

**Violence in Translation:
Georges Sorel, Liberalism, and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock**

Eric Brandom^{1,2}

This paper traces readings of Georges Sorel (1847-1922) from Carl Schmitt to Saul Bellow. The image of Sorel that came out of Weimar-era sociological debate around Schmitt and Karl Mannheim was simplified and hardened by émigré scholars in the war years, put to good use in the anti-totalitarian combat of the 1950s, and finally shattered when applied to the unfamiliar situation of the 1960s in the United States. Scholars taken with the problem of the political intellectual and the closely related problem of the relationship between instrumental and critical reason play the central role in this reception history. Sorel's commingling of left and right justified attempts to replace this organization of political space with one around totalitarian and free societies.

¹ Department of History, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506-1002, USA. Email: ebandom@ksu.edu.

² Many people have contributed to this work. The author thanks in particular for reading and comment Patricia Meltzer, Eric Hounshell, Daniel Bessner, and Malachi Hacohen, as well as audiences at German Studies Association meetings and the anonymous reviewers.

Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism, and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock

Il Heidegger, e accanto a lui quel Carl Schmitt, autore di libri di diritto pubblico et politico, discepolo, fino a un certo punto, di Georges Sorel, si van rivelando come i due disastri intellettuali della nuova Germania. Lo Schmitt mi pare anche più pericoloso.

Karl Vossler to Benedetto Croce, August 1933³

“In *Reflections on Violence* (1908), [Georges] Sorel argued that communism was a utopian myth—but a myth that had value in inspiring a morally regenerative revolt against the corruption of bourgeois society. The parallels between this view and [Slavoj] Žižek’s account of “redemptive violence” inspired by the “communist hypothesis” are telling.”⁴ So writes John Gray, in a 2012 review of two books by Žižek who, Gray thinks, the Yugoslavian Communist Party was right to judge insufficiently Marxist. Žižek, according to Gray, is not even a proper Leninist—preferring his poststructural Hegelianism to an encounter with reality, he has hollowed Marxism of any reference to the world as it empirically is. Žižek’s philosophy elides the difference between left and right and has now ended up, Gray suggests, in antisemitism. Here indeed is the function of Gray’s comparison with Georges Sorel (1847-1922). In the *Reflections* Sorel concluded that violence, within the context of the general strike understood as a myth, was a moralizing force for proletarian institutions and, in consequence, a good for civilization as a whole. And indeed Sorel’s *Reflections* was remembered largely because Sorel pivoted over the next few years from attachment to Revolutionary Syndicalism to alliance with the antisemitic monarchism of the Action française. Gray puts Sorel next to Žižek not because of any affinity between the two, but because Sorel is a useful shorthand for radicalism gone wrong.

Gray is able to use this shorthand because it has a long history. Sorel is often invoked in order to indicate a radicalism that fails to make important distinctions between left and right. “Sorel”

³ Benedetto Croce, Karl Vossler, and Vittorio De Caprariis, *Carteggio Croce-Vossler, 1899-1949*, (Bari, 1951).

⁴ John Gray, 'The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek', *The New York Review of Books* (2012).

stands for intellectuals who have betrayed the vocation of the intellectual by accepting the wrong kind of violence. Those damned by association with Sorelian myth confuse means and ends, giving too much space to the non-rational and to an apotheosis of the will. They are illiberal without even a faith that might be criticized; they are, in short, bad. This polemical usage is not the only possible approach to Sorel. Indeed historians and specialists in Sorel have over the past few decades painted a detailed picture of Sorel's trajectory and shown how much can be learned by seeing Sorel, in all his complexity and contradiction, as a product of his time and place.⁵

Once we move past the dismissive reading as symptom, it is clear that careful study of Sorel's writing can tell us much about French Marxism and socialism in the 1890s, the cultures of Dreyfusism, 19th century liberalism, and the history of French philosophy more generally. He was a European intellectual; he corresponded with Benedetto Croce, Henri Bergson, and Eduard Bernstein. He wrote about Giambattista Vico, Socrates, Ernest Renan, and William James as well as the general strike. In this light, his undeniable radicalism is a productive challenge for intellectual historians. There is no question that Sorel was by temperament heretical, and this can make it difficult, as generations of historians have lamented, to find the right box for him. Nonetheless, contemporary scholarship has shown us that Sorel was deeply rooted in what we might, with Alan Kahan, call the aristocratic liberal tradition in France. Yet, unlike Renan, he had made a kind of peace with the new democratic order. He broke from dominant Second International determinist

⁵ The most important recently published works are the 2014 issue of *Mil-neuf-cent*; Marco Gervasoni, *Georges Sorel, una biografia intellettuale: Socialismo e liberalismo nella Francia della Belle époque*, (Milano, 1997); Willy Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne : Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889-1914*, (Paris, 2006). In English, the best place to begin remains Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel : the character and development of his thought*, (New York, 1985); John Stanley, *The sociology of virtue : the political & social theories of Georges Sorel*, (Berkeley, 1981). See also, for more recent treatments in English, K. Steven Vincent, 'Interpreting Georges Sorel: Defender of Virtue or Apostle of Violence', *History of European Ideas* 12, no. 2 (1990): 239-57; John J. Cerullo, 'A Literary Sorel: 'Disreputing' a *Fin de Siècle* Moralizer', *History of Political Thought* 24, no. 1 (2003): 131-49; Chiara Bottici, 'Philosophies of Political Myth, a Comparative Look Backwards: Cassirer, Sorel, and Spinoza', *European Journal of Political Theory* 8, no. 3 (2009): 365-82; Creagh McLean Cole, 'The Ethic of the Producers: Sorel, Anderson and Macintyre', *History of Political Thought* 31, no. 1 (2010): 155-76. Important scholarly contributions to the reception history are to be found in two collective works, both foundational for the renewal of Sorel studies: Jacques Julliard and Shlomo Sand, eds., *Georges Sorel en son temps*, Seuil/Philosophie politique (Paris: Seuil, 1985); Michel Charzat, ed. *Georges Sorel*, Herne, no 53 (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1986).

Marxism not by synthesizing it with Bergsonian vitalism, but already in 1896 by using Vico to formulate a materialist account of culture, and by criticizing the monolith—indeed, as he would argue, the myth—of the unified and self-same proletariat that needed only to be awakened. Sorel is famously antidemocratic and, indeed, passes over into antisemitism. Yet he was a Dreyfusard and in 1900 stood with the reformist wing of the socialists in favor of participation in bourgeois governments. If frustration with the leadership of the revolutionary syndicalists pushed him, he was also pulled toward the most anti-republican elements in the political field by fear of an increasingly assertive anticlericalism in the early years of the century on the part of the Third Republic. “Myth,” his most durable coinage, appeared not as a desperate attempt to shore up revolutionary enthusiasm, but from a long process of reflection on method in social science, and how best to understand apparently irrational behavior, without either merely reproducing or rationalizing it. In these terms we can begin to understand the enthusiasm with which he greeted the philosophy of William James, but also his distaste for nationalist attempts to foster a cult of Joan of Arc. The above indicates, although it cannot really describe, the complexity of Sorel’s thinking and politics. The point is not that Sorel no longer confounds, but that scholars have shown the degree to which the dilemmas and instabilities Sorel presents ought to be productive. A figure “between two centuries,” as Antoine Compagnon wrote of one of Sorel’s younger contemporaries, Sorel’s work points to the interest that these decades hold for the history of political thought more generally.

And yet, the Sorel that remains best known is not the historical Sorel of the specialists. It is, rather, a polemical or historiographical construction.⁶ We can call this construct a ‘transatlantic Sorel.’ This paper will trace the growth and consolidation of this Sorel, a process that takes place

⁶ The work of Zeev Sternhell, which presents a challenging and sophisticated account of the political consequences of French intellectual life around 1900, also gives a privileged place to a caricature of Sorel that has proven easy for later scholars to draw on. See especially Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Ashéri, *The birth of fascist ideology : from cultural rebellion to political revolution*, (Princeton, N.J., 1994); Zeev Sternhell, *Neither right nor left : fascist ideology in France*, (Princeton, N.J., 1996). And, drawing on Sternhell, Mark Antliff, *Avant-garde fascism : the mobilization of myth, art, and culture in France, 1909-1939*, (Durham, 2007).

between several national contexts. It is first of all about Germans reading a French writer, and then, as some of them become foreigners in their own country, making use of this reading of Sorel in part to translate their own pressing concerns for a new Anglophone audience and in a much-broadened context. The historiographical construct of Sorel that interests us here emerged out of the matrix of Weimar-era sociological debate, was simplified and hardened into an effective tool by émigré scholars in the war years, put to good use in the 1950s, and finally shattered when it was applied to the unfamiliar situation of the 1960s in the United States.⁷ The figures treated here were not the only readers of Sorel, but they were the ones who proved most influential. The transatlantic Sorel was not simply a fantasy, of course. But to the elements drawn directly from Sorel's texts and affiliations were added several doses of conjecture and anxiety.

The transatlantic Sorel tells us, this is to say, as much about those who made use of it as it does about Sorel himself. These scholars were profoundly concerned with problems having to do with intellectuals and politics, the intellectual who was wrongly, excessively, or insufficiently, politicized. Karl Mannheim and others understood this both as a sociological problem and as the result of confusion between instrumental and critical reason. One consequence of this confusion was an incorrect framing of the relationship between means and ends in political action, especially around the question of violence. By the 1950s, all of this was in the service of elucidating a liberal democratic position while retaining the ability to exclude some who might also claim these values. And here there was a hesitation between conceptual criteria and evaluations of personality. Is an idea liberal, or is a person? Sorel's textual and biographical commingling of left and right could be cited to justify the attempt on the part of many émigré intellectuals and others in the middle decades of

⁷ That the émigré experience was distinctive, highly internally differentiated, and important for shaping intellectual life and even policy in the postwar US, is now well established. Particularly useful for me have been, George Steinmetz, 'Ideas in Exile: Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Failure to Transplant Historical Sociology into the United States', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 23, no. 1 (2010): 1-27; Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar century: German émigrés and the ideological foundations of the Cold War*, (2014). Daniel Bessner, *Democracy In Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* [forthcoming]. Jean-Michel Palmier, *Weimar in exile: the antifascist emigration in Europe and America*, (London, 2006).

the 20th century to replace this same left-right organization of political space with one organized around totalitarian and free societies.

