

**A Study of Political Myth and Political Violence through
the work of Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, and Carl
Schmitt**

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PhD

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Politics

October 2017

Abstract: Political myth and political violence are ignored by a large body of political theory. They are, moreover, not examined as related concepts despite their frequent theoretical interaction. This thesis shows the importance of both concepts to political theory, makes insights into their conceptual nature, and highlights the relationship between the two concepts. To do this, it examines the work of three thinkers who take political myth and political violence to be important concepts within political theory.

Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, and Carl Schmitt, all utilise political myth and political violence within their theoretical work. While building on each other's work, the three take distinct theoretical and conceptual approaches to both concepts. This thesis examines myth and violence within each of the three thinkers to gain insights into the thesis' central issues.

The thesis situates the thinkers within their broad and local historical contexts. It situates their work in opposition to much modern political theory, and opposed to Enlightenment views of politics as a myth and violence free sphere. It situates the thinkers, moreover, within the local context of early twentieth century Europe and the crises wracking both political theory and political life.

The thesis highlights how violence can be understood as existing both within, and external to, political communities. It shows how myth continues to create meaning for individuals; finally, it highlights how the concepts relate to politics. Conceptually, the thesis argues that myth should be understood outside of the Enlightenment dichotomy of true/false and should not be understood as predetermined. It argues that violence should be understood in non-physical and non-bloody (as well as physical/bloody) ways. In so doing, the thesis shows why political theory should not ignore myth and violence, and how we might think more fruitfully about the two concepts and their relationship to politics.

Author's declaration: *I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university. All sources are acknowledged as references.*

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Chapter 1

The Enlightenment Myth and Political Theory

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to highlight the way in which Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, and Carl Schmitt offer contributions to thinking about myth and violence politically. In different ways, each of them approaches and takes seriously the matter of myth and violence. I argue that their works offer insights into thinking through myth and violence, and I interrogate their works for this purpose. I offer a contribution to understanding the concepts of, and the relationship between, myth and violence and politics. I will show how three thinkers with radically different theoretical perspectives utilise the concepts of myth and violence in distinct ways. Centrally, I will utilise this analysis to highlight the importance myth and violence can have to thinking politically.

In this introductory chapter I lay the groundwork for the more focused and analytically incisive chapters that follow. I begin by outlining what I take to be the Enlightenment view of politics: I use Kant's political theory to highlight the Enlightenment view of politics as a violence and myth free sphere. I move on from this to show how this separation of myth and violence from politics continues into liberal political theory. I continue this historical and intellectual grounding of the subject through an outline of the early twentieth century's crisis of political thought. I outline the 'crisis of reason' that characterised the era, and I outline the specific contexts within which Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt were writing. From here I move on to focus on the concepts of myth and violence. I critically introduce canonical figures in the history of myth and violence: Henry Tudor, Ernst Cassirer, Hans Blumenberg, Hannah Arendt, Jean Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon. I also introduce a number of contemporary thinkers on the themes of myth and violence, notably: Chiara Bottici, Richard Bernstein, Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberley Hutchings. Finally, I conclude by looking forward to the more conceptually and theoretically incisive chapters that follow, outlining the specific contributions of the thesis to understandings of myth, violence and political theory.

In approaching myth and violence through Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt, I gain a number of insights. I show how the Enlightenment view of politics as a myth and violence free sphere is, in itself, a myth: not in the sense of myth as falsehood, but in the sense that it is something that does-not, or does-not-yet, exist. It is, rather, something which provides a sense of meaning and significance. I show how violence can be understood as existing within the state, as well as external to it. I argue that political myth gives meaning and significance to individuals within political communities. I argue that, because of these reasons, political theory should be more open to engaging with these concepts. Political theory utilises many different concepts and ideas. I show throughout this thesis that myth and violence should have a larger place within political thinking.

Section 1: The Enlightenment Myth – Reasonable and Pacified Politics

Section 1.1: Kant and the Enlightenment Myth

To begin the discussion of myth and violence in political theory, it is first important to outline where and why myth and violence are missing from political theory. I have already laid out a brief overview of the lack of myth and violence in a number of contemporary introductions to political theory. This absence of myth and violence from politics can, arguably, be traced back to the Enlightenment and its development into modern accounts of civic life. In my overview here I will go back to Kant's separation of political life from the state of nature. In political life, man lives free from violence and with the freedom to pursue the public use of reason. Such an account of politics fundamentally cleaves a political community from internal violence and myth. Violence and myth became extraneous forces, contradictory with proper accounts of civic life. In the Enlightenment view, violence is equated with pre-political life and myth is equated with falsehood (and in opposition to reason). This is based upon an assumption that the world is rationally intelligible and can be changed through the rational will. What I seek to make clear throughout the rest of my thesis is that this Enlightenment account of myth and violence as *other* to politics is, in itself, just a remarkably successful myth.¹ Instead I pose myth and violence as concepts that should be taken into accounts of political theory alongside concepts like justice, equality, sovereignty, and so on.

¹ I use myth here in the sense that I will go on to define in Section 3.1

Kant's belief that violence is something that should be removed from political life comes down to a separation of political life from the state of nature. Kant's understanding of the state of nature is that the state of nature is a state of war: "A state of peace among men living together is not the same as the state of nature, which is a state of war. For even if it does not involve active hostilities, it involves a constant threat of their breaking out." (Kant, 1996 [1795], p.98) In this, Kant follows Hobbes' (Hobbes, 2011 [1651], pp.88-89) view of pre-political life as one which is in constant strife and conflict. As Reiss points out, "Kant ... agrees with Hobbes that the state of nature is the state of a war of all against all." (Reiss, 1996, p.27) For Kant, the state of nature is problematic because it prevents the possibility of justice. Power and force, on this view, determine human relations in a way which precludes justice.

The state of nature need not necessarily be a *state of injustice (iniustus)* merely because those who live in it treat one another solely in terms of the amount of power they possess. But it is a *state devoid of justice (status iustitia vacuus)*, for if a *dispute over rights (ius controversum)* occurs in it, there is no competent judge to pronounce legally valid decisions. (Kant, 1996 [1797], p.137)

Kant's understanding of civil society stands in opposition to the state of nature: the civic state is one where we can work towards justice, free from war, conflict, and coercion. In this separation, Kant espouses a view that we can associate with the dominant Enlightenment view that proper political life is free from violence. With this separation, we see violence as ideally removed from political thinking – violence is associated with the state of nature, the pre-political.

Violence, for Kant, is negative primarily because it removes the possibility of a state of justice between men. For Kant, justice, or right, should prevail within civil society. As described by Hans Reiss: "the demand that right should prevail makes it imperative that it should apply to all men and provide legal protection against all kinds of violence. This is possible only if war is abolished as a means of politics and peace is established and safeguarded on earth according to the principles of right." (Reiss, 1996, p.33) The demand that right should prevail is not, however, solely reliant upon a removal of violence. The prevalence of right and justice relies on three things: first, the absence of violence or coercion; second, the ability for individuals to use their reason in public;

third, a progressive view to history (Kant, 1996b [1784], pp.41-53). For Kant, moving from a state of nature into a civic state is the means by which groups are able to escape a social relationship based on force, and strive towards mankind's development of reason.

Kant's support for the public use of reason can be seen in his support for the 'freedom of the pen'. According to Garrath Williams (2017), freedom of the pen means simply the freedom to use reason in public matters. For Kant, while the ruler is supreme (so as to prevent conflict within the polity), he must also be willing to receive criticism from his citizens. Without having freedom of the pen, the public would be unable to make use of their reason, and unable to work towards the rectification of mistakes made by the ruler; i.e. unable to move society towards conditions of right and justice:

the citizen must, with the approval of the ruler, be entitled to make public his opinion on whatever of the ruler's measures seem to him to constitute an injustice against the commonwealth. For to assume that the head of state can neither make mistakes nor be ignorant of anything would be to imply that he receives divine inspiration and is more than a human being. (Kant, 1996 [1793] p.84)

It is based on this claim, that citizens must be able to criticise their ruler so as to rectify mistakes, that Reiss argues: "[Kant's] attitude to the public use of reason [was that] without ... [it] political justice could not ... be achieved." (Reiss, 1996, p.ix) Kant's argument for this is based in his vision of a teleological account of life, with humans specifically able to reason: "Nature gave man reason, and freedom of the will based upon reason, and this in itself was a clear indication of nature's intention as regards his endowments." (Kant 1996b [1784], p.43) What becomes clear is that, for Kant, the ability to use *reason* in public affairs is the means by which we can progress, as a society and species, towards justice. Reason is the fundamentally human quality, and the quality which can help us strive towards true justice. On this view, myth is associated with falsehood and thus inhibits or prevents the development of reason and the achievement of justice.

I use Kant's understanding of both politics and the Enlightenment here because they represent the Enlightenment view of politics which has come to hold sway over much of

modern political theory. As Kant outlines in his ‘What is Enlightenment?’: “For Enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is *freedom*. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all – freedom to make *public use* of one’s reason in all matters.” (Kant, 1996a [1784], p.55) What we see, in Kant’s account of political life is an account which is specifically aimed at removing violence and aimed at promoting reason. This Enlightenment view of a polity is one which is free from violence, and where one is free to make public use of their reason. It is this Enlightenment view of political life which characterises much contemporary political thinking and, I would argue, the reason why violence and myth are often absent from accounts of political theory: the political is taken to be a sphere which is, or should be, free from violence and in which reason should direct the course of public affairs. What I will seek to do throughout this thesis is show how myth and violence can be useful concepts to political theory, and may enhance or expand certain aspects of contemporary political thinking. I wish to emphasise that we can still discuss justice whilst also discussing myth and violence. I do not wish to insist upon myth and violence’s inclusion in all political thinking, but rather to emphasise their potential for challenging and sharpening political concepts, theories and frameworks. I seek to show, moreover, that the Enlightenment view of the political is, in itself, a myth – not a falsehood or a slip into superstition – but an account which provides us with a meaningful way of viewing political life.² This does not mean that it is the only meaningful view of political life, nor the only valid way of theorising political life.

Section 1.2: The Enlightenment Myth in Liberal Political Theory

The Enlightenment myth of politics as needing to be free from myth and violence has its clearest modern manifestation in the liberal tradition. Rawls’ work is the most well known in this area of political thinking. Rawls’ political framework is arranged so as to lay out the possibility of justice despite the experiences of the mid-twentieth century. To do this, Rawls outlines a normative theory of justice which ignores both myth and violence. While I do not wish to claim that such normative theory is worthless, it is one of the aims of this thesis to argue in favour of a broader approach to political theory: one which encompasses myth and violence as valuable political concepts, alongside concepts such as justice.

² My own understanding of myth is made clear in Sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.4. I do not associate myth with falsehood but with providing meaning or significance to individuals.

The rise of the Nazis and the tragedy of the Holocaust are argued, according to Paul Weithman (2009), to be the background against which Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (first published in 1971) was written. Weithman sees violence as absent from Rawlsian liberalism because Rawls' project was concerned with trying to prove that justice was possible in spite of the mid-twentieth century experience (Weithman, 2009, p.116). Weithman argues that Rawls saw commitments to justice as only emanating from a position where people thought justice was possible: "And so if we do not believe that a just regime is possible - and possible because our nature is such that we could sustain it - then we are unlikely to make individual and collective commitments to justice" (Weithman, 2009, p.116). On this view, Rawls did not have to show what was wrong with violence or myth, but rather show what a just society would look like so that people could commit themselves to seeking justice: "To show that a just society is possible, Rawls needed to say what a just society would be like." (Weithman, 2009, p.116) Rawls' *Theory of Justice* is this account of a just society.

Rawls' theory is based upon the argument that rational persons under a 'veil of ignorance' would be able to choose principles of justice that would describe a just way of living (Rawls, 1999, pp.14-15). We see here the continuation of Kant's belief in the use of reason to achieve justice: it is necessarily rational individuals who pick the principles of justice, and thus reason which dictates how to achieve justice.³ As I outlined, Rawls did not consider myth or violence because he was trying to give a normative account of justice which was based in the Enlightenment view of a polity free from coercion and myth, and aimed towards justice. In one of the scant mentions of the word violence (it appears a total of 4 times in *Theory of Justice*: Rawls, 1999, pp.97, 217, 302, 321), Rawls associates it with extortion that would necessarily preclude consensus and a just social arrangement: "unjust social arrangements are themselves a form of extortion, even violence, and consent to them does not bind." (Rawls, 1999, p.302) For Rawls, violence (alongside myth) is a negative which does not have a part to play in a just society; because of this, violence (with a few minor exceptions) and myth are absent from his *Theory of Justice*. Even civil disobedience, which Rawls is not totally opposed to, is specifically non-violent in Rawls' account of it; as he asserts: "civil disobedience is non-violent" (Rawls, 1999, p.321).

³ I do not here consider the distinction between Kantian and Rawlsian accounts of reason. For a detailed discussion of this, cf. Koukouzelis (2009)

What Rawlsian liberalism shows us is a modern account of political theory which both relies upon, and is implicated in perpetuating, the Enlightenment myth. It is, moreover, one way of understanding the relationship between violence, myth and political theory: for Rawlsian liberal political theory, violence and myth are things that need to be removed from political thinking because they obscure the potential for true justice, based as it is upon an overlapping consensus and shared set of social values. Violence, in this view, is corrupting of relations between individuals insofar as it involves a degree of coercion that precludes the consensus required for justice. Myth, moreover, is something which would not prioritise the rule of reason within political life. The relationship of violence and myth to politics within this type of normative liberal thinking is thus an exclusive one: just politics cannot contain violence or myth, and violence and myth cannot achieve just politics. This is an account which we see conforming to the Enlightenment myth that to achieve justice, politics must be organised in such a way so as to occlude violence and to allow for reason to be used and/or developed (and thus do not contain myth). This form of political thinking is not without value: it gives us normative values and checks by which we can judge our present political life. What myth and violence can do is to offer new conceptual insights and a means to broaden our understandings of political theory.

Where the Enlightenment sought political units free from violence and myth, liberal political theory followed. The Enlightenment myth is that violence and myth are extraneous forces to proper political life. Accordance with the Enlightenment myth is still, arguably, the dominant way of thinking about political theory today. As I showed in my introductory section, myth and violence are often not considered proper subjects for political theory: myth and violence are not taken to be important concepts for political theory because it is assumed that a proper account of politics should be free from both. Instead of violence or myth, the rational will, free from coercion, is the centre of Enlightenment thinking on politics. I disagree with this assumption. What I show throughout the following section is the context within which significant challenges to the Enlightenment view of politics arose: specifically, I outline the context of Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt's work – both the broad intellectual history and the specific contexts within which texts were published.

Section 2: From Enlightenment to the ‘Lamps Going Out’

2.1: The Early Twentieth Century and the Crisis of Reason

On the eve of the First World War, Sir Edward Grey (the British Foreign Secretary) famously said: “The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime” (Grey [1914], as quoted in, Cronan, 2014). He was referring to the dark spectre of war which had come across the continent. Although the First World War marked a turning point for a number of political thinkers, including the three I focus on within my thesis, it was situated within the context of a crisis in European thought. The First World War came after a period of intellectual malaise and concern with the state of European civilisation. It came at a time when belief in the power of reason in social life were being questioned; it came at a time when the Enlightenment myth of politics as a space that should be free of violence and politics was being challenged. I will here lay out some of this context within which Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt are situated. Having done this, I will move onto focus on the more specific contexts within which Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt were writing, as well as the textual history of their works used herein. I seek to highlight the importance of the historical and intellectual context of the early twentieth century for the three thinkers under consideration here.

What we see in the three thinkers that I focus on here is a glimpse into the intellectual work of an important period in European history. The bulk of the work of the three thinkers was completed between 1900 and 1940.⁴ While Georges Sorel correctly belongs to the generation that preceded Benjamin and Schmitt, there is an attempt by the three to approach many of the same problems, and through some of the same concepts (including myth and violence). There is no easy way to characterise the period within which the three were writing. J.W. Burrow, in his account of European thought from 1848-1914, characterises the age leading up to the Great War as being a ‘Crisis of Reason’ (as the title of his book states) (Burrow, 2000). H. Stuart Hughes describes the period leading up to the war as one where European thought reoriented itself: where rational and positivist attempts at understanding the world gave way to those that sought explanations for human actions that went beyond the vision of man as a rational animal (Hughes, 1979, p.14). Hughes says of this generation, those who could see the

⁴ Sorel’s first two works were published in 1889, and Schmitt continued working until his death in 1985. The periodisation of 1900–1940 is thus a simplification for illustrative purposes in my explanation of the historical context, although I am correct in describing it as the period within which the bulk of their works were produced.

failure of positivism to comprehend the world and sought new ways of understanding: “these thinkers similarly shared a wider experience of psychological *malaise*: the sense of impending doom, of old practices and institutions no longer conforming to social realities” (Hughes, 1979, p.14). The ways of viewing politics through positivist and rational understandings was, it is argued, being challenged by a number of thinkers who saw in Western civilisation a declining force.

As it happened, this period of impending doom was also, at the time, one of the most peaceful in European history: there were no major wars between European states from 1870-1914, and there was a great deal of international cooperation (Müller, 2011, p.16). This changed with the First World War. The First World War saw the collapse of empires across the continent, the Bolsheviks take power in Russia, the German Empire reduced to a second-rate power, the rise of nation-states, and the challenging of the view of Europe as the heart of civilisation: “The First World War put into question every single institutional arrangement and every single political idea (or even just moral intuition) on which the Age of Security [the period from 1870-1914] had rested” (Müller, 2011, p.16). The First World War came as the culmination of Europe’s ‘crisis of reason’: it represented the fundamental challenging of all aspects of European political, intellectual and cultural life. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, when Benjamin and Schmitt were writing, this crisis continued: in Weimar Germany there was economic depression, civil war, invasion, political instability and, finally, the rise of the Nazis. It is impossible to separate the ongoing political and economic crises from the intellectual climate: Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt each wrote within the context of this collapsing European order.

The period within which the three were writing was one of crisis, collapse, change and a fundamental reshaping of the European world. It was a period when rationalist and positivist understandings were proving themselves unfit for purpose (Hughes, 1979, p.14), when the historical materialist account of class solidarity was blown apart in the trenches of the Western Front; in short, the period represented a fundamental challenge to many political, philosophical, and sociological assumptions upon which European thought was based. The three thinkers I work with in this thesis all tried to situate their response to this changing world in different ways: Sorel sought a regenerative civilisation based in violence, Benjamin sought a divine violence that could

reach true justice, Schmitt sought order and unity. They all sought to utilise myth and violence to their ends.

Political thought since the Second World War has been dominated by theories which follow the Enlightenment myth of rational and pacified polities. As I showed in my discussion of Rawls, this can be seen as a response to the experience of the Second World War – where myth and violence were explicitly used by regimes such as the Nazis. Again, myth and violence came to be seen as something to be removed from political thinking. What I will go onto show (cf. Section 3), in my discussions of myth and violence, is that there was, alongside this dominant strand of political theory, a renewal of thinking on myth and violence. At the same time as Rawls was laying out his theory of justice, the likes of Tudor, Fanon and Sartre were outlining their theories of myth and violence. Tudor, Fanon and Sartre, moreover, were building their work upon the earlier insights of thinkers like Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt.

2.2: Sorel, Benjamin, Schmitt, and the Crisis of Reason

I have, so far, laid out the pacific conception of the political – the Enlightenment view of politics as a violence and myth free sphere – and the broad challenges this faced in the period within which Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt were writing. Challenges from the lived reality of the political world, and of a crisis in the positivist use of reason to reach political ends. It is now worth focusing specifically on the thinkers and texts which I utilise in my thesis. I here lay out the specific contexts of the texts utilised and their historical positioning.

The reception of Sorel's work has been conducted primarily via an engagement with his *Reflections on Violence* (first published 1905-06). Sorel, however, published a number of books, essays and articles throughout his life, beginning in 1898. In my treatment of Sorel, I draw extensively upon Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* as it is the text where he deals most pointedly with myth and violence. What I also do, however, is situate this within Sorel's oeuvre, beginning with his earliest texts (published 1898). What we need to bear in mind when approaching Sorel's work is the historical context within which he was writing. Specifically, France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the ensuing crisis in French political life, and a number of other political scandals and

movements which rocked France (Stanley, 1984, p.1). According to Stanley, the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War had a major impact upon the France within which Sorel was living: “France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 profoundly demoralized French society. The political thought of the next decade and the parliamentary immobilism of the Third Republic reflected this malaise” (Stanley, 1984, p.1). This malaise in French society characterised much of the period during which Sorel was living. The period within which Sorel was writing (1898 onwards), however, was characterised by two key movements: the rise of the syndicalist movement, and the Dreyfusard movement. Throughout the 1890s and into the 1900s Sorel had followed developments within syndicalist movements (Jennings, 1999, p.viii). After 1902, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) implemented a series of strikes aimed at bringing down the capitalist system in France (Jennings, 1999, pp.viii-ix). Sorel saw these as embodying the true spirit of Marx’s thought, and a real possibility for moral renewal within France. These actions occurred alongside the ongoing Dreyfus affair. The Dreyfus Affair came to prominence in 1898 – the same year as Sorel’s first writings. The Dreyfus affair was a major scandal for the French Third Republic: it saw the wrongful imprisonment of a Jewish army officer, Alfred Dreyfus, for spying and espionage (Jennings, 1999, p.ix). What it highlighted, for Sorel, was the fundamental and inherent corruption in French political life: it highlighted how the current order was not organised in such a way as to achieve justice, but to serve certain interests. Sorel’s response was to believe that only a revolutionary change could restore the morality and conviction to French political life.

While most of Sorel’s writings were produced before the First World War, in the period described above as one of a ‘Crisis of Reason’, Benjamin and Schmitt wrote their most influential works during the interwar period. In my thesis I focus only on one of Benjamin’s texts: ‘The Critique of Violence’. It is in this text that Benjamin gives his most pointed treatment of myth and violence. Written and published in 1921, shortly after the failed German revolution of 1919/20, it is worth considering this text alongside those of Schmitt. The texts of Benjamin and Schmitt used here span a particularly tumultuous time in Germany: Schmitt’s *Dictatorship* (published 1921), *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (written 1921, published 1923) and Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ (written and published 1921) were all written while Germany was still in the throes of left-wing revolutionary violence. Schmitt’s 1927-1933 *Concept of the Political* was written in response to the ongoing instability (although not outright

civil war) in Germany, and the 1938 *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* was written long after the Nazis had consolidated their hold over the German state.⁵

As Hoelzl and Ward note in their introduction to Schmitt's *Dictatorship*, the post-war situation was one where "The Great War is over. Europe is exhausted and monarchy in tatters. Wilhelmine Germany, the epitome of the authoritarian state, lies in ruins." (Hoelzl and Ward, 2014, p.x). Moreover, "the communists ... are posing a radical threat, such that civil war is looming. They take to arms in the streets of Berlin in the winter of 1918-19" (Hoelzl and Ward, 2014, p.x). Schmitt's *Dictatorship* and Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' were both written in this context. Schmitt was not an impartial bystander in the crises wracking Germany. Schmitt was employed in the administration of martial law in Bavaria. Following the conflict in Berlin, in April 1919 a Soviet republic was proclaimed in Bavaria: directly and violently challenging the *Reichswehr* (Reich Defence) in which Schmitt was employed (Hoelzl and Ward, 2014, p.x). Only when the *Reichswehr* had suppressed the revolution was Schmitt released from his duties and able to prepare his *Dictatorship* for publication (Hoelzl and Ward, 2014, p.x-xi). Such a context highlights how Schmitt and Benjamin's works cannot be separated from their historical situation: violence underpinned by political belief was pulling at the seams of German political unity. Where Schmitt sought a totalising vision of the *demos* to overcome disorder, Benjamin saw the potential for revolutionary change. Both, building on Sorel's work, sought to utilise myth and violence to achieve their desired goal. The trajectory of Sorel's conceptual and theoretical work is thus twofold: where Schmitt takes up Sorel's conceptual work and seeks to utilise it to achieve order and stability, Benjamin sees the theoretical framework as one which allows prospects for political change.

George Schwab, who translates the canonical (1932) edition of *The Concept of the Political*, provides a broad historical context to the 1932 text: he argues that Schmitt saw the contemporaneous European state as in a position of decline and sought to offer responses to this (Schwab, 2007, pp.11-16). Schwab argued that the monumental shifts occurring in world geopolitics – WWI, The Treaty of Versailles, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia – were the reasons why Schmitt felt he had to offer solutions to the failing Weimar state (Schwab, 2007, pp.10-11). It is this broad context that I seek to

⁵ Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* went through three major revisions between 1927 and 1933. I detail this at the start of Chapter 6, where I discuss the publication history of the texts used.

emphasise here: the ongoing situation for the German liberal-democratic state was one of instability, weakness and conflict. Three of the texts I use of Schmitt's (as well as Benjamin's) are from this specific historical and political context. Where the broad historical context was one characterised by a 'Crisis of Reason', the German experience from 1919 – 1933 (the Treaty of Versailles to the Nazi takeover) was especially difficult: the liberal democratic state was fundamentally failing to meet the challenges posed by violent groups who used political beliefs to motivate their members to action. It is, perhaps, not difficult to see why – in this context – Schmitt and Benjamin considered myth and violence to be important concepts for political theory.

