GEORGES SOREL AND THE RISE OF POLITICAL MYTH

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I

Georges Sorel (1847–1922) continues to be a problem for many researchers and ideologists of the Right and the Left. He has become a litmus paper by which thinkers, researchers, and political activists shape their own beliefs and try to formulate their own ideas. An international colloquium on Sorel which was held in 1982 at the Ecole Normale Supérieure resulted in the publication of Georges Sorel en son temps (1985),1 and the Société d'Études Soréliennes which was founded in 1983 published the Cahiers G. Sorel2 and plans to republish Sorel's complete works in fifteen volumes. It is not surprising that this 'nouveau discours',3 this renewed interest, arose among the French Left when the Socialists came to power in France in this decade. This 'revision of Sorel' tries to achieve three main purposes: the Gallicisation of European socialism through Sorel; the reclaiming of Sorel by the Left; the rehabilitation of Sorel from the charge of contributing to the rise of Fascism, or to put it another way, the attempt to banish the memory of what Sartre called the 'Fascist speeches'4 of Sorel.

Sorel was a thinker who called himself a true Marxist, but viewed young Mussolini and Lenin as the two greatest politicians ever produced by socialism. He was a Dreyfusard and an anti-Dreyfusard in the same decade. He waited for a cultural rejuvenation of decadent Europe, but kept silent during World War One. He was anti-Semitic but admired ancient Hebrew civilisation. A revolutionary who discovered the modern instruments of power of the twentieth century, at the same time he looked at ancient heroic cultures as an inspiring model for the France of the fin de siècle. He supported the C.G.T. and 'Action Francaise', Revolutionary Syndicalism and Marxism, the Soviets and the great American capitalists, Proudhon and Bernstein. In the very same year that Sergio Panunzio glorified Sorel as the father of Fascist syndicalism, Sorel looked at the Soviets as true revolutionary syndicates.5 Two members of the 'Cercle Proudhon'—which brought together Monarchists and syndicalists, Nationalists and Socialists—sought to have a monopoly on Sorel as the father of their contradictory thoughts. These were Georges Valois, founder of the 'Faisceau', and the communist Eduard Berth.6

Sorel has influenced, in one way or another, French communist militants such as M. Michael, M. Fourrier, Barbusse, Delesalle, Louzon, Legardelle, and G. Bernier, as well as such French Fascists as Bourget, Variat and Johannet. He wrote in various French political journals including Effort, Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon, Cité Francaise, Avant-garde, Action directe, Indépendence, and Mouvement Socialiste. Daniel Halévy's well-known apocryphal story of the

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Bolshevik Russian and Fascist Italian ambassadors to France who proposed erecting a monument above Sorel's grave, once again emphasised the ambiguity that has surrounded Sorel's memory. Two days after Sorel died, Delesalle wrote in *Humanité*: 'Proletarians, exploited everywhere, believe me, one of your most lucid and greatest defenders has passed away.' Three days later, Valois wrote in *Action Française*: 'I bow and pray before the tomb of the man to whom I owe so much.'

Of course, Sorel himself is responsible for that 'baffling accumulation of paradoxes and contradictions', as pointed out by H. Stuart Hughes. Tracing the paths of the historiography on Sorel teaches us more about the ideological discussions and political debates which took place during the 20th century than about Sorel himself. More than a thousand articles, reviews, and books have been written on Sorel since he published his first book on Socrates in 1889. This literature points to the conclusion that the creator of the myth of the general strike and the sociologist of the myth himself became a myth used by different political activists and by various beliefs and ideologies. Just as every political camp has its own Sorel, so every generation also has its Sorel. It seems there is no other political theoretician in the twentieth century whose fame arose from a search for new myths and for cultural rejuvenation (ricorso). No wonder that Benedetto Croce called Sorel the 'Vico of the 20th century'. Sorel broke ideological boundaries and felt himself both an insider and an outsider in various political camps. This is perhaps why everyone can find his own Sorel.

