel cast doubt over the legitimacy of constructing, statistically, theoretical objects in order to engage in sociological research: for him, this compromises the rigour of causal deduction. But there are passages in the essay on Durkheim in which the examination of society is conducted without any reference to causal relationships between elements. One of the problems with statistical models is that they miss what Sorel has already identified as a crucial element of sociological and historical phenomena, namely, agency. 'Amateur sociologists' he wrote 'have often understood this issue better than professionals... [amateurs] try to bring events to life, and insist much (too much, perhaps) on currents of opinion, centres of revolutionary agitation, political groups.'<sup>4</sup> Even if lacking in method, these

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<sup>3</sup> Sorel, 'Théories de Durkheim', p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 168. 'Les écrivains qui ne font pas dogmatiquement de la sociologie se sont souvent mieux rendu compte de cette situation que les professionnels... ils cherchent surtout à faire sentir la vie dans les événements

amateurs describe what strikes them most forcefully, and in sociology ‘what is striking is what is human, that is, *action considered from the perspective of the agent*.’<sup>5</sup> In order to deal with this aspect, rather than adopting as Durkheim does, a ‘terminology borrowed from physics’<sup>6</sup>, it would be better according to Sorel, to understand, as socialists do, that ‘institutions do not have a mysterious origin: they are human works’.<sup>7</sup> In short, what Sorel is doing here is connecting the genesis of human institutions to the agency of collectivities, and suggesting that it is by enquiring into this origin that they can be understood. This is why Marxism gives so much importance to the doctrine of class struggle, because, by identifying the relevant collectivities, it allows the social scientist to emphasize agency. Moreover, in dealing with the agency of what Sorel calls ‘active groups’, ‘their movements will have to be described through psychological qualifiers, and all analogy with physics is bound to lead us into error.’<sup>8</sup>

What is tentatively sketched here is the solution that Sorel will eventually adopt. It consists in the abandonment of the search for strong causal connections in favour of an enquiry into the genesis of institutions conducted by examining the agency of groups. But what Sorel is missing at this stage is a philosophical justification capable of legitimising the scientific credentials of this way of proceeding. Although this short examination of the importance of agency in sociology clearly departs<sup>9</sup> from his earlier structuralist attempts, it seems to come at the expense of the scientific status of the social sciences. This is because, in 1895, Sorel did not possess an alternative to the conception of science as concerned with regularities, prediction and with the knowledge of deterministic causal relations. And this conception of science was clearly incapable of dealing with human agency. In the absence of a new epistemological criterion, the conclusion that seemed to follow was that no science, in the strong sense, of society was possible.

#### 4.2.1 EXPERIMENTAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATIONALISM

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et ils insistent beaucoup (trop parfois peut être) sur les courants d’opinion, les centres d’agitation révolutionnaire, les sociétés politiques.’

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. ‘Sans avoir de principes arrêtés, ils disent ces qui les frappe : et ce qui est frappant dans le milieu humain est ce qui est humain, c’est-à-dire *l’action considérée dans l’agent*.’

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. ‘Si on voulait opérer comme M. Durkheim et adopter une nomenclature empruntée à la physique...’

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. ‘... les institutions ne sont pas des choses ayant une origine mystérieuse : ce sont des œuvres humaines...’

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 169. ‘Ainsi, nous possédons le moyen de reconnaître ce qu’il y a de vraiment humain dans la sociologie ; nous pouvons définir correctement les groupes actifs... Leurs mouvements devront être décrits avec des qualificatifs psychologiques et toute analogie tirée de la physique ne pourrait que nous induire en erreur...’

<sup>9</sup> And this distance is most clear in the important role that Sorel gives to psychology. It is sufficient to compare this to what he had had to say about psychology in the 1892 ‘Étude sur Proudhon’ or the 1894 ‘Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique’ to see the distance travelled by Sorel in the relevant years.



It might be objected, at this point, that we are attributing an excessively deterministic conception of science to Sorel: after all, his early epistemological writings had already emphasized the artificial dimension essential to all scientific activity. Had Sorel not insisted at length on the notion of artificial expressive supports? Had he not ventured into a tentative sociology and history of science, arguing that the scientific concepts through which scientists through history had carried on their activity derived both from a scientific tradition, and from a more general historical context? He had indeed. But he had also insisted on the strict separation of the artificial conceptual toolbox that was essential to science from the discovery of the actual relations that linked the phenomena examined. The tools through which we conduct scientific activity are man-made, but what we discover is not. This is the reason as to why experimental knowledge was fundamental to Sorel's philosophy of science. Only in experimental settings it is possible to come into contact with the deterministic laws regulating the natural world, and a scientific theory is not proved until it has passed this test. In fact, the 'certainty of science', Sorel had argued in 1894, 'is based on its industrial origin or, at least, in its participation to industrial life.'<sup>10</sup> The idea is that 'the industrial world is an immense physics laboratory in which we let natural energies deploy themselves according to artificial models.'<sup>11</sup> Thus, experiments were the moment in which, thanks to the employment of artificial tools, scientists entered into contact with the deterministic forces of nature, and understood them scientifically.

Though we have already made this point in the first chapter, it is useful to repeat that Sorel insisted a great deal on the fact that science *does* make claims about the natural world and that it can in no way be equated to a coherent human discourse whose relationship with the facts it describes is difficult to prove. The connection with the natural world is guaranteed, as we have seen, by experiments. Without experiments, science would amount to 'a number of widespread prejudices held by everyone' and would effectively be what Sorel had called in the 'Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique', the 'old error of universal consensus.'<sup>12</sup> The connection with the natural world is then absolutely crucial to Sorel's understanding of science, and moreover, this connection is configured along a representationalist model, i.e. a

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<sup>10</sup> Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx*, p. 217.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 205. 'On peut donc dire que le monde industriel est un immense cabinet de physique où l'on fait agir les énergies naturelles suivant des modes artificiels'.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 217. 'j'ai pas seulement dit que la science était sociale ; car on pourrait conclure que je donne le nom de science à certains préjugés répandus dans un pays et acceptés par tout le monde ; je n'entends pas revenir à la vieille bêtise du consentement universel.'

model according to which an enquiring subject tries to map out phenomena that are external to him. Again, the Sorel of 1894 provides us with rather clear indications on this matter:

‘In the last two centuries, we have tried to ground knowledge in a process that starts from man and moves outside of him; the materialist point of view (in the Marxist sense) is utterly opposed to this way of seeing things; I have many times repeated that I consider knowledge in the Greek manner: I believe that reality penetrates in us from the outside and leaves its print.’<sup>13</sup>

Despite all the insistence on the artificial conceptual toolbox through which we do science, science remains, as this quotation testifies, the process of mapping out a reality that is fundamentally external to man. In the years following the publication of the ‘Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique’, however, we begin to see an important change of emphasis in Sorel’s epistemology. Whereas in 1894 the stress was on how experiments allow us to make claims about the natural world, in 1896 he appeared to believe that experiments could only yield knowledge of the artificial *milieu*: ‘...scientific relations belong to the artificial and not the cosmic *milieu*... they are human works in a certain way and they do not pre-exist, eternally established, in some *divine place* as the old philosophy imagined.’<sup>14</sup> This, of course, endangers the entire scientific enterprise, for it breaks the connection between human representations and the natural phenomena that they are supposed to represent, effectively erecting a wall between science and reality. Sorel is aware of the problem: ‘If laws could be discovered merely by observation of cosmic phenomena [i.e. without experimentation] one would find... only empirical formulas; and if the artificial milieu [i.e. experiments] deformed the supreme reason of things, it would be absurd to base scientific research on experimentation.’<sup>15</sup> The solution to this dilemma given by Sorel in the beginning of 1896 is simplistic and unsatisfactory: he limits himself to assuming a preordained symmetry between

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 190. ‘Depuis deux siècles, on prétend fonder la connaissance sur un processus qui part de l’homme pour aller à l’extérieur ; le point de vue matérialiste (au sens marxiste du mot) est absolument opposé à cette manière de voir ; j’ai déjà eu l’occasion de dire, plusieurs fois, que je considérais la connaissance à la manière grecque : j’estime que la réalité pénètre en nous de l’extérieur et s’y imprime.’

<sup>14</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘La science dans l’éducation’, *Le Devenir Social* 2, 1896, p. 136. ‘... un fait très réel, à savoir que les relations scientifiques appartiennent au milieu artificiel et non au milieu cosmique, qu’elles sont œuvre humaine dans un certain sens et qu’elles ne préexistent pas formées de toute éternité dans un *lieu divin*, comme l’avait supposé la philosophie antique.’ Of course, this amounts to breaking the connection between science and reality, between the scientific representation of something and the

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. ‘...si la loi cherchée ne pouvait être découverte que par l’observation des phénomènes cosmiques, on ne trouverait, généralement, que des formules empiriques ; -et si le milieu artificiel déformait la suprême raison des choses, il serait absurde de faire reposer sur l’expérimentation toute recherche scientifique.’

the artificial and the natural milieus, speaking of the ‘rational identity of the two environments.’<sup>16</sup>

The question of how we can establish the connection between our subjective representations and objective reality is a classical dilemma of modern philosophy, and becomes virtually unsolvable once we ascribe, as Sorel does, an essentially artificial and subjective character to our representations. The problem is a fundamental one, and its examination takes us to the philosophical core of Sorel’s engagement with Marxism, and, indeed, of his wider philosophical project. As soon as Sorel ascribes to experimental knowledge an essentially artificial character, he reaches a point where the classical representationalist model of knowledge breaks. It becomes impossible to conceive of knowledge as a more or less faithful representation of reality, for there is no way of connecting man-made representations to natural states of affairs. The only solution consists in an epistemological revolution, i.e. in a different conception of knowledge. In his introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel dissects the problem with great clarity. He writes:

‘If knowledge is the instrument to take hold of absolute Reality, the suggestion immediately occurs that the application of an instrument to a thing does not leave the thing as it is, but brings about a shaping and alteration of it. Or, if knowledge is not an instrument for our activity, but a more or less passive medium through which the light of truth reaches us, then again we do not receive this truth as it is in itself, but as it is in and through this medium. In both cases we employ a means which immediately brings about the opposite of its own end...’<sup>17</sup>

In other words, once we ascribe, as Sorel does, a transformative character to the activity of science, we end up with a distinction between how things are for our consciousness and how they are in themselves. Moreover, knowledge of things in themselves seems unreachable. Now, the standard Kantian answer to this dilemma is that of engaging in a critique of knowledge, an enquiry into ‘the way in which the *instrument* operates’<sup>18</sup> in order that we may know under what conceptual constraints our scientific activity takes place. But again, according to Hegel, this solution is incapable of yielding to us the knowledge of things as they are in themselves. If our scientific activity modifies that which it examines, then an understanding of how this modification takes place is powerless in giving to us the thing in itself, for even supposing that we could characterize and know the extent and manner of this

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. ‘... l’identité rationnelle des deux milieux, identité qui forme le postulat de toute experimentation...’

<sup>17</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §73.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §73.

modification, we would not be able to remove it without falling back into a pre-scientific, commonsensical understanding of things, thereby going back to where we started from. In other words, it is unclear how an understanding of the conceptual constraints to which our scientific activity is subjected is able to yield knowledge of things as they are in themselves.<sup>19</sup>

One ‘solution’, or perhaps capitulation to this problem, is the Kantian one according to which science operates at the level of modified representations of things, *phenomena*, and is powerless to examine things in themselves, *noumena*. The Hegelian solution moves, however, in a different direction. Hegel begins by pointing to the ease with which these preoccupations lead to scepticism, and wonders whether the mistake may not lie in conceptualizing science in terms of things and their representations:

‘Meanwhile, if the fear of falling into error introduces an element of distrust into science, which without any scruples of that sort goes to work and actually does know, it is not easy to understand why, conversely, a distrust should not be placed in this very distrust, and why we should not take care lest the fear of error is not just the initial error.’<sup>20</sup>

Hegel goes on to show that the problem is framed in a particular manner: the representationalist view presupposes ‘ideas of knowledge as an instrument, and as a medium, and presupposes a distinction of ourselves from this knowledge. More especially it takes for granted that the Absolute stands on one side, and that knowledge on the other side...’<sup>21</sup>. The issue, for Hegel, cannot be satisfyingly resolved under this paradigm, and so he proposes to subject these presuppositions to critical analysis, an analysis that will reveal, in the famous sentence, that representationalism is ‘a position which, while calling itself fear of error, makes itself known rather as fear of the truth.’<sup>22</sup>

The point here is that Sorel, as we have seen at the beginning of the section, was coming close to a very similar dilemma by 1896. The emphasis put on the artificial character of experimental knowledge cast doubts over whether science could make claims about the natural world. More importantly, the epistemological stance, and the conception of science to which Sorel still held, were not able to account for human agency, whether this agency was deployed in the historical genesis of human institutions or in the construction of scientific

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<sup>19</sup> ‘...if the examination of knowledge, which we represent as a medium, makes us acquainted with the law of its refraction, it is likewise useless to eliminate this refraction from the result. For knowledge is not the divergence of the ray, but the ray itself...’Hegel, *Phenomenology*, § 73.

<sup>20</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §74.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

concepts. Both these elements made the discovery of a way of dealing, scientifically, with the artificial *milieu* a priority. What Sorel needed was an epistemological approach capable of yielding knowledge of the artificial environment, an environment that was essentially understood in terms of human agency. Much like in Hegel's case then, the solution consisted in a radical epistemological break with the representationalist paradigm and with a new definition of knowledge that Sorel found not in Hegel, but in a short formula first expressed in 1710 by Giambattista Vico: *verum esse ipsum factum*.

#### 4.2.2 VERUM IPSUM FACTUM AND VICHIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

Sorel's encounter with Vico can be dated to some months before the autumn of 1896, when he published a long and important essay on the Neapolitan philosopher in the pages of the *Devenir Social*.<sup>23</sup> Though it is not completely clear through what channels Sorel discovered Vico, a few hypotheses can be advanced. The most reasonable guess is that the reading of Vico is the first important consequence of the Sorel-Croce-Labriola triangulation. We know that Labriola had lectured on Vico in 1887, and that he again lectured on him as a 'precursor' of historical materialism in 1894/1895, in his lectures that were to constitute the basis of his *Del Materialismo Storico*.<sup>24</sup> In the spring of 1895 Labriola, after having published his essay on the *Communist Manifesto* in the *Devenir Social*, tells Croce, 'I am thinking about the second booklet: Perhaps "From Vico to Morgan"',<sup>25</sup> and in those months he enquires with Croce about a book on Vico.<sup>26</sup> It is highly likely that Labriola would have spoken to Sorel about Vico, but, in the absence of definitive proof, we cannot go beyond a consideration of this as a high probability. The conceptual similarities between the lessons learnt by Sorel from Vico and from Labriola seem to reinforce this hypothesis.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Étude sur Vico', *Le Devenir Social* 2, 1896, pp. 785-817, 906-41 and 1013-46.

<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Croce dated 8/12/1894 Labriola writes that for this academic year he will 'unite under the title of "the materialist conception of history" all my courses from past years', amongst which we find an 1887 course entitled 'Vico the precursor'. Labriola, *Lettere a Croce*, p. 60. 'Vorrei che fossi quest'anno a Roma per udire le mie lezioni di filosofia della storia, nelle quali raccolgo finalmente sotto il titolo: "la concezione materialistica della storia" tutti i miei corsi degli anni precedenti (-e in forma sistematica): e cioè i corsi:

1887 – Vico precursore

1887-88. a) Historica e Filologia -2) origini della società moderna

1888-89 – La rivoluzione francese

1889-90 – Dei rapporti fra Chiesa e Stato da Costantino alla pace di Westfalia

1890-91 La preistoria e la

1891-92 dottrina di Morgan

1892-93 La genesi del socialismo

1893-94 moderno'.

<sup>25</sup> Labriola, letter to Croce 20/5/1895, in Labriola, *Lettere a Croce*, p. 72. 'Io sto già pensando al secondo opuscolo. Forse "da Vico a Morgan".'

<sup>26</sup> Letters to Croce 28/5/1895 and 5/6/1895, in Labriola, *Lettere a Croce*, pp. 74-5. The book was the study on Vico by Scottish theologian Robert Flint. Robert Flint, *Vico* (Edinburgh, Blackwood and Sons: 1884).

A second and more direct access is constituted by Jules Michelet's Vico translations. Michelet's complete works came out between 1893 and 1898, edited by Gabriel Monod. In fact, as Sorel himself reveals, his access to Vico is through 'Michelet's translation, [and more specifically, the] 1894 edition. The volume includes, in addition to the *Scienza Nuova*, Vico's autobiography, the treaty on the ancient wisdom of Italy, and some minor works.'<sup>27</sup> As is to be expected when a thinker of a certain stature engages with another such thinker, Michelet's selective translations of Vico display evidence of Michelet's preoccupations as much as they do of Vico's own. On a general level, post-Revolutionary France was ripe to welcome a philosopher whose insistence on the importance of poetry and anti-Cartesianism fit well with an emerging Romantic mood. But there is more. Tellingly, the title given to the abridged translation of the *Scienza Nuova* was *Principes de la Philosophie de l'Histoire*. The picture of Vico which characterized his French reception is that of a philosopher of history, and it is in this capacity that Vico made his fortune in post-Napoleonic France. Generations that had witnessed the terrifying powers of historical forces were bound to be receptive to the question of history, and this explains the enthusiasm generated by Michelet's translations. As Alain Pons writes, arguing for such a Romantic reception of Vico: 'For contemporaries, as well as for the following generations, the radical upheavals provoked by the Revolution in France and Europe put forward questions to which only a philosophical meditation on history could provide answers.'<sup>28</sup>

Both for Labriola and for Michelet then the importance of Vico was linked to his insights into historical methodology. For Sorel too, as we are about to see, Vico was important insofar as he opened up the possibility of a rational understanding of the artificial *milieu*, and

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<sup>27</sup> Sorel, 'Étude sur Vico', p. 785n. 'Les citations que je ferai se rapportent toutes à la traduction de Michelet, édition de 1894: ce volume comprend, en plus de la *Science Nouvelle*, l'autobiographie de Vico, le traité sur l'antique sagesse de l'Italie et quelques opuscules.' The work to which Sorel refers is the 27th volume of the complete works of Michelet, edited by Gabriel Monod, dedicated to the Vico translations and containing, as indicated by Sorel, substantial extracts from Vico's most important works as well as a generous selection of letters and articles: Jules Michelet, *Œuvres Complètes, vol. XXVII: Vico*, edited by Gabriel Monod (Paris, Flammarion: 1894). Michelet's translations, originally dating from 1827, inaugurated a somewhat of a Vico fad in the France of the mid nineteenth century, to the point that even Balzac, in his *L'illustre Gaudissart*, mentions the Neapolitan philosopher. 'One can be a genius' writes Balzac 'and live unacknowledged.... This was almost the case with the great Saint-Simon, and that of Mr Vico, man of talent who begins now to be acknowledged. He is well, Vico! That makes me happy.' Honoré de Balzac, *L'illustre Gaudissart* [1833], quoted in Alain Pons, 'De la « nature commune des nations » au Peuple romantique. Note sur Vico et Michelet', *Romantisme* 9, 1975, p. 42. 'On peut être un beau génie et vivre ignoré. C'est une farce... qui a failli être le cas du grand Saint Simon, et celui de monsieur Vico, homme fort qui commence à se pousser. Il va bien, Vico ! J'en suis content...'

<sup>28</sup> Alain Pons, 'Vico et la pensée française', *Études philosophiques* 23, 1968, p. 369. 'Pour les contemporains comme pour les générations immédiatement postérieures, les bouleversements radicaux provoqués par la Révolution en France et en Europe posent des questions auxquelles seule une méditation philosophique sur l'histoire permet de répondre.'

consequently of the historical process. This brings us to the final and most obvious observation concerning Sorel's access to Vico. As highlighted in Sorel's study, Vico is cited in Marx's *Capital*: comparing Darwin's works to his own intellectual project, the German philosopher justified the study of the productive organs of social man on the fact that 'as Vico states, human history differs from natural history in this, that we have made the former but not the latter...'.<sup>29</sup>

The idea that the intelligibility of history is guaranteed by its human genesis, what Sorel calls 'the conception of the construction of history by man'<sup>30</sup>, appears however to beg the question. The fact that Sorel enthusiastically endorses this conception shows the increasing importance that he attributed to the fact of agency. Nonetheless, the assertion that historical phenomena are human productions does not appear to solve Sorel's problems concerning the conceptualization of agency in the social sciences: in fact, it appears to be a mere re-statement of the problem. If history were the product of forces operating constantly through time, then we would have some hope of establishing a scientific study of it. But how is this forceful restatement of the centrality of human agency in history supposed to make a rational study of the human world any easier?

The answer is that, in addition to the idea that history is the product of human activity, Sorel took from Vico something else, namely an epistemological principle concerning the nature of knowledge – the abovementioned *verum ipsum factum*. Let us explore this theory of knowledge more in detail. As Sorel correctly remarks, Vico's epistemological theses are developed in opposition to the anti-historical Cartesianism of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> In search for an epistemological principle capable of vindicating historical knowledge and of neutralising Descartes' *cogito* Vico arrived at a definition of knowledge that essentially asserted that to know a thing is to have the knowledge of how that thing came to be. From this it followed that only the maker of a given thing can have a proper knowledge of it: 'the criterion and rule of truth is to have made it'.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand this equation of the known with the made – the principle of *verum ipsum factum* – effectively reduced Descartes' *cogito* to banal self-awareness, to mere 'consciousness (*conscientia*), not science (*scientia*), and

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<sup>29</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London, Lawrence and Wishart: 1954), p. 352n. Cited in Sorel, 'Étude sur Vico', p. 786.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 'C'est cette conception de la construction de l'histoire par l'homme, qui constitue la partie originale de l'oeuvre de Vico...'

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, pp 810-11.

<sup>32</sup> Giambattista Vico, *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia* [1710], trans. by Jason Taylor (London, Yale University Press: 2010), p. 27.

commonplace knowledge available even to a person without any learning...’<sup>33</sup> The certainty of the *cogito* cannot amount to science, since ‘while the mind knows itself, it does not make itself’.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the principle establishes a new hierarchy amongst the sciences. The natural sciences are put at an immense epistemological disadvantage, since man is not the creator of nature: ‘... one science is more certain than another only inasmuch as it is less immersed in bodily matter than another’<sup>35</sup>. In other words, in sciences such as physics we attempt to gain knowledge of something, the natural world, which God has created and only God can thus know in the strong sense. Mathematical knowledge is, conversely, possible, but only since man ‘finds within himself a sort of world of forms and numbers, a universe circumscribed by himself’<sup>36</sup> and thus can arrive at the knowledge of this artificial universe. Of course, the price to pay for the certainty of mathematical knowledge thus conceived is that mathematics become powerless to explain reality, and become merely a logical game with internal coherence: as Croce remarks ‘the certainty that he [Vico] claims for that reasoning [mathematical reasoning] is... acquired at the expense of reality... the stress... falls not so much on the truth of such disciplines but on their arbitrariness.’<sup>37</sup>

Conversely, and this is the decisive point, the study of history is fully vindicated by *verum ipsum factum* since the object under examination has been created by humans themselves. Of course, the step is not unproblematic since it is not clear exactly how the chaotic mass of historical phenomena – cultures, institutions, economic systems, arts – can be said to be made by the human spirit in the same way as mathematics can be said to be. This is a separate question that shall be addressed in a short while. Nonetheless, the argumentative logic is sufficiently clear: to know is to have knowledge of origins, it is thus to have made the thing that one wishes to understand, and human history is the product of human activity. Consequently, it is the most perfect object of science:

‘But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never-failing light of a truth beyond

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 33. The original latin reads: ‘Sed certitudinem, quod cogitet, conscientiam contendit esse, non scientiam & vulgarem cognitionem, quae in indoctum quemis cadat...’.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 27. The expression for ‘the mind knows itself’ is ‘se mens cognoscit’.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Benedetto Croce, *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico* [1911] (Bari, Laterza: 1933), p. 10. ‘...la sicurezza che egli vanta di quel procedere è, per sua medesima confessione, acquistata a spese della realtà; e che, insomma, l’accento della teoria non cade tanto sulla verità di quelle discipline quanto sulla loro arbitrarietà.’



all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.’<sup>38</sup>

It is important to spend a few words on the question of what kind of knowledge is being conceptualized here, for constitutes the blueprint of the type of knowledge that Sorel will ascribe to the social sciences. Unlike the knowledge produced by the natural sciences, the knowledge that one can have of the human world is *genetic*, i.e. concerns the process through which a thing becomes what it is. In the words of Vico, it is the ‘knowledge of the genus, or mode, by which a thing comes to be’.<sup>39</sup> From this genetic understanding of knowledge, it follows, as already stated, that the most perfect knowledge is that which a producer has of his productions. Thus, whereas the older ‘Greek’ conception of science to which Sorel subscribed presupposes a rigid but epistemologically-problematic separation between the enquirer and the object of enquiry, between the natural and the artificial *milieus*, the Vichian criterion justifies knowledge precisely on the abandonment of the epistemological dualism between subject and object. Knowledge thus is not the correct representation of an alien object, but the understanding of one’s own productions and thus, essentially, an elaborate form of self-knowledge.<sup>40</sup> It is precisely the underlying unity between the enquirer and the object of enquiry that guarantees the possibility of knowledge. As Croce wrote in 1913, the historical understanding conceptualized by Vico displays ‘an indissoluble connection between the subject and the object of knowledge’<sup>41</sup>.

Philosophically speaking, two points have to be highlighted. For a start, this connection between knowing subject and object of knowledge resolves the problem of the matching

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<sup>38</sup> Vico, *Scienza Nuova*, bk. I, ch. III. English translation from *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press: 1948), pp. 52-3.

<sup>39</sup> Vico, *De Antiquissima*, p. 19. ‘...scientia sit cognitio generis, seu modi, quo res fiat.’

<sup>40</sup> This means that the epistemological paradigm has been changed. Instead of a representationalist one in which we have an observing self and an observed object, we have what we could call a *reason in action* paradigm in which knowledge is self-understanding, i.e. the moment in which a knowing subject understands its own activity. Though he does not stress this important epistemological point, Isaiah Berlin dedicates a short essay to Vico’s theory of knowledge in which he brings out quite well the peculiarities of the Vichian conception. For Berlin, Vico ‘uncovered a species of knowing not previously clearly discriminated, the embryo that later grew into the ambitious and luxuriant plant of German historicist *Verstehen* – empathetic insight, intuitive sympathy, historical *Einfühlung* and the like’. The sense of knowing at stake is, for Berlin, different both from propositional knowledge – knowing that – and from practical knowledge – knowing how. It is ‘a sense of knowing which is basic to all humane studies: the sense in which I know what it is to be poor, to fight for a cause, to belong to a nation’. Further on, and perhaps more insightfully: Vichian knowledge is ‘the sort of knowing which participants in an activity claim to possess as against mere observers: the knowledge of the actors as against that of the audience.’ See Isaiah Berlin, ‘Vico’s concept of knowledge’ [1969] in his *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London, Hogarth: 1979), pp. 116-17.

<sup>41</sup> Croce, *La filosofia di Vico*, p. 23. ‘La verità dei principi generatori della storia nasce, dunque, non dalla forza dell’idea chiara e distinta, ma dalla connessione indissolubile del soggetto con l’oggetto della conoscenza.’

between artificial representations and the objects of enquiry, since both the creation and the understanding of history are the activity of the same human mind.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, since knowledge is genetic, i.e. the knowledge of how a thing came to be that which it is, it is an essentially *temporal* and hence *historical* kind of knowledge. Whereas, as we have previously highlighted, knowledge in terms of laws is atemporal, the Vichian conception of knowledge does justice to the diachronic, temporal dimension of phenomena in a way that no causal relation can.

#### 4.2.3 THE HISTORICAL GENESIS OF HUMAN IDEAS

The Vichian notion of *verum ipsum factum* thus is absolutely fundamental for Sorel. The principle legitimizes the study of the historical world of mankind without having to exclude human agency: in fact, it is precisely the centrality of agency in history that allows the historian to understand it. Nonetheless, the adoption of this apparently minimal epistemological principle is a true epistemological revolution that has profound consequences for Sorel's conception of science in general and of social science in particular. This should not surprise us too much. As we have outlined in chapter two, the importance that Sorel gave to agency sat uneasily with the deterministic conception of science he held to. The discovery of a principle capable of accounting for agency then led Sorel to a radical reshaping of his conception of science. In other words, the science based on Vico's epistemology is radically different from the activity that discovers deterministic causal connections. Thus, starting from this principle, Sorel will engage in a much-needed redefinition of the scope, ambition, and methods of both the social and the natural sciences.

The argument that Sorel deduces from Vico, to be clear, is made in two steps. On the one hand there is the epistemological principle that bases knowledge on human agency, *verum ipsum factum*. On the other, however, there is the assertion that history is wholly constituted by this agency, since it is made by humans. This means that, thanks to the principle of *verum ipsum factum*, Sorel is able to radically historicize the *entirety* of human thought. This, in turn, has profound consequences for the epistemic status of natural and social sciences, consequences that are similar to those deduced by Vico from his epistemological principle: on

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<sup>42</sup> This is a point that Sorel had somewhat anticipated, tentatively, in the essay on Durkheim, as he stated, citing Marx's *Misère de la philosophie*, that 'all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature'. See Marx, *The poverty of philosophy* [1847] in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6 (London, Lawrence and Wishart: 1976), p. 192.

the one hand, we have the legitimation of the social sciences, while on the other, the possibility that natural sciences might make claims about the natural world is now abandoned.

The principle that Sorel invokes to conceptualize this historicization is what he calls ‘Vico’s ideogenetic law’.<sup>43</sup> The law consists in the Vichian teaching that one ought to ‘look for the origins of our metaphysical constructions in the more or less empirical constructions of social life’<sup>44</sup> or, more elegantly put, the law explains ‘the formation of philosophy under the influence of the spectacle offered by the practice of political life.’<sup>45</sup> It follows, to start with that the epistemic ambition of the natural sciences are drastically lowered. The experiments of natural sciences, for example, are now conceived as human activities whose rationality resides precisely in their artificial and man-made character, in a similar way in which Sorel had described them in his ‘Science dans l’éducation’. ‘Man’ writes Sorel ‘does not place himself, as philosophers normally claim, in front of nature to observe it and know it. The scientist works on material bequeathed to him by previous generations, and this material belongs to what we now call the *artificial milieu*. It is thus in a milieu made by mankind that we practice out induction, and not in the cosmic milieu.’<sup>46</sup> ‘When we conduct an experiment’ continues Sorel ‘we do not imitate nature; we employ combinations and tools that are truly ours... Experimentation is thus a form of creation; it belongs entirely to the artificial milieu: it is at once the made and the true.’<sup>47</sup> The possibility that natural sciences might be able to make

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 906.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 801. ‘...il [Vico] nous apprend à chercher l’origine de nos constructions métaphysiques dans les constructions plus ou moins empiriques de la vie sociale.’

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 906. ‘...la formation de la philosophie sous l’influence du spectacle offert par la pratique de la vie politique.’

<sup>46</sup> Sorel, ‘Étude sur Vico’, pp. 813-14. ‘...l’homme ne se met pas, comme le disent d’ordinaire les philosophes, en face de la nature, pour l’observer et la connaître. Le savant travaille sur une matière qui lui a été fournie par les générations antérieures ; cette matière appartient à ce que nous appelons aujourd’hui le *milieu artificiel* ; c’est donc dans un milieu fait par l’humanité que nous pratiquons l’induction et non dans le milieu cosmique.’

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 816. ‘Quand nous faisons une expérience, nous n’imitons pas la nature : nous employons des combinaisons, des outils, qui sont bien le nôtres : nous cherchons à produire des mouvements qui ne se réalisent jamais dans le milieu cosmique. L’expérimentation est donc une création : elle appartient tout entière au milieu artificiel : elle est à la fois le fait et le vrai.’ In a footnote to these lines, Sorel refers to a passage in *Capital* in which Marx, citing the Italian economist Pietro Verri, speaks about the creation of use-value through work. Using Verri, Marx writes that the creation of use-value through work consists merely in ‘changing the form of matter’. In her critical annotations of the study of Vico, Anne-Sophie Menasseyre is puzzled by this reference, and concludes sarcastically by saying that there is some distance between *Capital* and the ‘Étude sur Vico’. Though Sorel’s reference is undoubtedly far-fetched, approximate and difficult to follow, it is not completely devoid of content. Both in Sorel’s reflection on experimentation and Marx’s on use-value and labour we have the same basic scheme at work, that of a human activity receiving its legitimation, epistemic in one case and economic in the other, from a confrontation with nature. Man’s work requires matter in order to generate use-value (‘labour is its father and the earth its mother’, writes Marx of use-value), in the same way in which experimental settings require natural forces in order to yield scientific conclusions. In both cases, moreover, human activity is an ordering one, it imposes rational form upon the chaotic material. See Marx, *Capital*, p. 50

claims about the natural world is thus put in serious doubt: ‘we never know truly the cosmic world; but we are able to know the artificial world for we make it – on the first we can have opinions and form hypotheses, the second gives us science.’<sup>48</sup>

The idea that natural science has a history, and perhaps even a sociology, is of course, not entirely new. In fact, many of the arguments Sorel uses to illustrate the historical dimension of the natural sciences are taken almost *verbatim* from his earlier writings.<sup>49</sup> But while, previously, the emphasis on constructed conceptual tools was accompanied by the idea that, thanks to experiments, these tools allow us to make claims about the natural world, now this latter idea is abandoned and what remains is the agency of individuals and collectivities. We have seen in the previous section that already in the ‘Science dans l’éducation’ Sorel had characterized experiments as belonging to the artificial *milieu*. But in that text Sorel had added an important rejoinder concerning the ‘rational identity of the two environments.’<sup>50</sup> This rejoinder allowed him to hold on to the idea that the natural sciences were able to describe and to make claims about the natural milieu. But this time the rejoinder is abandoned, with the conclusion that the natural milieu can at best be the object of ‘opinions and hypotheses’, but not of science. Everything is thoroughly historicized, everything is immersed in the historical world of mankind. Natural sciences, social sciences, institutions, ethical convictions, juridical systems: all are conceptualized as human productions, results of the historical agency of humankind. This, of course, has relativistic implications of which Sorel is acutely, and, it seems at times, painfully aware.

This emerges clearly in Sorel’s treatment of Vico’s notion of an ideal and recurring history guided by divine Providence. For Sorel, the reason as to why Vico had to postulate this theory is precisely to fight the relativistic implications of his ideogenetic law, i.e. the imperative ‘to look for the origins of our metaphysical constructions in the more or less empirical constructions of social life’.<sup>51</sup> Science and ethics are generally understood to be ahistorical:

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and Georges Sorel, *Étude sur Vico et autres textes*, ed. by Anne-Sophie Menasseyre (Paris, Champion: 2007), pp. 108n and 192.

<sup>48</sup> Sorel, ‘Étude sur Vico’, p. 817. ‘Nous ne connaissons jamais vraiment le monde cosmique ; mais nous devons connaître le monde artificiel parce que nous le faisons ; sur le premier nous pouvons avoir des opinions et former des hypothèses ; le second nous fournit la science.’

<sup>49</sup> For example, in order to stress the social nature of scientific and intellectual activity, he engages in a polemic against the epistemological individualism of Cartesianism that can be found, expressed almost identically, both in the ‘Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique’ (see pp. 195-200 for example) and in earlier writings such as the ‘Deux nouveaux sophismes sur le temps’ See Sorel, ‘Étude sur Vico’, pp. 811-13.

<sup>50</sup> Sorel, ‘La science dans l’éducation’, p. 136.

<sup>51</sup> Sorel, ‘Étude sur Vico’, p. 801.

scientific laws operate irrespectively of human history, and what was immoral yesterday is still immoral today. This, at least, is Sorel's starting assumption. But Vico's principle seems to invalidate this. This is why, according to Sorel, Vico has to postulate a cyclical and recurring history. 'It is necessary' he writes 'that the experimental bases of the science of ethics display enough uniformity so that reflexive thought is not exposed to the danger of finding contradictory moralities.... These contradictions in the human spirit could not be reconciled with the existence of right in God...'<sup>52</sup>. In order to avoid this relativism that, according to Sorel, Vico needs to postulate a providential guidance of history and the cyclical conception of *storia ideale*: '...since these [philosophical] principles [of right] have to be found by induction, by studying the historical movement, one has to admit that the historical movement has already operated in a complete manner [in order to avoid relativism].'<sup>53</sup>

Abstractly put, the problem is that of reconciling a thorough historicism with substantial standards of truth and rationality. Though he rejects Vico's providential solution as being too transcendental,<sup>54</sup> and in too stark a contrast with the historicist principle concerning the social genesis of human ideas, he is acutely aware of the problem, particularly when it comes to two aspects of human activity: ethics and science. The following passage is rather clear:

'Thus, ideal history has perished, buried by the development of historical research; it remains only a memory of the past; but the ethical problem to which it gave so simple and satisfying a solution remains, and cannot be abandoned like a thing of the past. In the science of nature there is a similar issue which contemporary philosophy has proven powerless to resolve. Criticism of the idea of God has shaken the foundations of various types of knowledge, whose

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 804. 'Il faut que les bases expérimentales de la science éthique présentent assez d'uniformité pour que la pensée réfléchie ne soit pas exposée à trouver des morales contradictoires... Ces contradictions dans l'esprit humain ne pourraient se concilier avec l'existence du Droit en Dieu.'

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 805. 'Mais puisque ces principes doivent être trouvés par induction, en étudiant le mouvement historique, il faut admettre que le mouvement historique a été opéré déjà d'une manière complète.'

<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to remark that while for Sorel Vico's *storia ideale eterna* is a transcendental solution to the relativism engendered by his own historicist principles, Benedetto Croce sees things in the opposite way. The question revolves around the agency of Providence in human affairs. Remarking that, according to Vico, Providence always acts, as it were, in spite of the intentions of historical actors, Sorel concludes that it bears an excessively transcendental character and amounts essentially to a 'supernatural cause' ('Étude sur Vico', pp. 795-6). For Croce, writing in 1911, things are quite different. The discrepancy between the intentions of historical agents and the providential outcome is what allows history to be more than the chronicle of the illusions that such agents harbour about their actions, since 'those who are the direct agents of a[n historical] fact do not have its full knowledge, or, if they do, it is an imperfect and misleading knowledge; so much that the illusions that accompany the deeds of men have become proverbial.' (*La filosofia di Vico*, p. 116). The transcendental interpretation of providential agency is, for Croce, out of the question: the concept is a fully immanent one: 'Vichian Providence, i.e. the rationality and objectivity of history following a different logic from that attributed to it by individual imaginations and illusions, took [in the 19<sup>th</sup> century] a more prosaic name with Hegel's concept of the cunning of reason, but did not change its essential character.' (*La filosofia di Vico*, p. 254).

certainty rested on the old conception of “God within nature”. Nowadays, science does not seem to be guaranteed against contingency; the point of reference has disappeared... It is not easy to answer those who ask what becomes of right in the materialist conception of history. The difficulty is the same one presented above, since an immutable right resting on a divine Idea has disappeared, much like the total science possessed by God. It would be fruitless to deny the difficulties which result from the new principles; but this is not a reason to go back to doctrines which we know to be false... It is precisely because we recognize its importance [of the problem of right and ethics] that we do not want to accept illusory solutions.<sup>55</sup>

Both science and ethics are seen as thoroughly human productions, the result of human agency. But this invalidates their universal and, essentially, ahistorical character. What Sorel does not yet seem to notice is that this principle would seem to hold for social science as well. If the natural sciences are the formalization of scientific practice, and if ethical maxims emerge out of the moral practices of individuals within communities, ought not social science equally reflect a number of social experiences? This question, Sorel does not yet approach. In any case, the search for strong causal connections in the historical world of humankind is conclusively rejected.

‘Without doubt, we lose, once more, the hope of unifying things through abstract formulas, of establishing an historical science that has an analogy with physical sciences; but this negative outcome guarantees the worth of historical materialism... We know now that historical laws do not express the effect of a cause but that they represent, in a mistakenly unitary guise, an infinite complexity of causes... We do not look for unity in the *immanent tendencies* of mankind, which one imagines in order to give a substance to the appearances of history, but in psychological evolutions, that are hidden under the cloak of historical laws.’<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 808-9. ‘Ainsi l’histoire idéale a péri, ensevelie par le développement des recherches historiques ; elle ne constitue plus qu’un souvenir ; mais le problème éthique, dont elle donnait une solution jugée jadis si simple et si satisfaisante, reste entier et ne peut pas être laissé de côté comme une vieillerie. Dans la science de la nature existe aussi une question de même genre que la philosophie contemporaine s’est montrée également impuissante à résoudre. La critique de l’idée divine a ébranlé toutes les bases des connaissances, qui appuyaient leur certitude sur l’ancienne conception de « Dieu dans la nature ». La science ne semble plus, aujourd’hui, garantie contre la contingence ; le point fixe a disparu... Il ne paraît pas qu’il soit facile de donner non plus une réponse aux gens qui demandent ce que devient le droit dans les conceptions matérialistes de l’histoire. La difficulté est la même que ci-dessus, le droit immuable et posé dans l’Idée divine comme la science possédée totalement par Dieu. Rien ne servirait de nier les difficultés qui résultent des nouveaux principes ; mais ce n’est pas une raison pour restaurer des doctrines dont l’inexactitude est notoire... C’est justement parce que nous en [of the ‘problème éthique’] reconnaissons l’importance que nous ne voulons pas accepter de solutions illusoire.’

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 913-14. It is worth citing the entire passage: ‘Sans doute, nous perdons, une fois de plus, l’espoir de faire une unification des choses d’après des formules abstraites, de constituer une science historique ayant une analogie quelconque avec les sciences physiques mais ce résultat négatif nous est une garantie de la valeur même des considérations propres au matérialisme historique. A la place d’une unité factice, nous avons trouvé l’unité concrète et vivante de l’homme obligé de suivre certaines voies, toujours les mêmes, pour s’élever à la connaissance intellectuelle et rajeunissant toujours son histoire sans jamais pouvoir l’épuiser. Nous savons,

We are quite distant from the search for causal regularities that had characterized Sorel's early social scientific attempts. Laws are, at best, simplifications, but they do not operate constantly throughout the historical process. What gives human history its unity, and thus allows the historian to understand it, is the fact that it is the product of human agency, however vaguely defined.

#### 4.2.4 AGENCY, INSTITUTIONS AND REVOLUTION

The thorough historicism that Sorel develops from his reading of Vico, however, suffers from the vagueness with which the deployment of human agency through history is dealt with. Though the general argument is clear, its important details are not. The human world is a series of human productions, but how do – concretely – various social and intellectual forms arise in the historical process? In order to clarify Sorel's answer, it is necessary to anticipate that Sorel refuses to provide, à la Hegel, a clear outline of the succession of social forms through history and proceeds, in the study of Vico, in a completely empirical manner, addressing specific questions and avoiding general answers. As we shall see later on, it is only with the reading of Labriola that he will offer an argument justifying his refusal to specify a general criterion.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, one of the weaknesses of Marxism in France was its perceived inability to make sense of law and of ethics. It is unsurprising then that, in addition to science, which we have examined in the previous section, Sorel dedicates to these two questions quite a lot of space in the 'Étude sur Vico'. Both ethics and law, to be sure, are seen as historical human productions, arising from given social conditions and societies. More precisely however, these human productions arise when the collective life of people is organized into what Sorel calls institutions. Now, this ill-defined but ever present concept plays an important role, for, however vaguely, it is an attempt to specify more concretely how human agency deploys itself in history, and how it is able to produce the complex systems that we call morality and law. What are then institutions? Sorel never quite defines this satisfyingly, so a little guesswork is required. Institutions are the organizational forms of *collective* life, this much seems to be guaranteed. They are, moreover, intermediate social

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maintenant, que les lois historiques ne traduisent pas l'effet d'une cause, mais qu'elles représentent sous un aspect facticement unitaire une complexité infinie de causes ce qu'elles décrivent ne se reproduira jamais et ne s'est jamais produit, parce que pour trouver la reproduction de combinaisons aussi multiples, dont la coïncidence est si accidentelle, il faut faire une hypothèse n'ayant aucune probabilité. Nous ne cherchons plus l'unité dans les tendances immanentes de l'homme, que l'on imagine pour donner un corps aux apparences de l'histoire, mais dans les évolutions psychologiques, qui sont cachées sous le manteau des lois historiques.'

forms, wider than the individual but definitively smaller than society: an individual participates to the life of an institution, but society is seen by Sorel as a set of institutions.

The best way of partially clarifying this nebulous concept is for example, by looking at how Sorel uses it. In examining the question of ethics, Sorel indicates a particular institution – the family – as ‘the main source of our moral ideas’.<sup>57</sup> This means, for him, that the pretension to improve mankind’s lot through *individual* moral education is doomed to fail: instead, one must address the issue at an institutional level, and deal with the ‘general causes’ of morality that are ‘the forms established through daily practice.’<sup>58</sup> Somewhat frustratingly however, the family itself is not seen as a given, but is put in relation, in its turn, with a number of other institutions and aspects of society. For example, the class aspect influences familial practices: ‘in the proletariat, the conception of the family is different from that of the nobility, and is less permeated by notions of paternal authority.’<sup>59</sup> Here, we have an economic class qualifier acting upon the familial institution. Neither the permeability of institutions to other societal factors, nor the amount of interactions between various institutions is ever regulated by a criterion specified with any amount of precision. What Sorel does is proceed empirically, case by case. To give another example, the soft character of contemporary penal law, is for Sorel, derived from the political practice of democracy: we have an institution, the juridical one, that is affected by a political practice.<sup>60</sup>

The picture painted is thus rich in interesting detail, but the lack of a criterion regulating the interactions between institutions and human activities makes it essentially chaotic. Sorel’s social world is a world in which everything potentially interacts with everything else, and no effort is made to shed some analytical clarity on these social interactions. This brings us to a rather important point, namely that institutions are not conceived in exclusively, or even principally, economic terms. There is no attempt to deduce the institutional life of mankind from the productive processes that occur in wider society. This, of course, does not mean that economics has no role to play, but merely that it does have a privileged position, i.e. it does not possess a foundational role in the complex web of human activities that makes up society. The example of the family is illustrative: the family, rather than the productive system, is the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 925. ‘...la source principale de nos idées morales...’

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. ‘...cette amelioration ne peut venir que de causes générales, de formes constituées dans la pratique journalière.’

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 924. ‘Chez les prolétaires, la conception de la famille est toute autre que dans la noblesse et elle ne comporte pas la puissance paternelle...’

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 928-9.



source of most of our moral ideas, but at the same time it is an institution that is permeable to the influence of economic factors. That this should be so is unsurprising: erecting economics to a structural level would mean determining a criterion that regulates the web of interactions that characterize the social world. But, as we have seen, Sorel does not do this, and hence does not give to productive activity the centrality it traditionally possesses in Marxism.

The lack of clear guidelines to examine the interactions amongst institutions will play an important part in the years to come. But if the structure of the social world remains chaotic, the dynamic of its transformation is sketched by Sorel with surprising clarity, almost as if he had arrived at the concept of institutions by thinking about the question of historical change. Such transformations are, for Sorel, a question of the development and the affirmation of new social relations, and these social relations, as we have seen, require an institutional habitat. This means, crucially, that a revolutionary process is a long term game in which older social relations are slowly and gradually replaced by those produced in new institutions. Revolutionary activity then is less a critique of the status quo in the name of ideals, and more the affirmation of those social relations that are *already* in place in the new institutions. Sorel's conception of the revolution, sketched here for the first time, follows what Marx wrote in a letter to Ruge in 1843, when the German philosopher had declared

‘We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for...’<sup>61</sup>

What dominates Sorel's conception of the revolution is, paradoxically, a concern with continuity: the revolutionary process is not a clean break with the past, but the acknowledgment of a presently existing new reality. The concerns of those who think that socialism ‘could compromise European civilisation, acquired through such patient work’<sup>62</sup> are thus shown to be misplaced. The socialist transformation will not be the work of ‘*an exalted mass, enchanted by the preaching of idealists*, rushing to the destruction of what is established and breaking abruptly with the past, under the misguided ambition of realizing some wonderful plan conceived in some brain’.<sup>63</sup> Instead, it will be determined by the degree of

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<sup>61</sup> Karl Marx, letter to Arnold Ruge, september 1843 in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London, Lawrence and Wishart: 1975), p. 144.

<sup>62</sup> Sorel, ‘Étude sur Vico, p. 934. ‘...elle pourra compromettre la civilisation européenne, acquise par un labeur si patient.’

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 934-5. ‘Ce reproche serait fondé si le prolétariat était une *masse exaltée, affolée par la prédication des idéalistes*, se tuant à la destruction des choses séculaires et rompant brusquement avec le passé, sous le

institutional development of the proletariat. Thus, for example, ‘juridical continuity will not even be violently broken by the proletarian revolution, provided that the current civilisation will have elaborated a system of laws regulating... the relationship of industrial actors [coopérateurs]: the capitalist part of the code will be able to vanish... without causing a great stir in juridical ideas.’<sup>64</sup> Much the same goes for economic continuity. By the time the socialist revolution takes place, collective property will already be a reality – a necessity of an advanced capitalist economy – and thus the transition will be effected without shock. In fact, one of the necessary preconditions of the revolution is that ‘the organization of labour in large industry be so well adapted to the needs and the conditions of collective production that *economic realities will constitute the bridge* through which the transformation from one state to the other will be accomplished.’<sup>65</sup>

We shall come back later in the chapter to Sorel’s conception of the revolution, also because it will be developed more thoroughly only in later writings. But the essentials are already present in the study on Vico. In true Marxian fashion, Sorel conceives of socialism as the next step in the social evolution of mankind, and thus its character will not be that of negating capitalism, but of incorporating into a new society all the most advanced aspects of the former system. Two important points follow. For a start, it follows that the revolutionary class cannot be conceived in terms of poverty and oppression, but must be conceptualized as, in some way, the most advanced class in society, since it is the class that deals with industrial production. As he had written to Croce in October 1896:

‘... the struggle of the poor against the rich was the basis of every revolution in ancient republics and in the middle ages; I do not believe that [Babœuf] rose much above this conception that tended to keep cities in a semibarbaric state. The modern proletariat is an organized productive force and has within itself the seeds of scientific and industrial progress: it is very dissimilar from the *petit peuple* of medieval Italian cities.’<sup>66</sup>

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prétexte fallacieux de réaliser quelque plan merveilleux élaboré dans quelques cervelles. Mais il n’en sera pas ainsi...’

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 935. ‘La continuité juridique ne sera pas même violemment rompue par la révolution prolétarienne, si la civilisation actuelle a élaboré un système de lois réglant d’une manière prudente les rapports des coopérateurs industriels : la partie capitaliste du Code pourra disparaître, comme a disparu le régime féodal, sans apporter beaucoup de trouble dans les idées juridiques.’

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. ‘...la seconde condition est que l’organisation du travail par la grande industrie soit tellement adaptée aux besoins et aux conditions de la production collective que le *réalités économiques constituent le pont* par lequel le passage d’un état à l’autre devra s’effectuer...’

<sup>66</sup> Sorel, letter to Croce 9/10/1896, in *La Critica* 25, 1927, pp. 42-3. ‘Je doute fort que Babœuf mérite l’honneur d’avoir innové quelque chose : la lutte des maigres contre les gras était la base de toutes le révolutions dans les républiques antiques et dans celles du Moyen-Age ; je ne crois pas qu’il se soit élevé au-dessus de cette

Socialism thus is not concerned with addressing social inequalities, but with furthering ‘industrial and scientific progress’, and this is why the proletariat is the revolutionary agent.

A second important point follows from Sorel’s *longue durée* understanding of historical transformations. The slow process by which new institutions generate new social relations that replace the older ones, what Sorel here calls the ‘theory of preparation’<sup>67</sup>, will make the revolutionary moment a mere formality. The more new social relations are already in place, the less cataclysmic will the revolutionary moment be. Conversely, a large amount of resistance encountered testifies to a still imperfect radication of the new social forms. ‘...The greatest revolution that one can conceive’ underlines Sorel ‘will be peaceful, for it will not be faced by forces capable of rising again against it.’<sup>68</sup> This point is quite important, because it signals the marginal role that violence has in Sorel’s understanding of the revolutionary transformation: the more violent a revolution is, the less ready is the new socialist society. We shall come back to this point later, but it is important to bear it in mind, especially in the light of the *Reflections on Violence*.

### 4.3 THE REVISION OF MARXISM

The encounter with Vico represents an extremely important turning point in Sorel’s intellectual trajectory. The shift, at its most fundamental level, is a philosophical and epistemological one. By combining Vico’s *verum ipsum factum* with the assertion that all human thought is an historically contingent human production, Sorel completely transforms his philosophy of science: rather than basing science on a representationalist model, which he previously understood in terms of mapping out deterministic causal relations, he now conceives of knowledge in the Vichian way, genetically, and thus the task of science becomes that of tracing the origin and genesis of human creations. The ability of the natural sciences to make claims about the natural world is put in serious doubt, while, at the same time, the search for regularities and laws capable of explaining the social world is condemned as epistemologically mistaken.

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conception qui tendait à maintenir les cités dans un état à demi barbare. Le prolétariat moderne se trouve être le producteur organisé et avoir dans son sein les éléments du progrès scientifiques industriels : il ne ressemble pas au *petit peuple* des villes du Moyen-Age italien. Les résultats des guerres civiles dans les républiques d’autrefois ont été malheureux presque toujours : si le socialisme ne se dégage des liens qui l’unissent, un peu trop partout à la démagogie radicale, il pourrait bien aboutir à des résultats que Marx n’avait pas prévus.’

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 936.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 935. ‘... la plus grande révolution que l’esprit puisse concevoir sera pacifique, - puisqu’elle ne trouvera pas, devant elle, des forces capables de renaitre.’

The epistemological shift can be understood by underlining the fact that the Vichian conception of knowledge allows Sorel to make sense of the crucial fact of human agency. Whereas this very concept had thwarted his early structuralist attempts at social science, now agency is not only put at the centre of the human world, of the artificial *milieu*, but is also what guarantees, in virtue of *verum ipsum factum*, the rational intelligibility of this world.

This historicist philosophical turn, however forces Sorel to address in some depth for the first time the crucial question of how human agency deploys itself over time in the human world. For Sorel, historically-relevant agency is not individual, but collective, or to be more precise, institutional: human collectivities organize themselves in institutions, and it is only within such institutions that social relations exist and develop. But Sorel, crucially, does not give a precise criterion regulating the interactions amongst various institutions. This creates an, as it were, chaotic social world in which everything potentially interacts with everything else, and thus historical questions cannot be tackled methodically, but only on a case-by-case basis, by trying to identify the relevant factors and influences which have shaped a precise human creation or institution. The social relations produced in various institutions constitute a given society, and thus the logic of historical development becomes a question of the vitality of a number of institutions and their capacity to produce new social relations capable of supplanting the old ones. The study of Vico, in short, provides Sorel with the basics of a theory of history: it gives him an epistemological criterion through which the study of the historical world of mankind is legitimated. It gives him a theory of society as composed of institutionalized collectivities, and provides him with an, albeit rudimentary, theory of social transformation through institutional development.

It is through this understanding of the historical process that Sorel will engage with the work of conceptual clarification of Marxism – of which we spoke in the last chapter – elaborating these points in order to develop a more theoretically-sophisticated Marxism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Sorel was not cold to some of the main objections directed at Marxism in the France of his time. He, too, was unconvinced by the deterministic theory of social development through a purely economic struggle. As he had written in his review of Say's *Contre le socialisme*, the predictive ambitions of Marxism seemed to him to run counter the grain of Marx's historical method, while class struggle was a phenomenon that could not be understood in merely economic terms without compromising the scientific value of historical materialism.

### 4.3.1 LABRIOLA'S HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Sorel's review of Say's *Contre le socialisme* appeared in the *Devenir Social* in May 1896, probably as Sorel was reading Vico's *Scienza Nuova* in Michelet's translations. The study of Vico was published in the same *Devenir Social* in the closing months of the same year: its three parts, roughly 30 pages long each, appeared in October, November and December. And also in December Sorel wrote a preface for the first French edition of Labriola's *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire*,<sup>69</sup> which was to come out at the beginning of 1897. Now, this text must be placed in the context outlined in the previous chapter, a context in which Marx's historical materialism was struggling to impose itself as the dominant ideology and theory of French socialism, and thus the discussion revolved essentially on the deterministic limits of Marxism. Sorel is firmly on the side of the 'German doctrine'. Not only does he ridicule the pretensions of the 'French spirit', and the 'naïve faith in French supremacy',<sup>70</sup> displayed by the French critics of Marxism, but also lauds Labriola's book as a useful antidote to the 'widespread prejudices'<sup>71</sup> that characterize the French reception of Marxism. For example, Sorel refers to the Jaurès-Lafargue debate of January 1896 and attacks Jaurès' attempt at combining idealism with Marxian materialism by saying that 'to admit these [Jaurès'] premises is to explain history exclusively through idealism; - it means rejecting everything, absolutely everything, of Marx's doctrine.'<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> We have referenced the text in the previous chapter and highlighted that it contained Labriola's first Marxist essay for the *Devenir Social*, 'En mémoire du manifeste du parti communiste', a French translation of his more theoretically oriented 'Del materialismo storico, dilucidazione preliminare' as well as Laura Lafargue's translation of Marx and Engels' *Manifesto*.

<sup>70</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Préface' in Labriola, *Essais sur la conception matérialiste*. Available at [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/labriola\\_antonio/essais\\_materialisme\\_historique/essai\\_1\\_En\\_memoire/labriola\\_en\\_memoire.pdf](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/labriola_antonio/essais_materialisme_historique/essai_1_En_memoire/labriola_en_memoire.pdf) last consulted 20/3/2014. 'Cette manière de considérer les choses [i.e. Marxism] ne va pas au génie français, - ou du moins à ceux qui ont la prétention de le représenter.'

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 'le lecteur français doit se mettre en garde contre les préjugés répandus'

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 'Admettre ces prémisses, c'est expliquer l'histoire par l'idéalisme et uniquement par l'idéalisme ; - c'est rejeter tout, absolument tout, de la doctrine de Marx.' The Jaurès-Lafargue debate, held on the 12 January 1896 in Paris constituted an occasion for public confrontation between Lafargue's Marxist materialism and Jaurès' attempt at conciliating economicism with a French concern for the historical importance of ideals and rights. Though, in many ways, in their concern for right and their suspicion of economics, their analyses bear important similarities (which would deserve closer examination) Sorel reproaches to Jaurès his insistence on the, as it were, historical soteriology that characterizes Marx's doctrine, which he understands as a grand narrative that brings an end to the historical development of humankind in order to realize 'humanity herself'. As Jaurès writes '...il y a dans l'histoire humaine non seulement une évolution nécessaire, mais une direction intelligible et un sens idéal. Donc, tout au long des siècles, l'homme n'a pu aspirer à la justice qu'en aspirant à un ordre social moins contradictoire à l'homme que l'ordre présent... Quelle que soit la diversité des milieux, des temps, des revendications économiques, c'est un même souffle de plainte et d'espérance qui sort de la bouche de l'esclave, du serf et du prolétaire : c'est ce souffle immortel d'humanité qui est l'âme même de ce qu'on appelle le droit.'

Jean Jaurès, 'L'idéalisme de l'histoire' [1896] in Jules Guesde, Jean Jaurès and Paul Lafargue, *Le grand débat* (Paris, Le Temps des cerises : 1994), p. 47. In short, unlike Jaurès, and somewhat unlike Gramsci, Sorel does not believe in history as a process of self-realization of humankind, destined to end when this self-realization has

The ambition of the text, in short, is that of ‘showing how false and futile are the big objections reproached to the Marxist doctrine.’<sup>73</sup> And thus, taking as his polemical target Rouanet’s 1887 *Revue Socialiste* article on Marxism and French socialism Sorel sets to answer the objections of economic and historical determinism. At first glance, the text appears as a straightforwardly ‘Marxist’ one, in the sense that the enemies are Rouanet and Jaurès, the allies are Lafargue and, indirectly, Guesde’s POF. In fact, Sorel goes as far as to explain the political weakness of French socialism through its theoretical resistance to Marxism: ‘where [i.e. in Germany] such ideas [historical materialism] have penetrated in the depth of popular consciousness, the socialist party is strong and alive, in other places it is weak and divided into sects.’<sup>74</sup>

And yet, a closer look reveals another, subtler line of reasoning. Though Sorel does defend Marxism, he defends a version of Marxism based on the understanding of history outlined in the ‘Étude sur Vico’. The argumentative strategy is that deployed in the review of Say’s *Contre le socialisme*: instead of defending historical determinism and the primacy of economics in the social world, he paints these two features of Marxism as being the result of misunderstandings and caricatures. The objections are addressed through Sorel’s own conceptual vocabulary and the picture painted is that of Marxism as a theory of proletarian agency and institutional development. As he succinctly puts it:

‘The problem of modern transformations – from the materialist perspective – is based on three questions: 1<sup>st</sup> Has the proletariat acquired a clear consciousness of its existence as an indivisible class? 2<sup>nd</sup> Does it possess sufficient strength to enter into a struggle against the other classes? 3<sup>rd</sup> Is it capable of overthrowing, along with capitalist organization, the entire system of traditional ideology? When one follows Marx’s principles... research does not concentrate on *what society ought to be* – but on *what the proletariat can achieve* in the current class struggle.’<sup>75</sup>

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been achieved: history cannot be subsumed under this great movement, but consists in a series of episodes that are not strung together by a wider narrative.

<sup>73</sup> Sorel, ‘Préface à Labriola’. ‘je crois nécessaire de montrer, ici, combien sont fausses et futiles les grandes objections que l’on oppose à la doctrine marxiste.’

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. ‘Le socialisme contemporain présente un caractère d’originalité, qui a frappé tous les économistes ; il doit ce caractère à ce qu’il s’inspire des idées émises par K. Marx sur le matérialisme historique. Là où ces idées ont profondément pénétré la conscience populaire, le parti socialiste est fort et vivant ; ailleurs, il est chétif et divisé en sectes.’

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. ‘Le problème du devenir moderne, - considéré au point de vue matérialiste, - repose sur trois questions : 1° le prolétariat a-t-il acquis une conscience claire de son existence comme classe indivisible ? 2° a-t-il assez de force pour entrer en lutte contre les autres classes ? 3° est-il en état de renverser, avec l’organisation capitaliste, tout le système de l’idéologie traditionnelle ? C’est à la sociologie de répondre. Quand on s’inspire des principes de Marx, on peut dire qu’il n’y a plus de question sociale ; on peut même dire que le socialisme (au sens ordinaire

In keeping with his understanding of history, the transformation from capitalism to socialism cannot be understood as a seizure of power or of the state, nor can it amount to a more rational reorganization of the productive forces, but can only be seen as the development of a number of new social relations through the institutional development of a new social class.

Sorel, however, begins by pointing out that ‘Marxist theses have not been understood well in France’,<sup>76</sup> and the discussion swiftly moves to the terrain examined in the last chapter, the accusations of historical and economic determinism that French socialists reproached to Marxism. ‘...The great scientific objection to Marx’s doctrine’ writes Sorel ‘is that it is accused of leading to fatalism.’<sup>77</sup> To start with, Rouanet’s argument that Marx’s determinism has to do with the Hegelian lineage of his thought ought to cause one to ‘have reservations on the idea that the French author [Rouanet] has of Hegel’s philosophy’.<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless it is clear that even a ‘superficial reading of *Capital*’ shows clearly that Marx did not propose what Sorel calls an ‘evolutionary apocalypse’.<sup>79</sup> The reason for this, of course, has to do with the fact that the artificial milieu is a non-deterministic environment shaped by the creativity of human agency, and thus the only talk of prediction and law allowed is metaphorical.

‘Determinism supposes that transformations are connected in an automatic way, that simultaneous phenomena form a bloc having a necessary structure, that there are laws assuring an ordered necessity amongst all things. We find nothing similar in Marx’s doctrine... We do not demand to see in the social world a system analogous to that of astronomy; we only demand that one recognizes that the interaction of causes generates periods sufficiently long and characterized that they can become the object of a *reasoned knowledge of the facts*.’<sup>80</sup>

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et historique du terme) est dépassé ; en effet, les recherches ne portent plus sur ce *que la société doit être*, - mais sur *ce que peut le prolétariat*, dans la lutte actuelle des classes.’

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. ‘Les thèses marxistes n’ont point été, généralement, bien comprises en France par les écrivains qui s’occupent des questions sociales.’

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. ‘Le grand reproche que l’on adresse – au point de vue scientifique – à la doctrine de Marx est de mener au fatalisme.’

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. ‘Il y aurait bien des réserves à faire sur l’idée que l’auteur français se fait de la philosophie de Hegel...’

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. ‘...mais une lecture superficielle du *Capital* suffit pour montrer que Marx n’avait jamais pensé à cette apocalypse évolutionniste, qu’on lui attribue si généreusement.’

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. ‘Le déterminisme suppose que les changements sont reliés entre eux d’une manière automatique, que les phénomènes simultanés forment un bloc ayant une structure obligée, qu’il y a des lois d’airain assurant entre toutes choses une nécessité d’ordre. On ne trouve rien de semblable dans la doctrine de Marx : les événements sont considérés d’un point de vue empirique ; c’est de leur mélange que jaillit la loi historique qui définit leur mode temporaire de génération. On ne demande point de reconnaître dans le monde social un système analogue au système astronomique ; on demande seulement de reconnaître que l’entrecroisement des causes produit des périodes assez régulières et assez caractérisées pour pouvoir faire l’objet d’une connaissance raisonnée de faits’. Notice how, if we examine this passage through the lenses of Sorel’s pre-Vico epistemology, what is being stated is that the social world can be the object of a ‘systématique’ rather than of a scientific study. But of course, with Vico, the search for deterministic causal relations is abandoned and science becomes something else, namely the genetic search for the origin of human productions.

Things become more interesting when a second objection, regarding economic determinism, is discussed. Though Sorel dismisses the idea that ‘for Marx, all political, moral, aesthetic phenomena are determined (in the precise sense of the word) by economic phenomena’<sup>81</sup> as ‘one of those silly things that have rendered ridiculous the vulgarisers of vulgar materialism’<sup>82</sup>, the question is a bit more complex than this dismissal would suggest. The idea that all social, political, moral and intellectual phenomena are just superficial manifestations of economic ones is a caricature of a theory about the fundamental role of economic activity in the social world. But though the caricature can be dismissed without argumentation, the theory cannot. The question concerns the architecture of the social world. Assigning a foundational, structural role to economics would equip the social scientist with a reliable criterion both to examine a given society and to identify the factors that determine a transformation. As we have just seen, Sorel’s social world as described in the ‘Étude sur Vico’ lacks any such criterion, as the various spheres of human activity constantly interact with each other. Thus, in order to reject the primacy of economics, Sorel has to give theoretical dignity to this lack of a hierarchy or ordering amongst the various spheres of human activity:

‘From the fact that all sociological phenomena, in order to be understood, need to be connected to their economic support it does not follow that the knowledge of the support replaces the knowledge of what is supported. *The mediations that hold between the economic infrastructure and the superior products are variable and cannot be expressed by any general formula.* It is thus impossible to speak of determinism, for there is nothing that can be determined.’<sup>83</sup>

This constitutes a substantial novelty. Whereas in the study on Vico the lack of criteria to determine the interactions amongst various institutions and spheres of human activities appeared as a mere matter of fact, here Sorel gives theoretical dignity to this insight and formulates it explicitly. It is precisely in virtue of this impossibility of finding such criteria

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. ‘Mais on insiste et on dit que, d’après Marx, tous les phénomènes politiques, moraux, esthétiques, sont déterminés (au sens précis du mot) par les phénomènes économiques.’

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. ‘Dire qu’une chose est déterminée par une autre, sans donner, en même temps, une idée précise du mode de jonction, c’est dire une de ces bêtises qui ont rendu si ridicules les vulgarisateurs du matérialisme vulgaire.’

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added. ‘De ce que toutes les manifestations sociologiques ont besoin, pour leur éclaircissement, d’être placées sur leurs supports économiques, il n’en résulte pas que la connaissance du support remplace la connaissance de la chose supportée. Les médiations qui existent entre l’infrastructure économique et les produits supérieurs sont très variables et ne peuvent se traduire par aucune formule générale. On ne saurait donc parler de déterminisme, puisqu’il n’y a rien de déterminable.’



that Sorel can reject economic determinism. In order to understand the origin of this argument, it is necessary, however, to look more closely at Labriola's text.<sup>84</sup>

On a general note, the reading of Labriola's essay on historical materialism<sup>85</sup> reveals a number of very important similarities with Sorel's own understanding of Marxism. Like Sorel, Labriola separates the human from the artificial milieu, arguing that 'History ...begins when the artificial environment has long been established'<sup>86</sup> and goes as far as to condemn social Darwinism, i.e. the idea that human history obeys the evolutionary laws that regulate natural history, as an 'epidemic'.<sup>87</sup> Like Sorel, he is careful to underline the contingency of progress. Not only, writes Labriola, are there parts of the world still living in a regime of primitive agrarian communism,<sup>88</sup> but more radically, he argues that it is important to understand that 'progress, which is not only a merely empirical notion, but is also always

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<sup>84</sup> When the book came out, it received a number of reviews, the most important ones being those by Charles Andler in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* and Émile Durkheim in the *Revue Philosophique*. The take of both authors is negative, and both seem to miss some of the central aspects of Labriola's text. For example, Andler accuses Labriola of abandoning the determinism of Marx, and concludes by saying that this shows that the problem of Marxism is that of 'se faire illusions sur la portée de la science de l'histoire' (p. 658). What Andler seems not to understand is that the idea of science as a description of causal relations between phenomena is not the one on which Labriola is operating. In other words, for Andler, the abandonment of a scientific Marxism is an indication of the shortcomings of Marxism *tout court*, and he never takes seriously the historical methodology outlined by Labriola. As for Durkheim, though this also applies in part to Andler, he attributes to Labriola the kind of economic determinism that Labriola so clearly rejects. So he states that 'il nous paraît faux qu'elles [the causes of social phenomena] se ramènent, en dernière instance à l'état de la technique industrielle et que le facteur économique soit le ressort du progrès.' despite the fact that Labriola does not really say this. Moreover, he insists on the fact that there is a structural social phenomenon, but that it is not economics but religion. See Charles Andler, 'La conception matérialiste de l'histoire d'après M. Labriola', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 5, 1897, pp. 644-58 and Émile Durkheim, 'La conception matérialiste de l'histoire', *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 44, 1897, pp. 645-51, retrieved at [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Durkheim\\_emile/sc\\_soc\\_et\\_action/texte\\_2\\_09/conception\\_histoire.pdf](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Durkheim_emile/sc_soc_et_action/texte_2_09/conception_histoire.pdf) on the 15/3/2014.

<sup>85</sup> We shall refer to the version published in the second French edition of Labriola's *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire* (Paris, Giard et Brière: 1902).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127. 'L'histoire, selon l'usage littéraire du mot, c'est-à-dire cette partie du processus humain dont les traditions se sont fixées dans la mémoire, commence à un moment où le terrain artificiel est depuis assez longtemps formé.'

<sup>87</sup> Labriola, *Essais*, p. 124.

<sup>88</sup> Labriola makes the example of Russia, writing that: 'Russia must become bourgeois; and, to do this, it must first convert land into a commodity, capable of producing other commodities, and at the same time transform in proletarians and paupers the former communists of the countryside. However, on the other hand, us in Western and Central Europe find ourselves at the opposite point of this developmental path which has only just begun in Russia.' *Ibid.*, p. 146. 'La Russie doit s'embourgeoiser, et pour cela elle doit, avant tout, convertir la terre en marchandise capable de produire de marchandises, et en même temps transformer en prolétaires et miséreux les ex-communistes de la terre. Dans l'Europe Occidentale et Centrale, nous nous trouvons, au contraire, au point opposé de la série de développement qui commence à peine en Russie.'

contingent, and thus limited, does not hang above human affairs as a destiny, a fate, or as a law.’<sup>89</sup> In this way both historical teleology and social scientific prediction are invalidated:

‘It is because of this that our doctrine cannot be used to present the entire history of humankind in a unitary perspective, which, *mutatis mutandis*, would repeat the finalist or planned *philosophy of history* as we find it from S. Augustine to Hegel, or, better, from the prophet Daniel to De Rougemont.’<sup>90</sup>

In his commentary to Labriola’s essay, which Sorel, as we have seen, had read, Croce picks up and develops this point. For Croce, an important consequence of Labriola’s argument is that it forbids us to think of Marxism as a philosophy of history in the traditional sense, that is, as a ‘conceptual reduction of the course of history’.<sup>91</sup> According to him, though it is possible to develop a philosophy of various elements, which appear in the historical flux, such as art, or ethics, the conceptual reduction of the course of history itself is impossible, as it will lead to ‘a single concept, that of development, emptied of all the proper content of history.’<sup>92</sup> In more prosaic terms, it follows from this impossibility of a philosophy of history that ‘historical materialism, in Labriola’s version, has abandoned all ambition to establish the law of history, of finding the concept to which historical facts, in all their complexity, would be reduced.’<sup>93</sup> It is in this way that Croce interprets Labriola’s historical materialism, and judging by his desire to publish Croce’s essay, Sorel also subscribes to this opinion.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 148. ‘Mais l’important est de comprendre que le progrès, dont la notion est non seulement empirique, mais toujours circonstanciée et partant limitée, n’est pas suspendu sur le cours des choses humaines comme un destin ou un *fatum*, ni comme un commandement.’

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. ‘Et à cause de cela notre doctrine ne peut pas servir à représenter toute l’histoire du genre humain dans une perspective unitaire, qui répète, *mutatis mutandis*, la *philosophie de l’histoire* à thèse ou finaliste, de Saint Augustin à Hegel, ou mieux du prophète Daniel à Monsieur de Rougemont.’

<sup>91</sup> Benedetto Croce, ‘Sulla forma scientifica del materialismo storico’ [1896] in *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Benedetto Croce: Materialismo Storico ed Economia Marxista* (Napoli, Bibliopolis: 2001), pp. 18-19. ‘La possibilità di una filosofia della storia presuppone la possibilità di una riduzione concettuale del corso della storia’. The essay was originally presented as ‘Sulla concezione materialistica della storia’, *Atti dell’Accademia Pontaniana XXVI*, 1896, pp. 1-16.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 19. ‘Nel suo complesso, il movimento storico non si potrebbe ridurre se non a un sol concetto, che è quello di sviluppo, reso vuoto di tutto ciò che è contenuto proprio della storia.’ For the Croce of 1896, a philosophy of history is only possible if we connect it to either an idea of God, and see history as His work, or to an Hegelian perspective in which the concrete historical elements are already contained in the formal concept of development itself. As he continues: ‘L’antica filosofia della storia teneva possibile un’elaborazione concettuale della storia, o perché, facendo intervenire l’idea di Dio e della Provvidenza, leggeva nei fatti le intenzioni dell’intelletto divino, o perché trattava il concetto formale dello sviluppo come includente in sé in modo logico le sue determinazioni contingenti.’

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 20. ‘Ora il materialismo storico, nella forma in cui lo presenta Labriola, ha abbandonato nel fatto ogni pretesa di stabilire la legge della storia, di ritrovare il concetto al quale si riducano i complessi fatti storici.’