Schmitt's *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* was written in a different context from the other texts used here. Written in 1938, Germany was no longer a liberal-democracy but a one-party state under the rule of the Nazi Party. This was not only a political shift for Schmitt: he had been on the receiving end of extensive personal criticism from the SS official newspaper in 1936 (Schwab, 1996, p.ix). The SS took Schmitt's conversion to Nazism in 1933 to be opportunistic and not rooted in a commitment to Nazi ideology. In this context, Schmitt moved away from studies of contemporary legal and political forms, to look at the work of Hobbes (Schwab, 1996, pp.ix-x). Schmitt's *Leviathan* lacks the sense of urgency which both *The Concept of the Political* and *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* contain, but it does interrogate the myth of the leviathan – the most famous symbol of an authoritarian state.⁶

It is, finally, worth considering the triangulation between the three thinkers in more detail. As I outline in the following section, Sorel is the starting point for most modern approaches to myth and violence. In the same way, Sorel is the starting point for both Schmitt and Benjamin's approaches to myth and violence. Sorel outlines the two concepts within his framework of a proletarian revolution. Historically, he precedes both Benjamin and Schmitt. Yet there is a sense in which Sorel's context is not unlike that of Benjamin and Schmitt: a state wracked by political controversy, violent and organised resistance to the state, and an intellectual atmosphere of malaise and crisis. As I go through my thesis I seek to show how the concepts and theory that we find in Sorel is taken up, and reoriented, by Schmitt and Benjamin. The conceptual lineage between the three, situated within the context of early twentieth century Europe's period of political, intellectual and social crisis, highlights the importance of situating

⁶ I look at the relationship between Schmitt and Hobbes in more detail in Chapter 6.

the study historically. The claims made by these thinkers are not ahistorical claims to objective political truth; they are, rather, interventions in a political world which is falling apart around them. These interventions seek to rail against the view that politics is a myth and violence free sphere; instead, myth and violence are harnessed to three distinctive projects: Sorel's aim of moral renewal, Benjamin's aim of a Marxist revolution, and Schmitt's aim of an ordered and secure political order. They each use myth and violence to work towards their aims.

Section 3: Myth, Violence and Politics

3.1: Myth

Where we see Kant and Rawls' approaches to politics being to exclude myth because it opposes reason, I will here outline some conceptual approaches to political myth. What we see by looking at thinkers who take myth seriously is both a set of conceptual insights, but also theoretical ones. As I go through this section I will outline the varying conceptual approaches to myth. What I will also do, is to highlight how myth is connected to politics: I will seek to emphasise the shifting relationships between the conceptual approach and the theoretical approach.

Georges Sorel is generally considered to be the first modern theorist of political myth (Bottici, 2007, pp.159-167; Bottici, 2012; Tudor, 1972, pp.13-14; Flood, 2002, pp.46-47). Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* and Ernst Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* constitute the two major historical works on political myth (Bottici, 2012). Building on this tradition, Henry Tudor's *Political Myth* (Tudor, 1972), Christopher Flood's *Political Myth* (Flood, 2002), and Chiara Bottici's *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Bottici, 2007) have deepened and broadened the understanding of political myth as a concept. In attempting to reach a working conception of political myth which goes beyond the idea of myth as simply misconception, thinkers like Tudor, Flood and Bottici have examined and developed the concept. I will begin, here, to do the same.

Ernst Cassirer's *The Myth of the State*, published 40 years after Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*, did not build upon Sorel's work.⁷ Instead, Cassirer sought to utilise a neo-Kantian framework of categorical structures to outline his concept of political myth. Myth was, for Cassirer, *traditionally* (i.e. in pre-modern times) an unconscious product of individuals who sought a means to understand and explain the world in which they lived (Cassirer, 1946, pp.4-6). Given Cassirer's belief in a progressive view of society Cassirer had to accommodate the dramatic rise of the Nazi myth that occurred during his lifetime. Cassirer did this by posing modern myths as a conscious product of skilful mythmakers (Cassirer, 2007 [1946], p.282). According to Cassirer, modern political myths are weapons to be used by groups in the same way as "machine guns or aeroplanes" (Cassirer, 2007 [1946], p.282). This view of the Nazi myth as a particularly cunning weapon which was used against the population, and which would ultimately be overcome, can be seen in the traditional 'Enlightenment' view of myth (de Vriese, 2017, p.4). In this view, myth is equated with falsehood, and it is something which should be removed from modern political life.

Contrasting with Cassirer's view of myth as a pre-modern form of understanding, Chiara Bottici argues that the modern world has actually enhanced the need of myth: the complexity of the modern world meaning that individuals can never fully comprehend their situation within it: "Modernity has not diminished the need from which myth stems. Rather, it can be argued that it has actually enhanced this need" (Bottici, 2007, p.131). She continues, "the civilised human being, who is inserted in a never-ending process, one that transcends him or her and about which he or she is able to understand only a very limited part, is destined to feel a greater need for significance" (Bottici, 2007, pp.131-132). For Bottici, the relationship between myth and politics is that the complexities of the modern world – the sheer size and scope of our modern political organisations, means that we can only ever rely on a mythical understanding of our place within it.

Following Cassirer, Henry Tudor provides the next major work on the concept of political myth. Tudor's account takes political myth to be a narrative form expressing an account of something political, the truth of which is determined by its acceptance. As Tudor states: "myth, whatever else it might be, is always a story. It is a narrative of

⁷ The publication date of Cassirer's *Myth of the State* was 1946. Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* first appeared in the Italian journal *Il Divenere sociale* in 1905-1906 (Jennings, 1999, p.xxxv)

events cast in dramatic form.” (Tudor, 1972, p.115). Moreover, “A political myth ... is a story told with a view to promoting some practical purpose, and it is successful only in so far as it is believed to be a true story.” (Tudor, 1972, p.132) Here we see an important feature of a number of accounts of myth (including Cassirer and Flood), that myth is somehow only successful if it is accepted as *true*. This is something which is challenged by Sorel’s account, as well as Botticci’s, who both argue that part of myth’s nature is that it defies truth claims: it inhabits an unreal (or not-yet-real) sphere and therefore cannot be proved untrue. Tudor’s claim that myth is always cast in a dramatic and narrative form is also an interesting claim: Sorel’s myth of the general strike is very much *not* a narrative, nor is Benjamin’s account of myth as the status quo or Schmitt’s myth arising from tradition (Sorel, 1999 [1906]; Benjamin, 2007a [1921], Schmitt, 2000 [1926]).

Tudor fails to explore the social origins of myths and seems to approach them as if a magician was conjuring up myths for people to believe. In this way, Tudor’s view is not drastically different from Cassirer who sees modern myths as something constructed artificially by mythmakers for a particular purpose, Cassirer quite explicitly describes the modern political mythmaker as “homo magus” (Cassirer, 2007 [1946], p.282). It does not, however, seem convincing that a myth would simply be crafted and given to the world. Cassirer sees myth arising from a social milieu in primitive societies, but not modern ones. To assume that the social origin of myths only exists in pre-modern societies is, I would argue, incorrect.

Christopher Flood, early on in his text, gives a ‘working definition’ of what he takes myth to be: “a working definition of political myth would be: *an ideologically marked narrative which purports to give a true account of a set of past, present, or predicted political events and which is accepted as valid in its essentials by a social group.*” (Flood, 2002, p.44). We see the way in which myth is presented as a kind of false truth: it purports to be true whilst really concealing something else. While I agree with Flood that a successful myth is one which is accepted as valid, I find a particular point in Flood’s definition problematic: by suggesting that myth only purports to be true, Flood reinforces the idea that there is a strict separation between truth and myth. Flood falls into the Enlightenment way of viewing myth as something necessarily false.

I do not take myth to be false. I prefer, instead, to side with Bottici in arguing that myth is simply a different form of knowledge exchange rather than providing a different kind of information. In her *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Bottici, 2007) Bottici begins by tracing the origins of myth to its root in ancient Greece. She notes that *mythos* (myth) and *logos* (reason) were not separated in the ancient Greek world (Bottici, 2007, pp.18-19). They were both claims to truth, but simply different modes of understanding. Only with the Christian 'word', which embodied truth, was the separation made, a separation that, she argues, still haunts the common understanding of myth as something untrue or fanciful (Bottici, 2007, p.45). In this sense, Bottici is working somewhat against the grain of many political thinkers on myth: as I have showed, Cassirer, Tudor, and Flood all have views of myth as something untrue or primitive. What Bottici argues is that a conception of political myth requires a much richer conception of truth, or at least an abandonment of the strict demarcation between myth and truth.

The need for myth, according to Bottici, comes from a universal human need to live in a meaningful world: "To sum up, political myths, understood as work on a common narrative by which a social group provides significance to its political conditions and needs, ultimately stem from a universal human need, the need to live in a world less indifferent to us." (Bottici, 2007, p.200) This is a much thicker account of the need for myth than that used by Tudor, who argues that "[Myth] gives men a fixed point by reference to which they can express their feeling and explain their experience." (Tudor, 1972, p.15). For Bottici, myth is not just about expressing feelings and explaining experiences but about grounding oneself within a meaningful world. It is a shared narrative which gives meaning to our lives. What makes it specifically political is that it is part of a social group's shared narrative. This is connected to the significance-giving meaning that does not come from other types and modes of thinking. As Bottici notes in the opening page of her book, Rawls and Habermas have provided extremely well-argued accounts of models for politics based in and through reason: "Nevertheless, when one looks at the everyday activity which goes under the heading of 'politics', one is confronted with quite a different picture. People involved in this activity are not so easily persuaded to adopt rational procedures of communication and decision. Therefore, a purely rational model of society risks being a model for a world that does not exist." (Bottici, 2007, p.1). In working beyond this 'purely rational model of society' Bottici is not only challenging the likes of Rawls and Habermas, she is also challenging much of the tradition within which she writes: Cassirer, Tudor, and Flood all use conceptions of myth in which myth is somehow untrue, pre-modern, or anti-

Enlightenment. For Bottici, myth does not undermine the political – as it does for those who follow the Enlightenment view of politics – but plays an important part in individuals living meaningful political lives.

What we also see in Bottici's account is the resurfacing of the question of narrative: for Bottici, work on myth represents work on a common narrative which provides meaning to individuals (Bottici, 2007, p.179). For Flood also, myth exists in a narrative form (Flood, 2002, p.44, and, pp.101-102), and for Tudor myth is always a story which is told (Tudor, 1972, p.115). Neither Sorel, Benjamin or Schmitt see myth as existing necessarily in a narrative form, and I agree with them. I would not limit the form of myth to a narrative form: if myth is about something which provides meaning, significance, and explanation – as I take it to be – then there is no need for this to be expressed narratively. I agree with Bottici on many points, but this is not one of them. I focus in more detail on the question of narrative form in Chapter 5.

Hans Blumenberg has not always been taken to work on political myth (Nicholls, 2015, pp.32-34). In the last ten years or so there has been a move towards interpreting Blumenberg as a theorist of political myth. This has been done through Bottici's (2007, p.183-184) use of Blumenberg's idea of *Arbeit am Mythos* (work on myth), and through Angus Nicholls' (2015) recovery of unpublished writings on the political side of myth which Blumenberg had kept out of official publications. Bottici (2007, p.179) aligns Blumenberg's view of the need for myth with the human need for 'significance'. She uses Arnold Gehlen's idea of humans as "always not-yet determined animals" (*noch nicht festgestelltes Tier*) (Bottici, 2012) to argue for this.⁸ On this view, humans are *mängelwesen* or 'deficient beings' and need something more than they are. Bottici (2012) uses this to argue that it is this *lack* in human life which generates culture; also, that the lack of adaption for a particular climate or environment forces us to generate understandings of our place within it (Bottici, 2012). While I do not seek to approach questions as to the origins of human culture, I would agree with Bottici's claim that humans seek to understand the world they live in and seek to understand their own significance within that world. I agree, moreover, that myth functions to fill the place where there is a lack of understanding. I would add, to Bottici's argument, that politics

⁸ Nicholls argues in his *Myth and the Human Sciences* that Blumenberg actually favoured Paul Alsberg's account of human life to Gehlen's (Nicholls, 2015, p.195). This does not impact on my discussion above but may impact on studies about myth which focus on Blumenberg.

cannot be fully comprehended in a positivist sense and therefore will always need myth to fill certain gaps.

In my own analysis on myth I begin with premises shared with Bottici: I do not see myth as something necessarily pre-modern, nor as something to be overcome. I am more interested in how they are understood, and to what purpose. Political myths, to me, are not obviously something archaic, and I am interested in different understandings as to their role within the modern political world. Furthermore, I approach the origin and genesis of myths without major preconceptions. In contrast to Bottici, I do not discount non-narrative forms of myth, nor do I discount (as does Tudor) myths that look in any particular direction (future, past or present). I begin with the thought that the multiplicity of myths may be innumerable, and that working towards a broad understanding of their nature and forms is the best way to proceed. In terms of the relationship between myth and politics, I take the Enlightenment view that myth is somehow destructive of politics to be false. Instead, I take myth and politics to be able to mutually support one another.

3.2: Myth and Ideology

It is worth here considering the question of ideology, for ideologies are often taken to contain a number of features which we see shared with that of myth. Arguably, part of the confusion here comes down to the plurality of understandings of ideology. As Flood (2002, p.5) points out there are so many ways of understanding ideology that one of them is likely to encompass what we might term myth. He cites 16 different uses of the word ideology which were all in active conceptual use at the beginning of the 1990s (Flood, 2002, p.5). It is thus worth pressing on what makes myth distinct: I argue that the fundamental difference comes down to ideology being able to be broken down into its constituent parts and rationally understood. In contrast, myth is more than the sum of its parts, and often contains irrational or contradictory elements.

Bottici's *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (2007) contains no discussion of the distinction between ideology and myth. Bottici, however, does come back to the issue of ideology. In her, later, discussion of political myth in the online 'Critical Lexicon of Political Concepts' she outlines her understanding of the difference between ideology and myth

(Bottici, 2016). For her, the difference comes down to narrative: “Put bluntly, political myths are always narratives staging a drama.” (Bottici, 2016) Ideologies, she argues in contrast, do not need to be narrative in form (Bottici, 2016). Differently to Bottici, Christopher Flood sees myth as ideology (Flood, 2002, pp.13-17). On Flood’s view, myths are ideology cast in narrative form: to reach this conclusion Flood essentially gives a very broad, inclusive, and neutral account of ideology (Flood, 2002, pp.13-17). Given that I do not take myths to be necessarily narrative in form, I clearly cannot share Bottici’s distinction. Moreover, I do not take Flood’s broad and inclusive account of ideology to be an analytically useful way of separating myth from ideology. Instead, I take the distinction to come down to myth’s nature as holistically, as opposed to additionally (in the mathematical sense), understandable.

For Tudor, an ideology can be understood “as a heterogeneous collection of practical beliefs which have been reduced to a system through being interpreted in the light of a single key doctrine” (Tudor, 1972, p.121). For Tudor it is this element of *practical argument* which is the key separation point. On this he explicitly draws on Sorel as outlining an ideology as a myth that has been rationalised and laid open for discussion (Tudor, 1972, p.121). Tudor uses the example of Cicero to make his point. Cicero, Tudor states, wanted to restore confidence in the Republican constitution of Rome (Tudor, 1972, p.126). To make his case he put forward two arguments: first, it was the constitution laid out by the heroic founders of Rome, and only by staying true to this constitution could the Roman people remain strong and great (Tudor, 1972, p.126). The second argument was based on a more general appraisal of the quality of the constitution: it was fundamentally free of structural defects and thus gave strength and stability to the Roman polity (Tudor, 1972, p.126). Tudor analogises this to the type of argument presented by myth compared to ideology. The political myth of Rome’s founders and the constitution could not be taken apart and analysed. Its strength comes from the belief in the myth, holistically. It would, moreover, only ever work in the context of Rome, and would only give meaning to the Roman people (Tudor, 1972, p.126). The second, practical, argument is based on a logical link between constitutional make-up and political strength and stability (Tudor, 1972, p.126). So while a myth is historically dependent and relevant, an ideology is general and universal (Tudor, 1972, p.126). A final point made by Tudor is that as is often (if not always) the case, mythical and non-mythical arguments go together. The Nazi myth of racial superiority drew upon modern genetics, and the Levellers combined their

historically mythic accounts with arguments in favour of their ideas (Tudor, 1972, p.127).

Tudor's separation of myth and ideology is a useful starting point. I agree with Tudor that myth and ideology can often be found together. I also agree that we can, in part, separate myth from ideology by looking at the way in which we can assess both. Where Tudor identifies the distinction in the separation between historical context and universal accountability, I would emphasise an analytical aspect of this which fundamentally defines the separation. I would argue that the power of myth does not come from its acceptance as logically coherent, but as *meaningful*. In this sense, while an ideology is convincing insofar as it can be broken down and its arguments understood, a myth could contain any number of paradoxes and still remain meaningful. We can, to continue Tudor's analogy, analyse the arguments that Cicero makes when presenting us with the ideology of the constitution. We can also understand the mythic nature of the constitution. What we cannot do is use our reason, as 21st century non-Romans, to disagree with the myth: our best hope is *understanding*. In this sense, we might say simply that an ideology adds up, while myth adds up to more than its parts (parts which can, in fact, be contradictory).

3.3: Violence

A brief look at some of the most famous works on political myth suggests a common theme to these myths: we see a 'Clash of Civilisations' between Islam and the West (Bottici and Challand, 2010), a 'Revolutionary General Strike' (Sorel, 1999 [1906]; Benjamin, 2007), and, arguably the most famous, the 'Nazi Myth' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1990; Cassirer 2007). All of the paradigm cases featured in major studies of political myth are based around a violent myth. With the exception of Sorel and Benjamin, who I focus on in my following chapters, none of these thinkers interrogate the concept of violence. What I seek to show throughout this section is how an entirely different set of thinkers have thought of the concept of political violence. Specifically, I seek to highlight some ways in which violence has been understood in its relationship to politics and the political. I look at how the concept of violence is understood in canonical works by Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Hannah Arendt. Building on this analysis, I use more recent work on political violence from Richard Bernstein, Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberley Hutchings. I also assess the way in which violence is

conceived in its relationship to a number of different strands of thinking on political theory.

Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (Sorel, 1999 [1906]), as well as representing the start of modern political thinking on myth, also represents a point of genesis for a number of ways of thinking about political violence. Frantz Fanon took Sorel's work on violence and utilised it in a distinctly different way. In his *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon centred on the need for revolutionary violence to overcome colonial violence (Fanon, 1965 [1961]). Fanon's definition of violence is both vague and broad: it encompasses physical aggression, the administrative power of a political regime, and the predisposition to militancy (Jha, 1988, p.360). Violence, for Fanon, can also be liberating: "[violence] frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon, 1965 [1961], p.73). Force and violence are, for Fanon, used interchangeably (Jha, 1988, p.360). Of force, Fanon talks about a "language of pure force" (Fanon, 1965 [1961], p.29), suggesting that the power associated with violence/force is not only manifested in physical aggression but also in the language of domination and oppression. Politically, Fanon's understanding of violence is aimed at highlighting the violence of the colonial oppressor, and the need for anticolonial political violence. In this sense, the relationship of violence to politics is exclusionary: violence is the means by which groups constitute themselves as other. The colonial power is a violent political unit which can only be replaced through the violence of another political unit. Violence comes to characterise the nature of the political group.

For the oppressed, opposing the force of the coloniser, Fanon claims that "violence is a cleansing force." (Fanon, 1965 [1961], p.73) For this reason, Fanon's work has been interpreted by some as a glorification and a celebration of violence for its own sake: Sartre's preface to *Wretched of the Earth* (Sartre, 1965 [1961]) offering an interpretation in this vein. In contrast, Bernstein argues that Fanon's argument is best viewed as a critique of violence: its main aim, on this interpretation, is to expose the violence of the colonial system and to justify counter-violence in overcoming it (Bernstein, 2013, pp.7-8). While Bernstein's argument certainly holds weight – Fanon is certainly exposing the violence of colonialization and justifying its opposition – Fanon does seem to ascribe a value to violence: "for the colonised people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and

creative qualities” (Fanon, 1965 [1961], p.73). We see, moreover, a clear role for violence in giving self-respect to the ‘native’ and in curing his despair and feelings of inferiority. Violence, on Fanon’s account, has the power to give individuals “positive and creative qualities” (Fanon, 1965 [1961], p.73). What we see in Fanon’s account is one in which violence seems to be both physical and non-physical, positive and negative.

Echoing Fanon, Sartre sees violence as necessarily involved in overcoming violence.⁹ Sartre argues that “violence, like Achilles’ lance, can heal the wounds it has inflicted” (Sartre, 1965 [1961], p.25). For Sartre “no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them.” (Sartre, 1965 [1961], p.18) According to Arendt (1970, pp.11-12), Sartre cannot escape from supporting violence because he takes violence to be the productive feature of man. This points us towards the relation of violence to the nature of man and the political. To uncover this, Arendt relates her discussion back to Marx and Hegel: for Hegel, man “‘produces’ himself through thought” (Arendt, 1970, pp.11-12). Marx turns this upside down and argues that man produces himself through his work, his labour (Arendt, 1970, p.12). Arendt accuses Sartre of identifying violence as productive of the individual in much the same way (Arendt, 1970, p.12). Arendt uses Sartre to highlight a shift, in her own time, towards violence amongst left wing thinkers (Arendt, 1970, p.14). She argues that this seems to have happened with the first generation to have grown up with knowledge of the “criminal violence” (Arendt, 1970, p.14) committed by certain regimes, and with knowledge and experience of the atom bomb. That Sartre sees Achilles’ lance in contemporary violence, for Arendt, is troubling in that it seems to suggest that revenge will cure all ills (Arendt, 1970, p.20). Arendt’s critique exposes the fundamental reason why Sartre’s account of violence ultimately relies on an ambiguous violence that necessarily requires an ‘other’ against which it is expended: without violence, man does not produce himself politically and thus violence is central to man’s political identity and selfhood. This seems a dangerous and problematic conception of the productive feature of man, and thus leaves Sartre’s understanding of violence as a quite radical proponent of violence.

⁹ Sartre’s most detailed discussion of violence is his preface to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (Sartre, 1965 [1961]).

Arendt's own take on violence, however, is distinctly different from Sartre or Fanon's. In describing violence, Arendt begins by distinguishing it from her own understanding of power. Arendt points out that traditional understandings of power generally refer to power as 'power over' someone (Arendt, 1970, pp.37-40). This is not the way in which she uses the term. For Arendt, power is the name given to actions of concert or coordination, which she draws from the ancient understanding (Arendt, 1970, p.40). In clear opposition to her understanding of Sartre (as violence as the productive political quality in man), Arendt argues that violence can never be the essence of something because violence is always a means: "*Violence ... is distinguished by its instrumental character.*" (Arendt, 1970, p.46) Where power, as concerted action, is productive, violence is destructive. Because of this, violence and power cannot co-exist. To illustrate her point, Arendt cites the example of Russian tanks rolling into Czechoslovakia in 1968 as an example of violence confronting power (Arendt, 1970, p.53). In this case, violence confronted power and violence won out. The problem, for Arendt, is that violence will always win out over power (Arendt, 1970, p.53).

Before moving on it is worth explaining my own approach to political violence, and how I situate myself amongst the thinkers so far discussed. Unlike Arendt, I believe politics and violence can, and do, go together. Like Fanon, I see some forms of violence as only being able to be overcome by violence. Unlike Fanon, however, I would not ascribe a positive quality to this violence: it is not the violence itself which is justified but resistance to violence, and sometimes this must be done violently. As an ideal, overcoming political violence through peaceful means would be preferable, but in reality there are some forms of political violence which require overthrow by force. I take the question of the justness of political violence to be different from the question of the fact of political violence. While questions of justice do appear herein (in particular in Chapter 4), it is not the focus of my study and I do not attempt to address it directly. In the same way as I do not take Fanon's positive account of violence to be convincing, I also do not agree with Sartre's understanding of violence as the productive quality of man, and I see Sartre's account as being too supportive of violence without sufficient qualification.

In its most simple form, I take political violence to be a form of power expressed and exerted upon individuals or groups by other individuals or groups with political approval. Violence, on this view, does not have to be manifested as physical harm but

could also be a cognitive restriction upon an individual or group. Politics is understood as a social group acting in (some degree of) concert, where an authority (of sovereign power) is grounded. I do not, furthermore, take political violence to necessarily involve harm as its conclusion: it is merely the expression and exertion of a form of power. I emphasise that political violence must be carried on by individuals or groups because it highlights the fact that political violence is always, to some extent, a decision made by people and thus a decision that can be unmade. Moreover, I use the word approval because political violence cannot, in my view, be something that happens accidentally or without some form of cognitive agreement between the individuals that make up that political group. I do not see this approval as necessarily being an explicit agreement but potentially as tacit: when parliament votes to bomb a far-away land there is explicit agreement by those in political power, but there could equally be a lack of tacit support within the political community as a whole. This is not a problem for understanding political violence, but rather uses the concept of political violence to expose certain power relations. I take the most important function of an account of political violence to be to find and locate instances of it, and to use it to struggle with the vindication of that violence. The questions a concept of political violence should be asking is: is this violence justified? If it isn't, why is it happening and how can it be stopped? Seeing violence is the first step towards overcoming violence. Yet we must also be prepared to reach the conclusion that some forms of political violence *are* justified. I do, for example, take law to be a form of political violence that should be upheld.¹⁰ Finally, I do not approach the concept of political violence with a belief that it embodies some positive qualities (as per Fanon and Sartre), but as, at times, necessary.