Was Sorel a barometer, a kind of seismograph of his time, or did he contribute to the emergence of 20th-century cults of violence? Of course he was both. Like the economist Marx, the sociologist Pareto, and the psychologist Le Bon, his analysis influenced his times. Sorel has to be considered as a thinker who thought in terms of civilisation, not just politics. That is why Sorel regarded myth as the subject-matter of renewal, rather than reason as the subject-matter of progress. From Marx, Sorel learned that the proletariat should be the center of civilisation and its modern agent of renewal. But unlike Marx, Sorel thought in moral concepts rather than economic terms, in terms of psychological phenomena such as myth rather than in a materialistic language. Sorel transformed Marxism from a model of social science to a myth of social poetry. Marxist ideology analyses reality; Sorel's myth mobilises masses. For Sorel, sociology exposes reality while myth tries to change it. True, Sorel was a sociologist, but he also built a modern political mythology.

II

The first formulations of Sorel's world-view, which placed myth at the center of his philosophy of history, can be found in his early writings. In *Contribution à l'étude profane de la bible* (1889), Sorel gives prominence to the symbolic–mythical aspect of Hebrew culture rather than to its rational–intellectual dimension. In *Le Procès de Socrate* (1889), Sorel analysed the transition from an agrarian and mythical society to an urban and rationalistic one. He condemned the Socratic ethics which replaced the Homeric aesthetics. In *La Ruine du monde antique*
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(1901) Sorel described how the myth of the Roman Empire as a great power had become bureaucratised and how yesterday's conquerors had become today's policemen. In Le Système historique de Renan (1902), he described the politicisation of mysticism by the Church and its elevation of theology and philosophy above myth.

These books are especially important because they contain the foundations of the basic Sorelian view: myth stands at the center of his philosophy of history. In his later political development and his fluctuations between the Left and Right, Sorel remained faithful to the attitudes expressed in his early writings. In his approach to ancient civilisations, Sorel was less interested in objective investigation of the Hebrew, Greek, Roman and Early Christian cultures than in finding a model of aesthetic heroism. Sorel was in search of virtue. Sorelian virtue concentrates on 'how' rather than focusses on 'what': Sorel's ethos emphasises values of struggle, suffering, solitude, determination and creativity—values which come into their own in a world of conflict. On the other hand, a harmonious world allows for false values of justice, the search for happiness and rational order.

Heroic vitality is the common denominator of civilisations before they become 'establishments', according to Sorel. He was only interested in the pragmatic component of the past, in the 'mythical past' which continues to operate and not in the 'historical past' as a passing interest. These early reflections on the vitality of the state of conflict of ancient civilisations led Sorel to attack the illusion of harmony in decadent modern culture which sprang, in his view, from the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

III

According to Sorel, the 'utopian' philosophers of the 18th century renewed to the concept of 'nature' which for them symbolised perfection and total adjustment. This vision of harmony as a long-awaited goal, he said, was the common denominator of religious and secular messianism. The philosophy of the Enlightenment, he claimed, exchanged the religious concept of 'God' for the modern concepts of 'nature' and 'reason'. Sorel decried all forms of messianism. One of the basic perceptions guiding the messianic idea is that the end of mankind will be as its beginning: in the beginning, man lived in a harmony which became distorted over time, for whatever reasons, but in the future, man's historic destiny is reconciliation and a return to Paradise, where all the paradoxes will dissolve and the contradictions be resolved finally and unequivocably. At the gates of Eden lies eternal peace. In this respect, Sorel is the anti-Messiah: the harmony, he said, is false. Paradise, whether religious or secular, is the refuge of cowards fleeing for their lives.

Sorel ridiculed the attempts of the rational philosophers to borrow the Church's ideas on the power of education to build utopian messianic societies: Turgot suggested to the king a clerical model of public education as a state project; Condursa believed in a rapid secular conversion of the non-European nations, since the oriental religions were in decline. Secular missionarism likened
Paraguayan villages to monasteries. Sorel replaced harmony with the idea of conflict; he replaced paralysing determinism with a lively voluntarism; he replaced linear development with cyclic development and in place of optimism, he preferred a pessimism divested of illusions.