<sup>94</sup> See Sorel, letter to Croce 1/3/1897 in *La Critica* 25, 1927, p. 43. The passage on Plekhanov that prevented the publication in the *Devenir Social* accused the Russian Marxist of indulging in historical teleology, by ‘substituting to the omnipresent Ideas the omnipresent Matter.’ Against these misguided attempt, wrote Croce, it is wise to ‘remind the impossibility of any construction of this type, which, when it does not lose itself in sheer

But the real innovation that Labriola represents for Sorel is that he furnishes him with a theory that formalizes his refusal to formulate a criterion regulating the interactions between various institutions and spheres of human activity, and thus to reject economic determinism. We had seen, in the past chapter, how the exclusively economic understanding of class struggle was a point that came under much criticism in France. It is thanks to Labriola that Sorel formalizes an understanding of Marxism that rejects this type of economic determinism. The issue can be subdivided into three questions. Firstly, what is the relationship between economic phenomena and their corresponding social and ideological forms? Secondly, and more decisively, are economic factors the only engine of history, or do social and ideological forms possess their own historical strength? Finally, if the answer to the second question is positive, are there fixed criteria regulating the interactions between structure and superstructure?

On all points, Labriola's answers are rather clear. He explains, in his discussion of the artificial environment which humankind inhabits, that as soon as the tools which enable humans to make their living off nature, i.e. the economy, have developed beyond a certain point, more complex social formations arise: 'meditated plans, political projects... legal systems, and then maxims and general abstract principles. In the context of these products... as a secondary phenomenon, arise sciences, arts, philosophy, erudition and *history* as a type of literary production.'<sup>95</sup> These productions of the human spirit are secondary to the economic realm – the sphere of human activity through which men guarantee their existence through the extraction of resources from nature – and cannot be understood as anything else than connected to this latter realm of activity. However, this does not lead to the conclusion that

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arbitrariness, becomes a superfluous tautology.' See Croce, 'Forma scientifica del materialismo storico', p. 22. 'Innanzitutto alla tendenza a ricostruire una filosofia materialistica della storia, sostituendo alla onnipresente Idea l'onnipresente Materia, conviene riaffermare l'impossibilità d'ogni costruzione di tal genere, che, quando non si perde nell'arbitrario, si risolve in una pura superfluità e tautologia.'

<sup>95</sup> Labriola, 'Le matérialisme historique', in his *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire*, p. 136. 'Partout où les moyens techniques sont développés jusqu'à un certain point... là, toujours et nécessairement, apparaissent des desseins prémédités, des vues politiques, des plans de conduite, des systèmes de droit et enfin des maximes et des principes généraux et abstraits. Dans le cercle de ces produits et de ces développements dérivés et complexes, du second degré, naissent aussi les sciences et les arts, et la philosophie, et l'érudition, et l'*histoire* comme genre littéraire de production.' It is worth adding that what Labriola calls an 'ideological' standpoint consists in taking these secondary products in isolation from the economic activities to which they are inseparably connected, from which they necessarily arise. Some men, 'especially those who make of their erudition a living... found and still find a way of living intellectually merely amongst the secondary and reflected products of civilization, and could, and still can, then subject everything to the subjective perspective which they inhabit: herein lies the explanation of every ideology.' See *ibid.*, pp. 136-7. 'Et, en effet, il est arrivé et il arrive que quelques hommes, et surtout les savants de profession, laïques ou prêtres, ont trouvé et trouvent le moyen de vivre intellectuellement dans le cercle fermé des produits réflexes et secondaires de la civilisation, et qu'ils ont pu et qu'ils peuvent ensuite soumettre tout le reste à la vue subjective qu'ils ont élaborée dans ces conditions : c'est la l'origine et l'explication de toute les idéologies.'

they are ‘mere appearances and soap bubbles.’<sup>96</sup> Though secondary, they have their role to play in the historical process, for they become part of that artificial environment which humankind inhabits, and which modifies humankind itself as it proceeds through history. In short, these secondary products shape the artificial environment and thus affect the course of the historical development. Though the extraction of means of subsistence from nature is mankind’s primary sphere of activity, its production of secondary and more refined elements is not an aspect which can be dismissed easily, for it contributes to the shaping of that historical and changing artificial environment, which is the *locus* of human history.

This crucial point is clarified a few pages later, as Labriola tackles the question more thoroughly. The idea that historical materialism consists in ‘attributing prevalence or decisive agency to the *economic factor*’ is erroneous, nothing more than a ‘doctrinal mistake’.<sup>97</sup> The reason as to why this interpretation of historical materialism is, for Labriola, fundamentally incorrect is of a certain importance. As the historian confronts the multiple aspects of reality, he faces the need to systematize them, and it is from this need that the belief in ‘historical factors’, as Labriola calls them, arises.<sup>98</sup> Thus we distinguish economic factors from geographical ones, intellectual factors from political ones and so on. The formation of those concepts is perfectly legitimate, as long as we recognize what they are: ‘*abstractions*, according to which the various aspects of a given social complex are, little by little, taken away from their being simply parts of a whole, and, increasingly generalized, lead to the so-called doctrine of [historical] factors.’<sup>99</sup>

The point is complex, but rather important. The reason as to why it is a mistake to speak of historical materialism as a doctrine stressing the primacy of the economic factor in the course of history, is that, for Labriola, there is no such thing as an economic factor outside of history books. The creation of factors is due to the fully legitimate intellectual needs of history-writing or social scientific analysis: but the key insight of historical materialism, for Labriola, is that the historical process is a whole, a totality. Historical factors, ‘conceived by abstraction

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 137. ‘Mais cela ne veut pas dire que ce soient de pures apparences, des bulles de savon.’

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-5. ‘... que toute cette doctrine consiste en ceci, que elle attribue la prépondérance ou l’action décisive au *facteur économique*.’ In the same paragraph he speaks of this belief as ‘*erreur*’, ‘*sémi-doctrine*’ and ‘*erreur doctrinale*’.

<sup>98</sup> Labriola writes that ‘This need of narrative configuration constitutes the first, intuitive, palpable, and I would say almost aesthetic and artistic origin of all those abstractions and generalizations which, eventually, lead to the half-doctrine of *factors*.’ Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 160. ‘C’est en cela que consiste l’origine première de ces abstractions qui dépouillent petit à petit de leur qualité de simples cotés ou aspects d’un ensemble les parties diverses d’un *complexus* social donné et c’est ensuite leur généralisation qui, petit à petit, conduit à la doctrine des facteurs.’

and subsequently isolated by abstraction',<sup>100</sup> continually and simultaneously act on each other, modify each other, so that separating them can only be legitimate from an epistemological perspective. Labriola insists greatly on the value of this abstract dissection of the historical whole into separated factors: he stresses the utility of this type of enquiry, and deems that this method of proceeding is, if 'much less than the whole truth, much more than a simple error'.<sup>101</sup> The separation of the historical whole into distinct factors is for Labriola a necessary prerequisite to the more mature and holistic conception of historical materialism. Historical factors are 'the necessary product of a knowledge in the process of development and formation.'<sup>102</sup>

To be sure, with the advent of historical materialism, the need for historical enquiries in, say, economics, art, or any of the other factors, remains. But this need stems from the requirements of history-writing. It is the belief in the real, independent, and isolated existence of such factors that constitutes, in Labriola's view, a half-doctrine, an error surpassed by 'us, who posit an absolutely unitary principle of historical interpretation'.<sup>103</sup> This notion of history as a changing totality is illustrated more clearly in Croce's commentary:

Labriola shows how historiography, in its development, had already arrived at the theory of historical factors; that is, to the conception that the historical process is the result of a series of forces, called physical conditions, social formations, political institutions, leaders. Historical materialism goes beyond, to the enquiry of the relationship between those factors or, put better, to considering them all as parts of a single process.'<sup>104</sup>

Now, this plurality of factors understood as parts of a whole is clearly incompatible with economism, for it denies the primacy of the economic factor in favour of a holistic interpretation of the historical process in which all factors have a role to play.<sup>105</sup> Hidden

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 162. 'Ces facteurs concourants, que l'abstraction conçoit et qu'elle isole ensuite, on ne les a jamais vu agissant chacun pour soi, parce que, bien plus, ils agissent d'une manière telle, qu'elle donne naissance au concept de l'action réciproque.'

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 166. '... les facteurs historiques... indiquent quelque chose qui est beaucoup moins que la vérité, mais beaucoup plus que la simple erreur.'

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 'Ils sont le produit nécessaires d'une connaissance qui est en voie de développement et de formation.'

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>104</sup> Croce, 'Sulla forma scientifica del materialismo storico', p. 25.

<sup>105</sup> It might be asked, as an aside, what happens then to materialism in Labriola's system. Though verbal accommodations are always possible, the problem remains: if the historical process is characterised by the interpenetration and reciprocal interactions of various spheres of human activity, whose separation is an analytical necessity rather than a reality, then it is unclear in what sense the sphere of production, the economy, can be called *primary*. One possible solution consists in interpreting the secondary nature of non-economic spheres of human activity in terms of their dependence on the existence of a relatively stable productive system. In other words this means stressing, as Labriola does (see p. 136 of the *Essais*), that only when the productive apparatus is firmly established and the extraction of resources from nature secured that other, non-productive,

behind the idea of historical moments as totalities lies a decisive argument against the determination of historical change by economical factors: given the continuous and reciprocal interactions of the various aspects of the historical whole, it is impossible to establish the primacy of one such factor. As Croce writes, the idea that historical materialism amounts to the claim that 'history is only economic history and the rest merely a mask, a shadow without substance' is to be rejected, also because it tends to generate discussions 'reminding one of the proverbial chicken and egg.'<sup>106</sup>

Now, Labriola's arguments, despite his occasional use of ambiguous terminology, are profoundly hostile to a way of reasoning in terms of economic structure and ideological superstructure, because not only does the superstructure possess a capacity to influence the course of history but, more decisively, because historical moments are totalities in which factors have what he calls 'reciprocal action'.<sup>107</sup> This means that no single factor acts in isolation, and thus no single factor can be thought of as foundational. Economic activity that is not influenced by the juridical, moral or political conditions in which it takes place simply does not exist. There remains a question as to whether there are general criteria regulating the interactions between the various spheres of human activities. Labriola does not, like Sorel, state categorically the contingency that regulates these interactions, but his theory of historical totalities seems to exclude the possibility of finding such a criterion. In assessing the

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spheres of human activity can develop. Before poetry, must come agriculture. But, although Labriola does make this point and repeatedly calls intellectual forms 'secondary', it is an unconvincing solution, for the primacy of economic production – in the sense of extraction of resources from nature for the support of human life – is reduced to a chronological event whose consequences would no longer be with us, since, once developed, non-productive spheres of human activity immediately become relevant factors in the historical process, thereby rendering the primacy of the economy a thing of the past. To understand Labriola's stance, one must understand that his is a way of reasoning that is fundamentally alien to the base/superstructure dualism, and consequently to the distinction between productive and non-productive spheres of human activity. The result, I believe, is a fundamentally different meaning of the notion of production, not understood as the economy, the relationship between human beings and nature that the former have to entertain for their subsistence, but as a general term for human activity. The primacy of production then would have to be interpreted as a claim about the primacy of human agency in history. The attacks on social Darwinism, the references to Vico, all seem to warrant the worth of this interpretation.

<sup>106</sup> Croce, 'Sulla forma scientifica del materialismo storico', p. 26. 'Parecchi hanno immaginato che il materialismo storico voglia dire: la storia non essere altro che la storia economica, e tutto il resto una semplice maschera, un'apparenza senza sostanza. E si affannano poi a cercare quale sia il vero dio della storia, se l'istrumento produttivo o la terra, con discussioni che ricordano in ogni punto quella, proverbiale, dell'uovo e la gallina.'

<sup>107</sup> Labriola, 'Le matérialisme historique', p. 162. 'Ces facteurs concourants... on ne les a jamais vus agissant chacun pour soi, parce que... ils agissent d'une manière telle, qu'elle donne naissance au concept de l'action réciproque.'

relationship between the economy and ‘all the rest’, he writes: ‘the process of derivation and mediation is very complex, often nuanced and tortuous, not always decipherable.’<sup>108</sup>

There is a final aspect of Labriola’s historical materialism that needs comment, mainly because it brings a point already made by Sorel in the study on Vico to its logical conclusion. Sorel, let us recall, had argued that what followed from Vico’s principle was the radically and inescapably historical character of human ideas: this means, essentially, reducing science to its practice. Labriola agrees, and presents a picture in which speculative and scientific activity is fully historical, and amounts to the theoretical elaboration of a given experience or set of experiences: ‘What is thought, at bottom, if not the conscious and systematic complement of experience...?’<sup>109</sup> But crucially Labriola specifies that Marxism itself is no exception to this rule. Thus Marxism is not a general sociology, but the elaboration of a number of historical experiences: ‘The true precursors of the new doctrine [historical materialism] were the facts of modern history...’<sup>110</sup>

‘Ideas’, writes Labriola, ‘do not fall from the sky’.<sup>111</sup> This means that sociologies and historical theories are articulations of experiences, collective practices, and so on. Thus, Marxism is not a theory of historical development valid for all times, but the self-consciousness of an historical subject shaped by a number of historical experiences. It is not ‘the usual subjective critique directed at things but the discovery of the *self criticism* inherent in things themselves.’<sup>112</sup> Marxism thus is the intellectual production that arises in capitalist societies, or at least in the proletarian class that emerges under conditions of capitalist production. The superiority of Marxism *vis à vis* other social theories lies essentially in its historicity:

‘This intellectual transformation [historical materialism]... reflected, little by little, the experience of a new life. This new life, in the revolutions of the past two centuries, had, as it acquired the practical and precise consciousness of its... preconditions, slowly stripped itself from the mythical, mystical and religious layers. Thought, which theorises and subsumes this life, has, equally, gradually emancipated itself from metaphysical and theological assumptions... The

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 168. ‘De cette infra-structure à tout le reste, le processus de dérivation et de médiation est très compliqué, souvent subtil et tortueux, pas toujours déchiffable.’

<sup>109</sup> Labriola, ‘Sur le matérialisme historique’, p. 174. ‘Et qu’es autre chose la pensée, au fond, sinon le complément conscient et systématique de l’expérience...’

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pp. 188-9. ‘Celui-ci n’est plus la critique subjective appliqué aux choses, mais la découverte de l’*autocritique* qui est dans les choses elles-mêmes. La critique véritable de la société c’est la société elle-même...’

materialist conception is the high point of this new tendency in the search for historico-social laws, *for it is not a particular instance of a generic sociology or of a general philosophy of the State, law, and history* but the solution to all the doubts and uncertainties which attend other ways of philosophizing on human affairs, and the beginning of their *integral* interpretation.’<sup>113</sup>

#### 4.3.2 ‘REVENONS À MARX’: DETERMINISM AND ECONOMICISM IN MARXISM

This long examination of Sorel’s engagement with the ideas of Labriola and Vico allows us to understand which direction Sorel’s reworking of Marxism was going to take. The Marxism that Sorel was going to elaborate had abandoned all pretensions at a social science capable of individuating deterministic causal relations, and had moved in a heavily historicist direction. The historical process was conceived by Sorel, with the help of Vico and Labriola’s arguments, in terms of human agency embedded in institutions, and rejected both the ideas of a law of history and of a fixed structure of the social world resting on economics. Writing in June 1897 to Croce about a conversation with Charles Andler, who had warned Sorel of an impending crisis of Marxism in Germany, Sorel had commented:

‘I believe that here there are some distinctions to make: for *Marxism* is far from being the doctrine and method of Marx. In the hands of disciples devoid of historical knowledge and incapable of sufficient philosophical critique, Marxism has become a caricature. “Let us go back to Marx”, here is my motto [devise], and I believe this to be the right way forward.’<sup>114</sup>

Despite the fact that only in this letter, in 1897, Sorel begins to acknowledge the revisionist character of his work, we have seen how these tendencies had been present in Sorel’s writings at least since his 1895 essay on Durkheim, and that they derived, in the last instance, from his belief in the importance of collective human agency in the historical process. The rest of the chapter will thus be dedicated to the Sorelian re-elaboration of the arguments sketched so far,

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., pp. 172-3. Emphasis added. ‘Le changement dans les idées, jusqu’à la création de nouvelles méthodes de conception, a reflété petit à petit l’expérience d’une nouvelle vie. Celle-ci, dans les révolutions des deux derniers siècles, s’était peu à peu dépouillée des enveloppes mythiques, mystiques et religieuses, à mesure qu’elle acquérait la conscience pratique et précise de ses conditions immédiates et directes. La pensée, elle aussi, qui résume et théorise cette vie, s’est dépouillée peu à peu des hypothèses théologiques et métaphysiques pour se renfermer finalement dans cette exigence prosaïque : dans l’interprétation de l’histoire il faut se restreindre à la coordination objective des conditions déterminantes et des effets déterminés. La conception matérialiste marque le point culminant de cette nouvelle tendance dans la recherche des lois historico-sociales, en tant qu’elle n’est pas un cas particulier d’une sociologie générique, ou d’une philosophie générique de l’Etat, du droit et de l’histoire, mais la solution de tous les doutes et de toutes les incertitudes qui accompagnent les autres formes de philosopher sur les choses humaines, et le commencement de l’interprétation intégrale de celles-ci.’

<sup>114</sup> Sorel, Letter to Croce, 2/6/1897 in *La Critica* 25, 1927, p. 45. ‘Je suppose qu’il y a là des distinctions à faire : car le *marxisme* est loin d’être la doctrine et la méthode de Marx ; entre les mains des disciples dépourvu de connaissances historiques et de critique philosophique suffisante, le marxisme est devenu une caricature. « Revenons à Marx », voilà ma devise, et je crois que c’est la bonne voie.’



in order to give a more complete picture of Sorel's non-determinist Marxism. The first text in which Sorel formulates his Marxism, fully aware of its potentially innovative and unorthodox character, is the review of a book by the Italian anarchist Francesco Saverio Merlino, *Pro e Contro il Socialismo*. Sorel's long review of the book, appearing in the *Devenir Social* in October 1897, consists, more than in an analysis of Merlino's theses, in a first systematic articulation of the key points of Sorel's Marxism, with particular relevance given to the question of historical determinism.

This question is tackled in terms of the possibility of historical prediction. Does Marxism contain a philosophy of history capable of deploying its explicative powers to the future and of coming up with predictions on future social developments? In examining the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation, Marx describes the succession of property relations characterising the emergence and decline of capitalist property: from 'individual private property' we move to capitalist property which, 'with the inexorability of a law of Nature', engenders its own downfall and leads to socialized property, the juridical relation expressing a socialized mode of production.<sup>115</sup> Commenting on this apparently highly deterministic passage, Sorel writes: 'the third term [socialized property], could have been completely different; Marx had reasons to conjecture, with high plausibility, that the future form of appropriation will be the one he indicates...'.<sup>116</sup>

What makes the last element of this Marxian triad merely a highly probable conjecture and not a scientific prediction based on the knowledge of supposed laws of history, is the fact that '...history is entirely in the past; there is no way of transforming it into a logical combination allowing us to predict the future.'<sup>117</sup> Historical understanding is for Sorel the understanding of events past:

'It is only long after events have unfolded [se sont déroulés], when the (often unforeseen) consequences have occurred, when the whole shiny and noisy apparatus (which hides to the actors of the drama and to the contemporaries the

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<sup>115</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 715.

<sup>116</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Pro e contro il socialismo', *Le Devenir Social* 3, 1897, p. 874. '...le troisième terme pourrait être tout autre ; Marx avait des raisons pour conjecturer, avec une haute vraisemblance, que l'appropriation future serait celle qu'il indique...'

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 873. 'L'histoire est toute entière dans le passé; il n'existe aucun moyen de la transformer en une combinaison logique, permettant de prévoir l'avenir.'

real conditions of their successes or defeats) has fallen – it's only then that the real reasons of human activity appear in the light of the day.'<sup>118</sup>

Contrary to the commonly-held opinion that Marxian determinism derives from Hegel, Sorel argues that it is precisely Marx's Hegelian pedigree that ensures the impossibility of determinism and prediction.<sup>119</sup> This impossibility 'would have been obvious to Marx, who had inherited so many of Hegel's preoccupations.'<sup>120</sup> The Hegelian trio of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, for Sorel, does not 'display the demonstrative character of a classical syllogism'<sup>121</sup>: quoting a contemporary philosophical encyclopaedia, he argues that, in Hegel, 'the new moment cannot be deduced from the previous one in the manner of a consequence', but instead, it consists of a 'creative and progressive synthesis' of materials bequeathed by its past.<sup>122</sup> For Sorel then, as for Hegel, the owl of Minerva rises at dusk and the future remains unknowable. The consequence for Marxism is clear: 'Thus, as in Hegel there is no demonstration in the classical sense; in Marx there is no determinism in the succession of historical facts, and thus no predictions.'<sup>123</sup>

From here, Sorel moves to an attack on economism. Sorel discusses the point in relation to two Marxian references. The first comes from the second part of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in which Marx asserts that '...the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist'.<sup>124</sup> The second comes from *Capital*, in which Marx speaks of factory legislation as the 'necessary product of modern industry.'<sup>125</sup> Now, the peculiarity of these two specific references is not only that they constitute passages in which Marx seems to subscribe to economic determinism, but also in that they are two references used by Charles Andler in his review of Labriola's *Essais*.<sup>126</sup> Andler, employing these quotes,

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 'C'est lorsque les événements se sont déroulés depuis assez longtemps, lorsque les conséquences (imprévues les plus souvent) se sont manifestées, lorsque tout l'appareil bruyant et brillant (qui cache aux contemporains et aux auteurs du drame les vraies conditions de leurs succès ou de leurs défaites) est tombé, – c'est alors seulement que les diverses raisons de l'activité humaine apparaissent au grand jour.'

<sup>119</sup> For example, Rouanet held that 'L'école historique déniait tout droit à l'avenir, l'école française au passé. Hegel concilia ces deux pôles... en établissant un lien de succession entre le passé et l'avenir, celui-là contenu dans celui-ci.' Rouanet, 'Le matérialisme économique', p. 399. . Even when, a few years later, Bernstein will argue against historical determinism, he will blame Hegel's influence on Marx for this aspect of Marxism.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 'Cette impossibilité de prévision devait s'imposer à Marx, qui a hérité de tant de préoccupations hégéliennes.'

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 874.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 'Ainsi donc chez Hegel pas de démonstration, au sens classique du mot ; chez Marx pas de déterminisme dans la succession des faits historiques et par suite pas de prévisions.'

<sup>124</sup> Marx, *Poverty of philosophy*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, p. 166.

<sup>125</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 451.

<sup>126</sup> Andler, 'Conception matérialiste de l'histoire', p. 657.

came to the conclusion that ‘Marxism is an antiquated doctrine’.<sup>127</sup> His argument was that, in discussing the relation of the economic structure to the superstructure, one would be better off to ‘conclude, like Mr Sorel does, that “it is impossible to speak of determinism, for there is nothing that can be determined”’. The problem’ continued Andler ‘is that determinism is present in Marx’s text.’<sup>128</sup> Andler’s position is clear: whereas the relations between the various spheres of human activity are dominated by ‘contingency’<sup>129</sup>, Marx provides a criterion to examine these relations, and thus paints a different, deterministic, and erroneous picture.

Now, Sorel’s rhetorical strategy is the usual one of separating Marx from Marxism. He casts doubt, indirectly, on Andler’s reading of Marx by ‘going back to Marx’, by separating Marx’s theses from the mistaken deterministic interpretations. He points out, not without some reason, the vagueness of the expressions through which Marx hints at the economic determination of social relations. He insists that whereas in Marx the expression ‘mode of production’ has a general meaning, ‘certain disciples have understood it in a very narrow sense, and have reduced all history to a dry mathematical conception of functions of one variable, which would be the coefficient of technological progress!’<sup>130</sup> The economic determination of social relation is, to Sorel, made up of hypotheses that are ‘indemonstrable, and useless, I believe, to socialism.’<sup>131</sup>

It is important here to stress here the use of the word ‘indemonstrable’, in order to show how Sorel believes that economic determinism is *scientifically* untenable. Beyond the rhetorical strategy there is, in other words, a more complex argumentation about history in which Sorel puts to good use his reading of Labriola. Commenting on the division of society by Marx into two rigidly defined classes, Sorel warns that ‘these are not living capitalists [patrons] and workers, but only abstractions borrowed from the historical organism and transformed into mechanisms in a process of economical composition. Such *scientific masks* cannot be

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 658. ‘Cette raison dernière et générale, jointe aux raisons de détail... oblige à proclamer le marxisme une doctrine vieillie’.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 657. ‘Le plus prudent serait sans doute alors de conclure avec M. Sorel qu’ « on ne saurait parler de déterminisme, puisqu’il n’y a rien de déterminable ». Le malheur est que le déterminisme est dans le texte de Marx.’

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., pp. 657-8. ‘... avec M. Sorel, nous préférierions voir une contingence... dans toutes les médiations qui existent entre cette infrastructure prétendue et les produits supérieurs.’

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. 863-4. ‘Il faut bien séparer Marx de *certain*s Marxistes, car il n’est pas douteux que si le maître a entendu l’expression « mode de production » dans un sens très large, certains disciples l’ont entendu dans un sens très étroit et ont ramené toute l’histoire à une conception sèchement mathématique de fonctions d’une variable, qui serait le coefficient du progrès technologique !’.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 863.

mistaken for... the men who make history.’<sup>132</sup> In other words, the division of society into capitalists and proletarians is a tool of economic analysis necessary for the isolation of economic relations. Economic analysis, writes Sorel, is based on the construction of ‘artificial compositions and movements, bearing no resemblance [aucune analogie] with what *appears in the historical organism*.’<sup>133</sup> In an interesting footnote, Sorel makes a comparison between mechanics and economics: both sciences try to establish what Sorel calls conditions of ‘*experimental determinism*’ in order to understand the objects they study. But these carefully constructed conditions should not be mistaken for real determinism.<sup>134</sup> The argument is not impeccable, but is understandable enough: the separation of society into capitalists and proletarians is a social scientific abstraction, an expressive support, needed to understand the mechanisms of a capitalist economy, but this does not imply, for Sorel, that economics are the fundamental structure of the social world.

Sorel goes more deeply into the issue a few years later in an article published in the middle of the Bernstein debate, in the revisionist *Sozialistische Monatshefte*.<sup>135</sup> Here Sorel, aside from acknowledging his debt to Croce and Labriola and castigating the more deterministic interpretations of Marxism,<sup>136</sup> reflects in some depth on the question of the relationship between economic factors and other aspects of an historical moment. What he gives is an almost *verbatim* repetition of Labriola’s arguments on historical totalities. According to Sorel, Marx did not believe that all aspects of a given society are reducible to its productive system: on the contrary, ‘Marx always underlined the undeniable relations between economics, law and politics – considering these three elements as belonging to a single system.’<sup>137</sup> The belief in the presence of this ‘single system’ means that for Sorel economic activity does not take

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 872. ‘... mais on n’a pas pris garde que ce ne sont pas des patrons et des ouvriers vivants, mais seulement des abstractions empruntées à l’organisme historique et transformées en mécanismes dans la composition économique. Ces *masques scientifiques* ne peuvent être confondus avec les êtres ayant de la chair sur les os, avec les hommes qui font l’histoire’.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 866. ‘C’est parce que l’économie (comme la mécanique) étudie des œuvres humaines, que l’on doit procéder de la sorte, créer des compositions et des mouvements artificiels, qui n’ont aucune analogie avec ce qui *apparaît dans l’organisme historique*.’

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 867n. ‘Ce *déterminisme expérimental* est lié à la *contingence historique* : les découvertes, les créations mécaniques, les phénomènes économiques ne forment pas des suites nécessaires : c’est un point fondamental.’

<sup>135</sup> The original article is Georges Sorel, ‘Betrachtungen über die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung’, *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, 2, 1898, pp. 316-22, 367-75 and 428-32. Here we will use the reworked version printed in Sorel’s *Saggi di critica del marxismo*. Georges Sorel, ‘Osservazioni intorno alla concezione materialistica della storia’ in his *Saggi di critica del marxismo* (Palermo, Sandron: 1903), pp. 19-57.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 19 ‘...due autori italiani (il professor Antonio Labriola e Benedetto Croce) resero un grande servizio dimostrando che le idee di Marx non avevano che una lontana rassomiglianza con quelle dei suoi discepoli più chiassoni.’

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 41. ‘Marx dimostra d’aver sempre rilevato le relazioni innegabili fra l’economia, il diritto e la politica, - questi tre elementi essendo considerati come facenti parte d’un unico sistema.’

place outside of society, it is not the unsocialized confrontation of man with nature but, on the contrary, is influenced by the sum of juridical, ethical and political relations that constitute a given society. Put more simply, the economy is not outside of society, but is merely another aspect of historical totality. Consequently, economic determinism is un-Marxist.

‘Nor do I believe that it is in conformity with a Marxist spirit to decompose facts into various elements: economic ones first, subsequently juridical and political ones... *It is in the form that the distinction can be established*, but only for our intellectual necessities; in history, as well as in reason, we have unity; but in order to carry on a scientific study, it is necessary to establish classifications.’<sup>138</sup>

The isolation of historical factors of various kinds is legitimate for scientific purposes, but the Marxist must remember the fundamental unity of the historical wholes, and this implies that it is impossible to conceive of the economy as an isolated and hence foundational aspect of society. For Sorel, Marx, like Hegel, treats the economy as a system of needs, but ‘needs are determined by the overall organization of society... Problems of this kind are not exclusively economic: they embrace the entire field of social history.’<sup>139</sup>

In short, Sorel counters the accusations of economic determinism by making use of Labriola’s arguments about the constant interactions that in any given society characterize the relations between various spheres of human activity. The impression of determinism is dictated by Marx’s fully legitimate need to *isolate*, for scientific reasons, one of the variables, i.e. economics. But this is, for Sorel, very different from making a claim about economic determinism.

The tendency to overstate the role of economic factors, continues Sorel, can be explained partially because economic laws, unlike those of the juridical or ethical sciences, have a closer resemblance to the laws established by the natural sciences. Thus, the economic world appears to be regulated by more rigid necessities than the moral or juridical worlds. The reason for this is that the economy, especially the realm of production, is closer to the natural *milieu* than either law or morality are: as such, it presents something similar to the necessities that regulate the natural world. As we shall see in a short while, Sorel does not believe that

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 42. ‘Né io credo conforme allo spirito marxista il decomporre i fatti in elementi di varia natura: economici gli uni, giuridici e politici gli ultimi... *È nelle forme che esiste la distinzione*; ma solo per nostro intendimento; nella storia come nella ragione si produce l’unità; ma per procedere a uno studio scientifico è d’uopo dare delle classificazioni.’

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 43. ‘...Marx procede come Hegel: l’economia è per lui il *sistema dei bisogni*; e i bisogni sono determinati dall’organizzazione sociale tutt’intera... I problemi di tal genere non sono esclusivamente economici: essi abbracciano tutto il campo della storia sociale.’

strong causal relations regulate the economic sphere. However, he does state that the economy is a sphere in which humanity is more subject to the determinism of nature. Conversely ‘moving from the economy to law and politics, our spirit constructs to some extent its *freedom*; we understand perfectly that it would be impossible to deduce law and politics from the economy.’<sup>140</sup> In other words, the economy here is conceptualized as a point of contact between the determinism of the natural *milieu* and the creative activity characterizing the human one.

Nonetheless, it should be clear that Sorel does not believe that economic activity is regulated by the determinism of nature. Despite the fact that it consists in an interaction with nature, and that it represents the sphere of human activity that brings humans closer to natural necessity, economic activity remains a human phenomenon. It is in another important essay dedicated to ‘Necessity and fatalism in Marxism’ that Sorel clarifies this point.<sup>141</sup> Marx’s insistence on economic phenomena, he writes, is justified because such phenomena bear the greatest similarity with natural ones, in virtue of their regularity. More precisely:

‘We know today that chance does not always operate in the same way; in an economy based on free competition it produces the results most *similar* to those it has in the physical sciences. It is here that we find most the indetermination of facts combined with the reciprocal determination of tendencies (or systematized averages); *economy appears as the only social science truly purged of psychological elements, that is, of free action...*’<sup>142</sup>

But the separation between the natural deterministic world and the human one remains. ‘In truth’ writes Sorel ‘the economy is governed by chance; the seemingly regular laws which it reveals are only apparent, and have some value only for our use.’<sup>143</sup> Economic tendencies such as capitalist accumulation or the proletarianization of the middle classes are, in other words, *not* laws of nature: one must not forget that ‘in the economic order, under a regime of free competition, chance gives us *averages*, susceptible of being systematized in such a way as to

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 44. ‘Passando dall’economia 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.’

<sup>141</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘La necessità e il fatalismo nel marxismo’ [1898], *Saggi di critica del marxismo*, pp. 58-94.

<sup>142</sup> Sorel, ‘Necessità e fatalismo’, p. 78. Emphasis added. ‘Noi sappiamo oggi che l’azzardo non opera sempre allo stesso modo; è nella economia della libera concorrenza che esso produce gli effetti somiglianti a quelli a cui esso dà luogo nelle scienze fisiche. È là che si trova al più alto grado quell’indeterminazione dei fatti, unita alla determinazione reciproca delle tendenze (o risultati medi regolarizzati); questa economia sembra essere la sola scienza sociale veramente purgata da ogni elemento psicologico, cioè da ogni azione libera; essa è quindi la sola che sia suscettibile di essere trattata matematicamente.’

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 84. ‘L’economia è in realtà sottomessa all’azzardo; le leggi regolari che essa sembra fornire non sono che delle apparenze, non hanno valore che per il nostro uso...’

present tendencies *analogous* to mechanical processes and capable of being expressed under the guise of natural laws.’<sup>144</sup>

The arguments remind those deployed in the discussion of Durkheim’s sociology: the objects of social sciences are theoretically constructed objects, statistical averages. The consequences that Sorel draws are the same ones, namely a separation of the strong causality of the natural world from the weak causality of the social world. In stark opposition with the ‘*historical contingency*’<sup>145</sup> regulating the human world, nature ‘presents us with immutable principles’<sup>146</sup>. Thus, whereas ‘economic laws hide from us a fundamental arbitrariness, physical laws are often hidden between an apparent arbitrariness; the former cannot be applied to an individual case, the latter cover every possible case.’<sup>147</sup> Sorel here restates that, despite appearances to the contrary, the economy is a social phenomenon and thus is not regulated by causal necessities: whereas in the natural world strong causal necessities allow scientific analysis to be conducted in terms of general laws, the absence of these necessities in the social world prevents the social sciences from formulating such laws. And thus, research has to be conducted on a case-by-case basis, through the analysis of specific problems. The methods and criteria that allow the social scientist to shed light on a specific question cannot be erected to general laws, for there are simply no such laws that regulate the interactions amongst the various spheres of human activity in the social world.

This fact brings Sorel to separate the activity of the natural scientist from that of the social scientist. Unlike the former, the latter operates through a work of schematization, simplification, what Sorel calls ‘reductions’: the social scientist separates the ‘important facts, the dominant traits, the general principles from the confused whole, trying to translate his reductions into clear and concise formulas, which then are often mistaken for the necessary laws of the historical order.’<sup>148</sup> These ‘clear and concise’ formulas, however, are rational only

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 83. Emphasis added. ‘Non bisogna mai perdere di vista che è nell’ordine economico e sotto il regime della libera concorrenza che l’azzardo fornisce dei risultati medi, suscettibili di essere regolarizzati in modo da far risaltare delle tendenze analoghe a dei processi meccanici e atte ad essere espresse sotto forma di leggi naturali.’

<sup>145</sup> Sorel, ‘Pro e contro’, p. 866-7n.

<sup>146</sup> Sorel, ‘Necessità e fatalismo’, p. 84. ‘La natura, al contrario, ci presenta dei principi immutabili’.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 84. ‘Le leggi economiche ci nascondono l’azzardo fondamentale, le leggi fisiche invece sono spesso dissimulate sotto un azzardo apparente; le prime non s’applicano a caso isolato, le seconde s’applicano invece a qualunque caso.’

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-8. Non si riflette in generale che il sociologo e il fisico, mentre pur sembrano servirsi di metodi analoghi, procedono invece per vie affatto diverse. Il primo per facilitare le proprie ricerche fa delle riduzioni successive, piuttosto che delle astrazioni; separa dall’insieme confuso i fatti importanti, i caratteri dominanti, i

insofar as they are connected to the specific problem upon which they try to shed light: ‘sociological reductions...are made to be used in dealing with specific problems’<sup>149</sup> Thus, in the absence of general laws, one must always specify the field of application of these ‘sociological reductions’: ‘In order to avoid all confusion and preserve their scientific status, it is necessary to always define the goal for which we formulate them; it is the philosophy of action that must enlighten the path of sociology’.<sup>150</sup>

#### 4.3.3. THE EPISTEMIC STATUS OF SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Now, what Sorel does in this passage is in fact rather simple. Having excluded the possibility both of finding a law of historical development as well as that of finding a fixed criterion regulating the interactions between the various spheres of human activity, he tries to come up with a method of preserving some scientific rigour in the absence of laws. And thus he comes up with this epistemological rule of thumb, that social-scientific concepts have to always be connected to the specific questions that they try to solve. But this epistemological rule of thumb is, in fact, a singular instance of a more general understanding of social science, and of its relation to historical agency, which Sorel directly derives from Vico and Labriola.

To understand this rather complex point, we must remember that Sorel, following Vico, believes in the historical genesis of all human ideas. The implication of this principle is that social scientific ideas also have to be seen as historical human productions – as connected to human agency. As he writes in his 1901 introduction to the *Saggi di Critica del Marxismo*, talking about the history of philosophy:

‘The formulas that resumed entire systems do not tell us why a system triumphed in a given era, nor the reason as to why it was able to influence institutions. What is truly valuable [importantissimo] in the history of philosophy is what cannot be found in dogmatic theses, i.e. the attitude taken by each school in the face of reality. Doctrines crumble, one after the other, like sand castles and the history of philosophy resembles the narration of successive failures; but this vanity of philosophy only belongs to the dogmatic part, that which presented itself as scientifically superior. But there was something that was not in vain: the light shed upon their own epoch by the creators of

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principi generali, cercando tradurre le sue riduzioni in formole chiare e brevi, che assai spesso sono scambiate per leggi necessarie dell’ordine storico’

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 68. ‘La riduzioni della sociologia e gli schemi dialettici che le riassumono sono fatti per essere usati nelle quistioni [sic] particolari...’

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. ‘Se si vuole evitare ogni confusione e conservar loro un vero carattere scientifico, bisogna sempre definire lo scopo in vista del quale noi li enunciamo; è la filosofia dell’azione che deve rischiarare il cammino della sociologia.’



philosophical schools, which allows posterity to understand it... Philosophy does not belong to the domain of knowledge, but to that of active life...'<sup>151</sup>

In other words, philosophies, as well as social-scientific theories, ought not to be understood as descriptions of social reality, but as *expressions* of this same reality. At the same time, since social reality is not static but is transformed by human agency, it follows that social scientific theories too must be understood as expression of historical agency. This, of course, holds for Marxism too.

It is in the introduction to the *Saggi* that this point is first developed, although somewhat awkwardly, because Sorel phrases this insight in reference to a scientific ideal of detached objectivity in which he is no longer allowed to believe, at least since the time of the study of Vico. So he writes sentences such as 'it is necessary to abandon all ambitions to transform socialism into a science', approvingly quotes Croce as the latter writes that it would be better to leave to charlatans the idea that 'science... is the regulator of life',<sup>152</sup> and speaks of Marxism in terms of its capacity to generate 'myths' and 'social poems'.<sup>153</sup> But despite the awkward language, Sorel is not embracing irrationalism, nor is he separating the strong causality of the natural sciences from the weak alternative of the social sciences. Instead, he is bringing his historicism to its logical conclusion and asserting that the idea of a social science that is not in some way the expression or articulation of a social situation is an impossibility. What Sorel is doing, in other words, is spelling out the impossibility of understanding social science à la Durkheim, as sitting above society and discovering its fundamental structures.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Introduzione' [1901] in *Saggi di critica del Marxismo*, pp. 9-10. Full passage: 'D'altronde, quando si studia la storia della filosofia, si arriva a riconoscere ben presto che le dottrine ebbero a compiere nel mondo una parte assai meno importante di quello che appaia sulle prime. Le formole che servivano a riassumere i sistemi non ci dicono perché tale sistema ha trionfato in un'epoca determinata, né la ragione per cui ebbe un'influenza sulle istituzioni. Quel che è importantissimo nella storia della filosofia è quel che non si trova nelle tesi dogmatiche, è l'attitudine presa da ciascuna scuola di fronte alla vita reale. Le dottrine cadono le une dopo le altre come castelli di carta; la storia della filosofia appare come la narrazione di deplorabili e successivi crolli; ma questa vanità della filosofia non tocca che la parte dogmatica, quella appunto che si presentava come scienza superiore. Vi fu qualche cosa che non fu vana, cioè la luce venuta dai creatori delle singole scuole, che permise ai posteri di conoscere la loro epoca; poiché spesso non tanto importa il sapere quel che il mondo potrebbe essere seguendo l'uno o l'altro fabbricatore di ipotesi, quanto il veder bene quel che interessa di vedere, per la pratica, in un'epoca determinata. La filosofia non appartiene al dominio della conoscenza, ma a quello della vita attiva: aver ben penetrato un sistema è aver appreso a ben servirsene.'

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 13. 'È necessario abbandonare ogni velleità di trasformare il socialismo in scienza; B. Croce ha scritto sopra tale questione delle pagine di buon senso. Io applaudo di cuore a questa sua massima: "Lasciamo ai chiacchieroni... il proclamare che la scienza (ossia la loro scienza) è la regina dominatrice della vita".' The citation comes from Croce's *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica*.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., pp. 13 and 15.

<sup>154</sup> Let us remember that Durkheim had written that 'Socialism is not a science... it is a cry of pain... uttered by those who feel most acutely our collective *malaise*.' Durkheim, *Le socialisme*, p. 37. Implicit in this criticism is the idea that too much involvement with the phenomena under consideration is scientifically inappropriate since science presupposes detachment, the separation of the enquiring subject and the object of knowledge.

Instead, social science is a socially embedded activity, the expression of human agency, and as such cannot be understood in isolation from the social reality it expresses.

We have seen many times why Sorel does not believe in the possibility of a ‘strong’, i.e. law-like, science of society: the central role of human agency in the artificial *milieu*. The point is reasserted again in the introduction:

‘...we do not live in a measurable and material reality, as those who dream of transforming sociology into a mechanical science think. The present world would be, in that case, the only one causing our actions. But as soon as man elevates himself above animal life, the present and mechanical reality become increasingly less important. Man adapts to a kind of ideal atmosphere, creates a world for himself, a future in which to take shelter from the anxieties of the present: this sphere of the *imagined future* is the truly human environment.’<sup>155</sup>

Here human agency, always sharply distinguished from the natural world, is characterized in terms of poetic imagination, but the point is always the same, namely the impossibility of establishing deterministic causal relations, and hence laws. This is the reason why there can be no general sociology, and why Marxism cannot be seen as a general sociology but instead must be seen as the intellectual production of a specific historical force, namely the workers’ movement. This is the fundamental point: the conceptualization of Marxism as the ideological production of a new kind of historical experience, that of the modern proletariat. This is the deeper meaning of the fact that ‘philosophy does not belong to the domain of knowledge, but to that of active life’.<sup>156</sup> It is, moreover, also the reason as to why Sorel begins seeing the workers’ movement and Marxist theory as two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the same phenomenon.

The clearest indications in this direction are provided by Sorel in the spring of 1902, as he is invited as the main speaker to the session on historical materialism organized by the *Société Française de Philosophie*.<sup>157</sup> The society represented the official, institutionalized forum of

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<sup>155</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Les aspects juridiques du socialisme’, *Revue Socialiste* 22, 1900, p. 398, quoted in Sorel, ‘Introduzione’, p. 14. French passage: ‘Nous ne vivons pas dans la réalité matérielle et mesurable, comme l’imaginent souvent des savants qui rêvent de faire de la sociologie une science mécanique ; le monde du présent serait, dans ce cas, le seul monde qui fournirait les causes de nos mouvements. Mais dès que l’homme s’élève quelque peu au-dessus de la vie animale, le présent et la réalité mécanique deviennent de moins en moins importants. L’homme s’entoure d’une sorte d’atmosphère idéale, d’un monde fait par lui, d’un avenir, dans lequel il se réfugie pour échapper aux angoisses du passé. C’est cette région de l’avenir imaginé qui constitue le vrai milieu humain...’

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>157</sup> ‘Séance du 20 Mars 1902: Le matérialisme historique’, *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* 2, 1902, pp. 91-122.

French philosophy. It was connected to the Sorbonne and it issued from the same group that had set up, less than a decade earlier, the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. In the session of the 20th March 1902, amongst Sorel's listeners we find Bergson, Charles Dunan, Xavier Léon, Edouard Le Roy and many other central figures of French philosophical thought of the time.<sup>158</sup> Already, the fact that a relative outsider like Sorel could be the main speaker in this forum shows us the difficulties that Marxism experienced in its French implantation, while the details of the heated discussion give us an idea of the specificity of Sorel's Marxism when compared to the normal understanding of Marx in France. For our purposes, the importance of the discussion lies in its showing rather clearly how from the refusal to believe in social scientific laws Sorel derives the impossibility of general sociologies and the understanding of Marxism as the ideological production of the workers' movement.

Sorel's exposition of historical materialism draws on Andler and Croce, and insists on two points: the rejection of economism and the status of Marxism as a synthesis of theory and practice along the lines of Labriola and Vico. But he is challenged by Elie Halévy, who reproaches him, on these two crucial points, for straying too far from the core of Marxism. First Halévy states:

‘...the terms of “solidarity” and “synthesis” amount to, I fear, a betrayal of Marxist thought. They imply a reciprocity of action between the elements considered, that Marx, in the name of his historical materialism, would have thought inconceivable. According to Marx, the reaction of the “spiritual” onto the “material”, and of the “theoretical” upon the “practical”, is an impossibility’<sup>159</sup>

What Halévy articulates is a Marxism that is equipped with a fixed criterion that regulates the interaction between the various spheres of human activity. We have, as the fundamental phenomenon, economics: what Halévy calls ‘the material’ or ‘the practical’. The secondary phenomena are what Halévy calls ‘the spiritual’ and the ‘theoretical’, what Labriola called the ‘produits et... développements dérivés et complexes’.<sup>160</sup> What Halévy insists is the presence of a fixed way in which these two spheres interact, a hierarchical relation in which

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 91n. ‘Étaient présents à la séance: MM. Belot, Bergson, Bernès, Brunschvicg, Coutourat, Darlu, Delbos, Dereux, Desjardins, Dunan, Evellin, Halévy, Jacob, J. Lachelier, H. Lachelier, Lalande, X. Léon, Le Roy, Lévy-Brughl, Pacaut, Pécaut, Rauh, Sorel.’

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 95. ‘En premier lieu, les termes, de « solidarité » et de « synthèse » constituent, je le crains, une sorte de trahison de la pensée marxiste. Ils impliquent, entre les éléments considérés, une réciprocité d’action que Marx considérerait précisément, au nom de son matérialisme historique, comme inconcevable. Selon Marx, la réaction du « spirituel » sur le « matériel », du « théorique » sur le « pratique » est une impossibilité.’

<sup>160</sup> Labriola, ‘Matérialisme historique’, p. 136.

the first set of phenomena is primary and the second set secondary. But for Sorel, as we have seen, this criterion does not exist: there is no general pattern regulating the interactions between the two spheres, everything interacts with everything, and science can only shed light on specific problems, but never come up with such a general criterion.

It should be noticed that on Halévy's view the revolutionary potential of Marxist theory is thus reduced to zero, for the only driver of historical change is the first, economic, type of phenomena. We can see how, though strictly speaking the economism of Halévy is capable of conceiving Marxism as the self-consciousness of the modern proletariat, it cannot ascribe any historical force to this self-consciousness. Historical change is dictated by economic, rather than ideological changes. This of course is unacceptable to Sorel, because the very idea of a sphere of human activity that somehow is able to develop without being influenced by the sum total of juridical, intellectual, and moral relations that characterize wider society is nonsensical.

There is, moreover, an epistemological point worth stressing. Despite the fact that Halévy claims to see in all ideological manifestations a reflection of the fundamental economic phenomenon, he still conceives of Marxism as a general sociology. And thus, when Sorel elaborates his point about how Marxism is not a social science but the theoretical articulation of a number of social practices that characterize the proletariat, he claims that he cannot understand:

‘Secondly, I fear that M. Sorel uses the terms “theory” and “practice” in a rather obscure way. All historical theories, M. Sorel tells us, have, consciously or unconsciously a practical goal (of edification, teaching, etc.): the merit of historical materialism is that of having grasped [avoir eu la conscience explicite de] this universal fact. It is from here that I cannot understand anymore.’<sup>161</sup>

It is normal that Halévy finds it hard to follow Sorel. He enters the discussion with the definition of ‘practice’ as coterminous with economics, i.e. the interaction with nature for the satisfaction of human needs. Further, he holds Marxism to be a theory claiming that this sphere of human activity is the only driver of historical change, and that which determines elements such as morality, law, and so on. But given that Sorel rejects this structure/superstructure way of thinking about society, it consequently becomes impossible to

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid. ‘En second lieu, je crains que M. Sorel n’emploie les termes de « théorie » et de « pratique » dans un sens assez obscur. Toutes les théories historiques, nous dit M. Sorel, se proposent, consciemment, ou inconsciemment, une fin pratique (d’édification, d’enseignement, etc.) ; le mérite du matérialisme historique c’est d’avoir eu la conscience explicite de ce fait universel. Ici, je cesse de comprendre.’

strictly separate ‘theory’ from ‘practice’. Social theories thus have to be seen also as particular forms of agency, as expressions, of a particular kind, of the agency of collectivities. The unity of theory and practice consists precisely in avowing that even systems of ideas, such as Marxism, are expressions of human activity, and that as such their perspective is not just historically situated, but also practical. The conceptual distinction between the sphere of economic production and the rest is, in other words, absent from Sorel’s perspective. With this in mind, it is not surprising that Halévy would say that Sorel calls ‘practice... that which Marx called theory, and vice-versa.’<sup>162</sup> More accustomed to public discussion than Sorel, Halévy gains the upper hand by referring to the very text by Charles Andler<sup>163</sup> that Sorel had brought in his support in order to illustrate his own take on Marxism.

‘It is not like this that one must understand, in an essay defining historical materialism, the terms “theory” and “practice”. It is not like this, specifically, that M. Andler - to whom M. Sorel often appears to refer to - understands these terms. By “theory”, M. Andler understands the complex of ideas through which men translate and express their social relations, imposed upon them by their economic conditions of existence; by “practice” the invention of working tools allowing men to “earn their life [gagner leur vie] with a certain set of tools, and through the division of labour which that set requires”... we alter [on fausse] Marxism, if by “practice” we mean not “technical activity”, but the propaganda of the socialist ideal.’<sup>164</sup>

But Sorel cannot accept this sharp distinction between theory and practice, for it amounts to establishing a separation between the economy and the rest. The ‘propaganda of the socialist ideal’ is itself a form of human activity rooted in an historical experience. The sphere of economic production is important, but cannot have the overwhelming importance which Halévy claims for it, for this would result in a one-sided historical vision, and would advance to the status of social scientific laws connections that, for Sorel, are at best empirical correlations between statistically constructed theoretical objects. Rather, following Labriola, the historical process is characterized by the rich and complex interaction of various spheres of human activity: this fidelity to reality, for Sorel prevents Marxism from formulating

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., pp. 95-6.

<sup>163</sup> Charles Andler, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels: Le Manifeste Communiste. Vol. II: Introduction historique et commentaire par Charles Andler* (Paris, Société Nouvelle de librairie et d’édition: 1901).

<sup>164</sup> ‘Séance sur le matérialisme historique’, pp. 110-11. ‘Mais ce n’est pas ainsi que l’on doit entendre, dans un essai de définition du matérialisme historique, les termes de « théorie » et de « pratique ». Ce n’est pas ainsi, en particulier, que M. Andler, auquel M. Sorel paraît souvent se référer, entend ceux deux termes. Par « théorie », M. Andler entend l’ensemble des idées par lesquelles les hommes traduisent et expriment les relations sociales que leurs conditions économiques d’existence leur imposent; par « pratique » l’invention des instruments de travail, permettant aux hommes « de gagner leur vie avec un certain outillage, et avec la division du travail que cet outillage requiert » (*Manifeste Communiste, Commentaire*, p. 207.)... l’on fausse le Marxisme, si par « pratique » on entend non pas « l’activité technique », mais la propagande de l’idée socialiste.’

illusory laws of history and society. Marxism then is the theoretical elaboration of a social force that is not understood in merely economic terms. In a timid reply, Sorel thus connects Marxist theory to the working class:

‘The historical interpretation given by Marx and Engels must be used to shed light upon the workers’ movement... they [Marx and Engels] tried to justify the movement by showing that it can succeed and that the proletariat can accomplish its revolutionary mission, which was, to them, the essence of all modern proletarian agitation. It is a question of clarifying a social practice, in the same way in which a theory of physics sheds light upon an industrial practice. Class struggle would not exist without ideas...’<sup>165</sup>

It is important to insist on this point, for, together with the rejection of historical determinism and that of economicism, it gives us the theoretical structure of Sorel’s Marxism. These three ideas – the rejection of historical determinism, the refusal to come up with a general criterion regulating the interactions between various spheres of human activity, and the understanding of all intellectual activity, Marxism included, as socially embedded – are what define Sorel’s Marxism, and constitute the theoretical bases of his more canonically political writings. They can all be seen as consequences of Sorel’s attempt to put human agency at the heart of the social world, and spell out Sorel’s refusal to see Marxism as an ‘*economico-revolutionary fatalism*’<sup>166</sup>.

Historical prediction is an impossibility, and economic analysis is not the analysis of the deep and only structure of social development, but at best a scientific abstraction of an infinitely more complex social reality. Society itself is a complex web of mutually-interacting spheres of human activity in which it is impossible to establish a priority, or a general criterion capable of delineating a definitive social architecture. The social scientist can try to enquire on specific problems, investigating what influences most a certain phenomenon, but must always bear in mind the constant and mutual interaction of the various spheres. Moreover, science itself is conceived as a sphere of human activity, and is situated in the social world: instead of representing, from a supposedly external perspective, the causal relations regulating society, science merely articulates what is implicit in a number of social practices from which

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 110. ‘L’interprétation historique donnée par Marx et Engels doit servir à éclairer le mouvement ouvrier, qui se développerait, sans cela, d’une manière purement empirique, au hasard de circonstances. Ils ont cherché à justifier le mouvement en prouvant qu’il peut aboutir et que le prolétariat peut accomplir cette mission révolutionnaire, qui était, à leurs yeux, l’essentiel de toute l’agitation prolétarienne moderne. Il s’agit d’éclairer une activité sociale, comme une théorie physique éclaire une pratique industrielle. Une lutte des classes n’existerait pas sans les idées...’

<sup>166</sup> Sorel, ‘Pro e Contro’, p. 864.

it arises. Theoretical activity, in short, can only be understood as one aspect amongst many in the social world. After all, it is ‘Marx’s principle’ that states that ‘science must emerge from action, the intellectual movement [must] express the movement of reality’.<sup>167</sup>

#### **4.4 THE INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROLETARIAT**

If the social world is a world characterized by the deployment of human agency in institutional settings, and, furthermore, if the various spheres of human activity that these institutions harbour continually interact with each other without a fixed criterion, it follows that historical change can only be understood in terms of the production of new social relations inside new institutions. We have seen, in section 4.2.4, how Sorel had formulated this idea in the ‘*Étude sur Vico*’. In the concluding part of this chapter we dwell more on this question of historical change by focussing on the issue of ethics in socialism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this was an issue that any French Marxist interested in the intellectual vindication of historical materialism had to deal with: someone like Sorel had, in other words, to show how Marxism was capable of making sense of morality as an important factor of historical change and how it was not, as it were, a ‘*théorie du ventre*’. The understanding of Marxism and of the historical process that we have outlined in this chapter, as should be clear, gave ample basis to Sorel to speak of such questions, and starting in 1898, Sorel underlined these aspects repeatedly, putting them at the centre of his revisionist project of ‘going back to Marx’.

In defending the right of Marxists to speak of ethics and of juridical relations, Sorel gave further articulation to his theory of historical change through institutional development. Ethics, in particular, came to be seen by Sorel as an indicator of proletarian institutional development, i.e. of the readiness of proletarian institutions to take charge of the new society. By examining the question of ethics, thus, we are in a position to clarify and further characterize Sorel’s understanding of historical change as a process of institutional development. Given that, for Sorel, institutions are the, so to speak, natural habitat of social relations, it follows that a new moral vision can only be embedded in new institutions and that, conversely, the presence of a socialist ethics becomes an indicator of proletarian institutional development. Moving from the abstract to the concrete, we conclude with the examination Sorel’s 1898 ‘*L’avenir socialiste des syndicats*’, a text that sees unions as the

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 886. ‘Suivant le principe de Marx, la science doit sortir de l’action, le mouvement de la pensée exprimer la mouvement réel.’

quintessential proletarian institutions and that outlines the socialist transformation in terms of a widening of the functions of unions, understood not merely as organizations of resistance to capitalist exploitation but, more radically, as the embryonic cells of the society to come.

#### 4.4.1 ETHICS, RIGHT, AND INSTITUTIONS

Sorel's concern for morality is an old one. It features in his writings since at least the *Procès de Socrate*, and occupies a central role in his revision of Marxism, in his 'going back to Marx'. That this should be so, as we have stated, is unsurprising, since the accusations against Marxists of not understanding morality and law were common currency in the France of the time. Moreover, the two closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are also characterized by intellectual conditions favourable to the voicing of such an issue. Those were the years of the Bernstein debate, in which the eminent member of the SPD questioned the necessity of the economic collapse of capitalism. This, as we shall see more thoroughly in the next chapter, created a fertile ground for Marxisms that gave importance to other factors of historical development than economics. In the aftermath of the Bernstein crisis, when the polemical battle between various reformisms and the orthodoxy came to life, Sorel used this space to publicly proclaim his non-determinist Marxism and to stress the questions of proletarian right and ethics.

But what can ethics and right signify from the perspective of Sorel's Marxism? A good starting point for examining the question comes from the following passage, written in 1899, discussing the success of Fourier amongst orthodox Marxists: 'Marxists' writes Sorel 'have not generally understood the enormous difference between the perspective of Marx and that of Fourier... despite the outlandishness of the hypothesis [of Fourier], they like [its] automatic stability because it does not imply any moral notion, and to most democratic socialists *morality is an abominable monster*.'<sup>168</sup> 'We can call utopians', continues Sorel, 'those reformers who cannot explain their projects by appealing to the observation of the social mechanism'<sup>169</sup>. This reference to the 'social mechanism' is significant as it sheds light on how Sorel approaches the question. Ethics and law are human productions, embedded not only, or even principally, in moral maxims and legislative texts, but also, and more crucially, in social

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<sup>168</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Y a-t-il de l'utopie dans le marxisme?', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 7, 1899, p. 158. 'Les marxistes n'ont pas, généralement, bien compris l'énorme différence qui sépare les points de vue de Marx et de Fourier ; comme les anciens phalanstériens, beaucoup d'entre eux sont dupes de la mécanique fantastique de Fourier ; ils trouvent que le système phalanstérien a une allure physique et par suite matérialiste ; la stabilité automatique, malgré l'in vraisemblance de l'hypothèse, leur plait, parce qu'elle ne requiert aucune notion morale ; et pour un très grand nombre de social-démocrates la *morale est un monstre abominable*.'

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. 'Nous devons considérer comme utopistes tous les réformateurs que ne peuvent pas expliquer leurs projets en partant de l'observation du mécanisme social'



practices occurring within institutions. But ethics and law, as we have seen, are particular types of human productions, one that, following Labriola, Sorel sees as higher, derived from the more basic economic realm. Though they are capable of influencing the sphere of economic production, they are secondary in that they distance themselves from economics, and thus exemplify the process through which '[the human] spirit regains its freedom and is capable again to realize, more or less, its ends.'<sup>170</sup>

In an Italian article of 1899 Sorel devotes an interesting analysis to the beginning of chapter two of *Capital*, where Marx writes that one of the conditions of exchange is the presence of a contractual relation between the two parties: 'this juridical relation... is but the reflex of the real economic relation between the two.'<sup>171</sup> Sorel's analysis of the word reflection – in the original German 'widerspiegelt' – is the following: the word must be taken in its 'psychological sense.... spirit, stimulated by the economical phenomenon, creates a spiritual product'<sup>172</sup>, i.e. the juridical relation. The best analogy here is an organic one, and it is impossible not to be reminded of a footnote in the study on Vico, where Sorel had declared that to assert that, in the study of human institutions, moral phenomena are epiphenomenal is 'as mistaken as saying that, in psychology, consciousness is epiphenomenal.'<sup>173</sup> Juridical and ethical systems are 'what we have in our hands, constructed by us, it is our tool, our reasoned work; it is... the expression of our freedom'.<sup>174</sup> Not only do these secondary social forms embody our freedom in a more complete way, they also have a role to play in the historical process. Ethics and right are thus secondary forms, but ones in which human freedom is realized more fully.

The point is that, though Sorel refuses to give a precise architecture of the social world, he believes that certain human productions such as ethics and law are more advanced human products than others, such as economic systems. The superiority is measured in terms of the detachment from the necessity of nature: it is 'precisely because the economy is a system that

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<sup>170</sup> Sorel, 'Necessità e fatalismo', p. 83. 'Di mano in mano che noi ci allontaniamo da questa regione dove l'azzardo fa nascere una specie di necessità, lo spirito recupera la sua libertà e ritorna capace in una misura più o meno grande di realizzare i suoi fini.'

<sup>171</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p.88.

<sup>172</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Le idee giuridiche nel Marxismo' [1899] in *Saggi di Critica del Marxismo*, p. 193. 'La parola *riflesso* è quasi presa in un senso psicologico e deve approssimarsi al termine *specie espressa* degli scolastici: lo spirito, eccitato dal fenomeno economico, crea un prodotto spirituale.'

<sup>173</sup> Sorel, 'Étude sur Vico', p. 89n. 'Il ne faudrait pas conclure que les appréciations morales sont des épiphénomènes; cela n'est pas plus exact que dire que la conscience est un épiphénomène en psychologie.'

<sup>174</sup> Sorel, 'Le idee giuridiche', p. 193. '*Mezzo* è ciò che noi abbiamo tra mano, ciò che è da noi fabbricato, è il nostro strumento, la nostra opera ragionata; esso è per una gran parte l'espressione della nostra libertà.'

displays a greater necessity and some analogy with nature, that Engels places it at the bottom of the ladder.<sup>175</sup> But this means something quite precise, namely that the emergence of new ethical and juridical forms signals the maturity of an historical movement, of a new social form. If we embrace economism, we can safely disregard ethics and law, because the only relevant change is one in the productive system. But if we are equipped with a more scientific, and for Sorel more truly Marxian, conception of the historical process, we have to conclude that they are key elements of an historical transformation, for they show us that the proletariat is truly ready to overthrow capitalism: not only has it broken with capitalism at the level of economic production, but it has also developed its class life to the point of having developed its own moral and juridical forms.

Sorel's concern for right and ethics then does not aim at providing a justification of socialism in moral terms. The purpose of this insistence is not that of showing that socialism is more moral, or just than capitalism. To argue this would mean embracing the un-Marxian perspective of natural rights. Instead, Sorel starts from the opposite point of view, from the observation that capitalism appears increasingly immoral. What must the historian conclude from this? That a new moral sense is emerging, historically, through the development of new institutions: the emergence of a proletarian morality and of proletarian juridical relations are good indicators that a new society is coming. Morality too, in other words, must be understood socially and historically: 'Morality thus understood is strictly related to the institutions of a country, and it is not without reason that the ancients considered morality as part of politics.'<sup>176</sup> The insistence on morality and law then can be understood best if seen from the perspective of Sorel's reflections on the conditions of revolutions, and of his understanding of the relations between the economy and other social forms in the historical process.

It is in a conference to the *Collège libre des sciences sociales*, published in the same year in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, that Sorel articulates his views on the issue. It is telling that he begins by a distinction between natural and historical right: 'the first one, inspired by the traditions of the liberal bourgeoisie, dates back to the French Revolution; the second, developed mainly under Marx's influence, derives its principles from the study of the

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 'Appunto perché l'economia è un sistema che presenta una certa analogia con la natura, una maggiore necessità, Engels la pone alla base della scala.'

<sup>176</sup> Georges Sorel, 'L'éthique du socialisme', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 7, 1899, p. 294. 'La morale ainsi entendue est en rapport très intime avec les institutions du pays et ce n'est pas sans raison que les anciens ont considéré la morale comme une partie de la politique.'

social conditions created by large industry.’<sup>177</sup> An appeal to natural right can be politically useful, as it gives ‘excellent weapons’ to those who attack the ‘established powers’<sup>178</sup>, but, crucially, it is a sterile appeal: ‘it [natural right] only yields negative results and its action is purely destructive: once the day of the revolution arrives, the social group in the best position to inherit power restores authority for its own benefit.’<sup>179</sup>

The question of morality ought, for Sorel, to be given more centrality in contemporary socialism. The political necessities of Marxists, fighting against adversaries who employed the language of natural right, have led them to ‘cover with ridicule all ethical preoccupations, and insist solely on the material side of the struggle.’<sup>180</sup> Of course, Sorel opposes this approach, which ‘deserves to be called materialist in the worse sense of the term’.<sup>181</sup> Class struggle, for Sorel, has an ethical and juridical side, whose origins lie in the social conditions of the two opposing classes and in their struggle. He cites the section of *Capital* in which Marx writes that attempts by unions to limit the working day configure ‘...an antinomy, right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchanges. Between equal rights, force decides.’<sup>182</sup> Commenting on this opposition between bourgeois and proletarian right Sorel adds:

‘Class struggle revolves around [porte sur] juridical systems; we can say that it is a struggle between two principles: a *struggle between juridical principles*; each of the two systems is characterized by *the political ideal which the two classes have of the role of law*, and by the general tendency which results from this idea for the economy of the country.’<sup>183</sup>

In interpreting this passage, we must remind ourselves that Sorel had clearly distinguished, a few pages before, between historical and natural conceptions of rights. Saying that the class

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., pp. 280-1. ‘Il est très facile de reconnaître dans le socialisme contemporain deux conceptions éthiques opposées : l’une est celle du droit naturel, l’autre celle du droit historique ; - la première, inspirée des traditions de la bourgeoisie libérale, se rattache à la Révolution française ; la seconde, développée principalement sous l’influence de Marx, puise ses principes dans l’étude des conditions sociales produites par la grande industrie.’

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. ‘...il [natural right] a été utilisé par les groupes les plus divers, parce qu’il ne fournit que des résultats négatifs et que son action est purement destructive : quand le jour de la révolution arrive, le groupe social le mieux placé pour recueillir la succession du pouvoir restaure l’autorité à son profit.’

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 285. ‘Les disciples de Marx, ayant à lutter contre les adversaires qui invoquaient le droit naturel, ont souvent cru de bonne guerre de tourner en ridicule toutes les préoccupations éthiques et d’insister uniquement sur le côté matériel de la lutte.’

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>182</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 225.

<sup>183</sup> Sorel, ‘Éthique du socialisme’, p. 287. ‘La lutte des classes porte donc sur des systèmes juridiques ; on peut dire que c’est une lutte entre deux principes, une *lutte sur le droit* ; chacun des systèmes est caractérisé par l’*idée politique que chaque classe se fait du rôle de la loi* et par l’allure générale qui résulte de cette idée pour l’économie du pays.’

struggle is a struggle between juridical principles does not mean that it is a struggle for the acknowledgment of the natural rights of the working classes. Instead, it means highlighting how in a conflict between different classes, each class has its own conception, rooted in its institutional practices, of what rights and morality are, and that this dimension must be acknowledged in Marxism.

The secondary nature of juridical and ethical forms thus allows them to function as indicators of the evolution of a form of social life. Once a social group has managed to develop its own ethical and juridical frameworks, it means that it has developed its institutions to the point that they require such frameworks to function. Ethics and right are thus signs of the historical maturity of the proletariat, and it is this development that alone can ensure the successful overthrow of capitalism. Again, the fundamental point is that the concern for rights and morality must be seen in connection with Sorel's theory of historical change through institutional development, what he had called in the study of Vico the 'theory of preparation'.<sup>184</sup> Because Sorel has a nuanced, complex understanding of society, and refuses to see it in purely economic terms, it follows that a social transformation must address this complexity, and that the revolutionary class must introduce a host of new social relations able to sustain a truly new society. If the revolution were a mere transformation of the productive system, the juridical, political and moral relations that characterized the old society would still exert their influence in the post-revolutionary world. And thus the new society would fall back on the old understandings of law and ethics or, alternatively, jumpo into the unknown. The French experience here appears decisive in orienting Sorel's thought. If we go back to the 'Éthique du socialisme', we read:

'Our fathers could believe that it was sufficient to overthrow power to allow things to take on their natural course, so that the reign of reason may begin. We have acquired far too much experience to accept this naïve optimism; the succession of authority never remains vacant for too long; tyranny swiftly follows tyranny. Socialists do not want to jump again in the unknown.'<sup>185</sup>

The fundamental thought at work here is one concerning historical continuity. The question is: what structures and institutions can a post-revolutionary society rely on? Sorel's answer is that these structures and institutions, amongst which there are ethics and law, must be

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<sup>184</sup> Sorel, 'Étude sur Vico', p. 936.

<sup>185</sup> Sorel, 'Éthique du socialisme', p. 288. 'Nos pères ont pu croire qu'il suffit de renverser le pouvoir pour permettre aux choses de prendre leur cours naturel, pour que le règne de la raison commence. Nous avons acquis trop d'expérience pour accepter ce naïf optimisme ; la succession de l'autorité ne reste jamais longtemps vacante ; la tyrannie succède vite à la tyrannie. Les socialistes ne veulent plus se jeter dans l'inconnu.'

developed before the revolutionary uprising. Thus, ‘..what was, in the past, secondary for utopians and politicians becomes now extremely important: the work of preparation of the proletariat.’<sup>186</sup> This work of preparation must consist in the development of new social relations, and cannot be limited to the transformation of the system of economic production. Against the evolutionary mechanicism of a specific kind Marxism and its sociological formulas, Sorel here deploys a considerably refined sense of history, and of its slow unfolding. Sorel’s conception of the revolution is one in which the violent upheavals associated with it are, in fact, secondary:

‘The notion [of the evolution of the revolution] reaches its full development when the ethical spirit completely permeates the revolution; violence still remains; but it is merely the struggle necessary to make old branches fall, to give air to young and vital creations, to ensure the victory of institutions having already passed their tests; - it is but the anticipation of the unanimity which will unfold incessantly and which will make reforms appear intangible.’<sup>187</sup>

The obscure expression concerning the ‘ethical spirit’ permeating the revolution can be explained as follows. The moral condemnation of capitalism, argues Sorel, is possible once a new moral sense has emerged. But since, to follow Labriola once more, ideas do not fall from the sky, this new moral sense can only emerge from a new form of social life, that of the proletariat and of its institutions. And once a social form has arrived at the point of developing its forms of morality and of law, it means that its evolution has reached the peak, that the work of preparation is done. Hence, the violence associated with the revolutionary moment is a mere formality, an historical detail, for the substantial change, at the level of social life, has already occurred. Unanimity is formed easily and reforms do not appear as big changes, for the big changes have already occurred, slowly and silently through the work of the preparation of the proletariat.

In conclusion, Sorel’s positions on morality and law can be summed up as follows. Morality and law are human productions: they are codes of practical conduct embedded in institutions. They are secondary to economic production, and, precisely because of this, they are good

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<sup>186</sup> Sorel, ‘Osservazioni intorno alla concezione materialista della storia’, p. 46. ‘Ciò che era in passato assolutamente secondario per gli utopisti e per gli uomini politici, diventa oggi importantissimo; è il lavoro di preparazione del proletariato.’

<sup>187</sup> Sorel, ‘Éthique du socialisme’, p. 289. ‘La notion atteint son entier développement quand l’esprit éthique pénètre complètement la révolution ; la violence reste toujours ; mais elle n’est que l’effort nécessaire pour faire tomber de vieilles branches, pour donner de l’air à des créations jeunes et pleines de vie, pour assurer la victoire à des institutions ayant fait leurs preuves ; - elle n’est que l’anticipation sur l’unanimité qui va se former incessamment et qui rendra les réformes intangibles.’

indicators of the evolution and maturity of a class or a people. Once a class has developed its own morality, it has reached full maturity: it is already a new society. This has important consequences for the question of the socialist revolution: morality and law become fundamental indicators of the readiness of the proletariat. Morality and law become indicators that the ‘work of preparation’ of the working class is almost complete. This, in turn, means that there is nothing to fear from the revolutionary upheaval, for the institutions and codes of conduct of the new society, as well as its productive system are already in place. What is left to do is a mere formality, namely the shaking of the tree necessary to ‘make old branches fall’.

#### **4.4.2 THE ‘AVENIR SOCIALISTE DES SYNDICATS’**

As we can see then, the discussion on ethics and morality is connected to Sorel’s understanding of historical transformations as processes of institutional development. That this idea, despite all its vagueness, was central in Sorel’s Marxism can be explained by pointing out that not only he had refused to allow for laws of historical development, but also that he had rejected any attempt to explain the social world exclusively in terms of the evolution of productive processes. Historical change, thus, could neither be a matter of inevitability nor a simple question of productive reorganization: it had to be seen as a question of institutional development, and implied transformations at the ethical and juridical level as well. Systems of ethics and law do not exist principally in codes and books: they are embedded in social practices, that is, they inform the institutional life of the proletariat. Consequently, the appearance of new such systems signals the maturity of proletarian institutions, and since a society is composed of institutions, they signal the historical maturation of the historical agent that will realize socialism, i.e. the proletariat. This means that the main political task of the socialist movement becomes that of developing, in every possible direction, the institutions of the working class. It is from this perspective of institutional development that we can understand Sorel’s interest in trade unions, which he saw as the most articulated forms of proletarian institutional life.

Sorel’s concern for institutions does not, of course, begin with his awareness of the historical potential of trade unions.<sup>188</sup> On the contrary, it springs, as we have seen, from his theoretical

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<sup>188</sup> Amongst the sources of this Sorelian interest that cannot be investigated in any depth here, the lectures of Jacques Flach at the Collège de France must be mentioned. Sorel had attended the lectures of the Alsatian professor at least since 1894 and, judging by the copious and enthusiastic references to Flach scattered in Sorel’s texts, we must conclude that they constituted for Sorel a great school of historical sociology. Flach’s great

work of conceptualization of the social world in terms that shun economic determinism. The great importance attached by Sorel to the institution of family, for example, springs from his impression that Marx's analysis of the social world, because of his interest in economics, omitted the historical genesis of too many important things, and thus needed to be completed; 'in the last years of his life', according to Sorel, 'Marx was struck by the necessity of completing his studies with a theory of the family'.<sup>189</sup> At any rate, institutions have a crucial role to play in developing the social relations that will regulate the future socialist society:

'The goal of morality is to direct our conduct; but how do we judge it, and how can we confer to it stability? Institutions have always oriented judgment; it is by connecting conduct to institutions that we can appreciate the mores of people. We are thus lead to attach great importance to proletarian institutions; we observe... that institutions are educative; cooperatives are not to be praised for their financial results, but by their moral ones, by the habits they develop amongst its members.'<sup>190</sup>

It is in the pamphlet *L'avenir socialiste des syndicats*, first published in 1898 in the anarchist *Humanité Nouvelle*, that this connection between revolutionary action and proletarian institutions is stated most completely. The essay, in which Sorel argues that labour unions are the key to the development of socialism, can be taken as a good example of how the theoretical understanding of Marxism to which Sorel subscribed led him to formulate a specific political strategy of institutional development. Seen from this perspective, it should not surprise us that Sorel's conception of the role of labour unions is rather broad. Unions are not simply tools in an economic struggle of the proletariat against capitalists, necessary to secure better working conditions; nor are they meant to act as a kind of electoral reserve for the socialist party. Instead, they are the *loci* of development of proletarian life, the cells of the new society.