The present essay is a history of political ideas pursued through reception history. It is therefore more interested in what Sorel signified for non-specialists than for specialists, although several of the latter appear here. By tracking how a cohort of scholars understood, deployed, and re-deployed Sorel across several different contexts, we can see how important categories of ideological combat—liberal, republican, fascist, totalitarian—changed their internal structures as well as their relations with one another.⁸ We begin with Sorel’s own writings because doing so allows us to paint—in miniature, to be sure—a picture of how Sorel looks today to specialists. The essential movement of this paper however is from the Weimar context to the American one, from combat against fascists, to anticommunism, and finally to a rearguard action, increasingly shot through with cruel ironies, against the new socio-political tides of the 1960s in the United States of America. Sorel, this paper argues, is an especially useful object for reception history because discourse around his work highlights the most problematic disjunctions between the thinking of those whose fundamental political experience was the failure of German democracy in Weimar, and the problems posed by the upheavals of the later 1960s.

Revisionism and After

Georges Sorel is best known for his *Reflections on Violence*, first published in periodical form in 1906, in which he articulated his theory of the myth of the general strike, and defended as salutary a certain amount of violent conflict between workers and bosses.⁹ Having graduated from the

⁸ Liberalism, in particular, demands historical investigation that crosses disciplinary lines between the history of political ideas and intellectual history. See, for instance, recent contributions by Duncan Bell, 'What Is Liberalism?', *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682-715. And, in a differently revisionist vein, Levy: Jacob T. Levy, 'Liberalism's Divide, After Socialism and Before', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20, no. 01 (2003): 278-97; *Rationalism, pluralism, and freedom*, First edition. ed., (2015).

⁹ The text appeared first in periodical form in 1905-06, and then as a stand-alone volume in 1908.

prestigious *École polytechnique* in the last years of the Second Empire, he attained a relatively high rank as a civil engineer, working in Algeria, Corsica, and southern France,¹⁰ before retiring in 1892 and moving to Paris. Once in Paris he rapidly became involved with the nascent world of French theoretical Marxism. Sorel developed an international network of contacts. He was particularly involved with Italian Marxists, entering into a fruitful correspondence with Antonio Labriola and his younger student, Benedetto Croce.¹¹ Together with Croce, Sorel was among those who began to question accepted Marxist accounts of economics and politics from within Marxism.

Sorel's reception in Germany begins with his involvement in what came to be called the revisionist crisis. Although he developed his own criticisms of Marx on the basis of the work of subsequent economists, Sorel immediately recognized Eduard Bernstein as an ally. He did so initially on the strength of a summary excerpt published in French. Sorel did not read German, and this would shape not only his response to debates in the world of socialism, but also of course his reception in that language.¹² Sorel introduced himself to Bernstein in 1898, and sent his recent workerist and syndicalist pamphlet, "L'avenir socialiste des syndicats," with which he believed Bernstein would agree. Bernstein's response, both in a letter to Sorel and in a notice of the piece in *Neue Zeit*, was respectful and guarded.¹³ The two agreed that capital was not concentrating, and further that the worker's movement had to be developed now, in the present—the movement was everything—not under the sign of some imagined final goal. But Sorel was already at this early date substantially committed to self-management. The question for Bernstein and others was the degree

¹⁰ On Sorel's years as an engineer, see the groundbreaking Alice Ingold, 'Penser à l' 'épreuve des conflits. Georges Sorel ingénieur hydraulique à Perpignan', *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 32(2014): 11-52.

¹¹ For one account of Sorel and Croce, see Eric Brandom, 'L'institution et l'esthétique: Sorel, Vico et Croce', *Mil neuf cent: revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 32(2014): 123-45.

¹² Sorel learned a great deal through the socialist press, but was also in close touch with the Germanist Charles Andler—arguably the first French academic to work seriously on German socialism, as well as the first to write in a sustained way on Nietzsche. Sorel had in fact studied German at the *Polytechnique*, but it was his weakest subject. On Sorel's school record, see the excellent Tommaso Giordani, "The Uncertainties of Action: Agency, Capitalism, and Class in the Thought of Georges Sorel" (European University Institute, 2015). 42.

¹³ See Michel Prat and Eduard Bernstein, 'Une lettre d'Eduard Bernstein à Sorel', *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 1(1983): 124-33.

to which this syndicalism was anti-, rather than non-parliamentary. How much did Sorel's *syndicats* look like English trade unions? In fact, although those two forms of worker organization were certainly opposed, Sorel was not yet a rigid antiparlamentarian. He supported the entrance of Alexandre Millerand into Waldeck-Rousseau's government of republican defense in 1899—a major litmus test—and was enthusiastic about socialist engagement for Dreyfus. In these years Sorel, like Bernstein, believed that democratic and legal means were likely to accomplish the most and were not incompatible with the goal of socialist revolution.

An 1897 article on Marx's theory of value, published in the staid and establishment *Revue des économistes* in France, brought Sorel to the attention of Joseph Bloch, editor of the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, an ecumenical publication loosely associated with the right wing of the SPD.¹⁴ Sorel was, for several years starting in 1898, the most frequent of the *Monatshefte's* foreign correspondents. Sorel's Marxism—drawing on Bernstein, but particularly on Labriola, with whom he eventually broke over the question of Bernstein's attack on orthodoxy—was attractive and open enough for extended involvement with the *Monatshefte*. Sorel, however, moved increasingly close to the Revolutionary Syndicalists, who rejected representation for workers by political parties or even, perhaps especially, the solid bureaucratic structures of the German labor unions. The break came in 1906, with the initial publication of *Reflections*. Bernstein himself wrote in the *Monatshefte* of Sorel's work that “Man könnte sie als nietzscheanische renovierten Marxismus bezeichnen, als Synthese von Nietzsche und Marx, die gar so unnatürlich nicht wäre.”¹⁵ Sorel's bitter likening of parliamentary socialists to the demagogues of the ancient Greek city-states could, Bernstein lamented, easily be drawn from many conservative newspapers.¹⁶ Sorel, Bernstein wrote, was simply reprising Bakunin's

¹⁴ See Michel Prat, “Georges Sorel en Allemagne” in Julliard and Sand, *Georges Sorel en son temps*. For a more recent and synoptic treatment of Sorel in Weimar, see Manfred Gangl, “Mythos der Gewalt und Gewalt des Mythos: Georges Sorels Einfluß auf rechte und linke Intellektuelle der Weimarer Republik,” in *Intellektuellendiskurse in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Manfred Gangle and Gérard Raulet (Frankfurt: Lang-Verlag, 2007).

¹⁵ Eduard Bernstein, “Die Generalstreik-Gewerkschaft,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, no. 8 (1906). 640.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 638.

role in the great First International debates of 1870. Such a position was of use to neither the left nor the right wings of the SPD.¹⁷ The consequences of this lack of interest from post-*Bernsteinstreit* German Marxism can be suggested by simple bibliography: between 1904 and 1928, nothing of Sorel's appeared in German.

Sorel's reformism has always been a matter of controversy. Commentators as different as Jacob Talmon or Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have noted that Sorel agreed on many points with Bernstein, but drew diametrically opposed political conclusions. Not reformism, but even more intransigent political conflict, was Sorel's response to Bernstein's critique of orthodoxy.¹⁸ Bernstein's dismissal of Sorel was significant for Weimar-era socialists, of course, but Bernstein voiced his objections before Sorel made his rightward turn. Bernstein could not approve of Sorel's increasingly radical rejection of parliamentary government and legalistic reform, but he saw it as ultra-left, which it was, rather than potentially rightist. Driving Sorel's radicalization were two factors: first was an increasing dissatisfaction, shared by Bernstein, with the account of contemporary capitalist dynamics that orthodox Marxism could provide; second was an increasing anxiety, not shared by Bernstein, about the capacity of the French state in particular to coopt socialism in its political and organizational manifestations. Although there is no space to explore it fully here, attention to Sorel's movement across the political field reveals an abiding concern for the autonomous development of the worker's movement, embodied for him in the *syndicats* understood as the institutions out of which a new civilization would emerge, and a changing evaluation of the dangers presented to this

¹⁷ In the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Emile Vandervelde, leader of the Belgian socialists and secretary of the Second International, wrote on the general strike, against Revolutionary Syndicalism, including a discussion of Sorel's theory. The general strike "kann ein Element und vielleicht das Hauptelement des Bildes sein, das man sich von der Revolution macht, aber soweit wir uns diese vorstellen können, muß sie auch die Eroberung der politischen Gewalt in sich einschließen." Sorel's theory of myth more broadly, Vandervelde allowed, contains within it something true, but it is only a "banale Konstatierung" about the psychological structure of the political militant. Emil Vandervelde, "Der Generalstreik," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 26, no. 1 (1908). 558.

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy : towards a radical democratic politics*, 2nd ed., (London, 2001); J. L. Talmon, *Myth of the nation and vision of revolution : ideological polarization in the twentieth century*, 1st pbk. ed., (New Brunswick, 1991).

movement by the ideological force of the bourgeoisie and the state. What kind of institution can defend the interests of the workers from the bourgeois state while, at the same time, developing new forms of sociability and cultural life—a new civilization—on the basis of the productive process? The question had, perhaps, no answer. A key moment in this shifting evaluation was the renewal of anticlerical activism in the lead up to the 1905 separating Church and State. This wave of anticlericalism, Sorel believed, was at once a diversion for socialists and a power-grab on the part of the ideological agents of the state: the university and the intellectuals. Sorel supported revision in the Dreyfus verdict not least because to do so meant standing for the rule of law and also, he believed, for a pluralist and liberal state that would be obliged to make room for the growing institutions of the proletariat. The muscle flexing of the anticlerical purges led by Emile Combes, on the other hand, showed that the Republican regime was determined to enforce *spiritual* unity through democratic enthusiasm. *Reflections on Violence* is such a compelling text in part because in it Sorel is struggling to think through the place of the *syndicats* in what he took to be the democratic but perhaps no longer liberal context of the Third Republic. In *Reflections*, Sorel argues that proletarian violence is generative. Violence, according to Sorel, stands against the order-imposing force of the state and the bourgeoisie—it is a measure of the democratic context in which the book was written that Sorel dismisses the possibility that the state will respond to proletarian violence with overwhelming force. This, easily imaginable in Germany, in fact did happen in France, in the person of Clemenceau, a perfect example of the left-wing Republican become statist authoritarian.

