

# Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence

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Towards the end of his life Georges Sorel, referring to his alleged influence on both Lenin and Mussolini, remarked: 'It is very odd that, after being so little read, such grandiose things are attributed to me ...'.<sup>1</sup> This was not false modesty. He wrote a dozen books and numerous articles which contained an extraordinary range of views, yet they were little noticed outside small intellectual circles. There was an exception which made Sorel one of the best known names in the history of twentieth century political thought – *Reflections on Violence*. These reflections, first published as a series of articles in *le Mouvement socialiste* then in 1908 as a book, are a conscious, deliberate attempt to establish an intellectual justification for revolutionary syndicalism – the violent working class movement which rejected parliamentary methods in favour of direct action. This made his reputation and the book went through various editions in French and foreign translations. It is the only work of Sorel to be published in English until the 'Decomposition of Marxism' appeared in 1961.<sup>2</sup> The influence of this celebrated work is difficult to establish and Sorel was right to be sceptical about its impact. Others have taken a different view and, in addition to his alleged influence on Lenin and Mussolini, he is credited with being the intellectual father of political violence in the twentieth century and of converting people to communism. Such claims are dubious. As Irving Horowitz, who paid Sorel the compliment of taking his writings seriously, writes 'The real importance of Sorel is, to use a much burdened word, symbolic'.<sup>3</sup>

None the less, Georges Sorel is a fascinating figure because he was deeply involved in some of the major political and intellectual concerns of his time. Some of these concerns, or variants of them, have persisted down to the present day. Echoes of Sorelian thought are scattered through political texts, especially of the libertarian left. His view of Marxism propounded in one of his books, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* illustrates a view of political ideology and an argument which has been employed both by radical revolutionaries and by anti-communists. The concept of class struggle is, according to Sorel, the key to the Marxist system but it simplifies the complexities of the social structure. The conclusion he draws is that Marxists

cannot permit themselves to subject their class conceptions to the

facts ...., about assuming the dichotomy [between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat] it would be impossible for them to make the revolutionary idea understood, just as without the description of the ideal future they could not fill the mass mind with the notion of moral catastrophe. It is one thing to study social science, another to form the consciousness of people.<sup>4</sup>

The conception of political theory as necessary myth is the idea with which Sorel's name is most widely associated. It is a striking idea and one which had counterparts in other contemporary writings, such as the 'political formulae' of Mosca, the derivations of Vilfredo Pareto, and it has some resemblance to what Marx meant by ideology. Sorel's exposition of political myth is not a fully worked out and coherent theory but its attractiveness to the unscrupulous political adventurer such as Mussolini is obvious. Together with his belief in the inevitability of struggle and violence, it made Sorel a figure of alarm in those liberal, conservative and democratic socialist circles which took ideas seriously. This alarm was exacerbated by verbal excesses ('it may be useful to thrash the orators of democracy and representatives of the government', p. 105) supposed, among Sorel's contemporaries only by Léon Daudet on the extreme Right.

Sorel irritated many of his contemporaries and this was partly because of his personality and partly because of his apparent inconsistency. In 1910, Mussolini, who later became an admirer of Sorel, heaped insults on him. Mussolini reproached him for his bourgeois mentality, his civil service pension (which he did not have), his Legion of Honour (which he did) and his vanity; he accused him of being poseur, an accomplished Jesuit, a bookworm and a clown making intellectual somersaults.<sup>5</sup> In some way Sorel was a difficult and withdrawn person who, at the same time, required an audience for his monologues. Relations with associates almost invariably broke down. The writings reflect the man – difficult, convoluted and incoherent but, on occasion, inspiring and impressive.

The nature and the form of his writings are partly explicable in terms of his biography. He was born in Cherbourg in 1847 and, except for his training as an engineer at the *Ecole Polytechnique*, he spent his early life and, subsequently, his professional life in the provinces. He was a civil servant in *Ponts et chaussées* until his resignation in 1891, aged forty-four, decorated with a *légion d'honneur*. Up to this time, he seems to have had conservative sentiments and was alarmed by the Paris commune and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. None the less he developed an understanding of problems of the poor, partly through the liaison he formed with an almost illiterate servant girl, Marie David, with whom he lived until her death in 1987. His family background, education and professional experience



created and sustained an austere morality of an old-fashioned, bourgeois kind, more related to the old rather than to the new testament. He objected to egoism and eighteenth-century rationalism on the grounds that every society must have its sacred institutions in order to maintain its solidarity. In his book, *Le Procès de Socrate* (1889), he argued that the execution of Socrates was justified because Socrates was wrong to question the ancient traditions of Athens.