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interest was the historical origin of juridical systems, and his great work, in four volumes, was dedicated to fortunes of Roman right in medieval France through a careful examination of the interplay between different social actors. It is more than a guess to say that Sorel's sense for the importance of institutions in the historical process owes much to Flach. See Jacques Flach, *Origines de l'ancienne France*, 4 vols (Paris, Sirey: 1884-1917).

<sup>189</sup> Sorel, 'Éthique du socialisme', p. 283.

<sup>190</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Morale et Socialisme', *Le Mouvement socialiste* 1, 1899, p. 212. 'Le but de la morale est de diriger notre conduite ; mais comment juger celle-ci et comment lui donner une certaine stabilité ? Ce sont les institutions qui ont toujours fourni les points de repère pour le jugement ; c'est par la corrélation de la conduite avec les institutions qu'on a toujours apprécié les mœurs des hommes. Nous sommes ainsi amenés à attacher une très grande importance aux institutions créés par le prolétariat ; et nous observons en même temps que les institutions sont éducatives ; les coopératives ne valent pas tant par leurs résultats financiers que par leurs résultats moraux, par les habitudes qu'elles développent chez leurs adhérents.'

The opening pages of the essay rehash, with copious references to Labriola, the theoretical reflections examined in this chapter. Marxism, writes Sorel, is not a theory of economic determinism, since even in the smallest social interactions we observe ‘relationships which are not simply economical’.<sup>191</sup> A society is an ‘organism’ in which various spheres of human activity are fundamentally interconnected:

‘The sociological structure may be called an organism; its different parts enjoy a certain freedom, fundamental for grouping them in different scientific systems; the rigid coordination often imaged by utopians does not exist; nor should we, like certain ultra-Marxists, reduce law and morality to simple ghosts.’<sup>192</sup>

In the same way, Marxism does not offer sociological formulas predicting the future development of society, given that ‘scientific and mechanical predictions do not belong... to the new social science.’<sup>193</sup> The crucial question for socialists then is an empirical and practical one, namely to understand whether or not the proletariat has accomplished that work of preparation described earlier. It is necessary to know ‘whether the *preparation is sufficient* to ensure that the [successful] struggle does not lead to the destruction of civilization.’<sup>194</sup> As seen in the previous section, the key problem is that of the post-revolutionary society; more precisely, on the resources upon which it will draw to sustain its existence. Institutional aspects are fundamental, for a society, be it old or new, can live only through institutions.

‘Had the Church been merely a philosophical school, preaching a morality of purity, it would have, doubtless, disappeared like countless other sects; [but instead] it was a society, working to develop amongst its members new juridical relations, and governing [itself] according to a new constitution. The day in which the edict of Milan proclaimed tolerance, the emperor consecrated, in fact, the existence of a hierarchy stronger than the imperial one, and instituted a State within the State... the French revolution gives us a[nother] very clear example: what strikes us is not the large and noisy storm but the conservation of a system developed at length within the bourgeois class.’<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘L’avenir socialiste des syndicats’, *L’humanité nouvelle* 2, 1898, p. 297. ‘Dans l’opération la plus simple se révèlent des rapports qui ne sont pas simplement économiques.’

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. ‘La structure sociologique peut être appelée un organisme : les différentes parties jouissent d’une certaine liberté, nécessaire pour qu’on puisse les grouper en systèmes scientifiques distincts ; la coordination rigide qu’avaient imaginée les utopistes n’existe pas ; il ne faut non plus, à l’imitation de quelques ultra marxistes, réduire le droit et la morale à de simples fantômes.’

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 299. ‘il s’agit de savoir si la *préparation est suffisante* pour que la lutte n’aboutisse pas à une destruction de la civilisation.’

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 298. Full passage : ‘On a souvent rapproché l’histoire du christianisme primitif de l’histoire du socialisme moderne ; il y a beaucoup de vrai dans ce rapprochement, - au moins sur certains rapports. Si l’Eglise avait été seulement une école de philosophie prêchant une morale pure, elle aurait, sans doute, disparu comme tant d’autres groupements ; elle était une société, travaillant à développer entre ses membres des relations



The revolutionary perspective can only be thought after the manner of these historical examples: a laborious work of preparation bringing the revolutionary subject to the point where it already controls society, *de facto* if not *de jure*. More precisely, the class life of the proletariat must develop until it constitutes a new society, equipped with all the resources needed for the continuation of civilization: a system of production, a legal framework, an ethical outlook and so on. The political strategy envisaged by Sorel is, in short, that of institutional development, and it consists in a struggle to ‘empty the bourgeois political organism of all life, and to move all the useful elements it contained in a proletarian political organism...’<sup>196</sup>

Sorel dedicates the lengthy opening section to an attack of the claims to leadership of the workers’ movement advanced by intellectuals. His argument is directed against what he calls the ‘*théorie des capacités*’, i.e. that the leadership of movements ought to be reserved to those who are more qualified: hence, intellectual workers ought to lead manual ones. For Sorel, the class origins of intellectuals are bourgeois: they thrive upon political activity and their interests lead them to transform the socialist struggle into a purely parliamentary one. They may be of some help in Germany, where the workers’ movement has constituted a ‘solid organisation, amounting to something like a bureaucratic state necessitating its paid functionaries.’<sup>197</sup> But, and this is the crucial point, ‘...intellectuals, in Germany, join the socialist party as *employees*, not as *bosses*...’, whereas in France ‘they claim the right to dictatorial power in case of [parliamentary] success.’<sup>198</sup> Sorel’s point here is that if the proletariat is to emancipate itself, it must constitute itself independently through its struggle as a class. If it allows itself to be directed by people outside of its class already from the start, the results will be dire.

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juridiques nouvelles et gouvernant d’après une constitution nouvelle. Le jour où l’édit de Milan proclama la tolérance, l’empereur consacra, en réalité, l’existence d’une hiérarchie plus forte que la hiérarchie impériale et institua un Etat dans l’Etat. — L’invasion des Barbares n’a pas consisté dans une simple destruction ; aujourd’hui, on semble d’accord pour reconnaître que les Germains ont apporté des systèmes juridiques déjà assez développés pour pouvoir exercer une influence sur les institutions, notamment sur l’organisation familiale. — Enfin la Révolution française nous fournit un exemple très clair: ce qui nous frappe le plus est moins la grande et bruyante tourmente que la conservation d’un système longuement développé dans le sein de la bourgeoisie.’

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 441. ‘... c’est une lutte pour vider l’organisme politique bourgeois de toute vie et faire passer tout ce qu’il contenait d’utile dans un organisme politique prolétarien...’

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 304. ‘Les intellectuels en Allemagne entrent dans le parti socialiste comme *employés* et non come *chefs*. En France, ils prétendent que leur vraie place est dans le Parlement et que le pouvoir dictatorial leur reviendrait de plain droit en cas de succès.’

The purpose of the attack on intellectuals then is that of highlighting the centrality of proletarian self-emancipation: ‘...if the worker accepts the leadership of people *alien to the productive community*, - he will always remain incapable of governing himself, he will always remain subject to an *external discipline*.’<sup>199</sup> The transformation of the proletariat into a class capable of overthrowing the capitalist system must ‘happen through an internal mechanism; it is within the proletariat, through its own resources, that a new right must emerge.’<sup>200</sup> This self-emancipation, as we have seen, is synonymous with the creation of a proletarian society: new means of production, new juridical relations, a new morality, created through the development of new institutions. Parliamentary activity must be subordinated to this goal: ‘What one must demand is that public authorities grant the concessions necessary to proceed to this transformation of the people by the people: it is with this goal that workers enter the electoral arena.’<sup>201</sup> It is important to notice that, despite the anti-intellectual and anti-parliamentary passages, Sorel does not completely condemn parliamentary engagement. He merely insists that it be subordinated to the development of the proletariat as a class, for this is the way that leads to the institutional development of proletarian life, and hence to the completion of the ‘work of preparation’ necessary to accomplish a revolutionary transformation of society.

Sorel gives an interesting example of a juridical victory of the proletariat. Class struggle, he states, also manifests itself in juridical forms. The workers’ resistance to the economic oppression of capitalism leads them to organize themselves in unions, and to fight back through the union against the bosses. In this clash between two organised collectivities, Sorel underlines the juridical contrast between two different principles, and sees in this clash the birth of the future juridical system. Justice, ‘as formulated in liberal codes, knows only the isolated worker’,<sup>202</sup> and thus regulates the relationship between employer and employee on this individualist principle of a contract between two parties. This juridical understanding – the ‘theory of freedom of work’<sup>203</sup> – reflects the social experience of the capitalist who moves in isolation. ‘But to the unionized workers, these theories are false; the whole of the workers

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., pp. 305-6. ‘... si l’ouvrier accepte le commandement de *gens étrangers à la corporation productive*, - il restera toujours incapable de se gouverner, il restera toujours soumis à une *discipline externe*.’

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 307. ‘La pensée de Marx ne peut être douteuse : la transformation doit se faire par un mécanisme intérieur ; c’est dans le sein du prolétariat, c’est au moyen de ses ressources propres, que doit se créer le droit nouveau.’

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 307. ‘Ce qu’il faut demander aux pouvoirs publics c’est d’accorder des facilités pour procéder à cette transformation du peuple par lui-même : c’est dans ce but que les ouvriers entrent dans l’arène électorale.’

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 432. ‘Le droit, tel qu’il est formulé par les codes libéraux, ne connaît guère que l’ouvrier isolé.’

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. ‘... telle est la théorie que les tribunaux appliquent sous le nom de la théorie de la liberté du travail.’

forms a body whose interest is one; no one can abandon the cause without being considered a traitor.’<sup>204</sup>

Here we have a struggle between two juridical principles: the individualist one of the capitalists versus the collective one of the workers. As soon as the union gains the right to entertain talks with the capitalist, as soon as the legal system recognises the legitimacy of the negotiations between unions and bosses, there is a victory of the collective principle. The law ‘recognizes, implicitly, the existence of this solidarity [amongst workers]: from the strictly individualist standpoint there is no conciliation to be attempted: the strike has broken all juridical relationship between the boss and each of his workers. Only individual contracts existed before the strike, but how can they give rise to obligations binding the boss to a collective body with which he has not signed any contract?’<sup>205</sup> What we have here is ‘a system of new rights, developed through struggles and countless difficulties’.<sup>206</sup> Workers can be proud of ‘having created, in the disorganised proletariat, a new organisation independent of all bourgeois institutions.’<sup>207</sup>

This juridical victory constitutes however merely an example of a process of institutional development which is wider. Juridical victories like the one illustrated above are significant principally as indicators of the developments of labour unions into the cells of the new society. From this perspective, Sorel’s words on the question of unions and social security are particularly significant. He interrogates himself, taking his cue from the English experience, on the desirability of getting unions to set up basic welfare measures, such as pensions for old workers, health and unemployment safeguards and so on. He acknowledges that one has to carefully weigh the practical consequences of imposing such measures, and yet he is clear that in principle this is the way forward. Without these developments unions are reduced to a mere oppositional role, and to impose on them this role means ‘opposing a formidable barrier to the development of the proletariat; it means putting it at the mercy of the influence of bourgeois

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid. ‘Pour les syndiqués ces thèses sont fausses ; l’ensemble des travailleurs forme un corps ; les intérêts de tous sont solidaires ; nul ne peut abandonner la cause de ses camarades sans être considéré comme un traître.’

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. ‘La loi française du 27 décembre 1892, sur la conciliation, reconnaît, implicitement, l’existence de cette solidarité : en effet, si on se place au point de vue strictement individualiste, il n’y a point de conciliation à tenter ; la grève a rompu tout lien de droit entre le patron et chacun de ses ouvriers ; il n’existait que des contrats individuels avant la grève ; comment peuvent-ils se transformer en obligations qui lieraient le patron et un corps avec lequel il n’a jamais traité ?’

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 433. ‘Voilà tout un système de droits nouveau qui s’est développé au milieu des luttes et de difficultés sans nombre...’

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. ‘...mais les ouvriers peuvent bien se vanter... d’avoir produit dans le sein du prolétariat inorganisé une organisation nouvelle et indépendante de toute institution bourgeoise.’

demagogues; it means preventing it from elaborating the principles of a new right in line with its way of life; it is, in one word, to deny to the proletariat the possibility of becoming a class *for itself*.<sup>208</sup> The development of welfare networks within unions is for Sorel an important aspect of the work preparation of the proletariat.

If they are to become the cells of the new socialist society, then proletarian institutions must provide new solutions and ways of dealing with the classical problems of modern society. The decision-making process of unions, for example, contains the germ of a political principle for the society of tomorrow.<sup>209</sup> Equally interesting for Sorel, if not more so, are new forms of institutionalization of sexual relations, with the creation of new juridical forms for the union of couples. Going back to his analogy with the history of Christianity, Sorel stresses that ‘one of the first instances of the new-born canonical law seems to be Pope Callixtus’ decree authorizing *Christian unions* in cases in which imperial law forbade *rightful weddings*.’<sup>210</sup> Connecting himself to Durkheim’s work on suicide, Sorel, in a tentative section of the essay, suggests that fully developed workers unions may constitute an effective remedy to this social condition, emphasizing their positive role in the fight against working class alcoholism.<sup>211</sup>

What interests us here is not the validity of Sorel’s views on questions of marriage, alcoholism, or political representation. What is significant in the *Avenir* is that it represents a thorough attempt to articulate an argument outlining the genesis of proletarian social forms from the experience of proletarian collective life, that is, through the growth of proletarian institutions. ‘All institutions’ writes Sorel, ‘have developed in the same way: they do not issue from the decisions of great statesmen, nor from the calculations of intellectuals [savants]; they constitute themselves by embracing and condensing all aspects of life. How could the proletariat escape this necessity of *constituting itself*?’<sup>212</sup> Sorel’s concern is the establishment – here and now – of new social relations, the ‘work of preparation’ of the proletariat, the development within and through proletarian institutions of all the structures needed for a

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 435. ‘... réduire les syndicats à n’être que des sociétés de résistance, c’est opposer une barrière formidable au développement du prolétariat ; c’est le livrer à l’influence prépondérante des démagogues bourgeois ; c’est l’empêcher d’élaborer, conformément à sa manière propre de vivre, les principes nouveaux de droit ; c’est, en un mot, lui refuser la possibilité de devenir une classe *pour soi même*.’

<sup>209</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 439-40.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p. 438. ‘Il n’est pas sans intérêt de rappeler ici que l’une des premières manifestations du droit canonique primitif paraît être le décret du pape Calixte autorisant des *unions chrétiennes* dans des cas où la loi impériale interdisait des *justes noces*.’

<sup>211</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 441-4, especially p. 443.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 436. ‘Toutes les institutions se sont formées de la même manière ; elles ne résultent pas de décisions de grands hommes d’Etat, non plus que de calculs de savants ; elles se font en embrassant et condensant tous les éléments de la vie. Pour quelle cause le prolétariat échapperait-il à la nécessité de *se faire* par la même voie ?’

society to function. This institutional development can only happen organically and slowly, with the necessary historical times. Failure to accomplish this work will severely limit the revolutionary potential of a successful socialist insurrection.

The conclusion to this unusually optimistic essay consists, then, in an exhortation to preserve the class basis of proletarian institutions. The growth of the ‘political and juridical capacity’ of the proletariat depends on its capability to ‘*remain exclusively working class*’.<sup>213</sup> Parliamentary struggle is not dismissed, but given a secondary role: what matters is the development of a society within society, slowly growing into a social organism capable of sustaining itself without bourgeois assistance. The slow work of eradication of bourgeois social forms can only take place in the midst of the class whose social conditions, created by capitalism, represent a radical novelty. This productive class, like all revolutionary historical agents, must develop its autonomous institutions, and socialism can only be understood as the culmination process through which the institutions of the working class achieve their historical triumph.

#### **4.5 CONCLUSION**

With this chapter on Sorel’s Marxism, the first part of the thesis comes to its conclusion. We have attempted to trace Sorel’s intellectual trajectory from his early engagement with the philosophy of science up to the understanding of Marxism outlined in this chapter. What we have tried to show is how much Sorel’s engagement with Marxism was shaped by the problem of freedom, determinism, and science as we have outlined it in the first chapter. It is thus necessary to take a step back and briefly go through the line of reasoning developed thus far.

In the first chapter, we have examined Sorel’s early epistemology, and insisted that it resulted from a desire to vindicate the objectivity and certainty of science, while at the same time safeguard the theoretical possibility of free human agency. That this problem should arise is explained by the deep connection, present in Sorel’s work in a central way – at least until his discovery of Vico – between the validity of science and determinism. Science could be vindicated only if it managed to produce laws, and these laws were possible only if the world which science studied was deterministic, characterized by strong, necessary, causal relations. Despite, or perhaps precisely because he was immersed in a climate in which this ideal of

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., pp. 444-5.

science was being increasingly questioned, Sorel's first epistemological attempts are characterized by the ambition of safeguarding the certainty and objectivity of science. Nonetheless, Sorel did not wish to embrace an all-encompassing deterministic cosmology, for this would have resulted in denying the possibility of human freedom. Moreover, these cosmologies had an understanding of the workings of scientific activity that Sorel knew to be excessively simplistic, and revealing of a deep ignorance of the realities of scientific endeavour.

In order to address these problems Sorel came up with a theory of science that managed to safeguard both the objectivity of science and its ability to make substantial claims about the natural world and human freedom. Sorel insisted greatly on the fact that the practice of science requires what he called *expressive supports*, which he defined as man-made conceptual tools that allowed the scientist to conduct experiments. This led him to emphasize the role that the historical and social influences of various kinds had in scientific practice: human activity forged, creatively and historically, a number of concepts and ways of proceeding that were essential to the practice of science. At the same time, experiments guaranteed science against the contingency of its practice: whereas the tools through which we practice science are man-made, what we discover in experimental settings is not. Experiments were thus conceptualized as the moment when a contact with the natural forces is possible, even if it is mediated by constructed expressive supports. Already in this first epistemology – articulated most thoroughly in the 'Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique' – we see the sharp distinction between the natural realm of determinism and necessity, and the artificial human and historical realm of freedom and agency.

It was the interest in the social sciences that provided Sorel with the problem that was, eventually to change his epistemology and theory of science. The scientific study of the human world was impossible in the context of the epistemology outlined above, for the human world was already characterized in terms of free agency rather than causal relations. In the absence of causal relations, what science, in terms of laws and regularities, could be produced from the domain of human agency? And so, after some initial attempts to square the circle, Sorel – thanks to his contact with Labriola and Croce and his reading of Vico – began to adapt his understanding of knowledge, and consequently, of science. Knowledge was conceptualized in Vichian terms, not as the representation of an alien reality but as the understanding of the process through which human agency develops and produces its

creations. The epistemological change is substantial, and radicalizes the historicist tendencies that were already present in Sorel's work.

But the importance of this philosophical shift lies in that it determined the way in which Sorel understood a body of thought that, in the France of the 1890s, was theoretically underdeveloped and little understood: Marxism. The context gave to Sorel the freedom necessary for a conceptual elaboration of Marxism along historicist lines and away from the deterministic social science that it claimed to represent, at least in France. Historical determinism, to start with, was out of the question, since the human world was characterized by creative agency rather than by unchanging laws. Economic determinism was equally banished from the Marxism that Sorel developed and defended. With the help of Labriola, Sorel conceptualized a social world in which the different spheres of human activity constantly interact with each other, leaving no space for a hierarchical understanding of society in terms of structure and superstructure. This meant that, stripped of its fatalistic and deterministic features, Marxism came to represent for Sorel only the ideological production of the rising social force, i.e. the industrial proletariat. Ideology and social reality were, according to Sorel's interpretation of historical materialism, two sides of the same coin, that of an emerging social force whose historical mission was the revolutionary transformation of the capitalist order.

We come to the core of Sorel's Marxism by asking the question of *how* this revolutionary transformation will happen. Sorel's opposition to economism prevented him from understanding the process as a merely economic one: a society is composed of various spheres of human activity, and the change in one does not necessarily imply change in others. More radically, it is inconceivable, given the complex understanding of the social world elaborated by Sorel, that one could come up with a single driver of historical transformation. The way in which human agency deploys itself historically, is for Sorel, through institutions. Institutions are the habitat of social relations, and they are the spaces in which new social relations emerge. Precisely because institutions harbour all kinds of social relations – be they moral, economic, political or juridical – they are defined somewhat vaguely. But Sorel is much less vague in making them the engine of historical transformation: only in institutions it is possible to create a new society capable of, in Sorel's words 'empt[ying] the bourgeois political organism of all life, and ... mov[ing] all the useful elements it contained in a

proletarian political organism...'.<sup>214</sup> The defining feature of Sorel's Marxism thus is that of an ideology connected to an emerging historical force, whose success cannot be assured by economic reforms, nor by the insurrectional strategy of the seizure of state power, but only through a slow process of institutional development.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 441. '... c'est une lutte pour vider l'organisme politique bourgeois de toute vie et faire passer tout ce qu'il contenait d'utile dans un organisme politique prolétarien...'



## **PART II: FROM BERNSTEIN TO SYNDICALISM**



## INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

‘Si l’ « idée » revêt une part dans la formation de tout point de vue politique spécifique, elle possède cependant un étonnant pouvoir d’adaptation à des positions diverses...’<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of this work we deployed our arguments at a high level of abstraction, remaining, with some exceptions, within the limits and methods of intellectual history. The argument we have outlined essentially individuates a conceptual problem which is deemed to be central to Sorel’s thinking between 1888 and 1898: that concerning the tension between a strong conception of science based on determinism and capable of discovering strong causal relations between phenomena, and Sorel’s belief in the free, productive, and creative character of human agency. The tension, as we have highlighted, was already present in the earliest epistemological texts, and Sorel’s protracted and thorough engagement with the problem constituted a philosophical apprenticeship of fundamental importance. We have seen how it was the attempt to conceptualize social science – a scientific study of the human world – that led Sorel to finally abandon the ambition of combining the strong conception of science with the belief in creative agency: working under such premises would have yielded the conclusion that social science was a search for stable causal patterns within a set of phenomena whose deepest nature was, in virtue of the creativity of human agency, unpredictability and transformation.

Much of Sorel’s Marxism, as presented in the preceding chapter, must then be understood as an answer to this question of social science, and historical materialism is, for Sorel, a rationally defensible way of making sense of the historical world of humankind.<sup>2</sup> Out of the two irreconcilable elements – a deterministic conception of science and the free agency of human collectivities – it is the latter that becomes predominant, while the former is gradually, somewhat ambiguously, but eventually clearly abandoned. Sorel’s refusal to accept not only historical teleology, but also any fixed criterion capable of illuminating the architecture of the

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<sup>1</sup> Shlomo Sand, ‘Georges Sorel entre utopie et politique’, *Mil Neuf Cent* 11, 1993, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Sorel, of course, uses a stronger word than ‘rational’, namely ‘scientific’. Here one must be rather careful, for to the use of the same word correspond two different stances: whereas before 1896 ‘science’ is for Sorel a search for regularities that requires determinism; after 1896, science and knowledge are understood in the Vichian way, i.e. historically and genetically.

social world must be seen as a choice in the direction of free human agency. The idea of a necessary course of the historical process, as well as that of a fixed, ahistorical, relationship between various spheres of human activity would amount, for Sorel, to a denial of the freedom of human agency. And this, ultimately, is why Sorel's historical materialism does not speak of laws, but of methodological principles, why it denies that the future is a legitimate object of enquiry for the social scientist, and finally why it cannot but see itself as the intellectual articulation of the historical experience of a precise social formation: the modern proletariat.

From a more philosophical point of view, Sorel's Marxism is characterized by the rejection of historical and economic determinism and by its self-understanding as a historically situated ideological production expressive of the agency of an historical subject. The conception of historical change that emerges from this understanding of Marxism is dominated by the sensitivity to *longue durée* processes of institutional development. It is important to highlight the connection between these two aspects of Sorel's historical thought. Precisely because Sorel refuses to explain the human world in terms of laws, he has to explain it in terms of agency, and the notion of institutions is an attempt to answer the question of how collective agency deploys itself through history. Institutions are forms of collective life that harbour and develop social relations: the complexity that Sorel attributes to society – the resistance that it offers to explanations in terms of laws – is reflected in the vagueness with which institutions are defined. Given, however, that a society in its entirety is made from the sum total of its institutions, historical transformation is a question of institutional change. The transition from capitalism to socialism is thus the process by which proletarian institutions develop and play an increasingly central role in society, marginalizing and desiccating progressively their bourgeois alternatives. Violence, as we have highlighted, plays a marginal role in this *longue durée* understanding of historical transformation, which is marked by an almost obsessive concern with continuity. Violence, in fact, acts as a negative indicator: the greater the violence associated with an historical transformation, the less ready the new society will be. From this follows a simple and clear imperative for the workers' movement: '*the entire future of socialism resides in the autonomous development of workers' unions.*'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sorel, 'Avenir socialiste des syndicats', p. 445. 'Pour résumer toute ma pensée en une formule, je dirai que *tout l'avenir du socialisme réside dans le développement autonome des syndicats ouvriers*'.

The second part of the thesis will be, essentially, dedicated to explaining how, from the 1898 socialism of slow, gradual, *longue durée* institutional transformation in which violence is marginal Sorel arrived at the syndicalist theory of violence for which he is most known, formulated between 1905 and 1908. It is one of the central assumptions of this thesis that the conceptual framework outlined above – that is to say the fundamental concepts through which Sorel thinks about the historical world of mankind in general, and socialism in particular – do not change fundamentally after 1898. Sorel's belief in the historical genesis of human thought, and hence of the inescapable subjectivity, i.e. genetic connection to actual social practice, of social science, his understanding of historical transformation as a process of institutional development and the birth of new social relations all remain substantially unaltered. What does change, however, is both the context in which these arguments are deployed, and crucially, Sorel's increasing awareness not only of context in general, but more specifically of a precise historical transformation: the second industrial revolution. What brings Sorel from the *Avenir socialiste des syndicats* to the *Reflections on Violence* is, in other words, not a theoretical evolution but, instead, his increasing understanding of the social, political, and economic transformations associated with the emergence of increasingly complex productive processes and his gradually emerging conviction that these dynamics are deeply unfavourable to proletarian institutional development.

In the second part of the thesis we shall then attempt to develop two parallel stories: on the one hand, that of the emergence and affirmation of modern large-scale capitalism in France, and partially in Germany, along with the political and social transformations that accompanied the rise in importance of the new productive forms. On the other hand, we shall tell the story of Sorel's gradual understanding of the evolution of this new economic phase, and of the social consequences of the economic transformation. This will necessarily imply a partial shift in the focus of our analysis, away from intellectual history and into political and economic history. However, this is a shift that is made requisite by Sorel's own trajectory. In the absence of substantial theoretical transformations, at least in the field of Sorel's social and historical thought, only the incorporation of these new elements is capable of explaining the emergence of Sorel's syndicalism. It is only when Sorel has come to the conclusion that the actual development of capitalism is highly unfavourable to the development of autonomous proletarian institutions that he can assign to violence the role that it has in the *Reflections*. Without insisting on this aspect, any interpretation of the theory articulated in the *Reflections on Violence* is vulnerable to mastodontic errors of judgment.

Before briefly outlining the following chapters and showing how they lead to an explanation of the syndicalism articulated in the *Reflections on Violence*, a few points have to be clarified. To start with, we must outline that beginning in 1898, Sorel's interests undergo a noticeable shift away from issues of epistemology and social theory and toward the direction of politics, economics, and the examination of current affairs and transformations. Whereas until 1898 Sorel's work had been dominated by the question on the possibility of social science, after that year his work essentially revolves around another, more empirical one: which conditions are conducive to the institutional development of the proletariat? Without ceasing to be interested in philosophical issues, his attention will thus be caught by more worldly matters, and this will slowly give him the awareness of the European political and economic context that he previously lacked. The developments he witnessed were, of course, partially responsible for this shift in attention, in the sense that it would be hard to find someone indifferent to the transformations that France was undergoing at the time: the political crisis of the republic in the *affaire Dreyfus*, the divisive struggles between various factions of a not entirely marginal socialist front, industrial developments, the rise of new forms of working class institutions and new capitalist associations, and so on. Despite this change in emphasis – from epistemology to current developments – one thing remained constant: the belief that the institutional development of the proletariat constituted the only possible revolutionary option. And thus, as his awareness of current developments grew, the question that became most important to him was which circumstances, and which political strategies were most conducive to proletarian institutional development. To this question, Sorel provided many answers, but he never changed his mind about the importance of working-class autonomous development.

A second and more important point concerns Sorel's understanding of capitalism, and of its role in bringing about socialism. Sorel's insistence on the fact that the socialist revolution could not be a merely economic transformation, but instead, it needed also to be seen as the advent of a new society in political, ethical, and legal terms, should not lead the reader to think that economics were irrelevant to his analysis. It is true that, for reasons that we shall examine in a short while, it is only after 1902 that Sorel will devote serious attention to the question of capitalism and its development. Nonetheless, it is necessary to outline that even before 1898 Sorel had a precise conception of capitalism, of its shortcomings, and of its role

in bringing about the socialist transformation. The relation that Sorel establishes between capitalism and socialism is an intimate one, and any examination of his understanding of capitalism must start with the obvious and absolutely fundamental fact that capitalism furnishes to Sorel his revolutionary subject: the modern proletariat. Sorel was extremely suspicious of conceptions in which the revolutionary subject is understood merely in terms of poverty and oppression. Poverty and oppression, to start with, are not specific features of modern industrial capitalism. Understanding the revolutionary subject in terms of these categories meant, for Sorel, seeing socialism as the timeless struggle between plebeians and patricians, between *popolo grasso* and *popolo magro*, between, to use Machiavelli's language, *popolo* and *grandi*. Historically, this kind of social struggle was regressive, as it tended to leave the medieval cities within which it occurred in a 'semibarbaric state'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it was a way of understanding social conflict closer to what Sorel called the 'démagogie radicale' than to Marx's views. The defining feature of the modern proletariat, for Sorel, does not lie in its state of oppression, but rather in its intrinsically progressive character linked to its, as it were, *avant-garde* position in the world of production: '...the modern proletariat is an organized productive force [le producteur organisé], and has within itself the seeds of scientific and industrial progress.'<sup>5</sup> It is the proletariat's proximity to the most scientifically advanced forms of production, and hence its inherent historical progressivity, that, as we shall repeatedly see in what is to follow, make of it the revolutionary subject *par excellence*.

One of the central aspects of the proletariat's institutional development consists, in fact, in its ability to develop the capacity to direct autonomously the productive apparatus of an advanced capitalist economy. It is important here to recall what Sorel had written in the study of Vico. In an advanced capitalist economy, 'the organization of labour in large industry [will] be so well adapted to the needs and the conditions of collective production that *economic realities will constitute the bridge*' to the new society.<sup>6</sup> Insisting on the theme of historical continuity, Sorel argued that although the private property of the means of production will be abolished, socialism will not dissipate the productive heritage of capitalism: in fact, it is the necessities of an advanced capitalist economy that will lead to the

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<sup>4</sup> Sorel, letter to Croce 9/10/1896 in *La Critica* 25, 1927, p. 42

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 'Le prolétariat moderne se trouve être le producteur organisé et avoir dans son sein les éléments du progrès scientifique industriel : il ne ressemble pas au *petit peuple* des villes du Moyen-Age italien.'

<sup>6</sup> Sorel, 'Étude sur Vico', p. 935. 'la seconde condition est que l'organisation du travail par la grande industrie soit tellement adaptée aux besoins et aux conditions de la production collective que le *réalités économiques* constituent le pont par lequel le passage d'un état à l'autre devra s'effectuer...'

socialisation of the means of production. There is, from this perspective, an interesting passage in the *Avenir socialiste des syndicats*, in which Sorel comments on the future of intellectuals, white collar workers and managers after the socialist transformation. What he argues essentially is that, thanks to the development of the capacities of the proletariat, intellectuals and white collar workers will find themselves unemployed, for the direction of production will be the task of the working class itself. As he puts it, ‘the socialisation of the means of production would result in a grand *lockout*’.<sup>7</sup> The anti-parliamentarian arguments developed by Sorel have to be seen in connection with the importance that he attached to proletarian control of economic production in the socialist society. The administration of complex productive systems requires capacities that the proletariat cannot develop as long as it is under the leadership of the progressive bourgeoisie. Only experiences of proletarian self-government can prepare the working class to the direction of the future society. Bourgeois socialists are, after all, expressions of a declining bourgeois class and resemble the ‘Romans of the decadent period, so different from our proletarians. Whereas the former lived at the expense of society, modern society lives at the expense of the proletariat.’<sup>8</sup>

It might be useful to point out the economic connotations that inform Sorel’s use of the language of decadence. What makes the bourgeois class decadent and the proletariat progressive is their position in the sphere of production: whereas the latter class is immersed in the world of production and is at the forefront of economic activity, the former is not. It is because of this that the socialist revolution, waged by a class placed at the forefront of industrial and scientific progress, will be a progressive revolution. Capitalism then is not seen by Sorel mainly in terms of alienation and dehumanization. These Marxist categories are marginal to Sorel, who, as an engineer by training and profession, could not remain indifferent to the wonders of human productivity and to the spectacle of ever increasing productive forces. Socialism will abolish the private ownership of the means of production but, as stated before, this will be done in order to further, to not slow down, the rhythm of productive expansion. Socialism, in Sorel’s understanding of it, would then not only inherit the productive forces of capitalism, but enhance them and continue down the path of productive expansion. The stance is, in other words, a productivist one, in which productive expansion and industrial progress are crucial factors that allow the rise of a proletariat fit for

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<sup>7</sup> Sorel, ‘Avenir socialiste des syndicats’, p. 305. ‘Ainsi donc la socialisation des moyens de production se traduirait par un *lock-out* prodigeux...’

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. ‘...on pourrait encore les rapprocher des Romains de la décadence, si différents de nos prolétaires, vivant aux frais de la société, tandis que la société moderne vit au frais du prolétariat.’



the direction of the post-capitalist world. This spells an important consequence, namely that the development of capitalism is a crucial factor in generating the preconditions for the socialist transformation.

It is here that we get to the heart of the question. The idea that capitalism generates the preconditions for the socialist transformation, of course, is not Sorel's own. The reference is Marx himself, who, in describing the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation outlined the standard Marxist scheme for describing the transition from capitalism to socialism as a progressive story of productive expansion. 'One capitalist' writes Marx 'always kills many'.<sup>9</sup> The logic of productive expansion in conditions of free competition, argues the German philosopher, leads to an increasingly severe battle for the control of the means of production, and to the 'expropriation of many capitalists by the few.'<sup>10</sup> The productive process, in the meantime, becomes more complex and socialized, condemning the artisan and the individual labourer, much like the mass of small capitalists, to historical extinction and, crucially, pauperization. In parallel thus 'grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation'<sup>11</sup> of those without capital. But together with oppression grow consciousness and organization, transforming the proletarians into not only an increasingly large social reality, but also into a class 'disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.'<sup>12</sup> The contradictions grow until they reach breaking point: an already socialized productive system expels the remaining capitalists and socializes ownership of the means of production. 'This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.'<sup>13</sup>

Now, in order to make sense of Sorel's post-1898 developments it is important to underline that his understanding of the transition from capitalism to socialism is based on this Marxian scheme and, crucially, that the years between the *fin de siècle* and the First World War are those in which this scheme becomes, if not obsolete, at least very problematic. Roughly speaking, we can say that, at the European level, while the development of the 'co-operative form of the labour process', and the 'conscious technical application of science'<sup>14</sup> to productive processes that Marx had envisaged did occur, and shaped European – and

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<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 714.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 715.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 714.

American – capitalism, arguably well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the social polarization that Marx thought would result from these developments was largely avoided. Still remaining at a very general level, the potentially destructive conflict between labour and capital was mediated by a force whose absence in Marx's scheme is striking: the state. The state not only facilitated, in various countries, the process of productive expansion and coordination that characterizes the second industrial revolution, but also, by addressing the social consequences of this capitalist development, substantially moderated the class conflict that would have resulted from it.

It is this process of productive expansion and inclusion of the working classes into advanced capitalist societies that will be central to the second part of the thesis. It is the discrepancy between the Marxist expectations of increasing conflict and revolution, and what really occurred that constitutes the background to Sorel's path to revolutionary syndicalism. Now, the study of this process is rather complex. Firstly, it varies greatly according to the national economies under consideration, and secondly its chronology is vast, and again, susceptible to important national variations. Furthermore, though at its beginnings it merely consists in a transformation of productive processes, its consequences are far reaching and touch the sphere of legislation, social structure, politics, and ideology, greatly complicating the overall picture. This is why it must be made clear that the focus of this work is not on the process itself, which is excessively vast and complex, but on its role in orienting Sorel's reflection.

Despite these difficulties, a number of more precise considerations can be offered. To start with, a point about chronology. Despite national differences, it is safe to assert that the closing two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century represent only the beginning of a process whose peak was reached after the First World War, and that dominated advanced capitalist and socialist countries for much of the 1930s and 1940s. In Germany, the rise of big business and attendant social consequences occurred much earlier, and with greater intensity than in France. This chronological difference, in fact, is crucial for the development of Sorel's thought. Nonetheless, it still remains true that what Sorel and his generation were witnessing was merely the *birth* of a new world, characterized by new economic, productive, social, and political conditions.

Secondly, it will be wise to outline some aspects of this process in order to clarify what we are going to deal with in the remainder of the thesis. We take the emergence of big business – firms who control various stages of the supply and distribution chain of a given product, who require management in order to function, and whose size, both in terms of both capital and

workforce, is consequently large – as our analytical starting point. We then point out how a functional capitalist system based on this kind of firms requires in order to function a degree of organization and cooperation that distinguish it from the earlier, small-scale, competitive capitalism. Cooperation is required at an intra-firm level, in order to coordinate the various activities of these industrial giants. Cooperation, as a matter of historical record, also happens at an inter-firm level. The growth in scale and complexity of the firms of the second industrial revolution is characterized by cartels and mergers: tools through which horizontal and vertical integration are realized and which contribute to the increase in complexity of productive forms. Cooperation and organization also characterize the other side of the productive world, namely the working class; unions, cooperatives, and socialist parties can legitimately be seen as instances of organizational developments within the working class.

Finally, but most importantly, the model does not function without at least a minimal degree of coordination between the two sides of the productive world, capital and labour, and it is here that the role of the state becomes important. On the one hand, the agency of the state facilitates the process of productive organization on the capitalist side, mostly through the protection of national markets and the legalization of mergers and cartels. On the other hand, essentially through the development of social legislation, the agency of the state integrates parts of the working classes into the national framework. Thus, by lending its protective hand and, at times, organisational expertise to emerging large businesses, and by slowly including the working classes and their institutions into the national community, the state allows the new and emerging capitalism to stand on more solid and inclusive social and political bases. Historically speaking then, we witness industrial expansions through the development of big business, we observe the rise of modern and organized working classes, and we see how, also through the mitigating influence of the state, these two elements fail to produce the catastrophic conflict widely expected by Marxists. This produces, amongst other things, a rise in industrial output and in the living standards of the working class, socialist parties integrated in the national political system, and an economic life characterized by a greater degree of coordination amongst economic actors.

Now, in the following chapters we shall essentially describe Sorel's gradual realization that this process – already occurring in France and Germany – was not conducive to the outcome he most desired, namely the development of an organized working class capable of leading society in the future. The complex nature of the transformations, the fact that Sorel was

observing them from within and, most importantly, in their initial stages, can account for a number of changes of opinion and misunderstandings on his behalf. The first aspect of the process that we investigate in some depth is the integration of the socialist parties of France and Germany into the political mainstreams of the respective countries. We show how Sorel's initial approval of this transformation was accompanied by the historically erroneous belief that more integration into the political life of the nation could be conducive to the development of autonomous proletarian institutions. That Sorel could reconcile a commitment to socialist reformism with the condemnation of politics and with the insistence on proletarian institutional growth displays, we argue, France's backwardness when compared to Germany in the processes outlined before. Whereas in Germany the integration of the working classes in the national framework was at an advanced state, and thus the SPD was already a social democratic mass party focussed on the search for electoral results, in France the process was in its initial stages, and socialist parties were in the midst of the transition. It is this that explains what we call Sorel's 'instrumental reformism', i.e. the belief that parliamentarism and reformism could be conducive to the development of revolutionary proletarian institutions. After 1902, however, Sorel began that the transformations that were occurring would have placed the working class increasingly at the centre of the bourgeois order, and began to reflect this question, indentifying the state as one of the great forces responsible for this turn of events.

Sorel's deep-rooted hostility towards the state certainly helped him become aware of statist agency, in putting the state on the analytical map. Nonetheless, the sources of Sorel's post-1902 hostility towards the state are partially different from his previous, mostly liberal, reasons for being suspicious of the state. The problem with the state is not merely that it oppresses individuals, that it is 'Socratic' or that it resembles Jesuit institutions. After 1902, the problem with the state becomes that its economic and social policies thwart the historically progressive conflict between capital and labour. The pursuit of social peace not only thwarts the proletariat's ability to build its own institutions, but, possibly more fundamentally, it hampers the development of capitalism, sending European civilisation on the quietist path hostile to productive expansion and ushering in an era of economic – and consequently morel – decadence.<sup>15</sup> This is the diagnosis elaborated by Sorel between 1902

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<sup>15</sup> The language of decadence, as we have hinted at above, for Sorel is always connected to production and to economic expansion and progress. It is this point that Zeev Sternhell appears to miss most blatantly in his otherwise perceptive and informed reading of Sorel's work. Blinded by rhetorical powers of Sorel and establishing connections between this Sorelian rhetoric of decadence and other similar discursive registers that

and 1905, and this diagnosis is the basis of the arguments developed in Sorel's most infamous book, the *Reflections on Violence*.

This is why, if one had to come up with a slogan to summarize the path that led Sorel to syndicalism, then 'the discovery of the state' would be a very good one. It is on the state that Sorel put a great deal of responsibility for the creation of a stale capitalist economy, devoid, in his eyes, of conflict, and for destroying the possibility for the socialism he envisaged. It must be noticed how this kind of hostility towards the state is importantly different from the classical Marxist accusation that the state is nothing but a 'committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. In fact, the problem for Sorel is that the state is *not* such a committee: if it were but a bourgeois tool, there would be no problems, for the class conflict necessary for the coming of socialism would be safeguarded. The state, for Sorel, is a third *independent* variable that by mediating the conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat fundamentally alters the game and undermines the historical conditions necessary for the socialist transformation. If the state were a tool of a progressive bourgeoisie, the preconditions for socialism would be fulfilled. But the state has altered, together with the proletariat, also the bourgeoisie, transforming it into a regressive force more preoccupied by social peace than by economic and productive expansion. Under these conditions, the Marxian scheme is invalidated, and socialism can only be hoped for as an historical miracle, rather than as a rational consequence of historical conditions. But it is here that violence comes back into play: proletarian violence and class isolationism can, perhaps, produce a reversal of the historical trend. This, as we shall try to show, is the fundamental plea of Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*.

In the next two chapters, then, we are going to tell the story of Sorel's progressive awareness of the obsolescence of the Marxian analysis of capitalist development in terms of social polarization, and of his gradual articulation of syndicalism as a Marxist response to the new

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were found in the right wing groups of the time, Sternhell never quite sees that the decadence of which Sorel speaks is first and foremost an economic decadence. Of course, since Sorel does not believe in economics as the structure of society, he is led to talk about other forms, most notably moral ones, of decadence: we must remember that the social world is for Sorel characterized by the constant interpenetration between different spheres of human activity. But the reading according to which 'history, for Sorel, was finally not so much a chronicle of class warfare as an endless struggle against decadence' (p. 38 of Sternhell's *Birth of fascist ideology*), though cleverly phrased, cannot be correct unless we attribute to this concept of decadence a predominantly economic and progressive meaning according to which decadence mainly means the slowing down of the process of deployment of human productive forces. This, Sternhell, never quite does, and the resulting analysis suffers quite a bit from this, especially the parts on the *Reflections*. Much more negative considerations apply to the misunderstanding of the epistemological status of myth. See Zeev Sternhell et al., *The birth of fascist ideology*, pp. 36-91.

circumstances. In telling the story of these economic, social, and political transformations our main point of reference will be France. Nonetheless, frequent digressions on Germany are necessary, if only because a large part of the socialist discussion of these issues arose from the SPD. In fact, the temporal discrepancies between German and French developments – in Germany the process happens earlier – account for a lot of Sorel’s hesitations on these issues. In chapter five, we are going to deal with the incorporation of the political forces of socialism into the political mainstream of France and Germany; while in chapter six we are going to be more concerned with the economic side of things, with the rise of cartels, protectionism, and labour legislation, as well as with Sorel’s diagnosis of the situation in the extremely important but often neglected *Insegnamenti sociali dell’economia contemporanea*.<sup>16</sup> Chapter seven will be dedicated to Sorel’s syndicalist solution as outlined in the *Reflections on Violence*.

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<sup>16</sup> Georges Sorel, *Insegnamenti sociali dell’economia contemporanea. Degenerazione capitalista e degenerazione socialista* (Palermo, Sandron: 1907).

## CHAPTER FIVE: SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN GERMANY AND FRANCE

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter four we have examined Sorel's Marxism and the consequences that derived from this particular understanding of the doctrine for the development of the workers' movement and for the understanding of the socialist transformation. Though we have privileged a more analytical approach in order to shed light on the conceptual architecture of the system, it must not be forgotten that, as we shall see in this chapter, this understanding was articulated in a particular context characterized by great theoretical effervescence generated by the social democratic turn of the German and French socialist parties. In 1898 the Bernstein controversy erupted at the heart of the SPD and caused much discussion in Marxist circles all over Europe and in gatherings of the International. It was unleashed by a series of articles in *Die Neue Zeit* in which no less prominent an SPD member than Eduard Bernstein openly questioned the validity of the Marxian analysis of capitalist development in terms of an increasing, and eventually self-destructive, social and economic polarization. In his *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus*, a systematized version of the earlier articles, hastily printed in the spring of 1899, Bernstein pointed out how talk of a catastrophic collapse of the capitalist economy seemed to be unrealistic in the present conditions, and urged socialists to abandon this manner of thinking about the social transformation. Bernstein also pointed to problems with the deterministic Hegelianism that for him still held too central a place in Marx's system.

The strength of the controversy that followed from Bernstein's texts can only be partially explained by his prominence within the SPD: its true force lay in the fact that Bernstein's theses seemed to offer a more convincing rationale for the activities of the party than traditional Marxist doctrine. In other words, a social democratic political practice predated, in Germany, and to a lesser extent also in France, its theorization by Bernstein's pen. At least since the repeal of the anti-socialist laws in 1890, the political activity of the SPD largely consisted in an extremely successful search for electoral results in a broadly speaking democratic framework. This success, in turn, had deeper structural causes. Germany's extremely rapid industrial and economic expansion through the emergence of large scale, technologically advanced, labour and capital intensive businesses, created an electoral base for a party capable of representing the immediate interests of workers. At the same time, the substantial integration of the working class into the Imperial polity, managed through

Bismarck's pioneering social legislation of the 1880s, sapped its revolutionary potential and concentrated its energies on the struggle for better working conditions and more rights. In this context, the success of a social democratic party appears unsurprising.

It is this context that is central to this chapter. While in Germany, despite a number of congress defeats, the *de facto* social-democratic nature of the SPD was Bernstein's best ally, in France the debate occurred in a different situation. The long-term process with which we are faced is, in fact, rather similar to that experienced by Germany, and it is characterized by the growth in comparative importance of large industrial concerns, accompanied by a gradual integration of the growing industrial proletariat into the social and political structures of the republic. But neither the scale nor the timing of these structural processes matched the German experience. The intensity and rhythm of industrial expansion were feebler, and though the new productive forms emerged in the French context, they did not have the predominance they assumed in the German economy. Moreover, these developments not only occurred on a smaller scale in France, they also occurred later. Though we shall not analyse in this chapter the economic and social dimensions of this process, the examination of the political forces of the French working class seems to confirm this interpretation. Much like the SPD's trajectory consisted in a transition from an illegal party of revolution into a successful electoral machine, one of the key processes that characterize the political organizations of French socialism in the last twenty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and beyond, is what we here call 'republicanisation' – an increasing integration into the representative institutions of the republic. Unification is the other important parallel between French and German socialism. In 1875 the SPD was born of the fusion between two organisations; in 1905, the founding of the unified party of French socialism – the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* – put over twenty years of squabbles and failed attempts at unification to an end.

As these dates suggest, whereas in Germany the process of integration of the working classes into the national framework was by 1898 substantially completed, French socialism was in those years in the middle of this double process of unification and republicanisation. As we shall show in this chapter, between 1898 and 1902 there were very real political choices to be made in France, and this constitutes an important difference with Germany, where a return to illegality and revolutionary intentions was inconceivable. Strongly influenced by the political dynamics set in motion by the Dreyfus affair, the contrast that arose in France was a clash



between an old Guesdist guard that, fearful of losing its hegemony over the unified party that was to come, had reverted to its old insurrectionist discourse, and a new reformist force, the so-called *socialistes indépendants*, who worked for the unification of the socialist front under a more republican and less Marxist banner through a combination of reformist politics and doctrinal polemic.<sup>1</sup> In 1899 one of their leaders, Alexandre Millerand, became the first socialist to ever participate in a European government when he entered Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau's cabinet of republican defence as trade and industry minister, much to the disapproval of the old Guesdist guard.<sup>2</sup> Discussions of revisionism, ministerialism, and unification characterized the following years of failed attempts at socialist unity, strongly colouring these years with the contrast between Jaurès' and Millerand's republican and reformist socialism and Jules Guesde's and the POF's integral Marxism preaching disengagement from bourgeois institutions and bourgeois quarrels such as the *affaire Dreyfus*. As we shall argue throughout the present chapter, the fact that these political choices were possible in France but not in Germany should be seen as an indication that the structural conditions which imposed a social democratic mass party in Germany were far less prominent in the hexagon.

One of the great puzzles of Sorel's trajectory is that, in contrast with the working class autonomy that he had articulated in his *Avenir socialiste des syndicats*, and in apparent complete opposition to his later, post-1902, syndicalist evolution, between 1898 and 1902 he fully embraced the social democratic turn of French socialism. On the one hand, he praised Bernstein on every occasion he could, and on the other, underlined the advantages of a socialist party capable of achieving results in the political arena over what he saw as the sect-like and doctrinally stale Guesdist alternative. In this period we find, in other words, not only Sorel as a convinced *Dreyfusard*, but also Sorel as a reformist socialist, advocating alliances with the progressive sections of the bourgeoisie, declaring with approval that 'socialism in France becomes more and more a *workers' movement within a democracy*', and in general

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<sup>1</sup> The conflict between a more 'integrationist' attitude towards the republic and one preaching detachment from it was, as we shall show, a recurring one in the history of late 19<sup>th</sup> century French socialism.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the disapproval, of course, was instrumental and testified the struggle between the two groups for the control of the future unified party. Nonetheless, the presence of Gaston de Galliffet, the *fusilleur de la commune*, responsible for the repression of the popular republic in 1871, in Waldeck-Rousseau's government constituted an excellent target for Guesdist scorn.

advocating greater involvement of socialists in the political life of the Republic.<sup>3</sup> It is to the explanation of this apparently enigmatic reformist parenthesis that this chapter is dedicated.

A few considerations, which we shall develop in the chapter, allow us to make sense of what at first sight appears as an unexplainable *volte-face*. To start with, it is important to underline Sorel's still essentially theoretical perspective on these developments. It is true that the *affaire Dreyfus* constituted the central political experience of Sorel's life, and it is also true that, after 1898, his attention will be increasingly drawn to analyses of French society and to current affairs. Nonetheless, between 1898 and 1902, Sorel remained essentially a theorist, preoccupied with the development of a social science based on Marxian methodological principles. One of the main consequences of this theoretical focus was that Sorel was led to give great importance to the issues of Marxist theory raised by Bernstein's writings and to focus on aspects which were, as a matter of fact, rather marginal to the debate. Though the central ideas of Sorelian revisionism were already in place before the Bernstein controversy erupted, it is between 1898 and 1899 that Sorel, comforted by the presence of an important heterodox voice, articulated his revisionist ideas on morality, historical necessity, and economic determinism in a number of important theoretical essays.

While the revisionist controversy opened up the polemical space that Sorel needed, and skilfully exploited, to give full articulation and publicity to his understanding of Marxism, this concern for theory produced a somewhat distorted view of the issues at stake. A tendency to treat political and economic developments as examples to use in the elaboration of essentially theoretical arguments can lead to the misunderstanding of the significance of such developments. Sorel, in other words, partially saw the social democratic transformation of French socialism and the increasing socialist involvement in republican institutions as the affirmation of an understanding of Marxism closer to his own one, based on the impossibility of social scientific prediction and on the paramount importance of proletarian institutions. What he reproached to Jules Guesde's POF then was not so much its refusal to fully embrace republican politics, but the stale, doctrinaire, and fatalistic Marxism on which Sorel understood this rejection of reformism to be based on. A perfect example of this dynamic is given by Sorel's treatment of the theory of capitalist collapse, which, following Bernstein, he argued had been falsified by empirical evidence. Instead of wondering how the formation of

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Préface' in Napoleone Colajanni, *Le socialisme* (Paris, Giard et Brière: 1900), p. iv. 'Le socialisme devient, de plus en plus, en France, un *mouvement ouvrier dans une démocratie*'.

proletarian institutions was going to be affected by the new social and economic conditions, Sorel used this empirical falsification essentially in order to show the futility of any kind of social scientific prediction.

Secondly, and most importantly, we must stress that, as suggested above, the structural conditions that guaranteed the SPD's success as a mass party and as an electoral force were less marked in France than they were in Germany. As we shall see better in the following chapter, the processes of economic and social organization that accompanied the rise of big business in Germany were present in a less conspicuous manner in France. This had an important consequence, which was that Sorel could ignore, or at least downplay, these aspects in his advocacy of reformism. It is, so we shall argue, this French backwardness which explains what is the most important – and perplexing – feature of Sorelian reformism, namely that he advocated it *instrumentally*, as a step needed to allow the development of strong and independent proletarian institutions. In other words, precisely because he fundamentally misunderstood the process of integration of the working classes into the social and political life of the republic, Sorel did not see reformism as incompatible with the revolutionary commitment to the overthrow of capitalism. On the contrary, he embraced reformism *precisely* because he thought it was the strategy that was most conducive to the development of proletarian institutions and thus to the eventual emergence of the new socialist society. We have seen in chapter four how Sorel's conception of the socialist revolution was characterized by the theme of historical continuity, and how this transformation was envisaged as a long term process of proletarian institutional growth: this should clarify how it was possible for him to see in socialism's passage to 'its *maturity* [when] it gives birth to a *political party* [as opposed to a sect]' a fertile perspective for the growth of proletarian institutions.<sup>4</sup> What characterizes Sorel's reformist texts more strikingly than is the *instrumental* character that he attributes to parliamentary involvement. The focus is unfailingly on proletarian institutions, and the task of political representatives is that of developing legislation capable of enabling the transformation of the disorganized proletariat into a class with organizational and moral capabilities sufficient to take control of the current society.

It was only in 1902, with the electoral affirmation of the *bloc des gauches* – a coalition that owed its force and unity to the political conditions generated by the *affaire Dreyfus* – and

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<sup>4</sup> Sorel, 'Préface à Colajanni', p. iii '...enfin dans sa *maturité* il [le socialisme] donne naissance à un *parti politique*, c'est-à-dire qu'il devient une force se combinant avec d'autres forces alliées ou antagonistes pour administrer les affaires...'

with the coming into effect of the policies of Émile Combes' government, the successor of Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau's government of republican defence, that Sorel began to see that socialist reformism and proletarian institutional growth were in fact incompatible. It is only, in other words, in the post-Dreyfus climate that Sorel began to understand that the process which had brought parts of French socialism into the republican family had, in fact, effectively integrated the working classes into the political, social, and economic structures of an advanced capitalist system, sapping not only their revolutionary potential, but also preventing their institutional development: but this, we shall deal with in the following chapter.

The present chapter is divided in two sections: in the first, we examine the Bernstein controversy and Sorel's engagement with it, while in the second we focus on France and highlight the instrumentality of Sorel's support for reformism. We begin by highlighting not only Sorel's predominantly theoretical engagement with Bernstein, but also a number of disagreements between the two on the role of political parties and trade unions. These disagreements are important because they allow us to show not only how under the Bernsteinian banner Sorel developed and argued for his own ideas, but also because they highlight the compatibility that Sorel believed existed between theoretical revisionism, political reformism, and proletarian institutional development. It is this compatibility that we try to bring out in the second section, in which we deal with Sorel's French reformist texts. We argue that such texts have to be placed in the context of a contrast internal to French socialism between the old Guesdist guard and the new and more republican vision of socialism that was making progress under the leadership of Jean Jaurès. The awkward Guesdist attempts to maintain a fading hegemony over political socialism as well as the particular circumstances, strongly influenced by the *affaire* Dreyfus, in which this conflict occurred led Sorel to see the intransigent and theoretically orthodox Guesdist option negatively. More strikingly perhaps, we show how Sorel saw, not entirely incorrectly, the Guesdist return to the Marxist rhetoric of the 1880s as an opportunistic move dictated by political calculations. Marxist orthodoxy came to be seen by him as the language of politicians, whereas theoretical revisionism and practical reformism appeared to him as the language and practice of the working class. This led him to see in the Jauressian line of political involvement in republican politics as a step in the right direction. But this direction remained a revolutionary one of proletarian institutional development.

## 5.2 THE BERNSTEIN CONTROVERSY

As early as the autumn of 1896, Eduard Bernstein had begun to denounce the dangers of what he called ‘another kind of utopianism’.<sup>5</sup> Not very different from the utopianism castigated by Marx and Engels a generation before, this error consisted, for Bernstein, in drawing a ‘heavy line’ between the present capitalist order and the future socialist one, in imagining the transition from the former to the latter in terms of an ‘abrupt leap’, and assuming that ‘...everything that takes place in the former is mere patchwork, palliative and “capitalist”’. The precarious and ultimately ineffective nature of all socialist action under a capitalist regime meant that all depended on the ‘abrupt leap’, on the catastrophic collapse of capitalism: ‘Miracles’ he sarcastically added ‘are not believed, just assumed.’<sup>6</sup> In the following three years, through a number of articles and a book, Bernstein further articulated his views.<sup>7</sup> He questioned the pattern of capitalist development in terms of self-destructive social polarization that was at the heart of the Marxist doctrine of the SPD, and argued that ‘Social Democracy should neither expect nor desire the imminent collapse of the existing economic system’.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the force behind Bernstein’s writings derived, more than from their intrinsic argumentative strength, from the fact that they articulated an existing and consolidated social democratic practice within the SPD. When Bernstein, for example, declared that ‘the prospects of this [socialist] struggle do not depend on the concentration of capital in the hands of a diminishing number of magnates’<sup>9</sup>, he was, as we shall try to show, in fact giving voice to the unspoken assumption that underlay the vast majority of the activities of the SPD. Moreover, there were solid structural reasons for this social democratic practice of the SPD. The willingness and effectiveness of the German bourgeoisie in moderating the social consequences of unbridled capitalism, in fact, has made an observer look upon the Marxism of the SPD as an historical mystery: ‘...as soon as we get a glimpse of the truth’, wrote

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<sup>5</sup> Eduard Bernstein, ‘General observations on utopianism and eclecticism’ [1896] in Henry and J.M. Tudor (eds), *Marxism and Social Democracy. The Revisionist Debate 1896-1898* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1988), p. 74. The article was originally published in the *Neue Zeit* on the 28 October 1896.

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

<sup>7</sup> For a short chronology of the relevant writings see Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy*, pp. 14-19. The book in which Bernstein synthesized his views is Eduard Bernstein, *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* (Stuttgart, J.H.W. Dietz : 1899), whose English translation by Henry Tudor came out in 1993. See Eduard Bernstein, *The preconditions of socialism*, ed. and trans. by Henry Tudor (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press : 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Eduard Bernstein, ‘The struggle of Social Democracy and the Social Revolution: 2. The Theory of Collapse and Colonial Policy’ [1898] in Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and Social Democracy*, p. 169. Article originally published in the *Neue Zeit* on 19 January 1898.

<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, *The preconditions of socialism*, p. 201.

Joseph Schumpeter in 1942, ‘we find it still more difficult to understand how in that un plutocratic environment [Imperial Germany] it was possible for the greatest of all socialist parties to grow up on a purely Marxist program and on a Marxist phraseology of unsurpassed virulence...’<sup>10</sup>

Although we shall not attempt to solve this puzzle, we shall insist on the fact that, given that the practice of the SPD – and, for that matter, of the POF too – was *de facto* social democratic, Bernstein’s writings did not really determine any abrupt change in the daily activities of the party. Instead, the debate found its true animators in the ‘intellectual revisionists for whom party doctrine was not a matter of indifference... It was they who talked about a party crisis and shook their heads about the future of the party.’<sup>11</sup> Sorel falls perfectly within this category. In examining the story of his involvement with the Bernstein controversy, we shall highlight how the principal issues at stake were, for Sorel, theoretical rather than political and how Bernstein’s heterodox work, to him, represented a vindication of his own heterodoxy. It was this theoretical enthusiasm that made him a supporter of Bernstein. Sorel rather skilfully used the polemical space generated by the controversy in order to develop and spread his own revisionism, which was, however, not entirely similar to Bernstein’s. We shall briefly point out some of the main differences between Bernstein’s revisionist reasons and Sorel’s own, both at a theoretical and at a practical level. But the main point we shall establish is that Sorel found in the intellectual context of the controversy a fertile environment for the development of the Marxism that we have examined in the previous chapter.

### **5.2.1 THE GERMAN BACKGROUND TO THE CONTROVERSY**

The contradiction outlined above between social democratic practice and Marxist ideology predated Bernstein’s articles. While vociferously ‘pretending to fight ruthless exploitation and a state that was the slave of slave drivers’, the SPD had, after the repeal of the anti-socialist laws in 1890 found a comfortable space in the institutional framework of Imperial Germany.<sup>12</sup> The Erfurt program of 1891 already combined a catastrophic prediction of capitalist development in terms of social polarization with the conviction that ‘the struggle of the working class against capitalist exploitation is necessarily a political struggle’, and the

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* [1942] (New York, Harper & Row: 1950), p. 342.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 347-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

willingness of the party to understand its political role in essentially legal and parliamentary terms immediately created perplexities.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, we had a number of young radicals such as Bruno Wille and Hans Müller that demanded a more revolutionary practice and advocated a break with the ‘political’, legalistic, and parliamentary line of the party. After having been disparagingly labelled by Engels himself as politically naïve and theoretically uninformed, they were expelled from the party at Erfurt in 1891.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand people like Georg von Vollmar, a prominent Bavarian member, suggested that the newfound legality ought to reorient party activity towards concrete improvements of the living condition of its electoral basis, at the expense of the Marxist theory. Like the young radicals, Vollmar was defeated at Erfurt, but his weight in the Bavarian constituency prevented his expulsion.

This same weight, a few years later, brought the agrarian question to the forefront. Vollmar had guided the Bavarian SPD to electoral success in the local elections of 1893 by promoting a program of defence of the interests of farmers and small landowners.<sup>15</sup> Given the social composition of Bavaria, this made a lot of electoral sense: at the same time, it highlighted clearly the contrast between the electoral strategy of a party within a broadly speaking democratic institutional framework and its Marxist analysis of social development. As Kautsky had been keen to point out after Erfurt, agricultural development would have followed the logic of capitalist accumulation, effectively turning small landowning peasants into an historically doomed class. To appeal to their support by promising to protect their interests would for Kautsky have ‘arouse[d] illusions that could not be realised.’<sup>16</sup> Vollmar

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<sup>13</sup> *Erfurt Program* [1891] available at [http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=766](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=766), last consulted 28/4/2014.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Engels, ‘Reply to the editors of the Sächsische Arbeiter-Zeitung’ [1890] in *Marx Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27 (London, Lawrence and Wishart: 1990), pp. 69-72. In the letter Engels writes that ‘the latest revolt by men of letters and students in our German party’ is informed by ‘a frenziedly distorted “Marxism” ’ and concludes that, in political terms, ‘...even a small sect cannot allow itself, unpunished, such a schoolboy policy’.

<sup>15</sup> See Iring Fetscher, ‘Bernstein e la sfida all’ortodossia’ in Eric Hobsbawm, Georges Haupt, Franz Marek, Ernesto Ragionieri, Vittorio Strada and Corrado Vivanti (eds), *Storia del Marxismo. Volume secondo: Il marxismo nell’età della Seconda Internazionale* (Torino, Giulio Einaudi: 1979), p. 254n.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Kautsky, *The Erfurt Program* [1892], ch. 5. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1892/erfurt/ch05.htm> last accessed 28/4/2014. In 1899 Kautsky, in the middle of the controversy, reiterated the same position. ‘In fact’ he wrote in his *Agrarian question* ‘nothing could be more dangerous and cruel than to awaken illusions amongst them [small landowners, who Kautsky called the agrarian ‘dwarf-holders’] as to the future of the small peasant farm. But an agrarian programme that promises effective protection for the peasantry does just this. Such a programme inevitably strikes a death blow at the proletarian soul in the dwarf-holders, and leaves field free for the peasant in their heart.’ Karl Kautsky, *The Agrarian Question. Vol. 1* [1899], trans. by Pete Burgess (London, Zwan: 1988), p. 324.

and the Bavarians were defeated once more at the Breslau congress of 1895, but the tension between Marxist principles and social democratic practice was there for all to see.

The concessions made to electoral activity enabled by the repeal of the anti-socialist laws, of course, partially explain the success of the SPD's social-democratic practice. Entering electoral competition imposes a number of constraints related to the capture of votes beyond the traditional proletarian reservoir, as we have seen in the case of Vollmar's concessions to small landowners: 'once a Socialist party enters into the vote-catching game, that magic figure, 51 percent, tends to obscure other considerations.'<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it is important to underline how successful the SPD's electoral practice was. The figures for national elections are as follows:<sup>18</sup>

Elections	1890	1893	1898	1903	1907	1912
Votes	1.427.300	1.786.700	2.107.100	3.010.800	3.259.000	4.250.400
Seats	35	44	56	81	43	110
% of votes	19,7	23.3	27.2	31.7	29.0	34.8

Some qualifications have to be made. On the one hand, despite already being the first German party in terms of votes in 1890, the SPD never managed to secure a parliamentary majority and form a government. On the other the role of the *Reichstag* in the institutional architecture of the *Kaiserreich* was far more modest than that of the *Chambres des députés* in the French republic. Nonetheless, the electoral success is still nothing short of exceptional, and constitutes the extremely important background to Bernstein's writings. There are, naturally, a number of structural features of Imperial Germany that explain this extraordinary success.

The main factor to consider is the specific character of the German prosperity of the late 1890s. In the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially after 1895, the German economy experienced a spectacular growth that conferred to it a position amongst the world's leading capitalist countries: 'During the years between 1870 and World War I, Germany, like the United States, quickly surpassed Britain in industrial output and captured an increasing share of Britain's international and even domestic markets.'<sup>19</sup> The German context, far more than the French, and probably even more than the British one, was a fertile environment for the

<sup>17</sup> Peter Gay, *The dilemma of democratic socialism. Eduard Bernstein's challenge to Marx* [1962] (New York, Octagon: 1983), p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> Source for votes and percentage: Dieter and Nohlen, *Elections in Europe*, pp. 774-5.

<sup>19</sup> Alfred D. Chandler Jr, *Scale and Scope* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press: 1990), p. 428.



development and success of the productive forms typical of the second industrial revolution. In the closing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, German economic growth was fuelled by the success of large scale, technologically advanced, capital and labour intensive, businesses in industries such as chemicals, metals, industrial machinery and electrical goods. The specificity of these new industries lay in their organisational complexity. The scale of the capital and the workforce required in the new industries led them to deal with many aspects of the economic process. Rather than dealing only with the productive side – the manufacturing of goods – they expanded their activities into *both* distribution *and* into the extraction of the raw materials required, i.e. into mining. In doing so, they departed from the earlier, smaller scale, model of familial capitalism and gave birth to what Chandler defines as ‘a new economic institution, the managerial business enterprise’.<sup>20</sup> The complexity of these firms highlighted the necessity of important managerial structures, capable of coordinating the various economic activities.<sup>21</sup> But the coordination required by these new industrial forms was not limited to the rise of management at an intra-firm level: it included both inter-firm forms of economic coordination, achieved through cartelization, and the coordination with that other side of the productive world, namely the working class.

It is this latter aspect that is more fundamental to our argument. Peter Gay has argued that it was this German economic expansion that ‘broke the Marxists’ back’, suggesting that ‘prosperity could have been fitted into the Marxist system with some stretching’.<sup>22</sup> This is correct up to a point. To start with, the dynamics of the second industrial revolution fully belonged to the Marxist system and, in fact, were central to it. Contrarily to what Gay asserts, Marx had not merely ‘never denied that capitalism was capable of increasing the total national income’. He had written with an almost prophetic precision of the advent of the ‘cooperative form of the labour process’ and of the introduction of the ‘conscious technical application of science’ to industry.<sup>23</sup> The problem thus was not prosperity, but the lack of polarization, i.e. the inclusion of the working and the middle classes into the enjoyment of this prosperity. This

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.2

<sup>21</sup> Jurgen Kocka has highlighted how the German success in managerial capitalism can be connected to the tradition of statal bureaucracy that characterized the German context. ‘...in sharp contrast to the situation in Britain and the United states’ writes Kocka ‘the rise of public bureaucracy preceded capitalist industrialization in Germany’ (p. 454 of his ‘Capitalism and Bureaucracy in German Industrialization before 1914’). Thus, when German businesspeople were faced by the new organisational challenges typical of large scale industry, ‘it was logical to use the bureaucratic models which belonged to the stock of tradition’ (p. 456). See Jurgen Kocka, ‘Capitalism and Bureaucracy in German Industrialization before 1914’, *The Economic History Review* 34, 1981, pp. 453-68.

<sup>22</sup> Gay, *Dilemma of democratic socialism*, pp. 125 and 127.

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 714.

is why cartelization and protectionism, alongside the welfare state, are the crucial elements in our analysis. As forms of economic organization and coordination at a national level<sup>24</sup>, cartelization and protectionism thwarted the monopolistic tendencies of the new capitalism; while Bismarck's social legislation of the 1880s provided a strong rebuttal to the Marxist prediction of increasing proletarian misery.

In these circumstances, the success of a workers' party promising tangible improvements of the living and working conditions of the proletariat through electoral result and political struggle appears understandable. It was this electoral success, grounded in the German economic expansion in the direction of managerial and cooperative capitalism, reined in by welfare legislation, that constituted the background to Bernstein's writings. In fact, the spectacular electoral progression of the SPD had brought Friedrich Engels himself to voice in 1895 opinions that closely resembled those of Bernstein.<sup>25</sup>

In the introduction to the French edition of Marx's *The class struggles in France*, Engels argued that the diminishing prospects for the success of a military insurrection, and the 'intelligent use which the German workers made of the universal suffrage' both fundamentally altered the character of the revolutionary transformation.<sup>26</sup> 'The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of

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<sup>24</sup> For a short examination of German cartels, see Jurgen Kocka, 'Entrepreneurs and managers in German industrialization' in Peter Mathias and M.M. Postan (eds) *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe. Vol. VII. The industrial economies: capital, labour and enterprise. Part one: Britain, France, Germany, and Scandinavia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1978), pp. 562-5. Kocka emphasizes how cartelization affected specifically the new industries. With the exception of brick production 'in 1905 the basic iron and steel industries had the largest number of cartels (62), followed by chemicals (32), and the textile industry (31).' (p. 564). It is important to see cartelization not as a successive development to the emergence of big business, but as *a way in which* big business emerged. It is interesting here to remark the differences between generally similar phenomena such as cartelization and mergers. 'Both mergers and cartels' for Kocka 'meant a step away from competitive capitalism... to more "organization"' (ibid.). Nonetheless, it was mergers that led with greater facility to the creation of big business, to what Kocka calls 'the appearance of large and integrated concerns with a central administration' (ibid.). The German legal system, unlike the British one, recognised the legitimacy of productive coordination in the form of cartel agreements. This might have had an effect upon the growth of large business, since 'because cooperation was legal, there was less pressure for industry-wide mergers. Because industry-wide mergers were the prerequisite to industry-wide reorganization and rationalization, far fewer such rationalizations occurred before World War I in Germany than in the United States.' Chandler, *Scale and Scope*, p. 424.

<sup>25</sup> For one of the best discussions of this, as well as on the wider issues surrounding the controversy, see Lucio Colletti, 'Bernstein e il marxismo della Seconda Internazionale' in Eduard Bernstein, *I presupposti del socialismo e i compiti della socialdemocrazia*, trans. by Enzo Grillo (Bari, Laterza: 1968), pp. vii-lxxxii. A substantial part of the argument developed in this chapter is indebted to Colletti's analysis. For the English translation see Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin* (New York, Monthly Review: 1972), pp. 45-110.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'Introduction to K. Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*' [1895] in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 27 (London, Lawrence & Wishart: 1990), pp. 514-15.

masses lacking consciousness is past.’<sup>27</sup> Instead, the ‘decisive “shock force” of the international proletarian army’ consisted in the ‘two million voters whom [the SPD] send to the ballot box.’<sup>28</sup> In a triumphant tone Engels underlined repeatedly how ‘the state institutions... offer the working class still further levers to fight these very institutions’ and commented on the ‘irony of world history’, which had determined that ‘the parties of order... are perishing under the legal conditions created by themselves.’<sup>29</sup> In fact, the only task of socialist parties was ‘to keep this growth going without interruptions’ and the ‘one means by which the steady rise of socialist fighting forces’ could be interrupted was ‘a clash on a grand scale with the military.’<sup>30</sup> Socialists, continued Engels, would be wise to avoid the provocations of the bourgeoisie and focus on electoral growth: as the example of ‘another party of overthrow’, i.e. the Christians in the Roman empire, showed, legal repressions would only contribute to the reinforcement and eventual triumph of the oppositional party.<sup>31</sup>

Now, as Lucio Colletti has remarked, ‘Engels had written of a revision of *tactics*; Bernstein objected that this... revision necessarily implied a revision of *strategy*, a revision of the premises of theoretical Marxism.’<sup>32</sup> What gave to Bernstein the conviction that such a step was necessary was then the increasing discrepancy not only between revolutionary ambitions and electoral activity, but also between the theory of capitalist development in terms of polarization and the reality of the emergence of managerial and cooperative capitalism. As we have outlined above, it was the absence of polarization that invalidated most spectacularly a doctrine based on the ‘increase of insecurity of ... existence’ of the ‘proletariat and the sinking middle classes’ in parallel with the ‘gigantic growth in the productivity of human labour’.<sup>33</sup> Incorporating in his work some liberal critiques to Marxist economy such as those of Julius Wolf or Gerhard von Schulze-Gavernitz, Bernstein disputed the validity of those predictions.<sup>34</sup> As the experience of the debate on the agrarian question had shown, the polarization of society into an increasingly small capitalist class and an increasingly large and dejected proletarian one was not happening, nor was the middle class being torn apart by the progress of industry. In the light of this, Bernstein proposed to adjust principles to the practice

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 520.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 521.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 516 and 522.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 522.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 523-4.