Sorel might have sounded notes familiar from the conservative press in 1906, but he was not yet allied with them. Even Nietzscheanism—and Sorel did not engage at any length with Nietzsche's writings—was not an indicator of anti-socialism.¹⁹ The Weimar spectacle of left-right cooperation in

¹⁹ Sorel mentions Nietzsche in a prominent place in *Reflections*, although not in an entirely positive sense, and even here the original comparison between the proletariat and the Nietzschean super-man is ascribed to Jean Jaurès. If Nietzsche had been less beholden to his memories of being a professor of philology, Sorel says, he would recognize that the

destroying the Republic was not yet imaginable. In the prewar years, despite his wanderings, Sorel was firmly identified with Revolutionary Syndicalism. Werner Sombart, who himself regarded Revolutionary Syndicalism as essentially French (only they and the Italians were impulsive enough for it), called Sorel “der Marx der neuen Lehre” in his treatment of the subject in his widely-read *Sozialismus und Soziale Bewegung*.²⁰ In any case, there was never an analogue for French revolutionary syndicalism in Germany, and so no natural political ally for Sorel.

Yet by 1910, Sorel had broken with the Revolutionary Syndicalists of the CGT. In the face of Clemenceau’s famous “decapitation” of the CGT, Sorel went looking for anyone who seemed to be capable of insisting on plurality in the face of the all-powerful republican state. He affiliated himself, if briefly, with the *Action française*—that is, with antisemitic monarchists—on the grounds of a shared admiration for Proudhon, antipathy for the parliamentarianism of the Third Republic, and antisemitism. This transition was well known, drawing the attention for instance of Thomas Mann.²¹ It would, indeed, come to define his legacy and justify the idea of equal-opportunity radicalism. The collapse of the 1930s should not, however, be read back onto the pre-war years. Sorel’s scissionistic radicalism emerged not in order to knock down a weakened parliamentary democracy, but precisely because the Third Republic’s parliamentary democracy seemed so strong, capable of flattening all institutions, economic or cultural, that opposed its power. Alexis de Tocqueville, after all, is almost as much a presence in *Reflections on Violence* as is Karl Marx.

Yankee captain of industry is the best present-day example of the master-type that so interests him. Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, (Paris, 1908). 229ff. It is certainly possible to pursue both commonalities in problem-situation, for instance an interest in the historical constitution of morality, and the readings of Nietzsche that Sorel would certainly have known about through acquaintances—he was close to perhaps the two most prominent scholars of Nietzsche of the period, Charles Andler and Daniel Halévy. However, this one passage in the *Reflections* is apparently the only textual ‘encounter’ between the two.

²⁰ Werner Sombart, *Sozialismus und soziale bewegung*, 6th ed., (Jena, 1908). 110.

²¹ Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen Eines Unpolitischen*, (Frankfurt, 1974). 327ff. There, Mann stages Sorel’s movement as irreversible. Once one has left socialism for monarchism, it would be impossible to return. Sorel, of course, importantly does return to the left. See also the somewhat different appearance of *Reflections on Violence* in Thomas Mann and John E. Woods, *Doctor Faustus : the life of the German composer Adrian Leverkühn as told by a friend*, (New York, 1999). 385-386. For a more general consideration of Mann and Sorel, see André Gisselbrecht, 'Thomas Mann et Georges Sorel ou la captation d'un penseur par un écrivain', *Cahiers Georges Sorel* (1988): 78-90.

Sorel did not remain attached to the nationalists. August 1914 brought Republicans and Monarchists and Bonapartists all together into one army in defense of the sacred soil of France. It turned even the rabidly anti-militarist anarchist Hervé into a patriot. Sorel stayed out. He thought the war a catastrophe from the beginning. The Entente would win, and it would be the victory of plutocratic Jacobinism. Sorel died in 1922, months before the March on Rome, and therefore just before the era of fascism began. His last years were fired by enthusiasm for two events: Lenin's Bolshevik revolution—the only good thing to come out of the war—and anti-colonial Egyptian nationalism.²² Mussolini would claim Sorel, but Sorel did not reciprocate, some interwar assertions to the contrary.²³

Given the above trajectory, that Sorel should become emblematic of left-right transgression is not surprising. However, Sorel's values in fact were liberal ones in the sense that he mistrusted the state and sought, giving primacy to rule of law, to support institutions that would balance and check its power. Sorel was nonetheless a Marxist in that he took the development of an industrial proletariat, bearer of a new way of life and a new set of values, to be the central historical movement of his time. His pluralism was political because room must be kept open for the free development of new social forms. It was also metaphysical, drawing him at the end of his life to William James. Sorel has been recognized as a careful theorist of social science. Much of this care was enforced by an acute awareness of how intellectuals, in describing social reality and then in serving the increasingly powerful modern state, use the latter to shape the former into the very categories they originally developed as approximations. Among the first projects Sorel undertook as a Marxist, in 1895, was a substantial essay on Emile Durkheim's sociological method, and it is easy to see the *Reflections* as an

²² On this last moment, see Jeremy Jennings, 'Georges Sorel and Colonialism: The Case of Egypt', *History of Political Thought* 8, no. 2 (1987): 325-33. and *Mil-neuf-cent* 2009.

²³ A good place to begin the unraveling of that particular legend, but also a clear confrontation with Sorel's antisemitism: is Shlomo Sand, 'Sorel, les Juifs et l'antisémitisme', *Cahiers Georges Sorel* (1984): 7-36; 'Legend, Myth, and Fascism', *The European Legacy* 3, no. 5 (1998): 51-65. See also Stanley, *The sociology of virtue*. 297-303.

anti-Durkheim. Sorel's long correspondence with Croce has perhaps even obscured the degree to which Sorel read and drew on the work of this arch liberal of the early 20th century. Yet this engagement with modern sociology and with the central questions of liberalism was not, for most readers, the salient or memorable element of Sorel's work.

Weimar

As the artillery went quiet on the Western Front in November 1918, the *Kaiserreich* had already collapsed. The next few years were rich in political experience. For many, this was a period of political idealism, quickly followed by disillusion. A whole generation of central European intellectuals encountered Sorel as they passed through phases of 'romantic' revolutionism after the war, György Lukács among them.²⁴ The wave of revolutions that swept across central Europe as the war ended proved durable nowhere, Russia excepted. Nonetheless, violence in the streets, assassinations, and general strikes, preserved and threatened to destroy the nascent Weimar Republic. Sorel's Third Republic may have been haunted by the memory of the repression of the Commune. Weimar, another republic born in military defeat, appeared destined to be eaten alive by its enemies left and right. It was in the wake of the Kapp Putsch and its defeat by a general strike, for instance, that Walter Benjamin read Sorel's *Reflections* in 1920-21.²⁵

²⁴ Later, in the 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács would write that it was the "contradictions in my social and political views" that brought him to Sorel's philosophy before and during the First World War. György Lukács, *History and class consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics*, (Cambridge, 1971). ix-x. Michael Löwy, tracking Lukács' discussions of and around Sorel, shows that a great shift took place between the early 1920s and 1933. Before, Sorel was a representative of an attractive, if ultimately sterile antiparlamentarism, a romantic anti-capitalist; after, he was an anti-rationalist protofascist. See "Georg Lukács: Sous l'étoile du romantisme" in Charzat, *Georges Sorel*. On Lukács and Mannheim see the extremely rich: David Kettler, 'Culture and Revolution: Lukacs in the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918/19', *Telos*, no. 10 (1971): 35-92.

²⁵ These events, together with long intensive work on Ernst Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* are the context for Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," which was supposed to be part of a larger attempt to write about politics. See Jan 1921 letter to Scholem in Walter Benjamin, Rolf Tiedemann, and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, *Gesammelte Schriften*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1991). (#94), 251-256. More broadly, see Howard Eiland and Michael William Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: a critical life*, (Cambridge, 2014). 114ff. This text, through Derrida's reading of it, has become a major one for critical theories of violence. Frederic Jameson, thus in 2016, "In recent theory, beginning, I think, with Walter Benjamin's famous essay,

The most influential early account of Sorel in German, however, came neither from Lukács nor Benjamin, but from the right in the form of Carl Schmitt's *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*.²⁶ In this 1923 work, Schmitt argued that bourgeois liberalism has historically been different from democracy, that the two are in conflict rather than concert. After 1848, against the relative rationalism of parliamentary government was arrayed the absolute rationalism of the (Marxist, scientific socialist) dictatorship of the proletariat. This is democratic without being liberal. More recently in reaction to these two competing rationalisms, there has erupted an irrationalist theory of unmediated life and decision. For Schmitt, Sorel's notion of myth is an especially well-articulated element of this larger explosion, itself a symptom of the crisis of parliamentary rationalism.

Schmitt was a careful reader of Sorel.²⁷ He nonetheless gave Bergson's philosophy and vitalism generally a more prominent place than it really had, asserting that "[t]he foundation for Sorel's reflections on the use of force is a theory of unmediated real life, which was taken over from Bergson."²⁸ The emphasis on Bergson leads Schmitt into serious confusion about the status of myth: at the "center" of Sorel's thought "is a theory of myth that poses the starkest contradiction of absolute rationalism and its dictatorship, but at the same time because it is a theory of direct, active decision, it is an even more powerful contradiction to the relative rationalism" that is parliamentarism.²⁹ The double-edged nature of Sorel's syndicalism is quite correctly seen—cutting at the socialists (the dictatorship of the proletariat) as well as the parliamentary liberals—but Schmitt carried with him the "active decision" he found in Sorelian myth. Moreover, Schmitt took Sorel to

there has come to be established a distinction between violence and force," although Benjamin explicitly draws this from Sorel. Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, (2016). [kindle loc 878]

²⁶ Schmitt's first discussion of Sorel was in a review slightly earlier—republished in Carl Schmitt, *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar-Genf-Versailles, 1923-1939*, 3. Aufl. ed., (Berlin, 1994). On Schmitt, Benjamin, and Sorel see Jan-Werner Müller, 'Myth, law and order: Schmitt and Benjamin read *Reflections on Violence*', *History of European Ideas* 29, no. 4 (2003): 459-73.

²⁷ Schmitt mentions Sorel a number of times across his body of work, often in footnotes. Schmitt appreciates the complexity of Sorel's political position and, crucially, the place of technical development in it. See especially the comments in "Age of neutralizations and depoliticizations" (1929). Reproduced in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, (Chicago, 2007). 92.

²⁸ *The crisis of parliamentary democracy*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1985). 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 68.

be operating on something like the same ideal-ontological level as was Schmitt himself. The properly sociological and, more important, *situational* aspects of Sorel's work do not find a place in Schmitt's reading.