Sorel held fairly conventional views about personal morality and lived a simple, unostentatious life. His literary and philosophical culture was acquired, not by formal education, but by solitary study. He was thus an outsider, socially and intellectually, in relation to the metropolitan academic, intellectual and literary circles when, in 1891, he established himself in, or more accurately, near the capital at Boulogne-sur-Seine. He remarked in *Reflections* (p.72): 'It is necessary to be on the outside in order to see the inside.' He led a retiring and hardworking life, meeting relatively few people, mainly through a weekly pilgrimage to the office of Charles Péguy during the period of the publications of the celebrated *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* at the turn of the twentieth century and subsequently holding court at his publishers, Marcel Rivière in the rue Jacob. But he read voraciously in the national library, attended the lectures of Henri Bergson and corresponded with distinguished contemporaries such as Benedetto Croce, Paul Delasalle, Robert Michels, Daniel Halévy and Agostino Lanzillo. He was a powerful influence on Arturo Labriola, the Italian revolutionary syndicalist, whose intellectual itinerary was as complex as Sorel's own. Except for a brief association with the syndicalist movement – he had an immoderate admiration for the one inspiring leader it produced, Fernand Pelloutier<sup>5</sup> – Sorel's contact and experience of the world of political action was minimal.

During his years as a man of letters, Sorel followed an extraordinary intellectual trajectory. His writings must be seen, as he saw them himself, as part of a continuous process of learning. They were always written as a response to what he had been reading. Most are difficult to summarize, although it is always possible to extract a telling phrase or a pointed argument. Consistency in single works, let alone over the whole corpus of his work, is lacking. His intellectual stance when he commenced his publishing career with *Le Procès de Socrate* and *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible* (both of which appeared in 1889) was that of a conservative moralist. In the latter work, he wrote: 'The vulgarisation of the Bible is today a social question. The Bible is the only book which can serve as a basis for the instruction of the people, initiate it in the heroic life, combat the deleterious tendencies of animilitarism, stop the propagation of the revolutionary idea....' By 1893 he was a socialist, moving from an orthodox Marxist position, through a brief phase of democratic socialism

to revolutionary syndicalism. 'with the fading elan of syndicalism, he veered towards the extreme Right, expressing admiration for Maurras and the direct action of the *Camelots du roi* who defended the cause of *Action Française*. In 1912 he wrote two mildly anti-semitic articles, one on Urban Gobier with whom he expressed some sympathy, the other entitled 'Some Jewish pretensions'.<sup>7</sup> According to Gaetan Pirou, he became very anti-semitic in the years before the First World War.<sup>8</sup> His active writing life was virtually finished by this time and his consistent pessimism turned into cynicism. He had one last enthusiasm – for the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and for Lenin who conformed to his ideal of the heroic and skilful revolutionary. He wrote a postscript to fourth edition of *Reflections on Violence*, published in 1919, entitled 'For Lenin' which contained a vigorous condemnation of Allied intervention in Russia.

In the light of this intellectual itinerary, it would be easy to dismiss Sorel as a café intellectual, changing his ideas as others changed the cut of their trousers, seeking and briefly achieving a 'succès de scandale'. But Sorel both reflected and contributed to a European-wide intellectual ferment at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. He published a considerable volume of work in Italian and was quickly translated into Russian and Spanish. His work was posthumously regarded as important in Germany where his profound pessimism struck a sympathetic chord in the Weimar Republic.<sup>9</sup> He was not a parochial figure and had a genuine feeling for the *zeitgeist* and struggled, often painfully, with the writings of an impressive range of his contemporaries. He took issue with them, sometimes savagely and unfairly, such as with Jean Jaurès, the humane and eloquent leader of parliamentary socialism, and Emile Durkheim one of the most influential fathers of modern academic sociology. He found fellow spirits in Croce, Parato, Pelloutier and Péguy, at least for a time. He struggled with the ideas of all of them, took them immensely seriously and earnestly desired to see their significance.

Sorel shared with many of his *fin de siècle* contemporaries a belief in the decadence of bourgeois civilization – it was ugly, lacked an heroic ethic and was doomed to destruction. The idea of inevitable progress in history did not attract him. In articles written for *le Mouvement socialiste* from August to December 1906 and subsequently published as *Les Illusions du progrès*, he described progress as the ideology of the 'bourgeoise conquérante' of the eighteenth century, subsequently helping the bourgeoisie to maintain its domination. Throughout his publishing career, Sorel seemed to regard moral degeneration and social disintegration as not only possible but likely. Political action of the conventional sort, no matter what ideas politicians espoused, was ineffectual in preventing these things. 'Luttes de classes, luttes nationales, ce seront toujours des temples pour farceurs' – a remark he made towards the end



of his life, expressed a consistent attitude of disdain towards politicians,<sup>10</sup> interrupted only by a transitory regard for Jaures during the early phase of the latter's campaign for the revision of the Dreyfus case.