Harmony as an initial or final vision of the world was for Sorel an artificial construction which has no place in reality.\(^7\) The attempts of 18th century thinkers to construct a free society out of the everyday world of conflict was utopian in the full sense of the word: it could never be realised. The messianic utopias of the Enlightenment envisaged an ideal man to fit their ideal world. This abstract man divested of history was a fiction, an artificial model, which had no place in reality. He was an expression of a desire for eternal peace—a peaceful life of sweet illusions. The illusions of harmony, of man resolving all his contradictions were merely tranquilisers at the same time as weapons in the hands of the bourgeoisie trying to preserve the status quo. The bourgeoisie was the conquering class and the philosophy of progress of the Enlightenment was its ideology. Progress, as Nisbet and Stanley explained in their introduction to the English edition of *Les illusions du prèges* (1908), legitimised the political power of the bourgeoisie.\(^8\) But progress was only the tip of the iceberg of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, according to Sorel, was not only the ideology of a class, but also an expression of a state of consciousness: i.e. harmony as against conflict.

The purpose of Sorel's radical analysis was to reveal the dangers of the bourgeois state of mind: the search for harmony, illusions of progress, democracy, rationalism and optimism were a cover for class interest, attempts to temper conflict, appease strife, suppress vitality and harmonise the reality of conflict. The political rule of the bourgeoisie imposed a bourgeois mentality, the sanctification of the prevailing order. Thus, exposure was not just a method but also the principle of Sorel's political outlook: namely, a continual undermining of the status quo and the destruction of everything that was 'established'. Whereas Marx thought 'ideological exposure' was a means of understanding socio-economic reality as he saw it, the destructive awareness and Sorel's principle of negation are an essential part of his political philosophy.

For Sorel, there was no dialectic and there was no progress. Instead of progress, Sorel looked for a ricorso (renewal) of myths in history. Sorel took the concept of 'ricorso' from Vico,\(^9\) who claimed that in order to understand human history, one must also investigate the hidden layers of human culture, especially the myths. While the development of reason was the essence of progress, Sorel saw myth as the essence of cultural renewal, of a ricorso. A civilisation needs a myth in order to flourish. Sorel set himself a double role: to invent such a modern myth for a decadent European civilisation and to distinguish between myth and anti-myth, or, to state it differently, between myth and utopia or ideology.

The French revolution was for Sorel a historical prism through which to examine the results of the philosophy of the Enlightenment: the increase in state power, bureaucratisation and centralisation, the establishment of new elites, the danger of abstract theories translated into the language of radical politics, and the domination of the physiocrats, the Jacobins and the Blanquists. Sorel warned that if the social-democrats gained power, they would be worse than the
Inquisition of the 'ancien régime' and of Robespierre. The Jacobins were exposed to the theories of the Enlightenment and to the praxis of the revolution; Jacobinism was revealed as a theory of vigour.20

Sorel saw the Jacobin terror and social democracy as linked by a single Leitmotif: the strengthening of the state's power of suppression. When the time comes, said Sorel, the theorist of revolutionary syndicalism, 'the syndicalists do not intend to reform the state, like the people of the 18th century; they want to destroy it'.21 Sorel saw the French Revolution as the modern political realisation of the ideas of the Enlightenment. Jacobin terror was evidence of the refutation of the 'natural order', and Sorel concluded that the need for terror to suppress deviation in a revolutionary era proved that the vision of harmony of the Enlightenment philosophers was totally false.

IV

In Sorel's political philosophy, one can see the sum total of the 'Fin de siècle' climate of opinion: Bergson's vitality, Croce's categories of action, Le Bon's psychology of the masses, James' pragmatism, Hartman's unconscious, and the discovery of Vico's ricorsi. The importance of Sorel is that he provided a political home for a wide range of contemporary opinions.

The growth of the new social sciences was also reflected in Sorel: the new psychological trends (Ribot, Poincaré and the 'Ecole de Paris') gave a sort of academic legitimacy to a preoccupation with the emotions of individuals and of the masses. In the same way, they legitimised the revolt against positivism, progress and Durkheims' sociology. Sorel, Le Bon, Mosca, Pareto and Michels are examples of the connection which developed between an interest in mass psychology and elitist political conclusions.