In any case, Schmitt recognized that Sorelian violence was opposed radically—or at least Sorel wanted it to be—to dictatorship or authoritarianism. Further, he understood that Sorel was no machine-breaker. The technical capacity of production had to continue, after the revolution, to increase. Indeed it was just this that Schmitt identified as the key “inorganic contradiction” of Sorel's thinking. The technical rationality of production would soon enough impose itself upon any political manifestation of the proletariat, which would have to give up its mythic energy. This is why the national myth must always, Schmitt argued, win out over the myth of class struggle. Sorel was right about myth, this is to say, but wrong about which one mattered the most. Schmitt's Sorel, then, is essentially anti-parliamentary and even, in a sense, an avatar of democracy; in any case, *symptomatic* of a larger failure of institutions.

In the wake of Schmitt's influential reading, and in line with a growing posthumous prestige linked to the successes of Italian fascism, Sorel became an object of academic knowledge. The translation of *Reflections on Violence* into German had been proposed first in 1923, but the volume did not appear until 1929. Gottfried Salomon was the motive force behind the project. Salomon, a sociologist associated with Karl Mannheim, would be obliged to come to the United States a few years later.³⁰ His translation project was supported by Robert Michels, one of the academic protectors of Sorel's legacy in the interwar.³¹ Michels studied with Max Weber and wrote his best-known work, *Political Parties*, on oligarchy and democracy with the German Social Democratic party

³⁰ Although by a rather circuitous route including Italy and France. Dirk Kaesler, "Solomon-Delatour, Gottfried," in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*(2005).

³¹ Michels functioned as an intermediary between Salomon and the publisher, Marcel Rivière. Initially, Salomon was also supposed to translate the 1919 collection of essays *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*. Michels claimed at several points that someone associated with the University of Frankfurt also wanted to do a translation, but I have found no evidence corroborating this. Fonds Marcel Rivière, IISG, 499.25.

as his example. Like Sorel, Michels did not approve of the socialist capitulation in the face of war, and found in it confirmation of his pessimistic idea that modern democracy requires large organizations which, themselves, generate fundamentally anti-democratic elite rule. In 1928, having found that the charisma of a leader might mitigate the negative effects of party organization, Michels accepted Mussolini's invitation and took a university position in Italy. He died, in 1936, a supporter of fascism.³²

In the same year Michels moved to Italy, Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* appeared to confront Marxism in a different way. Mannheim would play a major role in bringing Sorel across the Atlantic. He had been a student or disciple of Lukács' in Budapest during the war, fleeing with the collapse of the 1919 Soviet, eventually finding his way to a university position in Germany.³³ He drew on Sorel as a representative figure in *Ideology and Utopia*. This book accepted the arguments of Marxists about the material determinations of ideology, but turned this against Marxism as well in order to rescue a "relational," or relative rationality in the form of the sociology of knowledge. The goal, in the end, was to enable political action in consciousness of contingency and the relativity of fundamental value judgments.

Mannheim cited Schmitt frequently for his discussion of Sorel, who he located—together with Vilfredo Pareto—as philosophers ransacked for and adjusted into the *Weltanschauung* of fascism.³⁴ These philosophers, Mannheim wrote, deny all rationality to history, and focus entirely on an "intuitionist" adulation of the deed. Mannheim identified this non-relation of theory and practice with disconnected elites: "a deep affinity exists between socially uprooted and loosely integrated

³² Seymour Martin Lipset wrote an introduction for a new US edition of Michels' *Political Parties* in 1961. Lipset does eventually mention Michels' fascism, but regards it as a regrettable error on the part of an excellent and important scholarly sociologist. Michels' failure was that having shown that modern democracy generated elites, he did not investigate the ways in which democracy could function to select *good* elites—Lipset's own position. Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, (New York, 1962). 32-33.

³³ See Kettler Kettler, "Culture and Revolution: Lukacs in the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918/19."

³⁴ Mannheim also mentions, but does not discuss, Bergson. Karl Mannheim, Louis Wirth, and Edward Shils, *Ideology and utopia: an introduction to the sociology of knowledge*, (New York, 1954). 119.

groups and an a-historical intuitionism.”³⁵ Having no fixed place in social structure, they prefer to see history itself as a disconnected series of events. They do not seek changes in social structure (as do real socialists), but rather to supplant those elites currently at the top. Mannheim’s description of the sociology of Sorel’s social theory accurately describes those Sorel fulminated against most violently. Mannheim, by positioning Sorel in this way, opened the door to many triumphant remarks about Sorel’s lack of self-awareness.

Both Schmitt and Mannheim took Sorel’s rejection of rationality in politics as the most important feature of his work. Both understood him to replace rationality—discussion, prediction, technique—with intuition, action, the will. For both, but particularly for Schmitt, Sorel’s ultimate meaning in the history of ideas drives fundamentally against Sorel’s own stated position. Sorel theorized and at the same time performed the disconnected intellectual’s inevitable turn to the nation as the only secure source of spiritual and political energy. Sorel was framed as insufficiently self-aware to see the problem of his social location, even though, indeed, he was constantly concerned with this question; the problems of the socialist intellectual drive his methodological innovations. Schmitt, in seeing Sorel as *only* an antiliberal, allowed Mannheim to ignore elements of Sorel’s thinking that might easily have been assimilated to Mannheim’s own sociology of knowledge. A generation of émigrés from Weimar, themselves obsessed with the problem of the political intellectual, would look to Sorel as a paradigmatic example of failure to seriously consider the question, rather than reading his work as an attempt to *respond* to just this same question. Sorel could have helped this émigré generation approach younger leftists in the US with a modicum of sympathy. But this reading, already after Schmitt and Mannheim, was foreclosed.

The entry on Sorel written by Sigmund Neumann for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* in 1930 is a key early moment in the transition of a ‘German Sorel’ into English and across the

³⁵ Ibid. 126.

Atlantic.³⁶ Neumann placed Sorel in terms of a larger Marxist tradition, and suggested that Bergson plays in Sorel's work something of the same role that Hegel plays in Marx's. Neumann concludes his short sketch by suggesting that many "contemporary" phenomena that might superficially appear to be Sorelian in inspiration—resting on violence and myth—"may be interpreted according to Sorel as manifestations of the despised mass democratic movements, which in the hands of demagogues become forms of Bonapartist Caesarism. Sorel... was rooted in a liberal republican aristocracy which was the source of his political faith."³⁷ In other words, the distance between the historical Sorel and Mussolini's Sorel was too great for the encyclopedia to allow the dictator's claims to stand. Neumann, a student of Mannheim's and associated with the "Hochschule für Politik," would also, in 1933, be obliged to cross the Atlantic.³⁸ By the end of the decade, few scholars would be so willing to discuss the ways in which Sorel's liberalism and republicanism themselves made his work available to fascist appropriation.

Sorel was in general understood in Germany as fitting well into the revolutionary conservatism exemplified by Ernst Jünger.³⁹ He was, this is to say, a fascist. The major scholarly work on Sorel to emerge from Germany in this period was Michael Freund's 1932 monograph: *Georges Sorel, Der revolutionäre Konservatismus*. Freund pursued and radicalized this project with a selection of extracts from Sorel—a number taken from the spurious 'recollected interviews' with Sorel published by Variot in the early 1930s—titled *Die Falsche Sieg: Worte aus Werken von Georges Sorel* and published in 1944. Sorel never fit comfortably into a Nazi pantheon, but his reputation as,

³⁶ Sigmund Neumann Sigmund Neumann, "Sorel, Georges (1847-1922)," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934).

³⁷ Ibid. 263. The entry was written in 1930, and remained until the encyclopedia was radically revised in the 1960s as the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, at which time an entry written by George Goriely replaced Neumann's text.

³⁸ Peter Lösche Peter Lösche, "Neumann, Sigmund," in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (1999).

³⁹ Michael Buckmiller Michael Buckmiller, 'Sorel et le « conservatisme révolutionnaire » en Allemagne', *Cahiers Georges Sorel* (1985): 51-75.

ultimately, a conservative thinker remained.⁴⁰ Vichy adopted him as a quasi-official forebearer.⁴¹

Freund's work would remain influential for decades. Despite a wave of new English-language scholarship on Sorel in the 1950s, Isaiah Berlin and Jacob Talmon would both look back at the end of the 1960s to Freund's scholarship—which indeed was impressive—as the basis of their accounts of Sorel.⁴²

In 1906, Bernstein objected that Sorel's tone would suit a conservative paper. By the 1930s, intellectuals around Mannheim and the right of the SPD, drawing not least on Carl Schmitt's interpretation, but supported by more recent attempts in this direction, such as Freund's, saw Sorel's writings as evidence of what might befall those who failed to hew to the relative rationality of the engaged but independent intellectual.

Sorel Mobilized

Many intellectuals and scholars contributed directly to the Allied war effort, for instance through involvement with the OSS or later the occupation forces in Germany. The primary means they had to contribute, however, was to write. An important cohort of scholarship must be seen in this light. If those who had fled Weimar remained troubled by the de facto collusion of Communists and Nazis in destroying the Republic, the spectacle of Hitler and Stalin carving up Poland together only confirmed the essential similarity of the two regimes. In this context, Sorel became urgent; he appears in a number of the classic works from these years.

⁴⁰ There is no space to treat it seriously here, but Karl Löwith's brief discussion of Sorel, between Tocqueville and Nietzsche, dating from the late 1930s, is an interesting exception. See Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, (New York, 1964). 257-260. Similarly, Sorel appears in Löwith's postwar *Meaning in History* more as a fellow scholar, whose work on progress deserves consideration, than as an object.

⁴¹ Eugen Weber, *Action française: royalism and reaction in twentieth century France*, (Stanford, 1962), 442. I owe this reference to Kevin Duong.

⁴² This is particularly true of Talmon, whose essay paints a much more uniformly negative picture of Sorel than does Berlin's.

Ernst Fraenkel gave Sorel a typical place in his most famous book, *The Dual State*, published in 1941. Fraenkel had been a labor lawyer and member of the part of the SPD that wanted to use the *Rechtsstaat*, understood to be an instantiation of natural law, as the ground for the reconciliation of socialism and bourgeois liberalism.⁴³ Fraenkel had studied briefly with Schmitt in the late 1920s. He drew on Schmitt's account of the bankruptcy of parliamentary government, although, unlike Schmitt, he wanted to rescue it by integrating into it socialist demands to create a "collective democracy." Although the labor movement for which he worked was destroyed rapidly after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Fraenkel himself was a veteran and so was able to remain in Germany and work in the court system for several years. He fled to avoid arrest in 1938, eventually making his way to Chicago in order to earn an American law degree. *The Dual State*, appearing in 1941, was thus an important and oft-cited work on Nazi jurisprudence.