<sup>32</sup> Colletti, ‘Bernstein’, p. 49.

<sup>33</sup> Erfurt Program, at [http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=766](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=766), last consulted 1/5/2014.

<sup>34</sup> See Fetscher, ‘Bernstein e la sfida all’ortodossia’, pp. 246-52.

of the SPD, to abandon the belief in the prophesized catastrophic collapse of capitalism, and concentrate on the development of socialism within the framework of a democratic institutional arrangement.

This denial of the automatic self-destruction of capitalism, coming as it was from one of Europe's most respected socialist theorists could not go unnoticed. According to Leszek Kolakowski, '...scarcely any important socialist writer failed to join...' the attack on Bernstein.<sup>35</sup> It is necessary to insist that the force of Bernstein's critique, more than in his philosophical analysis of the nefarious effects of Hegel on Marx<sup>36</sup>, rested on it being an articulation of a consolidated political practice within the SPD, and a perceptive understanding of the wider German economic trend. Capitalism was not behaving in the predicted way, and the SPD had already stopped acting on the assumption of an increasing social polarization of wealth and on the expectation of a catastrophic collapse of the system. Bernstein called attention to this fact, opening up a gigantic polemical space in which to rethink Marxism.

### **5.2.2 SOREL AND BERNSTEIN: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

It might be plausibly argued that Bernstein's impact as a revisionist outweighed his one as a reformist: in other words, his imprint on the world of Marxist theoretical elaboration probably was larger than the one he had on the politics of the SPD and the International. The consolidated electoral and social democratic experience of the German party meant that Bernstein did not have to demand a substantial change of direction. In other countries, and at the international level, this was less true. In France, for example, the embracement of revisionism carried with it serious political choices on the collaboration with a 'bourgeois' executive. But in Germany, the theoretical debate held sway, and it soon spread to the rest of Europe.

As we have shown in chapter four, Sorel's dissatisfaction with the oversimplified, economic centred, deterministic Marxism of the time dates back to at least May 1896, when he conceded a number of important points to critics of Marxism in his review of Léon Say's *Contre le socialisme*. This explains why, when news of the debate began arriving in France,

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<sup>35</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 2. (Oxford, Clarendon: 1978), p. 111.

<sup>36</sup> On this, Kolakowski writes that 'Bernstein's critique of the philosophical basis of Marxism and its derivation from Hegelianism is summary in the extreme. He does not in fact seem to have known any more of Hegel's work than he could gather from the absurd simplifications of Engels.' *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 2, p. 104.

Sorel almost immediately sided with the revisionists. But before entering in the details of Sorel's engagement with the controversy, it is important to underline how the shared conviction of the need for a revision of Marxism does not imply agreement as to the form of the revision. The polarizing dynamics of a controversial exchange contribute to blur many of the differences between two who agree on the main points of the controversy, and, moreover, at times such as the one in question different principles find the same political outcome. Nonetheless, it is important to underline the differences that separated Sorel's revisionism from Bernstein's.

The most fundamental of differences is at a philosophical level. In the opening sections of Bernstein's *Preconditions of socialism*, we read the following definition of the materialistic conception of history:

‘To be a materialist means first of all to assert the necessity of all events. According to the materialist theory, matter moves of necessity in accordance with certain laws; there is therefore no cause without its necessary effect and no event without a material cause. However, since the movement of matter determines the formation of ideas and the directions of the will, these too are necessitated, as are all human events... The application of materialism to the interpretation of history therefore means asserting... the necessity of all historical events and developments.’<sup>37</sup>

Now, it is true that in the remainder of the chapter Bernstein develops arguments attempting to moderate and qualify this brutal determinism. And yet, the passage still betrays an understanding of social science diametrically opposed to Sorel's one. For Sorel, historical materialism consists in the understanding of the mutual interactions amongst the various spheres of human activity, and it is free human activity that determines the course of history. Necessity is a banished word in Sorel's social world, replaced by agency. It is in virtue of this unbelief in historical necessities that Sorel was substantially immune to the empirical data that Bernstein amassed against the theory of social polarization.

The theoretical importance that *both* Bernstein *and* his orthodox opponents attached to the mistaken prediction of social polarization and catastrophic collapse could not have preoccupied Sorel excessively. The statistical demonstration of social polarization becomes a decisive theoretical argument only in a context in which Marxism is seen as a predictive

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<sup>37</sup> Bernstein, *Preconditions*, pp. 12-13.

science of social development.<sup>38</sup> Only then do its predictive shortcomings become problematic. But Sorel's refusal to include the future in the fields of social scientific knowledge meant that a predictive failure was in the nature of sociological research. This, of course, is not to say that Sorel ignored the discrepancy between the Marxian scheme of capitalist development and actual capitalist development. As we shall see, this discrepancy will be important in shaping Sorel's syndicalism after 1902. But it does mean that this discrepancy could not have the *theoretical* importance it had for both Bernstein and most of his foes. After all, prediction, for Sorel, is not a social scientific activity.

Considering the heterodox sources of Sorel's Marxism, it is not that unsurprising to see that it differed from Bernstein's on such a fundamental point. To these philosophical disagreements, we must add a number of more precise and specifically political and tactical differences, which we shall examine in a short while. In the end, it is true, the differences remained insufficient to compromise the general agreement between Sorel and Bernstein. Even when, after 1902, Sorel's revisionism developed in a syndicalist direction opposed to Bernsteinian social democracy no polemic ensued. Sorel acknowledged the differences and continued to look upon and write about the leader of revisionism with a certain admiration. Nonetheless, as we are about to see, important differences separated the two revisionisms.

In November 1897 the *Devenir Social* added to its usual book review section – the *revue critique* – a new space dedicated to the world of various European socialist journals, the *revue des revues*. Hubert Lagardelle wrote about the *Revue Socialiste*, while the Pole Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz, under the pseudonym 'Es.', reported the salient debates in the *Neue Zeit*.<sup>39</sup> Already in those initial publications, Kelles-Krauz had begun reporting summarily on Bernstein's 'Problems of socialism' series.<sup>40</sup> In February 1898, Kelles-Krauz continued reporting on the debate between Bernstein and Belfort Bax, giving a summary of the latter's 'Colonial Policy and Chauvinism' and, probably beginning to see the potential importance of the debate, wrote that Bernstein's full reply 'promises to be interesting'.<sup>41</sup> When the full reply

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<sup>38</sup> Fescher makes this point, treating Kautsky's interpretation of Marx as 'a considerable flattening and reduction of of Marx's critique of political economy.' See Fescher, 'Bernstein e la sfida all'ortodossia', pp. 243-5. See also Colletti, 'Bernstein ed il Marxismo della Seconda Internazionale', pp. xxx-xlii.

<sup>39</sup> For the attribution of the pseudonym, see Michel Prat, 'Lettres de Georges Sorel à Eduard Bernstein', *Mil Neuf Cent* 11, 1993, p. 154n.

<sup>40</sup> Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz (Es.), 'Revue des revues – *Die Neue Zeit*', *Devenir Social* 3, 1897, p. 962.

<sup>41</sup> Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz (Es.), 'Revue des revues – *Die Neue Zeit*', *Devenir Social* 4, 1898, p. 186. [pp. 185-7]. 'La réponse de *Bernstein* (n°16) n'est pas encore complète, nous en attendrons la fin pour la résumer. Elle promet d'être intéressante.' Bernstein had replied to Belfort Bax's 'Colonial policy and chauvinism' (published in the *Neue Zeit* on 21 December 1897) with two articles. In the first one he limited himself to the discussion of

came, published in *Die Neue Zeit* at the end of January 1898, Kelles-Krauz in April produced an extensive summary, translating the salient pages for the French reader.<sup>42</sup> It was in this second reply that Bernstein first gave an ample overview of his more general revisionist theses. He argued that socialists had much to fear from a capture of the state under current economic conditions, since they ‘could not abolish capitalism by decree and could not indeed manage without it’, stated further that ‘there can be more socialism in a good factory act than in the nationalisation of a whole group of factories’, and famously remarked that the final goal of socialism ‘whatever it may be, is nothing to me, the movement is everything.’<sup>43</sup>

Sorel read the article with enthusiasm sufficient to consequently send a personal letter to Bernstein in May 1898, a few weeks after reading Kelles-Krauz’s French translation in the *Devenir Social*. ‘The article’ writes Sorel ‘is so important and concurs so precisely with the results of my research that I take the liberty of asking for some clarifications, as I fear I might over-interpret your theory in a subjective manner.’<sup>44</sup> Sorel outlines what are, for him, the main points of Bernstein’s stance: the abandonment of the theory of catastrophic collapse, the importance of capitalist vitality for socialism, an indifference towards ‘the formulas that define the socialist goal’, and finally the imperative to ‘actualize socialism in the frame of contemporary society, through the elevation of the working class.’<sup>45</sup> Sorel introduces himself to Bernstein as a fellow revisionist, saying that ‘it is clear that for Marx socialism is not a dogmatic theology’, and, making reference to his long review of Merlino’s *Pro e Contro il socialismo*, confessing that he had ‘not revealed all my ideas, for it seemed impossible to

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colonialism and to replying to Belfort Bax’s arguments. In the second one – subtitled ‘The theory of collapse and colonial policy’ – he had articulated his more general revisionist convictions. The relevant articles are Ernest Belfort Bax, ‘Colonial policy and chauvinism’ [1897] in Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and social democracy*, pp.140-9 ; Eduard Bernstein, ‘The struggle of Social Democracy and the social revolution : 1. Polemical Aspects’ [1898] in Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and social democracy*, pp. 149-59 ; Eduard Bernstein, ‘The struggle of Social Democracy and the social revolution : 2. The theory of collapse and colonial policy’ [1898] in Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and social democracy*, pp. 159-70.

<sup>42</sup> Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz (Es.), ‘Revue des revues – *Die Neue Zeit*’, *Devenir Social* 4, 1898, pp. 365-9.

<sup>43</sup> Kelles-Krauz, ‘Revue des revues’, pp. 367 and 368. ‘Il [le parti socialiste] ne pourrait abolir par décret le capitalisme, et même il ne pourrait se passer de lui...’ ; ‘Il peut y avoir plus de socialisme dans une bonne législation sur le travail dans les fabriques que dans l’étatisation de tout un groupe de fabriques.’ ; ‘...je ne me préoccupe guère de ce qu’on entend par le « but final du socialisme ». Ce but, quel qu’il soit, ne m’intéresse pas : le mouvement est tout.’ The English translations are from Tudor and Tudor, *Marxism and social democracy*, pp. 167 and 168-9.

<sup>44</sup> Georges Sorel, letter to Eduard Bernstein, 12/5/1898 in Michel Prat, ‘Lettres de Sorel à Bernstein’, p. 154.

‘...cet article est si important et concorde si exactement avec les résultats de mes recherches que je me permets de vous demander quelques explications, craignant de trop interpréter votre théorie dans un sens subjectif.’

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. ‘Les thèses fondamentales me semblent être les suivantes : 1) abandonner l’ancienne attente d’une catastrophe économique entraînant une crise politique ; 2) abandonner l’espoir de précipiter la ruine du capitalisme par la prise de possession du pouvoir, alors que l’étude scientifique montre que le capitalisme n’a nulle part achevé son œuvre ; 3) ne pas attacher d’importance aux formules qui définissent le but socialiste ; 4) actualiser le socialisme dans le cadre de la société actuelle, en élevant la classe ouvrière.’

present a thesis similar to the one you have since expressed in a journal with orthodox aspirations.’<sup>46</sup> And yet, he is always cautious not to conflate Bernstein’s theses with his own ones. At many points, he excuses himself for possibly interpreting Bernstein in an excessively ‘Sorelian’ way, for ‘letting myself get carried away by my own ideas’, and for possibly ‘exaggerating your personal tendencies.’<sup>47</sup>

It is probably in order to find out the actual extent of their mutual agreement that Sorel sent to Bernstein a copy of his *Avenir socialiste des syndicats*.<sup>48</sup> It is in the exchange over the *Avenir* that we start to see a number of more precise differences between the two. In a letter from 14 June 1898, the only surviving from Bernstein to Sorel, the German socialist replies to Sorel and gives him his comments on the *Avenir*. The letter is a very good example of the relationship of Bernstein’s ideas to Sorel’s own, characterized by a general agreement that is counterbalanced by a number of precise differences of opinion. As long as the discussion remains focused on the need to reform Marxism, the agreement is vocal and unproblematic; when the issues of political engagement and trade unionism arise, Bernstein distances himself. The opening sets the tone:

‘I don’t think that we agree on every point of Marxist theory and practice, but I believe that we approach such questions with the same state of mind... acceptance of the fundamental principles of [Marxist] theory, rejection of rushed and simplistic conclusions. For me... socialism is scientific as long as it gives up on absolute truth, that is, as long as it remains research.’<sup>49</sup>

Despite what Bernstein characterizes as minor disagreements, the great point of contact between the two is in the rejection of a certain Marxist dogmatism, and consequently in the shared conviction that Marxism is not a closed and unalterable system of thought. Bernstein goes on to illustrate his doubts over the planned direction of an industrial world that does not resemble the one pictured by Marx and Engels, and insists on the fact that, ‘...if things do not

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 155. ‘.. il est clair que pour Marx le socialisme n’était pas une sociologie dogmatique...’ and ‘J’ai discuté le premier livre de Merlino dans le *Devenir Social* (octobre 1897); mais je n’ai pas dit toute ma pensée parce qu’il me semblait alors impossible de présenter une thèse analogue à celle que vous avez donnée depuis, dans une revue à prétentions orthodoxes.’

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-6. ‘Mais ici je me demande, encore, si je ne me laisse pas emporter par mes propres idées et si je n’exagère pas vos tendances personnelles.’

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 154 and 154n.

<sup>49</sup> Eduard Bernstein, letter to Georges Sorel, 14/6/1898 in Michel Prat, ‘Une lettre d’Eduard Bernstein à Sorel’ [1898], *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 1, 1983, p. 131. ‘Je ne crois pas que nous soyons d’accord sur tous les points de la théorie et pratique marxistes, mais je crois que nous approchons ces questions dans le même état d’esprit. État d’esprit qu’on pourrait caractériser ainsi : acceptation des principes fondamentaux de la théorie, répudiation des conclusions hâtives et simplistes. Pour moi, l’affixe « scientifique » au mot « socialisme » signifie une demande ou obligation, plus qu’une constatation. Le socialisme n’est scientifique qu’à la condition qu’il renonce à donner la vérité finale, c’est-à-dire en tant qu’il reste recherche.’



march towards this large social cataclysm previously expected, socialists ought not to complain, and [I believe] that it would be a grave mistake to base our program of action on this old theory of the social catastrophe.’<sup>50</sup>

But on two points – the role of the party and of unions in the socialist struggle – Bernstein points out clear differences between himself and Sorel. In the *Avenir*, let us recall, Sorel had subordinated parliamentary struggle to the institutional development of the proletariat: the only purpose of a socialist political party was that of creating, through its parliamentary activity, the legal space necessary for the proletariat to develop its own institutions. Bernstein is not completely won over by Sorel’s theory. On the one hand, he finds Sorel’s mistrust of politics exaggerated, and on the other, conversely, he finds his enthusiasm for unions misplaced. ‘I gather from your pamphlet’ writes Bernstein ‘that you are no politician, and neither am I. But you abhor politics, and I do not yet share this opinion.’<sup>51</sup> Bernstein acknowledges that political engagement has its risks, in that it can ‘lead to radicalism more than to socialism, to the corruption of the masses more than to their moral elevation’.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, politics remain ‘a powerful means of intellectual education and the awakener of public consciousness. Thus I see my duty in the attack not of the thing in itself [politics] but of the exaggerated importance that is attached to it.’<sup>53</sup> In the same way in which politics is not quite just a bourgeois degeneration, proletarian institutions, and unions in particular, are not the only way forward for socialism: ‘I do not completely share your opinion on unions; I believe they are too victims of many errors and temptations, and I see in them but *one* element or force of the future socialist society.’<sup>54</sup>

A similar tone of benevolent though very real criticism characterizes Bernstein’s review of Sorel’s *Avenir Socialiste des syndicats*, published a month later, in July 1898, in the *Neue*

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 132. ‘C’est pourquoi je me suis dit (et je me suis senti obligé de le dire publiquement) que si les choses ne vont pas à ce grand cataclysm social préconisé auparavant, ce ne sont pas les socialistes qui ont à s’en plaindre, et qu’il serait une grande faute de former notre programme d’action d’après cette vieille théorie de [la] catastrophe.’

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 131. ‘Je vois d’après votre brochure que vous n’êtes pas politicien, moi, je ne le suis [pas] non plus. Mais vous abhorrez la politique et je ne suis pas encore arrivé à votre point de vue. Je dois confesser que je suis « en route »’.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. ‘Je concède que la lutte politique ait la tendance d’aboutir au radicalisme plutôt qu’au socialisme et plutôt à la corruption des masses qu’à leur élévation morale...’

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 131-2. ‘... mais cela n’empêche pas qu’elle soit en même temps un moyen puissant d’éducation intellectuelle et un réveilleur de la conscience publique. Je vois donc mon devoir dans l’attaque, pas de la chose même, mais de la valeur exagérée qu’on lui adjuge.’

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 133. ‘Je ne partage pas tout à fait votre opinion sur les syndicats, je crois qu’eux aussi sont soumis à beaucoup d’erreurs et de séductions et je n’en [n’y] vois qu’une force ou élément de la future [société] socialiste...’

*Zeit*.<sup>55</sup> Again, politics is the key point: ‘Mr Sorel’, writes Bernstein, ‘has a profound hatred of politics and politicians that can only be understood by one who has lived long in countries of deep rooted parliamentary regimes.’<sup>56</sup> Though Bernstein distances himself from this hatred by stating that Sorel ‘throws the baby out with the bathwater’, he nonetheless concedes that Sorel’s concerns are real enough, and that it would be a mistake to dismiss them as reactionary, and further that there is a real risk that political struggle degenerates into the personal struggle between professional politicians.<sup>57</sup> And yet, it is important to underline how these disagreements, in truth quite important, sink, in the context of a shared intellectual battle against the orthodoxy, to the level of what Bernstein describes in his letter as ‘limited criticism’.<sup>58</sup> Given the predominantly intellectual, theoretical vitality of the controversy, this is unsurprising: in spite of disagreements over politics or unions, both Sorel and Bernstein agree on the fundamental point: the need for a revision of Marxism and for an open minded approach to Marxist theory. ‘We both travel in the same general direction’, Bernstein seems to say, *e più non dimandare*.

### 5.2.3 THE APPROPRIATION OF A POLEMICAL SPACE

This blurring of the differences of opinion on unions and on parliamentary involvement should, however, not go unnoticed, as it allow us to spot how, through most of the revisionist controversy, Sorel developed and publicized positions that were not quite identical to Bernstein’s. As we have stated before, the polemical space opened up by Bernstein was vital for the development of Sorel’s Marxism, as indeed Sorel himself admits. In his initial letter to Bernstein, let us recall, he had written, speaking of his review of Merlino’s book, that he had had a certain timidity in fully articulating the extent of his revisionism, fearing orthodox reproach: ‘today’ he confesses to Bernstein, ‘protected by your authority, I would not have the same timidity.’<sup>59</sup> And indeed this is confirmed by looking at the dates in which Sorel publishes the texts that articulate his own Marxism. As we have stated, the opening text of Sorelian revisionism – the review of Merlino’s *Pro e contro il socialismo* – was published in October 1897. The *Avenir socialiste des syndicats* was published a few months later, between

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<sup>55</sup> Eduard Bernstein, ‘G. Sorel, “L’avenir socialiste des syndicats” ’, *Neue Zeit* 16 (44), 1898, pp. 572-3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 572. ‘Herr Sorel hat jenen tiefen Hass gegen die Politik und die Politiker, den nur derjenige begreift, der lange in Ländern eingewurzelten parlamentarischen Regiments gelebt hat.’

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* ‘Herr Sorel schüttet indes das Kind mit den Bade aus.’

<sup>58</sup> Bernstein, letter to Sorel 14/6/1898, p. 132. ‘Mais déjà ce criticisme limité mène dans la direction où vous vous trouvez.’ The ‘limited criticism’ is referred to Bernstein’s observations on the utility of the political struggle.

<sup>59</sup> Sorel, letter to Bernstein 12/5/1898, p.155.

March and May 1898. Although these texts already contain all the main ideas, their proper articulation will come later, in a number of important theoretical essays published at the height of the Bernstein controversy between the summer of 1898 and that of 1899.<sup>60</sup> It was, in short, thanks to the polemical space opened up by Bernstein that Sorel's revisionism could flourish.

And yet, the very real differences between Bernstein and Sorel did not magically disappear in the controversial context in which they first emerged. One of the main differences, of course, is one of concerns: whereas Bernstein was reasoning as one of the leaders of a party that was facing an unexpected change – or lack of change – of the circumstances that surrounded it, Sorel spoke as a social theorist trying to come up with a valid understanding of a science of the social world. But, as we have seen, there were more precise disagreements over party and unions that separated the two. The fact that these differences continued to play a central part in Sorel's writings from the period leads to the conclusion that what characterizes Sorel's involvement in the Bernstein controversy is the intelligent exploitation of a polemical space in order to develop and publicize ideas which were, in fact, his own. If we examine the texts in which Sorel deals more explicitly with the 'crisis of Marxism', and with the *Bernsteindebatte*, we detect a very precise rhetorical and argumentative strategy. What Sorel does is frame his texts in a Bernsteinian way through the use of copiously publicized but summarily examined Bernsteinian tropes: in most of these texts there are vocal and very visible references to issues such as the theory of capitalist collapse, the question of social and economic polarization, or the difference between revolutionary theory and social democratic practice. Having entered, through this framing, the polemical space of the controversy, Sorel unfailingly proceeds to articulate *his own* Marxism: thus we have the subordination of political activity to proletarian institutional development, rejections of the predictive ambitions of Marxism, and so on.

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<sup>60</sup> The most significant essays are the following. Georges Sorel, 'Betrachtungen über die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung', *Sozialistische Monatshefte* II, 1898, p. 428-32; 'La necessità ed il fatalismo nel Marxismo', *Critica Sociale* VIII, 1898, pp. 708-32; 'La crise du socialisme', *La revue politique et parlementaire* XVIII, 1898, p. 597-612; 'Dove va il marxismo?', *Rivista critica del socialismo* I, 1899, pp. 9-21; 'Marxismo e scienza sociale', *Rivista Italiana di sociologia* III, 1899, pp. 68-81; 'Y a-t-il de l'utopie dans le marxisme?', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* VII, 1899, pp. 152-75; 'Dommatismo e pratica', *Rivista critica del socialismo* I, 1899, pp. 211-18; 'Quelques objections au matérialisme économique', *L'Humanité nouvelle* IV, 1899, p. 657-65; 'Le idee giuridiche del marxismo', *Rivista di storia e di filosofia del diritto*, 1899. 'Betrachtungen', 'Necessità e fatalismo', 'Marxismo e scienza sociale', 'Y a-t-il de l'utopie dans le marxisme?', 'Quelques objections' and 'Le idee giuridiche' were later incorporated in the *Saggi di Critica del Marxismo*. See Sand, 'Bibliographie des écrits de Sorel', pp. 434-7.

It is in May 1898 that Sorel enters the revisionist controversy with an article on the ‘crisis of scientific socialism’ in Filippo Turati’s *Critica Sociale*, one of the most important Italian socialist publications. The tone of the article was so forceful that Turati felt the need to add a few pages of response at the end, in order to clarify that the journal had published Sorel’s text ‘for one reason above all: that is, that it may not be stated that we have been afraid’.<sup>61</sup> Sorel’s opening is worth citing:

‘Even when a school of thought is undergoing a decomposition, it is difficult for it to understand the true nature of the transformation it undergoes; the more it moves away from its original spirit, the more it clutches to the dry branches of dogmatism. This could not but occur to Marxism too, the day in which its supporters were forced to abandon their purely communist principles in order to look for support amongst small owners, shopkeepers and, in general, the suffering classes.’<sup>62</sup>

It is noteworthy that Sorel identifies the origin of the crisis in the discrepancy between Marxist principles and the struggle for electoral success that characterizes a party in a democratic institutional framework. The obvious references are to the experience of the SPD, and to a lesser extent, of the POF. He then speaks of the empirical falsification of the social polarization that capitalist development should have brought. It is necessary, he writes, ‘to find the courage to declare the bases of the collectivist project as false... the bronze law of salaries, the law of capitalist concentration, the law of correlation between economic and political power have all been falsified by experience.’<sup>63</sup> The opening is, with its focus on the political and theoretical consequences of an unexpected social and economic development, straightforwardly Bernsteinian.

And yet, the consequences that Sorel draws from these ‘Bernsteinian’ premises are essentially theoretical ones. The unexpected development of capitalist economies is used to prove the poverty of Marxism as a predictive social science. Why, asks Sorel, do socialists cling on so desperately to these outdated analyses of economic evolution? It is, he answers, because they believe that in those conceptions rest the claims of socialism to a scientific status. But

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<sup>61</sup> Filippo Turati, ‘Risposta a Sorel’, *Critica Sociale* 8, 1898, p. 139. ‘Abbiamo dato volentieri ospitalità a questo articolo del Sorel, trasmessoci dallo stesso Merlino, per una ragione soprattutto: non si dicesse, cioè, che ne abbiamo avuto paura.’

<sup>62</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘La crisi del socialismo scientifico’, *Critica Sociale* 8, 1898, p. 134. ‘Quand’anche una scuola è in piena decomposizione, le torna difficile riconoscere la vera natura della trasformazione che essa subisce; essa si sforza di attaccarsi ai rami disseccati del dogmatismo tanto più ciecamente quanto essa è più lontana dallo spirito primitivo. Questo fenomeno non poteva mancare di verificarsi per il marxismo il giorno in cui i suoi partigiani furono portati ad abbandonare i principii puramente comunisti per reclutare elettori fra i piccoli proprietari, i bottegai e, in generale, le classi che soffrono.’

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

predictive ability, for Sorel, is not central to social science, or at least not to its Marxian version: ‘...from a Marxist perspective, science is merely an abstract expression of a given way of exerting our power upon things.’ The point is then not that the prediction of social polarization and capitalist collapse has been falsified, but that *any* prediction of social development is unscientific and un-Marxian. This is because ‘we act only on the present, we have no other data but those of the present, we only know the conditions of today...How shall we then call those maximal programmes? I do not see why we should not call them utopias.’<sup>64</sup>

It is because of the unscientific nature of *any* prediction that socialism should, for Sorel, abandon the idea of the social catastrophe and stick, instead, to the true spirit of Marxism by looking at the real movement, the organized proletariat, the only yardstick against which it is possible to judge a specific proposal as socialist or not. The fact that the ‘law of capitalist concentration’ has been ‘falsified by experience’ is then quite irrelevant for the purpose of Sorel’s argument, because *any* plan of action based on social scientific prediction is scientifically mistaken. Instead of focussing on Marx’s predictive mistakes, socialists, in order to ‘understand contemporary facts’, ought to stick to Marx’s ‘methodological principles’:

‘He [Marx] tells us that the essence of socialism is the formation of a class spirit in the proletariat, which organizes itself starting from societies of resistance. As this spirit takes shape, socialism will be increasingly able to weight upon politics and to reform law. This work is utterly independent from the social catastrophe, an idea that has often obsessed socialism and that has ended by hypnotising Marxists.’<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 135. The long passage reads: ‘Ma, sotto l’angolo visuale Marxista per lo meno, si può attribuire a questi piani un valore scientifico? La scienza non è per Marx che l’espressione astratta di una maniera determinata di esercitare il nostro potere sulle cose. Io non posso credere che l’avvenire dei programmi massimi sia una delle cose sulle quali noi esercitiamo il nostro potere. Noi non agiamo che sul presente, non abbiamo altri dati che il presente, non conosciamo altre condizioni che quelle d’oggi. I programmi minimi sono anche, troppo spesso, più estesi che i limiti della nostra azione possibile. ; essi superano dunque quello che noi possiamo dire di scientifico sulle questioni sociali. E come chiameremmo dunque i programmi massimi? Io non vedo perché si rifiuterebbe loro il nome di utopie.’ In the passage Sorel draws on the distinction between ‘minimal’ and ‘maximal’ programmes: in the first ones, socialist parties articulated their short-term demands, while in the second ones they sketched the transformations associated with the future socialist society. Sorel remarks that even the minimal programmes are often beyond the reach of collective action, and thus labels both types of programmes as un-Marxist, unscientific, and hence utopian.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 138. ‘Ma bisogna prendere le mosse, per comprendere i fatti attuali, dai principi metodologici posti da lui [Marx]. Egli ci fa sapere che l’essenza stessa del socialismo è la formazione dell’anima di classe nel proletariato, che si organizza cominciando dalle Società di resistenza. Gli [sic] è a misura che quest’anima si forma, che il socialismo pesa sulla politica e riforma il diritto. Questo lavoro è affatto indipendente dalla catastrofe, l’idea della quale ha ossessionato parecchie volte il suo spirito e ha finito per ipnotizzare i marxisti.’ It might be noted that Sorel uses the expression ‘class spirit’ – anima di classe – instead of the canonical ‘class consciousness’ – coscienza di classe. He explains in this way in a footnote: ‘It is known that Marx uses the

The impossibility of social scientific prediction leads, as we can see, directly to the organization of the proletariat. This is the only proper goal of a socialist organization, and its realization is ‘utterly independent’ from any development of capitalism. It is in passages like this one that we appreciate the different concerns that animate Sorel and Bernstein. Whereas for the latter, a party leader and organizer, the evolution of German capitalism and society is fundamental in the argument for revisionism, for the former, at least in 1898 a philosophically-oriented social theorist, this empirical falsification of the Marxist prediction is mostly an example of the absurdity of predictive social science. Proletarian institutional development remains the priority, and Sorel does not (yet) interrogate himself on whether different paths of capitalist development have an impact on the possibility of this organization. He remains focused on theoretical questions.

The same argumentative strategy, moving from a commentary on the implausibility of the collapse of capitalism to a reflection on the scientific status of Marxism, and on the centrality of the workers’ movement to it, can be found in another article on the ‘crisis of socialism’ published by Sorel in December 1898 in the French *Revue politique et parlementaire*. Sorel this time begins by explaining how a mistaken scientific ideal has led French socialists to place undue emphasis on the notion of social catastrophe. The infancy of French Marxism, he explains, occurred in the context of a naïve understanding of science: the first ‘scientific’ socialists believed ‘science to be a set of formulas to which everybody ought to conform.’<sup>66</sup> It is from this scientistic framework that the theory of the social catastrophe can become the cornerstone of the whole Marxist building: ‘[socialists] attached great importance to a law of social development from which the necessity of the great catastrophe could be deduced...’<sup>67</sup> Needless to say, the scientific ideal is mistaken for Sorel and, moreover, the predictions have been falsified: as Bernstein and Merlino concur, one must reject the catastrophic conception of socialism and ‘give up on the hope of an imminent revolution’.<sup>68</sup>

But once again Sorel moves from Bernstein’s rejection of the predictions of social catastrophe to issues closer to his own Marxism. This time, the problem is that the catastrophic conception has given excessive importance to the role of the political struggle. The

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expression *class consciousness*, but this term has been used incorrectly so many times in French that it has lost all meaning in our language.’

<sup>66</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘La crise du socialisme’, *Revue politique et parlementaire* 18, 1898, p. 598.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 599. ‘On attachait une grande importance à une loi du développement historique d’où se déduisait la grande catastrophe...’

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 600. ‘M. Bernstein s’est rallié aux idées de M. Merlino ; lui aussi, rejette la conception catastrophique ; il a déclaré qu’il fallait renoncer à l’espoir d’une révolution prochaine.’

expectation of the social catastrophe has led socialists to forget the development of the working class, and to attempt the conquest of the state:

‘As long as a catastrophe was expected in the near future, it was important to place as many socialists as possible in public functions... one could hope, in this way, to preserve the organised forces of government and use them, after the revolution, to destroy the economic organisation of capitalism. But if a socialist government is neither probable nor, as Bernstein states, desirable, one wonders what would be the use of this conquest of public powers... Would it not be an old conception deserving to be abandoned just like the catastrophic notion?’<sup>69</sup>

We see how, despite framing his article in a revisionist mold, Sorel insists on points that are not only specific to his own understanding of Marxism, but on the very aspects of his Marxism that had perplexed Bernstein. Highlighting how an excessive focus on the conquest of the state is dangerous in a country like France, since ‘where formidable authoritarian traditions exist, that which makes the State more powerful is a danger to the people’,<sup>70</sup> Sorel proceeds to outline the predictable remedy: the development of ‘proletarian associations: cooperatives, unions, mutualities’.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps the most striking article from this perspective is the one published in 1900 on the debate within the SPD in the *Revue politique et parlementaire*.<sup>72</sup> In this text, we not only see the usual Sorelian appropriation of a polemical space for the development of his own Marxism, but also a rather strong condemnation of parliamentary politics *for their own sake*. The revisionist Sorel, while advocating the tactical importance of parliamentary activity, still manages to vocally highlight the dangers of parliaments. It is here that Sorel’s ability in reconciling theoretical revisionism and tactical reformism with a clear commitment to a long-term revolutionary goal emerges most clearly. It is significant, for example, that in a text that ends with a long paean to Bernstein, Sorel could write that ‘... the reformist politics of Mr

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 608. ‘Tant que l’on attendait une catastrophe prochaine, il était fort important de faire parvenir beaucoup de socialistes aux fonctions publiques ; on pouvait ainsi favoriser le succès de la révolution sociale ; on pouvait espérer, par ce moyen, conserver les forces organisées du gouvernement et s’en servir, après la révolution, pour démolir l’organisation économique du capitalisme. Mais si le triomphe d’un gouvernement socialiste n’est ni probable, ni désirable (comme l’affirme M. Bernstein), on se demande à quoi peut bien servir la conquête des pouvoirs publics, dont on a fait tant de bruit dans les manifestes socialistes. Ne serait-ce pas une vieilleries à remiser avec la notions catastrophique ?’

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 608-9. ‘Dans notre pays, où existent des traditions autoritaires si fortes, tout ce que augmente le pouvoir de l’Etat est un danger pour le peuple.’

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 609. ‘Les garanties les plus efficaces que l’on puisse constituer contre le despotisme et la corruption des administrations, sont celles que peuvent fournir les associations ouvrières coopératives, syndicats, mutualités.’

<sup>72</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Les dissensions de la socialdémocratie en Allemagne: à propos des écrits de M. Bernstein’, *Revue politique et parlementaire* 25, 1900, pp. 33-66.

Bernstein must not be judged by the material importance of the reforms, but by the moral consequences that they can have for the future.<sup>73</sup> In other words, the point of reformist politics and of the parliamentary involvement necessary to secure them remains the institutional development of the working class, both in terms of ‘morality’ and in terms of organizational capabilities. In other words, Sorel does not see Bernsteinian revisionism as reconciliation with the bourgeois order, but as functional to the long-term revolutionary goal.

The goal of the parliamentary struggle then is *not* the transformation of the workers’ movement into a political force, but, instead, the facilitation of the institutional development of the proletariat. Sorel, in fact, argues that the reason as to why the SPD leaders cling so desperately to their Marxist revolutionary phraseology is that this phraseology is fundamental to their careers as professional politicians. The German party, the glorious SPD, the light of European socialism, is described by Sorel as ‘an organisation of workers directed by forceful orators; an *oligarchy of demagogues* lording over the working class, suggesting books for the workers to read, the candidates to vote for at elections, and making their living from their task of directors of the people.’<sup>74</sup> On Sorel’s reading, Kautsky and Bebel are the ‘politicians’, whereas Bernstein’s reformism is the way forward for the growth of the institutions that will constitute the new society. Politics for its own sake, for Sorel, leads to the most undesirable of outcomes, namely ‘to the constitution of an oligarchy of *intellectual masters* whose *profession* is the government of the proletarian world.’<sup>75</sup>

But politics and reformism are necessary, though not for their own sake. The necessity of politics is dictated by the immaturity of the proletariat, who, in the present circumstances, is still unable to lead the productive forces of society. The real question for Sorel is ‘to what extent the proletariat has formed superior, solid and complete economic organisations in order to be able to begin the struggle against current civilisation.’<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, the situation is one in which ‘producers-proletarians are not in the condition of governing production: they

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 55. ‘... la politique réformiste, à laquelle se rallie M. Bernstein, ne doit pas être jugée par l’importance matérielle des réformes, mais par les conséquences morales que celles-ci peuvent avoir pour l’avenir.’

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 42. ‘La socialdémocratie est, en dernière analyse, une organisation des travailleurs sous la direction d’orateurs véhéments ; c’est une *oligarchie de démagogues* qui gouvernent la classe ouvrière, lui fournissant ses lectures, lui indiquant les candidats à soutenir aux élections et vivant de leur profession de directeurs du peuple.’

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 50. ‘La politique conduit à la constitution d’une oligarchie de *maitres intellectuels*, qui ont pour *métier* de gouverner le monde ouvrier.’

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-2. ‘Nous sommes ainsi amené, à chercher dans quelle mesure le prolétariat a constitué dans son sein des organisations économiques supérieures, solides et complètes, de manière à pouvoir entrer en lutte avec la civilisation actuelle.’



form a people *for whose benefit* it is possible to orient the national economy, but *through whom* it is not possible to reach any results.<sup>77</sup> And so, the point of Bernsteinian reformism is exclusively presented from the perspective of class development, as the useful means to arrive at an independent, self-governing and strong proletariat. In other words, the Bernsteinian perspective defended by Sorel in the article is actually rather Sorelian. Political struggle is a necessary evil, whose positive outcome will be an organized and independent proletariat who will not need the direction of a bourgeois party, because it will be able to weigh in society directly through its institutions. But in a context in which these institutions are still underdeveloped, legislative concessions obtained through parliamentary struggle are necessary.

‘Workers begin to understand that the social reforms that can be realised by a democratic government (even if they seem insignificant to theorists) still go well beyond the sphere of action of popular [i.e. proletarian] institutions... Time is needed, for the proletariat can make good use of reforms only when it improves itself. Its moral and intellectual formation marches slowly.’<sup>78</sup>

And, more explicitly:

‘The social question, conceived in a Marxist sense, consists in knowing if the governed class develops itself intellectually and morally to the point of shedding the guardianship imposed so far on it. The true Marxist considers all contemporary questions in relation to the development of consciousness within the proletariat... he gives more importance to the improvements in [proletarian] economic administration than to political revolutions.’<sup>79</sup>

A few general points can be gathered from this examination of Sorel’s involvement with the Bernstein controversy. To start with, the differences between Bernstein and Sorel, though they were obfuscated by their shared battle against the orthodoxy, remained real enough. These differences ranged from philosophical ones regarding historical materialism, to more tactical ones on the role of the party and the unions in the socialist struggle. When Sorel

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 52. ‘Ainsi nous aboutissons à cette conséquence peu rassurante que les producteurs-prolétaires ne sont pas encore en état de gouverner la production ; ils forment un peuple *pour* lequel il est possible de diriger l’économie nationale, mais *par* lequel on ne peut aboutir à rien de bon.’

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 64. ‘Les ouvriers commencent à comprendre que les réformes sociales que peut réaliser un gouvernement démocratique (alors même qu’elles semblent bien faibles à des théoriciens), dépassent encore le champ sur lequel peuvent s’étendre rapidement les institutions populaires... Il faut du temps ; parce que le prolétariat ne peut utiliser les réformes que dans la mesure où il se perfectionne, sa formation intellectuelle et morale ne marche pas très vite.’

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 65. ‘Le problème social, conçu au sens marxiste, est de savoir si la classe gouvernée se forme intellectuellement et moralement, de manière à pouvoir se passer de la tutelle qui lui à été jusqu’ici imposée. Le vrai marxiste considère toutes les questions contemporaines dans leur rapports avec le développement de la conscience dans le prolétariat... il attache beaucoup plus d’importance aux perfectionnements de l’administration économique qu’aux révolutions politiques.’

discovered Bernstein's writings, he did not abandon his ideas. Quite on the contrary, he used the polemical space generated by the revisionist controversy in order to develop and further them, both at the level of social theory and social science and at the level of socialist strategy. Under an ostentatious Bernsteinian banner, Sorel was in fact advocating his own Marxism, consisting politically of the subordination of parliamentary struggle to the task class development, and philosophically in the rejection of the predictive ambitions of Marxism. And thus, Sorel could reconcile theoretical revisionism, *tactical* reformism, and the commitment to the development of a proletarian revolutionary force through the growth of proletarian institutions. It is the latter aspect which is more important, i.e. the reconciliation of political and parliamentary tactics with the commitment to the long-term goal of realizing socialism through the development of autonomous proletarian institutions. For Sorel, not only were these two aspects not antithetical, but they were correlated, in the sense that the former was a prerequisite of the latter.

### **5.3 REFORMISM IN A CHANGING REPUBLIC**

It is this conviction that socialist reformism is compatible with the institutional development of the proletariat that characterizes most profoundly Sorel's writings and positions from the period. A successful parliamentary practice, he holds, can be conducive to the reinforcement of proletarian organisations, and it is from the evolution of such organisations that the socialist society will result. Though he is aware of the dangers of parliamentarism, he does not believe that electoral successes can transform the worker's movement into a full blown social democratic force, and consequently he does not see, as he later will, involvement in republican institutions as part of a process of domestication of the revolutionary potential of the working class. The reasons as to why he believes in this compatibility are many, and we have suggested some above. On the one hand, this belief in instrumental reformism can partly be explained by underlining the overly theoretical perspective from which he approached the Bernstein controversy. On the other, more fundamentally, the differences between the industrially advanced German economy and the French one, reflected in the difference between a modern mass party like the SPD and its smaller French alternatives, were bound to obscure to Sorel the deeper processes of working class integration reflected in certain political developments. A third reason must be added, and it is on this reason that we shall dwell in the following sections.

If this belief in the connection between reformism and proletarian institutional development emerges intermittently, though rather clearly, in Sorel's interactions with Bernstein and in his writings over the revisionist controversy, it is in the French context that it must be examined more closely. Sorel's reformist texts of the period have to be put in a narrower context, and seen as interventions in a debate about involvement in republican institutions that is substantially internal to French socialism. Whereas in Germany the revisionist debate erupted in the midst of an organized and successful mass party, comfortable in its role within the Imperial framework, in France it found a divided socialist camp in the midst of a transition towards unification and more integration into the republican framework. Although after 1892 almost every current of French socialism – anarchists excluded – had accepted, with varying rationales, the legitimacy of legal and parliamentary forms of struggle, this process of republicanisation suffered, in the last years of the century, a significant setback.

In an attempt to preserve their fading hegemony over French socialism from the threat of new reformist leaders such as Jaurès and Millerand, the old Guesdist guard reverted its politics and rhetoric to the revolutionary Marxism of the 1880s. In doing so, Jules Guesde's party effectively disowned over five years of its own political practice. Moreover, both the issue over which the Guesdists decided to break with the reformist *socialistes indépendants* and the timing of the break proved disastrous. The break occurred over the *affaire Dreyfus*, and the Guesdists decided to disengage from the battle for the revision of Dreyfus' trial precisely at the moment in which public opinion swung decisively in its favour. The entrance of Alexandre Millerand in Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau's cabinet of republican defence further entrenched the division between reformists and Marxists. Much in the same way in which the POF's disengagement from the Dreyfus affair had played in the hands of Jaurès, the Guesdist condemnation of Millerand's supposed betrayal found little support in the French working class, and further contributed to the isolation of the POF. Guesde, Lafargue, and the POF leadership thus appeared to many observers, and to a sizeable number of its own militants, as doctrinal extremists out of touch with reality, preaching class purity in a moment of danger of republican institutions and downplaying what many saw as a considerable victory, a socialist minister in a republican government. Other observers, Sorel included, saw only too well that the Dreyfus question was a mere *casus belli*, that the real battle was for the hegemony over a unified socialist party that was clearly in the making, and were unimpressed by the cynicism of the strategy. In examining the arguments used by Sorel to articulate his reformism, we can see all the dissatisfaction with the suicidal strategy followed by the Guesdists in the years

between 1898 and 1902. In those years reformism, however conceived, was the default option for the many socialists that wished to distance themselves from a discredited Guesdism, and Sorel embraced it.

Before fully developing the argument – with the help of two digressions, one on the republicanisation of French socialism up to 1898 and another on the clash between reformists and Guesdists during the *affaire Dreyfus* – it is necessary to spend some words on why we have chosen this interpretation. In accounting for Sorel's revisionism, there is a tendency in Sorelian scholarship to give an excessive importance to the events associated with the Dreyfus affair and to their aftermath. The policies of Waldeck-Rousseau and Combes – the most obvious political outcomes of the *affaire* – are credited with conclusively convincing Sorel of the intrinsic corruption of parliamentary democracy and, consequently, of determining his abandonment of reformism in favour of syndicalism. The argumentative line, at times, seems to be that Sorel's support for reformism was simply dictated by the Dreyfus emergency: Pierre Andreu, to mention the most blatant example, writes that 'the Dreyfus affair will falsify and bend Sorel's natural evolution, delay the development of his thought for many years, without however being able to properly alter it.'<sup>80</sup> Though most historians do not go this far, the tendency to use the importance of the Dreyfus events as an explanation of Sorelian reformism is common enough. To give another example, John Stanley, in his *Sociology of Virtue*, in speaking of Sorel's post-1902 phase – a phase in which, according to

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<sup>80</sup> Andreu, *Notre Maître*, p. 126. 'L'affaire Dreyfus va fausser et dévier l'évolution naturelle de Sorel, retarder l'épanouissement de sa pensée de plusieurs années, sans pouvoir pourtant véritablement la changer ni la transformer'. Jeremy Jennings is also highly typical of this tendency, since he disconnects the support for Dreyfus from socialism, arguing that Sorel 'saw socialist support for the Dreyfusard cause not as a means of achieving a socialist society, but primarily as a defence of the individual from arbitrary control' (Jennings, *Sorel*, p. 87). This might be so, but it does not say anything about the reformism of those years, i.e. about Sorel's conviction that parliamentary entrance was the right step in the development of socialism. But though Jennings does not *say* much, he *assumes* a lot, and falls in the trap of the *affaire* as an explanatory *deus ex machina*. Accordingly, he proceeds to explain the beginning of Sorel's syndicalism as a disillusioned reaction against the Dreyfus camp (pp. 88-9). But how can this be argued if Sorel's Dreyfusism was not a 'means of achieving a socialist society'? In opposition to Jennings, Marco Gervasoni refuses to disconnect Sorel's Dreyfusism from the question of socialism, and this leads him to what appears to be a more balanced understanding of the reformism of those years: 'And yet, Sorel did theorize an original position on the question of the relationship between the workers' movement and democracy. If proletarian institutions could participate and claim as their own the social reforms put forward by governments, they still needed to remain independent from political influences; they were allowed sympathizers in Parliament, but they could not unite stably and structurally with the parties that operated in Parliament, or, even worse, accept the direction of the State under any form.' See Gervasoni, *Sorel*, p. 163. 'E tuttavia Sorel arrivò a teorizzare una posizione originale del movimento operaio riguardo alla democrazia. Se le istituzioni operaie potevano fare proprie e condividere le riforme sociali proposte dai vari governi, dovevano tuttavia restare indipendenti da ogni influsso politico; esse avrebbero potuto avere dei simpatizzanti nel Parlamento, ma mai legarsi stabilmente e in modo strutturale a partiti che vi operavano all'interno, o peggio, accettare di essere, in qualsiasi modo, regolate dallo Stato.'

Stanley, Sorel ‘brought his distrust of politics to its logical conclusion’ – writes that ‘the historical event that precipitated this period was the Dreyfus affair’.<sup>81</sup>

This interpretation is problematic because it cannot satisfactorily account for the central element of the reformism that Sorel advocated between 1898 and 1902, namely its instrumental character. As we have seen, Sorel’s distrust of parties, parliaments, and politicians precedes the 1902 victory of the *bloc des gauches*. The temporary support that Sorel gives to parliamentary socialism is based on the idea that legal reforms can favour the development of proletarian institutions, institutions with a markedly revolutionary character. It is difficult, however, to highlight this instrumentality without putting Sorel’s reformism in the context of socialist unification and republicanisation outlined above, without showing that reformisms could be many and that most of them were animated by disillusion with the opportunistic Marxism of the Guesdists. At the same time, if we downplay the instrumentality of Sorel’s reformism, we have an unexplainable ‘democratic’ phase of an otherwise thoroughly anti-parliamentarian and revolutionary thinker. Thus, as the examples above testify, there is a risk of explaining this odd ‘democratic’ phase by appealing to the *deus ex machina* of the exceptional circumstances associated with the Dreyfus events, producing narratives characterized by stark and unconvincing breaks.<sup>82</sup>

This is why we deal with Sorel’s *fin de siècle* reformism, as well as with the *affaire*, by putting them firmly in the context of the process of gradual integration of the French working class and of its political organisations in the framework of the third republic. It is only by focusing on the question of socialism that it is possible to avoid presenting Sorel’s writings of the period as parentheses dictated by exceptional circumstances. What we suggest is that Sorel embraced reformism partly because the revolutionary alternative, represented by a

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<sup>81</sup> Stanley, *Sociology of virtue*, p. 18.

<sup>82</sup> Much of this tendency probably arises from an excessive reliance on Sorel’s autobiographical accounts of the period, accounts that do indeed stress the importance of the *affaire* as a factor explaining his reformism of the time. In 1919, for example: ‘...je pensais que le prolétariat aurait acquis dans cette lutte un tel prestige que désormais il pourrait imposer son impulsion à la bourgeoisie démocratique, dont il avait été jusqu’alors le dévoué satellite. Je m’étais gravement trompé...’ (Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d’une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris, Marcel Rivière: 1919), p. 173). Or again, in the same year, ‘le premières agitations dreyfusardes m’avaient fait augurer que le socialisme gagnerait beaucoup à acquérir la claire conscience d’être un mouvement ouvrier dans une démocratie ; la liquidation de la révolution dreyfusienne devait me conduire à reconnaître que le socialisme prolétarien ou syndicalisme ne réalise pleinement sa nature que s’il est volontairement un mouvement ouvrier dirigé contre les démagogues.’ (Sorel, ‘Mes raisons’, p. 268.) And yet, beyond presenting the *affaire* as a decisive event in his change of opinion, what Sorel stresses in passages such as these two is his unchanging concern for the development of proletarian institutions. Though the *affaire* certainly influenced Sorel, it did so only by orienting his thought on the question of what circumstances were most favourable to the institutional development of the proletariat.

declining party and by an orthodox Marxism that Sorel had long rejected, was impracticable. This cannot explain entirely how Sorel could see reformism instrumentally, as a tool of proletarian empowerment and eventually of revolution.<sup>83</sup> The ascendancy of more reformist currents in French socialism can be seen as part of a wider process of working-class integration into French institutions that has important economic and social aspects. But those aspects will be dealt with in the next chapter.

### **5.3.1 REPUBLICANISATION AND UNIFICATION: FRENCH SOCIALISM UP TO THE *AFFAIRE DREYFUS***

The question of involvement in republican institutions, and of whether one should see the socialist struggle as a revolutionary or as a reformist one, had been a recurring point of conflict in French socialism at least since the early 1880s. A first important episode, relevant to what will happen at the end of the 1890s, occurs already in the 1880s with the clash in the *Parti Ouvrier* between Guesdist Marxists and the followers of Paul Brousse, polemically labelled the ‘possibilists’ in virtue of their general propensity towards reforms within the existing capitalist system. The clash eventually led to a split in the *Parti Ouvrier* at the Saint-Etienne congress of 1882, with the Guesdist minority leaving and organizing a separate congress at Roane. Though the issues that generated the split range from doctrinal incompatibilities to the rivalry between two groups competing for party control, it is the stance towards political participation in republican institutions that characterized the cleavage most evidently. Given the size of the *Parti Ouvrier* at the time, the election of parliamentary representatives was not a realistic option, and so participation in bourgeois institutions meant something else, namely socialist involvement in local administrations and municipalities. It is mainly over this question that the ‘fundamental opposition between revolutionaries and reformists’ first developed.<sup>84</sup>

When Benoit Malon, a theorist closer to Brousse than to Marx and future founder of the *Revue Socialiste*, wrote his book on the workers’ party in 1881, before the split, he was careful not to appear too divisive and asserted the compatibility between Marxists and other socialists, i.e. between reforms and revolutions. ‘The great mistake of pure revolutionaries’ he

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<sup>83</sup> Sorel’s instrumental reformism is, in fact, rather similar that articulated by Engels in his 1895 preface to *The class struggles in France*.

<sup>84</sup> Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 21. ‘Entre les guesdistes et ceux qu’ils affublent désormais du titre de possibilistes, apparaît donc l’opposition fondamentale entre révolutionnaires et réformistes.’

wrote ‘is that of presenting reforms and revolutions as antagonistic pursuits.’<sup>85</sup> Instead, he went on to argue that only reforms can prepare the revolutionary spirit, for without reforms the oppressed lose even the capability of thinking about a social upheaval: ‘reforms are the mothers of revolutions.’<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, reforms do not, as ‘pure reformists’ would have it, ‘take away the *raison d’être* of the revolution.’<sup>87</sup> The need for the revolutionary uprising remains, and in arguing for it, Malon cited none other than Karl Marx, before concluding that socialists ought to be ‘reformists and revolutionaries at the same time.’<sup>88</sup> This attempt at conciliation was however less marked a year onwards. In his follow up to the *Nouveaux Parti*, Malon is much less kind to those he now calls the ‘sectarian Marxists’, and ‘a minority... that could not accept its minoritarian status and that is not afraid of breaking the party in order to try to conquer again... a lost hegemony.’<sup>89</sup> Despite the fact that doctrinal ecumenism still characterized Malon’s book, tensions were mounting, as these declarations by the leader of the possibilists just before the Saint-Etienne congress testify: ‘Ultramontanes cannot obey the law of their country because their leader is in Rome. Marxists cannot obey the party’s decisions, because their leader is in London. One does not reconcile the workers’ Party with Marxist fanaticism.’<sup>90</sup>

As we have highlighted, involvement in republican institutions was a question of participation in municipal politics. To the Broussists, the socialist control of French communes and municipalities and the beginning of a gradual program of ‘socialization’ of public services through small-scale municipal action was an effective way of realizing socialism. If we go back to Malon’s *Nouveaux Parti*, the central place attributed to communes and local institutions is striking: for Malon, the ‘*Parti Ouvrier* was not mistaken in attributing great

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<sup>85</sup> Benoit Malon, *Le nouveaux parti* (Paris, Derveaux: 1881), p. 74. ‘La grande erreur des révolutionnaires purs c’est de présenter la réforme et la révolution comme des réalisation antagoniques.’

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77. ‘...on peut dire que les réformes sont mères des révolutions.’

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* ‘De ce que les réformes appellent toujours d’autres réformes, les améliorations d’autres améliorations, les réformistes purs en concluent que la révolution n’a plus de raison d’être. Cette opinion n’est pas moins fausse et n’est pas moins démentie par l’histoire.’

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79. ‘C’est la force qui décidera de cette question, en dernière analyse : la force, l’accoucheuse des sociétés nouvelles, dit Marx. Il faudra des révolutions sociales pour conquérir l’égalité économique, comme il a fallu des révolutions politiques pour conquérir la République, expression suprême de l’égalité politique. Il ne d’agit donc pas d’être réformiste ou révolutionnaire ; il faut être réformiste et révolutionnaire.’

<sup>89</sup> Benoit Malon, *Le nouveaux parti II. Le Parti ouvrier et sa politique* (Paris, Derveaux: 1882), p. 4n and 128. Second citation: ‘... une minorité, dite *marxiste*, qui n’a pas su être minorité et ne recule pas devant l’idée de briser le parti pour tenter, vainement d’ailleurs, de reconquérir, par des moyens extérieurs, une domination perdue.’

<sup>90</sup> Paul Brousse, *Le Marxisme dans l’Internationale* (Paris, Le Prolétaire: 1882), p. 31, cited in Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 23n. ‘Les ultramontains ne peuvent pas obéir à la loi de leur pays, parce que leur chef est à Rome. Les marxistes ne peuvent pas obéir aux décisions du *parti*, parce que leur chef est à Londres. On ne concilie pas le Parti ouvrier avec le fanatisme marxiste...’

importance to the capture of municipalities.’<sup>91</sup> The most interesting part of the book, in fact, is constituted by the integral citation of the socialist municipal program, a program ‘inspired by Brousse’.<sup>92</sup> In it we read of the importance of making the ‘municipality mistress of its public services’ by socializing – i.e. municipalizing – ‘the monopolies of the great companies (omnibuses, trams, water, gas, etc.)’, by establishing ‘municipal industries’ able to provide work to unemployed workers and, in this way, ‘embarking on the path that leads from the regime of private property to that of public property’.<sup>93</sup>

More than one thing in this approach was liable to be the target of Marxist criticism. In 1883, after the split had occurred, Jules Guesde outlined why municipal socialism was alien to Marxism. The idea that socialism can be gradually realized through bourgeois institutions meant disregarding Marx’s analysis of the importance of capital in bourgeois society. In his *Services publics et socialisme*, Guesde brought this and other arguments to discredit the gradualist theory of ‘public services’. The ‘final goal’ of socialism, he stated, is a self-sufficient *society*, rather than a state distributing the good it produces to its citizens.<sup>94</sup> Beyond this dependency on the bourgeois state, Guesde pointed out the inability of municipal socialism to make sense of large industrial production – ‘great industry could disappear tomorrow’ he wrote in a sarcastic passage, ‘and western civilisation would be just as ready for communism’.<sup>95</sup> All in all, the main argument was the standard one deployed against reformists, namely the impossibility of reforms within a capitalist political system. The socialisation of the public services delivered by municipalities was, for Guesde, dependent on

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<sup>91</sup> Malon, *Nouveaux Parti*, p. 91.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 94. The text reads: ‘B. – Partie Économique. *La commune maitresse de ses services publics* : 1° Transformation en services communaux (ou départementaux), des monopoles des grandes compagnies (omnibus, tramways, eaux, gaz, etc.), tous ces services devant fonctionner désormais, sinon gratuitement, au moins à prix de revient ; 2° Etablissement par la Commune d’industries municipales, pour qu’en vertu de leur droit à l’existence, les travailleurs mis à pied par les crises, les grèves et les transformations de l’outillage, reçoivent du travail, et que la Commune s’achemine ainsi du régime de la propriété privée au régime de la propriété publique...’

<sup>94</sup> Jules Guesde, *Services publics et socialisme* [1883] (Paris, Jacques: 1901), p. 5.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 15. ‘Seuls des « justiciards » ... comme l’auteur du *Capital* ont pu invoquer à l’appui de l’appropriation communiste des filatures, tissages, hauts-fourneaux, etc., la production communiste engendrée par la mécanique. Ni un Creusot, ni un Fives-Lille ne pèsent un carat dans la transformation sociale qui va s’accomplissant. La grande industrie pourrait disparaître demain avec le grand commerce, la scie à main éliminer la scie mécanique circulaire, le rouet à filer enterrer les broches à vapeur, et le *Louvre* et le *Bon-Marché* s’effondrer sous l’ancienne petite boutique reconstituée, que la civilisation occidentale n’en serait pas moins mure pour le communisme.’



the ‘socialization of the means of production and exchange’, that in turn was dependent on the ‘expropriation of the capitalist class – the business of revolution.’<sup>96</sup>

This digression on the quarrel over municipal socialism is important not only because it displays rather clearly the Guesdist distrust of the time towards involvement in republican institutions, but also because it allows us to better understand the relevance of the shift that occurred at the beginning of the 1890s, and more precisely with the local elections of 1892 and the national ones in the following year.<sup>97</sup> It is during these years that the Guesdist stance changed completely and moved towards a far more conciliatory position over involvement in the republican framework. One of the most striking aspects of this transformation is the importance that local institutions and municipalities suddenly come to have in the Guesdist party. At the Lyon congress of November 1891, in preparation for the local elections that were going to be held in May of the following year, the party decided to complement its general programme with a ‘common programme of immediate demands that fall within the scope of municipal powers’, advocating welfare measures for children and old people and instituting a municipal institutional framework favourable to salaried workers and to their unions.<sup>98</sup> The success at the local elections – the Guesdists held the municipalities of Commeny and Narbonne and conquered Monluçon, Rubaix, and Caudry – further encouraged the move towards more involvement in the republican institutions. During the campaign for the 1893 national elections, for example, the adjective ‘Français’ was ‘silently’ added to the acronym of the *Parti Ouvrier*.<sup>99</sup> But it is the success of the various socialist candidates at the 1893 national elections that we can take as a watershed separating the old

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 10. ‘Seule une société ayant absorbé ou fondu toutes les classes en une seule, également propriétaire et également productrice, peut donner lieu à des services réellement publics. C’est-à-dire- que l’instauration de ces derniers est subordonnée à la socialisation des moyens de production et d’échange, subordonnée elle-même à la prise du pouvoir politique par le prolétariat et à l’expropriation de la classe capitaliste, - ce qui est affaire de révolution.’

<sup>97</sup> For the record, Sorel’s stance on municipal socialism was negative: proletarian institutions, for him, had to be autonomous from bourgeois one, and the socialisation of public services was the opposite of proletarian institutional development. See, for example, the ‘Avenir socialiste des syndicats’, p. 440, in which Sorel argues that unions ought to take direct control of these municipal services. On municipalism socialism in the France of the period, see Patrizia Dogliani, *Un laboratorio di socialismo municipale. La Francia (1870-1929)* (Milan, Franco Angeli: 1992).

<sup>98</sup> *Neuvième Congrès National du Parti Ouvrier: tenu à Lyon du 26 au 28 Novembre 1891* (Lille, Imprimerie du Parti Ouvrier: 1891), p. 14. ‘... le Congrès croit qu’il y a lieu d’élaborer un programme commun de revendications immédiates rentrant dans la compétence du pouvoir communal et adopte le programme suivant...’. See also Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 68.

<sup>99</sup> See Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 67.

revolutionary Guesdists from their new republican selves, transforming the Guesdists from ‘a simple ideological force’ into ‘a party, the first properly structured French political party’.<sup>100</sup>

The 1893 developments, of course, ran in parallel with what was happening on another scale in Germany. The increasing and increasingly successful involvement in electoral competition determined a gradual but sure distancing of socialist parties from both insurrectionism and political isolationism, and marked the affirmation of the political practice that Engels had so clearly outlined in his 1895 preface to Marx’s *Class Struggles in France*. In stark contrast with the 1880s, participation in republican political life was now seen by Guesde as ‘the lever with which we shall lift an entire world, the world of labour freed forever from bourgeois domination.’<sup>101</sup> It is true that differences with the Broussists still remained, and that the Guesdists specified with sufficient clarity the instrumental nature of their political involvement. Nonetheless, the shift remained quite significant, partly because with it we see the rise of a number of political phenomena typical of the transformation from a doctrinally coherent small-scale organisation to a mass party, however small. For example, we see the effort to muster support outside of the traditional proletarian electoral reservoir. Much like in Germany Georg von Vollmar had insisted on the importance of gathering agrarian support, at the 1892 Marseilles congress in preparation of the 1893 national elections the Guesdist ‘Congress decides to complete the general Party programme with the following agricultural programme destined to rally agrarian workers to socialism’.<sup>102</sup> We have, moreover, the forming of tactical alliances in specific constituencies with radicals and republicans, as well as a more vocal attitude on issues that were at the centre of the public debate, such as colonialism, protectionism, or the Panama scandal.<sup>103</sup>

With the new situation came new challenges and new actors. With the slow installation of socialists at the heart of the republican institutions, the question of socialist unity became more pressing. At the same time, the parliamentary success had added at least one important

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<sup>100</sup> Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 91. ‘Le Parti ouvrier n’est plus désormais une simple force idéologique ; il devient un parti, le premier parti politique français véritablement structuré...’

<sup>101</sup> Jules Guesde, ‘A l’œuvre’, *La Question Sociale*, 5 June 1892, cited in Michelle Perrot, ‘Les socialistes Français et le pouvoir’ in Michelle Perrot and Annie Kriegel, *Le socialisme français et le pouvoir* (Paris, EDI: 1966), p. 50. ‘Nous avons donc, dans le morceau de gouvernement que nous a attribué le suffrage universel, le levier avec lequel nous pourrions soulever tout un monde, le monde du travail arraché pour toujours à la domination bourgeoise.’

<sup>102</sup> *Dixième Congrès National du Parti Ouvrier : tenu à Marseille du 24 au 28 Septembre 1892* (Lille, Imprimerie Ouvrière : 1892), p. 34. ‘Le Congrès décide de compléter le programme général du Parti par le programme agricole suivant destiné à rallier au socialisme les travailleurs des champs...’

<sup>103</sup> See Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, pp. 59-64 and 72.

current, that of the so-called independent socialists, to the landscape of French socialism, further complicating this quest for unity. Though before 1893 the label of independent socialist was used vaguely to indicate those not clearly ascribable to an organization or current, after 1893 it increasingly came to indicate a precise group of MPs originally federated in the loosely structured *Fédération des socialistes indépendants*, set up before the 1893 elections.<sup>104</sup> Of overwhelmingly bourgeois social extraction, labelled by Lafargue, in the middle of a clash that we are about to examine as ‘multi-coloured independents of a sentimental, picturesque, and integral socialism’, the independents effectively constituted an ideological bridge between social republicanism and Marxism.<sup>105</sup> While their action cannot be entirely reduced to parliamentary activity, it was parliament that made the independent socialists: without the dynamics set in motion by the socialist entrance in parliament, and without the Guesdist inability to deal with such dynamics, it is highly unlikely that this current would have come to have the importance it had.

Between 1893 and 1898 the parliamentary group of *Union Socialiste* represented the main example of socialist unity. But this ‘entente au sommet’ was not the expression of a coherent political project, and the looseness of the criteria that regulated the entrance to and the functioning of the group allowed Jaurès and Millerand to emerge and, consequently, gave to them the political visibility and credibility that they needed in order to become an important force within French socialism. The Guesdist refused to ‘define the borders of the [parliamentary] cartel’ and to set up the parliamentary group along consistently collectivist lines. ‘The POF, drunk on its successes, sacrifices quality to quantity: the Groupe d’Union Socialiste, without programme nor precise conditions of access, is open to anyone wanting to join...’. The group functions in the absence of ‘a precise statute’ and there is no ‘voting discipline’. Under these conditions, ‘the revolutionary socialists, Guesdists and Vaillantistes, are drowned under the mass of independent socialists and radical-socialists.’<sup>106</sup> It was perhaps the instrumentality with which the Guesdist approached the parliamentary business, coupled

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<sup>104</sup> See Willard, *Socialisme et communisme français*, p. 72.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Bruno Antonini, *État et socialisme chez Jean Jaurès* (Paris, L’Harmattan: 2004), p. 169.

<sup>106</sup> Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 404. ‘Les guesdistes ne prennent pas soins au préalable de définir un programme minimum, de tracer les frontières du cartel. Renonçant à constituer, comme les y invite Engels le « noyau assez fort pour forcer les blanquistes, possibilistes, et socialistes indépendants à se rassembler autour de lui », le P.O.F., enivré de ses succès, sacrifie la qualité à la quantité : le groupe d’Union socialiste s’ouvre, sans programme, ni conditions préalables, à tous les députés qui en expriment le souhait ; il fonctionne sans règlement précis, sans discipline de vote ; dans ce groupe hétérogène d’une cinquantaine de députés, aux limites incertaines, les socialistes révolutionnaires, guesdistes et vaillantistes, sont noyés sous la masse des socialistes indépendants et des radicaux-socialistes...’

with their inexperience, that led them to this mistake, the first of many errors that eventually played into Jaurès' hands.<sup>107</sup>

Partially in virtue of their inexperience, partially in virtue of the fact that they were more concerned by other revolutionary groups than by the rise of the reformists, and partially because they were convinced that the future of the party would mirror the present of the SPD, and thus that electoral successes and a less insurrectionary attitude were the way forward, the Guesdists allowed the parliamentary *socialistes indépendants* to take the initiative on the question of socialist unity. After another successful round of municipal elections on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10th May 1896, a gathering – a banquet, in fact – of the representatives of a large number of socialist currents was held at Saint Mandé, on the outskirts of Paris. Alexandre Millerand's speech opened the gathering:

‘Citizens, the same cry has risen from all the battlefields in which socialist France has met capitalist reaction: union! Let us end doctrinal quarrels, let us forget internal divisions! Against the common enemy, one heart, one spirit, one action!’<sup>108</sup>

In the rest of the speech Millerand outlined a number of rather vague and reformist-sounding elements meant to unite all the socialist currents under a unitary, though rather broad, church. In outlining his minimal programme for a socialist unification, Millerand carefully painted the Marxian ‘expropriation of the expropriators’ in republican terms, giving an important role to the state, and underlining repeatedly that the socialisation of the means of production would only happen when a certain industry was ready for it. He spoke to small land-owners and artisans, to the ‘few privileged ones who still hold the instruments of production in their hands and who reap the entirety of the product of their labour’, reassuring them that socialism ‘does not threaten them in the slightest’ since their ‘fragmented property could not be the

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<sup>107</sup> A few months after the elections Guesde had declared: ‘Those who rely on socialist MPs for the triumph of their ideas will regret such hopes and mistakes. We don't even have the intention of seriously demanding that the Chamber of Deputies realize our programme... far from us the chimerical idea that our social revolution can accomplish itself within parliamentary and constitutional limits.’ [C'est comme si aujourd'hui on attendait des miracles de notre entrée au Parlement. Ceux qui comptent sur les députés socialistes pour le triomphe de leurs idées en seront pour leurs espérances et leur erreur. Nous n'avons pas même l'intention de demander sérieusement à la Chambre d'appliquer notre programme... loin de nous la chimère de croire que notre révolution sociale peut s'accomplir dans le cadre parlementaire et constitutionnel.']. The interview was published on the 26 November 1893 in the Bordeaux based *La Question Sociale*. Cited in Perrot, ‘Socialisme français et le pouvoir’, p. 55n.

<sup>108</sup> Alexandre Millerand, ‘Discours prononcé à Saint-Mandé, le 30 Mai 1896’ in his *Socialisme Réformiste Français* (Paris, Société Nouvelle de Librairie et d'Édition: 1903), p. 21. ‘Citoyens, de tous les champs de bataille où la France socialiste a rencontré la réaction capitaliste, le même cri a jailli : Union ! Trêve aux querelles d'école, oubli des dissensions intestines ! Contre l'ennemi commun, un seul cœur, un seul esprit, une seule action !’

object of a social appropriation'.<sup>109</sup> He stressed the uselessness of violence – 'recourir à la force, et pour qui, et contre qui?'<sup>110</sup> – pledged allegiance to the Republic and declared uncompromisingly the recourse to universal suffrage as the sole weapon that the party was going to use.<sup>111</sup> Finally, he outlined the three points on which to erect the edifice of socialist unity:

'Intervention of the State in order to move from the capitalist to the national sphere different categories of means of production as they become ready for social appropriation; - conquest of public powers through universal suffrage; - international workers' collaboration.'<sup>112</sup>

Despite some reservations, a substantial degree of internal disagreement, and a number of quite severe contrasts with the independents over the direction of the newspaper *La Petite République*, the Guesdists substantially went along for the ride, and embraced Millerand's minimal platform. The proletarian base appeared, at times, rather unconvinced by the new allies and the new direction of the party. In a letter written to Guesde, ten Parisian female militants asked whether a socialist union that had as its consequence the representation of the people by 'a string of lawyers without a cause, all more or less millionaires' was a good idea.<sup>113</sup> At the 1896 Lille congress, however, the POF declared itself 'partisan of the widest possible socialist union' and set up a number of electoral deals with other socialist candidates for the 1898 elections, deals that were subsequently confirmed despite internal party opposition.<sup>114</sup> However half-hearted, the subscription of the Guesdists to this reformist

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<sup>109</sup> Millerand, 'Discours de Saint-Mandé', p. 28. 'Et ce serait en vain qu'on essaierait d'exciter contre le parti socialiste les alarmes des rares favorisés qui réunissent encore dans leurs mains l'instrument de production et le produit intégral de leur travail. Ceux-là, ces petits propriétaires, non seulement la transformation poursuivie par le parti socialiste ne les menace en rien, puisque leur propriété morcelée ne saurait être l'objet d'une appropriation sociale...'

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 'Républicains avant tout, nous ne nourrissons point l'idée folle de faire appel au prestige illusoire d'un prétendant ou du sabre d'un dictateur pour faire triompher nos doctrines. Nous ne nous adressons qu'au suffrage universel...'

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 34. 'Intervention de l'État pour faire passer du domaine capitaliste dans le domaine national diverses catégories des moyens de production et d'échange au fur et à mesure qu'elles deviennent mûres pour l'appropriation sociale ; - conquête des pouvoirs publics par le suffrage universel ; entente internationale des travailleurs.'

<sup>113</sup> IISH, Amsterdam, Guesde archive, *Lettre de dix femmes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> à Guesde*, 16 May 1896, cited in Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 408n. 'L'union socialiste telle qu'on la pratique et qui fait que le peuple se trouve représenté par une kirieille d'avocats sans cause ou plus ou moins millionnaires ne serait-elle pas une vaste fumisterie qui permettrait d'endiguer le progrès du Parti ouvrier ?'

<sup>114</sup> *Quinzième Congrès National du Parti Ouvrier : tenu à Paris du 10 au 13 Juillet 1897* (Lille, Imprimerie Ouvrière P. Lagrange : 1897), p. 43. 'Partisan de la plus large union socialiste, là où l'unité socialiste n'est pas encore accomplie, le Parti ouvrier français ne considère comme socialistes, pouvant bénéficier de la discipline au second tour de scrutin, que les candidats qui, avec le groupe socialiste de la Chambre, poursuivent « l'abolition du régime capitaliste au moyen de la conquête du pouvoir politique par le prolétariat...'. The passage is at the

platform must be placed in a wider European context in which the SPD was moving in the same direction: Engels' 'reformist' preface to Marx's *Class Struggles in France* dates from little over a year before Millerand's speech. That the quest for unity required the adoption of a wider and more republican platform did not worry the Guesdists too much. It is true that there were substantial differences between Guesdists and followers of Millerand, as the former still kept the possibility open, in case of a suspension of universal suffrage, of going back to the revolutionary option.<sup>115</sup> But they underestimated the dangers of these differences, as they were confident that increasingly large electoral successes would, in the long run, resolve most of the problems associated with socialist unity and that they would keep ideological and political control of the new-born unified socialist party. When, as we are about to see, they realized that the new party was probably not going to be set up along sufficiently Marxist and collectivist lines they attempted a change of direction, and reverted to their older rhetoric of opposition to the republic in a bid to preserve their identity and base against the possibility of a socialist party that was going to be republican far more than socialist. But this attempt failed, largely in virtue of the fact that it occurred in a very particular context, that of the *affaire Dreyfus*.

### 5.3.3 THE *AFFAIRE DREYFUS* AND THE MILLERAND CRISIS

As we can see, the difference between the Guesdists of the early 1880s and the POF after 1893 is rather clear. By 1898 the POF, an almost fully legal and parliamentary party, entered a turbulent phase of the political life of the third republic convinced, despite the concessions made to Millerand at Saint-Mandé, of maintaining its hegemony over a growing socialist front. But the particular political circumstances associated with the Dreyfus affair provided the terrain on which Jaurès, Millerand, and the *socialistes indépendants* could launch their offensive, and the Guesdists did not manage to respond well.

The political dynamics unleashed by the judicial case of captain Alfred Dreyfus represent a central moment in the political history of the third republic, and the *affaire* arguably constitutes the central political experience of Sorel's life. That this should be so is unsurprising, if we underline the fact that the *affaire* at some point became something far larger than the simple judicial misadventure of an army captain unjustly accused of treason.