3.4: Myth, Violence and Politics

Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberley Hutchings have, in a series of articles (2007 – present), confronted the relationship between violence and politics. They have looked at the relationship as it exists in Sorel, Fanon, Arendt, Derrida, Agamben, Locke and many more. Frazer and Hutchings identify a tradition which they describe as realist, and which includes thinkers such as Weber, Clausewitz, and Machiavelli (Frazer and Hutchings, 2011a, p.57). In their articles, they are seeking to offer a conceptual account of violence which does not see it purely as a negative other to the peaceful pursuit of politics: “Whereas realists criticise liberals and radicals for over-idealising the concept

¹⁰ cf. Chapter 4 for a fuller discussion of the relationship between law and violence. I should add, moreover, that I do not take all *laws* to be just, even if I see law as a violence to be maintained.

of politics, we are more interested in the correlative conceptualisation of violence in which the concept of *political violence* is rendered oxymoronic.” (Frazer and Hutchings, 2011a, p.57) Instead, they seek to highlight how violence is connected to its political context and do away with the simplification of it as a concept (Frazer and Hutchings, 2011a, p.57). Frazer and Hutchings seek to offer a more nuanced account, one in which the relationship between violence and politics is not pre-determined, but rather more complex.

The focus of Frazer and Hutchings’ approach to the theme of political violence is to situate it within its relationship to politics more generally. On their view, both radicals and liberals create a separation between politics and violence, one which thinkers of *realpolitik* (they cite Weber, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz) do not ascribe to:

Liberals and radicals may over-idealise the meanings of politics, but they also massively oversimplify the meanings of violence and therefore the ways in which conditions and practices of violence are immanently connected to the conditions and practices of politics in the contemporary world. (Frazer and Hutchings, 2011a, p.57)

Radical thinkers such as Sorel, alongside liberal thinkers, are those that are taken to idealise and oversimplify violence. This is the same separation that I outlined in Section 1: that there is often taken to be a separation between violence and politics. That they are conceptually distinct. What I also did was to emphasise that it was not only violence which liberal theorists sought to remove from political thinking, but also myth.

Part of what Frazer and Hutchings emphasise in their essays is the oversimplification of violence as a concept (Frazer and Hutchings, 2011a, p.57). In seeing violence as either wholly positive or wholly negative, it is much easier to bracket it away from politics. In this way we might see radicals argue that politics is bad or corrupt, and that violence is good. Violence, on this view, comes to be a means to overcome politics. Alternatively, the liberal view might see violence as bad and thus want to keep violence out of politics as much as possible. Frazer and Hutchings’ aim is to work beyond these simplifications and to create a picture whereby violence is situated within its political context.

What I wish to do in my thesis is to offer a similar situating of myth, alongside violence. Part of this comes down to our understanding of myth and its relationship to violence. If we see myth purely as falsehood, then it does seem to be something which we should try to keep distinct from political thinking. If we were to follow Cassirer in seeing myth as a means of deceiving people which may lead to terrible violence then, of course, we should be trying to think about myth as something to be removed from politics. If, however, we take it to be something similar to how I have described it in Section 3.1, then it seems as though myth is something which should be a part of thinking politically. To understand how and why elements of political life give us meaning and significance seems an important thing for political theory to consider. Moreover, to think about this alongside violence, which is such a common theme for political myths, seems worthy of our attention.

As I have already outlined, most well-known myths are linked to violence. What I seek to do throughout this thesis is to interrogate the relationship between myth, violence and politics. Most theorists of myth or violence do not consider the other. Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt, in contrast, all treat *both* myth and violence as central to their thinking on politics. What will become clear is that Sorel sees myth as the means by which people can be encouraged to act violently. This violence, being, anti-political and virtuous. What we see, in Sorel, is thus a mythic means of creating a virtuous violence to overcome politics. There is, however, no emancipation or freedom from violence for Sorel. Because violence is virtuous, the process of struggle is ongoing. Benjamin, similarly, does not see any point at which we overcome violence. His understanding of myth and violence is, however, distinct from Sorel's. For Benjamin there are two types of violence: mythic and divine. Mythic violence is analogised with the state (and status quo) and is taken to be a negative. On this view, politics *qua* modern capitalist bourgeois state, is an institution of oppression. Politics is understood in its relation to the state, and myth is understood to be the form of violence which this utilises. In contrast is divine violence – a moment of extra-political action (or thinking) which breaks out of the bounds of the political status quo. In this sense, Benjamin follows Sorel in seeing contemporary politics as something to be overcome through violence. In contrast to Sorel, however, Benjamin does not take myth to be part of this overcoming, but part of the deception which maintains the status quo. Where Sorel and Benjamin both see violence as a way of overcoming politics (albeit with Benjamin seeing divine violence as overcoming mythic violence), Schmitt sees violence as supportive of politics. For Schmitt, myth serves to help create and maintain a sense of national identity. What

this national myth does, for Schmitt, is to underpin the identity of a national community. The point at which this community becomes specifically political, for Schmitt, is when they are willing to engage in violent existential conflict with a similarly constituted group. The relationship, on Schmitt's view, is thus one where myth creates a sense of identity, which aids in the act of becoming political.

What we see, in the three thinkers I discuss, are three different ways of theorising the relationship between myth, violence, and politics. They serve as a useful starting point to further theorising on the relationship between the three concepts. Normative ideals for a political world free of violence (as per liberalism) are not bad *per se*. Yet we should question the violence inherent within a liberal state: the violence of the law, of the police, of economic relationships, of gender roles. Thinking through these (and many more) instances of violence are important and would broaden the way we think about violence politically. Myth, moreover, so often taken to be something exclusive of truth, can be investigated in much the same way. In seeking to *understand*, rather than remove, we can see the presence of myths within our own politics. In opening up political theory to thinking myth through, we can see both the positive and negative manifestations of it. The aim of this thesis is not to celebrate myth and violence, but to understand and to theorise their relationship to politics more deeply. In looking at the work of Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt, we can gain insights into this. In understanding instances of myth and violence, we can begin to theorise responses to them. Understanding that some myths can be positive, and that some violence may be necessary, allows us to think more carefully about the relationship between myth, violence, and politics.

Understanding the relationship between myth, violence and politics also requires us thinking through the question of why myth and violence seem to go together so frequently. For Sorel, myths are linked to images of battle. On Sorel's understanding, myths are inherently violent in their subject matter. Benjamin, too, sees myth as inextricably bound with up a particular form of violence. On Benjamin's view, state power manifests itself as mythical violence. For Benjamin it is not that there are myths which are violent in their subject matter, but rather that the violence of the state is mythic insofar as it is deceiving of real power relations. Schmitt echoes Sorel, seeing myths as necessarily bound up with images of battle, albeit based in the nation rather than class. In contrast, I do not wish to support the theorisation which sees myth and

violence as necessarily bound together. Arguably, in viewing myth and violence as the two key things to be exorcised from politics, the Enlightenment/liberal view of politics has created the conditions in which the two are taken together. In defining politics as sphere free from myth and violence, myth and violence come to be seen as antidotes to what certain radical thinkers see as the problem with contemporary politics. In rehabilitating the concepts of myth and violence within political theory, a deeper understanding can be identified.

As should be clear from my outlines of myth and violence, I take myth and violence to be a part of politics. Unlike Sorel and Benjamin, I do not take politics to be a necessarily negative thing to be overcome through violence. I take there to be violence present both within and without politics. I take there to be justifiable instances of violence, and I take there to be unjustifiable instances. To theorise the justice of violence, we need to first identify and understand violence. It is this latter task that I take this thesis to be contributing towards. I take myth, similarly, to be present within political communities and to provide an important function within them. Political myths help to provide meaning and significance to individuals. This does not mean that no myths should be challenged: I take there to be the possibility of a great many myths which should be challenged. To use examples already mentioned, one would hope that a Nazi-type myth would not give meaning to people. If it did, it should be challenged. Exactly how we should challenge negative myths and/or violence is not a question answered in this thesis. This thesis is, rather, taken to be a starting point for understanding myth and violence in their relationship to politics and each other.

Section 4: Limitations, Problems, Difficulties

As with all studies, this is naturally limited in its scope. This thesis is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of all approaches to myth and violence, nor is it intended to give detailed commentary on the concepts of political myth and political violence in general. The scope is, rather, much more limited: the aim of the thesis is to provide a historically-situated, philosophical critique of political myth and political violence as it appears in the work of Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, and Carl Schmitt. Its aim is to argue that political theory would benefit from a greater consideration of myth and violence, and to offer some conceptual insights to support this.

A study of this kind necessarily reflects choices in terms of method, focus and approach. I am not writing the intellectual history of Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt (although I do take this study to offer some insights for intellectual histories of the three), but rather using their work as inroads into the study of political myth and violence. I take this approach for a number of reasons: in working via an examination of thinkers rather than themes I am able to more easily offer limits to my study. Each thinker touches on themes (e.g. civilisation, morality, psychology, law, hegemony, justice, community, class, nation, etc.) which I could not do justice to were I attempting to use a thematic approach to myth and violence: the text would simply be far too expansive. There is, moreover, a reason why I use these three thinkers in particular. As I have outlined, there is a lineage to Sorel's thought which continues through in both Benjamin and Schmitt. Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* acts as the basis for both Benjamin and Schmitt's work on myth and violence. In utilising the pair of concepts myth and violence, I am able to see how they relate within, and to, different theories.

The thesis has also had to be limited in the sources it utilises. Georges Sorel wrote from the late 1880s until the 1920s, Walter Benjamin from the 1910s until 1940, and Schmitt from the 1910s right up until the 1980s. Attempting to provide a genealogy of their thought would be too much for the scope of the thesis. As such, I have focused my analysis on a number of texts, whilst situating these within the oeuvre of the thinker where necessary. In my chapters on Sorel, I focus on his *Reflections on Violence* (Sorel, 1999 [1906]), while situating it within the context of his previous works. While I argue that it is necessary to understand Sorel's oeuvre to understand his stance on myth and violence, it is his *Reflections* that contains his most detailed treatment of both. With Benjamin I choose to focus on a single text, his 'Critique of Violence' (Benjamin, 2007a [1921]). Where Benjamin's text has a long history of interpretation within thinking on violence, it is almost absent from thinking on myth. This is puzzling given the two key types of violence described by Benjamin are the mythical and the divine (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.295). I believe that by approaching this text in isolation I can draw out a more focused account of myth and violence's relationship to thinking about politics than I would from a survey of Benjamin's entire oeuvre. In my chapters on Schmitt I focus on different works depending on the subject: on the relationship of violence to politics I draw largely on Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* (Schmitt, 2007a [1932]). I do support my arguments in this chapter with other works from Schmitt's oeuvre, but it is in the *Concept of the Political* that the relationship between violence and the political is made most clearly. In my chapter on myth I focus on Schmitt's *Crisis of*

Parliamentary Democracy (Schmitt, 2000 [1926]) and *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (Schmitt, 1996a [1938]). The reason for this is that it is within these two texts that Schmitt most explicitly, and in most detail, deals with the concept of myth.

Conclusion

In this introductory chapter I have laid out what I take to be the central aims of thesis, and the relevant contextual, conceptual and theoretical information required to underpin the study. I outlined the absence of myth and violence from much contemporary political theory, arguing that this stems from the Enlightenment myth of politics being a violence and myth free sphere. I showed how this continued into modern political theory, especially in the liberal tradition. I continued to ground the thesis historically by situating the three thinkers who I look at in detail within the context of early twentieth century Europe. I highlighted the intellectual malaise and 'crisis of reason' which many have taken to characterise the age. I moved on to focus this in the specific and local contexts within which Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt were writing. I highlighted the political crises that wracked their countries during the time in which they were writing. I then moved on to outline the concepts of myth and violence, explaining some of the canonical and recent interpretations of both. I raised a number of themes which are central to my thesis, and I put forward working definitions of both myth and violence. I gave an overview of what I take to be the insights for thinking through the relationship between myth, violence and politics. I highlighted how the work of the three thinkers gives us particular ways of theorising this, and put forward my own interpretation. Finally, I outlined some of the limits of the thesis.

What I have sought to do, throughout my introduction, is to ground my work within a broader historical and intellectual context. What I seek to do through the chapters that follow is to work through the arguments that I have outlined in this introduction, and to address a number of problems within the concepts of myth and violence, and their relation to politics. I seek to show that the Enlightenment myth of politics as a violence and myth free sphere is, in itself a myth: it is something which does not exist as a rationally ascertainable truth but rather as an ideal at which some strands of political theory aim. What I seek to show, furthermore, is that this is a limited way of approaching political theory. I do not wish to refute this mode of theorising, but rather

to emphasise the benefits of methodological plurality: in utilising myth and violence we gain new insights into key concepts in political theory. I will relate myth and violence to: justice, community, morality, sovereignty, and many other concepts which most would consider central to political thinking. That myth and violence can, and do, relate to these concepts shows us the importance of them as concepts within political theory. As I go forward, moreover, I will seek to sharpen and enhance the concepts of myth and violence themselves, working towards understandings which are useful and relevant to political theory. Finally, I seek to further problematise the relationship between myth, violence and politics. I approach the thinkers chronologically, and thus begin with Sorel.

Chapter 2

Conflict and Morality: Georges Sorel on the Psychological Need for Myth

Introduction

My argument in this chapter is that to understand Sorel's account of myth we also need to understand Sorel's views on morality, civilisation, and psychology, because it is here where myth finds its genesis. I argue that, for Sorel, myths fulfil a psychological requirement needed to evoke passions and sentiments which push us towards conflict. I argue that, for Sorel, we need conflict to give us a warrior mindset that he sees as necessary for morality and the regeneration of civilisation. It is myths, according to Sorel, which act upon individuals to evoke the passions and sentiments required to have this warrior mindset and thus myths are necessary for morality and the regeneration of civilisation. Myths are also, importantly, connected to violence through this support for a warrior ethic. The myth of the general strike is, for Sorel, a pragmatic choice in that he sees it as the myth most likely to succeed in the modern world. I argue that what this comes down to, for Sorel, is a support for an agonistic model of society which sees conflict as a good in itself, and myth as a means to support this. I draw out the implications of this: that in Sorel's work, myth cannot be separated from the account of conflict and violence of which it is a part. To remove the violence from Sorel's account of myth would be to miss its most central aim: the evoking of passions to create conflict.

I begin my analysis utilising one of Sorel's earliest texts: *Le Procès de Socrate* (*The Trial of Socrates*). I begin with this text because it is one of the first texts published by Sorel (published in 1889), and I believe it shows a concern with civilisation and morality which continues through into Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (1999), and

beyond.¹¹ As the text where Sorel deals most explicitly with myth, it is *Reflections on Violence* which makes up my main source for analysis throughout this chapter. In places, I draw on a number of other texts in my analysis: *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics* (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905]), *The Illusions of Progress* (Sorel, 1969 [1906]), and *Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat* (Sorel, 1976f [1911]). I do so because there are a number of times when Sorel's explanation in *Reflections* is lacking. Because I argue that Sorel has a consistent interest in morality and civilisation, I take texts from throughout Sorel's oeuvre to contain insights and be useful in illuminating difficulties in my discussion on myth.

In Section 1 I outline how an understanding of Sorel's oeuvre shows us that Sorel had an ongoing concern with morality and civilisation. I then highlight the importance of Sorel's account of pessimism and the tragic conception of life to his work. I argue that understanding these shows us why myth is important: because it is only via a violent myth that we can create the unity and cohesion of vision required to face and overcome the tragedy of life. I then move on, in Section 2, to give my interpretation of Sorel's account of myth. I support the account from *Reflections on Violence* with evidence from Sorel's *Trial of Socrates* and *Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat*, which I use to show that, for Sorel, reason is insufficient to motivate men to act morally. I then go on to investigate why Sorel uses the myth of the general strike, arguing that it is merely a pragmatic account of the most likely myth to work in his contemporary era. I use this to show how Sorel sees myth as essentially opposed to politics. Politics, for Sorel, is about agreement, whereas myth is about conflict. Finally, in Section 3, I interrogate Sorel's account further. I push on the question of whether Sorel is concerned with emancipation or with struggle: I argue that he undoubtedly supports struggle over emancipation. Moreover, I take up a theme which comes out of this idea of struggle and opposition: the question of gender in Sorel's work. I outline how Sorel's work could be taken utilised within a performative approach, although I highlight the problem this may have in reinforcing gender binaries (given that Sorel supports strong oppositions between groups). In Sections 1 and 2, I follow Sorel's linguistic lead and use the term 'men' when discussing the way myth impacts upon people, despite my argument (Section 3) that Sorel's concept of myth does not seem to be necessarily gendered.

¹¹ For aesthetic, and consistency I cite the publication date of the edition of the text I am referencing. Original publication dates for Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt can be found in the bibliography.

Section 1: Psychology, Morality, Civilisation

1.1: Sorel on Civilisation and Human Life

It will be shown throughout this section that Sorel has an ongoing concern with civilisation: specifically, preventing civilisation's decline and degeneration. I argue that underpinning Sorel's concern for civilisation and morality is an account of the nature of human life. The premise underpinning Sorel's concern with civilisation and morals is a commitment to a 'pessimistic' or tragic view of life. This claims that the individual is inextricably bound to the world, a world over which he (as an individual) has little or no control. It is only as part of a group that the individual can achieve any kind of moment within history. The argument made here will be that an awareness of Sorel's oeuvre is necessary to understand a major theme running through all of Sorel's work: the fear that European civilisation is in a state of decline and decadence that can only be stopped through an emotive and passionate response.

One of Sorel's first published works was his *Le Procès de Socrate* (published 1889). It was translated into English as *The Trial of Socrates*. The English editions of Sorel's earlier works (*The Trial of Socrates* [1898], *The Socialist Future of the Syndicates* [1898], *The Ethics of Socialism* [1898], *Critical Essays in Marxism* [1898]), as well as a number of his mid-career (*The Illusions of Progress* [1906], *Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat* [1911]), and later works (*The Utility of Pragmatism* [1921]) are collected in a single edition: *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy* (Sorel, 1976a-g). The collection, edited by John Stanley, and translated by John and Charlotte Stanley, appeared in 1976 and presents the first English translation of a number of Sorel's works. Some, such as *The Trial of Socrates*, are extracts of Sorel's text, chosen by Stanley as indicative of the text's content and thrust of argument. Others, such as 'The Socialist Future of the Syndicates', are full translations of essays or articles from Sorel. It is this collected edition which I use here. Alongside Stanley's collected edition, in this chapter I also draw on Sorel's *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics* (1984 [1903-1905]), again translated by Stanley.

The text translated into English as *The Trial of Socrates* (Sorel, 1976a [1889]) represents a study of systems of morality, and can be seen as an argument in favour of heroic, warrior ethics: an ethic that Sorel sees as simple, ascetic, and virtuous. In the *Trial*, Sorel conducts what is essentially a retrial of Socrates (Sorel, 1976a [1889]; Jennings, 1985, pp.18-19), finding him again guilty. The function of the retrial is to act as a study of a society, and to offer a critique of two vying systems of knowledge and morality: that of poetry and that of philosophy. In *The Trial of Socrates*, Sorel clearly aligns the ancient Athenians with a type of soldierly citizen, a type of individual whose strength is connected with their community (the *polis*) and who is superior to the bourgeoisie of his contemporary France:

The Athenians of olden times were quite superior to our envious, ignorant and gluttonous bourgeoisie. The Jacobin type did not exist in early Athens. Citizens were not merchants, demanding a guarantee for their trade, protection of their industry and soliciting government favours. They were soldiers whose existence was tied to the greatness of the city. The least weakness would put the state in peril. (Sorel, 1976a [1889], p.62)

It was, moreover, through the use of epic poetry that citizens learnt. Education was simple, and involved the whole of the individual, their spirit rather than their reasoning. This is important because it emphasises a particular method of instruction: Sorel argues that ancient Athenian education was based around the Homeric epics. The benefit of Homer was, according to Sorel, that the lessons could be understood by all and involved the 'whole' of the individual. There was no separation of intellectual, spiritual, and emotive life:

We have said that the chief aim of ancient education was the preparation for war: this education was not very complex, and consequently it was accessible to all citizens. Curtius evaluated this ancient Athenian instruction very well. "This intellectual culture, so simple in appearance and so unified, nonetheless involved the whole man, all the more profoundly and energetically as these young minds, not being distracted by multiple tasks, could more freely profit from what was offered to them as a spiritual nourishment. And, on the whole, look what was given to an Athenian child! The Homeric epic, with its magnificent portrayal of the world,

which inspires heroic feelings and the passion for lofty deeds'. (Sorel, with inset quote from Curtius, 1976a, pp.62-63)¹²

We see, for Sorel, the education of the 'whole man', with 'simple', 'unified' and energetic instruction. It is through this – through the use of Homeric epic as learning – that 'feelings' and 'passion' can be roused.

The reason, for Sorel, that education of the 'whole' man is better than an education based on intelligence is that the higher levels of reasoning are inaccessible to some. This would lead to a society separated by intellect, dividing society into rulers and ruled. Sorel argues that having a ruling class based on intellect or talent, rather than moral virtue, necessarily leads to the monetisation or calculative rationality of the rulers: "When a society is divided into distinct classes in terms of knowledge, the question of oligarchy is soon posed." (Sorel, 1976a [1889], p.65-66) And, "Here we have the city divided into two categories of citizens. Those who participate in a very notable way in the divine intellect, who enjoy a kind of grace ... better than others". (Sorel, 1976a [1889], p.66) The reason this is such a problem, for Sorel, is that "Of all governments the worst is the one in which wealth and 'talent' share power." (Sorel, 1976a [1889], p.68) Why? Because "Under this system, pride of race no longer exists ... success justifies everything and there is no moral ideal ... men do not matter, there are only monetary values." (Sorel, 1976a [1889], p.68) It is clear that the ancient Athenian education of Homeric epic, which educated the 'whole man' and evoked passions and sentiments, has clear affinities with Sorel's account of myth and its image-based education of moral sentiments. What is also clear is the way in which Sorel seeks to avoid a dominant hierarchy based on wealth or talent: Sorel is inclined away from a society based on 'success' and towards one based in virtue.

Jennings characterises Sorel's study of Socrates as a study of the differences between two types of education, and how this relates to social decline. He sees it as a discussion of the process by which the "admirable social system" (Jennings, 1985, p.19) of old Athens gave way to the "thoroughly degenerate" (Jennings, 1985, p.19) system that took its place. Alongside Jennings' interpretation, Stanley describes the text as "the

¹² Although much of the quote is made up of the Roman historian Curtius, it is clearly with great favour that Sorel quotes him. Of the quote, Sorel remarks: "Here we stop, while regretting that we cannot quote this admirable passage in its entirety." (Sorel, 1976a, p.63)

exposition of a genealogy of morals based partly on the superiority of poetry over philosophy” (Stanley, 1981, p.28). What we see is Sorel’s criticism of philosophy is the criticism of a mode of understanding which he sees as elitist, rational, and optimistic. In contrast, the social norms of ancient Athenian society were based on the preparation for war, and on simple ethics – both simplicity in terms of needs, but also in terms of the motivation for actions. That is to say, it was based on an idea of virtue.¹³ We thus see, in one of Sorel’s initial works, themes which will resurface throughout his corpus: ideas of heroism and how to instruct ‘the people’ into this life, ideas of virtue, ethics, poetry and morality. We also see how Sorel relates education and methods of learning to social decline and degeneration, a feature which recurs heavily in *Reflections on Violence*. It is, moreover, this education of the ‘whole man’ – the sentiments and passions – which will recur in Sorel’s account of myth.

While I contest that there is a recurrence of themes and ideas in Sorel’s work, Sorel is not always understood to have a consistency across his works. It is clear that the themes and subjects of Sorel’s studies change: from studies of the bible and Socrates to studies of Marxism and revolutionary syndicalism. Jeremy Jennings argues that Sorel’s work lacks any unity (Jennings, 1985, pp.4-5). He argues that any attempt to impose unity on Sorel’s work is just that – an imposition. This point is reiterated by Hughes who sees Sorel’s thought as a “baffling accumulation of paradoxes and contradictions” (Hughes, 1979, p.162), and by Lenin who once famously described Sorel as a “notorious muddle-head” (Lenin, as quoted in, Berlin, 1979, p.296). It is clear that not everyone took Sorel to have a consistent theme to his work. It is true, also, that Sorel is an idiosyncratic thinker and one who is marginal to much political theory.