Sorel appears as a key figure for Fraenkel in disabling Marxist resistance to Nazism. According to Fraenkel, the final goal of revolution, for Marx, was always to reach the realm of reason—freedom—by conquering that of necessity. Marx rejected Natural Law, which is to say abstract reasons, the *Rechtsstaat*, only in the present conditions of class struggle within the realm of necessity. Sorel was important because he rejected this final goal, this utopian moment in which reason would finally be the guiding principle of human flourishing. Sorel, Fraenkel wrote, "transformed [Marxism] 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."⁴⁴ This, Fraenkel assimilates immediately to Jünger, "not what we fight for, but how we fight, is essential." Sorel here represents *not* voluntarism, but rather its opposite, political action understood as pure "acquiescence in the laws of social development." This attitude, Fraenkel says, will naturally drive anyone into fascism. It had this effect on Mussolini as well as on

⁴³ On Fraenkel, see Greenberg, *The Weimar century : German émigrés and the ideological foundations of the Cold War.*, Chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Ernst Fraenkel et al., *The dual state: a contribution to the theory of dictatorship*, (New York, 1941). p 130.

“Carl Schmitt, an admirer of Sorel.” Fraenkel pursues the broader significance of the progress of Schmitt, “the most brilliant political theorist of post-war Germany” from political Catholicism to “National-Socialism” on this Sorelian ground. Sorel, then, was an early example of the experience of a significant part of a generation in Weimar: the destruction and bankruptcy of general ideas led to “political estheticism that worships violence for its own sake.”⁴⁵

At work here is the same confusion of means and ends, the same pathological failure of abstract reason to guide action in the world, for which we have seen Sorel stand already. That this takes the form of a confusion between *is* and *ought* explains the otherwise perhaps surprising company in which Fraenkel puts Sorel: “In the respects in which Machiavelli and Hegel can be regarded as the spiritual ancestors of National-Socialism, Sorel should also be so regarded.”⁴⁶ Fraenkel, in his reading of Sorel as in his broader theory of democracy, indeed drew on and tried to overcome the work that Schmitt had already done.

Franz Neumann’s *Behemoth* mentions Sorel’s theories in connection both to Italian Fascism and to Schmitt’s decisionism.⁴⁷ Enrico Corradini, Neumann wrote, had enrolled Sorel’s syndicalism into his early formulation of “national socialism.” This meant adopting Sorel’s arguments about the necessity of violence for proletarian action, and the solidarity amongst producers to be achieved through this violence, to the context of Italy as a whole, imagined as a “proletarian nation” in which everyone was a producer.⁴⁸ Carl Schmitt’s decisionism, encapsulated in the fundamental friend-foe distinction, might also, according to Neumann, be compared to Sorel’s formulation of Revolutionary Syndicalism, presumably because of the way in which Sorel foregrounded the absolute scission that had to (be made to) exist between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 131.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 130.

⁴⁷ On Neumann, see William David Jones, *The lost debate : German socialist intellectuals and totalitarianism*, (Urbana, 1999). p. 53 and passim.

⁴⁸ Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944*, (2009). pp. 193-195.

Another wartime example is Franz Borkenau's essay on fascist philosophers—"Sorel, Pareto, Spengler"—published in *Horizon* in 1942. Borkenau, originally Viennese, had studied in Leipzig and in 1921 joined the KPD in Berlin, only to leave in 1929 in opposition to the "social fascism" line. He remained an independent Marxist, attached in the early 1930s to the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, although not part of its inner circle, and centrally concerned already with the nature of fascism.⁴⁹ Borkenau became well known for his political reporting on the Spanish Civil War. By 1939, his work is best described as "liberal" and in 1950 he would help start the Congress for Cultural Freedom with an incendiary speech in favor of UN intervention in Korea.⁵⁰ Borkenau explained Sorel's basic problem-situation thus: "if...inflicting pain (and by implication also suffering pain) is the worst of all possible evils, and...nothing is regarded as more important than to preserve life, it is the last stage before the end. A society is vital precisely to the extent that it believes there are many things more important than the preservation of life."⁵¹ From this basic position it was supposed to be not many steps to the fascist eagerness to sacrifice life in the face of an ideal. Borkenau provides a stark version of what would be a common trope in the wartime and immediate postwar period of Sorel reception, commenting on Sorel's idea of a myth:

The definition of a myth is that its believers do not regard it as a myth, but as supernatural reality. There is no valid truth, these Neo-Conservatives might say, not at any rate any truth for which it would be worth while to lay down one's life and sacrifice other lives. But without such truths life, individual and social, is bound to disintegrate. So let's act the other way round. Let's start being ruthless and prejudiced to excess. The faith which used to inspire ruthless [sic] and prejudice will then be given unto us.⁵²

For Borkenau, Sorel encouraged not just violence in the hope of meaning, but also hypocrisy. Myth is taken to be the latest, most conscious form of ideological self-manipulation. It is a theory that justifies the mystical idea that a sufficient degree or special kind of belief will in fact change the

⁴⁹ On Borkenau's connections to Institute, see Martin Jay, *The dialectical imagination: a history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, (Boston, 1973). pp. 16-19.

⁵⁰ Jones, *The lost debate : German socialist intellectuals and totalitarianism*. pp. 91, 119, 185.

⁵¹ Franz Borkenau, 'Sorel, Pareto, Spengler: Three Fascist Philosophers', *Horizon* 5, no. 30 (1942): 420-31. pp. 424-5.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 429.

world. Thus, Borkenau argues, much like Mannheim, that Sorel's principled refusal of reality is at the root of totalitarian ideological delusion.

When Sigmund Neumann himself came to write his book on totalitarianism he gave Sorel an unexceptional place, less carefully drawn than in the *Encyclopedia* entry. The anti-rationalism represented by Sorel and his generation, Neumann writes, in *Permanent Revolution*, was really “the last stage of a hyper-rationalism which at last turns into its negation.”⁵³ Sorel's work is characterized by disrespect for entrenched party functionaries; hence he is an inspiration for those disgusted by Weimar's immobilism.⁵⁴ Sorel's rejection of parliamentary politics and embrace of myth are the ground on which left and right will come together in fascism.⁵⁵ All these wartime works enrolled Sorel—with more or less subtlety—into accounts of the uniquely terrifying political convergence of the late 30s and 40s. In an attempt to understand—historically, philosophically—how Hitler and Stalin could even temporarily come to an agreement, Sorel, who had passed from Pelloutier's syndicalism to Charles Maurras' *Action française*, was a necessary reference.

During and after the Second World War, in the Anglophone world, Sorel's work was presented as a tributary into totalitarianism.⁵⁶ If this was a break from the *Encyclopedia's* Sorel, it was nonetheless not surprising given, first, Sorel's outspoken support for Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and second, his association with literary modernism as understood by the likes of Wyndham Lewis. Sorel's myth and violence were said to be openings to the antirationalism and refusal of reality typical of totalitarian regimes. This is a mutation, but not a radical alteration, of the Sorel Freund and others fashioned into a Revolutionary Conservative. This understanding of Sorel was materially supported in the US by émigré scholars busy transporting the legacies of German sociology and

⁵³ Sigmund Neumann, *Permanent revolution: totalitarianism in the age of international civil war*, (New York, 1965). p. 38.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 238.

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 131, 138.

⁵⁶ As part of a discussion of totalitarian ideology, for instance, we read that Mussolini's debt to Sorel for the use of political myth is “apparent in all his utterances”—and this in the classic Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian dictatorship and autocracy*, 2d ed., (Cambridge, 1965). p. 93.

critical theory onto American soil.⁵⁷ Eric Voegelin, for instance, we find after the war in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, having been forced out of his home in Vienna by the Anschluss. In 1946 he reviewed a book that he regarded as “a skillful apology” for the Soviet Union based on its military victory over Nazism. Voegelin suggested that but for the Bolsheviks, Nazism and indeed fascism more generally might never have come into existence. After all “the paths that lead from the Communist class-war to Fascism [...] are not so obscure. Anybody who cares to study the intellectual biography of Georges Sorel will recognize the transitions.”⁵⁸ Sorel was not unknown in the United States and had already the reputation, developed for instance by Arthur Lovejoy, of having transformed the philosophy of Henri Bergson into an irrationalist political doctrine.⁵⁹ The émigré scholars brought new concerns about radicalism and intellectuals as well as a new frame for understanding Sorel’s work. At the same time, important mutations were taking place in the macro-structures of Anglophone political philosophy. Particularly important here is the emerging hegemony of liberal democracy as a concept defining acceptable political positions. As Duncan Bell, among others, has emphasized, the whole history of political thought was re-written so as to put Locke at the origin of the liberal political tradition—within this framework, the Republicanism in which Sorel was steeped made little sense.⁶⁰ The *fin-de-siècle* would come to be divided into pro and anti liberal democratic camps, just as Lukács would at the same moment divide the recent history of philosophy into progressive (reason, socialist or communist) and regressive (irrational, capitalist

⁵⁷ On ‘totalitarianism’ and its roots in interwar German social science, see Jones, *The lost debate : German socialist intellectuals and totalitarianism.*, and on totalitarianism in the US, Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War*, (New York, 1995). For this transfer considered broadly, see Martin Jay, *Permanent exiles : essays on the intellectual migration from Germany to America*, (New York, 1985). See also, David A. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and secular culture : studies in mid-twentieth-century American intellectual history*, (Princeton, N.J., 1996); Palmier, *Weimar in exile : the antifascist emigration in Europe and America*.

⁵⁸ Eric Voegelin, Jodi Lynn Cockerill, and Barry Cooper, *Selected book reviews*, (Columbia, 2001), pp. 139, 145.

⁵⁹ Arthur O. Lovejoy, 'The Practical Tendencies of Bergsonism. I', *International Journal of Ethics* 23, no. 3 (1913): 253-75; 'The Practical Tendencies of Bergsonism. II', *International Journal of Ethics* 23, no. 4 (1913): 419-43. And see on this Martin Burke, 'Intellectuals and anti-intellectualism in twentieth-century American public discourse', *Intellectual News* 15, no. 1 (2005): 34-41. p. 35.

⁶⁰ Bell, "What Is Liberalism?."

and/or bourgeois).⁶¹ There could be little doubt about which side of such lines, however artificial, Sorel would end up on.