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end of the document and reports the resolutions adopted at previous congresses. In this specific case, it refers to the 1896 Lille congress.

<sup>115</sup> See Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 405n.

After 1898, the case had grown to the level of a national schism, opposing the army, a rising anti-Semitism, the most reactionary sections of the French clergy against the defenders of republican government.<sup>116</sup> Given the obstinacy of the military authorities, the battle for Dreyfus' innocence could not be won in a military court. And thus it ended up being fought on the terrain of political lobbying, of newspapers, and of public opinion. It is here that Dreyfus won, but it is also here that the *affaire* set in motion a series of political developments whose ultimate significance was the creation of the political cultures that characterized the France of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To give an idea of the depth of the division created by the *affaire* as well as of its symbolic importance, it will be sufficient to say that when in 1945 Charles Maurras was condemned for high treason and expelled from the *Academie Française*, his comment was: *c'est la revanche de Dreyfus!*

The events begin in 1894 in the *Section de Statistique*, the intentionally misleading name given to the counter-espionage bureau set up in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war with the aim of monitoring German activity. In September 1894 the *Section* intercepts the document at the centre of the *affaire*: an anonymous memoir – the *bordereau* – addressed to Maximilian von Schwartzkoppen, the military attaché of the German embassy in Paris, revealing the existence of a mole amongst French officers. After a rushed investigation, Alfred Dreyfus is identified as the culprit and is presented with the option on an honourable suicide, to which he replies: 'I am innocent. Kill me if you wish.'<sup>117</sup> The evidence presented at the military trial, however, is not conclusive and the prosecution has to rely on the testimony of Colonel Hubert-Joseph Henry – a member of the *Section de Statistique* – who identifies Dreyfus as the mole on the basis of a conversation with an unnamed informant which he claims to have had a few months earlier. Refusing to name the informant, Henry offers his word of honour as the only guarantee of veracity, and on the basis of this evidence Dreyfus is found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment in Devil's Island, French Guyane, where he arrives on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1895.

Mathieu Dreyfus, Alfred's brother and Alsatian industrialist, begins in the meantime enquiries to prove his brother's innocence, and hires the journalist Bernard Lazare as a private detective and opinion maker. In March 1896 Georges Picquart, the new head of the *Section*, discovers

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<sup>116</sup> Though in some important respects the opponents of Dreyfus were the heirs of the counter-revolutionary tradition, they also incorporated extremely important elements of political modernity, both in their nationalist discourse and in the forms of their political mobilization. As we shall try to show, albeit tangentially, these forces constituted one of the first European examples of a modern right wing.

<sup>117</sup> Cited in George R. Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair, a chronological history* (London, Palgrave: 2005), p. 33.

through the ‘usual way’ the existence of another spy, Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy.<sup>118</sup> Having placed him under surveillance, he notices striking similarities between Esterhazy’s handwriting and that of the *bordereau*. Convinced of Dreyfus likely innocence, Picquart begins to suggest to his superiors the idea of indicting Esterhazy and of revising the judgement of the Dreyfus trial. But the suggestions are met coldly, and Picquart is invited to remain silent. Colonel Henry categorically refuses the idea of Dreyfus’ innocence, and goes as far as producing a fabricated piece of evidence in which Dreyfus is ‘shown’ to be the German spy. This piece – the *faux Henry* – will be crucial to Dreyfus’ eventual acquittal.

Lazare’s and Mathieu Dreyfus’ efforts, in the meantime, begin to yield results: in November 1896 the pamphlet *Une erreur judiciaire: la vérité sur l’affaire Dreyfus* is distributed secretly to a number of public figures, MPs, and journalists. In the same months, the newspaper *Le Matin* publishes a copy of the *bordereau*, and Mathieu commissions and displays posters juxtaposing the document to Alfred Dreyfus’ handwriting.<sup>119</sup> Sensing the possibility of a disaster, the military hierarchy at the end of the year relieves Picquart of his duties as head of the *Section*, and sends him to Algeria in an attempt to minimize the risk that he outs to the public the result of his enquiry on Esterhazy. In June 1897 however Picquart is allowed to return to Paris, and he confides the results of his enquiry, together with a number of important documents to an Alsatian friend, the lawyer Louis Leblois. A month later, Leblois speaks to another, more influential, Alsatian, the vice president of the Senate Auguste Scheurer-Kestner, who begins a lobbying campaign amongst government and politicians.

It is at this point that the judicial aspects become secondary and the weight of the issue on public opinion increasingly strong. The details of a late October meeting between Scheurer-Kestner and the war minister Billot are leaked to *Le Matin*, and the question becomes *de facto* public: in November 1897, ‘the *affaire* becomes the *Affaire*’.<sup>120</sup> The leak provokes the reaction of the right-wing press, which begins attacking Scheurer-Kestner. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, Mathieu Dreyfus publicly accuses Esterhazy, while at the same time Émile Zola has begun writing pro-Dreyfus articles in *Le Figaro*.<sup>121</sup> In January 1898, a military court acquits Esterhazy of any wrongdoing, while it condemns in the same trial Picquart to 60 days of

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<sup>118</sup> The *Service de Statistique* employed the cleaning lady of the German embassy, Marie Bastian, and thus would have access to the waste paper. This method of obtaining information was called ‘la voie normale’ – the usual way.

<sup>119</sup> See Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair*, p. 88.

<sup>120</sup> Madeleine Rebérioux, *La République radicale?* (Paris, Seuil: 1975), p. 7.

<sup>121</sup> The newspaper, following a drop in subscribers, will abandon the dreyfusard line on the 18th of December. See Michel Drouin (ed.), *Dictionnaire de l’Affaire Dreyfus* (Paris, Flammarion: 2006), p. 732.



incarceration. In the following days Zola publishes his *J'Accuse!* in the Parisian *L'Aurore*, directed at the time by Georges Clemenceau. The bold dreyfusard text filled with precise accusations against various army figures, sells over 200.000 copies in a single day, effectively kick starting the process of political mobilisation and polarisation of public opinion. Zola is immediately pursued for libel. The country, in the meantime, experiences a wave of anti-Semitic riots, some of considerable size. Far from being spontaneous, the riots are animated by rightist political groups, testifying the dynamics of political mobilization set in motion by the *affaire*.<sup>122</sup> Parisian meeting halls are filled by nationalists rallying to the defence of the army against the 'Jewish syndicate'.<sup>123</sup>

The early engagement of French socialism with the *affaire* was characterized by indifference and mild hostility to Dreyfus, reflecting its old attitude of utter distance from the bourgeois world and its republic. Even Jean Jaurès had, after Dreyfus' first condemnation in 1894, stressed that the death penalty was the norm for soldiers guilty of treason, and denounced the magnanimity shown to the bourgeois captain.<sup>124</sup> With the events of late 1897 and early 1898, the socialist attitude changed. The reactionary threat had become evident, and the army was an easy target for socialists, who, POF included, began questioning the methods of military courts and demanding a retrial.<sup>125</sup> And yet, in July 1898, after a round of national elections that had seen socialism progress despite the fact that both Jaurès and Guesde had lost their seats<sup>126</sup>, the Guesdists completely changed their stance on the *affaire*: on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July, the direction of the party declared that 'proletarians have nothing to do with this battle, which is not their own', effectively disengaging the POF from the *affaire*.<sup>127</sup>

The explanation of this sudden change of direction has to do more with socialist unification than with the Dreyfus affair. After the loss of his seat in the May elections, Jaurès had

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<sup>122</sup> See Eric Cahm, *The Dreyfus Affair in French politics and society* (London, Longman: 1996), pp. 71-2.

<sup>123</sup> Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair*, p. 155.

<sup>124</sup> See Réberieux, *La République radicale?*, p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> See Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, pp. 411-12.

<sup>126</sup> According to Nohlen and Stöver, a vaguely defined 'socialist' group obtained 888.000 votes at the national elections, a result which would mean a considerable increase of the 1893 results (598.000 preferences). The number of deputies, in a similar way, would have risen from 31 in 1893 to 55 in 1898. These numbers are however unreliable. Not only the 'socialist' label is too vague – it probably includes the POF, Edouard Vaillant's *Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire* and Paul Brousse's *Fédération des travailleurs socialistes* – but also, in giving the number of seats obtained, it does not take into account the formation of parliamentary alliances, therefore making these numbers somewhat hollow. Moreover, as admitted by the authors themselves. French electoral statistics before the Fifth Republic are notoriously problematic. See Nohlen and Stöver, *Elections in Europe*, pp. 671, 690, and 703.

<sup>127</sup> Déclaration du Conseil National di Parti Ouvrier Français, 24th July 1898, cited in Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, pp. 412-13.

forcefully taken the initiative in his hands both on the question of socialist unity and over the *affaire*. While on the one hand he had already begun a battle for the revision of the trial that was to progressively grow in intensity, and that was going to establish him as a political leader of national calibre, on the other he had started campaigning in the *Petite République*<sup>128</sup> to accelerate the process of socialist unification, which culminated with the organisation of an informal public meeting – ‘*un punch socialiste*’ – to discuss the question.<sup>129</sup> In that meeting, held at the Tivoli-Vauxhall in the 10<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, Jaurès showed clearly how he connected the Dreyfus question to that of socialist unity: ‘Since Reaction has formed a bloc’ he argued ‘Revolution must form a bloc...’<sup>130</sup> The intensity of the double Jauresian initiative put the Guesdists on their guard. Already at Saint-Mandé the party had accepted, not without some internal opposition, a mild and rather republican platform for socialist unity. The elections had not been the spectacular success they expected and, moreover, support for Dreyfus was not a popular option: had not Jaurès lost his seat also as a result of his embracement of this unpopular cause? It was perhaps time to distance oneself from Jaurès and from his insistence on a unity that would have meant further derogation from a Marxist line that had already been substantially watered down at Saint-Mandé. As Guesde argued in his famous public confrontation with Jaurès in 1900, to follow Jaurès would have meant ‘leading the proletariat to follow... that rifle-loving bourgeoisie of 1871! Not that, comrades. At that point the workers’ party shouted: stop there!’<sup>131</sup>

But the timing of this change of direction, effected in order to regain the upper hand over the reformists’ initiatives, proved terrible. The trial of Zola had ended in the condemnation of the writer, who had fled to England, but had resulted in the revelation to the public of a crucial piece of evidence, the *faux Henry*. On the 7 July 1898, the anti-dreyfusard war minister Cavaignac had read this document to the chamber of deputies in the context of an eloquent speech that was to establish conclusively Dreyfus’ culpability. The chamber had voted unanimously for the divulgation to the public of the speech: this effectively put the *faux Henry*, a fabricated piece of evidence, in the public eye. Jaurès immediately attacked the new

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<sup>128</sup> Millerand had, after Jaurès had lost his parliamentary seat, offered him full time employment at the newspaper.

<sup>129</sup> The expression is used by Claude Willard in his *Les Guesdistes*, p. 413.

<sup>130</sup> Jaurès’ speech at the meeting was reprinted in the *Petite République* of the 9 June 1898; the quotation comes from Harvey Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press: 1962), p. 237.

<sup>131</sup> Jules Guesde, ‘Discours du citoyen Guesde, prononcé à l’Hippodrome Lillois le 26 Novembre 1900’ in Guesde, Jaurès and Lafargue, *Le grand débat*, p. 148. ‘... il aurait fallu [pour suivre Jaurès]... conduire le prolétariat à cette queue de la bourgeoisie emprisonneuse, qui avait derrière elle la bourgeoisie fusilleuse de 1871 ! Ah non ! camarades. À ce moment-là, le Parti Ouvrier à crié : Halte-là ! À ce moment il a rappelé les travailleurs à leur devoir de classe.’

evidence, but at this point he was abandoned by the POF, who, as we have seen, disengaged from the *affaire* in late July. In August, however, a military enquiry discovered the forgery: Henry confessed and, when imprisoned, he committed suicide. After the suicide, public opinion swung decidedly towards the need for retrial: thus, ‘fearful of rowing against the current, Guesdists disengage [from the *affaire*], but just as the judicial details become clearer... the tide of public opinion changes.’<sup>132</sup>

In the autumn of 1898 and in the first half of 1899, as the strength of those pushing for a revision of the trial mounted, the political stakes surrounding the case grew exponentially. A gifted young journalist, Charles Maurras, spun Henry’s forgery as a patriotic act, portraying the colonel as a victim who, though guilty of ‘a forgery, but only one’, had paid with his life, with his French blood, for the defence of the nation.<sup>133</sup> The anti-Semitic *La Libre Parole* set up a public subscription, the *monument Henry*, to help Henry’s widow; the vitriolic anti-Semitism that accompanied the donations is a good thermometer of the political temperature.<sup>134</sup> When, in February, the anti-Dreyfusard president of the republic, Félix Faure, died, he was replaced by Émile Loubet. This unleashed an attempted *coup d’état* at the hands of Paul Déroulède and the right-wing *Ligues des Patriotes*. The insurgents however failed to secure the support of the army and thus the situation was resolved in the space of an afternoon. Tensions grew as the country awaited the decision on the revision of the trial. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, the Court of Cassation finally ruled that the retrial was to go ahead. The nationalist camp was indignant, and Loubet himself was attacked with a cane by a baron, Fernand de Christiani, in a series of incidents that saw clashes between police and riotous aristocrats. A week later, the republican left responded with a large demonstration of 100.000 people at the Hippodrome de Longchamps. Though the demonstration was relatively calm, the next day Edouard Vaillant demanded, at the *Chambre des députés*, explanations from Prime Minister Dupuy over police violence.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 413.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Maurras, ‘Autour de l’ affaire Dreyfus: le premier sang’, *Gazette de France* 6 and 7 September 1898. The passage cited is translated by Ruth Harris in her *Dreyfus: politics, emotion, and the scandal of the century* (New York, Picador: 2010), p. 238.

<sup>134</sup> We read, for example: ‘Lydia M., aged twenty, rich only in hatred of the Yids’; ‘An Artillery lieutenant ashamed to see so many Jews in his army’; ‘A French Catholic, out of hatred for the Jews and Protestants, enemies of France’; ‘A subscriber, convinced the Jew is a stinking and dangerous beast and destruction is necessary’; ‘A medical student who would like to dissect all the Yids in France’. And so on. Cited in Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair*, pp. 404-5.

<sup>135</sup> Vaillant, let us recall, was not a member of the POF, but the leader of the *Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire*.

Vaillant's speech, however, soon departed from the Longchamps events in order to deal directly with the elephant in the room, the defence of the republic. What the events of Longchamps had shown was not only that 'socialists are the true defenders of the Republic' because they see it as the 'necessary instrument of working class emancipation, as well as the preliminary stage of the social republic that they want to establish'. These events, and the preceding ones, had also shown the extent of the threat with which the republic was faced. Parliament needed to have 'full confidence' in its 'government, its functionaries, its police forces': France, in other words, needed 'a strong government of republican action and defence' capable of standing up decisively against the 'conspiracies of reaction' and the 'threats of the counter-revolution against the Republic'.<sup>136</sup> In the ensuing discussion Dupuy took full responsibility for the actions of the police at Longchamps, and demanded a vote of confidence for his government, which he did not succeed in winning. The way was now open for the government of republican defence demanded by Vaillant, and it materialized on the 22 of June, headed by Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau.

The logic of the new cabinet was that of uniting all the forces that were prepared to defend the republic in order to form a politically stable government able to face the nationalist threat.<sup>137</sup> This is why it needed, as war minister, a strong army figure such as Gaston de Galiffet, and this is why it offered a ministerial post to Alexandre Millerand, whose acceptance made him the first European socialist to participate in government. Though many socialist organizations had, as correctly pointed out by Vaillant in his speech, enthusiastically endorsed the battle against the right wing, Millerand's entrance into government became occasion for further divisions inside the socialist camp, with the Guesdists being the most proactive organization in condemning the 'ministerialist' error. By polemically exploiting the presence of General Galiffet, 'le fusilleur de Mai', the Guesdist strategy began with a tactical abstention in voting for confidence in the new cabinet, and continued with the issuing of a

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<sup>136</sup> *Journal officiel du 13/6/1899*, Chambres des députés, Séance du lundi 12 Juin 1899, p. 1641. '[Le peuple] était venu en masse avec les socialistes et les militants ouvriers organisés, pour acclamer la République et pour montrer que les véritables défenseurs de la République ce sont les socialistes... parce que les socialistes considèrent que la République est l'instrument nécessaire de l'émancipation ouvrière et du progrès, aussi bien que l'état préliminaire de la République sociale, qu'ils veulent fonder...' Later on, as he moves to his conclusions 'Dans ces conditions, nous pouvons dire qu'il y a lieu, pour la Chambre, dans la mesure où elle se sent républicaine... d'intervenir ; car il faut... qu'elle se sente sûre de son gouvernement, de ses fonctionnaires, de sa police, de tous ses agents sans exception, il lui faut un gouvernement énergique de défense et d'action républicaine. Il ne faut plus d'équivoque. Il ne faut plus qu'il y ait actuellement d'hésitation en présence des complots et des menaces de la réaction... nous ne saurions admettre que les menaces de la contre-révolution envers la République puissent se produire impunément.'

<sup>137</sup> The quest for political solidity was successful as Waldeck-Rousseau's government lasted for just under 3 years, becoming the longest serving cabinet in the history of the third republic.

public manifesto in July, condemning both the entente with Galiffet and, more in general, the participation of socialists in a bourgeois governments. The manifesto, strongly denouncing those who had damaged the ‘interests and honour of socialism’, asserted that the ‘socialist party, a class party, could neither be nor become a party of government without committing suicide.’<sup>138</sup>

Now, as should be clear, the logic behind this public and vocal condemnation of ministerialism was that of distancing the POF from the republican socialist line that Jaurès and Millerand were ably putting into practice. In other words, it appears that more than involvement in government, the fear was of seeing French socialism becoming a mild left-wing republicanism, of seeing over twenty years of Marxist propaganda and organizational work go wasted. Much like the abrupt disengagement from the *affaire Dreyfus* that the POF had effected a year before, the condemnation of ministerialism must be seen as an attempt at imposing a Guesdist line to the future unified socialist party. Much like that disengagement, it was too little and too late: after having accepted municipal socialism and after having supported the Saint Mandé platform, the U-turn did not appear credible, and left even the Guesdist base somewhat disoriented. After having marched slowly but steadily for twenty years towards more integration in republican political life, the strength with which the POF condemned Millerand’s governmental involvement appeared illogical and bizarre. The subtle distinctions between municipalities and parliaments, who ‘open up as the result of the workers’ external pressure... and allow us to enter them as enemies’, and ministries who ‘open up only from within, when their bourgeois holders have an interest in letting one of us in’, appeared to many socialist militants as mere sophistries.<sup>139</sup>

An important aspect of this change of direction that is that it consisted of a return to the anti-republican Marxism of the 1880s. Talk of the ‘bourgeois’ character of republican institutions, of the importance of class struggle, of the futility of attempts at reform under a capitalist regime, and, finally, of revolution and insurrection, made a comeback in Guesdist discourse. When, in 1900, after two years of tensions and conflicts, Guesde publicly debated with Jaurès in Lille, this revolutionary rhetoric was at the centre of his speech. He asserted that class

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<sup>138</sup> *Le Socialiste*, 16 July 1899, cited in Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 424n and 424. ‘Le parti socialiste, parti de classe, ne saurait être ou devenir, sous peine de suicide, un parti ministériel.’

<sup>139</sup> *Le Socialiste*, 30 July 1899, pp. 1-2, cited in Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 426. The following passage comes directly from Willard. ‘Car, au rebours des municipalités, des conseils départementaux et de la Chambre « qui s’ouvrent du dehors, sous la poussée des travailleurs... nous permettant d’y entrer en ennemis », les ministères « ne s’ouvrent que du dedans, dans la mesure où leurs détenteurs bourgeois peuvent avoir intérêt à y introduire un des nôtres.’

struggle ought to be ‘the rule determining our conduct every day, every minute’, and that if it were possible, as it was for Jaurès, to temporarily leave it aside, then class struggle would become ‘like the paradise of Catholics and Christians, which is placed so far away, so outside of everything worldly, that it does not influence everyday life... reduced as it is to a simple act of faith operated in the void.’<sup>140</sup> He then proceeded to describe Jaurès’ rallying to the defence of the republic as a dangerous ‘abandonment of the class perspective’.<sup>141</sup>

‘It was sufficient that the socialist party quit momentarily its class perspective... that it risked going all the way down this slippery slope. To obtain individual justice and reparation, it mingled with the enemy class, and now there it is, in a common government with this class. And they sell it to us as a triumph of the proletariat, as an indicator of socialist strength, this class struggle that has become class collaboration, this new form of cooperative, uniting in the same cabinet a socialist, who should fight for the overthrow of capitalist society, and a majority of other people whose only goal is the conservation of this society.’<sup>142</sup>

From the exclusive preoccupation with class struggle and the supreme prohibition of alliances with the bourgeoisie, it was but a very small step to the impossibility of reforms, for ‘nothing has changed and nothing can change in the present society, as long as capitalist property will not have been suppressed and replaced by social property’.<sup>143</sup> Consequently, the ‘exclusive task’ of socialists is that of ‘recruiting and enlarging the brigades that will have to... capture the bourgeois Bastille as its feudal predecessor has been captured in the past’.<sup>144</sup> Given that ‘...class struggle forbids negotiations between classes’,<sup>145</sup> revolution remains the only legitimate goal for a socialist party: ‘We are and cannot but be a revolutionary party, for our

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<sup>140</sup> Guesde, ‘Discours prononcé à l’Hippodrome Lillois le 26 Novembre 1900’, p. 137. ‘De telle façon qu’il [Jaurès] assimilait la lutte des classes au paradis des chrétiens et des catholiques, que l’on met si loin, si en dehors de tout, qu’il n’influe pas sur la vie quotidienne, ne dirigeant ni les volontés, ni les actes des chrétiens et des catholiques d’aujourd’hui, réduit qu’il est à un simple acte de foi dans le vide. La lutte des classes, telle que l’a très bien définie Jaurès, si elle ne devait pas déterminer votre conduite de tous les jours, le politique de la classe ouvrière... serait un mensonge et un dupe : elle est pour nous, elle doit être au contraire la règle de nos agissements de tous les jours, de toutes les minutes.’

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-51. ‘Il a suffi qu’une première fois le Parti socialiste quittât fragmentairement son terrain de classe ; il a suffi qu’un jour il nouât une première alliance avec une fraction de la bourgeoisie, pour que sur cette pente glissante il menace de rouler jusqu’au bout. Pour une œuvre de justice et de réparation individuelle, il s’est mêlé à la classe ennemie, et le voilà maintenant faire le gouvernement avec cette classe. Et la lutte de classes aboutissant ainsi à la collaboration des classes, cette nouvelle forme de coopérative réunissant dans le même gouvernement un homme qui, s’il est socialiste, doit poursuivre le renversement de la société capitaliste, et d’autres hommes, en majorité, dont le seul but est la conservation de la même société.’

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 153. ‘ Il n’y a rien de changé et il ne peut rien y avoir de changé dans la société actuelle tant que la propriété capitaliste n’aura pas été supprimée et n’aura pas fait place à la propriété sociale...’

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 154. ‘C’est la notre tache exclusive: il s’agit de recruter, d’augmenter la colonne d’assaut qui aura... à prendre la Bastille bourgeoise comme a été prise la Bastille féodale.’

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 160. ‘Nous ne sommes pas pour le négoce : la lutte des classes interdit le commerce de classe...’

emancipation and that of humankind can only be achieved through revolution.’<sup>146</sup> As Sorel had observed in 1898, ‘...the more it moves away from its original spirit, the more it clutches to the dry branches of dogmatism.’<sup>147</sup>

### 5.3.4 SOREL’S REFORMISM

In examining Sorel’s support for socialist reformism, we must then take into account the fact that it was developed in this context, characterized by the clash between Jaurès’ successful and popular line and the POF, whose untimely attempts to regain a fading hegemony through the resuscitation of its revolutionary rhetoric of the 1880s had left even its own base perplexed. The return to talk of revolution and the condemnation of Jaurès and Millerand as class traitors appeared, as we have stated, inexplicable to militants who had seen the same party approve the participation in national and local elections, and who had accepted the Saint-Mandé platform. As Claude Willard explains, ‘the parliamentary and electoral orientation that the POF had adopted after 1892-1893, and the endorsement of the Saint-Mandé platform had warmed hearts to ministerialism and reformism...’.<sup>148</sup> It is important, moreover, to underline how this Guesdist shift, where it implied a return to the Marxist phraseology of the origins, gave them a widespread reputation as doctrinal extremists, concerned more by the coherence of their doctrine than by the welfare of workers. Even a trade unionist member of the POF and personal friend of Jules Guesde, Raymond Lavigne, could write in private correspondence with Guesde that ‘You may have saved the party from the perspective of its theoretical importance, of its, dare I say, *academic* interest, but you have lost it *materially*... you live superbly in the clouds of the pure Idea, *but you are not at home in everyday human existence*.’<sup>149</sup>

A theoretical heterodox himself, a convinced supporter of the importance of proletarian institutional development, Sorel could not be expected to side with a party whose doctrine he had always thought to be a caricature of Marxism and whose political conduct during the *affaire* consisted essentially in a retreat from the parliamentary strategy that they had pursued

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 154. ‘Nous sommes et ne pouvons être qu’un parti de révolution, parce que notre émancipation et l’émancipation de l’humanité ne peuvent s’opérer que révolutionnairement.’

<sup>147</sup> Sorel, ‘La crisi del socialismo científico’, p. 134.

<sup>148</sup> Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 429. ‘L’orientation parlementaire et électorale du POF depuis 1892-1893, son adhésion au credo de Saint-Mandé ont préparé les esprits au ministerialisme, au réformisme.’

<sup>149</sup> Raymond Lavigne, letter to Jules Guesde, July 1899, cited in Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 430. ‘«Vous avez peut-être sauvé le parti au point de vue de son relief théorique, de son intérêt *académique* si j’ose dire, mais vous l’aurez perdu *matériellement*... Vous vivez superbement dans le nuages de l’Idée pure, *mais vous vivez mal la vie humaine*.’

in the last years. What bothered Sorel was, of course, not so much the sudden change of direction – whose political logic he understood only too well, and condemned<sup>150</sup> – but the choice to abandon the possibility to pass legislation whose influence on French society could have, potentially at least, contributed to the process of proletarian institutional development. And thus, in examining Sorelian reformism, we must not only insist on the fact that for him reforms obtained through parliamentary involvement were compatible with proletarian institutional development, but also that his texts are written under the spectacle of a political party who flees from the possibility of government in the name of a Marxism that Sorel found scientifically objectionable.

Already before the crucial year of the *affaire Dreyfus* and the Millerand crisis, we can detect in Sorel's writings a number of general exhortations to socialists to secure reforms capable of guaranteeing the development of proletarian institutions. 'What is the purpose', wondered Sorel in January 1898, 'of all the efforts made to elect socialist deputies to parliament if they do not adapt to the environment, and they do not bring home a single practical reform?'<sup>151</sup> The uneasiness with which Marxist delegates engaged in parliamentary activity was seen by Sorel as a form of utopianism and as the logical consequence of a deterministic understanding of Marxism that led to political fatalism. Rather than doing as the orthodox do and elaborating 'a program for the world of tomorrow, one must be able to exist in the present society; it is necessary to push forward achievable reforms, and it is necessary to collaborate to the work of improvement.'<sup>152</sup>

It is, however, the explosion of the Millerand crisis that is the background to Sorel's most reformist analyses. A few weeks before the fall of the Dupuy government, Sorel wrote a long analysis on the evolution of French socialism from the 1880s for the Italian *La Riforma Sociale*.<sup>153</sup> Despite appearances to the contrary, the text is not an historical analysis, but an intervention on current affairs, as becomes clear when Sorel argues with clear polemical

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<sup>150</sup> Citing Jaurès, in 1899, he writes that 'the true cause of the split is another one: "socialist unity, here is the true cause of the current crisis...'. Georges Sorel, 'La scissione socialista in Francia in rapporto con la teoria socialista', *Rivista Critica del Socialismo* 1, 1899, p. 872. 'La vera ragione della scissione è altra: « l'unità socialista, ecco la causa vera, reale della crisi attuale... »

<sup>151</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Marxismo e scienza sociale' [1899] in *Saggi di critica del Marxismo*, p.173. 'A che cosa servono tutti gli sforzi fatti per inviare dei deputati socialisti alle Camere, se essi non si adattano all'ambiente e non conducono in porto alcuna riforma pratica?'

<sup>152</sup> Georges Sorel, 'La crise du socialisme' p. 607. '...il ne s'agit plus de se mettre en mesure de reconstruire la société et d'élaborer un programme pour le monde futur ; il faut savoir vivre dans la société actuelle ; il faut s'efforcer de faire aboutir les réformes possibles ; il faut collaborer aux améliorations.'

<sup>153</sup> Virtually every one of Sorel's most incisive interventions on French current affairs occur, in this period, in Italian publications.



intent that political powerlessness goes hand in hand with the obsession for doctrinal purity: 'When a party is weak and cannot exert a serious influence on social reality... it soon becomes a church, concerned with dogmatism. It becomes intransigent and divides itself in sects that claim to possess the *only truth*.' Moreover, because of its powerlessness to exert an influence on the course of events, it begins to 'expect success not as the result of an evolution conforming to historical precedents, but as a miraculous event.'<sup>154</sup> It is easy to see that Sorel's political target is the POF, whereas his theoretical one is the determinist Marxism to which Guesdists had, however instrumentally, returned.

The belief in the collapse of capitalism and in the revolutionary uprising that will follow are equated to the irrational belief in historical miracles, and their most negative consequence is that they leads socialism away from the only thing that constitutes its essence, namely the organized proletariat. 'It is clear' he writes 'that workers are much more interested in practical reforms than they are in theories... Theorists, on the other hand, are more intransigent'.<sup>155</sup> The argument is that involvement in political life brings socialism into social reality, and thus is to be preferred to doctrinal purity preached in isolation. 'When the leaders of parties, rather than fighting amongst themselves in congresses of theorists, were faced by electors... they tried to outline achievable reforms; they were not regressing; they were returning on the real terrain of the economy, which they had left in order to engage in poor metaphysics.'<sup>156</sup>

It is the POF's return to the insurrectionist rhetoric of the 1880s that, for Sorel, constitutes the real regress, because it signals the return to a position of marginality in which doctrinal coherence is all that can sustain the forces of socialism. Thus, if there is a positive consequence to the clashes between reformists and Guesdists, as he wrote in October 1899, it is that this clash has given 'to the vast majority of workers the opportunity of showing that doctrinal [literally: dogmatic] disputes did not interest them.'<sup>157</sup> The distinction, mentioned

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<sup>154</sup> Georges Sorel, 'L'evoluzione del socialismo in Francia', *La Riforma Sociale* 9, 1899, pp. 512-13. 'Quando un partito è debole e non può esercitare un'influenza seria sul movimento sociale e non è adatto alle condizioni generali non tarda a divenire una chiesa, fa della dogmatica, è intransigente, si divide in sette che pretendono tutte di possedere l'unica verità, non aspetta più il successo da un'evoluzione conforme ai precedenti storici, ma da un avvenimento miracoloso.'

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 518. 'È chiaro che gli operai sono molto più preoccupati di riforme pratiche che di teorie... I teorici sono al contrario molto più intransigenti.'

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 524. 'Quando i capi dei partiti, invece di trovarsi in lotta nei congressi con i teorici, si trovarono in contatto con gli elettori, tornarono ai punti antichi di vista e cercarono di determinare delle riforme eseguibili; essi non retrocedevano; ritornavano sul vero terreno dell'economia, che avevano abbandonato per fare della cattiva metafisica.'

<sup>157</sup> Sorel, 'La scissione socialista in Francia', p. 869. 'La scissione... ha fornito nel tempo stesso alla grandissima moltitudine degli operai l'opportunità di affermare che le dispute dogmatiche non li interessavano.'

above, operated by Guesde between the legitimacy of participation in parliaments and municipalities and the illegitimacy of governmental involvement is dismissed by Sorel as ‘petty arguments.’<sup>158</sup>

It is in a couple of texts from December 1899 and January 1900 that Sorel outlines most clearly his understanding of the social democratic transformation of French socialism. Reflecting on the consequences of the *affaire Dreyfus*, he accuses the Guesdists not only of doctrinal extremism, but of having neglected their fundamental task, which is the one of helping the development of the proletariat and its institutional growth. The problem of the Guesdists is that for them ‘...everything is subordinated to electoral victories...’<sup>159</sup> By focusing on these victories, they neglect the proletariat: ‘The socialist absence in social work is saddening: they have displayed a guilty indifference towards anti-alcohol propaganda. The few exceptions, like Rouanet and Fournière, are *independent socialists* who have long lived outside organized parties, and for whom Lafargue and the other doctors of catastrophist socialism have only but disdain.’<sup>160</sup> It is because of their excessive electoral focus that they neglect the real movement: ‘...showing that *reforms do not make the world perfect* does not enlighten the people [i.e. the working class], and does not make it more capable of governing the economy... but it does provide applause in public discussions, and that is what matters to those who look for votes.’<sup>161</sup>

It is important to underline that though Sorel sides with the reformists, he accuses the supposed ‘revolutionaries’ of being excessively concerned by electoral and political calculations. This, as will be remembered, is exactly what Sorel had accused Kautsky and Bebel of in his writings over the Bernstein controversy. The ‘reformist’ Sorel, in other words, continues to see politics more as a danger than as an opportunity. The achievable reforms, then, have only one purpose: that of helping the working class in its institutional development, whose completion will allow it to shed the tutelage of party leaders.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. ‘...meschine ragioni date da Guesde nella circolare, che egli ha diretta ai suoi aderenti.’

<sup>159</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Socialismo e democrazia: conclusione sulla faccenda Dreyfus’, *Rivista Critica del Socialismo* 1, 1899, p. 965.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., pp. 965-6. ‘L’astensione dei socialisti nelle opere d’insegnamento è davvero desolante: essi hanno mostrato una colpevole indifferenza per la propaganda anti-alcolica: se alcuni fanno eccezione, come Fournière e Rouanet, sono degl’*Indipendenti*, che da lungo tempo vivono al di fuori dei partiti organizzati e per i quali Lafargue e altri dottori del socialismo catastrofico non hanno mai abbastanza disprezzo.’

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., pp. 966-7. ‘Facendo critiche amare alla società attuale e mostrando *l’insufficienza delle riforme a rendere perfetto il mondo*, non s’illumina il popolo, non lo si rende più atto a governare l’economia, non si fa nulla per migliorare la propria sorte; ma si ottengono sempre grandi trionfi nelle pubbliche riunioni; ed è ciò che preme a coloro, che vanno a caccia di voti.’

After having shown, not incorrectly, how electoral considerations were central in determining Guesdist behaviour during the *affaire*, Sorel begins to articulate a three-stage model of the evolution of political movements, which he applies to socialism in order to show why reformism is the way forward. Initially, socialism is utopian: it is a ‘*theory of human society constructed according to reasoned observation.*’<sup>162</sup> At this stage, ‘Socialism is still only a way of giving a precise form to the lamentations generated by human misery; the utopian formulates his criticisms at an imperfect social order by outlining an ideal regime...’<sup>163</sup> In the second stage, socialism becomes a philosophy of history, a supposedly scientific prediction on the inevitable course of social development. Here, its historical weight and ability to be a force in society are greatly increased, for ‘philosophies of history have always exerted an enormous practical influence on multitudes. The terrifying predictions that can be read at the end of the synoptic Gospels have had a much greater influence than the Sermon of the mount and the theology of the Greek Fathers.’<sup>164</sup> But it is in the third stage, when ‘Socialism becomes a *feeling*, acting like a living force in the world in order to transform institutions in a direction favourable to the working classes’ that the full historical maturity is reached.<sup>165</sup> It is in this third stage that

‘...we are brought back to real society. Reforms are implemented as the forces of socialism develop to the point of being able to influence legislation. Socialism is not postponed *in its entirety to a symbolical future*; it is in the present. Utopias are replaced by hypotheses capable of having practical consequences and by partially realizable projects. In a word *the evolution of society becomes socialist, thanks to the participation of all political forces of democracy.*’<sup>166</sup>

Guesdists, orthodox Marxists, the vast majority of the SPD, for Sorel had failed to understand the latest evolution of socialism: the evolution from doctrinally pure sect to historical force and political party. The scheme that brings socialism from utopia to sect, and from sect to

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 972.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 974. ‘Nella prima fase di questa evoluzione il Socialismo non è ancora che un modo di dare una forma alle lagnanze, che provocano le umane miserie; l’utopista ci dice le sue proteste contro un ordine sociale, che egli giudica cattivo, descrivendoci un regime ideale...’

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. ‘Il secondo momento è il più importante, perché le filosofie della storia hanno sempre esercitato un’influenza pratica enorme sulle moltitudini. Le predizioni terribili, che si leggono alla fine degli Evangelii sinottici hanno avuto più influenza del Sermone della montagna e della teologia dei Padri greci.’

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 973. ‘c) Il Socialismo è uno *stato d’animo*, che agisce come una forza viva nel mondo per trasformare le istituzioni in un senso favorevole alle classi operaie.’

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 974. ‘Nel terzo momento siamo ricondotti nella società reale; le riforme si operano nella misura, in cui le forze socialiste sono abbastanza sviluppate per avere un’azione efficace sulla legislazione. Il Socialismo non è più *in blocco rigettato in un futuro simbolico*; esso è nel presente; le utopie sostituite da ipotesi capaci di agire sulla pratica e da progetti parzialmente eseguibili, *il divenire sociale è socialista, grazie al concorso di tutte le potenze politiche della democrazia.*’

party, will be repeated almost verbatim a few weeks later, in another important reformist text, the 'Préface à Colajanni'. We read:

'Far from being a regress, as certain socialists would have it, the evolution that we are witnessing is progress. It is the passage from the sectarian to the political spirit, from abstract speculation to real life. At the beginning, socialism appears as a *philosophical doctrine* without much influence on society; it then becomes a *sect*, confident in the possession of truth; it aims at revolutionizing the world, at reforming it through dictatorship, at imposing on it programs derived from philosophical doctrines; the sect worries little or not at all about practical reforms; finally, in its maturity, it gives birth to a *political party*, that is, it becomes a force capable of combining with other forces, whether allied or antagonistic ones, in order to administer business, improve legislation and direct the State. A sect can isolate itself; isolation is even a condition of its doctrinal purity; a *political party* cannot but exist when it is mixed to general life, if it is an organ within an organism. Socialism becomes, increasingly, in France, a *workers' movement in a democracy*.'<sup>167</sup>

This long passage is worth citing in its entirety for it articulates rather clearly the logic behind Sorel's reformism, which is a logic of increasing inclusion of socialism in French society. The liberal Sorel goes as far as indicating the direction of the state as a legitimate socialist goal.<sup>168</sup> But what is most striking is not this analysis of the growth of a political movement in terms of its increasing ability to control or at least exert an influence over a number of social structures. As we have seen, this is not only chimes with the transformations that were occurring to German and French socialism at the time, but also is quite coherent with Sorel's *longue durée* understanding of historical transformation in terms of institutional development.<sup>169</sup> As institutions develop, isolationism ceases. What *is* truly striking, and

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<sup>167</sup> Georges Sorel, 'Préface' in Napoleone Colajanni, *Le Socialisme* (Paris, Giard et Brière: 1900), pp. iii-iv. 'Loin d'être un recul, comme le pensent quelques socialistes, l'évolution, que nous voyons se produire, constitue un progrès : c'est le passage de l'esprit sectaire à l'esprit politique, de la spéculation abstraite à la vie réelle. A l'origine, le socialisme se présente comme une *doctrine philosophique* sans grande influence sur la société ; - il devient ensuite une *secte*, qui croit posséder la vérité ; elle aspire à révolutionner le monde, à le réformer par la dictature, à lui imposer la pratique de programmes tirés de doctrines philosophiques ; la secte s'occupe peu ou point des réformes pratiques ; - enfin, dans sa *maturité* il donne naissance à un *parti politique*, c'est-à-dire qu'il devient une force se combinant avec d'autres forces alliées ou antagonistes pour administrer les affaires, améliorer la législation et diriger l'État. La secte peut s'isoler ; l'isolement est même une condition de sa pureté doctrinale ; le *parti politique* ne peut exister que s'il est mêlé à la vie générale, s'il est un organe dans un organisme. Le socialisme devient, de plus en plus, en France, un *mouvement ouvrier dans une démocratie*.'

<sup>168</sup> This however should not be interpreted in a centralist manner. For Sorel, the specificity of democratic government consists in the fact that in it '*political struggle is dispersed*'; it is not a question of *conquering* a fortress, but of acting on the entire society in order to modify all of its aspects: from this it follows that democratic tactics are favourable to local institutions and to the federation of groups.' Sorel, 'Socialismo e democrazia', p. 978.

<sup>169</sup> As a side point, it might be worth making explicit that one of the great examples on which Sorel shapes his historical thinking and his understanding of the evolution of political movements is Christianity in its first few centuries of existence. The second one is the revolution of 1789.

deserves attention and analysis is the fact that this is combined with a belief in the importance of working class autonomy against party direction.

‘The working classes are still quite distant from possessing sufficient capabilities [textually: culture] to exert an overwhelming action upon the transformation of society and to put it on the path of material and moral progress. The working classes are so unable to lead other classes that they are themselves led, in virtually every country, by what is called the *intellectual proletariat*...The necessity for a *purely working-class leadership of the working class world* could not have been proclaimed in a better way [than by Marx] and I never cease to warn the workers against the *intellectual proletariat who lives from politics*. As long as the workers will not be liberated from this tutelage, they will not be able to direct democracy.’<sup>170</sup>

This is the most important aspect of Sorel’s reformism. The fact that political reformism and involvement in the French institutions is advocated in order to free the working class from what Sorel sees as its political masters deserves closer attention. It is indeed this belief in the compatibility between reformism and working class institutional development that characterizes Sorelian reformism most profoundly.

## 5.4 CONCLUSION

What makes Sorel’s conciliation of reformism with revolution striking is that the developments that he was witnessing were part of a wider process of integration of the working classes into two advanced capitalist societies of the second industrial revolution. In other words, the socialist move towards the political mainstreams of France and Germany that we have examined were expressions of a process that was to conclusively reject the possibility of the development of a working class civilization in the midst of the bourgeois one. What makes this Sorelian position understandable is the fact that in France this process was still far from complete. It is, in fact, instructive to compare the SPD with the French socialist galaxy, to compare the German experience with the French one, because it furnishes the best explanation for Sorel’s trajectory in the period between 1898 and 1902.

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<sup>170</sup> Sorel, ‘Socialismo e democrazia’, p. 980. ‘Per esercitare un’azione preponderante sul movimento sociale, per condurlo nelle vie del progresso materiale come del progresso morale, le classi operaie sono ancora lontane dal possedere una sufficiente cultura. Esse sono così poco capaci di guidare le altre, che esse invece si lasciano guidare in quasi tutti i paesi, da quello che si chiama il *proletariato intellettuale* ... Le necessità d’una *direzione puramente operaia del movimento operaio* non potrebbe esser meglio proclamata ed io non cesso dal mettere in guardia gli operai contro il proletariato intellettuale, che *vive della politica*. Fino a che gli operai non saranno affrancati da questa direzione, essi non saranno in grado di dirigere la democrazia. È questo che bisogna insegnare al popolo, a rischio di non essere applaudito.’

To make ourselves clearer, we can suggest a bold counterfactual. No German observer of the time could have – and this emerges in Sorel’s discussions with Bernstein – adopted Sorel’s stance of *instrumental* reformism to the extent to which Sorel adopted it. No German socialist could have seriously believed that by moving the party more into the political and parliamentary arena it would have been possible to create the conditions for the development of autonomous working class institutions. Nobody in Germany could have taken as seriously as Sorel did the idea that more political involvement was conducive to a situation in which politics would not be needed anymore, for the working class institutions would have been strong enough not to need parliamentary representation.<sup>171</sup> So why could Sorel reconcile these two aspects, which as time went on became increasingly at odds with each other? We have amply shown how the commitment to proletarian institutional development arose naturally out of his understanding of Marxism. So the question is: how could he think that this development was going to be brought about by reformism?

We can start by adducing minor biographical reasons. The first and most obvious one is an appeal to the exceptional circumstances of the Dreyfus affair, and the superimposition of reformism with Dreyfus’ cause, which probably helped to give to Sorel’s reformism an additional layer of conviction. We can then move to point out that Sorel was still essentially a theorist in 1898, and tended to see Jaurès as the French Bernstein and Guesde as the representative of the out-dated determinist Marxism of the SPD. But already this aspect leads to more general, structural explanations.

The fact that Sorel could theorize and discuss Marxism from his house in Boulogne sur Seine, without having to join one of the many French socialist organisations betrays an important difference with Germany in terms of working class organization, and consequently of general economic and social conditions. To a German economy dominated by big business the French responded with a well-balanced and more antiquated productive system, in which agriculture and small businesses played an important part. To the industrial workers of the large German factories, the French opposed a proletariat of bakers, masons, and artisans of various kinds.

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<sup>171</sup> Of course, Engels’ preface to *The Class Struggles in France* might constitute a valid counter example to this claim. Though here we exaggerate for heuristic purposes, there are a few points that need to be clarified. Subsequent events strongly point to the conclusion that the revisionist crisis was the first episode in a series of events that led the SPD to Bad Godesberg. And indeed, this view is more than plausible and probably correct. But we must not confuse the historian’s judgment of the significance of the controversy with its contextual examination: despite subsequent events, it must be made clear that Bernstein’s thought was *not* Bad Godesberg. Precisely in virtue of the fact that the 1890s were a period of transformation, things which later proved incompatible could very well be thought of as reconcilable. Bernstein’s ambition of constructing socialism from within a democratic political system then should not be too easily dismissed as naive or hypocritical.

To a Bismarckian welfare system that had begun in the 1880s, the French responded with smaller and more timid attempts at social legislation, and beginning only in the 1890s. To the German mass party, the French responded with a cluster of different organisations, some of which were so alien to the logic of modern industrial capitalism that they believed that insurrection was a realistic revolutionary possibility.<sup>172</sup> In opposition to German unity and successful social democratic practice, the French experienced recurring divisions over the question of involvement in the republican system. With such differences between the two countries, it is unsurprising that Sorel could not understand that the developments that were occurring in France would not have led to the prosperity of working class institutions, but instead to the integration of these institutions into the republican framework.

Our analysis in this chapter has largely focussed, especially in the case of France, on political developments, ignoring the examination of the French economy, of French welfare state, and of French labour. It is in the next chapter that we shall examine these elements, because they became central to Sorel's reflections on the conditions of socialism only after 1902. It is this avoidance of economic and social factors that furnishes the best argument in favour of our argumentative line. The economic and social issues that were at the centre of the Bernstein debate were largely ignored by Sorel until 1902. As we have seen, he chose to engage with the controversy at a predominantly political and theoretical level. But as France increasingly reflected the German situation, most notably politically with the rallying of the working classes to the banner of the Republic, Sorel began to pay closer attention to economic phenomena such as cartels, protectionism and welfare measures. It is from his analysis of these new phenomena that eventually his syndicalism would arise.

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<sup>172</sup> This, it must be underlined, is *not* the case of the POF, whose talk of revolution was, as we have seen, largely calculated to fight back Jaurès' political offensives.





## CHAPTER SIX: A NEW STRATEGY FOR A NEW CAPITALISM

‘But, generally speaking, the Protective system in these days is conservative, while the Free Trade system works destructively. It breaks up old nationalities and carries antagonism of proletariat and bourgeoisie to its uttermost point. In a word, the Free Trade system hastens the Social Revolution. In this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, I am in favour of Free Trade.’

Karl Marx, 1847<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The most important change in Sorel’s political thought at the beginning of the new century is the abandonment of the reformism and commitment to parliamentary methods that, as we have seen, had characterized his stance in the previous years. In a relatively small number of years, parliamentary socialism went from being a method capable of securing legal reforms that would enable the proletariat to organize itself into autonomous institutions, to becoming the single greatest danger faced by the workers’ movement. Thus, with the beginning of the new century the awkward synthesis of revolutionary ambitions and reformist methods came to an end, and Sorel began moving in a direction that was to bring him to the syndicalism of the *Reflections*. It is this transformation that we examine in this chapter.

There are a number of reasons for this change of opinion on the merits of parliamentary reformism. A conventional interpretation that needs to be dismissed is that of a return to the origins generated by a disillusion with the political affirmation of the republicanism that had emerged from the *affaire Dreyfus*. The shortcomings of this narrative are two-fold: on the one hand it does not acknowledge the instrumental character that reformism had always possessed for Sorel, and on the other it portrays this reformist phase and the subsequent syndicalist evolution as reactions to an exceptional event, the Dreyfus affair, which becomes a problematic explanatory *deus ex machina*.<sup>2</sup> It is true that Sorel’s post-1902 worries about parliamentary socialism remind one closely of his 1898 *Avenir socialiste des syndicats*, a text in which he had argued that the ‘first rule of its [the proletariat’s] conduct must be “to remain

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Speech on the Question of Free Trade’ [1847] in *Marx Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6 (London, Lawrence and Wishart: 1976), p. 465.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Jeremy Jennings writes that though Sorel ‘had been conscious of the potentialities of the *syndicats* and of strike action for some time... it took the traumatic experience of the Dreyfus affair for him to conclude that the two combined might possibly lead to the seizure of economic power.’ Jennings, *Sorel*, p. 119. Pierre Andreu, as we have seen the previous chapter, equally portrays Sorel’s evolution as a linear one in which the reformist phase of 1899-1902 is merely a parenthesis dictated by the exceptional Dreyfus circumstances. See Andreu, *Notre Maitre*, p. 102.

*exclusively working class*”<sup>3</sup>. It is also true that the policies of the republican governments of Waldeck-Rousseau and, even more so, Émile Combes profoundly disturbed Sorel. But, as has been shown in the previous chapter, Sorel had never quite abandoned his understanding of socialism as a society based around the institutions of the emerging proletariat. Parliamentary reformism was but an instrument, and one whose dangers Sorel never forgot, to realise revolutionary goals. There can be, in other words, no return to original positions that Sorel had never abandoned. Another shortcoming of this ‘return to the origins’ narrative is that it outlines Sorel’s evolution through overly sudden and excessively radical breaks. Although the political circumstances generated by the *affaire* were indeed exceptional, they did not transform Sorel into someone convinced that the goal of socialism was the conquest of a more comfortable position for the working class within the existing system. As we have shown, reformism was instrumental: reforms secured through parliamentary activity would have furthered the development of institutions capable of bringing about a radical transformation of society. In the same way, though Sorel intensely disliked the policies of the triumphant republicanism of the opening of the century, his syndicalism is not just an elaborated form of hatred for the ‘Jacobinism’ of Waldeck-Rousseau and Combes’ cabinets. Though it might appear superficially as such, Sorel’s syndicalism is not merely an opposition, waged in the name of liberal principles, to the authoritarian progressivism of the republican governments of the time.

Instead, we must start from the assumption that Sorel remained a revolutionary socialist, and, however revisionist and heterodox, a Marxist. His central question remained that of what conditions could lead to the development of proletarian institutions, i.e. institutions arising out of the experience of production in an advanced capitalist economy. It is the answer to this question that changed: whereas until 1902 he had thought that parliamentary involvement could serve this goal, after that year he came to believe not only that this was mistaken, but that parliamentarism was positively damaging to the institutional development of the working class. Sorel’s hope in the *instrumentality* of parliamentary involvement disappeared, or to put it differently, his belief in the conduciveness of this tactic to the growth of proletarian institutions crumbled. The question must then be: why did this happen? And what brought Sorel to these new conclusions?

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<sup>3</sup> Sorel, ‘Avenir socialiste’, pp. 444-5.

The militant republicanism of the policies of Waldeck-Rousseau and Combes' governments did play a role. As we shall explain at the beginning of the present chapter, the stability and effectiveness of these two governments were exceptional when compared to the traditionally weak third republic cabinets. The common cause against the forces of reaction not only gave to Waldeck-Rousseau and Combes strong parliamentary majorities, but also a clear political line, i.e. the defence and consolidation of republican institutions. These tasks were carried out forcefully, in ways that could not but hurt Sorel's liberal sensitivity. The republicanisation of the army, the battle against the Catholic Church, and the republican rhetoric which accompanied these policies were to Sorel examples of that 'public force at the disposal of sects', which he had always disapproved of.<sup>4</sup> He moved, accordingly, like other intellectuals, from Dreyfusism to disillusionment with the authoritarian outcome of what had begun as a battle for the defence of the rule of law and individual rights.

But these are secondary aspects to the explanation of his syndicalism. The cause of more important Sorelian perplexities was the effect of these developments on socialism and on the working class, i.e. the fact that these developments had channelled the political forces of socialism in a direction that was favourable to greater proletarian integration in the republican system. This was why he became an opponent of socialist reformism and of the man who symbolized it, Jean Jaurès. Political socialism had not cleared up the legal and institutional obstacles that prevented the working class from developing its own institutions and becoming a class for itself, conscious of its historical force and mission. From 1902 onwards, Sorel became convinced that the only development that could arise from parliamentary engagement would be, instead, a strengthening of those obstacles, creating a state of perpetual dependency of the working class upon bourgeois elites. Political socialism had not remained faithful to its role of enabler, a facilitator of proletarian class development. On the contrary, it had taken centre stage and had effectively relegated the institutional growth of the real movement to a secondary role.

In the previous chapter we have argued that the idea that parliamentarism could be conducive to a longer-term revolutionary goal betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of the social and political dynamics of advanced capitalist societies at the turn of the century. We have suggested that not only Sorel's political inexperience, but also, and more importantly, the state of relative backwardness of the French when compared to the German system could

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<sup>4</sup> Sorel, *Procès de Socrate*, p. 9.

account for this belief. Throughout a short examination of the electoral successes of the SPD, we have argued that they can be explained by a wider structural process of economic growth characterized by the increasing organization of economic and social life. Crucially, through the agency of the state, this organizational development allowed increasingly larger parts of the German proletariat to access the German prosperity of those years, creating the perfect conditions for the success of a social democratic party such as the SPD. The growth in complexity and in the socialisation of the productive process did not, in other words, have polarizing consequences, but yielded instead an organized and relatively stable national capitalism. These issues were central in the Bernstein controversy; but they were issues that Sorel did not engage with in much depth, despite his many writings as a revisionist. Now, one of the consequences of the French political developments described above was that of opening Sorel's eyes to these questions. What the militant republicanism of the new century did, we argue, was to act as a trigger, opening Sorel's eyes to wider social and economic processes. As early as 1902, Sorel began questioning the significance of the latest trends in capitalist development, dedicating important analyses to phenomena such as cartelization, protectionism, and social legislation.

These analyses, grounded in a newfound awareness of the importance of the conditions of capitalist development for the institutional growth of the proletariat, constitute the absolutely fundamental but often little-acknowledged backbone of Sorel's syndicalism. They also constitute one of the greatest differences between his pre-1898 texts and his later syndicalism, between, in other words, the 'Avenir socialiste des syndicats' and the *Reflections on violence*. Whereas in 1898 Sorel had underlined the centrality of class, i.e. of the proletariat as historical agent, to Marxian socialism, after 1902 he was working on more empirical questions, examining current economic and social conditions in order to assess the likely progresses and setbacks of this historical agent. Although the processes of economic organization and of nationalisation of the working class were occurring in France with less intensity than in Germany, Sorel began to notice them and to reflect upon them. By confronting the capitalist society he observed with the one described by Marx, Sorel came to the conclusion that the only environment in which truly revolutionary proletarian institutions – i.e. institutions that were truly separated from the bourgeois world, and that were capable of harbouring new social and economic relations – could flourish was a capitalism characterized by free competition, relentless technological innovation and hostility between proletarian producers and bourgeois entrepreneurs. But instead of this capitalist utopia, Sorel and his

generation were witnessing the advent of managerial capitalism, characterized by industrial and commercial cooperation, the mitigating force of the state expressing itself in protectionist and social legislation, and the consequent integration of the disruptive, but to Sorel historically progressive energies of *both* the working classes and the capitalist elites into a national system capable of keeping class conflict under control.

This meant, essentially, that historical conditions for socialism were not ripe, that capitalism and the bourgeoisie had not yet accomplished their historical mission. Even worse, Sorel understood that they were not even going in the right direction. To him, the economic evolutions he was witnessing were signs of capitalist decadence, of a bourgeoisie that had given up on its historically progressive role, and had forged an alliance with the state, which Sorel, unlike most Marxists, always understood as an independent variable, rather than as a tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie. These being the historical conditions, no proletarian institution capable of emancipating itself, no matter how slowly or gradually, from the bourgeois order was to be expected. In a context characterized by the need for increasing coordination between various economic actors and forces, working class institutions would perhaps be able to carve out a space for themselves, but would not become the cells of the socialist society to come.

It is only by understanding Sorel's economic diagnosis of the situation that a large number of the arguments presented in the *Reflections on violence* become intelligible. As we shall show in the following chapter, the role that Sorel assigns to violence in his most famous book is far more limited than generally assumed, and consists essentially in the hope that proletarian violence can reawaken the progressive forces of the bourgeoisie, and thus reinstate the healthy capitalism that is the economic and social precondition of socialism. It is because of this dependency of the arguments in the *Reflections* on the economic analyses of 1902-1905 that it is necessary to examine them in some depth.

## **6.2 A CHANGE OF DIRECTION: SOREL AFTER THE *AFFAIRE***

The first manifestations of a new direction in Sorel's thinking appear at the beginning of the new century, in the years in which it becomes clear that the republic will pass the Dreyfus test and resist the insurrectionist assaults of the reactionary camp. In this phase of consolidation of republican institutions in French society, we see Sorel slowly beginning to realize a fact that in the previous chapter was identified as crucial in explaining his turn away from

reformism, namely the impossibility of promoting a strategy of *instrumental* reformism. Indeed, Sorel's endorsement of parliamentary methods was instrumental: political activity in bourgeois institutions was necessary to clear up the legal obstacles to proletarian self-organisation. This self-organisation, in turn, was revolutionary and did not seek integration in the bourgeois system. This is why the call to engage in political activity was, for Sorel, quite compatible with invectives against the leadership of party officials. Legal reforms and the parliamentary involvement that they required were a tool in the development of autonomous proletarian institutions. Reformism was a step in the right direction because it signalled the progression of socialism from a small doctrinal sect to a true historical force, an historical force whose evolution was in the direction of a proletarian civilisation characterised by new institutions and new social relations.

The abandonment of reformism then must be understood as the realization of the impossibility of instrumentality, the realization of the fact that collaboration with the bourgeoisie and proletarian class development were incompatible goals. It is in the post-Dreyfus years, when strong and stable republican governments dominate the French political landscape and begin the work of republicanisation of French society, that Sorel begins to be aware of this fact.

### **6.2.1 LIBERAL DOUBTS AND THE REPUBLICAN TRIUMPH**

At the end of June 1899 Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau requested the confidence of the *Chambre des députés* for his government. Interrupted repeatedly as he was giving his speech, he tried to explain the logic of a cabinet whose political composition, stretching from the socialist Millerand to the 'fusilleur de la Commune' Gaston de Gallifet, left many perplexed. 'It is true that on a large number of political points and on a large number of economic issues, each of us has diverging views...' he began to answer, but was soon interrupted: 'All that unites you' shouted a nationalist deputy 'is the Dreyfus issue!' Waldeck-Rousseau continued: 'But each member of my cabinet would declare, as I do, that in the presence of an interest superior to all our disagreements, in the presence of the defence of the Republic... we have only one sentiment and only one will.' 'The will to save Dreyfus!' repeated the nationalist deputy. Waldeck-Rousseau then pointed out that everybody understood why such a politically broad government was being instituted. And when the right-wing deputies provocatively demanded that he explain his motives again, the new prime minister won the applause of socialists and

republicans with his answer that the goal of the government was ‘to unite all republicans in order to face all reactionaries.’<sup>5</sup>

The vote of confidence secured in that parliamentary session inaugurated a rather particular phase in the political life of the Third Republic: a period of almost six years – from June 1899 until January 1905 – of politically stable and remarkably effective governments, whose agenda, as can be guessed from the above parliamentary discussion, revolved around the defence and consolidation of republican institutions. Real enough, though probably slightly magnified, the reactionary threat that the *affaire Dreyfus* had revealed as a powerful force in French politics and society had compacted the various republican parties, socialists – with the Guesdist exception – included. This republican unity had given to Waldeck-Rousseau the political strength necessary to act resolutely against the threat of a reactionary insurrection.<sup>6</sup> As is sometimes the case, these exceptional parliamentary conditions reflected exceptional conditions outside of parliament. In those years we can observe the enormous growth of civil society organisations and institutions mobilized in favour, or against, the republic: republican and anti-republican leagues, popular universities, and so on. Of this social and political mobilization, we shall merely say that it deployed itself following the binary logic of the moment: ‘the points of disagreement’, wrote Madeleine Réberieux about the motley world of republican associations, ‘are masked by the necessity of fighting the common enemy’.<sup>7</sup> In those years, to declare oneself a socialist or a radical only indicated one’s first name: ‘the

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<sup>5</sup> *Journal Officiel du 27/6/1899*, Chambre des députés, séance du 26 Juin 1899, p. 1678. The full exchange between Waldeck-Rousseau, who is presenting his cabinet, and the various deputies who interrupt him reads as follows. ‘Oui, il est parfaitement vrai que, sur un très grand nombre de points de politique, sur un très grand nombre de questions économiques, chacun de nous a des vues divergentes... (*Exclamations à droite. – Interruptions.*) **M. le vicomte de Montfort.** Parfaitement ! C’est alors la concentration poussée jusqu’à l’absurde ! **M. le président.** Permettez d’achever messieurs. **M. Le Hérisse.** Vous n’êtes d’accord que sur la question Dreyfus ! (*Bruit.*) **M. le président du conseil.** Mais chacun d’eux déclarerait aussi, comme je le déclare, que, s’agissant d’un intérêt supérieur à toutes nos querelles, s’agissant de la défense de la République... (*Applaudissements à gauche et sur divers bancs à l’extrême gauche.*) *A droite.* De Dreyfus ! **M. le président du conseil.** ... nous n’avons qu’un même sentiment et une même volonté. *A droite.* Laquelle ? **M. Le Hérisse.** Sauver Dreyfus ! **M. le président.** Monsieur Le Hérisse, vous ne cessez d’interrompre. Voulez-vous que je vous rappelle à l’ordre ? **M. le président du conseil.** Le Gouvernement n’a pas dissimulé à la Chambre, je suppose, dans quel but précis il se formait. *A droite.* Lequel ? **M. le président du conseil.** Ce but, - vous demandez une fois de plus lequel, - c’est de réunir tous les républicains pour faire face à tous les réactionnaires. (*Applaudissements à gauche et sur divers bancs à l’extrême gauche.*)’

<sup>6</sup> Though this term, the ‘reactionary threat’, is to be found abundantly in the sources of the period, it is somewhat misleading, because the nationalist and anti-Semitic forces were profoundly different from classical reactionary political forces. Both in their ideological discourse and, more interestingly, in their repertoire of political mobilization, these forces represented one of the first instances of a modern insurrectionary right wing.

<sup>7</sup> Réberieux, *République radicale*, p. 48. ‘... toutes ces sociétés de pensée apparaissent étroitement emmêlées et les points de désaccord sont dissimulés par la nécessité de combattre l’ennemi commun.’

family name was republican'.<sup>8</sup> When, in May 1902, French electors were called to renew their parliament, the choice they faced was, again, a binary one between continuity or rupture with Waldeck-Rousseau's policies of republican defence. The electoral victory of the *bloc des gauches*, the republican alliance of socialists, radicals, and moderates, was clear and beyond contestation: it was this electoral success that gave to Waldeck-Rousseau's successor, the radical Émile Combes, the possibility of pursuing the republicanisation of France with renewed energy.

Although the label of 'republican defence' generally covers the entire period between 1899 and 1905, it is a label that best describes the first, mostly defensive phase of the period, roughly coinciding with Waldeck-Rousseau's cabinet. In those years the threat to republican institutions seemed imminent, and lessons from France's experiences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century provided strong warning to not underestimate the possibility of insurrection. Waldeck-Rousseau's first measures thus focussed on avoiding the possibility of a *coup d'état*, which led him to concentrate on the army - hence, the ministerial choice of Galliffet. An old army man, Galliffet had demonstrated his distaste for military coups during the Boulanger crisis, and thus was the perfect candidate to dissuade an army under constant attack from the Dreyfus camp from any insurrectionist temptations it might entertain. A few days after being nominated, in June 1899, Galliffet immediately sent a strong signal by sending into early retirement the general de Négrier, second in command and guilty of having complained to the troops about the attacks of the dreyfusard press against the army. But the Superior War Council constituted Galliffet's main target. An army institution that after decades of weak republican cabinets, had effectively become the army's governing body, the *Conseil Supérieur de Guerre* was the object of three ministerial decrees in the autumn of 1899, which stripped it of all powers regarding promotion and supervision of army staff, bringing the army under strict ministerial control, and reducing the Council to a simple advisory role. The role of the army, Galliffet had made clear, was that of faithfully serving the democratically elected government.<sup>9</sup>

The republican victory at the 1902 elections, and the installation of Émile Combes' cabinet signalled the beginning of a new phase. Legitimated by the popular vote and resting on a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 'Comme le dit un des rapporteurs au congrès de mai 1904, lorsque les conférenciers se déclarent radicaux, radicaux-socialistes ou socialistes, ce ne sont que « des prénoms : le nom de famille est républicain »'.

<sup>9</sup> See Jean-Charles Jauffret, 'Un sabreur au gouvernement: le général de Galliffet, ministre de la Guerre' in Olivier Fourcade, Éric Duhamel and Philippe Vial (eds), *Militaires en république 1870-1962 : les officiers, le pouvoir, et la vie publique en France* (Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne : 2000), pp. 223-33.



coalition in which radicals dominated, the new government accelerated the processes of republicanisation of French institutions and society begun by Waldeck Rousseau. After the successful defence of the republic, it was time for republicans to go on the offensive. As Sorel wrote about the 1902 elections, ‘the anticlerical policy of the government has been approved by a landslide victory; if the ministry...’, he added, ‘were to abolish freedom of teaching, it would encounter no difficulty.’<sup>10</sup> The republicanisation of the army begun by Galliffet was taken cumbersomely to its extreme by his successor, general André. With the help of France’s masonic lodges, a system had been set in place to check on the political and religious opinions of army officers in order to accelerate the promotion of good republicans and hinder that of anybody suspected of excessive Catholicism or antipathy towards the republic. When the system of delation was discovered and the *affaire des fiches* erupted, Combes himself was forced to resign, bringing the six years of militant republicanism to an end. But the most important front on which Combes pursued the republican agenda was the religious one, engaging in a long and successful battle against the Catholic Church. The anticlerical struggle, which characterized most evidently Combes’ governmental action, led to the break of diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1904 and to three seminal laws – the 1901 *loi des associations*, subjecting religious congregations to the legal requirement of being recognised by the republic through a complex procedure, in the absence of which they were *de facto* outlawed, the 1904 law forbidding religious congregations from teaching, and the 1905 *loi de séparation* cutting all public support to organized religion – which drastically reduced the influence of organized religion in French society.

Sorel’s reaction to these developments was overwhelmingly negative, and this had important consequences for his political and intellectual evolution. As we have stated above, as a liberal, Sorel could not but find the situation worrying: the persecution of the Church and of the enemies of the republic was to him a republican version of the *raison d’état* that he had condemned in engaging in the battle for the revision of Dreyfus’ trial. Now, it is important to point out that not only Sorel had fought the battle for the revision of the trial, but also that he had fought it in the name of the protection of the rule of law and of the individual rights that it guaranteed against oppressive institutions such as the army.<sup>11</sup> This explains why the political

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<sup>10</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘I risultati delle elezioni francesi’, *Rivista popolare di politica, lettere e scienze sociali* 7(10), 1902, p. 263. By ‘freedom of teaching’ Sorel means the freedom of Catholic schools to continue their work. ‘...la politica anticlericale del governo è stata approvata da un vero plebiscito, se il ministero, profittando della sua vittoria, volesse fare sparire la libertà di insegnamento, non troverebbe nessuna difficoltà.’

<sup>11</sup> Sorel had signed a pro-Dreyfus petition appearing in the *Temps* of the 16 January 1898, demanding the protection of ‘legal guarantees of citizens against all arbitrariness’. Beyond the defence of individual rights, one

outcome of this battle could only leave him profoundly disillusioned and rather embittered. Expressing, before the 1902 elections, his most candid opinions about French developments in an Italian publication, Sorel compared the *affaire* and the oppositions that it had generated to ‘a commercial struggle between two rival advertisement firms’, or to the ‘circus of the late Roman Empire.’<sup>12</sup> The idea that the factions in the struggle could be animated by ‘principles’ and by ‘the noblest forces’, had revealed itself after the trial to be mere ‘illusion’: ‘Once things quietened down, it was clear that all the ideological apparatus was very artificial, and that politics was a truly dirty thing.’<sup>13</sup> Feelings of this kind were, of course, not unique to Sorel. In 1910, writing about the period, Sorel’s friend Charles Péguy famously articulated similar views, complaining about the degradation of the republican ideal into a series of factional squabbles.<sup>14</sup>

This disillusionment was based on two interconnected and important aspects of Sorel’s political identity: on the one hand, his distrust of politics, and on the other his liberal fear of the state. It was reflections on these issues that allowed Sorel’s disillusionment to give birth to more interesting reflections on the relationship between proletarian institutions and parliamentary socialism, and between class and party. In other words, beneath what appears to be the disillusionment of an old man nostalgically remembering the political battles of his youth and condemning the present generation for being ‘uniquely concerned with its material interests’,<sup>15</sup> there is something more interesting and fertile. Beneath a growing preoccupation

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of the motivating factors behind Sorel’s initial support of Dreyfus appears to have been the dislike he had for the military circles that, as an old *polytechnicien* and thus military engineer, he had known for most of his professional life. In a letter to Guglielmo Ferrero dated 10/2/1898, he writes of the ‘immoralité profonde de l’armée’ and argues that the ‘affaire Dreyfus ne me semble cacher qu’un seul mystère: *le mystère de l’immoralité et de l’imbécillité des Etats-majors.*’ See Mario Simonetti, ‘Georges Sorel e Guglielmo Ferrero tra “cesarismo” borghese e socialismo’, *Il Pensiero politico* 5(1), 1972, pp. 134-6. The sources come from a more thorough examination of Sorel’s dreyfusard trajectory carried on by Michel Prat in his ‘Georges Sorel et la décomposition du dreyfusisme’ in Michel Leymaire (ed.), *La postérité de l’affaire Dreyfus* (Lille, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion: 1998), pp. 15-30.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘La Francia prima delle elezioni’, *Rivista popolare di politica, lettere e scienze sociali* 8(5), 1902, p. 122. ‘Sotto molti rapporti il processo Dreyfus si può paragonare ad una gran lotta commerciale tra due case rivali di pubblicità; e sotto altri rapporti, poi, rassomiglia alle contese del circo durante il Basso Impero.’

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. ‘Fino al processo... vi erano molti che credevano, con tutta sincerità che i partiti politici... fossero diretti dalle forze più nobili e dai principi. Queste illusioni non hanno potuto conservarsi fino al processo; quando il rumore è stato estinto, si è visto che tutto questo apparecchio ideologico era molto artificiale, e che la politica era veramente una cosa sporca.’

<sup>14</sup> In his famous formula, ‘Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique...L’intérêt, la question, l’essentiel est que *dans chaque ordre, dans chaque système la mystique ne soit point dévorée par la politique à laquelle elle a donné naissance.*’ Charles Péguy, *Notre jeunesse* [1910] (Paris, Gallimard : 1993), pp. 115-116.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Due anni di anticlericalismo in Francia’, *Rivista popolare di politica* 10 (10), 1904, p. 261. In the passage Sorel compares the Dreyfus struggle to the struggle of his youth between monarchists and republicans, which he describes as ‘equally proud and unable to understand the ability of politicians... united in their reciprocal admiration and disdain for the Bonapartists, which appeared to them as representing the corruption of politics’. ‘...c’era una rimarchevole analogia tra gli uomini che attendevano la monarchia del

for the policies of Combes and Waldeck Rousseau', there begins to take shape a reflection on the extent to which these developments threaten the autonomy of the working class. Slowly, Sorel begins to wonder whether the fundamental process that is occurring is not one of working class integration into the bourgeois world. This is the logic behind remarks such as that made in 1902 about the fact that 'the spirit of French socialism moves further and further away from the Marxist one, and it comes ever closer to Jacobin traditions, filled with hatred against the Church',<sup>16</sup> and this is what motivates him, a few years later, in the context of the *affaire des fiches*, to describe with 'deep sadness' the 'enthusiasm that it [French socialism] displays towards denunciation' and to condemn habits that belong more to the 'special taste for police' of Jacobinism rather than to Marxian socialism.<sup>17</sup>

### 6.2.2 SOCIALISM AND THE TRIUMPHANT REPUBLIC

The point then is not simply that Sorel had begun to associate parliamentary socialism to what he saw as the authoritarian republicanism of Combes and Waldeck-Rousseau, though this is certainly the case. The point is that he had begun to reflect on the reasons and consequences of this association, and had begun to notice and point the finger at the assimilation of already fragile working class institutions into the republican system, and to denounce the incorporation of proletarian thought into the dominant bourgeois ideology. In December 1901 Sorel wrote a preface for Ferdinand Pelloutier's *Histoire des Bourses de Travail*. The text is, overall, rather theoretical, and apparently more concerned with Marxist sociology than with the latest political developments. Nonetheless, after many pages in which Sorel illustrates, with examples taken from the history of socialism, a psychological interpretation of Vico's theory of *corsi* and *ricorsi storici*, he begins to reflect on the consequences of the success of parliamentarism in French socialism. He suggests, in a nutshell, that the contact with republican institutions and with its centralist and statist traditions could have damaging effects on the political ideas of the working class:

'In our country the belief in the necessity of central authorities...also depends on our historical tradition; we are told so extensively... that royalty established French unity, that we come to believe that the process of the emancipation of the proletariat will have to follow the same path. To constitute a government capable

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Conte di Chambord e quelli che aspiravano a restaurare la repubblica: egualmente fieri ed incapaci di comprendere le abilità dei politicanti, questi difensori delle idee si stimavano reciprocamente e disprezzavano i bonapartisti che a loro sembrava rappresentassero la corruzione politica... la generazione attuale... non pensa che ai suoi interessi materiali.'

<sup>16</sup> Georges Sorel, 'La lotta anticlericale in Francia', *Rivista popolare di politica*, 8 (18), 1902, p. 519.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Sorel, 'La restaurazione giacobina in Francia', *Rivista popolare di politica* 11 (3), 1905, pp. 74-5.

of gradually *subjugating* all dissident groups: here is the ideal to which an imitation of bourgeois routine was [sic] bound to lead. It would be impossible to make educated bourgeois newcomers to socialism understand that things can develop differently; but there are many people in the proletarian world that reject bourgeois historical theory and who think that the development of the proletariat could very well follow a completely opposite path to that followed by the bourgeoisie. I believe that only those people have an exact understanding of the future of socialism.’<sup>18</sup>

The proletariat must break with the French centralist tradition and think boldly about constructing a genuinely new world based on *its own* experience rather than moulded by what Sorel calls ‘imitations of the bourgeois traditions’.<sup>19</sup> It is easy to see that this sudden preoccupation for the dangers of authoritarian centralism reflects the French political experience of the time, but it is perhaps more noteworthy to underline the importance that Sorel attributes to the ideological aspect of a process of working class assimilation that he is beginning to be aware of.