From 1901, Sorel and Charles Péguy participated in Bergson's lectures at the Collège de France.22 In order to understand Sorel, it is necessary to understand the 'Bergsonian' Sorel. The ultimate cause, in Bergson's pantheist view, is creative evolution: the flow of life means that construction and destruction are a single continuum.23 Bergson renewed the discussion of 'ex nihilo nihil fit': rejection of what now exists obviously involves the creation of something new. Bergsonian concepts, each one of which derives from the preceding one (e.g. durée, intuition, freedom, movement, the flow of life and élan vital), taken out of their broad philosophical context by Sorel and partially transposed, were therefore misleading in Sorel's theories. Bergson himself maintained that Sorel had too original and independent a personality to carry the banners of others and that 'there is no connection between his (Sorel's) daring innovations and my ideas'.24

Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil fascinated Sorel. Sorel wrote: 'In my view, the best way to understand any idea in the history of thought is to sharpen the contradictions as much as possible. I will adopt this method and take as my starting point Nietzsche's contrast between two opposing sets of moral values. Much has been written of this contrast but it has never been seriously investigated.'25 The Sorelian hero is typified not by his morality but by the heroic
ethos. Sorel did not distinguish between the values of the proletarian and the capitalist fighters. Both had the same personality structure and mode of action. He was interested in their essential vitality, not in their moral content. Sorel's dichotomy of ethics and the heroic ethos cleared the state for the rise of an amoral aesthetics.

The morality of producers and the morality of consumers, Sorel's new categories, were beyond the old criteria of good and evil. These new categories were taken from the teachings of Proudhon and not from Marxist terminology. The criteria had passed from the ethical dimension to the dimension of struggle and production. The morality of producers was a mark of authenticity and the expression of a new heroic culture, whereas the morality of consumers was characteristic of decadence and an expression of the Enlightenment culture. Authenticity and decadence were the litmus paper of this new morality, which became a starting-point for the reorientation of European political culture at the beginning of the twentieth century.

For Sorel Lofty moral views are no longer dependent in any way on the individual's considerations, education or wishes; they are dependent on the state of war in which the people agree to participate and which is translated into exact myths. His abandonment of traditional ethics brought Sorel to the aesthetic language of the workshops. In his view, the field of industrial production was similar to the field of art. There was an analogy between art, industry and war. The workers' tools were like the painter's brush or the sculptor's chisel, in that they became part of his very being. Sorel sang a hymn of praise to the ethos of the machine. 'If there is anything which is especially social in the activity of man, it is the machine. It is more social than language itself.' The aesthetisation of the machine did not make a fetish of the worker or personalise the machine but challenged the Marxist concept of alienation; the machine did not alienate man: it made him free.

Sorel translated into political terms the Nietzschean transition from the Judeo-Christian ethic to the aesthetics of the will-to-power. This is where the aesthetic politicisation of Nietzsche occurred: the general strike was discerned as a poetic myth and revolutionary syndicalism was a 'social poem'. Sorel changed the area of political discussion from science to myth, from ethics to aesthetics.

V

If we look carefully at Sorel's intellectual development, we see that he began to revise Marxism in terms of the Nietzschean, Proudhonist and Bergsonian concepts which had already shaped his own thought-processes. Bernstein was right when he defined Sorel as a new Marxism in Nietzschean form. Sorel revolted against the rational tradition from Socrates to the Enlightenment and transformed reason by means of an aesthetic view of the world. Historicism, romanticism, historical determinism and the theory of progress all described man as an historical concept. By contrast, at the center of the Nietzschean energy existentialist approach, man shaped his own world through myth. The dimension of guidance from past experience was abandoned in favor of an open future
invading the present through the medium of myth. It was the power of myth to achieve the unity of man and his world through an immediate aesthetic—existentialist—political experience such as the myth of the general strike.