The collapse of Weimar featured the spectacle of actual voters shifting, apparently for entirely superficial reasons, between far left and far right. This disregard for the historical rationale of political positionality, especially once it had, in fact, destroyed Weimar democracy, demanded a deeper philosophical pedigree. Sorel was an ideal figure here since he seemed to have exhibited precisely the same movement. Schmitt and Mannheim provided a suitably decontextualized Sorel. His *belle époque* context, which boasted significantly more deeply rooted democratic and liberal institutions than anything in Weimar, was no longer the backdrop for his *Reflections on Violence*.

From Cold War to Hot Summer

The postwar years in the US academy were marked by extraordinary institutional growth and a sense of intellectual mission shaped by the spectacle—rather than the experience—of the catastrophe of European history in the first half of the 20th century. Ira Katznelson, for instance, has written powerfully about what he calls “the political studies enlightenment,” which sought “to dominate unreason by appropriate political knowledge.”⁶² Sorel fit into this world, on the basis of the work of émigré scholars, many of them at The New School, as an enemy of Enlightenment—a relatively new category of political analysis. Hans Speier for instance, writing in *Social Research*, had used Sorel’s name as a shorthand for the profoundly anti-Enlightenment process through which “for the conviction that reason is powerful is substituted the knowledge of how to exploit prejudices

⁶¹ György Lukács, *The destruction of reason*, (Atlantic Highlands, 1981). Michael Curtis’ 1959 monograph, for instance, essentially accepts the polarization of politics into liberal democratic and totalitarian dispensations. The Third Republic embodied in a relatively unproblematic way the democratic, rational, and progressive legacy of the French Revolution (good); those who criticized it, Sorel among them, prepared the way for the elitist, anti-rational, fascism of the 20th century (bad). Sorel’s equivocations and ambiguities (and those of Barrès and Maurras) are also those of totalitarianism: toward the state, economic policy, democracy. History has two sides, and Sorel was on the wrong one—end of story. Michael Curtis, *Three against the Third Republic: Sorel, Barrès, and Maurras*, (Princeton, 1959).

⁶² Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and enlightenment : political knowledge after total war, totalitarianism, and the Holocaust*, (New York, 2003). p. 43.

and how to stir passion.”⁶³ It thus became common to cast Sorel as explicitly enabling ‘the big lie’ in the service of an elite. According to E.H. Carr in 1947, Sorel had “blended” the moralities of Marx and Nietzsche.⁶⁴ Myth was a “necessary imposture,” and would necessarily be at the service of the “audacious minority” which, as he had learned wrongly from the Dreyfus Affair, was the only real source of change in society.⁶⁵ The readers of *The New York Times* were for instance told in 1948 by Hugh Trevor-Roper that the Nazi party would have likely gone nowhere without Goebbels, who “knew the works of Sorel and Pareto and understood how the irrational beliefs of men can be canalized and exploited for political purposes.”⁶⁶ This would therefore be Sorelian myth: a tool for the effective manipulation of people’s beliefs by an elite. Such readings represent a different perspective than that of the Weimar intellectuals. Carr and Trevor-Roper were, like Borkenau, engaged not in self-reflection (however mediated by social science) but in depicting an enemy. In this immediate postwar moment, it was not so much the destruction of legality or the refusal of reason, but of atomized *truth*, that had to be highlighted.

In the years just following the war interest in Sorel surged. A new paperback edition of *Reflections* appeared in English,⁶⁷ this time with an introduction by Edward A. Shils, one of the most

⁶³ Hans Speier, 'On Propaganda', *Social Research* 1, no. 3 (1934): 376-80., p. 377. Sorel's name appears a number of times in *Social Research*, often associated with Italian Fascism. The faculty at the New School included Max Ascoli, one of the few émigré scholars to have been a Sorelian. Ascoli, as a young man in Italy, delivered a public lecture on Sorel that so pleased Edouard Berth, the best claimant to the title of Sorel's disciple, that Berth translated it himself and had it published in French. For Ascoli, there were striking similarities between Sorel's philosophy and Bolshevik political practice; Sorel, together with Croce, was the spiritual master of the youth setting out to rebuild the world. That in 1921, just before Sorel's death. Max Ascoli and Edouard Berth, *Georges Sorel*, (Paris, 1921). On Speier, see Bessner, forthcoming.

⁶⁴ Edward Hallett Carr, *Studies in Revolution*, (London, 1950). p. 157.

⁶⁵ Ibid. pp. 153-4, 156. Carr also, rather improbably, asserts that “French nationalism was at this time scarcely thinkable outside the framework of Catholicism.” 160.

⁶⁶ Hugh Trevor-Roper, "His Diary Explodes the Goebbels Myth," *New York Times*, 14 March 1948. In 1944, one historian reported without feeling the need to offer any evidence that “Sorel's doctrine of the value of myths has influences the Nazi and the Fascist ideologies and particularly Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*.” Joseph S. Roucek, 'A History of the Concept of Ideology', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 5, no. 4 (1944): 479-88. p. 483.

⁶⁷ This was a new edition of T.E. Hulme's translation from 1912. Some material added to later editions of the book was translated there for the first time by Jack Roth, on whom, see note below.

important translators and interpreters of German social theory for an Anglophone audience.⁶⁸ Shils, in line with Mannheim's interpretation, saw Sorel as exemplifying the politics of the "free-lance intellectual."⁶⁹ Sorel's hatred of intellectuals and rationalism "sharpens our eyes to the moral cleavage between the modern professional intellectual and primary institutions," a cleavage of which he was both victim and witness.⁷⁰ For Shils, Sorel represented to the highest degree the apocalyptic morality of the sect, indeed "no modern political writer of any intellectual stature has gone further than Sorel in denying the validity of any consensual ethic."⁷¹ Sorel was not a party man, and therefore his passage from socialism to fascism allows us to see "the large identities of these two major political movements which had been and unfortunately, still are thought to represent the two opposite ends of the political spectrum."⁷² Without using the term, Shils slots Sorel neatly into the pre-history of totalitarianism. The elitism and purificatory violence of Fascism and Communism were, Shils says, authentically Sorelian: "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."⁷³ Shils in 1950, then, makes exactly the connection between Sorel and Fascism and Bolshevism that Neumann rejected in 1930. Ultimately, Shils wants readers of Sorel to walk away with a lesson in the capacity of the apocalyptic point of view to corrupt and turn from "the right end of politics" even the most sincere desire to stand on "the side of the free society."⁷⁴ Tellingly, when Shils wrote his introduction in 1950 he was still obliged to point readers to the

⁶⁸ In addition to his work on Max Weber, Shils had translated Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* as well as Ernst Fraenkel's *Dual State*. Shils was a longtime University of Chicago faculty member, and an active participant in Congress for Cultural Freedom activities. See H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'In memoriam: Edward Shils, 1910-1995', *New Criterion* 14, no. 2 (1995): 77.

⁶⁹ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on violence*, (Glencoe, 1950). p. 14.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 14.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 22.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 23.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 23, 25.

notoriously pro-Hitler English modernist Wyndham Lewis for “the fullest discussion of Sorel in English.”⁷⁵

Shils and his attitude toward Sorel are important in pointing to just what was at stake in citations of Sorel in the postwar years: science. It was not Sorel’s respect for the density of tradition that bothered Shils—he himself had plenty of that. Indeed those aspects of Sorel’s work that are most difficult to reconcile with the left, especially his attacks on individualism, were or should have been congenial to Shils. Rather, it was Sorel’s broadsides against what he called “scientism” that put him at odds with a whole sector of the emerging US academic establishment that sought to ground freedom in the pursuit of science.⁷⁶

Soon enough several scholarly works would appear, in part the fruit of a new interest in Sorel in the American academy directed by Europeans. The best of these new books is James Meisel’s 1951 *The Genesis of Georges Sorel*.⁷⁷ Meisel, who was also an émigré German scholar,⁷⁸ had in 1950 sought without success to publish a volume of Sorel’s selected writings in English. This edition would have been done in association with Franz Neumann at Columbia, and put out through Oxford University Press’s World Classics Galaxy series. A substantial quantity of text would have been collected in it, but the edition was not to be expensive or for exclusively scholarly use. It seems

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 24.

⁷⁶ For a discussion relevant to Shils specifically, see S. N. Eisenstadt, “The classical sociology of knowledge and beyond”, *Minerva* 25, no. 1-2 (1987): 77-91.

⁷⁷ Also in 1951 was Richard Humphrey’s *Georges Sorel: Prophet Without Honor, A Study in Anti-Intellectualism*. Humphrey’s book is synthetic, philosophical, and uneven. It sees Sorel as a sort of minor accompaniment to Nietzsche and Freud as a ‘philosopher of energy.’ Despite the title, Humphrey is relatively sympathetic to Sorel. A review of the book in *Commentary* showed the resistance this approach would meet: “Georges Sorel, the hero of Mr. Humphrey’s volume, is chiefly remembered today as the advocate of physical violence and of irrational myths as the instruments of a superior type of politics. Was he not, then, the intellectual ancestor par excellence of present-day totalitarianism? Mr. Humphrey says no, all appearances to the contrary; and those who study Sorel at first hand will tend to agree that he has a valid case... Sorel was a pathetic, great, lonely figure. Absurd in his petulance and his enthusiasm alike, he was a “pure fool,” he was single-minded in his devotion to the ideal of regenerating mankind through greatness. The last thing we can say about him is that he had insights about political reality that were valid for his time and ours.” The main point is plain: either Sorel is a totalitarian, or he is not interesting. Paul Kecskemeti, ‘Georges Sorel, Prophet Without Honor, by Richard Humphrey’, *Commentary* (1952): 92-94.

⁷⁸ “James H. Meisel, 90, Political Scientist, Dies,” *The New York Times*, March 12 1991.

that Meisel had difficulty securing the rights from Sorel's publisher.⁷⁹ The failure of this publishing venture meant that the only text of Sorel's available in English remained the *Reflections*. There was great divide between specialists and synthesizers. By the end of the 1950s, the later had substantially established Sorel's historiographical position. H. Stuart Hughes' classic *Consciousness and Society* in 1958 gave him an important place—if, after Freud and Weber, as a thinker of the second rank—in the crisis of liberalism and intellectual turmoil of the *fin-de-siècle*.⁸⁰ Sorel's mind was, wrote Hughes, a “windy crossroads,” and he embodied much that would evolve in a dangerous direction after the First World War.