It is in the Italian articles mentioned above that we can find more articulated analyses of the transformation that Sorel begins to believe is occurring in French socialism. What should be underlined, to repeat, is not so much Sorel’s liberal distrust of state-sponsored repression, but the emerging idea that a vital republicanism is a threat to the autonomy of the working class, because it tends to its assimilation in the existing society, and, hence, to its dissolution. Parliamentarism becomes the cornerstone of this process of assimilation: ‘Today socialism is reaping the fruits of an excessively cunning policy that it has followed, Guesdists included, for too long: everything has been sacrificed to parliamentary successes, and socialism must now submit to the normal conditions of electoral competition...’<sup>20</sup> This criticism, implicitly a self-criticism, of the socialist line chosen in 1892-3 and confirmed at Saint-Mandé brings Sorel to underline the fact that electoral practice destroys the class specificity of socialist

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<sup>18</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Préface’ in Ferdinand Pelloutier, *Histoire des bourses de travail* (Paris, Schleicher: 1902), pp. 54-5. ‘Dans notre pays la croyance à la nécessité des autorités centrales... dépend aussi de notre tradition historique ; on nous raconte si amplement, dès notre jeunesse, que la royauté a fondé l’unité française que nous en arrivons à croire que le processus d’émancipation du prolétariat devra suivre une voie analogue. Constituer un gouvernement qui, peu à peu, arrive à *soumettre* tous les groupes dissidents, voilà l’idéal auquel devait conduire l’imitation de la routine bourgeoise. Il serait impossible de faire comprendre aux bourgeois lettrés devenus récemment socialistes que les choses puissent se passer autrement ; mais il y a dans le monde ouvrier beaucoup de personnes qui n’acceptent pas la théorie historique bourgeoise et qui pensent que la formation du prolétariat pourrait bien se développer suivant un plan tout opposé à celui que la formation de la bourgeoisie a suivi. Je crois que ces personnes sont les seules qui aient une intelligence exacte des conditions de l’avenir du socialisme.’

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> Sorel, ‘I risultati delle elezioni’, p. 264. ‘Si raccolgono oggi i frutti d’una politica troppo abile seguita da molto tempo, dagli stessi guesdisti; si è tutto sacrificato ai successi parlamentari; bisogna che il socialismo ora si sottoponga alle condizioni normali della concorrenza elettorale...’

parties. The very word 'socialism' has 'lost all precise meaning after the time of the Dreyfus trial, when the partisans of revision declared themselves socialists in order to have their speeches applauded by workers.'<sup>21</sup> But if socialist parties have ceased being class parties, what are they now?

'The socialism of our new politicians is unoriginal and is merely the reproduction of the utopianism before 1848. Like our forefathers, we now believe we have found an infallible method for making society harmonious; Jaurès reasons as if Marx had never existed. We can say of socialism today what Engels stated about utopianism: bourgeois movement, doctrine of salons.'<sup>22</sup>

In addition to invectives, Sorel also offers analyses as to why the parliamentary line leads to the destruction of the proletarian character of socialism, and thus of its revolutionary potential. On the one hand, the necessities of electoral competition encourage socialism to look for the votes of all who might have a grievance, thereby reducing the influence of the working class within the socialist party itself. On the other, and this is a reflection on the French situation, socialists remain numerically weak, and are thus forced to follow the lead of the stronger bourgeois parties, who are consequently in a position that allows them to manipulate socialism for their own conservative purposes. 'Waldeck-Rousseau has displayed an ability matching that of the Bonapartist ministers in evoking the *red spectre*: when the bourgeoisie gave the impression of being rebellious, he became the workers' friend and allowed them to organize demonstrations with a slightly revolutionary appearance; later, when he deemed that the revolutionary workers could become dangerous, he struck them down rapidly and forcefully.'<sup>23</sup>

Even those measures that, instinctively, would appear to be proletarian victories can become, in the present context, mere concessions made to the working class according to a conservative logic of political and social stability. A slow juridical evolution had sanctioned in 1884 the legality of the professional associations that had been outlawed during the

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<sup>21</sup> Sorel, 'Francia prima delle elezioni', p. 123. '...la parola *socialista*.. ha perduto ogni significato preciso dopo che al tempo del processo Dreyfus i partigiani della revisione si proclamarono socialisti per fare applaudire le loro arringhe dagli operai.'

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 124. 'Il socialismo dei nostri nuovi politici non offre alcuna originalità, e non è che la riproduzione del vecchio utopismo anteriore al 1848; come i nostri padri si crede di aver trovato il mezzo infallibile di rendere la società più armoniosa; Jaurès pensa come se Marx non fosse mai esistito. Si può dire del Socialismo attuale ciò che Engels diceva dell'utopismo: movimento borghese, dottrina da salotti...'

<sup>23</sup> Sorel, 'Francia prima delle elezioni', p. 149. 'Waldeck-Rousseau ha mostrato tanta arte quanta i ministri bonapartisti nel far marciare lo *spettro rosso*: quando la borghesia sembrava ribelle, egli era l'amico degli operai e permetteva loro di fare delle manifestazioni che avevano un aspetto un po' rivoluzionario; poi, quando ha creduto che gli operai rivoluzionari potessero diventare pericolosi, egli ha colpito forte e rapidamente.'

revolution and tolerated through the second empire.<sup>24</sup> This law, which effectively made trade unions legal, had been the work of Waldeck-Rousseau. For Sorel, the law had been enacted ‘in the hope of organizing workers’ corporations under the control of his [Waldeck-Rousseau’s] party...’<sup>25</sup> The fact that bourgeois parties enact laws that could, in theory, lead to the self-organization of the proletariat, should according to Sorel be understood as a conservative move: ‘It was necessary to show to the workers that the government cares for them... Social legislation was thus drafted in order to give to the workers an idea of the positive feelings that the government harbours for them more than to be of some use to the workers.’ For Sorel, bad intentions animate these laws, which are not ‘what they should be if one really had the intention of improving the conditions of the people that one pretends to protect’, and he goes as far as to say that ‘certainly many deputies that have voted for these laws [in the *chambre des députés*] subsequently do everything in their power to prevent the Senate from approving them.’<sup>26</sup>

Directed by an elite of progressive bourgeois, social legislation becomes not only a conservative force preventing the emergence of the new society, but also a factor of moral degradation of the working class: ‘The implementation of these workers’ laws has been conducted in order to flatter the least noble feelings of human nature’.<sup>27</sup> Envy, desire to be incorporated in the bourgeois world, delation of bosses to public authorities are the feelings that Sorel opposes to those that the proletariat ought to cultivate:

‘Negative passions always dominate man when they are not kept in check by an ardent faith in the value of great moral principles. When workers are genuinely socialists, they only see in their employer a representative of the capitalist order, and they believe that things cannot be different; their hostility against the person transforms itself and is swallowed up by the sentiment of class struggle. The industrial police organised by the government leads the proletarian soul in the

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<sup>24</sup> The ‘*Loi relative à la création des syndicats professionnels*’ of the 21/3/1884 had decreed the legitimacy of ‘associations professionnelles ouvrières et patronales’ and abrogated the *loi Le Chapelier* of the 14/7/1791. It also abrogated article 416 of the penal code of the time, that made it a criminal offence to endanger the ‘libre exercice de l’industrie ou du travail’ on behalf of ‘tous ouvriers, patrons et entrepreneurs d’ouvrage’ through ‘amendes, defences, proscriptions, interdictions prononcées par suite d’un plan concerté’.

<sup>25</sup> Sorel, ‘Francia prima delle elezioni’, p. 150. ‘Nel 1884 Waldeck-Rousseau aveva fatto votare una legge sui sindacati professionali, con la speranza di organizzare le corporazioni operaie sotto il controllo del suo partito...’.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. ‘Bisognava dimostrare agli operai che il governo è pieno di premura per loro... Si sono dunque redatte delle leggi sociali, per dare agli operai un’idea vantaggiosa dei sentimenti che il governo prova per gli operai, piuttosto che in vista di essere loro utili... Questi progetti non sono quelli che dovrebbero essere se si avesse sul serio il desiderio di migliorare le condizioni degli uomini che si pretende di proteggere. Pare certo che parecchi deputati che hanno votato queste leggi facciano poi tutto quanto possono perché il Senato non le voti.’

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. ‘L’applicazione delle leggi operaie è stata diretta in modo da lusingare i sentimenti meno nobili della natura umana...’

opposite direction: *the noble feeling of class struggle is lost and replaced by the cowardly desire of aggravating the wealthy; from socialism, we move to demagogy.*<sup>28</sup>

It is important not to be too distracted by the emphasis on the morality of disinterested struggle. What should be emphasized is that Sorel is speaking about class-consciousness in canonical Marxian terms: this noble feeling of hostility is after all grounded in the knowledge that proletarian and bourgeois interests diverge, that ‘things cannot be different’. It is a feeling, in other words, that is grounded in class, and class defined in a rather orthodox Marxist manner. This is why Sorel begins to underline that class struggle, and the feelings associated with it, require a vital capitalism in order to be sustained. Where capitalism is imperfect, we have demagogy. ‘Demagogy, whose progresses we observe on a daily basis, threatens France’s future; the interest of capitalists would be that the socialist movement could go back on its proper path, for socialism desires ardently the industrial progress that demagogy tends to block.’<sup>29</sup>

Sorel’s conclusion is that no hope can be placed on what happens inside parliament, but that ‘the entire future of the country depends on what happens outside’ of it.<sup>30</sup> He wishes that the distasteful spectacle of everyday political trafficking will ‘disgust’ the workers enough that they will desert organisations and unions that function for the maintenance of a national order, which is as damaging to socialism as it is to a truly progressive capitalist bourgeoisie. He confidently expresses the belief that ‘Today’s unions, whose leaders are increasingly tied to the government, will disappear and the space will open up for the reorganisation of truly socialist unions.’<sup>31</sup> The problematic point, for Sorel, is precisely this successful attempt, on behalf of the government, to reconcile interests that should be antagonistic. The integration of the workers’ organizations into a bourgeois system in which productive concerns are secondary to the imperative of maintaining social peace is a conservative development that

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. ‘Le passioni cattive dominano sempre l’uomo quando esse non siano frenate da una fede ardente nel valore dei grandi principi morali. Quando gli operai sono sinceramente socialisti, non vedono nel loro padrone che un rappresentante del regime capitalistico e credono che le cose non possano passare diversamente; la loro ostilità contro l’uomo si trasforma ed è ricoperta dal sentimento della lotta di classe. La polizia industriale che il governo ha organizzato, tende a fare percorrere all’anima operaia una strada inversa: *il sentimento nobile della lotta di classe si perde, ed è rimpiazzato dal sentimento vile d’imbestialire il ricco; dal socialismo si passa alla demagogia.*’

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., my underlining. ‘La demagogia, di cui vediamo tutti i giorni i progressi, minaccia seriamente l’avvenire della Francia; l’interesse dei capitalisti sarebbe oggi, che il movimento socialista potesse riprendere il suo corso, perché il socialismo desidera ardentemente il progresso industriale che la demagogia tende ad intralciare.’

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 152. ‘Tutto l’avvenire del paese dipende da ciò che si farà al di fuori della Camera.’

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 150. ‘I sindacati attuali, i cui capi diventano sempre più infeudati al governo, spariranno, e il campo diventerà libero per la riorganizzazione dei sindacati veramente socialisti.’

constitutes for Sorel constitutes the greatest danger faced by socialism. In such a situation, 'intelligent workers are disheartened; masses allow themselves to be led like flocks of sheep; the leaders of the unions are happy to be treated like *equals* by the minister; and the ministry uses the unions to scare off the conservative MPs.'<sup>32</sup>

### 6.3 A DIAGNOSIS OF THE NEW CAPITALISM

Between 1902 and 1905 this Sorelian analysis of the transformation of French socialism became noticeably wider. To the ever-present distrust of parliamentary politics and of party officials, Sorel added long term reflections on the significance of a number of economic and social transformations that were able to explain more structurally the reasons of the dominance of party over class, of parliamentary organizations over proletarian institutions, and of the process of dissolution of the working class. These thoughts, revolving essentially around the evolution of French capitalism, found expression in two seminal articles from 1902, and received more substantial elaboration in later monographs, amongst which the 1905 *Insegnamenti sociali dell'economia contemporanea* stands out in terms of articulation and coherence. These economic and social analyses of contemporary capitalism, partial as they were, not only identified very real and important historical processes, but more importantly managed to frame with extreme precision the new problems that Marxian socialism was facing at the turn of the century. They constituted, as we have repeatedly argued, the backbone of Sorel's syndicalism in the *Reflections on violence*, and, for the historian, they still represent the necessary background reading to that text: if in the *Reflections* Sorel proposes a solution, it is in the *Insegnamenti* that he outlines the problem. The two texts, as we shall argue more forcefully in the next chapter, develop a single line of argument.

The question in the background of these analyses is the following: why has the proletariat succumbed so easily to the bourgeois and parliamentary elements within socialism? Why has the historical agent, the working class, not made significant, let alone sufficient steps in its process of historical evolution? Why is it the case that we are very far from envisaging a productive apparatus fully run by workers? Why have institutions capable of developing the organisational, administrative, juridical, but also ethical capacities of the proletariat not arisen? The answer given by Sorel, summarily, is that this is because the bourgeoisie has

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. '...gli operai intelligenti sono scoraggiati; le masse si lasciano condurre come delle pecore; i capi dei sindacati sono felici di esser trattati come dei *signori* dal ministro; e il ministero impiega i sindacati per far paura ai deputati moderati.'



abandoned its progressive historical mission, i.e. because the economic life of France was characterized by conditions of very imperfect capitalism. Sorel centres his analysis on three aspects: protectionism, cartelisation, and social legislation, highlighting repeatedly that the taming of the competitive logic of international market capitalism destroys the structural conditions necessary for the emergence of proletarian institutions. Despite being centred on what Sorel correctly sees as *new* economic and social conditions, Sorel's analysis is not, and could never have been, that of an economic determinist: he constantly highlights the ideological and institutional consequences of these new economic facts, and attributes to them what we could call substantial historical force.

Thus, where lies the imperfection of the French bourgeoisie and of French capitalism? It lies, to start with, in the obsessive desire for social peace and harmony propagated by republicans and socialists alike; it lies in an economically conservative protectionism enforced with the goal of sheltering national businesses from international markets, rather than with the ambition of industrial concentration and growth; it lies in a top-down welfare state that keeps the working class in a state of dependency that prevents it from developing its capabilities. Finally, on the ideological side, the limitations of contemporary capitalism can be seen in the abandonment of Marxism and *laissez-faire* economics – two theories that, for Sorel, found ‘in the same economic conditions the causes of their success’ – in favour of reformism and protectionism.<sup>33</sup> As we have argued above, despite their limitations, Sorel's analyses intercepted important historical transformations. They suffered, arguably, from the French perspective from which they were developed, and consequently at times they tend to paint the emergence of managerial and organized capitalism in excessively conservative colours. This partly underestimated the fact that they coincided, especially in America and Germany, with a tremendous productive expansion. At any rate, the task of this chapter is not to pass judgment on these analyses, but merely to situate them in their economic and social context – which is done in the first section – and to outline how they modified Sorel's socialism and directed it towards the syndicalism that was to characterize the *Reflections on violence*, which we do in the following two sections.

### **6.3.1 TRENDS IN FRENCH ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE (1890-1914)**

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<sup>33</sup> Sorel, *Insegnamenti sociali*, p. 221. ‘É assai degno di nota che le due teorie [Marxism and liberal political economy, which Sorel labels ‘Manchesterianism’], che sembrano essere sì opposte, abbiano potuto trovare nelle medesime condizioni economiche le loro cause di successo.’

The standard view of the French economy in the decades before the Great War is of a country in a state of backwardness when compared not only to the British economic superpower, but also to the emerging economies of the United States of America and of Germany. Throughout the thesis, we have underlined aspects of this backwardness, especially with reference to Germany. However, it is now time to offer a more in depth analysis of the evolution of the French economy in the closing decades of the nineteenth and in the opening years of the twentieth centuries.

It is important to begin by saying that the French backwardness *vis à vis* Germany or Britain is not generally understood simply in terms of brute economic output. Quite naturally, data about domestic product, its growth, various indicators of capital formation and investment, are fundamental in assessing this backwardness. Nonetheless, such data is traditionally used to outline an argument according to which one of the main sources of French backwardness was France's inability to develop modern productive forms, i.e. the Chandlerian businesses described in the previous chapter and characterized by organisational complexity, horizontal and vertical integration, and industrial gigantism. France's economic backwardness, in short, would amount to a failure to fully enter the second industrial revolution, and in a productive system characterized by small-scale firms in a time in which American and German businesses were inaugurating the golden era of modern industrial capitalism.<sup>34</sup>

The picture appears to be, generally speaking, correct. Even if, as we are about to see, there are some caveats to add to this image of French industrial backwardness, there is little doubt about the fact that France was not at the forefront of the second industrial revolution. Its economy, at the turn of the century, was not dominated by what Marx called the 'co-operative form of the labour process', nor by the 'conscious technical application of science' to said process.<sup>35</sup> Let us recall the list of the members of the organizing committee of the socialist congress of Le Havre in 1880 cited in chapter three, and let us remember the prevalence of

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<sup>34</sup> In his *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France*, Michael Smith outlines the development of the economic historiography of France. He suggests that until the 1970s the historiographical consensus depicted the French economy as backwards when compared to Britain or Germany, but that this canon was challenged in that decade by 'revisionist' economic historians such as Patrick O'Brien and Caglar Keyder, who argued that 'in terms of per capita output, France had never really fallen behind the British' (p. 4). As the debate between 'pessimists' and 'revisionists' was taking place, however, a new historiographical tendency, which he labels 'post-revisionist' emerged. Moving away from the examination of macroeconomic data, the new school focussed on business history and suggested that, contrary to the pre-1970s consensus, 'French industry was much more expansive and technologically advanced in the nineteenth and twentieth century than once thought.' See Michael Stephen Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press: 2006), pp. 3-9.

<sup>35</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 714.

'boulangers', 'bijoutiers', 'cordonniers' and other similar artisanal profiles. Despite, or possibly because of, great conservative fears about *l'exode rural*, the population was still predominantly rural. In 1896, only 39% of French lived in an urban centre with more than 2000 inhabitants.<sup>36</sup> Agriculture, despite a number of crises, still occupied a central place in the hexagon's economic and social fabric. In 1891, 44,6% of the workforce was agricultural, as opposed to the 27,9% employed in industry, those percentages remaining essentially unchanged in 1911, with, respectively, 41,2% and 29,7%.<sup>37</sup> But even these meagre figures of industrial employment need to be treated with care, and examined in the context of the kind of businesses that dominated, numerically, the French industrial world. In 1896, 49,2% of French firms employed a single person, 21,8% had two employees, and only 12% of firms had more than five.<sup>38</sup> As Rolande Trespé has argued, the industrial landscape was still in part constituted by myriad small workshops, 'une poussière d'ateliers', a situation more congenial to artisans and craftspeople than to modern industrial workers.<sup>39</sup>

And yet, there are a few caveats that modify this image of French industrial backwardness. The prevalence of small firms does not imply the absence of large Chandlerian ones, and the fact that these latter firms constituted a minority in the French industrial landscape does not mean they can be ignored. In fact, as Michael S. Smith has suggested, the period between 1880 and 1930 was a crucial one in which the French economy developed 'a high level of technological, entrepreneurial, and organizational expertise, as well as an array of large business enterprises (either private or state-owned) that could serve as a vehicle in the application of the new technologies.'<sup>40</sup> Despite the fact that an 1881 survey of the largest French firms in terms of capital shows that 'industrial enterprises [and thus technologically advanced, Chandlerian firms] were largely outdistanced in scale by transportation companies

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<sup>36</sup> Jean-Yves Mollier and Jocelyne George, *La plus longue des républiques* (Paris, Fayard: 1994), p. 119.

<sup>37</sup> Yves Lequin, 'Labour in the French economy since the revolution' in P. Mathias and M. Postan (eds), *The Cambridge economic history of Europe. Vol. 7, part I. The industrial economies: capital, labour, and enterprise* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1978), p. 306. The German data are substantially different. Whereas in 1880 we still witness a predominance of agriculture over industry (49% versus 30%), there is substantial parity as early as 1910, with figures of 37% of agricultural workforce as against 36% of people employed in industry. See J.J. Lee, 'Labour in German industrialization' in *ibid.*, p. 445.

<sup>38</sup> Rolande Trespé, 'Deuxième partie: 1871-1914' in Claude Willard (ed.), *La France ouvrière. Histoire de la classe ouvrière et du mouvement ouvrier français. Tome I: Des origines à 1920* (Paris, Éditions Sociales: 1993), p. 252.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 'Cette catégorie regroupe donc une poussière de minuscules ateliers où un patron travaille avec un seul salarié, voire deux ou trois, ce qui relève plus de l'artisanat que de l'industrie.'

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Modern Business Enterprise in France*, p. 8.

and public utilities', their importance grew over time.<sup>41</sup> Starting with 1896 'a certain tendency towards concentration begins to emerge. The average size of firms has risen from 5,5 to 6,1 [employees], and those that have grown faster are large firms.'<sup>42</sup> Geographically concentrated around the Lyon and Saint-Etienne region, and on the northeastern axis running from Le Havre to Mulhouse, large, second industrial revolution firms played a significant-enough role in the French economy to modify the image of French backwardness sketched above.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that in 1896 only 12% of French firms employed more than five employees should then be taken as an indication of the resilience of pre-second industrial revolution productive forms, rather than as revealing the weakness of big business. It is arguably in the very nature of Chandlerian enterprises to be few in number, and to tend to concentration and oligopoly. It is by looking at the data on the employment of the industrial workforce that, in spite of the low number of large firms, we can have a clearer idea of both their strength and of the sectors in which they flourished. Data for 1906 reveals that the largest part of the industrial workforce (40,2%) was employed in firms of more than 100 people, although only 7,4% in firms of over 500 employees.<sup>44</sup> Whereas industries such as food (62%), clothing (58%), or wood (58,5%) were dominated by firms with less than 11 employees, the prevalence of big business was most obvious in metallurgy and mining, sectors in which, respectively, 77,7% and 82,7% of the workforce was in firms of over 500 employees. Technologically advanced industries such as chemistry, rubber, or paper, too were the preserve of relatively large firms, with over 100 employees.<sup>45</sup>

It is worth spending a little more time on these emerging big businesses, mainly because we have characterized them, so far, predominantly in terms of size. But with size, it should be emphasized, came new, more rationalized Taylorist forms of organizing labour, which minimized the role of the skilled worker in favour of managers and of unskilled workers. Size, in fact, is a pertinent indicator of these new methods, since in the French context 'the

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<sup>41</sup> Claude Fohlen, 'Entrepreneurship and management in France in the nineteenth century' in Mathias and Postan, *Cambridge economic history of Europe. Vol. 7*, pp. 362-3. The metallurgical giant Le Creusot, for example, was only eighteenth.

<sup>42</sup> Trempé, *France ouvrière.*, p. 252. 'Depuis 1896, un certain mouvement de concentration s'est dessiné. La taille moyenne est passée de 5,5 à 6,1 et ce sont les grands qui ont crû le plus vite.'

<sup>43</sup> For the data about the geographical connotations of large industry see the map in Trempé, *France Ouvrière*, p. 258.

<sup>44</sup> Trempé, *France Ouvrière*, p. 253. This implies, of course, that 32,8% of the workforce was in firms ranging from 101 to 500 employees. These data confirm the overall balance of the French economy. Small firms (1 to 10 employees) gave work to 32,2% of the industrial workforce, whereas medium sized firms (11 to 100 employees) to 27,6%.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

division between the old ways and the new largely coincided with the distinction between large and small.<sup>46</sup> Beyond size and labour organization, other aspects allow us to classify a number of French firms, mostly metallurgical ones, as classically Chandlerian ones. In 1884 the *Loi relative à la création des syndicats professionnels* had abrogated the penalties that were hitherto associated with economic association. By legalising ‘associations patronales’, the law effectively opened the way for the economic organization and concentration typical of the second industrial revolution. Oligopolistic business associations, such as the *Comité des Forges*, effectively and rather successfully stabilised the metallurgical market, lobbied governments, and, through the organisation of *comptoirs* (sale cartels), went as far as ensuring ‘that high prices for metal products would be maintained by limiting the expansion of productive capacity’.<sup>47</sup> Though they were aided by the rising economic protectionism of those years, they fought against social legislation, and, as the war approached, they had evolved into fully bureaucratized economic centres, in spite of the smokescreen of their ‘libertarian doctrine’.<sup>48</sup>

The picture of the French economy that emerges from this overview is that of a balanced productive system, characterized by the persisting importance of agriculture and, as far as industry is concerned, by the curious mix of craft-based productive methods with, especially after 1896, emerging big business, concentrated in some precise geographical areas and occupying sectors such as metallurgy or chemistry. Despite this balance, then, there were processes of industrial modernization occurring. Though, on the one hand, the resilience of older, artisanal, productive forms and firms was more marked in France than in Germany or the United States, on the other hand, as we have seen, big business did exist and generally behaved – in terms of horizontal and vertical integration<sup>49</sup>, of productive methods, and of guiding through oligopolistic practices, the national economy towards greater organization – like typical second industrial revolution Chandlerian firms.

It is fundamental to underline that the republican élites had mixed feelings about the rise of these new productive realities, and that, more precisely, they were greatly worried by the

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<sup>46</sup> Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1995), p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> John F. Godfrey, *Capitalism at War. Industrial Policy and Bureaucracy in France 1914-1918* (Leamington Spa, Berg: 1987), p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. It is curious that this libertarianism surfaced mainly in the *Comité*'s resistance to social legislation, whereas the ‘love of liberty’ did not prevent it from engaging into oligopolistic practices that would not have been out of place in a planned economy of the 1930s. According to Godfrey, ‘the *Comité des Forges* attempted to use the war as a means of eliminating ... small independent producers’ not associated with it (p. 19).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, *Capitalism at war*, p. 16 and 20-22.

potentially nefarious social consequences that they could engender: on the one hand, the rural exodus, and on the other the rise of a politically organized and contentious working class. Socialists, despite their divisions and their numerical weakness, and despite the fact that, by the turn of the century, they had effectively joined the republican cause, had entered parliament for the first time already in the early 1890s, and this could not but worry the republican establishment. As modernity advanced and the new productive forms grew in importance, so did worries about the *question sociale* and *exode rurale*, with these worries coming to dominate the republic's social and economic response to these transformations.

As Richard Kuysel has argued, industrial modernization was feared more than welcomed, as 'few saw any need to hurry headlong after industrialization and urbanization as the British, Germans, and Americans had done.'<sup>50</sup> Protection of the rural world and containment of the social consequences of big business were the republican priorities, and they were achieved through what could be called, with the due proportions and differences, Bismarckian policies, i.e. economic protectionism and social legislation. By the mid 1890s, 'a broad political and social consensus... dictated that public policy should try to maintain an equilibrium among industry, commerce, and agriculture and attempt to insulate France from the distress and upheaval that had struck other nations bent upon rapid economic advance.'<sup>51</sup> One of the champions of this policy of economic stability was Jules Méline, who, in 1891, had defended his proposal for a system of protective tariffs by stressing that the French peasant 'loves life in the open air and it is only as a last resort that he goes to labour in a workshop': rural depopulation, this 'worrying phenomenon', arises only when the landowning peasant 'has lost all hope of making a living out of it [the land]'.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, the other side of this desire for rural protection was the fear of the mounting socialist threat. Rural depopulation was worrying because it contributed to the creation of an urban and industrial proletariat that, when politically organised, could become problematic for the already precarious stability of the republic. In his tellingly titled *Le retour à la terre*, Méline

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Kuysel, *Capitalism and the state in modern France* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1981), p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Jules Méline, *Discours prononcé par M. Jules Méline, Président et rapporteur général. Séances des 11 et 19 Mai 1891. Discussion du Tarif Général des Douanes* (Paris, Imprimerie des Journaux Officiels: 1891), p. 49. The law was enacted in the following year and it is commonly referred to as the *loi Méline*. 'Il aime la vie au grand air, et ce n'est qu'à la dernière extrémité qu'il va s'enfermer dans un atelier. Il n'émigre pas volontiers ; il ne quitte la terre que lorsqu'il désespère de pouvoir gagner sa vie, que lorsqu'il est découragé au point de se dire : C'est fini ; il n'y a rien, plus rien à tenter. (Applaudissements sur divers bancs.) Et quand ce sentiment s'emparé de lui... il amène ce phénomène inquiétant auquel nous assistons depuis plus de dix ans...'

himself had argued that a strong agricultural sector, capable of absorbing large amounts of workforce, would be the best safety net against the unemployment generated by mechanization and industrial progress. Warning his readers about the dangers of ‘rushing blindly’<sup>53</sup> toward industrial progress, Méline argued that ‘social crises often have as their cause simply a bad distribution of work’: the self-evident solution was, thus, a slow and managed return to the land.<sup>54</sup> But to counter the social consequences of industrial modernization, the republic did not limit itself to preserving the economic balance between industry and agriculture. It also had to implement a number of legislative measures that could protect the industrial proletariat against market excesses. And thus, health and safety regulations in industrial workplaces were made legally binding by the law of the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1893; on 15 July of the same month, state-guaranteed medical assistance (Assistance Médicale Générale or AMG) for those in need was enacted; on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1898 we see a landmark law according compensation to workers in case of accidents occurring in the workplace, and this without the requirement of an onus of proof of the fault of the employer. With the law of 30 March 1900 working hours for women and minors were reduced to a maximum of 11 per day, while in 1910, with the law of the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, Léon Bourgeois succeeded in passing a pensions law.

The effectiveness of these welfare measures is disputed, especially because these attempts to rationalize and nationalize social protection were met with resistance by local élites who wished to safeguard their role as providers of welfare to local workers and communities.<sup>55</sup> But this is beside the point. What matters is that such an attempt to tame the social consequences of industrialization was made, and that this conservative economic policy was the expression of the coalition that dominated French politics from 1899 to 1905. It was, in other words, the republican bloc, ranging from radicals to reformist socialists, that most thoroughly pursued policies of social peace. These initial attempts at a welfare state were, in other words, implemented by ‘advocates of increased state intervention on behalf of workers, such as Alexandre Millerand [a socialist] and Léon Bourgeois [a radical-republican]’.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jules Méline, *Le retour à la terre et la surproduction industrielle* (Paris, Hachette : 1905), p. 3. ‘Si bien orienté qu’on soit cependant, il n’est pas sans danger de courir devant soi les yeux fermés...’

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311. ‘Les crises sociales n’ont bien souvent pas d’autre cause que la mauvaise distribution du travail...’

<sup>55</sup> See for example Timothy B. Smith, *Creating the welfare state in France 1880-1940* (Montréal, McGill-Queen’s University Press: 2003), pp. 13-50.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

It is indicative of the affirmation of this new socioeconomic consensus that the liberal economic orthodoxy that had governed French mainstream opinion from the time of the Second Empire had begun, by the 1890s, to be challenged, and that it was being slowly replaced by various discourses about national unity and solidarity. In the 1880s, Bismarckian interventionism was anathema to the French liberal opinion: writing in 1884, Léon Say, one of the strongest opponents of the protectionist *loi Méline* had described Bismarck's policies as those of 'a self-professed conservative socialism', argued that the scheme of compulsory social insurance 'is an enterprise against which reason protests', and that such developments would soon lead to the point in which a civil servant would become 'a figure with the duty of supervising the businessman in his dealings with employees and clients.'<sup>57</sup> And yet, by the turn of the century, Say's opinions had become those of a minority. Ideas of national solidarity had replaced them, as the republican-socialist bloc enacted welfare policies in a bid to counter the social consequences of industrial modernization.

It is a writer with impeccable liberal credentials, Vilfredo Pareto, who offers us the best image of the marginality of economic liberalism in the France of Waldeck-Rousseau and Combes. Writing in 1900 about the 'socialist danger', Pareto argued that socialism was more or less inevitable. Why was this the case? Was it the case that the proletariat was ready to overthrow the bourgeois order? Not at all, suggested Pareto: the danger did not come from the enemies of the bourgeoisie, but from the bourgeoisie itself and its newfound social vocation.

'Go and tell frankly to a bourgeois that, according to your theory, his home and revenues [rentes] need to be confiscated. He will, perhaps, still have enough energy and good sense to reject your theory. But let a Christian socialist, a representative of the *ethical school*, a partisan of "solidarity" appear, and he will carefully listen to them.'<sup>58</sup>

For Pareto, the combination of protectionism, social legislation, and an ideology of national solidarity was the gateway to socialism, whose future triumph was assured by the fact that even the bourgeoisie, deluding itself that it could appease the forces of the proletariat by yielding to some of their demands, was working towards it. He argued:

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<sup>57</sup> Léon Say, *Le socialisme d'état. Conférences faites au centre Saint-Simon* (Paris, Calmann Lévy: 1884), pp. 110, 112, and 151-2.

<sup>58</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, 'Le péril socialiste' [1900] in Vilfredo Pareto, *Libre-échange, protectionnisme et socialisme* (Geneva, Droz: 1992), p. 326. 'Allez dire franchement à un bourgeois que, suivant votre théorie, il doit être dépossédé de sa maison et de ses rentes, il aura peut-être encore assez de bon sens et d'énergie pour repousser cette doctrine. Mais que se présente un socialiste chrétien, un *éthique*, un partisan de la « solidarité » et il leur prètera une oreille attentive.'



‘There are people who imagine that they can disarm their enemies through cowardly complacency; they are wrong. The world always belonged to the strong, and will still belong to them for a long time. Men respect those who command respect. Those who turn themselves into lambs will always find a wolf ready to devour them.’<sup>59</sup>

### 6.3.2 MECHANISMS OF ASSIMILATION: PROTECTIONISM, WELFARE, AND ECONOMIC ORGANISATION

But if Pareto thought that the economic and social policies of the republic were leading to socialism, Georges Sorel, who agreed with many points of Pareto’s analysis, did not. In fact, as early as in 1902 he had begun thinking the exact opposite, namely that the social turn of the republic was the greatest obstacle to the emergence of the working class as an historical force. We have seen, in the first section of this chapter, his doubts about the reformist turn of socialism. It is now time to examine in more depth a number of texts from 1902 in which Sorel starts to elaborate on these doubts, widening the scope of his analysis to include the latest economic and social developments occurring in the France of the time.

The first of these important texts appears in the spring of 1902 in the *Revue Socialiste* and is tellingly titled ‘Idées socialistes et faits économiques au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle’.<sup>60</sup> As would be expected from a Marxist writing in a publication such as the *Revue Socialiste*, the piece consists of a defence of Marxism against other understandings of socialism. What is most interesting in the text is Sorel’s attempt to understand and defend Marxism historically, by connecting its successes and its crises to a number of changing economic and social conditions. It is through these analyses, which are fundamental to his syndicalism, that Sorel manages to specify with greater precision what are the conditions under which the proletariat can emerge as a revolutionary historical agent. Accordingly, the difference between Marxism and utopian socialism is described as an historical one, as a difference between the economic and social conditions in which the two understandings of socialism were elaborated. Whereas the socialism of, say, Fourier or Owen, belonged to ‘Rousseau’s kingdom’, Marxism was elaborated in ‘*the century of the men of steel*, the era of hardened people who ridiculed

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 330. ‘Il est de gens qui s’imaginent désarmer leurs ennemis à force de lâches complaisances. Ils se trompent. Le monde a toujours appartenu aux forts et leur appartiendra encore. Les hommes ne respectent que ceux qui savent se faire respecter. Qui se fait agneau trouvera toujours un loup pour le manger.’

<sup>60</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Idées socialistes et faits économiques au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle’, *Revue Socialiste* 35, 1902, pp. 294-318, 385-410, and 519-44.

philanthropy and were proud of their force'.<sup>61</sup> The first important remark made by Sorel concerns the Marxist revolutionary subject:

'Modern socialism concerns itself with *proletarians* and uses this term to indicate not the poor, but the man who, not being in possession of the instruments of his own subsistence, lives on the salary earned in a factory; the proletarian is a *living instrument* in the great whole of the forces organised, according to a scientific plan, by the industrialist.'<sup>62</sup>

What Sorel argues is, essentially, that the revolutionary subject of Marxism – like Marxism itself – is not ahistorical, but flourishes under a precise set of economic and social conditions. The success of utopian socialism and of its tendency to devise plans for the reorganization of society and industry, according to Sorel, is to be connected with the fact that in the first half of the nineteenth century capitalism was unable to generate and organize new productive forces. Before 1848 'the high bourgeoisie was stuck in antiquated ways of thinking about industry... it did not understand that the function of modern capitalism is that of rampantly developing all the productive forces of the country'.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the task of industrial growth and modernization was left in the hands of the state, and progress 'became a question of... strengthening governmental forces in order to accomplish what a helpless capitalism could not achieve; it was necessary to cover France with railroads...'<sup>64</sup> Neither Marxism as a theory, nor the proletariat as an historical force and revolutionary subject, would be conceivable before the great explosion of productive forces after 1848, when 'large-scale capitalism had become conscious of its force'.<sup>65</sup> This period, which Sorel brings to a close towards the 1890s, is characterized by a capitalism capable of mobilizing increasingly larger productive forces with only minimal assistance by the state, whose role is reduced to the maintenance of order and the removal of obstacles to trade: it is in this period when, parallel

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 386. 'Après 1848 commence le *siècle des hommes de fer*, l'ère des hommes durs qui bafouent la philanthropie et se vantent de leur force ; le règne de Rousseau qui avait commencé vers 1762 (date de la publication de l'*Émile*) avait duré presque cent ans.'

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 391. 'Le socialisme moderne s'occupe des *prolétaires* et il désigne par ce terme non pas le pauvre, mais l'homme qui, n'ayant pas de moyens de travail, vit du salaire gagné dans la fabrique ; le prolétaire est un *instrument vivant* dans le grand ensemble des forces organisées par l'industriel suivant un plan scientifique.'

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 388. 'A cette époque (avant 1848), la haute bourgeoisie restait confinée dans des traditions vieilles au point de vue industriel... elle ne comprenait pas que la fonction du capitalisme moderne est de développer, d'une manière exubérante, toutes les forces productives du pays...'

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 'Il s'agissait de changer l'orientation de la politique de l'État, d'accroître les forces du gouvernement, pour faire ce qu'un capitalisme incapable ne pouvait pas faire ; il fallait couvrir le pays de chemins de fer...'

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 390. 'Mais tout cela [utopian socialism] devait sembler puéril le jour où le grand capitalisme avait acquis la claire conscience de sa force...'

to the ascendancy of Marxism, ‘The slogan of *laissez faire, laissez passer* became a universal maxim, – a new ideological superstructure exactly fitting the new economy.’<sup>66</sup>

The conditions under which the proletariat flourishes as a revolutionary force are characterized by the absence of centralized economic direction, and by the free development of capitalist competition. Marxism understands that the conditions of production that will characterize the future socialist society cannot arise out of a plan for the democratic reorganization of a factory or a workshop, but, instead, will realize themselves ‘automatically through the interplay of those forces that animate capitalism: the pursuit of greater profit leads businessmen to create what the most stubborn creators of systems had tried, to no avail, ... to come up with.’<sup>67</sup> It is not, thus, an economy directed by the state that can create the economic preconditions for socialism, but only the seemingly chaotic interactions between actors in a competitive market. Accordingly, a revolutionary working class cannot emerge in the absence of the kind of bourgeoisie created by these competitive conditions.

‘It is not the State that can prepare the economic conditions of the new regime. It is only capitalist necessity; here is a fundamental thesis of Marxism, and those who do not admit this capitalist fatality are not Marxists. Capitalism shapes society in two ways: 1<sup>st</sup> it creates the modern workshop, which will become the collectivist workshop; 2<sup>nd</sup> it forces the working classes to organize themselves and leads them, through the struggle that the capitalists wage against them, to be able to emancipate themselves.’<sup>68</sup>

This is rather straightforward Marxism. Sorel’s references are *Capital* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which he cites copiously and passionately, underlining with care the anti-statist elements, such as Marx’s objection to the Lassallean idea that ‘with state loans one can build a new society just as well as a new railway.’<sup>69</sup> Sorel’s contribution consists in the historicization of these Marxian theses, in his underlining that the world in which Marx lived

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. ‘Une même formule : *laissez faire, laissez passer*, deviendra la maxime du monde, - la nouvelle superstructure se moulant exactement sur la nouvelle économie.’

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 399. ‘Ce plan que les utopistes cherchaient, avec tant d’ingéniosité, n’est pas à chercher ; il se réalise automatiquement par le seul jeu de forces qui font vivre le capitalisme : la poursuite du plus grand profit conduit les entrepreneurs à créer ce que les plus tenaces inventeurs de systèmes s’étaient vainement évertués à imaginer, sous des formes fantastiques.’

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 400. ‘Ce n’est pas l’État qui peut préparer les conditions économiques du nouveau régime, c’est la seule fatalité du capitalisme ; voilà une thèse fondamentale pour le marxisme ; qui n’admet point ce fatalisme n’est point marxiste. Le capitalisme agit dans la société de deux manières : 1° il crée l’atelier moderne, qui deviendra l’atelier collectiviste ; 2° il force les classes ouvrières à s’organiser et les amène, par la lutte engagée par les patrons contre elles, à devenir capables de s’émanciper.’

<sup>69</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’ [1875] in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24 (London, Lawrence and Wishart: 1989), p. 93, cited in Sorel, ‘Faits économiques’, p. 400. In the same page Sorel also makes reference to the ‘Historical tendency of capitalist accumulation’ outlined by Marx in the 32nd chapter of *Capital*.

was characterized by a strong capitalism capable of pushing class division to its extreme, of developing new productive forces, and, last but not least, of destroying a large number of antiquated social relations such as nationalism.<sup>70</sup> In fact, according to Sorel it was Marx's historically grounded faith in the destructive powers of capitalism that led him to 'oversimplify' the process through which the proletariat becomes a class for itself, conscious of its situation and of its mission, armed with its own institutions.<sup>71</sup>

This brings us to a crucial point of Sorel's argument, which is the suggestion that the current situation is rather different from that of the 1850s: 'We now know that things do not happen quite as straightforwardly as Marx supposed in 1847. The capitalist movement has not developed with the speed that he attributed to it...'<sup>72</sup> This is what the crisis of Marxism is really all about for Sorel. It is not a theoretical crisis, but an historical one: 'controversies between various theorists' cannot explain it, and its causes must be sought in the 'transformations that have occurred in society'.<sup>73</sup> Capitalism has become weaker; consequently, the state has taken a more central role in the evolution of the productive processes and thus both industrial progress and the development of a revolutionary proletariat have come to a halt, or at least have substantially slowed down. What Sorel is referring to, as will become clear in a short while, are the republican policies of containment of the social consequences of industrialization outlined in the previous section.

Switching from the economic level to the ideological one, Sorel suggests that the crisis of Marxism is generated by the same developments that have determined the crisis of liberal political economy:

'The more we examine the objective conditions upon which Marxist economics rests the more we find that it resembles *manchesterian* economics. We have already seen that it presupposes a complete juridical separation between capitalists and workers, [that it presupposes] the fatality of capitalist

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<sup>70</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 399. Sorel expresses some doubts as to whether new productive conditions will be able to eliminate morality and religion in the same way as they will be able to eliminate private property and nation.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401. 'C'est le mouvement ouvrier qui avait été trop trop [sic] simplifié par Marx'

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 'Nous savons aujourd'hui que les choses ne se passent point aussi simplement que Marx le supposait en 1847. Le mouvement capitaliste n'a pas marché avec la rapidité qu'il lui attribuait...'

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 519. 'Tout le monde reconnaît que le marxisme est aujourd'hui en décadence ; je ne crois pas que l'on puisse attribuer ce phénomène aux polémiques qui se sont produites entre divers théoriciens ; il faut déterminer quels sont les changements survenus dans l'état social qui ont pu déterminer d'autres courants.'

development and the indifference or powerlessness of the state; these are the three great principles of classical economics...'<sup>74</sup>

Sorel treats the vitality of competitive markets and the emergence of the working class as intimately connected phenomena: 'when capitalism has become so rich and that it is carried forward by the general conditions of markets, there is a truly absolute separation between capitalists and workers.'<sup>75</sup> But the conditions of the early twentieth century do not work in favour of this 'truly absolute separation'. If the organisation of the working class proceeds from above and not from below, it will suffer the decisive influence of the dominant social relations, with the consequence that it will lead to proletarian assimilation rather than to its autonomous institutional growth. Sorel cites a declaration by Millerand in which the trade and industry minister, speaking to the Chamber of Commerce of Saint-Etienne, had reassured its audience about the fact that all his proposals of social legislation were always going to carefully consider 'the *repercussion* that it could have on the interests of the businessmen.'<sup>76</sup> This declaration is not only an indication of the dependency of capitalists on the state, but also of the fact that the concessions made from above are just that, i.e. concessions, and that they cannot give birth to genuinely new, and hence revolutionary, institutions.

Protectionism is a key aspect of this transformation. Citing the third volume of *Capital*, Sorel stresses the 'revolutionary character of commerce', and its ability to destroy, amongst other things 'old productive forms'. Free trade is important to all those who 'care above all about the progress of productive forces and have little sympathy for the idyll of the old ways.'<sup>77</sup> With this in mind, the French protectionist turn, inaugurated in 1892 by the *loi Méline*, signals what Sorel ironically calls the French 'return to Thomas Aquinas in economic matters'.<sup>78</sup> On the one hand, this protectionism shelters a feeble capitalism from the threat of international competition, with negative consequences in terms of technological progress and of productive

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 522-3. 'Plus on examine à fond toutes les conditions de fait sur lesquelles repose l'économie marxiste, plus on trouve qu'elle ressemble à l'économie *manchestérienne*. Nous avons déjà vu qu'elle suppose une complète indépendance juridique entre les patrons et les ouvriers, la fatalité du mouvement capitaliste et l'indifférence ou l'impuissance de l'État ; ce sont les trois grands principes de l'économie classique...'

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 524. 'Quand le capitalisme est devenu tellement riche et qu'il est tellement secondé par les conditions générales des marchés, il y a vraiment une séparation absolue entre les capitalistes et les ouvriers...'

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 'Il y a peu de temps le ministre du Commerce affirmait, dans un discours adressé à la Chambre de Commerce de Saint-Etienne, qu'il ne séparerait pas la défense des grands intérêts de l'industrie et sa sympathie pour le sort des travailleurs, et il disait : « Je n'ai jamais abordé un projet dit ouvrier, sans me Préoccuper de la *répercussion* qu'il pouvait avoir sur les intérêts des patrons.'

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 525. 'On a signalé... le caractère révolutionnaire du commerce ; son développement contribue beaucoup à amener la mort des vieilles formes de production ; aussi a-t-il toujours été cher aux écrivains qui tiennent surtout au progrès des forces productives et qui sont peu sensibles à l'idylle des mœurs antiques.'

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 526. 'Ce sera un beau jour celui où la France proclamera le retour à saint Thomas d'Aquin en économie, comme le pape a proclamé le retour au thomisme en philosophie !'

growth. On the other hand, more importantly, protectionism fosters nationalism by encouraging national solidarity at the expense of international class solidarity: tariff barriers are an attempt to ‘preserve, in the economic realm, the separation that politics has established between nations.’<sup>79</sup> Protectionism is the sign of a capitalism that needs the state, and thus of a bourgeoisie that will be led to embrace principles of national solidarity over those of economic efficiency and technological progress. It is this spirit of national solidarity enforced by the state that is perhaps most damaging to the socialist cause, because it pools together, through concrete institutional arrangements and structures, interests that a progressive historical development would establish as antagonistic. This ability to unite the interests of capitalists and of proletarians in the name of the nation is carried through by social legislation: ‘there is, between the history of protectionism and that of social legislation a remarkable parallel.’<sup>80</sup>

Of course, both social legislation and protectionism can have progressive variants. Social legislation is necessary for the revolutionary organisation of the working class. Protectionism, Sorel concedes, can lead to industrial progress, such as in the case of the United States. But such progressive variants of these economic and social phenomena are those associated with expansive capitalism. Thus, in the same way as there are ‘two types of protectionism: one useful to strong peoples with growing population and wealth, - the other useful to discouraged, lazy ones with a declining population’<sup>81</sup>, there are ‘two kinds of social policy; a progressive and a retrograde one.’<sup>82</sup> The criteria through which Sorel distinguishes the two kinds of protectionism and social legislation are those of productive expansion and, above all, class separation. When protectionism leads to the expansion of productive forces, it is progressive, when it shelters individual capitalists from the competitive logic of global capitalism, it is conservative: ‘Marxists could never, under no circumstances, associate themselves with projects destined to impede or slow down the progress of the productive part of the economy’.<sup>83</sup> Social legislation, in the same way, is progressive when it is conducive to the self-organization of workers with the aim of class struggle. But when it is drowned in the practice and rhetoric of national solidarity, it is conservative, for it locks the new-born

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 527. ‘... ce qui tient le plus à cœur aux amis du *droit économique*, c’est une réglementation douanière, qui permette de conserver en économie la séparation que la politique a établie entre les nations...’

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. ‘Il y a entre l’histoire du protectionnisme et celle de la législation sociale un remarquable parallélisme’.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 529. ‘Il y a deux espèces de protectionnisme : l’un à l’usage des peuples forts, à population et à richesse croissantes, - l’autre à l’usage des peuples découragés, paresseux, à population stationnaire’

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 530. ‘...il y a deux espèces de politiques sociale ; l’une qui est progressive et l’autre rétrograde.’

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 532. ‘Les marxistes ne sauraient, jamais et sous aucun prétexte, s’associer à des projets destinés à empêcher ou à retarder les progrès de l’économie de la production...’

institutions and social relations to older and more powerful ones, decisively thwarting their potential for innovation and social change. The collaboration between workers and capitalists in the direction of business ‘tends to mix what socialism had tried to keep apart, what Marx had believed was irreducibly separated’.<sup>84</sup>

But what is the role of spontaneous, i.e. non-state driven forms of economic organization in all this? To the question of cartels, Sorel dedicates another important 1902 article, largely based on Paul de Rousier’s work on the phenomena, and examining the United States, Germany, and France.<sup>85</sup> The central question is whether cartels have to be seen as historically progressive or regressive, and throughout the article Sorel is careful in maintaining a certain ambivalence of judgement. Resurrecting the distinction between progressive and regressive protectionism, he argues that the significance of cartels can likewise be either regressive or progressive. There are, Sorel underlines, great differences between apparently similar phenomena occurring in different countries, and therefore the phenomena of economic organization that go under the names of cartels, trusts, and *comptoirs* can signify different things. But the criteria that the Marxist must use to express his judgment on the significance of such developments are clear. Cartels are progressive if they bring out new productive forces: ‘nothing characterizes the Marxist spirit better than the preoccupation about the progress of productive forces.’<sup>86</sup> Cartels, thus, can serve a historically progressive function when they contribute to the development of industrial capitalism, when they allow competitive interaction between individual capitalists to develop on a larger scale and on the international stage, and, in sum, when they are ‘means of *forcing* capitalists to bring productive forces to a higher economic level and to develop them beyond the demand that manifested itself in a national economy. There can never be too many productive forces in a country marching towards socialism; cartels provide means for the creation of a *better base for socialism*’.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 520. ‘Tout cela tend à mêler ce que le socialisme avait cherché à séparer, ce que Marx avait cru irréductiblement distingué...’

<sup>85</sup> Paul de Rousiers, *Les syndicats industriels de producteurs en France et à l'étranger* (Paris, Armand Colin: 1901). On de Rousiers, see Antoine Savoye, ‘Paul de Rousiers, sociologue et praticien du syndicalisme’, *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 6, 1988, pp. 52-77.

<sup>86</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Le syndicats industriels et leur signification’, *Revue Socialiste* 36, 1902, p. 59. ‘Rien ne caractérise mieux l’esprit marxiste que la préoccupation du progrès des forces productives.’

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 180. Underlining mine. ‘Les cartells doivent être étudiés comme des moyens de *forcer* les capitalistes à faire faire aux forces productives un nouveau pas dans l’ordre économique et à leur donner un développement hors de proportion avec les besoins tels qu’ils se manifestaient dans l’économie nationale. Il n’y aura jamais trop de forces productives dans un pays qui marche vers le socialisme ; les cartells fournissent des moyens de créer une *meilleure base pour le socialisme*...’

But if cartels can be a sign of a vital capitalism, and of a progressive historical dynamic, they can also be signs of the exact opposite. The expression ‘quietist economy’ is the one used by Sorel to describe an economy characterized by price fixing, by proportionality between production and consumption, by macroeconomic management either on behalf of the state or on behalf of business associations, and by the inevitable slowing down of the development of new productive forces and technological innovation. When cartels break the competitive and innovative dynamics of capitalist competition, they become regressive, and not too different from medieval guilds:

‘... it is certain that even during the capitalist era there are remnants of the past and practices, contrary to the general development of capitalism. It is possible that certain businessmen believe that it is in their interest to generate scarcity, but it is an exception utterly opposed to the spirit of capitalism, which constantly tends towards the revolutionising of productive forces, forcing everyone to produce more and cheaper goods. I admit that some *capitalists* entertain the idea of making profits by closing the market; but the *immanent laws of capitalism* almost always oppose themselves to this wish for a *quietist economy*.’<sup>88</sup>

It is important to note that for Sorel the ‘quietist’ economy is a *managed* and a *national* one. On the one hand, the desire to shelter individual capitalists from global competition cannot be done without protectionism, but with protectionism comes price fixing, which submits international trade ‘to the arbitrary will of a corporation of producers, and this domination could often be unfavourable to the progress of productive forces.’<sup>89</sup> Now, whether the national economy is directed by a ‘corporation of producers’ or by the state, the result is equally negative for a Marxist. Both corporatism and state socialism are characterized by the ‘ambition of introducing reason in spheres dominated by necessity and randomness’, i.e. of introducing an element of planning and organisation into the competitive interplay of market forces.<sup>90</sup> This reasoned organisation is for Sorel historically regressive and cannot but hinder

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp. 171-2. ‘... il est certain que durant l’ère capitaliste il reste des survivances du passé et des pratiques contraires à l’allure générale du capitalisme ; il se peut que quelques entrepreneurs croient, en effet, avoir intérêt à faire la rareté ; mais c’est une exception tout à fait contraire à l’esprit du capitalisme, qui ne médite que des bouleversements de forces productives, forçant tout le monde à produire toujours plus en grand et toujours meilleur marché. Que certains *capitalistes* aient l’idée d’accroître leurs revenus en resserant le marché, je l’admets ; mais les *lois immanentes du capitalisme* s’opposent, presque toujours, à la réalisation de ce vœu d’une *économie quietiste*.’

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 174. ‘Si les cartels réalisaient le programme de leurs admirateurs, ils auraient pour effet de soumettre les échanges à la volonté arbitraire d’une corporation de producteurs et cette domination pourrait souvent n’être pas favorable au progrès des forces productives.’

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 174. ‘Il est évident que, par sa prétention d’introduire de la raison là où il existe la nécessité et le hasard, le système corporatif se rapproche beaucoup du socialisme d’État.’ The characterization of a capitalist market as dominated by both ‘necessity’ and ‘randomness’ requires explanation. The randomness pertains to the fact that individual agents operate freely in a market situation. The necessity arises when one realizes that this randomness gives rise to strong tendencies. The word necessity is a rhetorical exaggeration and should not be



the historical movement leading to socialism, which, to repeat, requires fierce competition between capitalists.<sup>91</sup> The problem, it must be underlined, is one of working class self-organization: only in the presence of these competitive conditions can the self-organization of the working class avoid being subsumed under national structures. Thus, whenever cartelisation introduces conciliation and agreement where there previously was competition, there are good reasons to be concerned.

It is important to stress that the objections Sorel makes against a planned economy are empirical rather than principled. The preference accorded to a competitive capitalism over a managed one, in other words, is justified on the basis that the former provides, by separating working class from bourgeois interests, a better environment in which the self-organization of the proletariat can occur. Without stressing this, it is quite easy to be left perplexed by quotes such as the following one:

‘The problem which must occupy the minds of socialists is the following: to what extent do these new industrial realities accelerate the progress of productive forces? [...] It is thus nonsensical to see cartels as a way of making production proportionate to consumption, to see them as the instrument of a *conscious economic harmony*. Doubtlessly, they can also be this, and the agrarian party sees them in this way; but their role, in progressive countries, is rather different.’<sup>92</sup>

The salient points of Sorel’s analysis, as developed in the two articles examined, are conducive to pessimistic conclusions. For a start, the vitality of cartels, even when they play a progressive role and lead to technological innovation and productive expansion, shows that capitalism has not come to its final days, and that thus socialism is not imminent.

‘The results obtained by cartels show that capitalism is not moribund, that it is still capable of generating many productive forces and that consequently its historical mission is not accomplished: this is a fact of considerable importance,

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taken literally. See Sorel, ‘Necessità e fatalismo nel Marxismo’ in his *Saggi di critica del Marxismo*, pp. 78-84 as well as section 4.3.2 of the present work.

<sup>91</sup> Sorel argues, for example, that falling commodity prices, which some cartels fight against, are ‘important signs of the progressive movement’. ‘Syndicats industriels’, p. 174. ‘L’avalissement des prix contre lequel les cartells s’organisent sont, dans les grandes industries en voie de progrès, une des manifestations essentielles du mouvement progressif.’

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180. ‘Le problème qui doit retenir l’attention des socialistes est celui-ci : dans quelle mesure les nouvelles combinaisons industrielles accélèrent-elles le progrès des forces productives ? C’est un problème de statistique et d’ordre tout à fait matériel. C’est donc faire un énorme contresens que de considérer les cartells comme un moyen de mettre la production en rapport avec la consommation et comme un facteur d’un *équilibre délibéré*. Sans doute ils peuvent être cela et les agrariens les considèrent surtout à ce point de vue ; mais leur rôle, dans les pays progressistes, est tout autre.’

because it shows that the moment of looking for the juridical elements that announce the dawning of the new society has not yet arrived.<sup>93</sup>

Even if wishing to maintain some optimism, one has, in other words, to admit that the work of industrial progress and destruction of old social relations and institutions that capitalism must perform is incomplete. The bourgeoisie has not yet created the world in its own image of which Marx and Engels spoke. But there are other, more worrying developments, indicating not only that the evolution of capitalism is incomplete, but that it is advancing, at least in France, in a conservative direction most unfavourable to the emergence of the working class as a revolutionary subject. Capitalism appears to have betrayed its logic of international competition, and to have rather embraced national and oligopolistic tendencies. Cartels often are mere corporative structures which prosper under a protectionist regime that ‘invokes the principle of national solidarity’,<sup>94</sup> forging institutions and social relations based on the nation rather than on class. Socialism, however, presupposes a world in which collective solidarities develop around economic interests, and in which the hostility is between those who own the means of production and those who are forced to sell their labour. The logic of national solidarity therefore destroys the class specificity of the proletariat by integrating the worker into a number of nationally grounded institutions. In both cases, the proletariat is not yet ready to inherit the capitalist world. Its institutions are still in their infancy and, what is more worrying, they are faced by historical conditions leading to their dissolution rather than to their triumph.

#### **6.4 INSEGNAMENTI SOCIALI DELL’ECONOMIA CONTEMPORANEA**

Despite the fact that, in these 1902 texts, Sorel’s tone is still mildly interrogative, it would not take him long to understand that the most important conclusion to draw from the various processes of social and economic organization he studied was that the global capitalism which had inspired Marx was being replaced by a national one that tended to assimilate Marx’s revolutionary subject, the industrial proletariat, into national frameworks. This important realization gave birth to new questions. How can the class specificity of the proletariat be maintained? How will proletarian institutions arise if powerful economic and social forces

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 179. ‘Les résultats obtenus nous démontrent que le capitalisme n’est pas moribond, qu’il est encore capable de produire beaucoup de forces productives et que par suite sa mission historique n’est pas finie : c’est là un fait d’une importance considérable, parce qu’il nous démontre que le moment n’est pas venu de chercher quels sont les éléments juridiques qui annoncent actuellement l’aurore du monde futur.’

<sup>94</sup> Sorel, ‘Socialisme et faits économiques’, p. 520. ‘Le protectionnisme invoque le principe de la solidarité nationale’.

lead to the dissolution of this class? How can such an historical subject affirm itself when it is constantly brought under the supervision and control of statist and national institutions? Though most of these questions will only find their answers in the *Reflections on violence*, it is in the *Insegnamenti sociali* that Sorel first attempts to solve them, trying to understand how these transformations affected the possibility of the emergence of a revolutionary working class.

The book never found a French publisher, possibly because it is a text consisting essentially of a revised and enlarged edition of the two articles examined in the previous section. Despite the fact that it was published in Italy only in late 1906, it was written before, between 1903 and 1905, probably mostly in 1904. The introduction to the Italian edition is dated 'March 1905', and in July of the same year its conclusions were published, in their original French, by the *Mouvement Socialiste*.<sup>95</sup> The fact that the bulk of the volume consists of the repetition, often word by word, of 'Socialisme and faits économiques' and 'Syndicats industriels', does not diminish the importance of the text. To start with, the economic analyses are widened in scope and made more thorough. But most importantly, they are better framed from a Marxist angle. In other words, the question of what these developments signify for Marxism, and for the historical possibility of a revolutionary working class, is articulated at greater length and put at the centre of the analysis. It is this sustained reflection on the possibility of a proletarian civilisation in the context of an increasingly national capitalism that makes the text absolutely fundamental reading for a correct understanding of Sorel's syndicalism, and, more specifically, of the *Reflections on violence*. Aware of a changing context, Sorel here began to articulate the strategies that could counter the powerful forces which worked against the constitution of an international, class-based, revolutionary subject.

As one commentator has argued, without unfortunately finding too large an audience, 'the *Insegnamenti* is especially interesting when viewed as a sort of *Grundrisse* or draft for his [Sorel's] most renowned work... the *Reflections on violence*'.<sup>96</sup> Though, as we have

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<sup>95</sup> See Sorel, *Insegnamenti sociali*, p. 6 and Georges Sorel, 'Conclusions aux « Enseignements sociaux de l'Economie moderne »', *Mouvement Socialiste* 7, 1905, pp. 289-99. This text is reprinted in the *Cahier de l'Herne* dedicated to Sorel, at pp. 270-5.

<sup>96</sup> John Stanley, 'Introduction', in Sorel, *Social foundations*, p. 5. Despite the existence of the translation, we shall use the original – a translation itself, from the lost original French text into Italian – throughout the analysis. On the Italian translation, it must be stated that Sorel was far from happy with the work of Vittorio Racca: the volume, he confided to Croce, was 'ni bien traduit, ni surtout bien corrigé'. See Sorel, letter to Croce 1/10/1906, *La Critica* 26, 1928, p. 95. In the years following publication, Sorel many times attempted to rewrite the text in order to organize it better and secure a French edition, but to no avail. See Jeremy Jennings, 'Georges Sorel, Social foundations of contemporary economics', *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 4, 1986, pp. 166-70.

repeatedly argued and will continue to argue in the next chapter, the two texts are strictly connected, the relationship between the *Insegnamenti* and the *Reflections* is not that of a draft to a polished version. Instead, it is the relationship between diagnosis and prescription, between examining the terrain and outlining how one is going to move within it.

#### 6.4.1 CORPORATISM, STATE SOCIALISM, AND WORKING CLASS TUTELAGE

The argumentative strategy that Sorel employed in the *Insegnamenti* is the same historical one that we have seen at work in the economic articles examined above. In other words, Sorel connects specific political, ideological, and theoretical options to precise social and economic conditions that characterized different periods of the nineteenth century. He begins by underlining the historical magnitude of the socialist transformation. Socialism is not simply a transition from individual to social property, nor does it consist in the seizure of the existing institutions of power: rather, it is an historical transformation of much greater magnitude, one that rests on the possibility of the separation of the proletarian social and economic world from the bourgeois one, and on the ability of the proletariat to develop new institutions, social relations, and ideas. To use Gramsci's pertinent expression, socialism requires the 'progressive acquisition of the consciousness of [the proletariat's] historical personality'.<sup>97</sup>

This possibility, however, largely depends on precise conditions: it requires a vital capitalism, characterized by merciless competition, productive expansion, and technological innovation. Only in these conditions will the proletariat be able to emerge as an historical force and to realize socialism, because these conditions will tend to generate what Sorel calls an 'insolidarity' between classes, and leave to the proletariat the space required for its institutional growth, which amounts to the construction of the socialist society. Plans for the organization of such society are thus moot, for this society will realize itself from below: 'new institutions will emerge out of the organizations that the proletariat will create in its preparation for the social wars; from revolutionary syndicalism will emerge the masterless workshop; a new right will emerge progressively as the *class that carries the destiny of the future* becomes capable of directing itself independently, of understanding its own activity and of managing production.'<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 333.

<sup>98</sup> Sorel, *Insegnamenti*, p. 15. '... le istituzioni nuove usciranno dalle organizzazioni che il proletariato avrà fatto in vista delle guerre sociali; dal sindacalismo rivoluzionario si passerà all'officina funzionante senza padroni; un

The bulk of the *Insegnamenti* consists of a long and multifaceted analysis of the economic and social conditions that characterize advanced European societies at the opening of the twentieth century. In this, Sorel highlights how such conditions do not lead to this separation of the working class from the bourgeoisie, nor do they facilitate the development of proletarian institutions. Instead, they tend to the ideological, social, and economic integration of the working class into the existing order, thereby removing the heart of the Marxist doctrine, i.e. the self-conscious historical agency of the proletariat. As we have stated before, most of this analysis is a literal repetition of the two texts examined above, and thus we shall not dwell on it excessively. The aspects examined are the same – protectionism, social legislation, and cartels – and the conclusions on the regressive character of these developments is, equally, the same: any attempt to break the competitive logic of international capitalism, and to introduce elements of economic and social planning, if carried out by, through, and under currently existing institutions is regressive, as it magnifies social forces that tend towards the assimilation of the proletariat into the existing bourgeois order. What Sorel highlights with greater care, however, are not only the various mechanisms through which this assimilation occurs, but also the dependency of these mechanisms on two macroeconomic regimes: corporatism and state socialism.

For example, Sorel notices the convergence of opinion between conservatives and democratic socialists on the question of cartels. Conservatives applaud cartels because they see them as ‘*collective lordships*, similar to medieval communes... policing the economic terrain that belongs to them and receiving tributes from those who utilise their services.’<sup>99</sup> Some socialists – he later refers to Kautsky – have an equally positive opinion, because they see cartels as a step towards a planned economy brought under state control: ‘they believe that the state will, at times, be forced to fight these feudal powers, and that it will need to destroy them in order to enlarge itself... the State would [thus] not have to create a communal economy, for it would find it already made, and would only have to adapt it.’<sup>100</sup> Both conservatives and socialists, however fail to realize that cartels ‘organize themselves to

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diritto nuovo ne uscirà a misura che la *classe che porta i destini dell'avvenire* diverrà più capace di dirigersi in modo indipendente, di comprendere essa stessa la sua attività e d'amministrare la produzione.’

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p.297. ‘Per i *feudali* i *cartells* sono delle *signorie collettive* come lo erano i Comuni del Medio Evo: queste signorie hanno dominio eminente, esercitano la polizia sopra il terreno economico che loro appartiene e percepiscono delle imposte sopra tutti coloro che hanno bisogno di ricorrere ai loro servizi.’

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 298. ‘Molti socialisti vedono con piacere il progresso dei *cartells*, perché essi pensano che lo Stato entrerà, qualche volta, in lotta con queste potenze feudali e ch'esso sarà costretto a distruggerli per ingrandirsi... lo Stato non avrebbe da creare, esso stesso, un'economia comune, la troverebbe preparata e non avrebbe che da adattarla.’

eliminate economic anarchy, the fatality that dominates producers, and to lead industrial life towards rational planning...'<sup>101</sup> With the important exception of America, Sorel detects in the behaviour of cartels what he calls '*anticapitalistic vices*'.<sup>102</sup> Cartels tend to economic management, and their decisions are characterized by a 'light-hearted complacency that is rather contrary to the true tendencies of capitalism.'<sup>103</sup> Because they limit competition, and tend towards monopoly or oligopoly, they generate arbitrary powers and introduce 'feudalism into the industrial world, for the prosperity of businesses would not depend anymore on technology, on commercial prowess, or on capital size, but mostly on the rank occupied by the owner in the social hierarchy.'<sup>104</sup>

Now, such reasoned planning and '*anticapitalistic vices*' would yield either corporatism or state socialism. In the first case, 'There would be a State for coal mines, one for blast furnaces, one for mills... and, finally, the Estates General of metallurgy. This organization would be very similar to that of the *ancien régime*, and it is evident that it is at least inspired by ideas of the past.'<sup>105</sup> Under this arrangement, 'it would be impossible to deny the workers a place in these industrial Estates General'. But what would these representatives do in such an assembly? They would 'demand sacrifices to the owners' threatening them with the 'force that derives from the possibility of striking.'<sup>106</sup> They would partially obtain what they demand, but at the immense cost of, on the one hand, slowing down economic and technological progress, and, on the other, of pooling their interests together with those of the owners and thus abdicating their progressive historical role. Corporatism thus leads neither to economic progress nor to proletarian socialism, and the (German, for Sorel) idea of an

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 314. '...essi si organizzano... per far scomparire l'anarchia economica, la fatalità che domina i produttori, e condurre la società industriale su una via ragionata...'

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 322.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. '...si trovano nei *cartells* difetti che si manifestano negli affari controllati da vicino dallo Stato; vi si genera una certa soddisfazione spensierata molto opposta alle vere tendenze del capitalismo.'

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 323-4. 'Così il regime dei *cartells* tende ad introdurre nell'industria una specie di feudalità, poiché la prosperità delle imprese non dipenderebbe più dalla scienza tecnica, dall'abilità commerciale o dalla forza in capitali, ma soprattutto dall'ordine che i padroni occupano nella gerarchia sociale.'

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 315. 'Vi sarebbe uno Stato delle miniere di carbone, un altro degli alti forni, un altro dei laminatoi, etc. e infine degli Stati-generalis della metallurgia. Questa costituzione ricorderebbe molto quelle dell'*ancien régime*, ed è evidente ch'esse, almeno, sono ispirate da idee analoghe a quelle di altri tempi.'

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 316. 'Evidentemente non si potrebbe rifiutare di dare un posto in questi Stati Generali di un'industria ai rappresentanti operai... I sindacati operai andrebbero là allo scopo di domandare sacrifici ai padroni, e con la minaccia di impiegare la forza che risulta dallo sciopero, costringere questi ad accettare...'

industrial parliament resembles ‘medieval diets, in which diplomatic discussions between delegates yielded compromises between various interests.’<sup>107</sup>

On the other hand, cartels could be seen, as they are by many socialists, as a step towards a centrally directed economy under the control of a democratic state. But even this solution is profoundly unsatisfactory for Sorel, who is extremely suspicious of any attempt at economic organization that starts from existing institutions, preferring to leave the administration of production in the hands of the proletarian institutions to come. However, leaving aside the fact that the administrative capabilities of the proletariat were seen by Sorel as being too distant from the level required to administer an advanced economy, planning does not appeal to Sorel, mostly because of the fact that it does not appear to him as being conducive to growth: ‘the experience of cartels shows that the difficulties of central planning would be enormous.’<sup>108</sup> This surfaces most clearly in the critical manner with which he deals with Kautsky’s plans of socialist economic administration articulated in his *Social Revolution*.<sup>109</sup> The adaptation of production to consumption outlined by Kautsky is dismissed on the basis that ‘consumption is variable’, and Kautsky’s reasoning sarcastically labelled as ‘a beautiful tautology’.<sup>110</sup> Crises of capitalism, concedes Sorel, are problematic, but ‘it is not by dreaming about the circumstances of patriarchal life in a fossilized past that it will be possible to reason on how to alleviate evils which are the side effect of the spirit of initiative.’<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 318. ‘Il progetto d’una rappresentanza generale della produzione e del consumo... ci viene dalla Germania, e là è completamente al suo posto perché i parlamenti di questo paese ... [sono] delle diete al modo del Medio Evo, nelle quali si impegnano delle discussioni diplomatiche tra plenipotenziari e che arrivano a stabilire dei compromessi tra i vari interessi.’

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 326. ‘...trovo che l’esperienza dei *cartells* ci prova che le difficoltà d’una gestione centralizzata sarebbero enormi.’

<sup>109</sup> Karl Kautsky, *The Social Revolution* [1902] (Chicago, Charles Kerr & Co: 1903) available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1902/socrev/>, last accessed 14/9/2014. The text, originally a series of two lectures delivered in April 1902 at the Amsterdam and Delft Socialist Reading Circle, was translated from German by Camille Polack for the *Mouvement Socialiste*, in which Sorel read it. See Karl Kautsky, ‘Reformes sociales et révolution sociale’, *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 4, 1902, pp. 1537-45, 1633-48, 1748-53 and 1835-91; Karl Kautsky, ‘Le lendemain de la révolution sociale’, *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 5, 1903, pp. 203-20, 309-28 and 385-418. The repeated critical references that Sorel makes to Kautsky’s text are interesting: the Frenchman saw the German theorist not only as a convinced supporter of state socialism, but also, targeting Kautsky’s precise plans of social organisation developed in the second part of his text, as a good example of the kind of utopianism and hollow planning that flourishes in the absence of a strong and organised proletariat.

<sup>110</sup> Sorel, *Insegnamenti*, p. 325. ‘Basta assegnare ad ogni fabbrica ciò che essa deve produrre; si obietterebbe inutilmente che il consumo è variabile: ma esso varia in ragione delle alternative dell’attività e del riposo industriale; ora si suppone che si sopprimeranno queste alternative; dunque tutto essendo regolare, sarà facile avere ovunque una produzione regolare. Ecco una bella tautologia.’

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 326. ‘... non è sognando le condizioni della vita patriarcale d’un passato fossilizzato, che si potrà ragionare sopra i mezzi d’attenuare mali che sono la controparte dello spirito d’iniziativa.’

Both under corporatism and under state socialism it remains true, then, that '*industry suffers when it is governed through the principles of the State*'.<sup>112</sup> What Sorel means by this is that the solution to the ills of capitalism does not consist in the erection of structures capable of limiting its progress. On the contrary, the solution to those ills can only come from the class that emerges when capitalism triumphs, that is from the organized proletariat. The competitive market conditions in which capitalists operate – what Sorel calls the world of capitalist fatality – give birth to '*the emerging world of freedom*'; organised workers arise against disunited capitalists; those who aspire to a socialist society without masters revolt against masters who have created conditions for an extraordinarily rich society.'<sup>113</sup> The emergence of the proletariat depends on the vitality of capitalism, and this is why the 'anticapitalistic vices' of cartels and the evolutions towards corporatism or state socialism are damaging to socialism, because they destroy the conditions capable of giving birth to new proletarian institutions. The problem, in other words, is not exclusively one of economic organisation versus economic anarchy, but also one of class-consciousness and class organization. In the absence of a strong, conscious, and institutionally organized proletariat, all attempts towards economic organisation will have regressive consequences and lead to the dissolution of the working class.