The revision of Marxism by Sorel in the 1890's must be considered together with the revisions by Bernstein and Lenin. But whereas both the latter accepted Marx's ultimate aims with respect to a classless society and equality, one supporting the method of social-democracy and the other a revolutionary élite, Sorel's revision was centred on the concept of class warfare. In the years 1895-1898, Marxism split into two opposing camps, each of which claimed legitimacy. Those who wished to attain Marxism 'through the ballot box' focussed on the rational, and those who preferred a combative Marxism, who idolised the concept of class warfare and saw in struggle a way to preserve the energy of the proletariat, focussed on the irrational, vital, psychological and combative elements of Marxism. While the Bernstein and Lenin revisions claimed to be the heirs of the Enlightenment, Sorel's revision revolted against it and wanted to free Marx from Marxism.29

Marx gave to Sorel a coherent perception of the philosophy of history: history was class-struggle. The historical method and the ability to unite various elements within a single framework: this was the greatness of Marx, and this was what Sorel needed at the period when he assimilated different theories and thinkers such as Nietzsche, Bergson and Proudhon. When Sorel based Marxism on class struggle, he did not refer only to historical necessity and technological improvement, but gave priority to the subject of the class's responsibility to itself. The proletariat did not only swim against the stream, but created the stream; the concepts of 'war' and 'classes' not only represented historical forces but also an expression of self-consciousness and self-determination. The key-question for Sorel was motivation, and he concluded that exploitation was not an economic or social category, but a psychological one: Man was not an *Homo Economicus*, but was motivated by emotions, symbols and myths.

Sorel was never a Marxist in the true meaning of the term.30 From the very beginning, he accepted only partially the basic principles of Marxism: he never espoused Marx's conclusions on the nationalisation of the means of production, on historical determinism socio-economic forces, the dictatorship of the proletariat, or the concepts of alienation, property, the fetishism of goods or the division of labour. Sorel had an a priori view of what Marxism ought to be: Marxism should be an ethical message and a test of authenticity. Sorel's revision of Marxism was not just the adding of another layer or a mere afterthought: from the first, his acceptance of Marxism was dependent on the revision he had made. Instead of economic mechanisms he wanted moral renewal, in place of Hegelian dialectics he returned to Proudhon, progress was to be exchanged for a perpetual struggle, voluntarism replaced the determinism of economic forces, and permanent violence took the place of the revolution.

The pace-setters in French politics were also examined according to the principle Sorel set himself in order to establish who was carrying the banner of these combative, vital, ethical values of Marxism. Sorel rejected the 'Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire' because of its Blanquist tendency. At first he supported the 'Fédération des Travailleurs Socialistes' (the 'Possibilists'),
founded in 1882 and led by Paul Brousse. However, closest of all to his heart was the 'Parti Ouvrier Socialiste Révolutionnaire', founded in 1890 by Jean Allemane, who opposed the trade-unionism of the 'possibilists' and supported the Proudhonian view of direct proletarian action. The establishment of the National confederation of the 'Bourses du Travail' by Fernand Pelloutier in 1892 and the C.G.T. in 1895, which supported the general strike, direct action, the decentralisation of the syndicates and workers' unions, finally brought Sorel to abandon the political parties. Sorel's final disillusionment with the socialist political parties as carriers of the flag of action occurred with the creation of the united socialist block in October 1898. Despairing of party politics, Sorel began to support direct political cults.

La Décomposition du Marxisme (1908), which was published in the same year as Réflexions sur la violence and Les illusions du progrès, is thought to be the summary of the Sorelian revision of Marxism. The aim of the booklet, based on a lecture given to the international conference of socialist syndicates in Paris on 3 April 1907, is 'to examine the significance of Marx's thought'. Long before the Decomposition, Sorel had examined the meaning of Marx's ideas in the trilogy: L'avenir socialiste des syndicats which was published in Humanité Nouvelle in 1898 (and reprinted as Materiaux d'une théorie du prolétariat in 1919), Saggi di Critica del Marxismo (1902) and Introduction à l'Economie Moderne (1903). This Sorelian trilogy on Marxism proved that Sorel had always been critical of the orthodox Marxist assumptions as formulated, for example, by Engels, Kautsky and Gil Ged, and the social democratic assumptions as formulated by Bernstein and Jaurès.