Edward Shils has correctly characterised Sorel as a 'conservative moralist'.<sup>11</sup> There is a deep and pervasive concern, found in *Reflections on Violence* as well as in most of his other works, about moral standards. Sorel's intellectual journey can be viewed as a search for an ethic, an answer to the question about what is the right way of behaving in an uncertain and disintegrating world. Sorel's personal moral code remained that of a respectable bourgeois – he believed in honesty, hard work, chastity, and personal autonomy and responsibility. But he did not consider that there was a natural morality discoverable by reason or that morality could be established on the basis of a consensus, on a common ground between men of goodwill. The moral rectitude of the orthodox Marxists, convinced that they were acting correctly in accordance with the direction of history, Sorel also found unconvincing. His view of the basis of morality, resting on conflict, struggle, heroism and a sense of the sublime scarcely varied (except for a brief 'scientific socialist' period) between *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible* in 1889 and his unstinted admiration for Lenin at the end of his life. The closest analogy for Sorel's morality is in military virtue – heroic action to defend the integrity and solidarity of the group against another group. True virtue can only be expressed when the interests of the individual are sublimated in a struggle between competing groups. This is a conception of morality which allowed Sorel to take the struggle between modernist and traditionalists within the Catholic Church seriously and to treat respectfully the moral objections which some Catholics had to liberal parliamentary democracy.<sup>12</sup> It allowed him to sympathise with the young militants of *Action Française* and foreshadowed the 'esprit ancien combattant' and the Fascist ethos of the inter-war period.

Much of Sorel, the man and the writer, is revealed in *Reflections on Violence*. It is a rambling and discursive work. 'I am a self-taught man', he wrote in his introduction, 'showing to others the notes which have been useful for my own instruction'. As one of his commentators remarked: 'Few books have succeeded in provoking such an abundance of non-sensical reactions. Few, it should be recognised, lend themselves better to such reactions.'<sup>13</sup> It was written as an attempt to understand the recent development of socialism in France and to analyse the significance of revolutionary syndicalism. But his account of the recent history was highly partisan, containing anathemas of unequalled ferocity on the parliamentary socialists and his view of the syndicalist movement was partial and short-sighted, illustrated by his rapid disillusionment with it. The *Reflec-*

tions are therefore not of any great value as history but interesting as series of recommendations.

The first of these is the support for the 'revolutionary and direct method', of direct confrontation between workers and entrepreneurs and between workers and public authorities if they intervened on behalf of the workers. The advantage of this method was that it led to a separation of the classes and to the use of violence. Violence was the most effective weapon in the hand of the workers because the middle class were cowardly and always backed down when confronted with violence. Violence makes the future Revolution certain and it enables the European nations to recover their former energies 'at present stupefied by humanitarianism'. The Revolution would come through the general strike, the great day of action, and not through any political party or parliamentary action.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of the Revolution is to destroy the bourgeoisie and the state.<sup>15</sup> In an obscurely expressed paragraph he comes to the nub of the relevance and significance of the notions of direct action, violence, the general strike and revolution:

And yet without leaving the present, without reasoning about this future, which seems for ever condemned to escape our reason, we should be unable to act at all. Experience shows that the *framing of a future, in some indeterminate time* may, when it is done in a certain way, be very effective ...; this happens when the anticipation of the future takes the form of those myths, which enclose with them, all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party or of a class, inclinations which recur to the mind with the insistence of instincts in all the circumstances of life ... these social myths in no way prevent a man profiting by the observations which he makes in the course of his life, and form no obstacle to the pursuit of his normal occupations (p. 142).

Myths can lead to effective action and to a higher quality of life: 'Strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, deepest, and most moving sentiments they possess: the general strike groups them all in a coordinated picture, and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum intensity' (p. 145). Sorel sought to distinguish between force 'used by the bourgeoisie since the beginning of modern times' and violence used by the proletariat reacting against the bourgeoisie and against the state. Only violence had a moral justification and moral content and it is a phenomenon pertaining to one social class, the proletariat. Men will resort to violence, according to Sorel, to restore imperilled moral absolutes and each class must choose these absolutes. He made his personal choice – that of allegiance to the proletariat. There is



an element of an existentialist position in this view, Sorel clearly thought that to some extent these choices were arbitrary and that the moral content of subsequent actions were dependent on the choice which had been made. Sorel did not choose the side of the proletariat because he thought that its triumph was imminent and inevitable. 'Everything may be saved', he wrote (p. 113), 'if the proletariat, by their use of violence, manage to re-establish the division into classes, and so restore to the middle class something of its former energy; that is the great aim to which the whole thought of men must be directed'. This is a text from which fascists and activists of the extreme Right could draw comfort. It reveals that the enemy, for Sorel, is not the bourgeoisie as such but the decadence and moral bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie of his time. It is not surprising that his thinking has been associated with his famous contemporaries, the nationalist Maurice Barrès and the monarchist founder of *Action Française* Charles Maurras who made similar attacks on the decadence of the rationalist bourgeoisie.<sup>16</sup>