#### **6.4.2 MARX'S SHORTCOMINGS AND THE 'SPIRIT OF SEPARATION'**

It is here that the weaknesses of Marx's thought manifest themselves most evidently for Sorel. Essentially, Marx made three interconnected mistakes. To start with, he took capitalism for granted, and had an excessive faith in its ability to destroy older social relations and to create a world dominated by the competitive logic of markets. This led him to underestimate the influence that other forces, most notably the state and its institutions, could exert over capitalism, leading him to ignore the possibility that they might radically transform capitalism. Finally, because of his excessive faith in the power of global capitalism, he was led to underestimate the complexity and difficulty involved in the formation the proletarian revolutionary subject, believing that an organized and conscious working class would arise almost automatically:

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 324. '*...l'industria soffre per essere governata secondo i principii dello Stato.*'

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 391. '*A questo mondo della fatalità crescente si oppone il mondo della libertà in via di formazione; di fronte ai capitalisti disuniti, sorgono i lavoratori che cercano di raggrupparsi; contro i padroni che creano le condizioni di una società prodigiosamente ricca, si rivoltano coloro che si orientano verso una vita socialista senza padroni.*'



‘The spirit of class struggle does not arise mechanically from conflicts over salary; experience teaches us that these conflicts can be resolved in a way conducive to social peace and inspiring solidarity between classes. In order to produce and, above all, to maintain the *spirit of separation* it is necessary to have *institutions capable of generating and developing it*; on this point, Marx’s thought is severely deficient.’<sup>114</sup>

Once again, the crux of the question lies in the enormous distance separating the world in which Marx lived from that of the beginning of the twentieth century. The ‘experience’ that teaches contemporaries that the conflicting interests of salaried workers and capitalists can be reconciled through a corporatist economy under statist supervision, accompanied by an ideology of national solidarity between classes was not available to Marx. The German philosopher understood society in a binary way, as characterized by the opposition between the anarchic competition of the capitalist world and the reasoned organization of the proletarian one. The state was seen by him as incapable of being anything else but a puppet of the bourgeoisie; ‘Lassalle, on the contrary, saw the state as an independent force, capable of breaking capitalism; his model was Prussia, in which the tradition of Frederick the Great was still alive...’<sup>115</sup> The experience of the end of the nineteenth century proves Lassalle right and Marx wrong, and not just on the question of the state: ‘Marx thought that the working class was the only class capable of uniting itself, and that it would face a capitalism increasingly divided by competition; but now we see that capitalists organize themselves too in a methodical way.’<sup>116</sup>

The consequence of this capacity for capitalist self-organization is that workers ‘ask themselves how they might ever be able to replace the formidable organization of the bourgeoisie. They become fearful and... incline towards reformism or State socialism.’<sup>117</sup> There are, in short, ‘a number of general causes’ that have transformed socialism from the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 182. ‘Lo spirito della lotta di classe non si produce automaticamente in causa di conflitti che hanno luogo per il salario; l’esperienza ci insegna che questi conflitti possono essere risolti in modo da produrre la pace sociale e di mettere in rilievo la solidarietà delle classi. Perché lo *spirito di separazione* si produca e, soprattutto, si mantenga, occorrono *delle istituzioni capaci di generarlo e svilupparlo*; è su questo punto che l’insegnamento di Marx è più difettoso.’ Though we cannot pursue this connection in detail, Sorel’s ‘spirito di separazione’ is the reference for Gramsci’s ‘spirito di scissione’.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 393. ‘Lassalle, al contrario, vedeva nello Stato una forza libera, capace d’infrangere il capitalismo; egli pensava alla Prussia, in cui la tradizione di Federico il Grande sussisteva ancora.’

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 337. ‘Marx aveva creduto che la classe operaia fosse la sola capace di unificarsi, e che essa troverebbe davanti a sé un capitalismo sempre più diviso dalla concorrenza; ora succede che i padroni s’organizzano essi pure, in modo metodico...’

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., pp. 336-7. ‘...essi fanno tristi riflessioni sulla debolezza dei sindacati ch’essi rappresentano, e si domandano come essi potrebbero sostituirsi a una organizzazione altrettanto formidabile di quella della classe borghese. Essi diventano timidi e in conseguenza... comincia a prodursi in loro una tendenza verso le idee riformiste o verso il socialismo di stato.’

historical movement of proletarian self-organization into the struggle for the conquest of power under presently existing institutions.<sup>118</sup> These causes should by now be familiar: protectionism, ‘which generates notions of solidarity [amongst classes]’ and has convinced socialist MPs that the right strategy is that of ‘appealing to the benevolence of the State in favour of their poor electors.’<sup>119</sup> Cartels, that have ‘reinforced the notion of solidarity’ and have given birth to the introduction into economics of ‘methods borrowed from politics’ that, as we have seen, favour the reconciliation of conflicting economic interests in the same way as medieval diets did. When this reconciliation yields economic benefits, then parliamentary socialism has pretty much won the battle against Marxism. Workers would need ‘a heroic courage not to profit from the partial concessions that power can grant. Giving prominence to the electoral struggle means conceding to reformists the most essential aspect of their tactic.’<sup>120</sup>

These developments have precise ideological consequences that further reinforce the state of inferiority in which the proletariat already finds itself. The social duties that flourish under a proto-corporatist regime presuppose a social hierarchy, and silently assume that the only redemption for the proletariat consists in the charity that the bourgeoisie bestows upon it. In Sorel’s striking words: ‘bourgeois magnanimity is a certificate of working class inferiority’.<sup>121</sup> These are, to Sorel, corrupting tendencies that ‘accustom’ the proletariat to ‘take the existence of a superior class as the starting point of all its reasonings’.<sup>122</sup> It is superfluous to add that the material benefits deriving from these measures do not contribute to the historical development of the proletariat, and that in a socialist society without masters ‘there can be no place for such notions of social duties’.<sup>123</sup> Thus, while on the one hand ‘capitalists become increasingly soft, and are each day more aware of the necessity of accomplishing their *social duty*’, workers, on the other hand, ‘appeal to the good sentiments

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 395. ‘Delle cause generali hanno precipitato questo movimento di degenerazione, e reso molto difficile un ritorno alle antiche idee.’

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 395-6. ‘La politica protezionista che domina sempre più, tende a generare le nozioni di solidarietà... e i deputati socialisti hanno stimato che la loro funzione fosse soprattutto quella di fare appello alla benevolenza dello Stato, in favore dei loro elettori poveri.’

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 341. ‘Ci vorrebbe un coraggio eroico per non profittare dei vantaggi parziali che procura il potere. Mettere in primo ordine la lotta elettorale, è concedere ai riformisti la parte più essenziale della loro tattica.’

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 38 ‘La magnanimità della borghesia è un brevetto di inferiorità dato alla classe operaia’.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 35. ‘... corromperebbe il pensiero popolare fino alle sue radici, abituandolo a prendere per base dei suoi ragionamenti l’esistenza d’una classe superiore.’

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 31. ‘In una società socialista pienamente sbarazzata dei padroni, non può più esservi posto per queste antiche nozioni di doveri sociali; se ciò non apparisce perfettamente evidente a molte persone, è che poco numerosi sono ancora quelli che concepiscono una società senza padroni.’ On Menger and social duties see *ibid.*, pp. 23-30.

of their masters, beg them for higher salaries and accept that their leaders present them as children that need to be treated with lenience.<sup>124</sup> These profound historical transformations were all unforeseen by Marx, who lived in an era in which ‘the progress of capitalism smashed... all the obstacles that laws, family traditions, local and ethnic reasons could oppose to it...’<sup>125</sup> and whose theory ‘completely ignores the continuous enlargement of the modern State, that progresses in parallel with the enlargement of capitalism.’<sup>126</sup>

Sorel insists a great deal on the fact that these developments unforeseen by Marx initiated the degeneration of Marxism, which has currently abandoned the idea of proletarian institutional development in favour of that of the conquest of the existing institutions of power. Marxism has become ‘the theory of a new [17]93’ and has embraced the belief in ‘the magical power of governmental force’.<sup>127</sup> These developments make the maintenance of the spirit of separation an imperative far more important than it could have been in Marx’s time, when powerful historical forces worked for the maintenance of this spirit. And thus the question becomes that of how to resist institutional and ideological assimilation in the absence of the necessary institutional and economic conditions.

### 6.4.3 STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

Sorel retains the minimum optimism required for the elaboration of a number of strategies of proletarian resistance to assimilation. One should, clearly, be aware of the transformations that work against the constitution of the proletariat as a revolutionary agent, and reflect seriously on their consequences. But for Sorel, the class antagonism that animates capitalism has not fully vanished: ‘it matters little that the revolution did not occur as Marx expected, as long as the organization of the workshop does not change so much as to eradicate what Marx saw as essential to it. As long as the work contract is a sale, and this sale occurs in a free

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid. ‘I capitalisti divengono più arrendevoli, e sono ogni giorno più penetrati della necessità di compiere il *dovere sociale*; il grande ostacolo che incontrerà oramai il socialismo proverrà dal dovere sociale. I lavoratori fanno appello ai buoni sentimenti dei loro padroni, chiedono a questi di far loro l’elemosina di salari migliori, e accettano che i loro capi li rappresentino come bambini che bisogna trattare con indulgenza!’

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 391. ‘il progresso del capitalismo sopprimeva, ai tempi di Marx, tutti gli ostacoli che le leggi, le tradizioni famigliari, le ragioni locali ed etniche avevano potuto opporgli...’

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. ‘essa non tiene nessun conto dell’ingrandimento continuo dello Stato moderno, che marcia di pari passo con quello del capitalismo.’

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 394. ‘Si fu così condotti a concepire il Marxismo come la teoria di un nuovo ’93, e a considerare come essenziale una concezione del potere magico della forza del governo. Si trattava d’impadronirsi dell’autorità e di servirsene per cambiare il mondo.’ In the following page Sorel argues that as soon as soon as the electoral struggle started being successful, the socialist ideal became that of an economy controlled by a state in which socialist deputies would play an increasingly important role, with the result that ‘in the present day Marx’s principles have been completely replaced by a mixture of Lassalleism and democratic appetites.’

market, average wages follow Ricardo's theory, and classes remain independent from each other.'<sup>128</sup> At the same time, despite this cautious optimism on the permanence of a fundamental clash of interests between salaried workers and owners of the means of production in contemporary capitalism, new developments cannot be ignored, and they call for a number of countermeasures, essentially for a new strategy capable of dealing with a new capitalism. The main challenge is that of how to ensure class separation in an environment in which the proletariat 'does not look with contempt upon bourgeois civilisation, but with admiration and envy and aspires to think with the ideas of the ruling class.'<sup>129</sup>

It is, and it is fundamental to underline this, as an answer to this question that Sorel begins to reflect upon violence. What is the role of violence in revolutionary transformations?

'... its value is wholly negative and destructive; it is necessary to halt a certain social development and allow a new one to emerge, but this is all it can achieve. Our academic socialists, fully immersed in the ecclesiastical spirit, mistake themselves when they attribute to violence the power of putting into practice the consequences of dogmas formulated by theorists.'<sup>130</sup>

Violence, thus, can generate neither the proletarian society nor any kind of new society. Only institutions can give rise to new social conglomerations. However, its destructive role makes violence interesting in the present context, because it can fight against the assimilationist tendencies that characterize capitalist societies at the opening of the century. Violence is an instrument of class separation, an instrument that becomes important when a corporatist and statist capitalism fails to produce the class antagonisms that are essential to an historically progressive capitalism. Acts of violence, together with revolutionary strikes, can be useful, and whenever they occur, 'the essential question is to determine how much the acts of

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<sup>128</sup> Sorel, *Insegnamenti*, pp. 393-4. 'Importa poco che la rivoluzione non si sia prodotta come Marx supponeva, purché l'organizzazione dell'opificio non si modifichi a tal punto da far sparire ciò che egli vi aveva osservato di essenziale. Finché il contratto di lavoro è una vendita, e questa vendita si fa sul mercato libero, la remunerazione media è conforme alle concezioni di Ricardo e le classi sono indipendenti l'una dall'altra.'

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-2. 'Oggi il proletariato non si trova in questa situazione; esso non disprezza la civiltà borghese, l'invidia e l'ammira; aspira ad assimilarsi le idee della classe dei padroni.' See also Sorel's 'L'esprit petit bourgeois', a short appendix written around the same period, most probably in 1905, for a planned Italian edition of the 'Avenir socialiste des syndicats'. Originally published in the *Mouvement Socialiste*, the text is reprinted in Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Paris, Marcel Rivière : 1921), pp. 145-51.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-2. 'La violenza ha avuto una parte completamente preponderante; ma noi vediamo quale è il suo valore; esso è tutto negativo e distruttivo; essa è necessaria per arrestare uno sviluppo e per permettere ad uno nuovo di nascere, ma è questo tutto quello che può fare. I nostri socialisti universitari, che sono imbevuti di spirito ecclesiastico, si ingannano quando attribuiscono alla violenza il potere di mettere in pratica le conseguenze dei dogmi formulati dai teorici.'

violence of strikers have pushed back the idea of social duty.’<sup>131</sup> It is also extremely important to underline that Sorel assigns to violence the status of an, as it were, emergency measure, rather than seeing it as an essential requirement of any revolutionary transformation: ‘acts of violence are the most effective means of maintaining class separation in the absence of sufficiently strong and independent institutions, constituted in the womb of the proletariat, capable of guaranteeing this separation.’<sup>132</sup> As we shall see in a few pages, this argument will receive a longer elaboration in the *Reflection*.

Sorel returns constantly to what he sees as Marx’s greatest shortcoming, i.e. the superficiality with which he dealt with the problem of class formation. The success of socialism depends entirely on the growth in complexity of the proletarian social organism, i.e. on the existence of a wide and diversified set of proletarian institutions capable of harbouring the vast array of human activities that make up what we call civilisation.<sup>133</sup> To separate this class from the dominant institutions and to allow it to develop this wealth of new and complex social arrangements is an enormously difficult task, and is a task that is made even more difficult by the assimilationist tendencies examined by Sorel. And yet, Marx ‘spoke as if the socialist idea, spread amongst workers engaged in a corporatist struggle against their bosses, would be sufficient to produce the organization of the proletariat...’<sup>134</sup> As we have seen before, Sorel concedes that Marx’s ideas were formed under the influence of a different capitalism from that which dominates Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, and thus his negligence can be partially understood. But even in conditions of a vibrant and historically progressive capitalism class-consciousness does not arise automatically: ‘*the socialist feeling is extremely artificial*, and Marx’s great fault was that of not insisting on this point’.<sup>135</sup>

Sorel’s awareness of the changing capitalism of the early twentieth century, thus, brings him to consider the problem of class-consciousness as an incredibly important and urgent one. Under a certain type of capitalist regime, this consciousness is implanted in and supported by

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 55. ‘...la grande questione non è di sapere qual vantaggio materiale può avere guadagnato una corporazione; l’essenziale è di determinare in quale misura l’idea di dovere sociale è stata respinta dalle violenze degli scioperanti.’

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. Underlining mine. ‘...le violenze sono il mezzo più efficace per mantenere la separazione delle classi fintanto che non vi sono istituzioni abbastanza forti e abbastanza indipendenti, costituite nel seno del proletariato, per assicurare questa separazione.’

<sup>133</sup> In particular, the socialist society will need to develop institutions capable of harbouring the progresses of law and of science. See *Insegnamenti*, pp. 56-72.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 392. ‘...egli [Marx] ha parlato e agito come se la parola socialista cadendo in mezzo agli operai impegnati in conflitti d’ordine corporativo coi padroni, bastasse a produrre l’organizzazione del proletariato...’

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 342. ‘*Il sentimento socialista è estremamente artificiale*; e il grande torto di Marx è stato di non insistere su questo principio...’

autonomous institutions; but in conditions of protectionism and national solidarity things are more complicated, for the autonomy of these institutions is constantly and systemically threatened. This is the emergency situation that might call for violence as a means of establishing class separation. Despite his awareness of the difficulties, Sorel does not quite yet give up on the historical possibility of proletarian socialism: 'It is not yet possible to affirm that Marxism is dead; but it is time to examine more closely the means that can allow the development of the revolutionary proletariat.'<sup>136</sup>

The list of prescriptions with which Sorel ends the *Insegnamenti* constitutes a mix of short and long-term measures. On the short term, the imperative is the maintenance of proletarian autonomy and resistance to the assimilationist forces of the state. Thus he advocates, for example, the abandonment of parliamentarism in order to preserve the class specificity of the socialist movement, and urges socialists 'not to present themselves as the party of the poor, but as that of workers.'<sup>137</sup> He calls for socialist abstention from 'institutions created by the State and by the bourgeoisie' and, echoing the conclusions to the 'Avenir socialiste des syndicats', suggests that workers ought to 'lock themselves up in workers' unions [camere del lavoro] and concentrate proletarian life around them.'<sup>138</sup> In the long term, the hope is that of reinstating a virtuous and historically progressive dynamic capable of creating productive expansion, technological innovation, and, of course, that 'insolidarity' between classes that constitutes the most fertile environment that emerging proletarian institutions could ever hope to find. Thus, in addition to the violence highlighted above, he recommends the rejection of any 'measure that might slow down industrial activity, even when it might momentarily benefit workers'<sup>139</sup> Resistance to assimilation and the creation of an environment capable of fostering class separation: these are, as we shall see, the central themes of the *Reflections on violence*.

## 6.5 CONCLUSION

Before continuing, it might be worth offering a quick synopsis of the steps taken in this chapter. We have begun by examining how Sorel progressively came to see the post-Dreyfus

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 397. 'Ancora non si può dunque dire che il Marxismo sia colpito a morte; ma è alfine tempo che si esaminino più da vicino i mezzi che possono permettere lo sviluppo del proletariato rivoluzionario.'

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 397. '...non presentarsi come il partito dei poveri, ma come quello dei lavoratori...'

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 398. '...rifiutare ogni partecipazione di delegati operai alle istituzioni create dallo Stato e dalla borghesia; - rinchiudersi nelle camere del lavoro e concentrare attorno ad esse tutta la vita operaia.'

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. '...respingere ogni misura che possa restringere l'attività industriale, anche quando essa sembri momentaneamente favorevole agli operai...'

republican consensus in a negative way. We have suggested that the spectacle of an efficient republican state determined to cleanse French society of its reactionary foes and to reinforce republican institutions opened Sorel's eyes to the effects that such a state could have on the working class. We then have dedicated the last part of the chapter to an examination Sorel's analyses of the new capitalism, focussing on the questions of protectionism, social legislation, and economic organisation. We have highlighted that Sorel believed, rather correctly as a matter of historical record, that these developments produced assimilationist consequences for the working class, i.e. that they worked against the emergence of autonomous proletarian institutions arising from the experience of production in an advanced capitalist regime. We have thus underlined how the problem of class separation – of resistance to such tendencies – became central in Sorel's thought and how, despite his awareness of the extremely difficult conditions in which the proletariat found itself, he tentatively outlined a number of strategies capable of protecting its class specificity.





## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENCE

‘La lotta di classe effettiva richiede la classe che la combatta e che la sappia combattere. Per fare la lotta di classe occorre innanzitutto la classe: ecco un’umile verità che i Lapalisse del socialismo internazionale pur mo’ cominciano a intuire.’

Il Divenire Sociale, 1905.<sup>1</sup>

‘Cosa si può contrapporre, da parte di una classe innovatrice, a questo complesso formidabile di trincee e fortificazioni della classe dominante? Lo spirito di scissione, cioè il progressivo acquisto della coscienza della propria personalità storica, spirito di scissione che deve tendere ad allargarsi dalla classe protagonista alle classi alleate potenziali...’

Antonio Gramsci, 1930<sup>2</sup>

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the final chapter of the thesis we examine Sorel’s most infamous book, the *Reflections on violence*. As we have highlighted in our introduction, this is the text on which a vast array of substantially misleading readings of Sorel, both contemporary and past are based. More than about Sorel, the Sorelian legend examined at the beginning of this thesis is a legend about the *Reflections on violence*, and thus it is necessary to examine this text in some depth. In what follows we shall try to read the *Reflections* in light of the two lines of enquiry that we have pursued throughout the thesis, i.e. the epistemological and Marxist themes. It is, however the latter aspect which sheds more light on this very complex text. The *Reflections*, we shall argue, are Sorel’s attempted solution to the problem of working class organization that he had begun analysing in the *Insegnamenti*, and they outline a number of possible strategies for the preservation of a revolutionary subject arising out of the experience of production in a capitalist economy. The background against which the *Reflections* should be read, in other words, is Sorel’s analysis of the mechanisms of assimilation that he had outlined in the *Insegnamenti*, and which he largely repeats in the *Reflections*. But, as many other Sorelian texts, the *Reflections* goes in many different directions, and thus it will also be necessary to go back, especially in the interpretation of the concept of myth, to the epistemological

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<sup>1</sup> Il Divenire, ‘Torniamo alla vita!’, *Il Divenire Sociale* 1, 1905, p. 3. ‘Real class struggle requires a class to fight it and able to fight it. To engage in class struggle what is required, first and most, is the class: here is a humble truth that the representatives of international socialism are just now beginning to understand.’

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. 1, p. 333.

considerations on social sciences that had characterised his first and decisive engagement with Marx.

By incorporating this very complex and at times perplexing text into the wider context of Sorel's intellectual trajectory, we shall attempt to dissipate much of the obscurity which still surrounds it, trying to emphasize what is perhaps the source of most misunderstanding, namely that it is a series of considerations on class, class consciousness, and class formation, rather than a book about revolution. We shall begin with a number of preliminary remarks, in order to then move on to an analysis of the first section of the text, in which Sorel clearly circumscribes the argument for violence, assigning to proletarian violence precise limits, and more importantly an expected outcome. We then deal with the dynamics of class formation that can result from the immediate task of resistance to assimilation, and, in the longer term, through the experience of production in the context of a historically progressive capitalism. We conclude with a section in which we explain the notion of myth by connecting it to Sorel's understanding of Marxist social science.

## **7.2 PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

In this introductory section we do two things. First, we outline the general argument of the *Reflections*, i.e. we try to bring out the fundamental line of reasoning that animates the text - the bass note of the argument. We argue that the *Reflections*, also because of chronological reasons must be read as intimately connected to the analysis of the destruction of the class identity of the proletariat that Sorel had developed in the period between 1902 and 1905. If this hypothesis is accepted, it follows that the *Reflections* is a book about class rather than about revolution, and this, it is believed, gives to the reader a fundamental interpretative key to the text. Secondly, we briefly outline the complex editorial history of the book. We suggest that the greatest difference between the first Italian, and the 1908 French version, which has since become the standard reference for scholarly studies, is that the latter text is characterized, and perhaps burdened, by the addition of a number of secondary issues and questions, which tend to obscure its central argument. In the latter versions of the book we find, for example, references to John Henry Newman's *Grammar of Assent* and to Bergson's just published *L'Évolution Créatrice*, references that would sit awkwardly in the straightforward Marxist framework that characterized the first Italian version of the

*Reflection*.<sup>3</sup> What we suggest is that, in preparing the text for the French edition as a book, Sorel sought to bring its content to bear on a number of philosophical, epistemological, and religious discussions that were central to the French intellectual context of the early twentieth century. Simply, he added more layers to the text, transforming a relatively straightforward reflection on class identity into the complex text that we have come to know.

### 7.2.1 A BOOK ABOUT CLASS, NOT REVOLUTION

The background against which the *Reflections on violence* should be read and examined is the diagnosis of capitalist evolution as outlined by Sorel in the seminal 1902 articles, and at greater length in the *Insegnamenti sociali*. As we have seen, Sorel had become aware of the transformations that were occurring in advanced European capitalist societies, and had identified a number of important differences between mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century capitalism, which according to him, explained the state of crisis in which Marxism had fallen. The defining traits of the new capitalism were its moderation, its ability to work with institutions, especially national ones, with which it should have normally entered into conflict, and most importantly its tendency to absorb the working class into bourgeois institutions and ideologies, and thus to blur the conflict between salaried workers and owners of the means of production that Marx had seen – and Sorel still saw – as essential to a vital and historically progressive capitalism. This process of working class assimilation was particularly problematic for Sorel, who had always conceived of socialism as the society resulting from the triumph of a precisely defined historical subject – the modern proletariat. The realization of socialism was seen, accordingly, as a slow process of institutional evolution, a process in which the social relations, ideas, economic, administrative and political forms that regulated the life of proletarian institutions would have gradually imposed themselves upon the existing order. We have repeatedly emphasized this *longue durée* understanding of the socialist transformation in Sorel's writings, but it is necessary to go back to it in order to understand the questions and issues that are at the heart of the *Reflections*.

As early as his study on Vico in 1896, Sorel had argued that the proletarian revolution would not be a work of historical destruction, but instead, as is any historical transformation of considerable magnitude, it would be characterized by a remarkable continuity. The

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<sup>3</sup> This reference to the *Évolution créatrice* was added in the third edition of 1912, see Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 133n. The Bergson invoked by Sorel throughout the text, however, is the Bergson concerned about freedom and determinism with which he had engaged already in the late 1880s and early 1890s – it is the Bergson of the *Données*, rather than that of the *Évolution*.

revolutionary upheaval would only arrive when the ‘work of preparation’ of the proletariat, i.e. its slow process of institutional growth, was completed, thereby sanctioning and giving an official, *de jure*, stamp to institutions and social relations which would have long been, *de facto*, dominant in society. The revolution would be, in other words, an historical detail, for the real transformation would have already occurred, silently and subterraneously. Pushing this insight to its logical conclusion, he had stated that ‘the greatest revolution that one can conceive will be peaceful, for it will not be faced by forces capable of rising again against it.’<sup>4</sup> It is thus not only the revolutionary upheaval that is unimportant in this *longue durée* understanding of the socialist transformation, but also violence which, it must be underlined forcefully, functions as a negative indicator of the ripeness of the historical conditions for socialism: the greater the violence required, the less developed the structures of the new society. A few years later, Sorel admitted that a revolution without violence was perhaps impossible, but did not change its marginal and secondary importance when compared to the *longue durée* process of institutional development: ‘Violence’ he wrote in 1899 ‘still remains: but it is merely the struggle necessary to make old branches fall, to give air to young and vital creations, to ensure the victory of institutions having already passed their tests.’<sup>5</sup>

The sudden centrality that violence assumes in Sorel’s socialist thought cannot then be understood as a radical change of opinion on its role and on the possibilities that it can open up. To argue this, in the absence of a substantial explanation, would be hermeneutically adventurous to say the least, and it is more correct to believe, instead, that violence remains a secondary factor when compared to the process of institutional development. Violence, in other words, does not become capable of creating a new socialist society: its character, as Sorel repeated in the *Insegnamenti*, remains ‘wholly negative and destructive’.<sup>6</sup> But then why dedicate so many writings to a reflection on violence? The answer has already been implicitly given in the previous chapter, and has to do with Sorel’s newfound awareness of the difficult circumstances facing the European working class in the opening of the new century. As we have shown, Sorel had begun to understand the power of a number of social and economic forces that tended to the dissolution of the class identity of the proletariat. Powerful

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<sup>4</sup> Sorel, ‘Étude sur Vico’, p. 935. ‘... la plus grande révolution que l’esprit puisse concevoir sera pacifique, - puisqu’elle ne trouvera pas, devant elle, des forces capable de renaitre.’

<sup>5</sup> Sorel, ‘L’éthique du socialisme’, p. 289. la violence reste toujours ; mais elle n’est que l’effort nécessaire pour faire tomber de vieilles branches, pour donner de l’air à des créations jeunes et pleines de vie, pour assurer la victoire à des institutions ayant fait leurs preuves ; - elle n’est que l’anticipation sur l’unanimité qui va se former incessamment et qui rendra les réformes intangibles.’

<sup>6</sup> Sorel, *Insegnamenti*, p. 42. ‘esso [the value of violence] è tutto negativo e distruttivo’.

mechanisms of assimilation of the working class into the bourgeois order were at work, and this was extremely problematic as it countered the constitution of the proletariat into a conscious revolutionary subject, halting the historical process of institutional growth that would eventually have led to socialism. Under a parliamentary regime, under a protected and increasingly planned economy, and in an ideological climate of national solidarity, the proletariat could never have developed its own autonomous institutions. Consequently, socialism would have become unrealizable: without the real movement, i.e. without the proletariat as an historical agent, deploying this agency in a process of institutional creation and development, Sorel's socialism lost its cornerstone. The main avenue to socialism, in other words, was blocked, and these exceptional conditions called for exceptional countermeasures, amongst which violence stood out. These measures would have had to, on the one hand, foster a successful practice of resistance to assimilation, whereas on the other, in the longer term, they would have had to be conducive to the restoration of historically progressive processes of class separation and productive expansion, which were the necessary, though insufficient, conditions for the birth of durable and vital proletarian institutions.

The *Reflections*, to repeat once more, are a series of solutions to the problem diagnosed in the *Insegnamenti*. Under, so to speak, 'normal' conditions of international, competitive and expansive capitalism these reflections would be unnecessary, for historical conditions would work in favour of the emergence of the working class as an historical agent and as a revolutionary subject. But in these unforeseen conditions, the maintenance of class separation becomes an imperative life or death question, and violence an extremely useful tool. This brings us to a decisive point, namely that the central problem of the *Reflections* is not that of revolution, but that of class. The questions of how to conquer power, of how to overthrow the existing order are very marginal in the *Reflections*: what animates the text is the problem of how to prevent the dissolution of the ideological and institutional identity of the proletariat. In a very general but absolutely fundamental way, the *Reflections* are an emergency manual, written with a recently acquired understanding of the existing mechanisms of assimilation, for the preservation of the revolutionary subject in a hostile environment. The scope of application of its arguments is, consequently, circumscribed to this specific, though important, problem of class preservation and formation.

A great number of interpretative mistakes on the *Reflections* come from believing that it is a book concerned with revolution, and, consequently, that the strategy of intransigence which it outlines – a strategy to be pursued through violent resistance informed by the myth of the general strike – is a revolutionary strategy, i.e. a strategy for the realization of socialism. But it is so only very indirectly. Socialism is far off, in the mists of the future, since it will arise out of presently non-existent or underdeveloped institutions. The *Reflections* is a book about class, about the collective subject whose development will yield socialism. The *longue durée* understanding of socialism as an historical process of proletarian institutional development is not challenged by the arguments of the *Reflections*: it is merely integrated and completed by a series of considerations on how to prevent, in the here and now, the destruction of the revolutionary subject. Thus, given the focus on class, and given the fear of its dissolution, what Sorel outlines in the *Reflections* are essentially a number of what we could call dynamics of class formation: i.e. dynamics capable of maintaining the separation between bourgeoisie and proletariat in the very difficult context of early twentieth century capitalism. In the presence of a number of mechanisms and processes that tend to reduce the conflict between sellers and purchasers of human labour, in the absence of strong working class institutions, how can the class identity of proletarian institutions be maintained? Sorel's answer is that this can be done through a syndicalist epic punctuated by occasional acts of violence and informed by the revolutionary myth of the general strike. The *Reflections* are thus a manual for the development of the spirit of scission. But the necessity of this spirit of scission is not absolute, but topical. It is not an ahistorical requirement of every revolutionary movement, but, on the contrary, it is dictated by precise historical circumstances that tend to the destruction of the class identity of the proletariat.

### **7.2.2 PHILOLOGICAL PRECAUTIONS**

Despite the general aim being sufficiently clear, the *Reflections* remain for a number of reasons, on which we shall dwell here, a complex and difficult text requiring some introductory precautions. Such precautions must start by acknowledging that, more than a book, the *Reflections* is a series of articles written and revised over a number of years. To give an anecdotal but still significant indication, we can say that there are 17 essays that preceded to the 1908 edition, which is the final product of two rewritings of a series of articles that Sorel originally published in Italy between 1905 and 1906. The Italian version was immediately followed by a substantially revised French one, appearing in the *Mouvement*

*Socialiste* in 1906, and, after more than a year, by a third, monographic, version published by Pages Libres in 1908. In the following editions, the text continued to change with the inclusion of additional references, and of three appendixes added respectively in 1910, 1913, and 1920.<sup>7</sup> Even leaving the appendixes aside, the fact remains that the *Reflections* is a philologically complex text, written three times over a period of three years between 1905 and 1908. The fact that the writing and revision process developed over such a long period makes for a very layered text, and it would be unwise to ignore this stratification. Without any ambition to exhaustiveness, we shall try to outline the editorial history of the *Reflections* in order to first give to the writing its correct chronology, and secondly to highlight how different concerns made their way into the successive rewritings of the original Italian version.

The bulk of the *Reflections on violence* was written between 1905 and 1906 in two connected series of articles published in France and Italy in that period. The original core is the Italian version, a series of articles appearing in the syndicalist journal *Il Divenire Sociale* between October 1905 and April 1906, and collected in a book prefaced by Enrico Leone under the title *Lo sciopero generale e la violenza*.<sup>8</sup> The book contains all the eight Italian articles that constituted the original ‘Reflections on violence’ series, and has a chapter structure slightly different from the one that will characterize the text that has been passed on to posterity. The text is structured by three broad argumentative lines: a reflection on the historical role of violence, developed in the first three chapters, a comparison between revolutionary and integrationist strike practices, and a number of considerations on the ethics of proletarian scission, which Sorel calls the ethics of violence and the ethics of the producers. With very slight and largely insignificant alterations, this is the structure that will characterize the 1908 text. The first, and not unimportant thing to notice about the Italian articles is the dates in which they were written. The opening essay of the series, ‘La lotta di classe e la violenza’, appeared in the *Divenire Sociale* in October 1905.<sup>9</sup> This publishing date is extremely important because it gives chronological corroboration to our claim that there is an important

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<sup>7</sup> The first appendix, ‘Unité et Multiplicité’, appeared in the second edition of the *Reflections*, the first one published by Marcel Rivière, and was written in September 1909. The second appendix is called ‘Apologie de la violence’ and was first published in 1908 in *Le Matin*. Sorel included it in the 1913 third edition of the *Reflections*. Finally, the ‘Pour Lénine’ was written in September 1919 polemical response to an article that had appeared in 1918 in the *Journal de Genève* and Sorel added it to the fourth edition of *Reflections* that came out in 1920. See Sorel, *Réflexions*, pp. 284, 287, and 288.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Sorel, *Lo sciopero generale e la violenza*, trans. by Salvatore Piroddi (Roma, Tipografia Industria e Lavoro: 1906). For reasons of facility of access to this source, citations from the Italian version will come from the book, rather than from the articles. There are, to my knowledge, no differences between these two versions.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘La lotta di classe e la violenza’, *Il Divenire Sociale* 1, 1905, pp. 294-8 and 313-15.

continuity between the *Insegnamenti* and the *Reflections*. The preface to the *Insegnamenti*, as we have seen, is dated March 1905, that is, seven months before the publication of the first article on class struggle and violence. If we consider a lag between writing and publication, we can assume that Sorel wrote at least the first three articles on violence straight after having finished the examination of the new capitalism in the *Insegnamenti* in the summer of 1905.

While the Italian series of the ‘Reflections’ was still being written and published, Sorel began, in January 1906, to republish the articles in their original French for the *Mouvement Socialiste*. With the exception of a short introduction, the beginning of the series merely consisted in a republication of the Italian material without substantial alteration.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the first three articles of the series, which substantially correspond to the first three chapters of the 1908 text, are the original versions of the Italian articles. But when Sorel began to deal with the questions of revolutionary and political general strike and of the ethics of violence and production, he substantially widened the Italian text and changed the chapter structure.<sup>11</sup>

A detailed comparison of the two versions will not be attempted here, though it is a work that still needs to be done, and that probably will shed much light on certain key aspects of the text. But it is still necessary to give a general idea of how and why the text changed. Essentially, what we see is a widening of the scope of the arguments: whereas the Italian texts answered a set of questions grounded in the socialist world, the French ones try to occupy a wider intellectual field, and enter a number of more philosophical debates. Sorel himself gives an important indication of the general direction in which the revisions to the Italian texts go. Introducing the first substantially revised essay in the *Mouvement Socialiste*, he writes that he has taken particular care in developing ‘above all those [sections] which have affinities with M. Bergson’s philosophy, for this philosophy is still relatively unknown to the wider public and it has a great importance for all reasoning relating to social facts.’<sup>12</sup> This remark is extremely important for two reasons. On the one hand, it signals Sorel’s desire to be taken seriously in the French context from the social scientific point of view, and thus it reveals the existence in the French versions of the *Reflections* of a secondary, but important, thread

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<sup>10</sup> Georges Sorel, ‘Réflexions sur la violence – Avant-propos’, *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 18, 1906, pp. 5-12. When using ‘Réflexions’ between inverted commas we shall refer to the series published in the *Mouvement Socialiste*, whereas the label *Réflexions* and *Reflections* will indicate, respectively, the 1908 French text and the 1999 CUP edition supervised by Jeremy Jennings.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed account of the changes see the appendix at the end of the present thesis.

<sup>12</sup> Sorel, ‘Réflexions’, *Mouvement Socialiste* 18, p. 256n. ‘...j’ai mieux développé les parties qui me semblaient d’une intelligence difficile, surtout celles qui ont des affinités avec la philosophie de M. Bergson, parce que cette philosophie est encore peu vulgarisée et qu’elle a une importance majeure pour tous les raisonnements relatifs aux faits sociaux.’



revolving around questions of social scientific method. As we shall see later on, this sub thread is crucial for a correct understanding of Sorel's notion of myth.

On the other hand, more importantly, the reference to Bergson signals Sorel's attempt to make his text relevant to a number of philosophical, epistemological, and religious debates that were animating French intellectual life around the time. Speaking at a very general level, the philosophical context was characterized by the same cleavages that we have examined in the first chapter, that is to say it still consisted in an important way of a discussion about free will, determinism, and the limits of science. In addition to this, a second, related, discussion had become topical, a discussion that was made more politically charged by the climate of anticlericalism of those years, namely that of the relationship between science and religion. If one were to describe the main cleavage animating French philosophy in those years, one would have to speak of a movement of critique, spearheaded by Bergson and a number of disciples such as Eduard Le Roy, against what were perceived as the excessively rationalistic tendencies that dominated the French university. It is Bergson himself who, writing in 1905 in the *Revue Philosophique*, offers a very clear definition of the philosophical stakes of these various debates about science and religion: 'The need for a more truly empirical philosophy – closer to the immediately given than was the traditional philosophy elaborated by thinkers who were predominantly mathematicians – is felt in every country and by many thinkers.'<sup>13</sup>

Sorel was deeply engaged in these debates, for they represented the continuation of the epistemological line of thought that had characterized his beginnings as an intellectual. As was hinted at in the fourth chapter, the pragmatist and historicist tendencies of his epistemology had become more marked after his encounter with Vico's *verum ipsum factum*. The movement of his epistemological thought had subsequently been characterized by a gradual abandonment of the strong ideal of science that he had previously defended, and by the attempt to construct a viable theory of science as an historical and artificial epistemic enterprise.<sup>14</sup> We can only speculate as to why Sorel decided to amend the text of the *Reflections* to include this epistemological and scientific dimension; but it is certain that he did so, as both French versions are characterized by a greater emphasis placed on questions of science and by a more thoroughly developed critique of the epistemic ambitions of certain

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<sup>13</sup> Henri Bergson, 'Lettre au directeur', *Revue philosophique* 60, 1905, p. 230. 'Dans tous les pays, et chez beaucoup de ceux qui pensent, le besoin se fait sentir d'une philosophie plus réellement empirique, plus rapprochée de l'immédiatement donné, que ne l'était la philosophie traditionnelle, élaborée par des penseurs qui furent surtout des mathématiciens.'

<sup>14</sup> It is this line of thought that will lead to Sorel's interest in pragmatism.

understandings of social science. This can not only be ascertained by the proliferation of Bergsonian references, but, much more convincingly, by pointing out that the expression *petite science*, by which Sorel means an excessively deterministic and rationalist understanding of scientific enquiry, is entirely absent from the Italian essays. We can thus conclude that the later versions of the *Reflections* are characterized by the addition of this important argumentative layer. In addressing the French public, Sorel moves within an intellectual landscape with which he is more familiar, and he insists on philosophical and epistemological questions that he knows to be topical. It is fundamental to understand that, however important, the sub thread about science and epistemology constitutes an additional secondary line of thought, something added later to a text that remains essentially concerned with processes of class formation and dissolution. It is by underlining this stratification that the book can be more easily understood.

The addition of this second, epistemological and social scientific, layer to the original Italian text is an example of a wider tendency that characterizes the French rewritings of the *Reflections*, a tendency that could be summed up by saying that Sorel's self-consciousness as an author grows. This self-awareness is most evident in the introductory 'Letter to Daniel Halévy' – a text dated July 1907, and thus, significantly, written well after the completion of the writing of the *Reflections* – in which Sorel seeks to present himself and his views to a broader public than his usual socialist audience, for 'the readers of this book will be bewildered if I do not submit a kind of defence that will better enable them to see things from my own point of view.'<sup>15</sup> In the text, an exercise in self-representation and a self-portrait for public display, Sorel casts himself ostentatiously as an intellectual outsider sheltered from hollow adulation, thus not running 'the risk of becoming my own disciple'.<sup>16</sup> The desire to present himself in a particular way emerges perhaps most clearly in a rare instance of literary vanity in which he suggests that he is the unnamed target of Viviani's attacks on syndicalism.<sup>17</sup> But beyond literary vanity, Sorel's awareness of the public for which he is writing is most evident in the attempt, outlined just above, to cover a wider intellectual space and to intervene in the philosophical, epistemological and religious debates that animated French intellectual life of the early twentieth century. As we have stated above, though we are not going to attempt this, an exhaustive comparison between the three versions of the *Reflections* would shed much light on this dynamic.

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<sup>15</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

For our purposes, it is sufficient to underline that there are differences between the Italian and the French version, and that they can be explained, on a general level, by Sorel's desire to transform the *Reflections* into a book capable of entering a greater number of French debates. More precisely, the French versions are characterized by a greater emphasis of epistemological questions. This, quite naturally, does not help the readability of the book, and in fact, by adding a large number of centrifugal references, contributes to obscure the central argumentative line of the *Reflections*, to which we now turn.

### **7.3 THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF VIOLENCE**

We begin by outlining what we believe to be the fundamental argumentative line of the *Reflections*, which we suggest is a rationale for violence closely connected to the peculiar conditions of early twentieth century capitalist societies that Sorel had previously examined. Socialism, the argument goes, becomes a chimera in a context in which the working class is subjected to powerful forces that try to erase its class identity: under current conditions, workers can aspire to a larger share of capitalist prosperity, but not to a radical transformation of society. The institutional development of the proletariat can only occur under an economic regime of a certain type, and the economic and social trends that characterized capitalism in Sorel's time are not conducive to this class development. Proletarian violence is an answer to these challenging conditions. The functions of violence are twofold: on the one hand, it is a practice that fosters class identity, whereas on the other it can, potentially, break the trend towards assimilation and bring the bourgeoisie back to its role of capitalist innovation, thereby restoring the conditions fit for the institutional development of the proletariat.

This general rationale for violence is outlined in the first two chapters of the *Reflections*, which construct the framework within which the following chapters move. In this section, however, we examine an additional text, which, we argue, functions as a bridge between the first chapters and the rest of the book. In the text, written as a preface for an Italian edition of the 'Avenir socialiste des syndicats' that never appeared, Sorel anticipates the arguments that he would develop more thoroughly in the rest of the *Reflections*, circumscribing with great precision the function of the general strike in his syndicalist theory. He establishes an important distinction between the urgent task of class formation and the long-term one of institutional development. He limits the role of the general strike to the former, arguing that proletarian institutional development cannot be expected to develop out of the practice of social conflict, but, instead, can only emerge out of the experience of production.

### 7.3.1 ASSIMILATION AND THE RATIONALE FOR VIOLENCE

To understand how closely the arguments of the *Reflections* are connected to the reasoning about assimilation and class formation begun in the *Insegnamenti*, one has to look no further than the opening chapters of the book. Already in the short introduction that Sorel added in January 1906 to the articles in the *Mouvement Socialiste*, the focus on the long-term historical consequences of violence emerges clearly. Why is the phenomenon of proletarian violence important? To start with, it is a phenomenon that emerges spontaneously in strikes, and thus from working class practice, and, as such, it ought to claim the attention of committed socialists. But, more importantly, proletarian violence is described as a social phenomenon capable of changing what Sorel calls ‘rapports sociaux actuels’, and what Jennings translates as ‘present social conditions.’<sup>18</sup> It is from this perspective of changing relations between social classes that Sorel examines violence. He cites the *Insegnamenti* and highlights that the function of violence lies in its potential ability to maintain ‘the division between the *proletariat* and the *bourgeoisie*’<sup>19</sup> This potential alteration of the relations between classes is, in turn, capable of engendering a wider long term process of historical transformation, and it is with this in mind that a socialist ought to examine the phenomenon of violence. As he puts it:

‘The socialist imagines... that he has been transported into a very distant future, so that he can consider current events as elements of a long and completed development and that he can attribute to them the colour that they might take for the future philosopher. Such a procedure certainly presupposes a considerable use of hypotheses; but there would be no social philosophy, no reflection about the process of evolution and even no important action without certain hypotheses about the future.’<sup>20</sup>

The historicism examined in the fourth chapter of this thesis comes to the fore here: understanding of the social world is historical, and thus can only happen when the dust has settled, when a social transformation has exhausted itself. But in the absence of this understanding, it is still necessary to examine current social forces, and in order to do so one must look at them from the perspective of this hypothetical future. Proletarian violence, to come back to the main issue, can have a decisive influence on social development, and it is for this reason that it needs to be examined. The central question thus, is not that of judging

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 39. The translation is unsatisfying, and this is why I have added the extract from the French original. See Sorel, ‘Réflexions sur la violence – Avant Propos’, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p.39n.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

the permissibility of violence or of ‘awarding prizes for virtue’,<sup>21</sup> but that of trying to understand the historical role of violence, i.e. the social transformations that it is capable of engendering or, more modestly and more accurately, allowing to happen.

Having established that it is the *historical*, long-term consequences of violence that deserve attention, and that the object of his enquiry will be ‘the function of *the violence of the working classes* in contemporary socialism’,<sup>22</sup> Sorel assigns to violence a revolutionary role. But, as we pointed out above, this revolutionary role is indirect. Violence will not create socialism, but will allow the proletariat to assert its independence from the bourgeois institutions that increasingly encroach upon its organisations. Not all violence, to be sure, is revolutionary. When it is used as an instrument of negotiation, in order to obtain concessions granted by the existing *status quo*, it loses its revolutionary character: it is in this art of negotiating with the bourgeoisie by threatening it with violence and disorders that parliamentary socialists excel. Revolutionary violence is the exact opposite: it is a tool capable of breaking the corporatist dynamic of negotiation between classes whose interests ought to collide. It is easy to see how the framework within which this distinction between different uses of violence moves is the one laid out in the *Insegnamenti*. Thus, ‘we should not ask whether it [violence] is more or less directly advantageous... but rather... what will result from the introduction of violence into the relations of the proletariat with society. We are not comparing two kinds of reformism [i.e. violent and non-violent], but want to know what contemporary violence is in relation to future social revolution.’<sup>23</sup> The subtext of these lines is sufficiently clear. A proletariat that uses violence tactically, to negotiate with the bourgeoisie, is bound to be, sooner or later, assimilated into bourgeois structures, and thus to lose its revolutionary potential. The revolutionary role of violence thus consists in its ability to break the assimilationist dynamic and to bring back the proletariat to its revolutionary role.

This revolutionary role is inextricably bound to the class identity of the proletariat, i.e. to the working class’s consciousness of the fact that its role of producers puts its interests in uncompromising opposition with those of the bourgeoisie. It is significant that the *Reflections* open with a discussion about the loss of this class identity, which Sorel ascribes to the excessive weight of parliamentarism in contemporary French socialism. The logic of electoral success, by obscuring and, eventually, replacing that of class struggle, functions as a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

mechanism of assimilation, effectively destroying the class specificity of the proletariat and creating a socialism that has nothing to do with Marxism.

‘Parliamentary socialism speaks as many languages as it has types of clients. It addresses itself to workmen, to small employers, to peasants, and, in spite of Engels, it aims at reaching farmers; at times it is patriotic, at others it rants against the army. No contradiction is too great – experience having shown that it is possible, in the course of an electoral campaign, to group together forces which, according to Marxist conceptions, should normally be antagonistic. Besides, cannot a parliamentary deputy be of service to electors in every economic situation? In the end the term “proletariat” becomes synonymous with the oppressed; and there are oppressed in all classes.’<sup>24</sup>

The political representation of the oppressed, the pressure exerted upon governmental institutions in order to further the interests of those oppressed, is alien to Marxism. The Marxist revolution is the high point of a conflict between purchasers and sellers of human labour, a clash occurring in a world in which traditional allegiances and institutions have been destroyed by the power of capital. Parliamentary democracy works against the constitution of these two opposing camps, and not only because it forces socialists to abandon the criterion of class. Parliamentarism, to Sorel, is the regime of compromise between conflicting interests, and thus it denies the existence of class antagonism at a more fundamental level: it tries to create ‘social peace by legislation’ and to show ‘to the poor that the government has no greater concern than to improve their lot... imposing the necessary sacrifices upon people who possess a fortune judged to be too great for the harmony of the classes.’<sup>25</sup>

Despite this parliamentary work of class dissolution, Sorel is not completely pessimistic, and goes as far as saying that the policy of looking for social peace at all costs might have unforeseen radicalizing effects upon the proletariat. He concedes that ‘the efforts which have been made to remove the causes of hostility which exist in modern society have undoubtedly had some effect’<sup>26</sup>, but he suggests that bourgeois and governmental laxity and the concessions that they imply can, in some cases, foster proletarian intransigence. The facility with which unions obtain concessions from owners desiring social peace brings workers to understand that there are no economic necessities behind their masters’ previous refusals to grant a higher salary or fewer working hours. In Sorel’s words, they ‘perceive that the activity

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 54

of conciliation and arbitration rests upon no economico-juridical foundation'.<sup>27</sup> This makes the proletariat aware of the immense amount of wealth that capitalism can generate, and leads them to demand more, pushing them away from an ideology of conciliation and compromise that flourishes in conditions of productive scarcity, and back into the terrain of class struggle, which characterizes a vital capitalist economy: with the consciousness of the immense prosperity generated by capitalism, 'workers think they would be dupes if they did not demand all that they could obtain; they look upon the employer as an adversary with whom one comes to terms after a war.'<sup>28</sup>

What Sorel is highlighting here are two historical possibilities. The key question is whether the processes of pacification and proletarian integration into the existing system will be successful or not. On the one hand, the efforts of a large number of bourgeois and statist institutions work for the inclusion of the working classes in the existing system; on the other, the proletariat can refuse this integration and engage the bourgeoisie on the revolutionary terrain of class struggle. It is to the exploration of this latter possibility that the *Reflections* is dedicated, but the fact that Sorel presents two alternative options does not mean that he believes them to be equally possible. In fact, the dominant tendency is, for Sorel, the former one, that tending towards proletarian integration. This can be deduced, as had been highlighted above, by the success of parliamentary socialism and of the various ways with which it attempts to strike deals with the bourgeoisie, and by the control that either party or state exert over working class organizations. But, more fundamentally, this tendency towards national solidarity and assimilation has an economic base. Conciliation and concessions require a timid, decadent bourgeoisie, and this bourgeoisie can only flourish in conditions of productive stasis, in an economic policy that seeks to moderate the expansive logic of authentic capitalism.

'The ideology of a timorous, humanitarian bourgeoisie professing to have freed its thought from the conditions of its existence is grafted on to the degeneration of the capitalist economy; the race of bold captains who made the greatness of modern industry disappears to make way for an ultra-civilised aristocracy that demands to be left in peace. This degeneration fills our parliamentary socialists with joy. Their role would vanish if they were confronted with a bourgeoisie which was energetically engaged on the paths of economic progress, which regarded timidity with shame and which was proud in looking after its class

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

interests. In the presence of a bourgeoisie which has become almost as stupid as the nobility of the eighteenth century, their power is enormous.’<sup>29</sup>

The logic of this reasoning should appear clear enough. Capitalism breeds economic and technological progress, it dissolves old social relations, and creates two antagonistic classes. This line of historical development has come to a halt, and this prevents not only economic progress, but also the formation of the revolutionary subject. As he had previously done, Sorel highlights the intimate connection between the future socialist society and a present world shaped by the progressive power of capital: ‘Capitalism creates: the heritage that socialism will receive, the men who will suppress the present regime, and the means of bringing about this destruction...’<sup>30</sup> Only in these conditions will the proletariat be able to begin its work of construction of the new society, ‘to develop embryonic forms of its organizations of resistance, so that it may build institutions that... depend solely upon the position of producer in large-scale industry.’<sup>31</sup> Only capitalism, in simpler words, can create the proletariat, and only the proletariat can construct socialism.

‘In a society so enfevered by the passion for the success which can be obtained through competition, all the actors walk straight before them like veritable automata... they are subject to very simple forces and not one of them dreams of escaping from the circumstances of his condition. It is only then that the development of capitalism is carried out with that inevitability which struck Marx so strongly and which seemed to him comparable to that of a natural law.’<sup>32</sup>

We are back to the analyses of capitalist evolution that had characterized the 1902 articles and the *Insegnamenti*. The capitalism of the 1850s, for Sorel, is very different from that of the early twentieth century. The latter is characterised by bourgeois decadence, which is the process by which the bourgeoisie abandons its role of economic innovation and productive expansion in order to concentrate on other pursuits. It is a spirit that most befits the current economic and social situation, in which protectionism replaces free trade, corporatism takes the place of internal competition, and social peace replaces class struggle. Under these conditions, the interests of a decadent bourgeoisie and of a proletariat dreaming of inclusion in the bourgeois world march in harmony. Socialist agitation can maintain the revolutionary spirit in the working classes, but these social and economic trends make this a Sisyphean task:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-6.



‘how can they [revolutionary socialists] hope to give back to the bourgeoisie an ardour which is extinguished?’<sup>33</sup>

It is here that Sorel spells out the rationale for violence most clearly. The need for violence is dictated by very specific social and economic conditions, because violence has the power of opening up a new historical possibility, i.e. of reinstating the progressive historical dynamic that Marx had detected in the capitalism of his days, but which was now withering away.

‘Capitalism drives the proletariat into revolt, because in daily life the bosses use their force in a direction opposed to the desire of their workers... Capitalist force is at the base of this entire process and it operates in an imperious manner. Marx supposed that the bourgeoisie had no need to be incited to employ force; but we are faced with a new and very unforeseen fact: a bourgeoisie which seeks to weaken its own strength. Must we believe that the Marxist conception is dead? By no means, because proletarian violence comes upon the scene at the very moment when the conception of social peace claims to moderate disputes; proletarian violence confines employers to their role as producers and tends to restore the class structure just when they seemed on the point of intermingling in the democratic morass.’<sup>34</sup>

Although he will clarify in greater detail the kind of violence he has in mind, it appears immediately clear that the violence advocated by Sorel is not a pure, self-justifying violence, but an instrumental violence that tends toward a precise goal. This goal is neither the conquest of the state, of the existing institutions of power, nor, as we are about to see, that of proletarian institutional development, but instead, more modestly, the restoration of the separation between classes that characterizes an historically progressive capitalism. If, on the one hand, violence can prevent the proletariat from being absorbed into bourgeois institutions, on the other, ‘in an indirect manner’, proletarian violence ‘can operate on the bourgeoisie so as to reawaken a sense of their own class interests.’<sup>35</sup> Sorel’s encouragements to ‘repay with *black ingratitude* the *benevolence* of those who wish to protect the workers, to meet with insults the homilies of the defenders of human fraternity, and to respond by blows to the advances of the propagators of social peace’<sup>36</sup> are pronounced with a precise intention, that of bringing back the bourgeoisie to its economic role and of preventing the conciliation of interests, which a progressive historical dynamic puts in opposition: acts of violence, to sum

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

up in a formula, 'can only have historical value if they are *the brutal and clear expression of class struggle*'.<sup>37</sup>

### 7.3.2 FUNCTION AND LIMITS OF THE GENERAL STRIKE

The first two essays of the *Reflections* outline the rationale for violence and constitute the widest framework of the book. Within this general rationale for violence, required to prevent assimilation and to bring back the bourgeoisie to its progressive role of capitalist production, move the arguments outlined in the rest of the book. It is not a coincidence that the first two chapters remained virtually unchanged throughout the rewritings: this has to do with the fact that they constitute the argumentative backbone of the *Reflections*. The work which Sorel attempts in the following chapters is a work of finesse: he tries to provide answers to a number of more specific questions that arise from the general rationale for violence, as outlined at the beginning of the book. Of what does proletarian violence consist exactly? In what ways does it invigorate the class-consciousness of producers? What are the consequences, for the society to come, of a proletariat fully emancipated from bourgeois traditions? And finally, but most importantly, what is the line of demarcation between the topical, temporary, task of resistance to assimilation and the development of institutions based in the experience of production?

The clearest answer to the last question comes from a text not included in the *Reflections*. After having published the first two essays of the *Reflections* in the *Divenire Sociale*, Sorel wrote a short preface for a proposed Italian edition of the 'Avenir Socialiste des Syndicats' entitled 'Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire', which was printed in the *Mouvement Socialiste* in November 1905.<sup>38</sup> The importance of this text is that, aside from being a rather clear anticipation of the arguments that will be developed in the remaining essays of the *Reflections*, it establishes a crucial distinction between the two tasks that await the proletariat in its progress towards socialism and circumscribes the role of the general strike to only one of them. On the one hand, there is the immediate task of resistance to assimilation, whereas looming ahead on the historical horizon is that of institutional development. In the first two chapters of the *Reflection*, the role of violence is described in a general way, and it is that of preventing assimilation and returning the bourgeoisie to its progressive historical role. Here

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> The planned Italian publication never materialized. See Georges Sorel, 'Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 17, 1905, pp. 265-80. Reprinted in Sorel, *Matériaux*, pp. 57-75 with the title of 'Préface de 1905'. We shall use the latter version for references.

Sorel becomes more precise, and argues that the practice of social conflict through the general strike can only perform the first task, whereas the institutional development of the proletariat, i.e. the process of institution building that will yield the fundamental social, juridical, and political structures of the socialist society, can only emerge from the experience of production, rather than from that of social conflict. This distinction, as we shall see, is crucial to a correct understanding of the *Reflections*. Conflict creates class identity, which in turn might restore the class oppositions typical of a progressive capitalism. Only then, in a capitalist society structured around these oppositions, can the work of institutional development begin, and the historical source of these new institutions will be, more than social conflict, the experience of production.

Moving from the general to the particular, Sorel looks for a proletarian practice that is capable of performing the functions and roles that he had cast as essential in the opening two essays of the *Reflections*. This practice is what he calls the general strike. In describing the processes of assimilation typical of capitalist societies of the early twentieth century, Sorel had repeatedly identified the political realm as the terrain in which practices of compromise and social peace were most successful, whereas the fundamental opposition between workers and capitalists remained more or less in place in the economic sphere. Despite the powerful mechanisms of assimilation at work, Sorel had argued that ‘as long as the work contract is a sale... in a free market... classes remain independent from each other.’<sup>39</sup> Strikes, Sorel remarks, are essentially economic conflicts, occurring when, despite the best efforts of conservatives and parliamentary socialists, the interests of employers and workers collide: the practice of struggle in strikes can thus have the effect of consolidating the class identity of the proletariat by reminding to workers the irreducible opposition between their interests and those of their employers. ‘The general strike’ he underlines ‘was not born out of profound reflections on the philosophy of history; it issues from practice.’<sup>40</sup> That the general strike has the power to cement class identity, thus, derives from the fact that it is a form of struggle that emerges from the quintessentially proletarian experience, i.e. that of economic conflict in a free labour market. It emerges from those aspects of proletarian life which are still shaped by the power of capital, and thus are somewhat insulated and protected from the practice of social conciliation. Because it is based in persisting economic conflict between owners and workers, the general strike brings to the fore the specifically proletarian elements of socialism: workers

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<sup>39</sup> Sorel, *Insegnamenti*, pp. 393-4.

<sup>40</sup> Sorel, ‘Préface de 1905’, p. 60. ‘La grève générale n’est point née de réflexions profondes sur la philosophie de l’histoire ; elle est issue de la pratique.’

engaged in strikes are people and groups predominantly defined by their role in the capitalist economy.

Precisely because it is based in the basic conflict of capitalism, the general strike is a form of social struggle that does not require excessive involvement in bourgeois institutions, and thus can avoid the assimilationist traps that these institutions conceal. Once again, Sorel underlines the magnitude of the socialist transformation, which amounts to nothing less than a completely transformed society, and that thus requires the overcoming of the institutions and ideas that characterize the current one. This is why he underlines that the general strike is completely separated from parliamentary practice and that, more radically, it ‘expresses, with infinite clarity, that *the time of politicians’ revolutions is over*’.<sup>41</sup> Parliamentary politics, as Sorel has repeatedly asserted, and continues to assert in this essay, are one of the strongest factors of proletarian dissolution, for they foster a practice of negotiation and conciliation. No revolutionary transformation can emerge from this conciliation. A revolution carried on through existing political institutions will certainly produce a new ruling class, but not a new society, since the latter can only arise out of institutions emerging from a substantially new historical experience. What this implies is the necessity of a clean break from the bourgeois political and ideological tradition, and thus minimal involvement with the institutions that harbour and replicate this tradition. From this perspective, the general strike appears as a step in the right direction.

‘This formula [of the general strike] ignores human rights, absolute justice, political constitutions and parliaments; it denies not only the government of the capitalist bourgeoisie, but also all hierarchy more or less analogous to bourgeois hierarchy.’<sup>42</sup>

These political ideals, which are absent from the revolutionary practice of the general strike, are the values and notions that animate bourgeois institutions and that have arisen out of a bourgeois historical experience. They are thus irrelevant to the socialist society, which, to repeat, can only emerge from the historical maturation of institutions and social relations grounded in the historical experience of the working class.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 59. ‘...elle exprime, d’une manière ininiment claire, que *le temps des révolutions de politiciens est fini...*’

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60. ‘Cette formule ne sait rien des droits de l’homme, de la justice absolue, de constitutions politiques et des parlements ; elle ne nie pas seulement le gouvernement de la bourgeoisie capitaliste, mais encore toute hiérarchie plus ou moins analogue à la hiérarchie bourgeoise.’

It is important to underline that the proletarian historical experience from which the socialist society will emerge is twofold. On the one hand, it is the experience of economic and social conflict with employers, a conflict that is intrinsic to capitalism, or at least to its historically progressive variants; on the other, however, it is also the experience of organized, large-scale production. Now, in the 'Préface de 1905' Sorel outlines very clearly a fundamental feature of his syndicalism, which is the division of labour between these two aspects of the historical experience of the working class. A certain practice of social conflict is what gives to the revolutionary class its self-consciousness – its subjectivity – whereas the experience of production is what will provide the basis for the future organization of society. Class struggle, in other words, prevents assimilation, whereas industrial organization creates the new society. These two tasks, moreover, have different temporalities. The practice of conflict, and the class-formation that derives from it, is the short-term, urgent task, whereas the social relations and institutions that will shape the socialist society, to be looked for in the experience of production, will emerge at a later stage. This tension between the immediate task of class formation and the longer term one of institutional development is a fundamental distinction of the *Reflections*, and we can detect it rather clearly in the text we are examining now.

When socialists stigmatize the revolutionary strike as 'anarchist madness', and wonder 'what could follow the general strike', they are giving evidence of their ideological submission to bourgeois models, and displaying their inability to imagine radically new institutions.<sup>43</sup> But these radically new institutions will emerge out of the experience of production more than out of the experience of struggle. After the general strike, argues Sorel, 'there would only be only one possibility: a society structured on the model of the organization of production, that is, a truly socialist society.'<sup>44</sup> Contrary to the received interpretation, we can see, and shall see more clearly later, that Sorel is very aware of the necessity of a new social organization, of structures capable of organizing the post-revolutionary society. He is conscious of the fact that 'previous revolutions were not purely and merely wars [i.e. instances of social conflict] but... they served to realize new juridical systems.'<sup>45</sup> It is in the experience of production under capitalism that one has to look for the seeds of the future socialist organization of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 60. 'Plus d'un écrivain socialiste, trop nourri des traditions de la bourgeoisie, ne parvient cependant point à comprendre une telle *folie anarchiste* ; il se demande ce qui pourrait succéder à la grève générale'. Notice how the inability to imagine a society governed by proletarian institutions derives from ideological submission to 'bourgeois traditions'.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 'il n'y aurait de possible qu'une société organisée suivant le plan même de la production, c'est-à-dire la véritable société socialiste.'

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 69. '...les anciennes révolutions n'ont pas été purement et simplement des guerres, mais... elles ont servi à réaliser des systèmes juridiques nouveaux.'

society. 'The source of the laws of tomorrow is evidently in the *good practices* of the workshop; socialism will not only inherit the machinery created by capitalism and the science that emerged of technological development, but also procedures of cooperation that will have slowly consolidated themselves in factories...'<sup>46</sup>

What this means is that the general strike, because it is a practice of social conflict, generates neither new juridical relations, nor new institutions and is essentially incapable of bringing about the socialist society. This society will emerge from industrial organization, which will provide models and practices to budding proletarian institutions. But in the present the task at hand is a different one, because the very concrete present risk is that of never seeing the development of these institutions. Under conditions of national, corporatist capitalism 'the proletariat finds itself dragged into a sphere alien to its nature; it becomes the collaborator of capitalism; social peace thus appears very close to becoming the normality.'<sup>47</sup> This is why the more urgent task, the task to whose examination the *Reflections* are dedicated, is that of class formation, of separating the proletariat from the rest of society, and it is here that the role of the general strike, in virtue of it being a practice of conflict, emerges most clearly. 'Preserving the idea of war' he writes 'appears more necessary now than ever, when so many efforts are attempted to oppose social peace to socialism.'<sup>48</sup>

The central aspect of the general strike is that it is a practice of struggle that emerges from the economic conflicts characterizing the relations of workers to their employers in a capitalist economy. It does not require resources and ideas that are alien to the proletarian experience, it can be carried on without parliamentary representation and without the consequent adoption of bourgeois ideals in the socialist struggle. But, in order to fulfil its revolutionary potential, the struggle of strikers must be carried on in a particular way. Individual strikes 'would only be economic incidents of small social importance if revolutionaries did not alter their character and transform them into episodes of a social war. Each strike... is a skirmish in the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 70. 'C'est dans les *bons usages* de l'atelier qu'est évidemment la source d'où sortira le droit futur ; le socialisme héritera non seulement de l'outillage qui aura été créé par le capitalisme et de la science qui est sortie du développement technique, mais encore des procédés de coopération qui se seront constitués à la longue dans les usines...'

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 69. 'Le prolétariat se trouve ainsi entraîné dans une sphère qui lui est étrangère ; il devient le collaborateur du capitalisme ; la paix sociale semble ainsi bien près de devenir le régime normal.'

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 61. 'Maintenir l'idée de guerre paraît aujourd'hui plus nécessaire que jamais, alors que tant d'efforts sont tentés pour opposer au socialisme la paix sociale.'

great struggle which we call the general strike.’<sup>49</sup> If the practice of the general strike is to be successful, it requires a specific narration, a particular way of being understood and lived by those who practice it: it must be seen as an episode in an historical clash between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Only in this way can the general strike play its revolutionary role, which is not that of creating socialism, but the more urgent one of preserving and strengthening the ideological and historical identity of the proletariat. On this, Sorel is unequivocally clear:

‘By operating in a capillary manner it [revolutionary syndicalism] can sustain strike actions everywhere; long wars have developed the idea of fatherland [patrie]; local and frequent strikes continuously rejuvenate the socialist idea in the proletariat, reinforce feelings of heroism, of sacrifice and of union, and maintain alive the hope of the revolution.’<sup>50</sup>

The ‘Préface de 1905’ is an extremely important text for a number of reasons. To start with, it introduces the general strike as the model of social conflict advocated by Sorel. It is a model of conflict characterized by the preference of diffused, small or medium-scale instances of conflict over the presence of large centralized unions (‘defenders of social peace’ he writes ‘wish that proletarian organizations become sufficiently powerful to be *condemned to prudence*’<sup>51</sup>) and that takes as the basic instance of conflict the clash of interests between employers and workers that, despite everything, still characterize contemporary capitalism. Secondly, Sorel assigns a limited and precise role to the practice of conflict through the general strike: this role is that of class formation, of developing a revolutionary class-consciousness, and not that of establishing the proletarian institutions that will regulate the future society. Finally, Sorel begins to sketch an idea that will be central to the rest of the *Reflections*, namely that social conflict, when narrated, understood, and practiced in a certain manner, generates identity.

## 7.4 CONFLICT AS CLASS FORMATION

With the exception of chapter three and the final chapter, the *Reflections* on violence explore the questions put forward by the ‘Préface de 1905’. Though Sorel makes constant references to issues that we have already examined, such as the dangers of assimilation and the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-1. ‘Les grèves ne seraient que des incidents économiques d’une assez faible portée sociale, si les révolutionnaires n’intervenaient pour en changer le caractère et en faire des épisodes de la lutte sociale. Chaque grève, si locale qu’elle soit, est une escarmouche dans la grande bataille qu’on nomme la grève générale.’

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 69. ‘En opérant d’une manière diffuse, il peut maintenir partout l’agitation gréviste ; les longues guerres ont engendré l’idée de patrie ; la grève locale et fréquente ne cesse de rajeunir les sentiments d’héroïsme, de sacrifice et d’union, de maintenir toujours vivante l’espérance de la révolution.’

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. ‘...les défenseurs de la paix sociale ont émis le vœu que les organisations ouvrières deviennent assez puissantes pour être *condamnées à la sagesse*.’

progressive role that the restoration of an expansive capitalism can play, the bulk of the book is dedicated to understanding how the practice of the general strike can reinforce the class-identity of the proletariat, and in exploring, through a vast array of historical examples, the more general idea that a certain practice of conflict creates identity. This means, as we had previously highlighted, that the vast majority of the *Reflections* is dedicated to the examination of a very circumscribed problem, that of class formation, whose urgency is dictated by exceptional and unforeseen circumstances. The urgency of maintaining the proletarian identity is dictated by the fact that the conflictual but progressive logic of capitalism has been replaced by a corporatist economy and by the pursuit of social peace. If the proletariat operated in the conditions which characterized the capitalism of Marx's time, there would be no need for a practice of social conflict capable of separating the proletariat from the rest of society: economic conditions would establish this separation. Not only the urgency, but also the modalities of the practice of conflict that Sorel calls the general strike are thus the response to unforeseen and unfavourable conditions in which the proletariat of the early twentieth century finds itself.

In this section we shall begin by examining the third chapter of the *Reflections*, in which Sorel specifies with some precision what proletarian violence does *not* consist in, by outlining a genealogy of the French state and highlighting how proletarian violence is something rather different from what French history has accustomed its observers to understand as violence. We then deal with Sorel's comparison between the two kinds of strike: the political strike and the proletarian strike. We interpret the distinction as one between two different aims of social conflict. Under the political conception, social conflict is a tool of negotiation, whereas the syndicalist conception sees social conflict as a tool of class formation, and thus requires intransigence. We then conclude by examining the core of the *Reflections*, i.e. Sorel's account on how a certain practice of social conflict is able to generate class identity: it is here that we shall examine in depth what kind of violence Sorel has in mind as well as the role of myth in the general strike.

#### **7.4.1 A NEW KIND OF VIOLENCE**

Before venturing into a detailed examination of the practice of the general strike, Sorel attempts to dispel what he believes are the mistaken associations that the French public has with violence. In other words, before spelling out what the general strike is, he spells out what it is not, and, more precisely, how the revolutionary violence of socialists is different from the



violence that has characterised French history up to this point. In doing so, Sorel takes the occasion to further underline a central point of his revolutionary conception, namely the complete break that socialism will represent *vis à vis* the bourgeois political tradition.

‘The ideas current among the general public on the subject of proletarian violence’, he begins ‘are not based on... contemporary facts nor on a rational interpretation of the present syndicalist movement.’<sup>52</sup> Instead, they are based on ‘an infinitely simpler mental process’, i.e. on the historical memory of past revolutionary experiences, on the ‘memories that the word *revolution* evokes almost automatically.’<sup>53</sup> This, in France, means something very specific, namely the understanding of the socialist transformation as a new 1789, and the association of revolutionary violence with the experience of 1793. But for Sorel this past is ‘mille fois mort’, and the analogies are thus misleading.<sup>54</sup> To start with, Sorel argues that until 1870, a proper historiographical reflection on the revolutionary and Napoleonic period was impossible because the institutions and practices that had resulted from this moment of French history had been sheltered from critique, and sacralised by the memory of the revolutionary wars: ‘Protected by the prestige of the wars of Liberty, the new institutions had become inviolable [intangibles] and the ideology that was built to explain them became a faith which seemed for a long time to have for the French the value which the revelation of Jesus has for the Catholics.’<sup>55</sup> It should be noticed, as an aside, how Sorel is implicitly making a point about the identity-creating power both of conflict and of the memory of conflict.

At any rate, the historical power of the revolutionary wars waned around 1870: ‘The disasters of 1870 brought the country back to practical, prudent and ordinary conditions; the first result of these disasters was the development of... the idea of opportunism, which has now been introduced even into socialism.’<sup>56</sup> For Sorel, the post-1870 period is characterized by a lessening of the moral energies of France<sup>57</sup>, and the attempts by Le Play, Taine, and Renan to ‘search for the most appropriate means of setting the country on its feet again’ were doomed to the failure that awaits all who ‘wish to found an intellectual and moral reform on

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<sup>52</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 87.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Sorel, *Réflexions*, p. 88.

<sup>55</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 89. ‘Intangibles’ is an ambiguous term: it can both mean inviolable, untouchable, and invisible. It is probably the first meaning which is most correct here.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>57</sup> By the term ‘morality’ Sorel essentially means moral energies: not a set of prescriptions, but the ability to act in accordance with them.

investigations, on scientific syntheses and on demonstrations.’<sup>58</sup> Again, it is important to underline the secondary line of reasoning that Sorel is developing here, disconnecting moral renewal from social scientific writing. But disenchantment about the revolutionary period also brought a more sober appreciation of the events of the time. ‘What remains’ however ‘is not very savoury: police operations, proscriptions and the sittings of servile courts of law’.<sup>59</sup> This is where Sorel’s argument enters its central phase: the memory of revolutionary violence nowadays, without the revolutionary epic, is automatically associated with the revolutionary excesses, with the unfortunate consequence that, in hearing about revolutionary syndicalism ‘instinctively people think of the committees of revolutionary inspection, of the brutalities of suspicious agents, coarsened and frightened by fear, of the tragedies of the guillotine.’<sup>60</sup> This explains well the ambivalent stance of parliamentary socialists towards violence, their efforts to reassure the bourgeois public of their good intentions, and the maxim pronounced by Millerand recommending party members to ‘*be afraid to frighten*’.<sup>61</sup> But these connections between the past and the present require care: thus, Sorel invites the reader to ‘examine the violence of 93... and endeavour to see whether it can be identified with that of contemporary socialism.’<sup>62</sup>

The difference between the bourgeois violence of the past and the proletarian one of the present is, for Sorel, an historical one, ‘depending on the past history of the bourgeoisie’, and one so great that it gives to the word ‘revolutionary’ no less than ‘two perfectly distinct meanings’.<sup>63</sup> Here Sorel traces a genealogy of the republican regime that, following Tocqueville’s *Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, postulates a hidden continuity between monarchy and republic, a continuity that is most clearly visible in the centrality of the state in both regimes. He underlines the overrepresentation of legal professionals in the Convention, and suggests that, though ‘this class brought to the Revolution a great deal of administrative capacity’, it also coloured the new institutions with the legal ideology of the monarchy and of the *ancien régime*.<sup>64</sup> Now, this understanding of law is essentially a statist one in which law is an instrument of the arbitrary will of the monarch, first, and the republic later: ‘one of the fundamental ideas of the *ancien régime* had been the employment of the penal procedure to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

ruin any power which was an obstacle to the monarchy.’<sup>65</sup> This understanding of law, which Sorel calls ‘archaic’ and medieval, sees courts ‘primarily as instruments of royal greatness’, and has important historical examples in the Catholic inquisition.<sup>66</sup> It is, of course, the idea of law as an instrument of *raison d’état* that Sorel is stigmatizing here, and, as we shall see in a short while, the experience of the *affaire Dreyfus* colours his most scathing judgments of this practice.