In his lifetime and in the years following his death, however, Sorel’s influence was great: “One thing, though, everyone seemed to be able to agree upon in the 1920s and 1930s: Sorel’s ideas were of the utmost importance.” (Müller, 2011, p.94) And despite the fact that Sorel is seen by many as a contradictory and paradoxical thinker, we have already seen that Sorel does have a number of themes that occur in his earliest work and which reappear in *Reflections on Violence*: ideas of ethics, virtue, morality, and education. Sorel himself notes in a letter to Benedetto Croce that: “you recognised well

¹³ There are similarities between Sorel and Nietzsche as displayed in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Trial of Socrates*, but it is generally accepted that at the time of it writing Sorel had no knowledge of Nietzsche (cf. Meisel, 1951). Due to limitations of space, I do not compare Sorel and Nietzsche although there is the possibility of a productive study therein.

the abiding preoccupation of my life: the historic genesis of morals". (Sorel, as quoted in Meisel, 1951, p.41) In Sorel's own words, there was a 'preoccupation' of his life: and that was connected to the origin and creation of morals within history. I take this to be the consistent feature in Sorel's works. Supporting this, John Stanley argues that when "the famous twistings and turnings of Sorel's political allegiances are seen in this light, many of the apparent contradictions of his thought give way to a quite coherent sociology of morals." (Stanley, 1981, p.1). If we fail to understand that there is a consistent theme to Sorel's work, we will also fail to understand his take on myth. Myth is instrumental in Sorel's account: it is instrumental in being the best form of education for the creation of virtuous, warrior-like morality.

As noted, in Sorel's earliest texts he is interested in methods of education, and how we might best educate individuals to live with a warrior ethos. Why, though, is Sorel interested in creating a warrior form of life? The answer, arguably, is to be found in Sorel's view of 'pessimism': the tragic view of human life. It is not until the first collected French edition of Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* in 1908 that Sorel provides a detailed explanation of this. Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* first appeared in an Italian journal – *Il Divenire Sociale* – over 1905 and 1906. These were first published as a single volume in Italy, in 1906 (Jennings, 1999, p.xxxv). They were subsequently published – revised and expanded – in a series of articles in France, in 1906. They were finally brought together in French in 1908. This 1908 edition featured the introductory 'Letter to Daniel Halévy', which I will draw upon here. The 1908 edition was, also, a further revised edition from the 1906 edition (Jennings, 1999, p.xxxvi). The text went through a number of further editions in Sorel's lifetime, with Sorel adding appendices and prefaces to the new editions (Jennings, 1999, xxxvi). As Jennings (1999, p.xxxvi) notes, the third edition (1912) includes an introductory remark on the continued relevance of the work. Other than Sorel's 1920 edition, which adds praise for Lenin, Sorel made no further additions. The edition of Sorel's *Reflections* here used is from the Cambridge series of texts in the history of political thought. The translation of this edition is largely based on the original English translation, by T.E. Hulme in 1914.

In the introductory 'Letter to Daniel Halévy', Sorel characterises the pessimistic view of human life in opposition to the optimistic view of life which was embodied by Socrates and the Sophist philosophers. The optimistic view, held by these philosophers, is the idea that progress is possible and that people can be taught to be better. Sorel saw the

optimism of philosophical thinking as degenerate when compared to the pessimism of the tragic view of life: “So little are we prepared to understand pessimism that we generally employ the word quite incorrectly: we wrongly take pessimists to be disillusioned optimists.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.9) In reality, according to Sorel, pessimism is a way of thinking about morality which acknowledges man’s weakness and attempts to forge a means of overcoming this:

Pessimism is quite a different thing from the caricatures that are usually presented of it; it is a metaphysics of morals rather than a theory of the world; it is a conception of a *march towards deliverance* that is narrowly conditioned: on the one hand, by the experimental knowledge that we have acquired of the obstacles which oppose themselves to the satisfaction of our imaginations (or, if one prefers, by the feeling of social determinism) – on the other, by a profound conviction of our natural weakness. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.10-11)

Sorel claims there are three features of pessimism, although they are often ignored: first, the literature of tragedy and grief has always had an appeal to people: “sorrow and pain ... constantly threaten mankind.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.11). Second, pessimism recognises the “social conditions as forming a system bound together by an iron law which cannot be evaded” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.11). Because it is a system in its whole – in entirety – pessimism is not “driven mad” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.11) by its belief in achievement (which would be optimism). Moreover, it “does not dream of bringing about the happiness of future generations by slaughtering existing egoists.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.11). What this creates, on Sorel’s view, is a recognition of the tragic nature of human life and an examination of one’s fate.

In understanding, and living with, the pessimistic view of human life, Sorel argues that individuals are able to conceive of a means of overcoming it. The essential feature of pessimism, for Sorel, is a vision of reaching deliverance and freedom. It is through living a pessimistic life that men are buoyed by the hope that they may put an end to suffering. Importantly, it is always men (plural) who conceive of this striving for deliverance and not a (singular) man:

The most fundamental element of pessimism is its method of conceiving the path towards deliverance. A man would not go far in the examination either of the laws of his own wretchedness or of fate, which so shock the ingenuousness of our pride, if he were not borne up by the hope of putting an end to these tyrannies by an effort attempted with a whole band of companions. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.11-12)

Pessimism thus accepts the infinitesimal smallness of the individual, and recognises that he can only gain meaning through something larger than himself, in a 'march towards deliverance'. Note the final line of the above quote: that individuals can only put an end to tyrannies as part of a 'whole band of companions'. Sorel clearly sees the individual as infinitesimal against the forces of nature and history. Groups composed of individuals change history, not sole individuals.

Sorel uses the examples of the Napoleonic soldier, the Roman conquerors, and the glory of the Greeks to reinforce his argument about the importance of group action. He argues that the soldiers of the Napoleonic era sacrificed their lives in order to know that they had taken part in "eternal' deeds" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.22), that the Romans "resigned themselves to an appalling inequality and ... suffered so much to conquer the world" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.22). Finally, Sorel argues that the Greeks believed in glory to the extent that they managed to create a special place for themselves amongst the "swarming masses of humanity" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.22). For Sorel, the key point of this comes down to the fact that for these *groups*, life had a motive and a purpose: "life had a motive, and there was a recompense for those who had pursued the good and the beautiful; - these are things that the intellectualist philosophy cannot explain. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.22) The pessimistic view and way of life is a necessarily communal activity which gives men purpose for which to live. Modernity, on Sorel's view, is losing the communal, pessimistic view of life, in favour of an optimistic view of life and a belief in progress: "This dogma [of the "infinite progress of mankind"], which was to exercise so great an influence upon modern thought, would be a bizarre and inexplicable paradox if it were not considered as bound up with economic progress and with the feeling of absolute confidence that this economic progress engendered." (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.82). If a resolution to the problem of the optimistic view of mankind is not found, Sorel fears a similar result to that of the fall of the Roman Empire: "We ... possess a dreadful historical experience of a great transformation taking place at a time

of economic decadence; I mean the victory of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire which closely followed it.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.82).¹⁴

The philosophical idea of pessimism is something which has recently received attention from Joshua Foa Dienstag in his *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Dienstag, 2006). Dienstag argues that pessimism is an approach to thinking about politics that has largely been ignored for the last three centuries (Dienstag, 2006, p.265). Dienstag includes in this tradition thinkers such as: Rousseau, Nietzsche, Freud, Adorno, Camus, Weber, Foucault, Montaigne, Pascal, Sartre, Arendt, Benjamin, Wittgenstein (Dienstag, 2006, pp.5-6). Interestingly, Dienstag doesn't include Sorel, and does not even mention him in the entire text. What Dienstag argues about pessimism is that it is a useful way of moving beyond the progressivist and optimistic approaches that have characterised much modern political thinking. Dienstag argues that pessimism as a way of thinking about politics has disappeared, or “gone missing from our standard histories of political theory” (Dienstag, 2006, p.3).¹⁵ Dienstag argues that for too long the choices within Western political theory have been a form of progressive optimism: either some kind of liberalism, or some kind of post-Hegelianism (Dienstag, 2006, p.266). What pessimism does, according to Dienstag, is to create an awareness that man must create himself and his society in imperfect conditions and against the backdrop of the chaos of the universe: “To make something stable in the universe means to take account of the natural tumultuousness of the universe and the self and nonetheless to effect a transformation worth remembering” (Dienstag, 2006, pp.268-269). While Sorel does not feature in Dienstag's text, we can see the key aspect of Sorel's thinking on pessimism recurring in Dienstag's: pessimism is about confronting man's place in the world and attempting to create a better world in spite of it. What we see, in Dienstag's work, is an argument which supports Sorel's approach, and which in turn supports Sorel's use of myth in political thinking: Sorel shows how, through myth, we can approach political thinking from outside of what Dienstag takes to be the liberal and post-Hegelian hegemony.

¹⁴ Sorel, however, is not as opposed to Christianity as first appearances may suggest. Sorel saw early Christianity as extremely revolutionary, and as embodying a number of tenets that could be mimicked by modern socialists: primarily, the creation of a separate state of existence within the current political state, which would allow for the creation of new morals, values etc.

¹⁵ We could add that Sorel's account of pessimism has 'gone missing' from Dienstag's.

What Sorel is doing in enunciating the pessimistic view, and approaching social questions from this perspective, is to define the nature of the questions his work is approaching. Just as Dienstag describes, Sorel is concerned with understanding the situation of man within an unpredictable world. This comes from a psychological understanding of the way in which man, as an observable creature, thinks and acts. Given that Sorel is concerned with morals and civilisation, he attempts to base his account of regenerative morality on an account of human psychology. For Sorel, men only achieve great things when they are part of a large community who subscribe to the same system of beliefs: this is, for Sorel, an observable psychological feature of mankind. This system of beliefs need to be simple and virtuous. Complicated philosophical reasoning can only lead to division as it did in ancient Athens: it is poetry, not philosophy, which (on this view) is the way to generate cohesive political communities. There is more, however, to Sorel's account of civilisation. Sorel is concerned with creating a civilisation of virtuous individuals who live with a warrior mindset. We have already seen the examples of the French Revolution and the Ancient Greeks. Sorel seeks a renewal of what he sees as these violent, impassioned, and belief-driven civilisations. It is against what Sorel sees as the bourgeois ideals of peace and tranquillity that he poses his understanding of a good civilisation. We will see through my discussion of myth (in this chapter) and violence (primarily in the next), how this belief in a simple and easily understandable account of morals, underpinning a violent account of civilisation, is central to understanding Sorel's work.

Section 2: Myth and Civilisation

2.1: The Nature of Myth: Images beyond Intellect

We have already seen (in section 1.1) how Sorel claims that men who can live pessimistically have the ability to achieve great things. I argue that it is in myth that Sorel sees the source of motivation to act in such a way. Throughout this section I will explain the nature of myth. I explain how Sorel conceives of myth as holistic images that are beyond rational comprehension. Myth is (for Sorel) beyond intellectual apprehension. Which is to say, that to appreciate it requires something that goes beyond the intellect and operates on a broader psychological account of emotion, sentiment, and passion. This builds upon Sorel's admiration for the Athenian education of the 'whole man'. I go on to argue that, for Sorel, the myth that is 'right', is that which works – not necessarily that which makes the most sense or aims at a particular end.

What this means, for Sorel, is that myth is an instrument for civilisational regeneration, rather than either a good in itself or a means of transmitting a particular kind of information. Finally, it is important to note that, according to Sorel, it is through myth that the contradictory elements of modern ethics can be reconciled into a coherent and holistic image.

Early on in *Reflections* Sorel gives the following outline of what he takes myth to be:

Men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. I proposed to give the name of 'myths' to these constructions, knowledge of which is so important for historians: the general strike of the syndicalists and Marx's catastrophic revolution are such myths. As remarkable examples of myths I have given those which were constructed by primitive Christianity, by the Reformation, by the Revolution, and by the followers of Mazzini. I wanted to show that we should not attempt to analyse such groups of images in the way that we break down a thing into its elements, that they should be taken as a whole, as historical forces, and that we should be especially careful not to make any comparisons between the outcomes and the pictures people had formed for themselves before the action. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.20)

Within this description we have a number of interesting points to note. First, we see that it concerns 'great social movements', which indicates that Sorel is talking about some kind of political myth.¹⁶ Second, it is a 'coming action', and not a historical myth which provides the momentum. This means that myths, on Sorel's account, must be forward-looking. Thirdly, they take the 'form of images of battle'. The warrior spirit is very clearly central to Sorel's conception of myth, given that he analogises it to battle. Also, and importantly, myth is concerned with images, rather than words. Fourth, their 'cause is certain to triumph': the myth is always a myth of victory, though not one of optimism (as noted in the previous section). Finally, myth is the name given to 'these constructions'. The use of the word 'construction' implies an artificiality (in the sense of created, rather than false) which means the myth is not fixed and not natural. We can see clearly, even from this brief description, that Sorel's conception of myth is forward-

¹⁶ I discuss the relationship between politics and myth in Section 2.2

looking, image-based, violent, expectant of victory, and man-made. It is worth considering each of these features in turn.

The idea that myths are constructed by images is an important feature in Sorel's understanding of myth, for it gets to the centre of Sorel's critique of rationality. Sorel separates out the linguistic from that which is 'evoked' by images (via intuition and before any analysis). There thus seems to be a separation of language from image in terms of the way that they relate to individuals:

Ordinary language could not produce these results in any very certain manner; appeal must be made to collections of images which, *taken together and through intuition alone*, before any considered analyses are made, are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.113, italics in original)

Images, on this view, seem to possess a power which rational argument cannot muster. Images speak to us in a way that ordinary language cannot. What we see is that, for Sorel, images speak to the emotions and to sentiment, rather than to reason. Moreover, it is this which not only *speaks* to the sentiments, but can *evoke* them. These images, however, are also connected to an ability to intuit sentiments from those images. Michael Tager argues that this comes down to Sorel's belief that philosophical reasoning was incapable of explaining sacrifice: "Sorel's interest in myth arose from his belief that 'intellectualist philosophy' could not explain why a man would willingly sacrifice his life for an ideal." (Tager, 1986, p.626) This is, on Tager's account, key to Sorel's account of myth: rationally, man should aim to keep himself alive. And yet, we see countless examples of men risking their lives for causes which have no rationally ascertainable outcome: i.e. they risk death. On Tager's interpretation we see Sorel addressing his ideas of myth towards problems which are (or, perhaps, should be) central to political thought: why are people willing to die for certain beliefs? Tager sees Sorel's answer to this question being in myth, as justified by an understanding of psychology (Tager, 1986, pp.626-627). On Tager's interpretation, Sorel's work existed alongside "developments occurring in the psychological study of personality" (Tager, 1986, p.627). What these led Sorel to believe, Tager claims, is that myth was the force by which the decline of France would be reversed (Tager, 1986, p.627).

It is not clear, however, that certain images would necessarily evoke the same sentiments in all of society. If these images did evoke the same sentiments, then this would engender unity of thought. In contrast, if these engendered different sentiments then they would likely foster conflict; or, at the very least, division. Sorel must, presumably, accept that the same images which may evoke particular sentiments in the proletariat will produce very different sentiments in the bourgeoisie. It is here – in the evocation of conflict – that Sorel’s support for images arguably lies. It is clear that (for Sorel) moral convictions come from violent conflict rather than intellectual consideration: “These facts show us the way to a right understanding of the nature of lofty moral convictions; these never depend on reasoning or on any education of the individual will; they depend upon a state of war in which men voluntarily participate and which finds expression in well-defined myth.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.207-208) Arguably, the use of mythic images to create violent conflict is of central importance to Sorel’s account of regenerating morality and civilisation. I discuss the importance of violence in more detail in the next chapter, but it is important to note the important overlap of war and myth here. For Sorel, it is through a state of war in which men voluntarily participate, underpinned by myth, that moral convictions can be realised. Those moral convictions cannot be explained by reasoning, or on education of the individual will. This stands in direct contrast to the Enlightenment myth that sees individuals as able to use reason to direct their will. Instead, it is through myth that proper moral education can be achieved: it is worth here remembering Sorel’s *Trial of Socrates*, where poetry – with its appeal to the whole man, especially his spirit – was seen as the ideal form of education. Violence is a central feature of Sorelian myth because it is the only means of engendering the morality he sees as necessary for civilisational health.

The way in which myth is both expectant of victory and man-made are connected: Sorel sees any action as involving an artificial world created in our minds which propels us forward. As Sorel describes it: “When we act we are creating a completely artificial world placed ahead of the present world and composed of movements which depend entirely on us” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.26-27). It is this artificial world which requires an image of victory because without the image of victory we would not live up to the moral ideals which are laid out in these future images. Men engaged in war, according to Sorel, always have to see their cause as expectant of victory because men engaged in war have to expect either triumph or slavery: “I explain it [examples of heroism] by

saying that, these men being engaged in a war which was bound to end in either their triumph or enslavement, the sentiment of sublimity was bound to be engendered by the conditions of the struggle.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.210) Men reach a sense of ‘sublimity’ through this struggle that relates back, again, to the nature of myth as a holistic image capable of creating lofty moral sentiments. We see how myth and violence, together, play a role in this forward-looking vision which is expectant of victory and created through our minds and actions. These visions become myths when the artificial worlds are sufficiently strong to move a mass of people: “These artificial worlds generally disappear from our minds without leaving any trace in our memory; but when the masses are deeply moved it then becomes possible to describe a picture which constitutes a social myth” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.27) What we see is Sorel describing a vision of the future which is sufficiently moving to motivate the masses then it becomes social myth.

We can see, then, how Sorel needs myth to fulfil all of its constituent elements so as to play Sorel’s desired role for myth. Myth, in Sorel’s account, has to be forward-looking, image-based, violent, expectant of victory, and man-made because it is through these features that myth connects to the emotions and sentiments. As I outlined in Section 1, Sorel’s view of human life sees the need for myth and violence to work through the pessimistic conception of life and achieve the moral greatness required to save civilisation. It is through the myth of the general strike that Sorel sees this as most likely to occur, in his era, and it is to that which I shall now turn.

2.2: The Myth of the General Strike

Sorel’s myth of the general strike expresses his political commitment insofar as, in *Reflections on Violence* (Sorel, 1999 [1908]), he sees it as the most possible means of engendering the warrior mindset that he sees as necessary for a regeneration of morals. The premises underpinning it, as I have so far laid them out, are that myth constitutes a means of engendering passions and motivating the actions of individuals. I argued that, for Sorel, myth appeals to the sentiments and passions. Furthermore, I argued that he sees myth as able to evoke a warlike state of mind which is necessary for moral action. Sorel’s argument in favour of the myth of the general strike is determined by what he sees as its nature as a violent, revolutionary, but moral force of social change. In other words, it is a myth which can fulfil those criteria outlined above. Throughout this

section I will, through the discussion of the myth of the general strike, pursue the theoretical nature of myth in more detail, and also give an account of Sorel's political commitment to Marxism in *Reflections on Violence*. What will become clear is that Sorel's commitment to a Marxist, proletarian revolution, was only a particular means to achieving the ends he desired. In other words, Sorel was not a committed Marxist, but rather a committed moralist who saw in the myth of the general strike a means to achieving the social transformation he desired. It was because the proletariat were, in Sorel's view, the class most likely to effect change that he was in support of them. This is important because it shows that Sorel's concerns were not with Marxism as such, but rather with the civilising morality of myth and violence as expressed in the myth of the general strike.

Sorel's political commitments shift throughout his writing, but in his most detailed writing on myth (in *Reflections*), he is committed to the Marxist idea of a proletarian revolution. One of Sorel's most valuable insights, for Marxists, was his distancing of Marx's writing from its seeming determinism. The way that Sorel achieved this distance was through the idea that Marx was always, really, writing social myth (Sorel, 1976f [1911], pp.247-248). According to Sorel, Marx's view of impending revolution is imaginative and not historical. It is forward-looking, not backwards-looking. What Marx was doing, on Sorel's account, was to create the myth that would direct the proletariat's energies. Marx's myth was, Sorel insisted in *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics*, an artificial construction: "*Socialist sentiment is extremely artificial*. It was Marx's great mistake not to insist on this principle. The sentiment relies on reflections that have nothing to do with necessity." (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.284) Which is to say, class consciousness is not a logical conclusion from the separation of classes but must be created: it is artificial. Moreover, Sorel acknowledges that the Marxist account of revolution is not the only valid social myth: "In exploring how minds are always prepared for revolutions, it is easy to see that there has always been recourse to social myths, the contents of which have varied according to the times" (Sorel, 1976f [1911], pp.247-248). Social myths, on this view, are conditional and context dependent. Universal claims are invalid, and so Sorel is seeking to utilise a myth that will engender moral sentiments.

Sorel contends that socialism embodies the highest moral ideals created by man, and that the general strike is characteristic of the myth that he sees as necessary for the

modern world: “Socialism ... represents the highest moral ideal ever conceived by man.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.228) This is because Sorel sees proletarian socialism (as distinct from political socialism) as being created by individuals who are not followers of leaders. For Sorel, those who take part in the revolutionary proletarian movement are groups of individual producers rather than collections of individual followers. They are not subjects but rather autonomous and strong-willed agents, and this is why it is the highest moral ideal: because it embodies the idea of the virtuous, independent individual. Moreover:

Thanks to these men [people who take an active part in the revolutionary proletarian movement], we know that the general strike is indeed what I have said: the *myth* in which socialism is wholly comprised, i.e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society. Strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, the deepest and the most moving sentiments that they possess ... appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness. We thus obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness – and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.118)

As was outlined in the previous section, myth – for Sorel – is defined, in part, by its use of images, its appeal to the sentiments, and its creation of motivation. In the above quote we see how the general strike fulfils all of the requirements that Sorel has for a myth: as a myth of a coming revolution, it is forward looking; it is an image of battle and thus both image-based and violently organised; it is created by those, such as Marx, who predict a victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, thus showing how it is artificial and expectant of victory.

As stated, the function of myth – for Sorel – is to be a constructive force for change. As I have outlined, it is on the one hand because myth corresponds to what Sorel takes to be beyond the rational. Furthermore, however, myth is about ideas, and about how ideas relate to the world. Sorel outlines two types of socialism, the parliamentary and the proletariat. The former seeks gradual social change through the state, while the latter seeks a fundamental refashioning of the political world. The former seeks

agreement, while the latter seeks conflict. As Sorel outlines, regarding the two socialisms:

The great differences that exist between the two general strikes (or the two socialisms) become still more obvious when social struggles are compared to war; in fact, war may also give rise to two opposite systems of ideas, so that quite contradictory things can be said about it, all based on incontestable facts. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.159)

This leads us to two points: first, the relationship between myth and the political. Second, the way in which social struggles are analogised to war. On the first, Sorel specifically separates political/parliamentary socialism from proletarian socialism. We have already seen Sorel describe the type of myth he supports as 'social myth'. What this must lead us to conclude is that myth, for Sorel, is extra-political: it impacts upon social groups rather than political groups. The difference, arguably, comes down to Sorel's concern for *civilisational* regeneration. Sorel identifies the political with the parliamentary, and sees this as something which works against proletarian violence and myth. Chapter V of Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.143-173) focuses on the 'Political General Strike': in this Sorel speaks of it in overtly disparaging tones. Politics, for Sorel, is about agreement and consensus: exactly what myth seeks to work against. The political general strike does leave open the possibility of myth, because it cannot create images of battle: "We perceive immediately that the political general strike does not presuppose a class struggle concentrated on the field of battle in which the proletariat attacks the bourgeoisie – the division of society into two antagonistic armies disappears" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.151). Politics and myth, for Sorel, are thus opposed. Where politics exists, so does agreement and consensus. Where myth exists, we have social struggles manifested as war: exactly what Sorel seeks.

The second point raised above was that Sorel analogises social struggles to war. We might take Sorel's analogy (given that he directs us towards analogies with war) and think of two states who have a dispute over a piece of territory. The agreement-seeking method recognises the facts of the dispute and seeks some kind of agreement. The conflict-ready method recognises the very same facts, but is unwilling to let their belief in their own rightness to be compromised to any extent because they have a vision of

victory on their side. This lack of compromise from both sides would lead to war. For Sorel, this ability to be willing to go to war (or engage in class war) is good, because war is good. It is good also because it is the need for a belief in the moral rightness of your cause that is necessary. War is good because it in turn engenders nobility, glory, and strength – the very things that Sorel believes can create the change that he desires and can save civilisation and morality. Here lies a key point: that we need to understand human psychology (the pessimistic mindset), and how to act upon it (with myth), to prevent civilisational decline. The reason we need war, for Sorel, is because it is what can create the morals which can save civilisation. As we will see in Chapter 3, Sorel is not exclusively tied to a view of the myth of the general strike as essential, describing as he does the potential for a foreign war to fulfil the role he sees in the myth of the general strike. Sorel is, however, clear that revolution can play the role of the war-stage for the warrior: “In the last pages of the first chapter I compared the general strike to the Napoleonic battle which definitively crushes an adversary; this comparison will help us to understand the ideological role of the general strike.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.109) The ideological role of the general strike is thus to provide the impetus to action that initiates social change and individual moral nobility. As he notes, “In our own times, the [French revolutionary] wars of Liberty have been scarcely less fruitful in ideas than those of the ancient Greeks.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.160). The general strike fulfilled this role, for Sorel, and offered a potential myth for moral regeneration.