The ‘German’ Sorel was not the only one on offer. There was also an ‘Italian’ Sorel. Jack J. Roth in 1963 ended his first substantial essay on “Sorel and the Sorelians” by claiming that “their work is symptomatic of a profound intellectual and moral disturbance—the desertion by intellectuals of the democratic idea. And their story is something of a tragedy. They sought to evoke the sublime. But they helped, rather, to unleash the beast.”⁸¹ Roth's work on the Italian reception of Sorel continued in this vein, presenting Sorel's desire for a *ricorso* (a term borrowed from the 18th century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico) as a quest for authenticity.⁸² This was, in most

⁷⁹ It is possible that Meisel did not succeed in securing the rights to Sorel's work because he insisted in writing to the publishers in English. IISH, Fonds Marcel Rivière, 499.24.

⁸⁰ H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and society; the reorientation of European social thought, 1890-1930*, [1st ed., (New York, 1958).

⁸¹ Jack J. Roth, 'Revolution and Morale in Modern French Thought: Sorel and the Sorelians', *French Historical Studies* 3, no. 2 (1963): 205-23. p. 223. Roth, in addition to participating in the new 1950 edition of *Reflections*, defended a thesis on Sorel at Chicago in 1955. His monograph on Sorel would only appear in 1980: Jack Joseph Roth, *The cult of violence : Sorel and the Sorelians*, (Berkeley, 1980).

⁸² Jack J. Roth, 'The Roots of Italian Fascism: Sorel and Sorelismo', *The Journal of Modern History* 39, no. 1 (1967): 30-45. Croce's full paragraph, from which Roth cites, "Revolutionary minds, scornful of accommodating reformism and impatient of the flabbiness into which orthodox socialism had fallen, devoted themselves in Italy also to seeking new formulas, better fitted to them; and one was supplied by Sorel with his syndicalism. Sorel assimilated socialism, as he conceived it, to primitive Christianity, assigned to it the aim of renewing society from its moral foundations, and therefore urged it to cultivate, like the first Christians, the sentiment of 'scission' from surrounding society, to avoid all relations with politicians, to shut itself up in workmen's syndicates and feed on the 'myth' of the general strike. It was the construction of a poet thirsting for moral austerity, thirsting for sincerity, pessimistic with regard to the present reality, stubbornly trying to find a hidden fount from which the fresh pure stream would well forth; and tested by reality, his poetry quickly vanished, even in his own eyes. But when the World War broke out, the official Socialist party, which had detached itself from reformism in the Congress of Reggio Emilia in 1912, and had wavered irresolutely between moderate and revolutionary tendencies, did not show a spirit equal to the occasion and, unable to and perhaps unwilling

ways, a recapitulation of the analysis offered in the 1930s by Sorel's friend and correspondent, Benedetto Croce—it would turn out to be central to the account of Sorel offered in analogy with the New Left. This marks a curious departure from the immediate postwar suggestion that Sorel was, somehow, a Machiavellian manipulator of the masses. Rather, Roth and others would argue, he was *too* concerned with authenticity and purity. In this way Sorel—and the catastrophic radicalism that he stood—could be assimilated to the dangerously idealistic students of the New Left.⁸³

By the end of the 1960s, the paradigm of totalitarianism was on the wane as a legitimate social science concept.⁸⁴ If the grand narratives of modernism and modernization resting on the foundation of a scientific sociology still had their place in the Academy and had the ear of political figures, their days were numbered. Sorel, who had been scrupulously labeled and boxed as an ambiguous and tragic—but ultimately pre-totalitarian and dangerous—figure during the 1950s, became useful in the present. Somewhat later, Allan Bloom would notoriously compare the radicalized pleasure-protest of the American 1960s with that of the Nazis: “Nuremberg or Woodstock, the principle is the same.”⁸⁵ Sorel and his left-right ambiguity helped to make this case in its softer and less polemical forms. Scholars might have been guilty of simplifying the situation when they ascribed Mussolini's ideology to Sorel, but they could draw on concrete textual and personal connections, as well as conceptual commonalities to do so. The same cannot be said of the

to prevent Italy's taking part in the war, remained among those who hung in the air, cutting themselves off from national and even international life." Benedetto Croce, *History of Europe in the nineteenth century*, ed. Henry François Amédée Furst, (London, 1934). p. 306.

⁸³ Hans Kohn, writing in 1968, cited Roth on Sorel, whom he folded in a conventional way into a narrative of intellectual transformation in the decade before the First World War. Kohn was an extraordinary scholar, and so his defective portrait of Sorel is evidence of the power of the historiographic image more than anything else. Kohn calls *Reflections* “inspired by Bergson and Nietzsche more than by Marx,” and emphasizes violent conflict leading to regeneration. His Sorel preaches “authoritarian revolutionism” demanding “leaders” connected to the masses, “their doctrine mattered little.” Sorelian myth, writes Kohn, found its proof “in its power to influence action.” Kohn correctly points to the late addition of the “defense of Lenin” to the *Reflections*, and then simply invents a substantial addition about Mussolini. Hans Kohn, 'Review-Article: A Turning Point', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30, no. 2 (1969): 283-90. p. 287.

⁸⁴ Not that it was not still applied to Sorel. See particularly James A. Gregor—who has been writing on Sorel as a proto-totalitarian since the late 1960s. A. James Gregor, *Contemporary radical ideologies: Totalitarian thought in the twentieth century*, (New York, 1968); *Marxism, fascism, and totalitarianism: chapters in the intellectual history of radicalism*, (Stanford, Calif., 2009).

⁸⁵ Allan David Bloom, *The closing of the American mind*, (New York, 1987). p. 314.

link made between Sorel and the New Left. This was not usually a claim of historical continuity, but of conceptual, psychological, or political similarity. Frantz Fanon was sometimes invoked in this context.⁸⁶

Emblematic is a commencement speech given by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. on June 7, 1968—the day after Robert Kennedy was shot. Schlesinger decried what he saw as the growing willingness to accept violence in American politics, especially on the far left. He warned that “in the footsteps of Sorel, the New Leftists believe in the omnipotence of the deed and the irrelevance of the goal.” Schlesinger might as well be reading from the wartime writing on Sorel. This accusation echoes, of course, the sloganeering of the revisionist debates—the goal is nothing, the movement everything. Schlesinger drew a line of descent from Sorel to Herbert Marcuse and Frantz Fanon. He feared that the New Left had begun to follow Sorel in excluding “freedom and reason” from politics. The consequences would be dire: “if we abandon this, we abandon everything.”⁸⁷ For Schlesinger, Sorel should remind young Leftists that admitting violence into political struggle always vitiated noble aims, and especially that the Right would always be better at manipulating and wielding violence.⁸⁸

Hannah Arendt wrote *On Violence* as a direct response to increasing violence on both sides of the various political and social conflicts of the late 1960s. The opening pages assert that the means-ends structure implied by all acts of violence has been radically altered in the 20th century. For

⁸⁶ Successive editions of Ted Honderich’s book on violence from the early 1970s have retained intact his footnote to the decontextualized line from Fanon “to shoot down a European...is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses,” which maintains that “a similar idea is at the centre of Georges Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*.” See Ted Honderich, *Terrorism for humanity: inquiries in political philosophy*, Rev. ed., (London, 2003). pp. 210-211. A recent, sympathetic reading of Sorel and Fanon that explicitly takes Sartre’s disavowal as evidence of convergence between the two is George Ciccariello-Maher, “To Lose Oneself in the Absolute: Revolutionary Subjectivity in Sorel and Fanon”, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5, no. 3 (2007).

⁸⁷ Arthur M. jr. Schlesinger, ‘America 1968: The Politics of Violence’, *Harper’s magazine* (1968): 19-24. pp. 22, 24.

⁸⁸ Irving Louis Horowitz, who had written a scholarly study of Sorel from the disciplinary point of view of sociology in the early 1960s—including a translation, the first new material to appear of Sorel’s in English since *Reflections*, of *The Decomposition of Marxism*—added a postscript to a new edition of this book in 1968 that enumerated, in a rather confused way, nine areas of overlap between Sorel’s violent revolutionary myths and the New Left: “Fascism returns in the United States not as a right-wing ideology, but almost as a quasileftist ideology, an ironic outcome that Sorel anticipated in his own writings.” Irving Louis Horowitz, “American Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason,” in *Ideology and Utopia in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). pp. 193.

Arendt, Sorel's worldview was organized around antique heroism, and he was basically a Bergsonian vitalist.⁸⁹ Once social struggle is conceived in biological terms, violence becomes mandatory, even a positive virtue: "nothing, in my opinion, could be theoretically more dangerous than the tradition of organic thought in political matters."⁹⁰ Fanon, somewhat surprisingly, is wedged into this same box with Sorel. Arendt's diagnosis of the political moment of 1968 is straightforward: real politics (the exercise of power) is no longer on the table, and all that remains is more or less violent refusal: "the present glorification of violence is caused by severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world."⁹¹ The blockage of real politics also means that struggles over material existence are elevated into ideology. Hence the attraction of Sorel's and Fanon's quasi-vitalistic approach to political struggle. The fundamental danger of this vitalist approach to violence is that it confuses the true nature of violence in social conflict, which is basically instrumental. That is, it is in fact "more the weapon of reform than revolution."⁹² Not only will Sorel and Fanon encourage the use of violence in the hope of revolution, but the spoils will in fact go to reform, and probably not rational reform either, since the use of violence was not rationally planned. Ultimately, like Schlesinger, Arendt objects that Sorel confuses violence as a means with violence as an end.

Isaiah Berlin also turned to Sorel as an indictment of the New Left.⁹³ In his essay, originally published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Berlin presents the bewildering variety of Sorel's political positions and then, in a characteristic move, postulates an underlying unity of anthropology:

⁸⁹ These are both somewhat odd criticisms to come from a person who organizes her own thought around the model of the Greek polis and the idea of natality. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt in passing diagnosed Sorel as one among a number of writers who, working before WWI, were taken up by the younger 'front generation' for their savage critiques of bourgeois society; lost in this generational transfer, she says, were the positive programs of this generation: Sorel's "reorganization of political life," for instance, and Nietzsche's transvaluation. Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*, New ed., (New York, 1973). pp. 328.

⁹⁰ *On violence*, (New York, 1970). p. 75.

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 83. This is also said in terms of a growing bureaucracy: "the greater the bureaucratization of public life, the greater will be the attraction of violence."

⁹² Ibid. p. 79.