Das Kapital was translated into French only in 1875, and as Daniel Halévy pointed out in 1880: 'Paris did not know anything about Marxism.' Proudhon dominated the workers' political consciousness in France during the 19th century. By means of Proudhon, Sorel hoped to retrieve Marx from the rationalistic-harmonious-philosophical context of Marx's early writings, the inheritance of the Enlightenment, and to turn him into the militant Marx of class warfare. The Marx who attacked Proudhon was, in Sorel's opinion, a very Hegelian Marx: within Marx there was a clash between two contradictory trends, Hegel and Proudhon. Whatever was historical for Hegel—that is, whatever was a temporary thesis or antithesis, swallowed up in the dialectical process—was immanent for Proudhon and Sorel. For them, contradictions existed side by side and balanced each other out: movement was everything and synthesis was a philosophical fiction. Sorel hung on to Proudhonism because he preferred Marx's class warfare (contradictions) to the Marxian classless society (synthesis).

In 1895, the interaction between Sorel and the Italian Marxist Circle became decisive. Sorel, in association with Lefargelle and Deville edited the Devenir Social which, together with the Italian Critica Sociale, founded by Turati in 1891, was the organ for promoting the revision of Marxism. The foremost Italian representatives were Filippo Turati, leader of the socialist party, Severio Merlino, editor of Rivista critica del socialismo, the young Benedetto Croce and Antonio Labriola, professor of moral philosophy at Rome University and leader of the group. Sorel accepted from their critique of Marxism those principles which suited him. He was particularly impressed by their critical and professional
analysis. Marxism, henceforth, was regarded as a conception which extolled political struggle—both class and ethical—and thus forged the figure of a proletarian-militant who saw his work as creative rather than alienating: it was not the economic content which was important but rather the form of militancy.

Sorel's revision of Marxism gave birth to revolutionary syndicalism: syndicalism represented for Sorel the value of self-consciousness and the expression of the daily voluntary struggle of the proletariat for freedom and at the same time for the deliverance of civilisation. He saw the syndicate as a militant group of the proletarian masses and the microcosm of the free ideal producers' society. Syndicates were the avant-garde which had to be isolated from the bourgeois order to avoid being assimilated within it. This 'New School' revolted against the priority of theory over practice which, according to Sorel, typified the ideologists, politicians and social-democrats, and emphasised the primacy of the workers. It was the Syndicates and not the party which represented socialism. 36 This primacy of 'ouvrierism' brought Sorel to an unsolved dilemma and drove him away from Marxism. The role of violence was to 'rediscover energy ... Thus', concluded Sorel, 'violence has become an indispensable factor in Marxism'. 37 Sorel clarified his meaning in the preface to Réflexions, 'We are ready to complete Marx's doctrines rather than simply interpreting his texts'. 38 It was the militancy of the conflicting classes that captured his heart. Violence was the proving-ground of the class war: only if it was violent was it an authentic class war. If violence ceased, then the class war became a distorted contest between two camps striving for class harmony.

Every ideology has its own philosophy of history: violence, which expressed itself in the general strike, revolutionary syndicalism and the cult of violence was the Sorelian philosophy of history. Sorel, who declared himself a true Marxist who wanted to complete his master's work through violence, turned Marxism upside-down. The result was absolutely different from the original: in order to arouse and stir up the working class, Sorel developed a theory of history that put violence in the centre. This creative violence as the energetic factor of history was transformed into a new political content, and when, at this juncture, the theory of the myth and direct action were added, nothing remained of the original Marxist model.