As I have noted, Sorel saw the general strike as the myth that would likely generate the sentiment he required. Sorel, however, was unconcerned with whether his view was objectively correct or not. Sorel saw himself as utilising a scientific method, which he took to be one of trial and error:

To proceed scientifically means, first of all, to know what forces exist in the world and then to take measures whereby we may utilise them, by reasoning from experience. This is why I say that, by accepting the idea of the general strike, although we may know that it is a myth, we are proceeding exactly as a modern physicist does who has complete confidence in his science, although he knows that the future will look down upon it as antiquated. It is we who really possess the scientific spirit, while our critics have lost touch both with modern science and philosophy; - and having proved this, we are quite easy in our minds. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.141)

The general strike is, for Sorel, the means of engendering mythic violence. Sorel has identified what he takes to be those 'forces that exist in the world' as revolutionary socialism. Sorel is using the general strike as that myth which is most likely to generate the desired outcome. This is how, and why, Sorel sees himself as working scientifically: it is about identifying the forces in the world, and utilising them to certain ends. Work on myth is analogised with science: it is the identification of "what forces exist in the world" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.141), and their putting into use. In the future, Sorel is suggesting, the general strike will no longer be mythical because it will not be a force able to act upon men and the world. This is how understanding myth, for Sorel, is analogised with science: because it is a constant assessment and appraisal of the forces in the world and how to put them into use, not an attempt to create a unity that does not exist.

Sorel has identified the myth of the general strike as that which can act upon the proletariat to create the warrior mindset that he sees as necessary for civilisational regeneration. Meisel (1951, p.48) makes the argument that it was because Sorel saw the proletariat as the most socially conservative class that he saw them as the one potentially most able to act. Rouanet offers support for this insofar as he argues Sorel's view of the bourgeoisie was of one who could no longer be expected to act:

This is the main point to be kept in mind: the basic reason why Sorel scorned the middle class was because it was complacent, unheroic, and steeped in the values of decadence ... [Sorel] however, always had a deep admiration for the bourgeoisie in its heroic times, when it was not demoralised by compromise and humanitarianism. (Rouanet, 1964, pp.49-50)

Sorel makes the point that the bourgeoisie is not inherently incapable of heroic action. In fact, according to Sorel, the bourgeoisie still represent the warrior type in the USA. I have already mentioned how Sorel saw the French bourgeoisie as decadent and incapable of action. This is not, however, an argument over which class can act to regenerate society, but rather which one is most likely:

The bourgeoisie with which Marx was familiar in England was still, in the great majority, animated by conquering, insatiable and pitiless spirit ... we should always

bear in mind this similarity between the capitalist type and the warrior type ... This type is still found today in all its purity in the United States: there are encountered the indomitable energy, the audacity based upon an accurate appreciation of its strength, the cold calculation of interests, which are the qualities of great generals and great capitalists. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.75)

It suffices here to state that Sorel had great admiration for the bourgeoisie in its conquering and heroic days. As discussed above with regards to *The Trial of Socrates*, Sorel supported an ethics of warrior virtue. The bourgeoisie had embodied this but in Europe it had lost its spirit and become tepid. Sorel was a socialist insofar as he saw the proletariat as the class most able to act upon the world to create a moral civilisation – just as had done the early Christians and the ancient Athenians. His myth of the general strike was an intervention in creating this sense of consciousness, and it was up to the experience of the world to test, scientifically, his theory. If the myth of the general strike did not work, his hypothesis was incorrect, and his hypothesis needed alteration.

What I have shown, through my analysis of Sorel's commitment to the general strike, is: first, how it conforms to Sorel's description of a myth; second, how the myth of the general strike is only, according to Sorel, the most likely myth to succeed in his era. What this shows us is that Sorel does have a general account of myth, not one solely conditioned by the myth of the general strike. What I showed was how a number of correlate terms and features were a part of myth, with one of the most important being violence: without violence, Sorel's account of myth loses its purpose. In the following section I interrogate this further, highlighting how myth is connected, for Sorel, with creating an agonistic or conflictual model of civilisation and society so as to maintain a virtuous warrior ethic.

Section 3: History and Struggle

3.1: Emancipation or Agonism?

Isaiah Berlin, in his study of thinkers who stand *Against the Current*, asks of Sorel: “if he [Sorel] believed, as he appeared to, that if the enemy weakened so would the class of producers, would not total victory lead to the elimination of the tension without which there is no effort, no creation?” (Berlin, 1979, p.321). Furthermore: is the function of

myth, for Sorel, a means to achieve the emancipatory goal that Marxism purportedly aims at, or is it to act as an impetus to action that will pit man against man? Is it to achieve the conflict-free stage of dialectically resolved history, or to allow one to “try one’s strength in battles, to submit to the test which gives the military calling its claim to superiority, and to conquer glory at the peril of one’s life”? (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.159-160) I will argue throughout this section that it is undoubtedly the latter.

One question I asked above is whether we should consider Sorel’s work as aiming at emancipation or agonism. To begin, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by these terms. Marx’s idea of emancipation is that in the state of dialectically resolved history, man will no longer live in slavery but will be free. In Marx’s earlier works freedom is viewed from an almost Aristotelian perspective of achieving liberation from capitalism so as to reach human flourishing (cf. e.g. Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*; Marx, 1973). By the time of the Communist Manifesto this becomes a view of emancipation based around the dialectical resolution of the inherent contradictions of capitalism (Marx and Engels, 1996).¹⁷ Sorel, who drew heavily on Marx, could quite feasibly have envisaged the general strike as a means of achieving this kind of liberated society. I do not believe this is what Sorel sought. Instead, I take Sorel to be in favour of an agonistic society or civilisation. In my use of the term agonism I am situating Sorel within a tradition of thought which sees conflict as a good in itself.

Mark Wenman, a recent commentator on agonistic democracy, describes agonism thus: “one of the most prominent aspects of contemporary agonistic democracy has been an emphasis on the positive value of conflict.” (Wenman, 2013, pp.45-46) In the tradition of agonistic thought, Wenman includes the likes of Nietzsche, Freud, and Arendt (Wenman, 2013). I believe Sorel deserves a place in this tradition. What agonism seeks to do is to give conflict a role within society, and to see this as a good. Chantal Mouffe describes the basic idea of this as “relinquishing the ideal of a democratic society as the realisation of a perfect harmony or transparency.” (Mouffe, 200, p.100) Sorel does not, I contest, seek harmony or transparency. Sorel, rather, seeks ongoing violent struggle, motivated by the sentiments and emotions engendered by myth.

¹⁷ By the time of Marx’s writing of *Capital* the emancipatory element becomes less clear: some interpretations see the emancipatory element as hidden, while those such as Althusser go so far as to say that Marx has given up on the emancipatory goal (Althusser and Balibar, 1977). I leave this question for others.

Sorel, like Marx, never gives a detailed account of a post-revolutionary era. Sorel however, unlike Marx, removes all determinism from the Marxist view of history. Instead of dialectically arranged conflict driving history, we instead have – with Sorel – an aleatory view of history. In his *Illusions of Progress*, Sorel describes it thus: “when one no longer intends to reason on the ‘eternal plan’, which is not accessible to historians, chance is found to be the great law of history, the very condition of the regularity that permits the philosophical study of history.” (Sorel, 1969 [1906], p.122) And moreover,

If anything unique has been produced in history, it is because chance plays an enormous part in the life of peoples. It sometimes happens that the union of powerful causes produces results that are of an entirely new type. The historian must seek to determine those new types to which the most important causes are related. But he would be on the road to the absurd if he purported to teach us why, in a given place and at a given date, this unique conjunction of causes came about. (Sorel, 1969 [1906], p.171)

Chance and luck, are thus – for Sorel – the driving forces of history. This relates to both Sorel’s idea of civilisational decline and the question of emancipation: Sorel thinks there is no way of predicting an emancipated stage of history, and that it is rather driven by luck. In light of this, Sorel believes we must think about how to achieve the ideal of a morally virtuous civilisation without utilising deterministic ideas about history.

For Sorel, we might see moral virtue as working against chance and luck in a similar way to how Machiavelli takes *virtu* to work against *fortuna* (Machiavelli, 2005, pp.84-87). Without a predictable ‘law of history’, without an ‘eternal plan’, without endorsing the absurd, the only way to relate ourselves to history is to define ourselves through our ability to achieve greatness in spite of it. Sorel’s view is in direct contrast to the Enlightenment’s progressive view of history. History, for Sorel, is not the progression of reason or of man. Stanley claims that, “Sorel sees history as a sea of decline (*decadence*) punctuated by occasional moments of historical greatness.” (Stanley, 1969, p.xxxv) I would argue, against Stanley, that while Sorel does see this ‘sea of decline’ it is because of the weakness of individuals and of their civilisation rather than based in a

directional account of history. The way in which men can counter this is through virtue, driven by myth.

It is our virtue, for Sorel, which can allow us to achieve great things despite the fortune of history. Without virtue we are unlikely to achieve anything of importance. Neal Wood (1968) has also argued that Sorel stands alongside Machiavelli in this tradition:

Sorel and Machiavelli were moralists in the sense that both were profoundly disturbed by the behaviour of their contemporaries and wished to change it for the better. They were not moralists as, for example, Plato and Kant were, for they did not arrive at universal moral principles from an elaborately conceived and intricately developed philosophic system. (Wood, 1968, p.84)

Wood sees in the two thinkers a shared viewpoint and approach: “The principle tenets of the tradition consist of a faith in an empirical science of politics, and a conception of politics as a struggle for power involving force and fraud, in which a ruling elite and non-rational actions arising from an ideology are central” (Wood, 1968, p.76).¹⁸ Moreover, between Machiavelli and Sorel “grounds for the comparison of the two thinkers are to be sought in their common devotion to a regenerative morality born out of strife and conflict, for which they find a source of inspiration in the ancient classical world.” (Wood, 1968, p.76) This interpretation, which coheres with my earlier sections and chapter, suggests that Sorel is only concerned with Marxism insofar as it serves the purpose of offering a means by which to drive men towards a virtuous conflict. If history is undetermined and driven by chance, like Machiavelli’s metaphor of the river (Machiavelli, 2005, p.84), man must be virtuous and strong to achieve anything within it. This, I contend, is the crux of Sorel’s position: if the proletariat are to become virtuous men, they need a warrior mindset, and one which must be driven by myth. Given that history is driven by chance, it is only as virtuous men that they can achieve anything.

As mentioned, I use the term men in my discussion of Sorel, myth and violence because it is men that Sorel describe as those engaging in action. This leads us, however, onto

¹⁸ I do not offer any interpretative stance, or comment upon Wood’s interpretative stance, of Machiavelli. That would require a thesis in itself.

two key aspects which have not yet been explored: the implications of Sorel's gendered account, and the prospects for accommodating Sorel's insights from a feminist perspective. On the first, it is not clear that Sorel has a stance on gender regarding myth: there is no reason spelled out by Sorel why myth should be something which impacts upon one gender more than another, other than in its link to a warrior life. I take up the warrior aspect of Sorel and gender in Chapter 3. Regarding the second point, Tudor Balinisteanu has interrogated Sorel's theory of myth from this very perspective. For Balinisteanu, Sorel's theory of myth is one which allows for the imagination and expression of "zones of alterity" (Balinisteanu, 2014, p.109). While I will not outline Balinisteanu's somewhat dazzling utilisation of theorists to make his case, it is useful to point to an argument put forward towards the end of his essay. Regarding Butler's work on performativity, he argues:

Sorel's theory of social myth is implicitly a theory of performativity, for social myths are always expressed in the language of action. Social myths provide fictions that, like the fantasy of the general strike in Sorel's view, may be only discursive constructions, yet in the subjective realm where these change how we think our agency and social relation to the material, they establish a will to act against the power legitimated in reiterations of normative identities within citational chains. (Balinisteanu, 2014, p.125)

For Balinisteanu, then, Sorel's ideas on myth have the potential to inform groups who are subject to power imbalances within the contemporary world: it allows us/them to think in a way which is outside of contemporary power relations towards a new, not-yet existing world. This 'zone of alterity' permits and even encourages thinking outside of contemporary power relations. If this argument is convincing, then it is worth considering Sorel as potentially containing many more insights for contemporary work on performativity and gender. I take up the issue of gender and conflict in more detail in the next chapter, but it is worth reiterating Balinisteanu's argument that Sorel does, potentially, provide a way of thinking about 'zones of alterity', including issues of gender. What Balinisteanu does not confront is the issue of conflict within Sorel's work: viewed within the context of my argument, it would be necessary for gender to create a view of conflict which drives individuals towards battle. We could view a group such as the suffragettes in such a way, although we would also have to accept that such a view would reinforce gender binaries. While we may be willing to subscribe to a separation of bourgeoisie and proletariat based on control of the means of production, subscribing

to a gender binary would work counter to much of what Balinisteanu seeks to work towards. In pushing groups of opponents towards conflict, a gender myth would necessarily reinforce gender binaries by supporting stark oppositions between the groups.

Myth is thus a means of acting to create strong, virtuous individuals, willing to engage in battle. These myths must be relevant (i.e. the myth of the general strike is context dependent) to their age: “Myths must be judged as a means of acting on the present; all discussion of the method of applying them as future history is devoid of sense.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.116-117) In Sorel’s time he clearly saw the proletarian myth of the general strike as the one that would act upon the present. The myth of the general strike, for Sorel, embodied vital conflict, and a means of acting upon men so that they may be virtuous: “In place of the vital competition between individual men, socialism substitutes the class struggle. Better still, the struggles fought on democratic grounds (and especially in the Greek *polis*) were hardly anything but vital conflicts, wars of the poor who wished to confiscate the wealth of the rich.” (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.285) The myth of the general strike is thus the myth which, during his own time, Sorel saw as most likely to engender those values which he sought. In the past, Sorel argued, we have seen the early Christians, the ancient Athenians and the French revolutionaries act with mythic virtue. Sorel’s time was, in his view, the time of the general strike. To return to Berlin’s problem, posed at the beginning of this section: would a total victory for either side result in exactly the opposite of what Sorel wants, in peace and an end to struggle? The answer is yes. To add, on the question I posed, is Sorel committed to an emancipatory socialist revolution or to an agonistic environment creative of virtue? The answer is undoubtedly the latter.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have sought to situate Sorel’s understanding of myth within his broader approach, seeking to highlight how a number of related concepts – civilisation, morality, psychology – influence and shape his view of myth. Through my analysis I highlighted that Sorel was, despite his Marxist influence, ultimately striving for a conflict-driven society which would maintain a vital morality and rejuvenate civilisation. His myth was thus not an attempt at emancipation or liberation. I showed how this belief in conflict required a myth to drive men to act. This action stood

opposed to Sorel's understanding of politics as an area of agreement and consensus. Myth thus stands, for Sorel, as something which is psychologically necessary for violent actions and a warrior life: the only things that Sorel sees as being able to prevent the degeneration of civilisation.

What my interpretation raises is some important questions over the relationship between the concept of myth and the related ideas of the socialist project, the martial/agonistic virtues, and civilisational health. It should be clear that Sorel's commitment to socialism is limited: Sorel does not support a socialist project of emancipation, and so we should wonder what the proletariat are fighting for; the answer is virtue and, in turn, civilisational health. Socialism is merely a means to achieving conflict, and the means most likely to engender the sentiments and passions required. The myth of the proletarian general strike stands in opposition to the political general strike., and to any kind of bargaining. If we ignore this specifically violent and conflict-driven aspect of Sorel's concept of myth, we fail to fully comprehend or understand its nature and role. Sorel's account of myth as necessarily violent and creative of conflict is also distinctly different from the accounts of Cassirer, Bottici et al that I outlined in the introduction: none of these explicitly link myth with violence in the way that Sorel does. Sorel's work on myth pushes at many points that political theory sometimes fails to sufficiently think through: what if people are motivated by mythic images rather than rational argument? What if, adding to this, it is myths of conflict, division and opposition which are most appealing? Moreover, if any of Sorel's arguments are borne out, is there a way of harnessing these myths to a progressive cause? I also emphasised the way in which Sorel's work on myth relates to gender: I highlighted the performative aspect to Sorel's work, but also the potential problems a binary account of oppositional groups has for gender. Finally, it is worth considering the premises upon which Sorel's account is built: his view of civilisation, virtue, decline, and weakness. Sorel's view is explicitly anti-progressive in its view of history: if we accept a non-progressive view of history, how do we situate myth within history and how does myth relate to an overcoming of falsehood?

Chapter 3

In the “Immemorial Interests of Civilisation”: Georges Sorel on Violence¹⁹

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a critical account of violence within the work of Georges Sorel, and to situate his understanding of violence alongside his account of myth. Sorel is most famous for his *Reflections on Violence* and, as such, is often thought of as a theorist of violence. The aim of this chapter will be to give a more nuanced account of Sorel’s thought, while still emphasising the role of violence within his work. I argue that Sorel was concerned with violence primarily because he saw it as having a role in the regeneration of morals and the creation of a thriving civilisation through the creation of a warrior mindset or a constitutively violent society.

I begin, in Section 1, by introducing Sorel’s understanding of violence. In my account of Sorelian violence I offer a typology where I break down Sorel’s use of violence into four types: ‘unspecified’ violence, proletarian violence, war, and force. I argue that it is only in war that Sorel sees the possibility of creating a warrior mindset, and that this is the primary means he sees of achieving morality. War, for Sorel, includes both international conflict and class war (thus, also proletarian violence), his *Reflections on Violence* being primarily concerned with the latter. In Section 2 I build upon my typology of Sorelian violence. I begin to interrogate what Sorel outlines as violence, and begin to highlight some of the contradictions in his account. I show that it is not entirely clear what Sorel’s preferred type of violence is, and that his professed support for a violence which aims against the state is inconsistent. In Section 3 I use the case of Norway to show how Sorel also supports types of violence which do not seem to be strongly connected to war or myth. I conclude the section by proposing that Sorel’s account of a violent society may be constitutive: i.e. Sorel may see the violence of

¹⁹ Inset quote from: (Sorel, 1999, p.85)

society as the moral good, rather than seeing violence as instrumental to a moral good. In doing this, I seek to emphasise the contradictions and difficulties in understanding Sorel's thought on violence and its relation to myth. Furthermore, I seek to emphasise the role and importance of violence within Sorel's work.

Section 1: Understanding Sorel's use of Violence

What I show throughout this section is how Sorel's work gives us insights into many key areas of thinking through the nature of violence: its conceptual nature (i.e. what violence is) and its purpose. I argue that Sorel has four conceptual uses of the word violence. Moreover, I show how violence, for Sorel, enhances life. I will focus here primarily on Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*. In this, Sorel does give us a definition of violence. He defines violence as that which resists the force of the state. Sorel does not, however, use the word violence consistently; because of this I bring in evidence from other texts of Sorel's to try and discern a meaningful concept of violence.

Sorel does not begin his *Reflections on Violence* by defining what he means by violence. Possibly due to its original format as a series of journal articles, Sorel waits until page 165 (of 251) to offer any definition of violence. The way that Sorel defines violence is by distinguishing it from what he terms 'force':

Sometimes the terms 'force' and 'violence' are used in speaking of acts of authority, sometimes in speaking of acts of revolt. It is obvious that the two cases give rise to very different consequences. I think it would be better to adopt a terminology which would give rise to no ambiguity, and that the term 'violence' should be employed only for the second sense; we should say, therefore, that the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order. The bourgeoisie have used force since the beginning of modern times, while the proletariat now reacts against the middle class and against the State by violence. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.165-166

We see in this extract that force, for Sorel, is that which maintains the social order in which a minority governs. Violence, for Sorel, is thus that which aims at destroying this order. What we also see is that what distinguishes these is their consequences. The

difference between the two is not in their inherent nature, but rather their functions. The difference between force and violence, thus, seems to be in the ends towards which they aim. We can see here that we have two forms of power in operation: the violence of the state which maintains a minority's rule and maintains power (force); and that which challenges this and seeks to undermine or overcome the prevailing power (violence). Because Sorel uses the word violence in various ways, I will from hereon in name the type of violence defined here by Sorel as 'violence' as proletarian violence. The reason for doing this is because, as already stated, Sorel does not use the term violence consistently and I must maintain an analytic separation between when Sorel is using violence to mean proletarian violence, and when he is indicating something else.

Sorel is not always as clear in his definition of violence. Only ten pages prior to his definitional outline of violence, Sorel uses violence in a much more ambiguous way:

The masses believe that they are suffering from the iniquitous consequences of a past which was full of violence, ignorance and wickedness; they are confident that the genius of their leaders will render them less unhappy; they believe that democracy, if it were only free, would replace a malevolent hierarchy by a benevolent hierarchy. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.157)

It is not entirely clear whether Sorel means violence in terms of a revolt against force, or simply violence as is more commonly understood. Sorel's *Reflections* are, furthermore, peppered throughout with the word violence and it is rarely clear in what sense of the word he is using.²⁰ In other words, it is not clear that Sorel even has terminological coherency within a single text where he specifically identifies and defines the concept in question. While it is true that Sorel's *Reflections* were first published in serial form, it is also true that Sorel was a frequent editor of his older texts, meaning that had he desired to change it, he may well have done so. Given that Sorel is ambiguous with his use of the term violence within *Reflections*, we may garner some insights from Sorel's other texts. If we accept Sorel's assertion that his use of the word violence is defined as opposed to force, we may gain a better grasp on both if we understand the relationship between the two.

²⁰ The French text also uses the same word, *violence*, in both occasions that I describe above (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.116 and p.110)

In his *Ethics of Socialism*, Sorel asserts that “Immediate violence is found at the origin of the history of law.” (Sorel, 1976 [1898], p.101). I will assume here, because it does not fit with his account in *Reflections*, that in this statement Sorel is not using the definition of violence that he uses in *Reflections*. This assertion, from a lecture given ten years before the publication of *Reflections*, may give us an insight into the nature of force, as defined by Sorel. I suggest that Sorel’s use of the term violence in the above statement indicates a physical manifestation of power (an unspecified violence), rather than a challenging of force. I suggest this because, at the origin of law there cannot be a legal force against which violence can be opposed. Violence instead (in this quote), I propose, indicates an unspecified violence which is some kind of physical manifestation of power. At the foundation of force was an unspecified violence, and so all force is essentially founded on this. Legal codes of bureaucratic order – which (Sorel argues) claim to be founded in a move away from barbarism – are in fact just the codification of a physical assertion of power that was there at its origin. Sorel’s point here, as I have constructed it, is not to try to escape from *any* manifestations of power by the creation of a non-physical power (law), but rather to highlight the fundamental violence (of an unspecified form) at the heart of all legal regimes; this then allows us to challenge the opposition of (order maintaining) force and (order destroying) violence. Looking back from a perspective that has the benefits of the work of Foucault, the Frankfurt School et al, this may seem uncontroversial, but Sorel did not have the benefit of this and sees himself at the forefront of a pushback against what he calls “bourgeois philosophy” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.65). Force, therefore, can be physical in its manifestation of power, but also must be based around maintaining a particular social order and doing this through a bureaucratized and legalised mechanism for violence. In this sense, Sorel’s understanding of state violence does not differ dramatically from many other Marxists who see the state as a violent tool for maintaining the bourgeoisie’s power. This is the meaning of force as I use it throughout. Furthermore, my outline of ‘unspecified violence’ as a physical manifestation of power will be used in this sense (of physical power) throughout.

Understanding an unspecified violence as, in some sense, present within legal forms of power as well as oppositions to that power is an important insight insofar as it may lead us to question the legitimacy of laws, the legal system, and justice. There have been, and remain, legal systems around the world that clearly rely on the explicit use of physical power (unspecified violence, in my interpretation of Sorel). If my

interpretation of Sorel is correct, then it also leads us to challenge the hidden violence – especially at its origin – of *all* legal systems because all legal systems necessarily have their foundation in an unspecified violence. In this sense we may challenge Hobbes’ view that the state is what puts an end to the “warre ... of every man against every man” (Hobbes, 2011 [1651], p.88) through a contractual agreement. We may also challenge the Enlightenment view that the political sphere is one free from violence. Instead, we might follow Foucault’s assertion that “we can invert Clausewitz's proposition and say that politics is the continuation of war by other means” (Foucault, 2003, p.15): a political ‘peace’ would rather represent the abstraction of conflict into law rather than peace in the sense of an absence of conflict.²¹ If this is the case – that there is always a form of violence inherent in legal systems – then Sorel’s preference for violence *qua* war is not the thing that needs thinking through: what, rather, needs thinking through, is this inability of escaping from violence within human political life.²²

As I indicated above, Sorel is not concerned with giving a critical account of violence that seeks an escape from violence. There are positive aspects of proletarian violence, for Sorel. Importantly, for Sorel, proletarian violence must not be framed as a relic of barbarism. According to Sorel, in our aversion to violence we are conditioned by our knowledge of ‘bourgeois philosophy’: “It is very difficult to understand proletarian violence as long as we try to think in terms of the ideas disseminated by bourgeois philosophy; according to this philosophy, violence is a relic of barbarism which is bound to disappear under the progress of enlightenment.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.65). Sorel is clearly arguing against what he sees as bourgeois philosophy’s renunciation of all forms of violence (because Sorel does not see law or force as non-violent). He is also arguing, importantly, against the belief in the Enlightenment’s ideal of progress achieving a society free of violence.

While Sorel is not opposed to violence *per se*, he *is* opposed to certain types of violence. Sorel, for example, opposes violence between certain groups of individuals:

²¹ n.b. Foucault’s inversion of ‘Clausewitz’s proposition’ is actually an inversion of a simplified view of Clausewitz’s proposition: cf. the endnotes in (Frazer and Hutchings, 2011a, p.71)

²² I return to these problems in my discussion of Walter Benjamin in Chapter 4. I take Benjamin’s interpretation of Sorel to be similar to my own, and I take Benjamin to appeal to the possibility of emancipation from legal violence through a divine violence which is necessarily implicated with a particular understanding of truth and the absence of power.