⁹³ On Berlin generally, see Joshua L. Cherniss, *A mind and its time : the development of Isaiah Berlin's political thought*, (Oxford, 2013); Arie Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin : the journey of a Jewish liberal*, 1st ed., (New York, 2012). Sorel appears in Berlin's work relatively early, but only in the most marginal way. In the Prologue to *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, already Sorel is

man is a creator, fulfilled only when he creates, and not when he passively receives or drifts unresisting with the current...Man...at his most human, seeks in the first place to fulfill himself, individually and with those close to him, in spontaneous, unhindered, creative activity, in work that consists of the imposition of his personality on a recalcitrant environment⁹⁴

From the beginning it is clear—Sorel stands on the side of positive freedom, and thus is essentially anti-liberal. Despite this, though, there is a surprising sympathy running through Berlin’s reading that makes it especially valuable.⁹⁵ Berlin sees Croce’s influence to have been in line with a philosophy of praxis that could also come from William James: “our categories are categories of action...they alter what we call reality as the purposes of our active selves alter.”⁹⁶ Berlin quotes Sorel asserting that the human will constitutes even the categories of matter (what we cannot change at will) and form (what we can).⁹⁷ Sorel thus evades rationalism of any kind, however constrained: “Sorel’s uncompromising voluntarism is at the heart of his entire outlook.”⁹⁸ The human will, not the human intellect, is the defining feature of Berlin’s Sorel.

Against the backdrop of this anthropology Berlin takes Sorel to be, at his best, a moralist—for this reason his writings transcend their particular day-to-day inspirations and remain fresh and

among those who react against the “frictionless” vision of Saint-Simon. He appears in the main text of those lectures in a list with others who, following Rousseau, defended the technique of depriving individuals of liberty in order to grant them a higher liberty. Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy, *Political ideas in the romantic age : their rise and influence on modern thought*, Second edition. ed., (Princeton, 2014). pp. 6-7. In 1958, Berlin had written in a letter that there is “a tradition of irrationalist European thought beginning with Rousseau or the counter-revolutionary reactionaries or in some such region that includes Carlyle, Nietzsche, Sorel, of which Fascism is no more a travesty than Leninism is of Marx.” Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening : letters, 1946-1960*, (London, 2009).

⁹⁴ Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy, *Against the current : essays in the history of ideas*, (New York, 1980). pp. 298, 299. This was not, it should be pointed out, an entirely original observation. Georges Goriely closed his groundbreaking 1962 work *Le pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel*: “L’homme, nous enseigne en fin du compte Sorel, ne vit que pour créer, que pour instituer historiquement sa volonté et pourtant aucune création particulière ne constitue sa fin dernière, il n’a d’autre fin que l’élan créateur lui-même.” Georges Goriely, *Le pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel*, (Paris, 1962). p. 222.

⁹⁵ The important comparison is with Jacob Talmon’s essay on Sorel from the same period. J. L. Talmon, ‘The Legacy of Georges Sorel’, *Encounter* (1970): 47-60. This essay was included in Talmon’s later *Myth of the Nation* (see above). On Talmon, see Arie Dubnov, ‘A tale of trees and crooked timbers: Jacob Talmon and Isaiah Berlin on the question of Jewish Nationalism’, *History of European Ideas* 34, no. 2 (2008): 220-38; Malachi H. Hacohen, ‘Jacob Talmon between Zionism and Cold War Liberalism’, *ibid.*: 146-57.

⁹⁶ Berlin and Hardy, *Against the current : essays in the history of ideas*. p. 302.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 302.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 310.

compelling.⁹⁹ Sorel's is the "moral fury of perpetual youth"—this "fiery, not wholly adult, outraged feeling may in part account for his affinity with the young revolutionaries of our time."¹⁰⁰ Sorel's ideas still "come at us from every corner" because the experience against which he and a few other small circles of intellectuals reacted in the later 19th century is today broadly felt. Sorel's writings "mark a revolt against the rationalist ideal of frictionless contentment in a harmonious social system in which all ultimate questions are reduced to technical problems, soluble by appropriate techniques. It is the vision of this closed world that morally repels the young today. The first to formulate this in clear language was Sorel."¹⁰¹ For Berlin, Sorel's appeal and his significance are essentially as a moralist of youth and energy. In this vein, Sorel "might have approved of the *Croix de Feu*, but never of Poujadism." This is a question of style—Berlin likens Sorel to Karl Kraus or even George Bernard Shaw—and therefore of psychology.¹⁰²

Berlin sees Sorel as concerned with collective action, perhaps, but not with materially grounded collectivity, not, that is, with institutions. Alienation, yes, but essentially understood as an individual experience, and therefore a basically theological notion, because it refers necessarily to a time when the individual could be something other than at tragic variance with the world as it exists. Sorel would therefore, says Berlin, have been entirely at home with Marcuse's perverse notion of "repressive tolerance, the belief that toleration of an order that inhibits 'epic' states of mind is itself a form of repression."¹⁰³ For Berlin, Sorel's "symbol of creation was the cut stone, the chiselled

⁹⁹ Ibid. pp. 321-322.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 331.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. pp. 331-2.

¹⁰² Ibid. pp. 310, 315.

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 328. That Berlin connects Sorel to Marcuse should leave us in no doubt as to how sympathetic Berlin ultimately was to him—not at all. On Berlin's disgust with Marcuse, see Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: a life*, 1st American ed., (New York, 1998). pp. 252-3. According to Ignatieff, this hostility had a great deal to do with Marcuse's irresponsibility in speaking about and around the Shoah. Yet Berlin is not very agitated by Sorel's antisemitism.

marble.”¹⁰⁴ Thus life is at best a kind of art, and must be engaged in with all the uncompromising energy and even cruelty of art.

Berlin, in what is a brilliant and insightful reading of Sorel, nonetheless assimilates him to a vulgarized Frankfurt-school critique of a fully administered world. Sorel is one more dangerous apostle of positive freedom. As Michael Ignatieff has emphasized, Berlin was driven by a deep sense of the tragic fact that values are incommensurable, that rationality, which after all is all we have, simply cannot decide between values.¹⁰⁵ If he recognized this in Sorel, if he agreed with Sorel that individuals take political action through moral impulsion rather than rational analysis, he also saw in Sorel a prolepsis of the fanaticism of the “grimmer dynamiters of the present.”¹⁰⁶ Berlin reads Sorel through the New Left rather than the other way around. The conscious abandonment on the part of many students of the factory-centered politics of the old left in favor of a morality of authentic commitment, this blinded Berlin—who was otherwise by far the best-equipped to see it—to Sorel’s essential concern with the foundations of moral action in material collectivity. Berlin, who was as alive as any reader to the meaning of Crocean liberalism and Durkheimian collectivism, never considered that Sorel’s central intellectual project was to find an answer to the problems of liberalism left unsolved by Durkheim’s nationalist collectivism on the one hand, and Croce’s elitist idealism on the other. Problems that Berlin and his cohort still had. It was the weight of accumulated interpretation as much as contextual or biographical limits that shut off this possibility, while allowing Berlin to see in Sorel a more appealing, but equally confused, bearer of the same message as the “young revolutionaries” of the 1960s.

Conclusion

¹⁰⁴ Berlin and Hardy, *Against the current : essays in the history of ideas*. p. 331.

¹⁰⁵ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin : a life*.

¹⁰⁶ Berlin and Hardy, *Against the current : essays in the history of ideas*. p. 329.

The eponymous character of Saul Bellow's 1970 novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is an anglophile Polish-Jewish intellectual and a Holocaust survivor. The character is a composite, but in constructing it, Bellow drew heavily on his mentor and colleague at the University of Chicago, Edward Shils (born in Chicago), who also heavily edited a draft of the manuscript.¹⁰⁷ The novel depicts Sammler in the present, now much aged, in and around Columbia University. One of his freewheeling younger acquaintances invites him to give a lecture. Really, Sammler is told, just to reminisce about London in the 1930s to a small seminar as part of a charity project for "the black children." He arrives to find a crowded lecture hall. Surprised, he nonetheless plunges into his remarks about Bloomsbury, Orwell, and H.G. Wells. Soon, a bearded man from the audience interrupts him:

'Orwell was a fink. He was a sick counterrevolutionary. It's good he died when he did. And what you are saying is shit.' Turning to the audience, extending violent arms and raising his palms like a Greek dancer, he said 'Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He's dead. He can't come.'

Sammler retreats, surprised and confused rather than afraid. Later he discovers that the students had assembled expecting to hear a lecture about "Sorel and Modern Violence."¹⁰⁸ The encounter dramatized for comic effect by Bellow—between the European intellectual of an older generation and the angry student revolutionary, over the textual remains of Georges Sorel, amongst the moldering corpses of later political writers—is a fantasy. In Bellow's novel, which as a whole is an expression of disgust at everything Bellow believed to be the counter-culture of the 1960s, the younger generation in its ignorance wants to know about Sorel. In fact, it was the older generation, émigrés like Berlin and students of the émigré generation like Shils, that wished the younger one would attend to the lessons they believed Sorel to hold.

¹⁰⁷ See James Atlas, *Bellow : a biography*, 1st ed., (New York, 2000). The novel was written in the summer of 1969, and published February 1st, 1970.

¹⁰⁸ Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, (New York, 1969). p. 42. He discovers, without comment, the topic of the speech somewhat later, 109. See also the passage at 149ff.

We can say in general that contexts of production and of reception are importantly different for Sorel's writings.¹⁰⁹ Sorel began his thinking in conversation with writers of his own generation or older, for whom the Republic was an aspiration or a fragile project, or perhaps a looming danger. He came to prominence in a context dominated by what was in fact a powerfully centralized democratic, liberal, and representative state—although hardly all of those things perfectly—which despite the eruption of the Dreyfus Affair really had successfully contained and coopted nationalism. For his younger readers, the Republic was an accomplished fact, which wanted either elaboration and reform, or called forth heroic resistance.

The afterlife of Sorel's writings differs across national contexts. But the national differences should not be allowed to obscure the point that it was in an interwar context—and above all in Germany—that Sorel was read and began to be assimilated into a transatlantic intellectual culture. Sorel's fulminations against the ideological strength and adaptive capacity of parliamentary government found their greatest echo in an interwar political outlook marked by weak parliamentary systems and especially by Weimar, helpless in the face of street-level violence and increasingly dominated by parties that fundamentally rejected its legitimacy. Sorel wrote in the *belle époque*, but was read and became politically significant on Mark Mazower's *Dark Continent*. Sorel's writing was not itself, as Schmitt suggested, a symptom of the crisis of parliamentary democracy. Its success in the interwar, however, surely was such a symptom. The subsequent attempt on the part of some older liberals to return to Sorel during the 1960s was part of a larger tendency to see the disruption and dissent of that era through the experience of Weimar. Bonn was not Weimar; but neither was Washington, nor Greenwich Village, nor Berkeley.

¹⁰⁹ I borrow this turn of phrase—as I have borrowed much—from Malachi Hacohen.