Now, the key point is that the ‘Revolution piously inherited this tradition’, and thus poisoned the nascent republican regime with an understanding of law whose ‘essential aim was not the administration of justice but the welfare of the State.’<sup>67</sup> Various other factors, amongst which Sorel lists the ‘philosophy of the eighteenth century’<sup>68</sup> and the importance of the economic agency of the state in the first half of the nineteenth century, contributed to this development. As we have seen, Sorel had highlighted the fact that the historical period of the revolutionary wars had come to a close in 1870. He thus insists on the fact that the present era is different from the previous one, and that the importance of the state is now being challenged. ‘The capitalist economic system’ for example ‘has thrown full light on the extraordinary power of the individual; the confidence which the men of the eighteenth century had in the industrial capacities of the State appear puerile to everybody who has studied production...’.<sup>69</sup> It is important to underline the progressive role that Sorel assigns to capitalism here and elsewhere, and this connection gives a preliminary hint on why the proletariat – the class that is most shaped by the logic of capital – cannot cling to antiquated conceptions of the state. Sorel concedes that despite the historical break that has occurred, ‘it would be strange if the old ideas were completely dead’<sup>70</sup> and, to illustrate that the idea of law as an instrument of power is still alive, he proceeds to an examination of the *affaire Dreyfus* and the *affaire des fiches*.

But despite this, the proletariat, precisely because it is the product of a different historical era, is still impermeable to the old statist conception. Sorel goes as far as making the general statement that his contemporaries ‘are no longer dominated to the same extent that our fathers

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 96 and 97.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

were by this superstition of the God-State, to which they sacrificed so many victims.’<sup>71</sup> This, of course, is the crucial point that Sorel needs to establish in order to draw a line between the statist revolutionary violence of the past and the proletarian violence of the present. Anyone who still holds to the bourgeois political tradition, which harks back to the monarchy and to its statism, is bound to replicate the revolutionary horrors of the past: ‘if... our parliamentary socialists come to power they will prove themselves worthy successors of the Inquisition, of the *ancien régime* and of Robespierre; political courts will be at work on a large scale and we may even suppose that the *unfortunate* law of 1848 which abolished the death penalty for political matters will be repealed.’<sup>72</sup> But because the proletariat belongs to a different era, it can no longer hold on to the bourgeois tradition. Consequently, proletarian violence is different from the violence of the past: ‘proletarian acts of violence have no resemblance to these proscriptions; they are purely and simply acts of war; they have the value of military manoeuvres and serve to mark the separation of classes.’<sup>73</sup> This point is of crucial importance, and reinforces what has been stated above about the role of violence, which is mainly one of class-formation rather than one of social transformation.

Socialism, Sorel continues, is internationalist, and this means that it is committed to the destruction of the state. He remarks that socialists in France are antimilitarists, but underlines that this opposition to the army is not ‘a protest against the harshness of discipline... or the presence, in the higher ranks, of officers hostile to existing political institutions’.<sup>74</sup> Antimilitarism and internationalism are, instead, forms of opposition to the state:

‘The army is the clearest and the most tangible of all the possible manifestations of the State and the one which is most firmly connected to its origins. The syndicalists do not propose to reform the State... they want to destroy it, because they wish to realize this idea of Marx’s: the socialist revolution ought not to culminate in the replacement of one governing minority by another. The syndicalists outline their doctrine still more clearly when they... declare themselves antipatriotic – following the example of the Communist Manifesto.’<sup>75</sup>

Despite the vehemence with which Sorel attacks the state, one should not be side tracked by this. As we have stated before, here Sorel indicates what proletarian violence *is not*: it is not a tool of government, it is not an instrument in the hands of the any state, present or future.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 105-6. Underlining mine.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

New institutions will characterize the socialist transformation, and the state must wither away with the old order. Proletarian violence can thus be used neither to bring about the new order, nor to protect it from its future enemies. And thus we return to its original role of class-formation, which Sorel goes on to examine in the following chapters.

#### 7.4.2 TWO UNDERSTANDINGS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

Throughout the third chapter of the book Sorel had already hinted at the capacity of conflict to generate group identity, and, even more radically, he had suggested that even the mere memory of past conflicts was a powerful engine of legitimation of the institutions that had emerged out of them. The relationship between class identity and a certain practice of social conflict is the question at the heart of the *Reflections*, and it is articulated most thoroughly in the three central chapters of the *Reflections*. These chapters are dedicated to, respectively, the revolutionary practice of social conflict, the conservative, or assimilationist, practices of social conflict and, finally, to the ways in which revolutionary social conflict – the proletarian general strike – fosters class identity. What Sorel does in those chapters are essentially two things. To start, he underlines that while the general strike aims at class separation and the restoration of a progressive historical dynamic capable of leading to the development of proletarian institutions, the practice of social conflict typical of political socialism is an assimilationist, and hence conservative one. Secondly, Sorel explores in great depth in what way the general strike creates class identity, and in doing so he elaborates at length on the mythical status of the general strike. These two conceptual lines are continuously intertwined in the three chapters of the reflections, and thus we shall separate them analytically. In this section, we deal with the comparison between revolutionary and assimilationist practices of social conflict, whereas in the next section we examine the function of the general strike and its status as a myth.

Before beginning, it is necessary to insist a little more on the function of the general strike, which is not that of creating socialism but, instead, that of creating socialists. The general strike is a practice of social conflict whose goal is that of class formation. Thus it is a practice of mobilization that aims at creating a group identity of a specific type, i.e. a group identity based on the position of the group in a capitalist economy. It is important to stress that Sorel is not concerned with group identity *per se*, but with proletarian class-consciousness. How the general strike achieves this will be examined in the next section. Here it is more important to remind the reader of the context within which Sorel wrote the *Reflections*, which is that

characterized by the processes of working class assimilation that he had been examining since 1902. Now, the fundamental difference between the proletarian strike and the political strike lies in the fact that while the former engenders resistance to these assimilationist processes, the latter is a symptom of such processes, and thus essentially accelerates them. The distinction between these two understanding and practices of social conflict, it must be underlined, is not one of methods, i.e. it is not a distinction between violent and peaceful means. Though violence of a particular kind is essential to the proletarian strike, it can also be important in the political strike: the latter, Sorel concedes, 'might be peaceful and of short duration', but it 'might also be the first act of a series of bloody riots' without *ipso facto* changing its political and non-revolutionary nature.<sup>76</sup> The difference between the two kinds of strike, instead, must be looked for in the measure in which they resist or accelerate the tendencies towards proletarian assimilation that characterize the current context.

It is important, for example, to dwell a little bit on the effects that the two different practices have on the idea of class as conceived by Marx. Sorel is acutely aware that the Marxian notion of class is in crisis. He knows that the current social structure is characterized increasingly less by the opposition between wage earners and employers that is fundamental to socialism. 'Marx' he writes 'speaks of society as if it were divided into two fundamentally antagonistic groups; observation, it has often been argued, does not justify this thesis of dichotomy and it is true that a certain effort of the will is necessary before we can find it verified in the phenomena of everyday life.'<sup>77</sup> New economic conditions have complicated the class structure of society, and, for example, have allowed for the emergence of white-collar workers, those whom Sorel calls 'a little aristocracy' amongst wage earners, i.e. a group 'possessing the confidence of the employer and not belonging to the world of the proletariat.'<sup>78</sup> Here the practice of the general strike can be of help, since it is a practice which forces groups to take sides, and thus in which 'oppositions [between classes] become extraordinarily clear'.<sup>79</sup> The general strike 'separates the interests and the different ways of thinking of the two groups of wage-earners much better than do the daily circumstances of life.'<sup>80</sup> But if the practice of the general strike leads to a sharper awareness of the still existing conflicts of interests between different classes, the political strike does exactly the opposite. Because the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

necessities of parliamentary politics lead socialists to look for the largest possible constituency, it follows that the Marxian class structure has to be abandoned, that ‘the division of society into two antagonistic armies disappears’ since the upheaval envisaged by reformists ‘is possible with any kind of social structure.’<sup>81</sup> Under parliamentary socialism it is ‘no longer possible to distinguish the classes by the place occupied by their members in capitalist production; we go back to the old distinction between rich groups and poor groups’.<sup>82</sup> Thus, whereas the revolutionary strike fosters the proletarian identity, the political strike tends to assimilation.

Context is crucial, and we must remember that the arguments of the *Reflections* outline emergency measures for exceptional circumstances. The most basic way in which the practice of the general strike can fight the processes of proletarian assimilation is by being a self-consciously revolutionary understanding of social conflict, an understanding that sees no possibility of compromise with the existing *status quo*. Sorel compares the general strike to the decisive Napoleonic battle, and casts it as a series of incidents in which revolutionary syndicalists ‘see in each strike a model, a test, a preparation for the great final upheaval.’<sup>83</sup> This refusal to compromise, and we shall see precisely how in the next section, has an extraordinary power, for it reduces to zero the space of conciliation and thus infuses an increasingly resigned working class with revolutionary consciousness:

‘...the day when the slightest incidents of daily life become symptoms of the state of struggle between the classes, when every conflict is an incident in the social war, when every strike engenders the perspective of a total catastrophe, on that day there is no longer any possibility of social peace, of resignation to routine, or of enthusiasm for philanthropic or successful employers. The idea of the general strike... drags into the revolutionary track everything it touches. In virtue of this idea, socialism remains ever young; all attempts to bring about social peace seem childish; desertions of comrades into the ranks of the bourgeoisie, far from discouraging the masses, only excite them still more to rebellion; in a word, the line of cleavage [la scission] is never in danger of disappearing.’<sup>84</sup>

This incredibly dense passage already anticipates a number of key features of how general strikes function, most notably highlighting their being an educational practice far more than a practice leading to the seizure of power. But it is important to underline how the function of

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-7.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 124-5.

the general strike is defined by the processes of assimilation occurring in society, how it represents an answer to the dangerous conservative appeal of ‘philanthropic employers’, and to ideologies of national and social solidarity. This is why intransigence is key, because without it the general strike becomes something else, namely a tool of negotiation. It is the fact that the proletarian strike is animated by the vision of a radically transformed society that allows it to perform its vital role of class formation, and it is also what marks its most profound difference with the political strike. ‘Politicians’ writes Sorel ‘... argue about social conflicts in exactly the same manner as diplomats argue about international affairs... they see in the combatants nothing but instruments. The proletariat is their army...’.<sup>85</sup> The point here is not merely the instrumentality with which political leaders treat the masses, but, more decisively, that international conflicts end with peace treaties. This turns the political strike, no matter how bloody and violent, into a weapon of negotiation with the existing order and thus into an aspect of the assimilationist dynamic which Sorel attempts to reject. This negotiation is impossible with the proletarian strike, for how is it possible to negotiate with people that demand nothing short of the complete surrender of their foe? The general strike cannot be functional to the dynamic of compromise between classes that characterizes the current regime, and this is why parliamentary socialists – being essentially mediators – find it unpalatable. They ‘detest the general strike because all the propaganda surrounding it is too socialistic to please philanthropists.’<sup>86</sup>

It is clear that the practice of social compromise and negotiation in which parliamentary socialists excel and which gives to the political strike its intrinsic logic is a practice that is not conducive to the restoration of the conditions necessary for the socialist transformation. Quite on the contrary, it is the expression of that historical tendency that makes the advent of socialism an increasingly unrealistic possibility. A historically progressive capitalism creates, along with economic growth and technological innovations, class divisions. But the political practice of parliamentary socialists tends to ignore or downplay the importance of economic conflicts in society. As such, it is a political practice that can only flourish in the context of a corporatist and decadent capitalism: ‘experience shows us that it is by seeking to stop the progress of capitalism and to preserve the forms of existence of classes who are in the decline that the prophets of social peace endeavour to capture popular favour.’<sup>87</sup> Parliamentary socialism, and its understanding of social conflicts, are thus expressions of those historical

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 128.



tendencies that tame capitalist development and militate against the emergence of the proletariat as a self-conscious revolutionary subject. It is because of the fact that their deepest nature is a conservative one that they have enormous trouble in balancing their revolutionary ideology with their daily political practice:

‘In the mouths of these would-be representatives of the proletariat all socialist formulas lose their sense. 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 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.’<sup>88</sup>

The passage points to another key feature that Sorel ascribes to parliamentary socialism and, by extension, to its understanding of social conflict as negotiation: its intimate connection with that most powerful of existing institutions, the state. This connection should immediately result from the fact that the political strike is a weapon of negotiation: negotiation presupposes the permanence of existing institutions and merely seeks a more satisfying accommodation of the demands of workers within such institutions. Institutional continuity is, for Sorel, the great indicator of conservative movements. Whereas a revolution might legitimately preserve the economic conquests of the old order, institutions – and consequently social relations – must change, and when a movement operates within the bounds of existing institutions, it is the surest signs of its conservative, non-revolutionary nature. Sorel cites the Russian experience of 1905, and the Belgian one of 1893, in support of this thesis, arguing that, in the Belgian case, ‘the workers served the ends of the State and of the capitalists.’<sup>89</sup> More generally, a few pages later, Sorel argues that ‘the political general strike presupposes that very diverse social groups shall possess the same faith in the magical force of the State’, and that this faith is typical of ‘groups in the decline’, i.e. of classes without any capacity of renewing society through the development of new institutions.<sup>90</sup>

Now, if the dependency of the political strike upon the state signals its conservative nature, it also means something else, namely that parliamentary socialism still views the political and social world through bourgeois categories. But the future cannot be thought through the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 147 and 147n.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

categories of the past. ‘Socialists’ writes Sorel ‘have for a long time been dominated by the idea that capitalist society must be likened to the feudal system. I scarcely know any idea more false and more dangerous; they imagine that the new feudalism would disappear beneath the influence of forces analogous to those which ruined the old feudal system.’<sup>91</sup> This force is the state, ‘a strong and centralized power, imbued with the conviction that it had received a mandate from God to employ exceptional measures against evil’, a state whose genealogy, as we have seen in the previous section, Sorel traced back to medieval monarchy.<sup>92</sup> This dependency on bourgeois models is problematic not only because it reveals the unwillingness, or inability, of parliamentary socialists of conceiving a socialist society governed by genuinely new institutions, but also because it condemns them to replicate the repressive and centralizing practices typical of statism. Once again, Sorel’s main historical example is 1789:

‘...we always find a supernumerary State (an *artificial State*, to use an expression of that time) which is organized in advance by the side of the legal State, which considers itself a legitimate power before it becomes a legal power, and which profits by some slight incident to take up the reins of government as they slip from the feeble hands of the constituted authorities.’<sup>93</sup>

The revolution is not the organization of a shadow cabinet ready to step in and exercise power through the existing models and institutions, it is not ‘a simple transmutation in the personnel of the State.’<sup>94</sup> Socialism is a society structured around institutions and organizations having arisen from a substantially new historical experience, and thus requires an institutional break, which Sorel calls a ‘break in the system of domination.’<sup>95</sup> Without it, any change is bound to replicate existing models, with the result of seeing the ‘social revolution culminate in a wonderful system of slavery.’<sup>96</sup> Revolutionary syndicalism ‘cannot accept the idea that the historic mission of the proletariat is to imitate the bourgeoisie; it cannot conceive that a revolution as vast as that which would abolish capitalism could be attempted... [merely to achieve] a change of masters’.<sup>97</sup>

This brings Sorel to a crucial distinction of the *Reflections*, that between bourgeois force and proletarian violence. The distinction is straightforwardly formulated: ‘the object of force is to

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-3.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order.’<sup>98</sup> How should this be interpreted? Force is a statist concept: it is the use of violent means to ensure the survival and reproduction of a form of social organization centred on a specific historical institution, the state. The crucial aspect of violence, on the other hand, is not so much that it tends to the destruction of existing institutions, including the state, but that it tends to destruction. This is a crucial argumentative step, which, when correctly understood, sheds great light on the *Reflections*. A socialist society will not be an anarchic utopia: it will be structured around new institutions that are still inexistent. Violence *does not generate* these new institutions, it merely fights the existing ones. As we have pointed out repeatedly, the role of violence, and of the general strike, in bringing about the new society is a very indirect one, and here Sorel clarifies once more its mostly destructive character. But if violence and the general strike cannot create institutions, they still have a positive, constructive role to play in that they can create a revolutionary subject. It is here that we enter the core of the *Reflections*.

#### **7.4.3 MYTH AND THE GENERAL STRIKE AS REVOLUTIONARY EDUCATION**

The role of the general strike and of violence is, as we have just seen, a destructive one insofar as it is not a practice of institution building. As Sorel had clarified in the ‘Préface de 1905’, the institutional framework of the new society will arise out of the productive experience of the proletariat. But the general strike is not merely destructive, it also serves an important positive function, which is that of creating class-consciousness in a context in which class tends to disappear from the socialist horizon. In other words, the general strike is not exclusively a practice of resistance to assimilation, but it is a practice of resistance that creates class-consciousness. We have seen before how, for Sorel, the conservative politics of parliamentary socialists had created confusion in Marxist language. One of the advantages of syndicalism is that it remedies this confusion, and that it uses ‘methods of expression’ capable of clearly outlining the conflict of interests that, despite everything, still remains in capitalist societies.<sup>99</sup> Through the practice of the general strike, ‘the movements of the revolting masses are presented so as to make a deep and lasting impression on the souls of the rebels.’<sup>100</sup> It should be noticed how Sorel is, as a matter of fact, speaking about revolutionary education: the contradictory Marxism of reformists is contrasted with the clearer one of the syndicalists,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 164-5.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

and the emphasis is firmly on the ‘impression on the souls of the rebels.’ Throughout the *Reflections* Sorel makes constant references to what he alternatively calls the ‘ideological’ or ‘educational’ function of the general strike, but the scattered nature of these references means that their importance is easily overlooked. These references point to the central idea of the *Reflections*, which is that the general strike is an instrument of class formation, or, more accurately, a practice capable of educating the proletariat to its revolutionary role. In other words, the greatest function performed by the general strike is the impression it leaves ‘on the souls of the rebels’, and though it cannot aspire to transform society, it can transform the working class.

This leads to a clearer understanding of what the general strike is. It is not merely a series of clashes with the bourgeoisie, but an articulated and highly ideological practice of social conflict capable of reinforcing the revolutionary instincts of the working class. But how is this revolutionary education through social conflict achieved? We had seen, in examining the ‘Préface de 1905’, how Sorel had insisted that strikes, in themselves, were ‘economic incidents of small social importance’, and that, in order to foster the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat, they required a specific way of being understood by workers.<sup>101</sup> The general strike thus is a series of episodes that need to be experienced, understood, and narrated in a particular manner if it is to leave the desired impression ‘on the souls of the rebels’: this way of experiencing social conflict requires what Sorel calls the ‘revolutionary myth’. It is only by underlining forcefully the ‘ideological’ or ‘educative’ function of the general strike that we understand not only the necessity of myth, but also the features which Sorel ascribes to it. The mythical dimension of the general strike, in other words, is essential to its educational function, for only when social conflict is conducted through the lenses of the revolutionary myth can it effectively cement the class identity of the proletariat and counter processes of class dissolution.

In discussing the extremely complex notion of myth, it is necessary to separate the historical role, or function, that Sorel ascribes to it from the epistemic status that he assigns to this notion. We shall deal in the next section with the latter question, and limit ourselves here to highlighting the role that myth has in the practice of social conflict that Sorel calls the general strike. Of course, the two questions cannot be completely separated, but for the sake of clarity we shall try to do so. The function of myth is that of conferring to the practice of the general

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<sup>101</sup> Sorel, ‘Préface de 1905’, p. 60.

strike its greatest possible educative, or ideological, effectiveness. To say that myth, and the general strike, have an educational function means that they aim at a transformation of those who engage in the general strike more than at the transformation of society. It means, in other words, that those who engage in the general strike will be able to resist the assimilationist tendencies that characterize current capitalism, and that, in the longer run, this intransigence towards social conciliation will be capable of restoring the conflictual dynamic proper to an historically progressive capitalism. The general strike, as we have seen before, must be able to drag ‘into the revolutionary track everything it touches’, to preserve and reinforce the cleavage between employers and workers, to destroy the ‘possibility of social peace’. This can only be done when it is informed by the revolutionary myth.<sup>102</sup> This sheds much light on a number of key features that Sorel ascribes to myth.

It explains, for example, why myth cannot be broken down into its various constituent parts, but ‘must *be taken as an undivided whole*’<sup>103</sup>: the analytical breakdown would take away most of its heuristic and educational value. ‘Ordinary language’, writes Sorel, ‘could not produce these results’, and this is why ‘appeal must be made to collections of images which, *taken together and through intuition alone*... are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society’.<sup>104</sup> The results about which Sorel speaks can only be obtained when instances of social conflict are lived through the framework of a coming revolution that leads to the collapse of the capitalist order. To break this apocalyptic image into its various individual components would nullify the educative power of the general strike and render it useless. Myth, as had been underlined at the beginning of this section, is a ‘method of expression’ of Marxism. It is, to be more precise, the manner in which the revolutionary ideology is apprehended and lived by the revolutionary class, and this is why Sorel insists that ‘there is a fundamental identity between the chief tenets of Marxism and the coordinated aspects furnished by the picture of the general strike.’<sup>105</sup> This explains why it is essential that it contains references to the total collapse of capitalism, for without this the practice of the general strike would not be able to perform its educative function, and would transform itself into a conservative, political, practice of social conflict. When dealing with the socialist revolution, it is important that ‘its character of absolute and irrevocable transformation should

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<sup>102</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 124-5.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

be preserved, because it contributes powerfully to giving socialism its high educational value.<sup>106</sup> These two characteristics of myth are necessary to the fulfilment of its function, which is the educational one of strengthening proletarian class-consciousness and fighting assimilation. A question clearly arises as to whether *anything* which galvanizes the working class can qualify as a revolutionary myth, i.e. whether deliberate lies are in order, but we shall answer it in the next section as we deal with the epistemic status of myths.

The educational, ideological, or identity-forming role of the general strike further clarifies, and greatly circumscribes, the function of violence and myth in the general strike. Regarding violence, it appears clear that what Sorel is speaking of here is a demonstrative violence, a violence that will not bring down the capitalist order but that will reinforce the intransigence of the proletariat towards the offers of conciliation that come to it on behalf of a decadent bourgeoisie. Contrary to common opinion, Sorel is not a worshipper of violence. He concedes that 'violence may hamper economic progress and even, when it goes beyond a certain limit, that it may be a danger to morality.'<sup>107</sup> The rejoinder he adds to these concessions is however extremely illuminating. He writes that 'this concession cannot be used as an argument against the doctrine set forth here, because I consider violence only from the point of view of its ideological consequences.'<sup>108</sup> In other words, because the myth frames violence so as to produce a strong impression of class solidarity and of hostility towards the bourgeoisie, there is no need for a great deal of it: 'a great development of brutality accompanied by much blood-letting is quite unnecessary in order to induce the workers to look upon economic conflicts as the reduced facsimiles of the great battle which will decide the future.'<sup>109</sup> Moreover, the role of violence is bound to become even less important if the general strike achieves its second, indirect, but incredibly important aim of the mobilisation of the bourgeoisie to the defence of its class interests: 'If a capitalist class is energetic... its frank and consistently reactionary attitude contributes at least as greatly as proletarian violence towards keeping distinct that cleavage between the classes which is the basis of all socialism.'<sup>110</sup>

The most striking historical parallel that Sorel draws in the *Reflections* is that between proletarian violence and Christian martyrdom in the Roman Empire. In discussing this 'great

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., pp. 177-8

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

historical example', Sorel further clarifies important aspects of the role of violence and myth in the formation of an historical identity. The central question is the separation of the historically declining social formations from historically emerging ones: 'without this cleavage [between the pagan and the Christian worlds] the latter would never have acquired all its characteristic features.'<sup>111</sup> Violence helps in maintain this cleavage, even when it is suffered. However, Sorel quickly rejects the idea that the persecutions of Christians occurred on a very large scale. Citing the Protestant historian Adolph von Harnack, he minimizes the extent of these persecutions, and, by underlining that Christianity had mostly spread to the Roman aristocracy, he creates an historical puzzle: 'there is something paradoxical... in the situation of the Church which had its followers in the upper classes, who were obliged to make many concessions to custom in order to live, and who could yet hold beliefs based on the idea of absolute cleavage.'<sup>112</sup> The puzzle can be solved by bringing up the historical force of ideology: 'if the Christian system of ideas had been rigorously determined by material facts, such a paradox would have been impossible.'<sup>113</sup> Thus, it was the Christian's consciousness of their identity as a group that avoided their dissolution into the Roman world. This identity was preserved also thanks to the violence suffered; however, because this violence was experienced through the lenses of a myth, a very limited amount of instances of persecution could nonetheless have a very profound effect. What allowed Christianity to preserve and strengthen its historical identity was not the frequency of persecutions, but their ideological effects upon the Christian community.

'The statistics of persecutions therefore play no great part in this question; what was of much greater importance than the frequency of the punishments were the remarkable occurrences which took place during the scenes of martyrdom. It was through these rather rare but very heroic events that the ideology was constructed: there was no necessity for the martyrdom to be numerous in order to prove, by the test of experience, the absolute truth of the new religion and the absolute error of the old, to establish thus that there were two incompatible ways and to make it clear that the reign of evil would come to an end.'<sup>114</sup>

The capacity of myth of colouring individual instances of violence so as to produce an ideological reinforcement could hardly be articulated more clearly. Sorel stresses the influence of the apocalyptic texts of early Christianity in giving to acts of martyrdom their ideological function. It was thanks to the influence of these various apocalypses that a given

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

instance of Roman repression ‘instead of being valued on its actual importance as a misfortune that had befallen a few individuals... became an incident of the war carried by *Satan, prince of this world*, who was soon to reveal his Antichrist.’<sup>115</sup> In his treatment of Christian martyrdom Sorel is also careful to underline that the necessity for this, as it were, ideological practice of social conflict, is typical of historical movements either in their infancy or faced by the threat of extinction. Movements in their maturity acquire their ideological identity from something else, namely institutions, and when this occurs the importance of myth and violence decrease: when ‘Christianity had developed sufficiently, the apocalyptic literature ceased to be cultivated to any great extent’.<sup>116</sup> If it is correct to read the digression as an historical parallel, we are allowed to think that this point reinforces what we have called the topical nature of the measures advocated by Sorel in the *Reflections*. Their great goal is that of helping the return to an historical dynamic in which the economic conflicts intrinsic to capitalism are allowed to fully develop. In that context, the only one that can lead to socialism, myth and violence would still play a role in shaping the consciousness of the working class. But they would not have the importance that they have in the current context in which the proletariat finds itself in a situation somewhat akin to that of the Christian Roman aristocrats, i.e. dangerously on the verge of being assimilated into the system.

## **7.5 MYTH, MARXISM, AND SOCIAL SCIENCE**

Before concluding, it is necessary to address the question regarding the epistemic status of myth. The issue is complex, but answering this question takes us to the heart of Sorel’s philosophical and epistemological conceptions, and illuminates them in a satisfying manner. We have seen before how Sorel had insisted that the tenets of Marxism, especially the ‘catastrophic’ notion of the socialist revolution, be part of the revolutionary myth through which the working class practice social conflict. We have also seen how the function of the general strike is an educative one. Does this mean that Sorel reduces Marxism to myth, i.e. to an educative catechism? There are a number of considerations that would seem to warrant this conclusion. To start with, it must be noticed that Sorel had begun using the concept of myth before the *Reflections on Violence* and, more importantly, that he had used it in connection with the tenets of orthodox Marxism that had been questioned by Bernstein. Sorel had learned, though somewhat belatedly, the lesson of Bernstein. He had understood that the economic and social conditions that characterized early twentieth century capitalism were

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.



substantially different from those that characterized the capitalist societies about which Marx was writing. It is at this point that he had begun to reflect about myth, as a way of conceptualizing a number of key Marxist theses. In the *Insegnamenti*, for example, he had written that ‘the catastrophic conception [of the revolution] can be preserved as a social myth, to which the idea of the general strike is added.’<sup>117</sup>

The impression that myth is just fantasy Marxism is made stronger by a number of Sorelian statements in the *Reflections*, in which he adopts a casual attitude towards the truth of myths. He writes, for example, that a ‘myth cannot be refuted since it is, at bottom, identical to the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement’<sup>118</sup> Further on, he states that people ‘who are living in this world of myths are secure from all refutation’<sup>119</sup>, giving the impression that myth is something similar to blind conviction in the face of contrary evidence. More strikingly perhaps, he explicitly states that ‘it matters little whether the general strike is a partial reality or simply a product of the popular imagination’.<sup>120</sup> In discussing a number of historical examples of myths, Sorel accepts that many of the elements that constituted such myths have not gone on to become features of the new societies, and goes as far as conceding that, in some cases, it is even possible that ‘nothing which they contain will come to pass’.<sup>121</sup> But he insists that all this can be conceded unproblematically because myths are not ‘astrological almanacs’, but instead ‘must be judged as a means of acting on the present; all discussion of the method of applying them as future history is devoid of sense.’<sup>122</sup>

It is easy to see where the established image of an irrationalist obsessed with action for action’s sake has been derived, especially in the light of passages such as the following, taken from the introductory letter to Halévy, in which he confesses that ‘By employing the term myth I... [thought I] put myself in a position of refusing all discussion with the people who wish to subject the general strike to detailed criticism and who accumulate objections against its practical possibility’.<sup>123</sup> On the one hand, Sorel insists that the practical realization of myths is unimportant, while on the other he underlines that they are instruments of action,

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<sup>117</sup> Sorel, *Insegnamenti*, p. 394. ‘La concezione catastrofica può esser conservata come un mito sociale, al quale viene ad aggiungersi l’idea dello sciopero generale.’

<sup>118</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 29.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116 and 116-17.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

more precisely instruments of mobilization. This seems to suggest that in the face of adverse social and economic conditions the revolutionary proletariat should, in the face of all evidence, take up arms against the existing order because this generates a morality of the sublime.<sup>124</sup> It would thus appear as if myth is a convenient way of reintroducing into social science what has been conclusively falsified by history, and that when Sorel speaks of the mobilizing power of myth upon the revolutionary class, he is effectively suggesting the use of a Platonic noble lie in order to produce desired social outcomes. But this conclusion, despite its superficial appeal, is both rushed and substantially incorrect.

To show this, it is necessary to go back to the fourth chapter of the thesis, and to Sorel's understanding of Marxism, and consequently of the historical process and of the ways in which it can be understood. We had seen how, to start with, Sorel held that social scientific understanding is historical, and thus it is only possible retroactively, when a given historical movement has exhausted itself. As we had pointed out, this means that the predictive failures of Marx do not invalidate Marxism in any way, i.e. that Sorel could learn Bernstein's lesson without having to consequently reject Marxism. Secondly, this impossibility of understanding scientifically not only the future, but also the present, is connected to Sorel's understanding of the historical world as essentially a product of collective agency. Here we return to the first chapter, and to the fundamental irreconcilability between science and agency. Only when the creative process has come to completion will it be possible to understand how it occurred. This understanding is justified by the Vichian epistemological principle of *verum ipsum factum*: before agency has exhausted itself, it is possible to guess, to identify correlations, but it is not possible to understand society scientifically. This principle is repeated at the beginning of the *Reflections*, when Sorel states that current developments have to be studied in light of a hypothetical future.<sup>125</sup>

With this in mind, the fact that the notion of myth in the *Reflections*, but also elsewhere, is constantly accompanied by the language of action should alert us to the fact that myth is not a Platonic noble lie, but, instead, is an expression of an historical movement. In the *Reflections*, for example, Sorel not only repeatedly insists that myths are 'not descriptions of things but

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<sup>124</sup> The discussion of the moral sublimity which comes from conflict, developed in the last two chapters of the *Reflections*, will not be treated in the present chapter. Sorel does, indeed, think that a moral renaissance could emerge out of the sustained conflict between workers and capitalists, but this moral renaissance is typical of all dawning eras and in no way it is the goal pursued by Sorel through his socialist writings. What he devotes his pages to, in other words, is not any kind of moral rebirth, but the advent of the civilisation of producers – which will, of course, carry with it a moral rebirth.

<sup>125</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 40.

expressions of a will to act'<sup>126</sup>, but also frames the notion of myth through continuous references to Bergson. Now, it should be noticed that the Bergson that is being referred to here is *not* that of the *Evolution Créatrice*, but instead that of the *Données*, through whom Sorel had first engaged with the problem of freedom and determinism. The conceptual structures that Sorel summons to help him explain the idea of myth are those discussed in the first chapter of the thesis: freedom understood as creative agency, and arising from inner depths that are inaccessible to scientific analysis. 'When we act' explains Sorel 'we are creating a completely artificial world placed ahead of the present world and composed of movements which depend entirely on us. In this way our freedom becomes perfectly intelligible.'<sup>127</sup> When Sorel refers to Bergson, then, he is essentially arguing that myth is the product of the willing, and thus creative, activity of a subject, with the difference that whereas for Bergson the subject is an individual self, for Sorel it is collective and historical. It is in the fourth chapter of the *Reflections* that Sorel discusses this question in depth, by examining the shortcomings of what he calls *la petite science*. The greatest limitation of this understanding of science is its inability to go beyond what Sorel calls the 'superficial regions' of social phenomena.<sup>128</sup> This is not a general critique to scientism, but a very precise one: what lies beneath these superficial regions, as should be clear, is (collective) agency, the ability of social groups to act upon present conditions and to change them. Hence, the shortcomings of the *petite science* consist essentially in its inability to deal with human agency in history.

Myth is, then, essentially an expression of this historical agency, and the language and categories through which it must be examined are those of (historical) subjectivity. This is why it is impossible to assess the epistemic credentials of myth by confronting its elements with present or future historical reality: both present and future, in virtue of the creativity of human agency, are illegitimate fields of social scientific enquiry. However, contrary to what a superficial reading might suggest, myths *can* be tested empirically. This verification must however make reference to the collective subject that expresses the myth. This is why Sorel argues that this procedure of verification does not imply discussions about future developments, avoids 'lofty reflections about philosophy, history or economics' and remains on what he calls 'the level of observable facts'.<sup>129</sup> These facts, as should be clear, are psychological ones, and the relevant empirical data will be the testimony of revolutionary

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

workers. Thus, to assess the credentials of the myth informing the general strike ‘we have to question men who take a very active part in the real revolutionary movement among the proletariat, who do not aspire to climb into the bourgeoisie and whose mind is not dominated by corporative prejudices.’<sup>130</sup> Though Sorel concedes that they ‘may be deceived about an infinite number of political, economic or moral questions’, the fact remains that ‘their testimony is decisive, sovereign and irrefutable when it is a question of knowing what are the ideas which most powerfully move them and their comrades’.<sup>131</sup> In other words, since myths are *expressive* of the agency of a given historical subject, their empirical verification must adopt the language of authenticity.

What this implies is that, contrary to what Sorel appears to assert at various points in the *Reflections*, myths can be refuted. They cannot be arbitrary constructions imposed on a collective subject, but, on the contrary, because they are expressive of the historical agency of a collective subject, they must emerge from below. A myth is not what Sorel colourfully mocks as ‘a work of pure reason manufactured by armchair experts attempting to solve the social problem according to the rules of logic’ but instead is ‘a spontaneous product analogous to those others which students of history come across in periods of action’.<sup>132</sup> In other words, we can say that myths possess an historical truth, in the sense that they must correspond to the expectations and conditions of a collective historical subject. A myth then is not arbitrary, but it is the expression of the conception of the future that a social group elaborates in order to deploy its historical agency. It is, so to speak, a working hypothesis about the future which animates the activity of historical agents, i.e. those who will create the future. As underlined before, the criteria to adopt in order to understand myth are those of subjectivity and, more precisely, those of purposive action and of willing. It makes little sense to ask whether an intention to perform an action in the future is true or false: an act of the will, which requires an imaginative activity, opens up a space of possibility. And, far from advocating action for the sake of action, Sorel articulated at length the range of the historical possibility that could have been opened by revolutionary syndicalism.

A further consideration must be added in order to protect Sorel from the accusation of advocating a blind and self-justifying mobilization, namely that this historical space of possibility was, at the time in which he was writing, an open one. With the benefit of over a

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

century of hindsight, the possibility advocated by Sorel, i.e. that a conflictual and self-consciously revolutionary working class might have altered the course of history by taking the bourgeoisie away from the path of national, welfarist, capitalism, might appear as helplessly unrealistic. Looking backwards generates an unconscious tendency towards determinism. We might thus tend to agree much more with Bernstein, and believe that the real historical opportunity for the proletariat of the early twentieth century consisted in securing all the advantages it could from the redistributive action of a state increasingly involved in the running of large scale capitalism. We might thus come to see Sorel's vision as a something fundamentally outside of the historical reality of his time, and this could lead to the usual accusations. We would condemn Sorel as a thinker who, having understood that the social polarization which Marx had argued was intrinsic to capitalism was not occurring, still insisted on trying to make it happen, possibly in virtue of his insatiable appetite for conflict, or in virtue of his being in the words of Cole, 'a pessimist moaning for blood.'

But the revolutionary tendencies of which Sorel speaks in the *Reflections on violence* were not the fruit of his imagination, nor were they invented *ad hoc* in order to write a pamphlet capable of mobilizing workers against the republic. They were very real tendencies of the French – and Italian – proletariat. Throughout this chapter, especially in our insistence in describing the *Reflections* as a manual written for exceptional circumstances, we have likely been guilty of that unconscious determinism mentioned above. But it must be forcefully stated that the space of historical possibility outlined by Sorel in the *Reflections* was constructed with materials taken from the historical reality of the workers' movement of the time.

## 7.5 CONCLUSION

Socialism is the society resulting from the triumph of proletarian institutions, but these institutions require precise social and economic structural conditions in order to flourish. They require a world shaped by the power of capital, a world characterized by economic development, thunderous technological innovation, and, most importantly, the dissolution of antiquated identities and social relations, and their substitution with a single, increasingly severe, economic cleavage between sellers and purchasers of human labour. As early as in 1902, Sorel had begun thinking that these conditions were not ripening; in particular, the processes of class formation that would have characterized that historical dynamic were being replaced by a tendency towards the assimilation of the proletariat in the bourgeois world. In

these conditions, socialism became a matter of exerting, through democratic institutions, pressure upon the bourgeoisie to obtain concessions. This, for Sorel, meant abdicating the revolutionary character of socialism, and would lead to the dissolution of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject.

The *Reflections on violence* explore the historical possibility of subverting this path of historical development by responding to the concessions of the bourgeoisie with a practice of social conflict animated by two principal objectives. The first, most immediate one, was that of creating the revolutionary class, of fostering the class identity of the proletariat and thus of fighting the dangerous tendency towards assimilation. The second, probably more important but less urgent, is that of returning the capitalist bourgeoisie to its historically progressive mission of capitalist production. Though most of the pages of the *Reflections* explored deal with the first task, it is clear that without the second the possibility of socialism remains chimerical. As Enrico Leone wrote, introducing the book version of the *Reflections* to the Italian public:

‘In this epoch it seems to Sorel... that proletarian violence performs the useful task of bringing the bourgeoisie back to its productive activity, leading it away from the attempts of conciliation and *paternalism* to which it holds on in a desperate attempt to preserve itself. But, only because he assigns this temporary task to violence, Sorel must not be confused for an exponent of the antiquated Blanquist conception. Despite superficial similarities, syndicalism is the exact opposite of *Blanquism*: the latter holds... that violence is the source of all rights, the former instead believes, in conformity to the Marxist spirit, in a process of economic development of which right is the *automatic* product.’<sup>133</sup>

Of course, Sorel was not very inclined to believe in the automatism of which Leone speaks. But apart from this, the passage highlights well the topical nature of the measures described by Sorel in the *Reflections*. It highlights, in particular, how the socialist society requires a certain kind of capitalist development, and how proletarian violence can, indirectly, bring it about. Only in such conditions can the institutional development of the proletariat occur, and only from this development can Sorel’s society of tomorrow arise. In describing, in the

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<sup>133</sup> Enrico Leone, ‘Prefazione’, in Sorel, *Lo sciopero generale e la violenza*, pp. vii-viii. ‘In questa fase a lui sembra, da spassionato osservatore, che la violenza proletaria svolga l’ufficio utile di risospingere la borghesia dal suo reale ufficio produttivo, distogliendola ai tentativi di conciliazione e di *paternalismo* a cui, per istinto di salvezza, tenta di aggrapparsi. Ma non perché assegna tale ufficio provvisorio alla violenza, il Sorel deve andare confuso con un qualunque epigone della passata concezione blanquista. Malgrado le esterne somiglianze il sindacalismo è il precisamente opposto del *blanquismo*: questo crede, come si esprimeva l’Eckstein, che la violenza è la fonte di tutti i diritti, quello invece conforme allo spirito marxista crede ad un processo di formazione economica di cui il diritto è l’*automatico* prodotto.’

second chapter of the *Reflections*, the historical process through which socialism will impose itself, Sorel had written that ‘capitalist force is at the base of this entire process and it operates in an imperious manner.’<sup>134</sup> The possibility explored by the *Reflections* is, in some way, the opposite of this, insofar as it is the possibility that proletarian violence, by reawakening capitalist force, might be a decisive factor in the process that leads to the civilisation of producers.

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<sup>134</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 78.





## CONCLUSIONS

With the examination of the *Reflections on violence* the thesis comes to an end, consequently leaving Sorel's intellectual activity between 1908 and his death in 1922 unexamined. Despite the noticeable drop in output that characterized Sorel's writings after 1914, the period with which we do not deal contains a number of interesting issues which would be worth a closer examination, from Sorel's sporadic contacts with the *Action Française* to the reaction to the Great War, from the examinations of Soviet Russia to the philosophical turn to pragmatism, from the change in tone that comes from having the consciousness of being a relatively authoritative writer to his last years as a regular commentator on current affairs for *Il Resto del Carlino*. And yet, despite the interest that these questions clearly have, the last 15 years of Sorel's life constitute an appendix to the more vital period going from 1890 until 1908. It is in this latter period that Sorel elaborated his most important ideas, that he dealt with the central problems of his work, and that, in short, constitute the core of his thinking. Though, then, it is possible to examine the last years through the categories and interpretative keys developed in the study of the period between 1890 and 1908, the opposite does not hold. In other words, the defining traits of Sorel's thought were amply established before 1908, and did not change afterwards, which means that the most interesting aspects of his post-*Reflections* writings have to be looked in Sorel's analysis of new historical phenomena, most notably the Great War and the Russian revolution.

The story that we have told in this thesis is one that begins in philosophy and ends in socialism. It is a story that begins with Sorel's attempts to conceptualize human agency in history and that understands Sorel's engagement with Marxism through the lens of this concern for agency, showing how it led him, with the assistance of Labriola, to reject both historical and economic determinism and to embrace an understanding of Marxism as the ideological production of an emerging social force, as the consciousness of a budding historical subjectivity. The Marxism to which Sorel subscribed, characterized by the centrality of class, determined a precise political strategy for the realization of socialism: proletarian institutional development. The second part of the thesis, on the other hand, is dedicated to showing how this political strategy played out in a precise historical context characterized by important transformations in European capitalist societies. Sorel, I try to suggest, lived at the dawn of an era of mass production and social organisation, and understood rather well that

this called for a rethinking of the Marxian scheme of capitalist development in terms of increasing social polarization and class conflict. The national and welfarist capitalisms that were taking shape at the beginning of the century did not contribute to the development of the proletariat as a revolutionary class but, on the contrary, tended to incorporate this class into existing social and economic institutions. What Sorel was observing, in short, was the dissolution of the proletarian subjectivity, and revolutionary syndicalism was his antidote to this unexpected development.

By way of conclusion, we shall attempt to widen some of the issues explored in this thesis and to explore the significance of the Sorel that we have sketched. This means reflecting on two different Sorels. On the one hand, a wider interpretation of the most philosophical aspects of Sorel's thought is needed, in order to clarify that, far from proclaiming the bankruptcy of reason, Sorel dealt with some of the classical problems of philosophical modernity, and that, far from being the expression of an irrationalist philosophy confined to the dust of history, he gave solutions to such problems that fully belong to the philosophical horizon which we still inhabit. On the other hand, it is necessary reflect on Sorel's status as a Marxist theorist in an important moment of capitalist transformation. What has been suggested through the thesis is that the tendencies that Sorel had begun to detect in the opening years of the twentieth century – tendencies towards economic and social organization and productive expansion developing along national lines – were those that dominated the following fifty years of European history and that greatly contributed to the intensity of the two European conflicts. To offer a broader reflection on how Sorel saw these transformations serves not only to illuminate the stakes of the debate, but also can shed light on the significance of his syndicalist solution.

### **SOREL AS PHILOSOPHER: PRACTICE, HISTORY, CONTINGENCY**

The fundamental philosophical theme of Sorel's oeuvre is the tension between historicism and the need for substantial standards of truth and rationality. This tension is a classical one, and it accompanies virtually every epistemological stance that abandons the representationalist paradigm of knowledge in terms of enquiring subject and object of knowledge. According to the representationalist view, knowledge is a question of correctly mapping out a reality that is fundamentally external and independent from our cognitive processes and from our efforts to grasp it. The standard problem of such epistemologies is the ease with which they lead to scepticism, insofar as they create the problem of matching subjective representations with objective states of affairs to which we have no independent

and unproblematic access. This, at least since Descartes, creates the epistemological problem of, in Habermas' words, 'bridging a chasm' between inner impressions and outer reality and offers a fertile terrain for scepticism to develop. One of the canonical answers to the sceptical problems engendered by the representationalist paradigm is what we can call the Hegelian solution. This solution, which is the one pursued by Sorel, consists in radically altering the terms in which the problem is framed. Rather than positing the problem as one of access to an external reality, Hegelian, activist epistemologies seek to examine the ways in which the enquiring subject acquires knowledge, thereby abandoning the question as to the *possibility* of knowledge and concentrating on what could be called the *practice* of knowledge. It is important to stress that this stance does not imply a renunciation of the traditional philosophical pursuit of truth; on the contrary, it is a stance that holds that the pursuit of truth should be examined in the concrete, by looking at how reason functions. This is why it takes the form of a *phenomenology* in Hegel and why it can reasonably be called a 'reason in action' model.

But the Hegelian solution, too, comes at a cost. To concentrate on the agency of the enquiring mind means opening up the question of truth to a potentially endless list of contingencies. However one chooses to interpret the imperative to examine reason in action, one will be faced by pluralism. To focus on the activities of enquiring subjects and to argue that truth is to be found in these activities means essentially giving up on the idea of an external and stable criterion of truth. Activism, in other words, implies pluralism, and pluralism easily becomes relativism, whether it be historical relativism or some other form of it. Thus, very generally speaking, the challenge that activist, Hegelian epistemologies face is that of finding a way to contain the relativism that they necessarily engender. As Richard Rorty put it, the crucial question is 'whether one can be a pragmatist without being an irrationalist, without abandoning one's loyalty to Socrates': in other words, whether rational argumentation, be it philosophical or pertaining to other forms of thought, is sustainable in the absence the strong – though problematic – standard of external truth that the representationalist paradigm guarantees.<sup>1</sup>

As should be clear, one of the claims of this thesis is that Sorel's philosophical trajectory is essentially defined by this attempt to embrace an activist epistemology without falling into

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 53(6), 1980, p. 733.

relativism. On the one hand, this is of some importance, because it suggests that Sorel, when examined from a philosophical perspective, does not belong to a philosophical tradition of irrationalism, but instead to a Hegelian tradition of the philosophy of action. Sorel does not proclaim the bankruptcy of reason, but tries to develop an account of human rationality based on practice, arguing that reasoned thought can not be understood in isolation from the agency which characterizes human experience more in general. It is clear that that this inscription of Sorel into a Hegelian philosophical tradition requires greater elaboration.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, it seems to me that there are sufficient hints to believe that it is substantially correct. Not only Sorel engages with thinkers such as Vico, Labriola, Croce, and Marx, who all belong to this tradition, but, more fundamentally, he makes the relevant philosophical moves at the right moments.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when, in the late 1880s, he becomes aware of the limitations of the ageing positivism that surrounds him, he refuses to embrace conventionalism and to accord to science the epistemic status of a useful fiction, but instead forcefully argues that standards of truth and rationality have to be looked for in the concrete, historical, practices of scientists, and insists that ‘science must not prove its possibility; this is the very starting point of all reasoning’.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that, when he wrote those words, Sorel still believed in the possibility of, as it were, anchoring science in reality, i.e. in the possibility that science could faithfully represent the deterministic causal relations that characterized the natural world. What could guarantee the connection between artificially created scientific concepts and the world of nature were, as we have shown in the first three chapters, experiments. But with the reading of Vico this representationalist conception of knowledge gradually faded away and the later developments of his epistemology consisted in a radicalization of the activist and historicist tendencies. This emerges not only in the kind of Marxism that Sorel elaborated and defended, but also, though we have not dealt with it, in the pragmatism that he came to develop later in his life. Now, the peculiarity of specifically *philosophical* problems is that they are problems that pertain to

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<sup>2</sup> This is so particularly in virtue of the fact that I have dealt with Sorel’s epistemological thought only until his engagement with Vico and with Marxism, and largely ignored his writings on such issues after 1896. Generally speaking, subsequent developments lead Sorel to a greater awareness of the relevance of Hegelianism to the philosophical issue of truth and agency and, more importantly, to the discovery of and enthusiastic engagement with Jamesian pragmatism. But these new developments remained on the conceptual tracks that had been formed in the crucial years between 1888 and 1894 and thus, though they enrich the picture painted in this thesis, they do not alter it.

<sup>3</sup> For an interpretation of Marxian epistemology that is both relevant and that shaped a great deal of my thinking on the subject see Leszek Kolakowski, ‘Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth’ [1958] in his *The two eyes of Spinoza and other essays on philosophers* (South Bend, IN, St. Augustine’s Press: 2004), pp. 173-95.

<sup>4</sup> Sorel, ‘Cause en physique’, p. 478.

very general habits of reasoning, and that thus emerge in a wide variety of more specific concerns. This means that, as Sorel progressively abandoned the representationalist conception of knowledge in order to embrace the Vichian one, he was continuously confronted by the risks of excessive pluralism, relativism, and irrationalism on a variety of issues. Whether on questions of morality or of the epistemic status of scientific assertions, the tension between free agency and truth resurfaces continuously all through Sorel's vast oeuvre. The following constitutes perhaps the clearest expression of this *leit motiv*:

'Morality, like historical epochs, is a changing thing – like everything; the difficulty lies in knowing how this fact of change can be reconciled with the idea of truth. At bottom, it is with the fundamental problem of pragmatism that we are faced today; it is a problem that must be re-examined by being more sympathetic to Hegel than we tend to be nowadays. His solution, it is true, is too simple. [According to Hegel] The idea is revealed to us in each epoch according to the degree of its development; but if we abandon idealism, the difficulty becomes enormous and metaphysics has not yet begun to deal with it; yet, this is the modern problem.'<sup>5</sup>

Should there be any doubts left, the extract should reinforce the point that it is quite simply mistaken to see Sorel as belonging to a tradition of irrationalism. What this extract shows is not only how aware Sorel was of the relativistic potential of his epistemological stance, but also, more importantly, how he saw this as a yet unsolved *problem*. There is no embracement of a joyous relativism, and the tension between historical sensibility and standards of truth is described as a 'difficulté' and as 'le problème moderne.' It is significant, moreover, not only that Sorel kept engaging with this tension between agency and truth, but that he refused the solution, which he here attributes to Hegel, of a secularized historical theodicy.

This last point deserves closer examination, if only because the idea of history as process through which contingency is gradually overcome constitutes a standard answer to the relativism engendered by historicism. The historicization of human knowledge leads to relativism, but this problem can be resolved if history is a progressive narrative tending towards an end. Though we shall not, both for reasons of complexity and for the difference in

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<sup>5</sup> Georges Sorel, letter to Jean Bourdeau, 7/4/1911 in 'Lettres de Georges Sorel à Jean Bourdeau. Ire partie 1906-1913', *Mil Neuf Cent* 14, 1996, p. 189. 'La morale est changeante comme les périodes historiques – soit comme toute chose ; la difficulté est de savoir comment le fait du changement peut se concilier avec l'idée de vérité. Au fond c'est toujours le problème fondamental du pragmatisme qui est agité aujourd'hui ; problème qu'il faut reposer en se rapprochant davantage qu'on ne fait de Hegel. Celui-ci avait un procédé par trop simple, il est vrai. L'idée nous était révélée à chaque époque suivant le degré de son développement ; mais si on supprime l'idéalisme, la difficulté devient énorme et la métaphysique ne l'a pas encore abordée ; cependant c'est le problème moderne.'

philosophical magnitude between the two thinkers, develop a comparison between Hegel and Sorel on this question, it is illuminating to juxtapose Sorel to Gramsci. The two belonged to contiguous generations, shared a commitment to revolutionary Marxism and, most importantly, through a shared background in Italian idealism grounded in Labriola and Croce, had similar understandings of the philosophical content of Marxism. In fact, a closer examination of the similarities and differences between Sorel's and Gramsci's Marxisms would be worth developing, because they share so many of the basic philosophical premises, most notably the idea of the historicity of philosophy, which they both see as an articulation of the ideas implicit in social practices.

For Gramsci, for example, it is necessary to abandon the idea of philosophy as the 'intellectual activity of a precise category of specialized scientists or professional philosophers'<sup>6</sup>, because philosophical assumptions are hidden beneath every social practice: 'even in the slightest manifestation of intellectual activity, "language", is contained a precise conception of the world.'<sup>7</sup> What Gramsci calls the 'philosophy of intellectuals' is but a more articulated and crystallized version of ideas that are already present, in an unarticulated manner, in the social practices of a given historical period. It is, moreover, the part of philosophy which is more expressive of an historically situated 'common sense' [senso comune] that is most valuable:

'But accomplished and perfect systems of thought are always the work of individual philosophers and in them, beyond the historically relevant part, the part corresponding to contemporary conditions of life, there is always an abstract, "ahistorical" part, in the sense that it is linked to previous philosophies and either responds to external and pedantic necessities of architecture of the system or expresses individual traits of the philosopher; thus, the philosophy of an era cannot be found in any individual system...'<sup>8</sup>

The similarity not only of issues treated, but also of arguments and of judgments, with this passage from Sorel's *Saggi di critica del Marxismo* is striking:

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<sup>6</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 1375. 'Occorre distruggere il pregiudizio molto diffuso che la filosofia sia un alcunché di molto difficile per il fatto che essa è l'attività intellettuale propria di una determinate categoria di scienziati specialisti o filosofi professionali e sistematici.'

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. '...anche solo nella minima manifestazione di una qualsiasi attività intellettuale, il "linguaggio", è contenuta una determinata concezione del mondo...'

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 1409-10. 'Ma i sistemi compiuti e perfetti sono sempre opera di singoli filosofi, e in essi, accanto alla parte storicamente attuale, cioè corrispondente alle contemporanee condizioni di vita, esiste sempre una parte astratta, "astorica", nel senso che è legata alle precedenti filosofie e risponde a necessità esteriori o è dovuta a idiosincrasie personali; perciò la filosofia di un'epoca non può essere nessun sistema individuale o di tendenza...'

‘The formulas that resumed entire systems do not tell us why a system triumphed in a given era, nor the reason as to why it was able to influence institutions... Doctrines crumble, one after the other, like sand castles and the history of philosophy resembles the narration of successive failures; but this vanity of philosophy only belongs to the dogmatic part, that which presented itself as scientifically superior. But there was something that was not in vain: the light shed upon their own epoch by the creators of philosophical schools, which allows posterity to understand it.’<sup>9</sup>

Both Sorel and Gramsci then share this idea of the essential historicity of human thought and the idea that more systematized forms of knowledge emerge from social practice. Beyond sharing this commitment to the historicity of philosophy, and of human knowledge more in general, Sorel and Gramsci also share the worry about the relativistic implications of their stance: ‘To think’ writes the Italian ‘a philosophical claim as true in a given historical period, that is, as a necessary and inseparable expression of a given historical agency, of a given praxis, but overcome and “made obsolete” in a successive period without falling into scepticism and moral and ideological relativism, in other words, to conceive philosophy as historicity, is a rather difficult mental operation.’<sup>10</sup>

But though they share this burden of historicity, Sorel and Gramsci, importantly, differ in their willingness to keep carrying it. Addressing directly the question of truth, Gramsci denies that this truth can be conceived in terms of an ‘extra-historical and extra-human objectivity’, suggesting that these conceptions are religious residues.<sup>11</sup> But then how should truth and objectivity be accommodated in a historicist conception of knowledge? Gramsci’s answer is historically and teleologically: ‘Man knows objectively when knowledge is real for a humankind *historically* unified in a unitary cultural system; but this process of historical unification occurs through the overcoming of the contradictions that tear human society apart, contradictions that give rise to social groups and to their partisan ideologies...’<sup>12</sup> The progressive movement of mankind through history, thus, constitutes what Gramsci calls a ‘struggle for objectivity’, which consists in the ‘struggle for the cultural unification of

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<sup>9</sup> Sorel, *Saggi di Critica del Marxismo*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 1402. ‘Pensare un’affermazione filosofica come vera in un determinato periodo storico, cioè come espressione necessaria e inscindibile di una determinata azione storica, di una determinata praxis, ma superata e “vanificata” in un periodo successivo, senza però cadere nello scetticismo e nel relativismo morale e ideologico, cioè concepire la filosofia come storicità, è operazione mentale un po’ ardua e difficile.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 1415. ‘...analizzando questa concezione, non è poi tanto facile giustificare un punto di vista di oggettività esteriore così meccanicamente intesa. Pare che possa esistere una oggettività extrastorica ed extraumana?’

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 1416. ‘L’uomo conosce oggettivamente in quanto la conoscenza è reale per tutto il genere umano *storicamente* unificato in un sistema culturale unitario; ma questo processo di unificazione storica avviene con la sparizione delle contraddizioni che sono la condizione della formazione dei gruppi e della nascita delle ideologie non universali concrete ma rese caduche dall’origine pratica della loro sostanza.’

humankind.’<sup>13</sup> Significantly, Gramsci adds that ‘what idealists call “spirit” is not a starting point, but an end point’.<sup>14</sup> In other words, though Gramsci rejects the idea of history as a process of actualization of the potentialities of consciousness, he keeps the same basic teleological scheme. Though knowledge derives from practical engagement with the world, and this engagement changes historically, the overall movement of history is a progressive one, meaning that it implies a widening of human knowledge until the end point, i.e. the ‘cultural unification of mankind’, is reached and objective knowledge finally attained.

Readers of the thesis will be aware of how distant we are from Sorel’s position on the problem. Sorel was, indeed, aware of the possibility of the teleological solution, but always dismissed it, sometimes forcefully and sometimes, like in the citation above, with a certain regret. But he never accepted the legitimacy of this recourse to historical teleology. In rejecting Vico’s notion of *storia ideale*, let us recall, Sorel had been sympathetic to the necessities that had brought Vico to formulate it, and understood how it would have solved the problems of historical relativism. But he had also added that ‘the difficulties which result from the new principles’ were not a good reason to ‘go back to doctrines which we know to be false... It is precisely because we recognize its importance [of the problem of ethical and juridical relativism] that we do not want to accept illusory solutions.’<sup>15</sup> This refusal to endorse teleology means that Sorel’s epistemological system remains essentially unstable, always subject to the charge of relativism and irrationalism. But this is a risk that Sorel is conscious of, one that he chooses to run, and one that he would, if he could, avoid taking. Far from irrationalism, this refusal to endorse teleology, though it condemns his philosophy to a degree of instability, places him in a philosophical world close to the one we inhabit. ‘This kind of historicism, unlike Hegel’s, involves a form of fallibilism: it is a kind of historicism which excludes all claims to absolute knowledge’: what MacIntyre predicates of his own philosophy could very well describe Sorel’s thought.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. ‘C’è quindi una lotta per l’oggettività... e questa lotta è la stessa lotta per l’unificazione culturale del genere umano.’

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. ‘Ciò che gli idealisti chiamano “spirito” non è un punto di partenza, ma di arrivo, l’insieme delle sovrastrutture in divenire verso l’unificazione concreta ed oggettivamente universale e non già un presupposto unitario...’

<sup>15</sup> Sorel, ‘Étude sur Vico’, p. 809.

<sup>16</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A study in moral theory*, 2nd ed. (London, Duckworth: 1985), p. 270.



## THINKING THE REVOLUTION IN THE ABSENCE OF CAPITALISM

A few additional words have to be spent also on Sorel's syndicalist vision and on the circumstances in which it developed. One of the claims that I have tried to develop through the second part of the thesis is that Sorel was living at the very beginning of an era of national capitalism, of mass social organization, of nationalism, and of managed economies. It was the Great War that inaugurated this era, and thus Sorel's observations were developed in a sort of prehistory of this phase of European history. The transformation of European societies was of considerable magnitude, and we can see the importance of the shift by noticing how it completely destroyed Marxist doctrine as it was generally understood and practiced during the Second International. Beyond questions of historical and economic determinism, the mood had been one of optimism, of the ripening of social conditions that would lead to socialism. But conditions had begun to alter. Parliamentarism did not lead to the triumphant march to socialism that Engels had outlined in 1895. The Bernstein crisis opened the debate; the fiasco of 1914, when international proletarian solidarity succumbed to nationalism, sealed the fate of the practices and ideas of that International; the Bolshevik victory in 1917 introduced a new paradigm of socialist theory and practice. Capitalism had shown that, with the help of nationalism and of a greater management of economic phenomena, it was capable of dealing rather well with the class cleavages that it generated, and that national states could secure the allegiance of the working class. Commenting, in 1935, upon the period in question, Karl Kautsky wrote:

'Indeed, we expected much more from the crisis at that time... Not only the revival of the socialist movement in Britain, but the breakdown of capitalism throughout the world. This hope proved illusory. Capitalism survived the crisis... A new phase of capitalist prosperity ensued. But what emerged was an entirely altered capitalism. The older form of capitalism had been eclipsed.'<sup>17</sup>

What the second part of the thesis has been concerned with demonstrating is that Sorel, unlike Kautsky, was acutely aware of the transformations that capitalist societies were undergoing. He had identified the trends towards the nationalisation of the working class; he had seen that the new capitalism, the capitalism of the welfare state and of social peace, had found ways of dealing with the rise of a contentious proletariat. The centrality of the problem of class formation in his work derives, as has been argued, from the awareness of these circumstances. How does one create a revolutionary subjectivity in the absence of its structural conditions?

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Kautsky, 1935, cited in Colletti, 'Bernstein', p. 58.

This was the question that animated most profoundly his syndicalism. The understanding of revolution that underscored his thought was a canonical Marxist one, and socialism was seen as the process of historical coming of age of the proletariat. But new conditions forced Sorel to ask himself the question of how to turn the tide of an historical development that pushed the advent of the proletariat further and further away.

In 1922, Carl Schmitt commented on Sorel's notion of myth and, though he heaped praise on it, remarked that Sorel's mistake was that of rooting this myth in Marxian economic concepts, i.e. in an idea of class. Nation, argued Schmitt, would have been a better option:

'Sorel's other examples of myth also prove that when they occur in the modern period, the stronger myth is national. The revolutionary wars of the French nation and the Spanish and German wars of liberation against Napoleon are symptoms of a national energy. In national feeling, various elements are at work in the most diverse ways, in very different peoples. The more naturalistic conceptions of race and descent, the apparently more typical *terrisme* of the celtic and romance peoples, the speech, tradition, and consciousness of a shared culture and education, the awareness of being different from other nations – all of that tends towards a national rather than a class consciousness today.'<sup>18</sup>

To write these sentences, in the aftermath of the Great War and of the breakdown of the Second International, was easy. Moreover, despite Schmitt's claim to simply describe a state of affairs in which nation had overcome class as the source of political legitimation, it is perhaps not incorrect to read, between the lines, a subtle endorsement of this state of affairs. The passage offers a perfect occasion for reflecting on the historical possibility that Sorel thought could be opened up by proletarian violence at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sorel's vision was, as we have tried to argue, and as Schmitt also admits, a Marxian one. It is a vision of proletarian emancipation that presupposes a world in which human sociability is shaped by economic considerations. This means, *inter alia*, a world in which 'naturalistic conceptions of race and descent', 'consciousness of a shared culture and education', and 'the awareness of being different from other nations' are relegated to the dustbin of history and looked upon with puzzlement and condescension. The world in which Sorel's proletarian institutions could have flourished, and that Sorel hoped could be reinstated by proletarian violence, is a world fully shaped by capital.

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<sup>18</sup> Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, p. 75.

In this, Sorel shares what Pierre Rosanvallon has called Marx's 'fascination for the power of capitalism.'<sup>19</sup> The progressive work of emancipation of humankind from antiquated forms of sociability and politics, in other words, is largely attributed to the devastating forces of market interactions, which, as Sorel repeatedly points out, end up having to do most of the historical work required for the realization of socialism. Markets, and the interactions that they generate, have the capability of fully transforming human sociability, and thus constitute, in Marx, 'the sole true revolution that has ever occurred in human history.'<sup>20</sup> In Sorel, moreover, this momentous progressive force of capitalism, it is important to stress, manifests itself even in the movement of proletarian reaction that it engenders. One of the fundamental tasks that the budding proletarian institutions will have to learn to perform, in fact, is the administration of production, i.e. the capacity to maintain and further the economic abundance that capitalism has generated. All other forms of antagonism to capitalism are reactionary ones. In describing, in a letter to Jean Bourdeau, the specificity of the Marxist conception of class struggle Sorel could not be clearer in highlighting the intimate relationship that connects insurgent proletarians to the progressive forces of market capitalism against which they revolt:

'There are, moreover, a lot of distinctions that must be established between different social struggles: what is specific to Marx and Engels is that struggle to them derives from an economic division, whereas for A. Thierry it is military conquest, and the separation between victors and vanquished it creates, that is fundamental. The capitalist workshop has no historical or ethnic cleavages: it functions under the regime of human rights; it is a technological distinction [la différenciation technique] that engenders class struggle in the Marxist sense. Andler does not understand this, and he has remained stuck in Thierry's conception; he confuses a feudal baron and a capitalist. The prince of Sagan has immense holdings in Soleure, never goes there, and is content with collecting his feudal rent. But Schneider goes to Creusot, and he is respected in the Creusot. It is against the Schneiders that Marxist class struggle establishes itself.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le libéralisme économique* (Paris, Seuil : 1989), p. 200.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 211. 'Si Marx pense le développement du capitalisme et des forces productives, ce n'est donc pas parce qu'il part de la présupposition... que le mouvement du capitalisme ne peut être ni freiné, ni contrôlé et que son émergence constitue la seule véritable révolution qui ait jamais eu lieu dans l'histoire de l'humanité.'

<sup>21</sup> Sorel, letter to Jean Bourdeau, 2/10/1906, in 'Lettres de Sorel à Bourdeau. 1re partie', pp. 171-2. 'Il y a aussi beaucoup de distinctions à établir entre les diverses luttes sociales : ce qui est tout à fait spécial dans Marx et dans Engels, c'est que la lutte leur apparaît comme étant dérivée d'une division économique tandis que pour A. Thierry c'est la conquête et la séparation des vainqueurs et des vaincus qui est fondamentale. L'atelier capitaliste n'a point de différenciation historique ou ethnique ; il fonctionne sous le régime des droits de l'homme ; c'est cependant la différenciation technique qui engendre la lutte de classe marxiste. Andler ne parvient pas à comprendre et il en est encore à A. Thierry ; il confond un capitaliste et un baron féodal. Le prince de Sagan a d'immenses domaines à Soleure, il n'y met pas les pieds et se borne à percevoir des redevances d'origine féodale. Mais Schneider est au Creusot et même il est une grande chose dans le Creusot. C'est contre les

It is true that here Sorel adds an additional element to the specificity of the Marxist class struggle, that of technological and scientific development. Nonetheless, the main point remains: in the historical process that leads to socialism, ‘capitalist force is at the base... and it operates in an imperious manner.’<sup>22</sup>

This intimate connection between the progressive force of capitalism and the progressive character of the proletarian revolt that it ought to engender goes quite far in explaining both the language used by Sorel to condemn the new statist and welfarist tendencies and the violence with which he condemns them. After all, Sorel rejected historical teleology, so should not have been excessively shocked in seeing that capitalism had evolved in unexpected ways. But though his understanding of history could account for unexpected developments, the character of those developments struck him as profoundly regressive. Tendencies towards statism and protectionism were not only damaging to the prospect of proletarian institutional development, but were a betrayal of the bourgeoisie’s own historical mission. Hence, the recurring accusations of ‘feudalism’, the employment of a language of historical progress and regress, the tendency to see in economic planning the road to productive and technological decadence<sup>23</sup>, and the condemnation of the French bourgeoisie as a spent historical force to be compared unfavourably with its progressive American counterpart. What shocked Sorel was the realization that capitalism, far from being the progressive force capable of assuring technological advances and economic prosperity, was merely, to use again Rosanvallon’s words, a ‘class pragmatism’, that could embrace protectionism or *laissez faire*, seek social conflict or social peace, according to what best served its interests in different situations.<sup>24</sup> This, Sorel could not pardon to the bourgeoisie.

This, I believe, sheds light on the profoundly progressive nature of Sorel’s syndicalist vision. It is a vision that requires a world fully shaped by capital: a world without ethnic or national allegiances, without borders, without all social relations that are not a result of market interactions. A world in which social and political formations are grounded in the only

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Schneider que se forme la lutte de classe Marxiste.’ The Schneider family owned one of France’s largest metallurgical establishments in Le Creusot.

<sup>22</sup> Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> Whereas, in fact, it was quite the opposite, in that managerial capitalism was accompanied by a remarkable productive expansion.

<sup>24</sup> Rosanvallon, *Libéralisme économique*, p. 211. ‘Cela n’a donc aucun sens de critiquer le capitalisme en tant qu’il ne se conforme pas fidèlement aux principes du libéralisme économique et qu’il ne réalise pas le programme de l’utopie libérale. La seule liberté qu’il revendique est celle du capital, il est indifféremment libre-échangiste ou protectionniste selon que l’un ou l’autre favorise cette liberté. Il est d’abord un *pragmatisme de classe*.’

cleavage that capitalism has not eliminated, that between owners of the means of productions and sellers of human labour. The elimination of this cleavage is the task of socialism and of proletarian institutions. Needless to say that, even beyond the transformations in capitalist production that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, this world was far from being actualized in Sorel's lifetime. But when the new economic and social tendencies began to arise, it further receded from the horizon of historical possibility. The collaboration between governmental organization and capital whose birth Sorel observed produced two world wars, increased production and prosperity, and a social configuration that, by redistributing that prosperity and by completing that process of proletarian assimilation which Sorel denounced, precluded any realistic possibility of revolutionary transformations in twentieth century Western European societies.

The work of this thesis could be expanded in many ways. It could include the last years of Sorel's life, in order to investigate the development of his anti-bourgeois positions and shed light on the rightist sympathies which he did, however marginal they might be, entertain in that period. More interestingly, a substantial work on Sorel's reception in the 1920s and 1930s, focussing on Italy and France, would rescue this thesis from the contextualist excesses in which it might have fallen. The exploration of the relevance of Sorel's ideas to a number of current debates might also have the same effect. This relevance of Sorelian ideas could be pursued, most obviously, in the sphere of post-Marxist theory and, most interestingly, in Anglo-American post-analytic philosophy and in its interest in questions of historicism. This task would also show that the significance of a thinker or of an idea is neither exhausted by the explication of their historical meaning nor by studies of their reception and diffusion. A thinker or an idea remain significant and can avoid being of mere antiquarian interest as long as the same problems to which they responded keep arising in the historical experience of new generations. At the beginning of this conclusion, I have argued that, philosophically, Sorel still fully belongs to our horizon, by which I mean that, despite the change in philosophical languages, we face some of the same problems that Sorel faced. But philosophy is a *longue durée* activity, and the timings of its paradigm shifts are slow ones.

I want to end the thesis with a suggestion. The beginning of the twenty-first century has been characterized by developments that seem to suggest that the era of fruitful collaboration between state and capital is all but over. Social democratic politics based on the paradigm of redistribution of wealth appears to have exhausted its historical force. In Southern Europe,

increasingly large sections of society are partially or totally cut off from the enjoyment of social prosperity and fail to find meaningful political representation in ageing and increasingly confused social democratic parties. Protections from market excesses, capable of guaranteeing the stability of the Keynesian model, are under attack – sometimes by the same social democratic parties that had fought for them and implemented them. The ability of capitalism to operate beyond and in spite of national borders and state powers is evident anew. History does not repeat itself, but the fading of the state as a meaningful economic and social actor does put us in a context more similar to Sorel's one than anything seen in the past ninety years. Generations have lived and died under the social democratic consensus of redistributive prosperity. Those who will not, however, might find the ideas of Georges Sorel interesting.

## APPENDIX: EDITORIAL CHRONOLOGY OF THE *REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENCE*

- 1) 'La lotta di classe e la violenza', *Il Divenire Sociale* 1, 1 and 16 October 1905, pp. 294-8 and 313-15.
- 2) 'La decadenza borghese e la violenza', *Il Divenire Sociale* 1, 1 and 16 November 1905, pp. 331-33 and 343-8.
- 3) 'I pregiudizi contro la violenza', *Il Divenire Sociale* 1, 1 December 1905, pp. 359-66.
- 4) 'Lo sciopero generale', *Il Divenire Sociale* 1, 16 December 1905, pp. 374-8.
- 5) 'Réflexions sur la violence – Avant-propos', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 18, 15 January 1906, pp. 5-12.
- 6) 'Réflexions sur la violence – Lutte de classe et violence', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 18, 15 January 1906, pp. 12-32. [Slightly adjusted French version of 1]
- 7) 'Réflexions sur la violence – Decadence bourgeoise et violence', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 18, 15 January 1906, pp. 32-56. [Slightly adjusted French version of 2]
- 8) 'Lo sciopero generale politico', *Il Divenire Sociale* 2, 16 January 1906, pp. 22-5 and 1 February 1906, pp. 35-7.
- 9) 'Réflexions sur la violence – Préjugés contre la violence', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 18, 15 February 1906, pp. 140-64. [Slightly adjusted French version of 3]
- 10) 'Morale e violenza', *Il Divenire Sociale* 2, 16 February 1906, pp. 51-5.
- 11) 'Réflexions sur la violence – La grève prolétarienne', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 18, 15 March 1906, pp. 256-93. [Substantially enlarged French version of 4]
- 12) 'Lo sciopero generale e la morale', *Il Divenire Sociale* 2, 16 March 1906, pp. 86-9.
- 13) 'La morale dei produttori', *Il Divenire Sociale* 2, 1 April 1906, pp. 100-103.
- 14) *Lo sciopero generale e la violenza*, trans. by Salvatore Piroddi and preface by Enrico Leone (Roma, Tipografia Industria e Lavoro : 1906), xii + 128 pp. [Contains 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 13]
- 15) 'Réflexions sur la violence – La grève générale politique', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 18, 15 April 1906, pp. 390-427. [Substantially enlarged French version of 8]
- 16) 'Réflexions sur la violence – La moralité de la violence', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 19, May-June 1906, pp. 33-81. [Substantially enlarged French version of 10 and 12]
- 17) 'Réflexions sur la violence – La morale des producteurs' *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 19, May-June 1906, pp. 81-124. [Substantially enlarged French version of 13]
- 18) 'Lettre à M. Daniel Halévy', *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 22, August-September 1907, pp. 137-75.
- 19) *Réflexions sur la violence* (Paris, Pages Libres : 1908). [Contains slightly altered versions of 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 15, 16, 17 and, by way of introduction, 18]





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