Everybody agrees that the disappearance of these old brutalities [fighting between working men's associations] is an excellent thing; from this opinion it was so easy to pass to the idea that all violence is an evil, that this step was bound to have been taken; and, in fact, the great mass of the people, who are not accustomed to thinking, have come to this conclusion, which is now accepted as dogma by the *bleating herd* of moralists. They have not asked themselves what there is in brutality which is reprehensible. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.186-187)

The violence between working men's associations was not in opposition to force, it was directed at other groups who lacked force.²³ It was, presumably, spontaneous and not bureaucratised (these were not paramilitaries but groups of working men). This was, on Sorel's view, negative. We see Sorel describe them as 'brutalities'. As well as showing us again the difficulty with understanding Sorel's use of the term violence, it shows us that violence is not positive in itself, but as a means: violence, for Sorel, is instrumental. What is violence instrumental for, and why do these incidents of violence between groups of individuals represent brutalities? Below I will argue that it is primarily war that Sorel supports, as it can (he believes) engender moral feelings and sentiments. Small acts of violence between groups is not enough to engender feelings of nobility, whereas war – class war or a foreign war – is. This is important because it highlights that the central point of violence, for Sorel, is not connected to its intuitive and spontaneous aspects, but to its use in creating a noble and moral sensibility.

Finally, we come to Sorel's definition of war. Sorel explicitly relates war to both class war and to a "foreign war" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.72). In a discussion of myth, Sorel explicitly overlaps the idea of proletarian violence with that of war: "the general strike is ... the *myth* in which socialism is wholly comprised, i.e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.118). War, which in this example Sorel is using in the context of class war, can thus engender (on Sorel's account) the noblest and deepest sentiments which men possess. As Sorel states:

²³ It is worth noting here, again, the ambiguity in Sorel's use of the term.

War may be considered from its noble side, i.e. as it has been considered by poets celebrating armies which have been particularly illustrious; proceeding thus we find in war:

1. The idea that the profession of arms cannot compare to any other profession, – that it puts the man who adopts this profession in a class which is superior to the ordinary conditions of life, – that history is based entirely on the adventures of warriors, so that the economic life existed only to maintain them.
2. The sentiment of glory which Renan so justly looked upon as one of the most singular and the most powerful creations of human genius, and which has been of such incomparable value in history.
3. The ardent desire to try one's strength in battles, to submit to the test which gives the military calling its claim to superiority, and to conquer glory at the peril of one's life. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.159-160)

What Sorel is describing here is not violence in a general sense, nor proletarian violence. What Sorel is describing is the wider category of war (which can include proletarian violence *qua* class war) and the positive view of it. War is thus a broad category which can include class war, would engage in violence in an unspecified sense, and – depending on the type of war – could also engage in proletarian violence. Presumably if the army or an armed police force were engaged in combating proletarian violence then they too would be engaged in war (but as force), and thus war seems to be able to be manifested as both force and violence.

Sorel's account here seems interesting: the spontaneous and intuitive aspect of Sorel's positive view of myth, where men are virile, morally virtuous individuals, is combined with the organising power of the images and poetry of war. In other words, the power of myth, as I described it in the previous chapter, is somehow supposed to both organise and be spontaneous in its relation to violence and conflict. The role of myth, in this function, seems to be to inject order into spontaneity. It is in mythically inspired war that Sorel sees positive aspects to proletarian violence: those positives being the nobility of war, the sentiment of glory, the engendering of deep sentiments. We have, moreover, already seen how Sorel distinguished the 'old brutalities' of violence between working men's groups from the positive account of class and foreign war. The difference seems to come down to a difference in moral ideals: it was not a mythic ideal (whether Christian ethics, proletarian revolution, national pride) which drove the violence between working men's associations. The violence of war, "as it has been considered by poets" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.159), is important because it connects to

Sorel's account of myth and the need of myth for violent action in the pursuit of an ideal. If my interpretation holds, however, then Sorel seems to be missing something: there is a tension between the organising power of myth, and its separating power; there is a tension between the individual and the collective; and there is a tension between the locus of the myth being primarily proletarian and yet also accessible to the military of the state. What this highlights is how Sorel's understanding of violence, is reliant on his understanding of myth: Sorel sees war as a good because myth "correspond[s]" with war (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.118). Force and unspecified violence are not good because Sorel does not see them as necessarily moral, precisely because they are not connected to myth. Exactly what this correspondence is, moreover, is also unclear. It is, in some sense, this link between myth (and its creation of an ideal) and violence which seems to distinguish that violence which Sorel supports from that which he does not. We thus see the importance in understanding Sorelian myth in trying to tease out a coherent account of violence in Sorel's work.

We saw, in Chapter 2, how Sorel opposes politics and myth. From what we have seen, violence and politics are not opposed in the same way. For Sorel, force is inherent within the political order. It is for this very reason that Sorel seeks to create a violent opposition. Sorel is seeking to overthrow the political violence of force with the violence of war. The relationship between violence and politics is thus not exclusive, but it is a specifically violence, force, which is present within politics. Myth, for Sorel, thus has a positive relationship with certain types of violence insofar as it engenders and supports them. As I outlined at the end of the previous chapter, Sorel's support for an agonistic model of society would also suggest that he would support any myths which would lead to conflict. As I work through Sorel's understanding of violence, it is worth considering this dynamic between myth, violence, and the political.

What I have tried to show throughout this section is that Sorel's concept of violence is actually, then, several conceptions of violence. I have broken these down into four types of violence: violence in an unspecified sense (a physical assertion of power); proletarian violence (aimed against the force of the state); force which maintains the status quo of a ruling minority; and war. I argued that, for Sorel, politics was not an arena which was free of violence, but rather one which was violent by the very nature of law as codified and bureaucratised violence. Sorel's discussions of violence, however, are often ambiguous and, at times, confusing. The link between myth and violence seems to be

that war and myth are inherently connected. Because, for Sorel, myth is connected to some kind of ideal, this means that mythic violence *qua* war carries with it a moral sentiment which may be lacking from other forms of violence. Over the next two sections I seek to test this typology and push on the details of Sorel's account.

Section 2: Sorel's desire for War – Civilisation and Decline

Throughout this section I seek to present evidence that supports the argument that the type of violence Sorel primarily sees as good is war. In this section, I argue that Sorel sought war as a means by which the degeneration of civilisation could be reversed. I argue that, for Sorel, civilisations flourish when they embody a mythologically violent martial life. Sorel takes the heroic warrior (Homeric Greek, early Christian, Revolutionary Frenchman) as his model of an archetype for a society that has the strength to maintain civilisation. It will be argued that weakness, apathy, and decline, for Sorel, come from the decadence (both economic and social) of ruling elites. Sorel, moreover, sees his own era as poised at one of these moments of decline: Sorel argues that the bourgeoisie have lost their revolutionary zeal and become a conservative class wanting to maintain power and wishing to offer concessions to the proletariat (assisted by the role of the parliamentary socialists) to secure this. For Sorel, this path can only lead to the weakening of individuals and the collapse of society. This is Sorel's central fear against which his work is aimed and why he sees a need for war: because war represents both the means and the end of overcoming this weakness and degeneration.

Throughout Sorel's texts, he decries weakness and apathy. He sees in the concessions of parliamentary socialism and the attempt to reach accord not only a sign of class weakness, but the shift from waking reality into a regrettable slumber. According to Sorel, in various points throughout history the weakness of those who have not been engaged in constant struggle has been shown, and Sorel sees it as occurring again in his own era. Of the modern bourgeoisie, Sorel despairingly declares:

The ideology of a timorous, humanitarian bourgeoisie professing to have freed its thought from the conditions of its existence is grafted on to the degeneration of the capitalist economy; the race of bold captains who made the greatness of modern industry disappears to make way for an ultra-civilised aristocracy that demands to be left in peace. This degeneration fills our parliamentary socialists with joy. Their

role would vanish if they were confronted with a bourgeoisie which was energetically engaged on the paths of economic progress, which regarded timidity with shame and which was proud in looking after its class interests. In the presence of the bourgeoisie which has become almost as stupid as the nobility of the eighteenth century, their power is enormous. If the degradation of the upper middle classes continues to progress at the pace it has taken in the last few years, our official socialists may reasonably hope to reach the goal of their dreams and sleep in sumptuous mansions. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.71-72)

We see here that Sorel praises those early bourgeoisie who engaged ‘energetically’ – ‘bold captains of industry’ who were ‘proud of their class interests’. Instead, the modern bourgeoisie want to be left in peace, the very opposite of being engaged in conflict. What seems to be a central element of the above quotation, however, is the association of a desire for peace with ‘timidity’, ‘stupidity’ and ‘degeneration’. This alignment between peace and degeneration is a consistent theme in Sorel’s writings. I have already enunciated a number of these themes, in Chapter 2, with regards to Sorel’s account of pessimism and how he sees decline and degeneration coming out of an optimistic mindset which will not engage in struggle. I will not repeat the arguments made there again, but the example of the Roman empire fits well, Sorel asserts: “We ... possess a dreadful historical experience of a great transformation taking place at a time of economic decadence; I mean the victory of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire which closely followed it.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.82) He, moreover, clearly aligns this kind of decadence with his contemporary France. Peace, then, aligns itself with decadence and degeneration, and allows for the collapse of society.

This is where we can identify Sorel’s understanding of the relationship between myth, violence and the political: the political is good insofar as it is engaged in war. We can cite Sorel’s own examples of the Roman Empire and the Ancient Greeks. Myths, in these cases, were part of the political, and underpinned the political. Sorel’s contemporary France is clearly lacking the mythically inspired violence that these other political communities possessed. Politics, then, is not without violence or myth, but it needs mythic violence and to maintain its moral vitality. Supporting this, we see Sorel’s support for a foreign war.

If we know how Sorel sees us as being able to overcome the stupidity, timidity and degeneration of a polity gone soft, we may be able to interrogate the problem even further. In identifying the solution, we can better understand the problem. There are, Sorel asserts, two means:

A great foreign war, which might reinvigorate lost energies and which, in any case, would doubtless bring into government men with the will to govern; or a great extension of proletarian violence, which would make the revolutionary reality evident to the bourgeoisie and would lead to their disgust with the humanitarian platitudes with which Jaurès lulls them to sleep. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.72)²⁴

Sorel is clearly in favour of strength and energy, which he has already opposed to stupidity and degeneration. We can see here that Sorel sees the ‘reinvigoration of lost energies’ and the ‘will to govern’ as what is needed to overcome the present apathy. Sorel analogises struggle with life, and this struggle with the continued functioning of society and the maintenance of civilisation. Peace is analogised with sleep and a collapse of civilisation and morals. Politics is useful insofar as it serves mythically inspired violence, but is not essential. Strong individuals are seen as morally praiseworthy by Sorel, for it is they who have a clear sense of belief, action and – importantly – are *willing* to act. Moreover, though, it is a great foreign war (presumably a political act) or an extension of proletarian violence which would ‘reinvigorate lost energies’. Violence *qua* war thus plays the role of engendering energy and overcoming timidity. It is through this active and positive sense of being that Sorel sees civilisation and morality as being ‘reinvigorated’. We must also note that it is not only proletarian violence as opposition to force that is performing this function, because a ‘great foreign war’ cannot be seen to be challenging the social order in which a minority rules. It can also not be seen as being anti or extra political. Violence, although seemingly instrumental, is ultimately aimed at this sense of reinvigoration and strength, not instrumental in the sense of achieving a given political end. It is war, in both senses described here, which provides the possibility for overcoming. An absence of war, therefore, is aligned with degeneration, weakness, timidity, and a lack of energy.

²⁴ Jean Jaurès was one of the leading French social democrats at the time of the publication of *Reflections*.

Sorel uses numerous historical examples to reinforce his argument that a warrior lifestyle will maintain a virtuous and thriving civilisation: he cites early capitalist businessmen, Christian monks, and Greek warriors (among others). What characterises these groups of people, on Sorel's view, is a virility and strength which allows them to achieve great deeds. In his *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics*, Sorel notes the longstanding peace that has reigned in much of Europe for decades. He also adds: "For France this prolonged peace has been a cause of moral and intellectual weakness, as well as economic weakness, the spirit of enterprise having become less virile." (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.317) As we saw in the previous chapter, there is, for Sorel, a clear link between the ethics of the warrior and that of the capitalist: "We should connect [the French Revolution with enterprising business] these speculations to the wars of liberty, not only because these wars provided means for speculation, but also because there are many profound analogies between the psychology of warriors and that of the great money managers." (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.133) As I have already argued (cf. Chapter 2), what we can thus discern in Sorel is a kind of psychological or emotive account of motivation and will: an account which is closely connected to his views on myth and which conditions his views of the effect of psychology/emotion upon morality. It is worth here referring to my discussion in Chapter 2 where I outlined Sorel's account of pessimism: the psychology of pessimism is what Sorel sees as the necessary driving force behind any kind of greatness. Sorel also associates the warrior mindset with that of pessimism. All of this becomes unified within Sorel's violent myth of war as a means of fulfilling the necessary psychological needs of a human life that can create a thriving civilisation.

The will, then, is clearly of central importance to Sorel. It is this strong will which runs throughout all the periods of greatness that Sorel admires. If we look at things from the point of view of the will, according to Sorel, we inevitably end up with a heroic view of life: "the interpretation of the world made from the standpoint of the will is going to produce a legendary, heroic, or lyrical body of literature; philosophical idealism serves as the basis for criticism of established institutions, customs, or ideas". (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.190) On this view, philosophy can only criticise while only the will can create. To reinforce this, Sorel also notes that the most important values in the contemporary world are ones connected to virtue, not to rules. The establishment and following of rules, for Sorel, is sapping of the strength that he sees as necessary for a warrior mindset and for a virtuous morality. Being able to will is what creates true morality and this primarily comes from noble individuals, motivated by myth, and not

from rules. Rules, bureaucracy and administration will only ever, on Sorel's view, create servility and stagnation: "The superiority of enthusiasm over regular administration could have seemed more obvious to Fourier's contemporaries, since the empire was dead because of administration and regularity. It lost power the moment the old enthusiasm diminished". (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.128) To have virtuous ethics, on Sorel's view, we need virtuous individuals rather than strict rules. It is not only about appearing as good, but being ethical: Sorel describes the 1848 revolution as a 'burlesque', stating that the word applies to those who wish "to pose as a hero, while showing that he is only a poor philistine; while being an ass, he wants to wear the pelt of a lion." (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.141) To be heroic and ethical, on Sorel's account, we must not just act like it, we must be it. To offer a well thought out account of ethics is insufficient, an ethical society is achieved only by living ethically.

As I have outlined, for Sorel, an ethical life is one of a strong-willed individual living with a warrior ethos. It is, on Sorel's view, simple ethics that create a virtuous will, and philosophical trickery which creates an unheroic view of life. It is worth considering what Sorel says on the matter when discussing his contemporary era – an era which we have already seen him describe as degenerate and in a state of decline: "The values to which the contemporary world clings most closely, and which it considers the true *values of virtue*, are not realised in covenants, but in the family; respect for the human person, sexual fidelity and devotion to the weak constitute the elements of morality of which all high-minded men are proud". (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.234, italics in original). While it may not be an obvious link between a warrior ethic and devotion to the weak, the important point for Sorel seems to be the ability to will, as oriented by myth. There is, however, another element to Sorel's assertion here: that true virtue is realised in 'the family' and 'sexual fidelity'.

I have already discussed the issue of gender in relation to myth, but it is worth considering in more detail how Sorel sees the role of the family and of gender within his account of violence. In *Gender for the Warfare State*, Robin Truth Goodman reads Sorel against Clarence Lispector and Antonio Negri (Goodman, 2017, pp.150-151). She argues that, for Sorel, violence is something which is physically enacted upon bodies. With this we can, in most senses, agree. What Goodman then does is to compare this to Lispector's hero from her novel *The Hour of The Star*, Macabéa. Where Sorel's warrior violence is a simple physical assertion, the violence we see in Macabéa comes merely

down to her existence and refusal to adapt. The violence is not the physical impression upon a body, but a social process of subjectivity creation: it is in the creation of a female subject that violence is done (Goodman, 2017, pp.150-151). The female hero in Lispector's text, according to Goodman, represents "the invention of a female subjectivity that repeats *and* interrupts the symbolic production of the national warrior-hero." (Goodman, 2017, p.150). What Goodman identifies (utilising Negri) is a shift between Sorel's era and that of the 1970s: whereas Sorel saw the family as something that stood outside of the conflictual relations of class and society, by the 1970s there had been an "infiltration" (Goodman, 2017, p.151) of these relations into all aspects of life. Quite what Sorel would have made of this Goodman does not discuss. Given, however, that Sorel sees the family as representing the "*true values of virtue*" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.234), we must infer that Sorel would see the intrusion of conflict into the family as a negative. It is, perhaps, paradoxical of Sorel to seek conflict between class alongside harmony within the home. What such an account must lead us to assume is that Sorel's account supports a patriarchal view of society: it is, for Sorel, men who need to engage in conflict while the relations between those of differing genders must remain harmonious. For Sorel, it is thus only men who engage in virtuous violence.

Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberley Hutchings have engaged directly with Sorel on the issue of the relationship of violence to virtue, comparing his thoughts on revolutionary violence to the work of John Locke. They identify that Sorel is not dealing with violence to a particular political end, but as what they term a practice: "Sorel rejects the conflation of war with the idea of law, crime and punishment. Instead he ... focus[es] not on the ends of war but on war as a practice, one that both requires and nourishes certain heroic, military virtues." (Frazer and Hutchings, 2009, p.56) War is, on this view, instrumental in creating the warlike individuals who are required to maintain morality. James Meisel offers a counterargument to this, claiming that: "the philosopher of violence [Sorel] cannot be called an advocate of war. He calls it 'that ignoble stupidity which changes nothing'." (Meisel, 1951, p.172, inset quote from Sorel) How, considering this, are we to understand Sorel's views of war? Meisel, given that he is directly quoting Sorel, seems justified in claiming that Sorel does not support war. And yet I have argued throughout this section, backed by evidence, that Sorel supports war and in fact sees war as a central part of his argument. Here we come up against the fundamentally contradictory nature of Sorel's work: a simple characterisation is

impossible, and trying to understand some of these flips and changes in his thought is the best that can be hoped for.

If we refer to Sorel's insistence on the importance of myth for engendering belief, we might see the reason why war is so important for Sorel: war (class war or foreign war), is what creates the most viable, potent and powerful myths. As Sorel states:

Legends born of wars and revolutions exert the most potent influence on the public mind while at the same time this influence is the most neglected. These legends impress us strongly and take away from us almost all freedom of appreciation. For the majority of men, history is reduced to these legends that are so deeply rooted in childhood memories of strong sentimental tone, that they cannot be eradicated by reason when one reaches maturity. The historical period designated by Vico as the Heroic Age has determined the direction taken by a civilisation for centuries.
(Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.106)

It is the stories of wars, of battles and of revolutions that take hold of people's imaginations. Sorel is not here talking of myths directly: he is talking of legends. He is, however, indicating the importance of violent narratives in impressing this imaginative power upon people's minds: they cannot, he asserts, be eradicated by reason. There is, for Sorel, in most people an inability to let reason overcome the deep-rooted sentimentality of childhood. As such, stories of war must be used to motivate, to create the mythic images of nobility and of morality.

What I have argued throughout this section is that it is through mythically-inspired war (that is, wars inspired by myths that might in turn create stories of war) that Sorel sees the primary means of creating a thriving civilisation. While it may be true that stories of war are often the most successful narratives, it is in the violent manifestation of mythic conflict that Sorel sees regenerative action as taking place. This comes down to Sorel's view of martial life as the way in which an ethical society is lived as an individual practice. We see, furthermore, the importance of conflict and action in Sorel's derogatory remarks on the peaceful lives of the bourgeoisie and of pacified polities. I argued that, for Sorel, only war could create the warrior mindset that he desired (either a politically organised foreign war or a class based war). I sought to show how this

related to the idea of the will, which in turn I connected to the pessimistic mindset and to myth. War, in this sense, was instrumental insofar as it was necessary for a thriving civilisation. What I sought to highlight throughout my discussion, however, was that it was morality which Sorel was aiming towards: war is good, for Sorel, because war is the most likely means of creating a myth which will motivate men to act morally through a lived practice of a martial life. In the next section I seek to show how Sorel supports a somewhat contradictory account of violence, supporting a violence which is not based around war. I argue that what this ultimately shows us is that Sorel's concern with morality must hinge upon a view of morality which sees it as inherently violent.

Section 3: Constitutive Violence and the Case of Norway

In this section I present evidence which, at first sight, contradicts Sorel's account as I have so far tried to construct it. While I have sought to present the difficulties with working with Sorel's texts, I have also sought to highlight a consistent concern for civilisation and morality. I have, moreover, argued that Sorel supported mythically inspired war (whether class war or foreign war) as the primary means of engendering a warrior or martial mindset that would push people to act morally. In this section I show that this is not the only positive way in which Sorel describes violence: I show Sorel's support for Norwegian peasants who acted violently to uphold their Christian beliefs. In doing this, I highlight how Sorel's support for violence must be, in some sense, constitutive; i.e. violence in this case must be part of what makes a good society and not only instrumental to creating morality. I argue that this shows us that violence, for Sorel, can be either instrumental to a warlike mentality that creates morally virtuous individuals, *or* it can be constitutive of a morally good society.

We see a contradiction to Sorel's clear support for violence *qua* war in one of Sorel's examples: the case of Norway. In Norway, Sorel sees a morally virtuous (and violent) nation. Sorel sees in the rural Norwegian population a violence combined with a simple Christian ethics. Not only does this combination of belief and action engender a sense of (in this case, Christian) ethics (which, for Sorel, is good), but it seems to be necessarily predisposed towards an unspecified violence. Importantly, however, it is not presupposed by the kind of war as I have so far outlined Sorel as supporting (class or national war):

P[aul] Bureau was extremely surprised to find in Norway a rural population which had remained profoundly Christian: the peasants, nevertheless, carried a dagger at their belt; when a quarrel ended with a stabbing the police enquiry generally came to nothing for lack of witnesses ready to come forward and give evidence.

The author concludes thus: 'In men, a soft and effeminate character is more to be feared than their feeling of independence, however exaggerated and brutal, and a stab given by a man who is virtuous in his morals, but violent, is a social evil less serious and more easily curable than the excessive profligacy of young men reputed to be civilised. (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.176)

It is this kind of simple, direct morality which Sorel sees as good. This does not, however, seem to fit with Sorel's account of war as I have defined it. I argued that Sorel saw a group, motivated by a mythic vision of future battle, as the location of a warrior mindset. The case cited is interesting, however, in that it is based in the individual Christian ethics with which the Norwegian peasants act.²⁵ I have already explained that myth, for Sorel, is connected with creating an image and ideal towards which one is aimed. Sorel's support for the violence of the rural Norwegians does not support my argument that his primary support is for war backed by myth. In this case there is the established epic of the Bible and of Christian ethics which provides the ideal which is backed by violence. It is not, however, a warrior violence in the way I have so far laid it out. While Christianity provides the ethical framework, and possibly the mythic motivation, the acts do not seem to be those of a group of warriors envisioning a coming battle, but rather those of isolated individuals. This clearly distinguishes the case of Norwegian peasants from Sorel's other cases such as the French Revolutionaries, Ancient Athenians, or even the early Christians.

The population of rural Norway has a form of ethical life which Sorel sees as distinct from predominant modern ways of acting. Describing the modern situation, Sorel claims "There is a tendency for the old ferocity to be replaced by cunning, and many sociologists believe that this is real progress; some philosophers, who are not in the habit of following the herd, do not see exactly how this constitutes progress from the

²⁵ That is not to say that Christian ethics cannot also be warrior ethics, as I described earlier in this chapter. In this case, however, the ethics are those of individuals rather than a Christian warrior community.

point of view of morality.” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], pp.187-188). As well as clearly identifying himself as one of these philosophers, Sorel is arguing that violent, ethical individuals are good because they stand as moral guardians. He is also questioning the premise that cunning constitutes a form of moral progress. What Sorel’s example of Norway shows us is his belief in a simple and clear form of ethics which can be backed by an unspecified kind of violence if necessary. Some kind of violence again here functions to operate as the maintainer of ethical life. In this case we do not see war, but simply an unspecified violence backed by an ideal, functioning to maintain an ethical society.

Sorel follows his account of Norway with a description of how the United States magistrates were unable to clear the Rockies of bandits, but that a group of “courageous citizens” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.177) managed to get it done. Sorel states that there will be those in favour of “mild methods” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.177) who see this violence, and that of the case of Norway, as potentially harmful of morality. Sorel responds that this argument does not hold weight against his own work because he is only approaching violence with regard to its impact upon the way people think: “I consider violence only from the point of view of its ideological consequences” (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.178). What we must infer is that, for Sorel, the violence in Norway (and America) had a positive impact upon the ethical life of the society. There is no obvious coming battle or mythic vision of war here, but rather a simple account of ethics which is underpinned by the potential for violent action. What this helps to show is something which I argued at the outset of Chapter 2: namely, that Sorel’s consistent concern is with morality. Morality, however, always seems to be conceived by Sorel as connected to violence: in the case of Norway, this seems to be a form of constitutive, unspecified, violence rather than a martial or warrior way of life.