VI

Violence was the Sorelian philosophy of history which was anchored, first and foremost, in his revision of Marx and class-warfare was for Sorel the cornerstone of the Marxist thought. 39 The decadent bourgeoisie and the proletariat as devotees of social peace were signs, for Sorel, of a dual process of degeneration. He concluded that violence 'tries to rebuild the class structure', and 'aspires to restore to capitalism the belligerence it once had'. 40 History, according to Sorel, was the history of violence; it is impossible, he believed, to understand history without understanding the role of violence: the positive value of violence, which was characterised by such terms as 'pure', 'idealistic', 'just' and 'purified', 41 lies in its vitalisation of history. Violence was not just the key to the philosophy of
history: it was a moral testing-ground. Sorel not only analysed violence as an immanent historical tool but endorsed it as a permanent aesthetic value.

Myth was a central concept in Sorel’s philosophy of history: the fuel that powered vitality in history was not to be found in ideologies, but in myths. The role of ideology, according to Sorel, was to perpetuate the existing system of interests or to replace it with another. On the other hand, the role of myth was to stage revolutionary actions and to undermine the existing order. Sorel used the study of history as a tool for a reorientation of political philosophy: he believed that an understanding of the inner logic of the rise and fall of ancient civilisations could give an impetus to present-day history. Sorel did not regard myths as historical legends which were elaborated over the years and finally interpreted retroactively as myths. He believed that just the opposite was true: namely, that the crystallisation of myth, from the beginning, encouraged those who believed in it to effect changes in a particular historical reality. It is not the rationalisation of myth which was respected by Sorel, but rather its political effectiveness. Sorel diagnosed myth as acting in the service of politics.

Sorel differentiated between utopia and myth. Utopia was the image of reality, an imitation, a reflection. Utopia was not revolutionary vis-à-vis the existing order, but aimed, rather, “to direct the powers-that-be towards reform.” A corroboration of this view may be found in Sorel’s attacks on Renan: ‘He (Renan) sees in socialism a utopia: that is, something which may be compared to reality.’ Sorelian myth, unlike a utopia, was nihilistic with regard to the given historical reality: ‘Our myths lead people to prepare for battle to defeat the existing order.’ Myth was not part of the harmonious order of things. It was an alternative order, a real substitute for the existing order, albeit artificial: in this way myth negated concrete historical existence and tried to eliminate whatever exists. Historical myths tried to negate the existing historical reality: examples are the myth of early Christianity, the myth of Roman power, the myth of the conquering barbarians, the myth of the Reformation, the myth of the Italian ‘Risorgimento’, the myth of the French Revolution and the myth of Napoleon.

Following Le Bon’s social psychology, Sorel created a political philosophy according to which the future producers’ society would understand socialism through the intuitive and spontaneous drama of the general strike. Sorel, who accused other intellectuals of inventing utopias, did the same; or, to put the matter in Frank E. Manuel’s words, ‘Sorel... was committed to a utopia of absolute principles internalized by a heroic proletariat... there was, of course, no final conquest because the utopia lay in the conflict itself.’ Sorel’s myth of the general strike, the central concept of his political philosophy, was in fact a utopia.

The Sorelian distinction between power and violence paralleled his distinction between utopia and myth: bourgeois power rested on utopia while proletarian violence rested on myth. We saw how Sorel analysed bourgeois power and found its origins in the harmonious philosophy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. This philosophy represented an abstract construction, a Platonic state-of-mind, and for its realisation power was needed. Only the myth of violence could destroy this arbitrary compulsion or static power, and the ‘general strike’ was the crystallisation of this myth. Sorel chose the concept of the strike,
as applied to the proletariat, to recreate the concept of the warrior, the producer, as the human basis for a new civilisation of creative men. The destruction of the bourgeoisie was at the same time the building-up of the creative proletariat through violence. In this respect, violence became creative at the very moment when it destroyed power. Power preserved order, while violence destroyed it; power was compulsion, while violence was freedom; power was decadent, while violence was authentic. No other thinker went as far as Sorel in glorifying the historical value of violence: movement, for him, was everything, and violence supplied the necessary energy.  