The message of the *Reflections on Violence* is far from clear and Sorel remains an enigma, his legacy uncertain. It is easy to dismiss his as a second rate thinker but there exists much distinguished testimony to the contrary. Croce, Pareto and Bergson treated Sorel as their equal and many contemporaries – Charles Péguy, Daniel Halévy, Paul Bourget, Georges Valois and the Tharaud brothers amongst others – regarded him as their teacher.<sup>17</sup> The antipathy which he attracted from many people is also an indication that he was considered to exercise considerable influence. He had a number of disciples, but like all intellectual disciples they were people of the second rank.<sup>18</sup> One of them, Emmanuel Berth, contributed largely to Sorel's posthumous reputation as a proto-Fascist. Berth encouraged his flirtation with the monarchist Right and his ponderings on the possibility of a national-syndicalism. Berth also wrote a book, *Les Méfaits des intellectuels*, published in 1914, which was an enthusiastic synthesis of the ideas of Maurras and Sorel. He continued to publish writings on Sorel in the inter-war period and these, with Mussolini's later admiration for Sorel, have helped to make him an object of deep suspicion in Left wing circles.

There is, however, considerable difficulty in identifying Sorel's legacy because he expressed so many views and he did not develop a distinctive method of political analysis. He has been described as the apostle of political violence but there has been, since his death, much political violence which he would have disapproved. There is nothing in Sorel's writings which could, for example, serve as a justification for the systematic use of assassination and terrorist violence practised by the Red Brigades and by the Baader-Meinhof gang. But there are echoes of Sorelian thought in many places and particularly in extreme left-wing

milieux over the last two decades. The aspiration not to reform the state but to destroy it, the condemnation of dominant bourgeois values (labelled consumerism in the 1960s), the rejection of conventional political action in favour of the politics of tumult, the belief in the moral value and creativity of violence and the use of Marxism as revolutionary myth are found in these milieux and in the works of Sorel. There is no evidence of direct Sorelian influence but parallels between student radicalism in the late 1960s and Sorel's thinking have been suggested.<sup>19</sup> Sorel's old publisher brought out a new edition of *Reflections on Violence* in the wake of the events of 1968.<sup>20</sup> Student radicalism has waned but working class violence in industrial disputes in some Western countries has persisted. Whether this will develop into a revolutionary syndicalist movement capable of shaking the foundations of states is, according to Sorel, determined by our myths. There is no way in which we can calculate, by rational means, the possibilities of this happening.<sup>21</sup>

Sorel continues to exert a fascination over some political theorists (a major collection of essays was published in 1985 and a journal *Cahiers de Georges Sorel* published its fifth issue in 1987) mainly because of puzzlement about statements concerning the political future. Can these statements, as Sorel contended, be powerful ideas which can change the world or are they froth on the surface of political discourse, perhaps attractive and stimulating but of no lasting significance? The answer is important but, as yet, we have not discovered a method of getting close to one.

## NOTES

1. J. Vario, *Propos de Georges Sorel, recueillis par Jean Vario* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), p. 57.
2. As an appendix to I.L. Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt against Reason* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1961.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris: Marcel Rivière), 1919 p. 188.
5. P. Andreu, *Notre Maître, M. Sorel* (Paris: Grasset, 1953), p. 305 G. Magaro, *Mussolini in the Making* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939), pp. 238–9.
6. J. Julliard, *Fernand Pelloutier et les origines du syndicalisme d'action directe* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 194, 195 *passim*.
7. *Indépendance*, 1 Jan., 1 and 15 May, 1 June 1912.
8. G. Piron, *Georges Sorel* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1927).
9. See particularly M. Freund, *George Sorel: Der Revolutionäre Konservatismus* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1932).
10. J. Vario, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
11. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T.E. Hulme and J. Roth, introduction by E.A. Shils (IL: Glencoe, The Free Press, 1950), p. 18.
12. 'La Crise de la pensée catholique', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, Sept. 1902; 'De l'Eglise et de l'état', *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, 3, 3ème série, Oct. 1901.
13. G. Goriely, *Le Pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel* (Paris: Rivière, 1962), p. 198.
14. F.F. Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The direct action of its time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. vii.