What this further highlights is the ambiguity of Sorel’s account of the relationship of violence to the political. I have already laid out how Sorel is unclear as to whether his account of violence could be implicated within the political, or whether is anti/extra political. I noted that Sorel’s support for class war was aimed against what Sorel terms politics, and by which he meant parliamentary government. What I also showed was how Sorel’s support for a foreign war would, in fact, this very same political grouping. The case of Norway separates Sorel’s account of violence and myth from politics: the individuals’ violence is not aimed either in support of, or against Sorel’s understanding

of the political. It is entirely separate. Such an account must lead us to assume that there is no fixed relationship between politics, myth and violence in Sorel's work. Sorel uses whichever formulation works in each individual case he is exploring.

If war is not the only form of violence that Sorel supports, then it appears Sorel's account of violence may not be solely instrumental, but also (in some instances) constitutive. In other words, a violent society may be what makes a society good, rather than violence being a means to moral virtue created through a mythic vision of war. James Meisel makes the point that violence is not, for Sorel, a good in itself. According to Meisel, it is not because violence is good, but because it is a necessary part of a political life: "Violence, for Sorel, is not an end in itself; he never advocated violence for the mere sake of violence. It is a means, to keep the body politic intact." (Meisel, 1951, p.136). This does not seem to be a clear-cut case: while Sorel does seem to see violence as having an end, it does not seem to be maintaining the body politic. If my argument is correct, then the role of violence is either as a part of rejuvenating civilisation, or part of constituting a morally good society. If this is the case – that violence is either constitutively or instrumentally good – then Sorel's account is fundamentally and centrally violent. What this also highlights is the difficulty of trying to salvage a consistent idea of violence, and its relation to myth, in Sorel's work. At root, it shows somewhat divergent strands within Sorel's thought and the difficulty with pinning down a single interpretation. If Sorel's view of a morally good civilisation is constitutively violent, then this leads us to question the argument made by Stanley that "much of the *Reflections* is devoted to a study of the limits of violence, the suppression of hatred, the minimisation of brutality and brigandage, and the ethics of war" (Stanley, 1981, p.221). If my interpretation is correct, then we must disagree with Stanley's argument that "the most violent thing about the *Reflections on Violence* is the title." (Stanley, 1981, p.221) The most violent thing about Sorel's understanding of violence is the inherently violent civilisation it represents. In other words, for Sorel any kind of politics is inextricably linked with *some kind* of violence: it is important, for Sorel, that this violence be a moral force.

Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to understand Sorel's use of violence and the way it relates to myth and the political. I argued that Sorel uses violence in several different ways, but

that he ultimately favours a view of war as the form of violence most likely to create an ethical society. I argued that Sorel saw violence as present within law, and thus that political society was not an arena free from violence. Sorel's view of the relationship between violence and politics, I argued, is that violence is always present but in different forms. I argued that because Sorel saw violence as always present, he sought to utilise violence to achieve a morally good society. The primary way, I argued, that Sorel sought to present this was via support for a mythically inspired war. In doing this, Sorel gave support for a warrior or martial lifestyle which would maintain an ethical life. Because war is that which imprints most upon men's minds, war is the most likely way of creating morally good individuals in the future. I also emphasised how this relates to Sorel's view of the political: I argued that Sorel's vision of the relationship between myth, violence and politics was flexible and ambiguous. Sorel seems willing to see myth and violence as supportive (foreign war), challenging of (class war) and unrelated to (Norway) the political. I highlighted the case of Norway to show that Sorel's support for violence was not only manifested in war, but also in a violent yet morally good society. Using this evidence, I argued that Sorel saw violence as either instrumentally good for creating a warlike mentality which maintained an ethical society, or as constitutive of a morally good society.

Chapter 4

Law, Justice, Hegemony: Benjamin on Myth and Violence

If I were to wish for anything, I should wish not for wealth or power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating as possibility!

Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*²⁶

Introduction

In this chapter I focus on Walter Benjamin's account of myth and violence. Specifically, I focus on Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' and the accounts of mythic and divine violence that appear therein. Benjamin's text has a long history of interpretation within thinking on political violence but is completely absent from discussions of political myth. I seek to show how myth is as important as violence within Benjamin's text, and that an understanding of both is required to appreciate the full extent of its argument. I argue that Benjamin's concept of mythical violence is used to describe the cognitive force that emanates from the legal system, and that his account of divine violence is his critique of this bounded account of legal rationality. I argue that Benjamin's account shows us a way of thinking about violence which moves beyond its definition as an expression of physical force. I critique Benjamin's account for its inability to ground itself without recourse to means/end logic and an account of the good, the very thing Benjamin is trying to overcome. I argue that, despite this, Benjamin's account can still provide us useful insights given the correct approach: particularly, I argue that

²⁶ (Kierkegaard, 1973, p.35)

Benjamin's work highlights the non-physical nature of some forms of violence as well as raising questions that are relevant to contemporary approaches to violence.

In Section 1 I set out the historical and intellectual context within which Benjamin is writing. Following this I situate Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' within his own writings by discussing some interpretations of his oeuvre. I explain the significance of the context of Benjamin's text and argue that Benjamin's work remains relevant today. In Section 2 I offer my own analysis of Benjamin's text. I do this by reading Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' alongside the work of Max Weber. I argue that Benjamin's account is best read as offering a critique of practical reason as viewed in the Weberian sense of what is limited by legal rationality. I argue that myth, in the 'Critique of Violence', is not about a particular narrative or ideal, but about the acceptance of present legal limits. Divine violence, contrarily, is about a way of thinking and acting beyond those limits. In Section 3 I argue that Benjamin's account is inherently flawed: first, I argue that without an account of the good, Benjamin's argument ultimately fails to stand. I then go on to argue, in the final section, that Benjamin's account of myth, in the 'Critique of Violence', acts to obscure some aspects of politics, through their presentation as myth. Finally, I argue that violence, for Benjamin, is used to overcome violence and that Benjamin fails to sufficiently work through the consequences of this.

Before moving onto my analysis of Benjamin's work and, specifically, his 'Critique of Violence', it is worth noting that there is a discordant and many-voiced choir of interpreters of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'. There are many interpretations of Benjamin's text, and to give an account of them all would require much more space than I can devote to it. What I will do, however, is draw on interpretations when they relate to my own argument – either positively or negatively. This will show some of the background against which I am writing, and help to elaborate on some of my themes. It is, finally, important to note that Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' is not usually included in studies of myth. The text is, however, often included in studies of violence. Despite its title, there is little justification for the huge disparity in analysis of the text in relation to myth and violence: I will be seeking to begin a redress of this balance.

Section 1: The Context of ‘Critique of Violence’

The main body of Benjamin’s work was produced over a short (twenty-five year) period from the mid-1910s up until his premature death in 1940. Despite the short timeframe within which he wrote, Benjamin worked in a dazzling array of areas: from baroque theatre to the life of students, from the philosophy of history to a study of Parisian arcades, from studies of Kafka, Baudelaire and Proust to jurisprudence. Benjamin has been, and still is, primarily, known as a literary critic. While this has been the focus of much commentary, there is still a significant body of work devoted to Benjamin’s political philosophy. Initial interpretations in this vein were driven by Theodor Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, and Gershom Scholem. Each had strongly divergent stances on the nature of Benjamin’s thought, but established a scholarly base which has been significantly built upon over time. Within this context sits Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’, written in 1921, which has attracted attention from a huge number of influential thinkers: thinkers as diverse as Herbert Marcuse, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and Jacques Derrida, have all used Benjamin’s enigmatic text as a point of orientation. In this section I seek to situate Benjamin’s text, both historiographically and historically, within his oeuvre and experience of the political world. This will show, as with Sorel, the difficulty of extracting a consistent and coherent account from Benjamin’s work. I will not use my analysis of Benjamin’s oeuvre (and interpretations thereof) to ground my reading of ‘Critique of Violence’. Instead I focus on reading the text alongside Weber’s work.

As I have already laid out in the introductory chapter, Benjamin was writing during a short but incredibly tumultuous time in the European world. A brief glance at the period 1915-1940 shows us a world collapsing in on itself through war, violence, revolution, and pandemic. Benjamin’s 1921 ‘Critique of Violence’ was written partway through the European crisis of the twentieth century. Not only did this crisis manifest itself in a profound shift in the lives of Europeans because of states waging war against each other, it was also the point at which modern technology had reached its most devastatingly impactful. Not only war, but modern war, was the defining feature of Benjamin’s intellectual genesis. As Benjamin, writing in 1936, described it:

A generation which had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the

clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin, 1979b, p.84).

Benjamin did not see the major schools of philosophy contemporary to him as providing a means of accounting for the dramatic shift, and his work is best viewed as attempts at a new way of thinking philosophically: “It must be said in Benjamin’s favour that during the period of his intellectual maturation circa World War I, the established models of his theoretical discourse – whether neo-Kantianism, *Lebensphilosophie*, or positivism – all presented themselves as equally inauthentic”. (Wolin, 1994, p.xi) Benjamin’s work is best seen as a response to this.

Andrew Benjamin’s (2013, p.28) recent work argues that Benjamin’s response to the inadequacy of philosophical traditions was to embrace a form of creative destruction which destroyed systems of order. In destroying that which upheld the status quo, it opened possibilities for the future: “creation through destruction as involving an actualisation of potentiality – provides the basis of a possible set of actions arising from destruction.” (Benjamin, 2013, p.28) According to this view, destruction is the central feature of Benjamin’s political philosophy: “[Destruction as defined by a genuine ‘other’] is the basis of Benjamin’s entire politico-philosophical project. Here the naming of that which is ‘other’ indicates an opening that occurs with and as destruction.” (Benjamin, 2013, p.21) Destruction, on this view, is central to Benjamin’s project because it is a means of breaking out of the same, of effecting a real change rather than merely the appearance of change. Destruction provides the space in which something new can be created. Throughout my analysis of the ‘Critique of Violence’ the centrality of destruction to support change and the genuinely new will be shown to play a major role in Benjamin’s political philosophy.

Benjamin’s intellectual focus shifted during his life. Graeme Gilloch, utilising Benjamin’s own imagery, describes two primary constellations around which Benjamin’s work is centred (Gilloch, 2002, p.20). These ‘constellations’ represent clusters of work which are related and intertwined, but also distinct. He argues that there is an initial constellation, Benjamin’s earlier writings, grouped around themes of language and translation (Gilloch, 2002, p.20). There is then a second constellation, with the *Arcades Project* as its focus (Gilloch, 2002, p.20). What Gilloch is keen to emphasise, however, is the interrelationality of these two constellations: they are not

distinct periods but rather the first lays down themes which recur throughout the second. Gilloch notes, “almost all commentators emphasise, that Benjamin’s oeuvre is not to be understood in terms of a division into ‘early’ and ‘late’ works. Rather, the continuity between his ‘production-cycles’ must be stressed” (Gilloch, 2002, pp.87-88). Similarly, Richard Wolin (1994, p.xii-xiii) claims that Benjamin’s work cannot – as has been done – be split into an early theological period and a late Marxist period. Benjamin’s earlier work was primarily organised around literary criticism, with his doctoral dissertation on ‘The Concept of Art in German Romanticism’ completed in 1919, and his essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* appearing shortly after. His failed *Habilitationschrift* (the work required to become a university teacher at German universities) on *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* was finished in 1926. Unlike his later works these were not Marxist in their orientation, but generally taken to be theologically informed. During the early to mid-1920s, Benjamin was also working on several other projects: between 1923 and 1926 he was involved in a creative relationship with “Bolshevik Latvian theatre director Asja Lacis” (Osborne and Charles, 2015). During the late 1920s Benjamin started working on his (never finished) ‘historical materialist’ *Arcades Project*. This more explicitly Marxist orientation to Benjamin’s work supposedly driven by a visit to Moscow in 1926-27, alongside his enthusiastic reception and study of Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (Osborne and Charles, 2015). Throughout the 1930s Benjamin continued work on the *Arcades Project* (and related studies), as well as attempting to found a left-wing periodical titled ‘Crisis and Critique’ (Osborne and Charles, 2015). In 1933 he was forced to flee Nazi Germany, and died in 1940 trying to cross the border from France into Spain (Osborne and Charles, 2015).

The early, theological themes in Benjamin’s work, Wolin claims, never goes away and influences the Marxist themes. This can be shown most clearly in Benjamin’s final text – the ‘Theses on History’ – where he attempts to unite the theological and the Marxist aspects of his work (Wolin, 1994, pp.xiv-xv). This understanding, which develops the earlier interpretations of stages or distinct spheres of interest, is – according to Howard Caygill – also reflected in Benjamin’s own opinion on his oeuvre (though Benjamin would not approve of citing this as evidence of its validity): “Benjamin himself proposed a distinction between two phases or ‘production cycles’ in his work” (Caygill, 1998, p.xi). The way this plays out in Benjamin’s work, according to Caygill, is that, “The continuity between [the work on *Trauerspiel* and the *Arcades Project*] may be

described in terms of the development of a Kantian concept of experience through an extension of a Nietzschean method of active nihilism.” (Caygill, 1998, p.xiii)

While I interrogate Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’, which would be identified with Benjamin’s earlier phase of work, it is important to note the development and interrelatedness of his thought. As shown above, there is a general understanding that Benjamin’s earlier works were more theologically oriented while his later were Marxist oriented. My analysis of ‘Critique of Violence’, however, will support the view that any binary oppositions would certainly be a mistake. Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ is explicitly and pointedly in favour of a proletarian revolution, although the concepts used are often theologically inspired (e.g. divine violence). I choose to focus on ‘Critique of Violence’, rather than a broad sweep of Benjamin texts, so as to maintain a close analysis of the relationship between myth and violence, both of which receive their most sustained treatment in this text. Understanding that both Marxism and theology play a part in Benjamin’s thought is, however, important when approaching one of Benjamin’s texts. Without knowing the influences of both Marxism and Jewish theology on Benjamin, we might seek an application of the theological to the Marxist or vice versa. In reality, Benjamin’s thought often represents a complex dialogue between the two.

Some of the divergent interpretations of Benjamin’s work arise from his commitment to esotericism and allegory. It is, quite simply, never entirely obvious how Benjamin’s work should be interpreted. Moreover, Benjamin never sought a definitive or comprehensive philosophy, and never sought to provide the tools for a simple interpretation of his work. As Richard Wolin succinctly asserts: “There is no question that this procedure [of “steadfastly refusing to supply outright the meta-theoretical bases of his conceptual train”] laid itself open to the misunderstandings, confusions, and condemnations to which his works so often fell victim”. (Wolin, 1994, p.xi) This is reiterated by Honneth, a consistent critic of Benjamin, who notes that any unity to Benjamin’s work must be forged *ex post facto*: “whoever is interested in the systematic fruits of Benjamin’s works has always been forced to first constructively forge a unity between disparate ideas, a unity which they intentionally lacked.” (Honneth, 1998, pp.118-119) This is a further reason why I will focus on Benjamin’s violence text in isolation: attempting to incorporate it within the broader development of his thought

and tracing the contradictory and disunited threads of Benjamin's work would go beyond the scope of this thesis.²⁷

The ever-increasing commentary on Benjamin suggests that his work provided, in some sense, a starting point for thinking through certain philosophical or political questions. Not all, however, see him as relevant:

It is only in a trivial sense that Walter Benjamin seems to be still contemporaneous today. True, an ever-increasing group of scholars participates in the interpretation of his life and work, but his theory has no recognisable effect on the advancement of philosophical and sociological research. (Honneth, 1998, p.118)

The concerns of Honneth are to a large extent grounded in Benjamin's bases for normativity and claims to truth. Honneth seeks to ground an account of normativity as situated within, and drawing its arguments from, modernity. We might here think back to the Enlightenment myth of a polity which can reach a rational basis for its normative grounding. In contrast, Benjamin appeals to the divine, the eternal, the good and the true. It may well be true that Benjamin's philosophical work does not advance philosophical and sociological research in the way that Honneth understands advances in philosophical and sociological work. At least to the extent that Benjamin never produced a coherent or comprehensive framework, this is true. Benjamin's work does not positively inform the type of philosophical work done by Honneth. What Benjamin's work can do, however, if we situate it within a tradition of political thinking – as I am doing here – is to provide one direction for thinking within political philosophy. It can, moreover, offer us insights into the important areas of myth and violence. Honneth may seek an advancement in philosophical and sociological research, and it is hard to see a study of myth and violence as contributing anything other than this.

While we may not agree with Benjamin's approach entirely, what it can do for us is to allow us a degree of distance but within which we may see contemporary concerns: the

²⁷ I argued that we needed an understanding of Sorel's oeuvre to understand some central features of Sorel's arguments on myth and violence. In contrast, I do not take the insights of 'Critique of Violence' to be tied to, or reliant upon an understanding of, Benjamin's oeuvre.

experience of modern technology, the rise of extreme politics, a political turning away from a prolonged period of relative stability. Moreover, we see the inability of much contemporary political theory to account for many, or even most, of the monumental shifts currently occurring in our world. No historical situations are identical, and no concerns are the same; it is, however, perhaps as this historically situated body of philosophical work that Benjamin can still have a 'recognisable effect on the advancement of philosophical and sociological research'. If we can understand philosophical responses to historical periods of crisis, we will be better informed – both philosophically and politico-historically – in our own responses.

It is in this context that I consider the themes of violence and myth as Benjamin uses them within his 'Critique of Violence'. The aim of highlighting some of the broader interpretative accounts of Benjamin's work has been to give us a more comprehensive picture of Benjamin's thought, and to situate it historically. In essence, Benjamin offered a destructive philosophy which sought to challenge and break old ways of thinking. In this space, it sought to create new ways of thinking.

Section 2: Reading 'Critique of Violence': Weber and Benjamin

In this section I provide an analysis of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'. To do this I begin by outlining the meaning of the German word *Gewalt* (which is translated into the English 'violence'), emphasising the German word's broader meaning and some of the implications of Benjamin's paradoxical use of the term. I then go on to outline the particular reading of Benjamin that I use: that is, alongside the work of Max Weber. I argue that reading Benjamin alongside Weber points us towards a particularly productive reading of Benjamin's text. Following this, I give a description of Benjamin's two types of violence: mythical and divine. I argue that mythical violence represents the force of legal institutions which limit practical reason, while divine violence seeks to break open the boundaries of practical reason. Building upon this, I show how Benjamin separates out law from justice, and how he identifies all legal systems as connected with power and with violence. I then show how, through his account of proletarian violence and education, Benjamin seeks to give an account of divine violence as 'pure means', and which goes beyond means/end rationality.

Before moving on to discuss my interpretation of myth and violence in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', it is important to lay out a definitional description which will be necessary for the proceeding discussions. The central word in any discussion of Benjamin's text on violence is the word 'violence' (violence being a translation of the German *Gewalt*). The title of the original, German, text is *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*. It is *Gewalt* that Benjamin is referring to throughout the text. *Gewalt* is translated throughout most of the English text as violence, although at times it is also translated as power. This difference in translation – from violence to power – becomes pertinent when discussing Benjamin's comments on education, as I do later in this section. It is also necessary to highlight some of the other ways in which the translation of *Gewalt* affects the reading of 'Critique of Violence'. The translation of *Gewalt* into violence is not a direct substitute: while *Gewalt* can mean violence, the German word carries with it a broader meaning. *Gewalt* can, alongside violence, be translated as force, sway, lordship and authority. *Gewalt*, moreover, makes no distinction between legitimate and illegitimate force, something noted by Derrida in his (in)famous 'Force of Law' essay (Derrida, 1992, pp.31-34).

While both *Gewalt* and violence share the indistinction between legitimate and illegitimate force, it is within this ambiguity that Benjamin's essay essentially posits itself. It does so, however, within a matrix which is not so obvious when approaching the English term violence. Benjamin situates his discussion of *Gewalt* within the relational values of authority and its opposite. For Benjamin the opposite of authority is not anarchy, but a position of complete openness. This is a point made by Sami Khatib (2016) who argues that Benjamin's use of *Gewalt* must always be relational: because *Gewalt* implies authority, but also its opposite (insofar as it is both legitimate and illegitimate), the terms of violence are ultimately defined by what it stands in relation to. In the case of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', this comes to be understood with regards to violence's relationship to morality (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.277). Because *Gewalt* is always referring to both the force of law and the possible destruction of law (its opening), Benjamin argues that violence can only be critiqued from within this dichotomy. This is something which Khatib (2016) emphasises with his interrogation of the positioning of Benjamin's divine violence (*Göttliche Gewalt*):

Divine violence as violent violence does not perform a double negation in the classic Hegelian sense of becoming positive again. Rather, divine violence remains negative, unstable, indeterminate; as an *entsetzende*, de-posing or de-positing,

violence it denotes neither a positive quality, a positing of something, nor a definite or predictable event. (Khatib, 2016)

What we see is Benjamin's situating of his text, within the ambiguity of legitimate/illegitimate authority, as the essential space from within which the dichotomy of mythic and divine violence emerges. While the English 'violence' does not ultimately preclude such an understanding, there would be little reason to lean towards this understanding of violence as *necessarily* posited within a discussion of authority. The violent violence that creates openness and de-positing (Khatib, 2016), moreover, would be a difficult interpretation to make of any kind of violence, but especially of Benjamin's understanding of education, were it not to be understood within this context of a violence necessarily judged relationally with regards to authority and morality. It is from this relationally open positing that Benjamin's use of *Gewalt* gives rise to the dichotomy of mythic (authoritative) and divine (de-positing) violence. While we can see that violence *could* be either legitimate and illegitimate, *Gewalt* – according to Benjamin – can *only* be understood relationally to legitimacy and illegitimacy.

It is important first to note that the interpretative approach taken may give the conceptual definitions of myth and violence, as they appear in Benjamin's text, differing meanings. The interpretative approach that I will take here draws on the work of Alexei Procyshyn (2014). Procyshyn argues that Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' was written in response to Weber's *Politics as Vocation* lecture and is best read alongside it: "In its timing and structure, it ['Critique of Violence'] resonates with, and seeks to critically respond to Max Weber's influential account of political action and practical reason in '*Politik als Beruf*' ['Politics as a Vocation']". (Procyshyn, 2014, p.390) In Procyshyn's essay he argues that Benjamin's project was intended to be a critique of "(Post-)Kantian conceptions of practical action that emphasise the role played by institutions in shaping agents and their potentials for action." (Procyshyn, 2014, p.390). While being a general critique of '(Post-)Kantian conceptions of practical action', Procyshyn claims it is especially a critique of the Weberian view of politics and political rationality. On Procyshyn's view, Benjamin is not only offering a critique of violence, but rather a critique of practical reason as viewed in the Weberian sense of what is achievable within the current institutional frameworks. While I make no claims that Benjamin's text was written in direct response to Weber's, I do see a productive reading emerging from positioning Benjamin's text alongside Weber's and this is the approach I take.

In their introduction to Weber's *Vocation Lectures*, David Owen and Tracy Strong suggest reading Weber's lectures as answers to the questions: "What can I possibly know?" and "What can I possibly do?" (Owen and Strong, 2004, p.xv) They argue that a "concern for the political education of modern men and women ... preoccupied Weber throughout his career." (Owen and Strong, 2004, p.xvli) Moreover, "Political education, as Weber conceives it, consists in being trained to accept the realities of the world in which one lives." (Owen and Strong, 2004, p.xlvi) If we accept that this was one of Weber's longstanding concerns, then we can also see how Weber's 'Politics as a Vocation' may sit within this lifelong concern. 'Politics as a Vocation', viewed in this light, is an exercise in political education: a lesson on how to work within the institutional and organisational setting of the state.

At the outset of his 'Politics as a Vocation', Weber makes it clear that he takes the state to be the locus of modern thinking about politics: "Today we shall consider by politics only the leadership, or the exercise of influence on the leadership, of a *political* organisation, hence today, of a state." (Weber, 2004 [1919], p.32) The defining feature of the state, for Weber, is its use of violence, because without violence used as a means to an end, Weber believes that the concept of the state would no longer exist: "If there existed only societies in which violence was unknown as a means, the concept of the 'state' would disappear." (Weber, 2004 [1919], p.33) Weber argues that, "The state is regarded as the sole source of the 'right' to use violence." (Weber, 2004 [1919], p.33) If we accept Owen and Strong's above point that Weber was concerned with educating people so as to "accept the realities of the world in which one lives" (Owen and Strong, 2004, p.xlvi), then working within the institutions of the state seems to be the means by which politics occurs or should occur. Furthermore, if we refer to Owen and Strong's above question, 'What can I possibly do?', we might see the answer in Weber's concluding paragraph:

Politics means a slow, powerful drilling through hard boards, with a mixture of passion and a sense of proportion. It is absolutely true, and our entire historical experience confirms it, that what is possible could never have been achieved unless people had tried again and again to achieve the impossible in this world. But the man who can do this must be a leader, and not only that, he must also be a hero – in a very literal sense. (Weber, 2004 [1919], p.93)

Politics, for Weber, should not be about the instance of revolutionary change, but about the slow drilling of hard boards. Weber is not ignorant of the possibility of revolutionary change, but rather accepting of the need for institutional limits to action. It is this limit which Benjamin seeks to challenge.