In Sorel's political philosophy one could find a new moral scale in the same way as in Nietzsche's thought: authenticity, creativity and vitality were regarded as good, and compromise, weakness and decadence as bad. Sorel examined Socialism according to these new criteria, and when he looked for a new lexicon for the modern world, he found it in religious terminology, as when he said: 'I owe to socialism all the highest ethical values, because it brings salvation to the modern world'. Violence as the energising force of history passed beyond descriptive analysis and attained a metaphysical significance. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the political myth became the hallmark of a European political style and was formulated in terms of this creative violence.

VII

Sorel made his revision of Marxism in 1895, because the revolution did not take place as Marxist theory predicted. As a result, he turned from orthodox Marxism to revolutionary syndicalism in its French or Italian variants. But the 'new school' disappointed him also, and in 1910 Sorel broke away from syndicalism. It became clear to Sorel that the proletariat in France and Italy wished to integrate itself into the liberal state through political parties, trade unions, education and the army. The syndicate, according to Sorel, did not carry out its function of liberating the proletariat and hence civilisation, and Sorel turned away from it and looked for renewal in the myth of the nation. Sorel left the 'Mouvement Socialiste' in 1908, and declared that 'Action Français' was the only serious national movement. When he published the Révolution Dreyfusienne in 1909, Sorel condemned the pro-Dreyfus movement. In 1910 he expressed his disappointment with the Syndicalist movement, and in a letter to Agostino Lanzillo he claimed that his socialist writings had never been considered the most important part of his work. In the same year, 1910, he participated in the planning of La Cité française, a national-socialist review he intended to found. In 1911 he joined the national group 'L'Indépendance' and together with Variot was the co-editor of the review which carried this name. Later, he was the spiritual father of the well-known 'Cercle Proudhon' although he never joined it formally.

The essence of Sorel's preoccupations arising from the past, concerning the ancient heroic civilisations and the syndicalist revision of Marxism, did not change at all: Sorel kept searching for a myth which would bring renewal. Sorel's move into nationalist circles in France and Italy did not conflict with the
principles of his political theory, but served only to emphasise the more sharply that he attached greater importance to a myth (the revolution) than to its agents (the proletariat or the nation). In place of content (either left or right), which was the product of past tradition, there was an identification of the present reality with man as the essence of the existentialist idea. Since modern reality was dynamic, modern man was bound to identify with the rhythm of reality. Hence, Sorel introduced a concept which affirmed man’s aesthetic (non-rational) view of (non-rational) reality. This view departed from the accepted rational and ethical criteria of good and evil, replacing them with new definitions of authenticity and decadence, of producers and consumers. Sorel transformed an aesthetic view of the world into concepts of political action.

The combination of the revolt against reason, the negation of progress, the affirmation of modernity and the theory of myths proved to be the point of collapse of the identification, hitherto regarded as essential, between the idea of reason and modern development. Man, for Sorel, created his modern world not by means of rational progress but through myth. The ‘new man’ did not receive his world from inherited culture or from history, but identified with his modern world which he himself created, thereby becoming authentic. The modern myth stripped the political avant-garde of its ideological clothing by using modern, radical political concepts such as energy, activism, and violence in place of history, determinism, and progress. To be authentic, one had to identify with the modern world, and if this reality was dynamic and non-rational, then a dynamic political style and aesthetic language had to be invented to suit it. This political style became the heart of a new *dynamic political culture* which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the above-mentioned modern phenomenon, aesthetics were no longer perceived in classical 18th-century terms, but as an active force embodying ‘social poetry’ as an existential life-style which stimulates heroic action. The new criteria transcended categories of left and right. The aesthetic of dynamics, which found expression in the affirmation of violence (even a ‘symbolic’ or ‘metaphoric’ violence) was transformed into a romantic protest against the frozen and static bourgeois order. This revolt of the fin de siècle period and afterwards became a political style which created the ‘generation of 1914’.

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NOTES

27. Réflexion, pp. 54, 360, 371.
37. Réflexions, p. 120.
38. Ibid., p. 48.
39. Ibid., p. 118.
40. Ibid., p. 120.
41. Ibid., p. 161.
42. Ibid., pp. 45–50, 176–182.
43. Ibid., p. 47.
44. Ibid., p. 50.
45. Ibid., p. 46.