The way in which Benjamin offers us a challenge to this is by taking up a number of Weberian points. Weber asks a number of questions which, I show below, Benjamin also addresses:

Can the ethical demands made on politics really be quite indifferent to the fact that politics operates with a highly specific means, namely, power, behind which *violence* lies concealed? Is it not obvious that the Bolshevik and Spartacist ideologues are achieving exactly the *same* results as any militarist dictator precisely because they use this tool of politics? (Weber, 2004 [1919], p.81)

Moreover, Weber asks how they are to be distinguished from any other ruling group? “By their noble intentions, we shall be told! Well and good. But it is the methods they use that we are talking about here, and the nobility of their ultimate intentions is also claimed by the people they oppose and with a sincerity that is just as genuine.” (Weber, 2004 [1919], p.81) It is these fundamental questions – on the nature of the relationship between force, violence, the state, and Bolshevism or Spartacism – that Benjamin takes up in his ‘Critique of Violence’.

Weber’s ‘Politics as a Vocation’ offers a critique which highlights the violent instrumentality of the state in achieving ends: we may disagree over ends, but we use the same means (the violence of the state). Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ offers a rejoinder: Benjamin argues that violence does not have to be used as a means (i.e. towards an end), but that violence can be manifested (in its proletarian form) as pure means (i.e. without end). Weber’s view of institutional rationality is challenged, on this interpretation, by Benjamin’s essay (Procyshyn, 2014, p.393). Procyshyn argues that Benjamin’s text is offering this very means of breaking out of a limited and bounded account of law: “to say that an action is objectively impossible means simply that it is not consistent with the status quo, *not* that it is incoherent or unrealisable.”

(Procyshyn, 2014, p.393). On this view, Benjamin is not primarily offering a critique of *violence*, but rather a critique of practical reason as viewed in the Weberian sense of what is achievable within the current institutional frameworks. That is, within the current force of legal institutions. This is why I earlier emphasised the difference between the German *Gewalt* and the English *violence*: without this distinction, this interpretation is unconvincing. Once we see Benjamin's violence as *Gewalt*, Procyshyn's argument becomes much more convincing. It is around this understanding of Benjamin's text as a critique of conceptions of practical reason that I base my argument and my conceptual definition.

To separate out practical reason from reason which stands beyond legal-institutional rationality, Benjamin uses the terms mythical violence and divine violence. Mythical violence, for Benjamin, is that which maintains the status quo: it stands within the bounds of what is reasonably possible. It is, in other words, connected to that which is permitted by law. As Benjamin states: "Far from inaugurating a purer sphere, the mythical manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence." (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.296) But, it is not only law that relates to violence. Violence is also connected with justice. As the opening line of 'Critique of Violence' states: "The task of a critique of violence can be summarised as that of expounding its relation to law and justice. For a cause, however effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it bears on moral issues." (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.277) Violence, for Benjamin, is thus not only connected to law, but also to justice. Benjamin is attempting to pick apart this seemingly connected pair of concepts to highlight the non-moral nature of the law. What, Benjamin argues, is connected to justice, is a different kind of violence: divine violence. Thus: "Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical lawmaking" (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.295). Which is to say, divine violence is connected with justice, mythical violence is connected with the law (as an expression of power). Benjamin is opposed to mythical violence insofar as it maintains the status quo, which he wishes to challenge, and in favour of divine violence insofar as it aims at justice. Benjamin's ambition, then, is to offer an exposition of the relationship that violence has to both law and justice. Despite its sometimes complex method and style, the central points of his argument are decipherable: namely, that all legal systems are inherently violent (or, use *Gewalt*); that means/end reasoning is an insufficient justification for violence; and, thus, that only a violence of pure means (divine violence) could ever be

legitimate. I will now examine how Benjamin reaches these conclusions, and what – potentially – the insights might be for political philosophy.

Benjamin begins by noting that any critique of violence which is concerned with its cases of use, is necessarily connected with a knowledge of just ends. “The question would remain open whether violence, as a principle, could be a moral means even to just ends.” (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.277) Benjamin identifies natural and positive conceptions of law as being the primary reason why the question of the legitimacy of violence is obscured:

The thesis of natural law that regards violence as a natural datum is diametrically opposed to that of positive law, which sees violence as a product of history. If natural law can judge all existing law only in criticising ends, so positive law can judge all evolving law only in criticising its means. (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.278)

Benjamin, however, wishes to offer a critique of violence that goes beyond means/end rationality. It is violence as means/end rationality which Benjamin sees as implicated within the legal system. Benjamin takes this mythical violence to be connected to an instrumental rationality – a means/end logic – of maintaining the state/status quo. Benjamin sees divine violence as being ‘pure means’; which is to say, it does not aim for a particular end or *telos* but simply the cessation or destruction of the status quo/state.

This idea of pure means is something which needs briefly working through. As I have already mentioned, Benjamin takes divine violence to be connected to pure means. Benjamin, moreover, takes pure means to be that which is beyond means/end logic. The idea of pure means, however, is seemingly contradictory: means are usually understood to be the way we reach an end. Khatib identifies the fundamentally Kantian inspiration for Benjamin’s work here: “From a Kantian perspective, Benjamin’s concept of pure means or means without end might be read as an inversion of the ethical end-in-itself.” (Khatib, 2016) On this, Khatib argues, Benjamin begins with Kant’s aesthetic idea of purposiveness without purpose: “Instead [Benjamin] takes his cue from Kant’s Third Critique, *Critique of Judgment*, and its paradoxical formulation of a *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*, purposiveness without a purpose.” (Khatib, 2016) Where Kant limits his account to aesthetics, Benjamin expands it to include language

and politics (Khatib, 2016). In the case of politics, Benjamin uses the two types of proletarian strike to differentiate means/end logic from pure means: where the political strike represents an attempt to achieve a given end, the proletarian strike represents pure means (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.291). Before examining this in more depth, it is necessary to explain how Benjamin takes mythical violence to be connected to the law.

Benjamin's interrogation of mythical violence identifies two aspects of law that relate to mythical violence: the law-making and the law-preserving (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], pp.282). The law-making aspect is the "first function of violence" (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.282), and the second is the law-preserving. The reason law-making is violent is because it involves the institution of power within a legal system. The function of law-making violence is thus the creation, or reassertion, of power:

Power ... is what is guaranteed by all lawmaking violence. Where frontiers are decided the adversary is not simply annihilated; indeed, he is accorded rights even when the victor's superiority in power is complete. And these are, in a demonically ambiguous way, 'equal' rights: for both parties to the treaty it is the same line that may not be crossed. Here appears, in a terribly primitive form, the same mythical ambiguity of laws that may not be 'infringed' to which Anatole France refers satirically when he says, 'Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges.'²⁸ (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], pp.295-296)

This can be manifested in terms of a peace agreement because, at the conclusion of a peace, it establishes a number of legal spheres of power, it institutionalises the violence of the conflict into a peace which maintains that force: "If, therefore, conclusions can be drawn from military violence, as being primordial and paradigmatic of violence used for all natural ends, there is inherent in all such violence a lawmaking character." (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.283) The conclusion of peace is merely the moment, on Benjamin's account, when violence is contractualised or institutionalised. The violence has not gone away. One way of interpreting this is to consider it in the context of 1921 Germany: the peace treaty of Versailles, the criminalisation of the German war effort, and the institutional enforcement of Germany as a second-rate power. The violence

²⁸ The relationship between law and myth will be explored more in Section 3.

that created this arrangement was the violence of the First World War, but Benjamin analogises this kind of violence to that which maintains the status quo within a state.

Law-making violence is also present in the power over life and death: “In the exercise of violence over life and death more than any other act, law reaffirms itself” (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.286). This reaffirmation, however, exposes the inherent violence within the contractual agreement of the law:

In the exercise of violence over life and death more than any other act, law reaffirms itself. But in this very violence something rotten in law is revealed, above all to a finer sensibility, because the latter knows itself to be infinitely remote from conditions in which fate might imperiously have shown itself in such a sentence. Reason must, however, attempt to approach such conditions all the more resolutely, if it is to bring to a conclusion its critique of both law-making and law-preserving violence. (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.286)

Law-making violence is thus that point at which a legal system’s power is created, or re-created. Law-preserving violence is that which maintains the legal system which has been initiated by the law-making violence. The rotten core that can be seen in law is the fact that the law is not connected to justice, but to power. What Benjamin has thus given us is a means of exposing the inherent violence within the law. These limits, on Benjamin’s account, merely represent the institutionalisation of a violence that was present at the origin of the law. It is this self-maintaining legal rationality that Benjamin refers to as mythical violence.

Having established how law is connected to (mythical) violence (*Gewalt*), it is now necessary to explain Benjamin’s analysis of strike action and how this relates to both means/end thinking about violence, but also a violence of pure means (divine violence). Following Sorel, Benjamin identifies two types of strike: the political and the proletarian (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.291). He claims that it was Sorel who first enunciated this politically: “Sorel has the credit – from political, rather than purely theoretical, considerations – of having first distinguished them.” (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.291). Benjamin then goes on to quote Sorel’s differentiation between proletarian and political general strike (put forward in Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*):

the key point being that the political strike sees merely a “change of masters” (Sorel, as quoted in, Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.291), while the proletarian strike attempts to “abolish the state” (Sorel, as quoted in Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.291). Benjamin sees the political strike as violent because it is necessarily extortionate: it is connected to means/end rationality. As he says, of the political strike:

The moment of violence, however, is necessarily introduced, in the form of extortion, into such an omission, if it takes place in the context of a conscious readiness to resume the suspended action under certain circumstances that either have nothing whatever to do with this action or only superficially modify it. (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.281)

We must, thus, understand any kind of means/end political action as mythically violent – on Benjamin’s account. If we are ready to resume work within the current legal framework, but only after having our ransom paid, we are performing a form of legally permitted violence against the state: “Organised labour is, apart from the state, probably today the only legal subject entitled to exercise violence.” (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.281). Benjamin then asks how a non-action can be classified as violent, answering that it becomes so when it is extortionate. Thus, on this view we must see the political strike as inherently connected with the means/end rationality of political groups: it is connected to a means/end logic because it seeks to *achieve something*. It has an aim towards which it is directed. It uses violence as a means to this end.

The proletarian general strike (according to Benjamin), in contrast to the political strike, is not extortionate (it does not seek a particular end) and thus not connected to means/end rationality. It does not seek to achieve some end, to hold the state to ransom, but rather to fundamentally change the legal system: to abolish the state and the status quo. Proletarian violence (divine violence) does not embody mythical violence:

For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes as consummates. (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], pp.291-292)

If a revolutionary general strike, however, does not seek to overthrow the current legal system, then it is no different from a political strike:

Such conduct [the revolutionary general strike], when active, may be called violent if it exercises a right in order to overthrow the legal system that has conferred it; when passive, it is nevertheless to be so described if it constitutes extortion in the sense explained above [i.e. that of trying to achieve some end]. (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.282)

It is, thus, only in the breaking down of the current legal boundaries, but without a particular end, that a revolutionary general strike can be said to embody divine violence. Divine violence is pure means because it is against all attempts at reconsolidating power or achieving a given end. It stands, according to Benjamin, beyond means/end logic. As described by Khatib:

While the political general strike remains in the domain of mythic violence since it establishes a new law, the proletarian general strike is anarchistic insofar as it reaches fully beyond law-making violence. In doing so, its truly an-archistic, a-teleological and non-instrumental character is strictly non-utopian. (Khatib, 2016)

Divine violence, for Benjamin, is pure means because it stands opposed to all attempts to consolidate or legalise its power; that is, to create some end for it. It is purely destructive, anarchistic, and without end.

The distinction between divine and mythic violence thus comes down to this divide between a violence with an end (achieving a given end within the legal system) and a violence without end (destruction of the legal system). Divine violence stands as that which is law-destroying, and destructive of the mythical violence that maintains the law:

This very task of destruction poses again, in the last resort, the question of a pure immediate violence that might be able to call a halt to mythical violence. Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.297)

Which is to say, divine violence is lethal to the legal system, strikes the power of the state, expiates the wrongs of the state; in short, it destroys current law. Law being, as discussed earlier, necessarily connected to its own form of violence (mythic). Divine violence – that which breaks current laws/the legal system – thus must be distinct. Moreover, it stands beyond means/end rationality and is ‘pure means’ because it does not accept the limits of the politically and legally, rationally possible (which is not the same as impossible).

Benjamin uses the figures of Korah and Niobe to portray the differences between mythical and divine violence (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.297). Alongside further reiterating the difference between mythical and divine violence, it points us towards another question: how does gender fit within Benjamin’s view of mythical and divine violence? The legend of Niobe describes how Niobe boasted of her fourteen children to Leto, who only had two. In retaliation against Niobe’s boastfulness, Leto’s two children (Artemis and Apollo) then kill all (or most, depending on the version) of Niobe’s children. This is cited by Benjamin as a case which shows us how a law is established: the retaliation is mythical violence that establishes a law (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], pp.294-295). In contrast, Korah was punished by God for rebelling against Moses: Korah and his followers were consumed by fire, their punishment thus being bloodless and expiating, according to Benjamin (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.297). These examples are as close as Benjamin comes to discussing gender within his ‘Critique of Violence’, but it poses interesting questions to us: Niobe, the mother, is punished with the death of her children, and she spends eternity mourning their loss. The violence, however,

is not actually destructive. Although it brings a cruel death to Niobe's children, it stops short of the life of their mother, whom it leaves behind, more guilty than

before through the death of the children, both as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods. (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.295)

The figure of the eternally suffering mother without children thus stands 'between men and gods'. Niobe is punished with mythical violence: her fate is to suffer. Korah – the male figure – is expiated by God's divine violence. While I do not take Benjamin to be making a point regarding gender by using these examples, it does point us to the question of gender in Benjamin's text. Except for the juxtaposition of the bereaved mother's eternal suffering and the rebellious male leader's expiation, Benjamin leaves open a reading from the perspective of gender. Regardless of intent, Benjamin's examples show us that the weight of mythical violence – of power relations written in law – falls heaviest upon women. If we take this reading of Benjamin's text, it allows us the same possibilities of destruction of that mythical violence which Benjamin intends his account of divine violence to provide.

What we have seen so far is that Benjamin offers a violent (divine violence) response to the violence of the legal system, embodied in the general strike. We can see how Benjamin is quite clearly combating mythic violence with an altogether different form of violence: divine violence. We must ask, however, whether all relations between political groups come down to violence? Benjamin poses the question himself: "Is any nonviolent resolution of conflict possible? Without doubt. The relationships of private people are full of examples of this ... Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust, and whatever else might be here mentioned, are their subjective preconditions. Their objective manifestation, however, is determined by the law". (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.289) So while these potentially non-conflictual abilities are within us, they are proscribed by law. Benjamin cites language, and the ability to understand speech, as being outside of the law (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], pp.289-290). He notes that it is only in advanced legal systems that fraud becomes a crime (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], pp.289-290). Moreover, he notes that parliament, because it relates to law-making (which is inherently mythically violent), is not a place where this linguistic manifestation of peaceful agreement can be manifested. So, while it seems that potentialities for peaceful resolutions exist, they are increasingly restricted by law so that the only means of breaking out of them is through divine violence; divine violence, which, we have seen, is manifested in the proletarian general strike.

It might be here interesting to ask: are there any other ways in which divine violence can be manifested? The critical literature on Benjamin focuses on the revolutionary violence of the general strike.²⁹ And without a doubt the proletarian general strike is the central thrust of Benjamin's argument. Benjamin does, however, briefly mention one other: education. Benjamin states: "The divine power is attested not only by religious tradition but is also found in present-day life in at least one sanctioned manifestation. The educative power, which in its perfected form stands outside the law, is one of its manifestations." (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.297) It is important here to note that what is translated as 'educative power', is rendered by the word *Gewalt* in the original text (Benjamin, 2015 [1921], p.60). Benjamin is, clearly, then, ascribing the same type of power to education as he does to the proletarian strike. We can, given our discussion so far of Benjamin's account of divine violence, see how education could fit into an account of divine violence: it stands outside of mythical law (insofar as it is not law-preserving or law-making); it is not (necessarily) connected to means/end rationality; and it has the power to break laws insofar as laws are that which sets the boundaries of rational action. That is not to say education is a means to break some or other law, but rather to fundamentally break the means/end proscription of the current legal framework. Education provides the ability to see beyond the current legal system and to appreciate its inherent violence, and in so doing is thus law-breaking on Benjamin's account. As I outlined at the beginning of the section, we must understand Benjamin's *Gewalt* as positing itself within the relationality of legitimate/illegitimate authority, and specifically as authoritative violence against a de-positing or opening of violence. Education can quite clearly be seen within this context of a de-positing or opening. Its violence constituted by its relationality, education shows us that Benjamin's violence aims to be non-prescriptive and against authority. While Benjamin's inclusion of education as a type of divine violence is interesting, it is also important insofar as it shows us that what Benjamin defines as divine violence is quite distinct from Sorel's account of proletarian violence. While building upon Sorel's account, Benjamin is thus clearly shifting the account to a more theoretical – rather than polemical or pragmatic – account of political violence. It is, moreover, one which does not rely upon warrior virtue or martial mindset, but rather a way of thinking around the law.

²⁹ Sharon Jessop's (Jessop, 2013) recent article is the only text that deals with Benjamin's account of the divine violence of education in any depth. Jessop, however, approaches Benjamin from a pedagogical perspective rather than a political one.

It is also worth considering that while Benjamin takes education to embody the same *type* of power as the proletarian strike, it may be relatively less powerful. I take the educative power (for Benjamin) to be divine violence, just as exists in the proletarian strike, but weaker. I take this to be the case primarily because of Benjamin's emphasis on the proletarian general strike. Benjamin does not explicitly state that the educative power is weaker, but his emphasis on the proletarian general strike belies a support for this particular form of divine violence. I return to this in Section 3, where I outline Benjamin's support for a particular conception of God/the good. For now, it suffices to note that we too can appreciate why Benjamin would support the proletarian strike over the educative power. In the historical context within which Benjamin was writing a proletarian general strike was a real possibility. It seems understandable that a mass general strike would be a more potent means of ending the status quo than the process of education. Following the logic of the argument I have so far laid out: where education is a process whereby an individual can come to think beyond practical rationality, a general strike is a moment where a people come to think beyond practical rationality. The general strike represents a qualitatively identical, but quantitatively superior, form of divine violence.

What we have seen throughout this section is how Benjamin uses his critique of violence to offer a critique of means/end rationality, and of the legal limitations on just actions. Using the models of the political and proletarian general strike, Benjamin draws out the relationships between violence, law, and justice. Any legal framework is connected, according to Benjamin, to mythic violence which ensures the maintenance of the status quo and/or the creation of power. Instead, Benjamin seeks to offer an account of divine violence which is directly connected to justice. An account which can offer a form of 'pure means', so that violence is justified in and of itself. He sees this as potentially manifesting in the proletarian general strike, but also – a point which is often overlooked – through education, showing us the multifaceted nature of Benjamin's conception of violence.

Section 3: Immanent and Contextual Critique

3.1: The Ends of ‘Critique of Violence’ – the problematic nature of Benjamin’s account of the good

In this section, I recast Benjamin’s concepts within a more critical framework, examining the underlying premises that make Benjamin’s ideas stand. My main aim of this section is to question and challenge some of the fundamental premises of Benjamin’s method. I argue that Benjamin’s use of revolution within the work is an end in itself, and relies upon a smuggling in of an account of the good. I begin by pressing on Benjamin’s use of the idea of divine violence: is this a valid, or useful way to approach politics? I argue that while we have reasons to think that a revolutionary account of politics does have historical justifications, its unpredictability provides insufficient grounds on which to build a forward-looking framework. Furthermore, I argue that for Benjamin’s account to hold, he necessarily must subscribe to an account of the good (or God), which he does through his support for the proletarian general strike. I argue that this is an importation of ends into the Benjaminian account: exactly what Benjamin sought to avoid. I argue, moreover, that without it, Benjamin’s account is insufficient.

I argued in Section 2 that Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ was centrally concerned with offering a critique of the limits of rational action. I showed how Benjamin sought to give an account of that which stands beyond the bounds of practical reason. It is this that Benjamin terms divine violence. The critique of this account of political possibilities as being related to the divine is not a new one: Habermas offers perhaps the most sustained and convincing account of this (in relation to Benjamin, but also to other thinkers) in his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Habermas, 1992). The problem, as Habermas sees it, is that modernity – as a unique epoch – can no longer ground its normative claims in either the past or the future:

the question arises as to whether the principle of subjectivity and the structure of self-consciousness residing in it suffice not only for ‘providing foundations’ for science, morality, and art in general but also for stabilising a historical formation that has been set loose from all historical obligations ... How can an intrinsic ideal form be constructed from the spirit of modernity, one that neither imitates the

historical forms of modernity nor is imposed upon them from the outside?
(Habermas, 1992, pp.19-20)

Benjamin's account of a divine intervention thus holds little in the way of a coherent account of how to find this 'intrinsic ideal'. As I mentioned in Section 1, it is in this mode of analysis that Benjamin's work may well contribute little to contemporary philosophy. Throughout Section 2, however, I have sought to show that Benjamin was confronting political problems in a way that can provide us with insights into our own responses to such problems. Questions pertaining to things such as the relation of law to justice, of the limits of means/end rationality, and the nature of political violence, have not disappeared. Benjamin provides particular responses to them; we may choose others.

Benjamin is clear that accounts of true justice can only relate to the divine: "it is never reason that decides on the justification of means and the justness of ends, but fate-imposed violence on the former and God on the latter." (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.294) Reason, according to Benjamin, cannot decide on the justness of ends, only God. If we accept Habermas' criticism of Benjamin, that modernity needs an immanent normative foundation rather than an external one, this seems problematic. If we use Habermas' criteria for identifying just ends, Benjamin's account will fall down. And Benjamin's own account of justice relating to God is also problematic: even on his own account. Benjamin's striving for justice creates fundamental contradictions with his method of pure means. What we see are two essential problems in Benjamin's typology of violence.

First, Habermas' criticism is that modernity needs an immanent normative foundation – one which is not imposed from without. It needs to find its intrinsic ideal and strive towards this (Habermas, 1992, pp.19-20) Benjamin's account, however, is oriented around not having an ideal, not having a normative foundation, and not striving towards an end. This is antithetical to Habermas' thought, but should also be a challenge to anyone wishing to take Benjamin's work seriously: how can we strive for anything without ideals or norms? Divine violence would seem, in this sense, to be based in reactivity: a reaction to injustice. Without a positive ideal, we would only strive towards divine violence in the case of injustice. How would we know, however, that there is injustice without an instance of divine violence? It is difficult to get to the root

of Benjamin's thought here. As I mentioned at the outset, and as Andrew Benjamin (2013, p.28) has well laid out, the fundamental aim of Benjamin's philosophy is one of destruction. There is no obvious constructive or forward-looking outcome to Benjamin's account of history or to his critique of means/end rationality (despite his belief that it is only through destruction that we can have creation). All we have, from the 'Critique of Violence', is a theoretical account for working towards the abolition of the present state of affairs. Such an account still lacks a fundamental justification for divine violence except where we see cases of divine violence; by this I mean that without a reaction to injustice (divine violence), it is difficult to know when we need to challenge the laws that govern us (divine violence).

The second criticism of Benjamin's account turns on his argument that only God can decide on the justness of ends (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.294). While Habermas' arguments come from the direction of someone seeking immanent normativity within modernity, Benjamin is seeking to locate this normativity elsewhere – with God. While he does not do it explicitly, what Benjamin must do, for his account of divine violence to stand, is to offer an account of the divine (i.e. God) or the good which operates with divine violence. Within Benjamin's text, I would suggest that he quite obviously smuggles in an account of the good. Benjamin smuggles in an account of the good by focusing on the (quasi-) Marxist account of the revolutionary strike. The revolutionary general strike, while destructive of current law, is clearly representative of an account of the good: it is an account of the good which sees contemporary bourgeois law as bad, and which sees the proletariat as a force for overcoming this. There is a tension here: Benjamin claims to seek an account of divine violence as pure means, and yet outlines certain ends which are proper to it. In positing a normatively charged account of pure means, Benjamin is not just giving us an account of divine violence, but giving us an account of the good which corresponds to his understanding of divine violence.

As I mentioned in my discussion of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', Benjamin does leave open the possibility of an "educative power, which in its perfected form stands outside the law" (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.297). In this instance, it is education (of what form is unclear) which provides a means of challenging the limits of the rationally possible and breaking open the cycle of mythic violence. If we accept that having an account of politics which appeals to God is problematic insofar as it does not base its normative claims within modernity, how can we accept that education performs the

function of a *Göttliche Gewalt* (godlike violence)? We here come up against the ambiguity of Benjamin's account: he does not specify what education means, but he does give us an account of what divine violence is. What divine violence is, for Benjamin, is that which can see beyond the bounds of the possible and to abolish those boundaries. If it relates to the divine, however, then surely we need to know what the divine is. If we do not know what the divine is, however, then his account of the divine really is simply about breaking open the possibilities of reason and we necessarily have a purely destructive account of the divine. It is unconvincing that this is what Benjamin wanted to argue for given his professed commitment to Marxist revolution. We thus reach a fundamental tension in Benjamin's work: it is either purely destructive, or must rely on an account of God and/or the good. Arguably, it is the latter: Benjamin's account of the good is one where proletarian violence is a normative ideal.

3.2: 'Critique of Violence': insights on myth and violence

I will now consider Benjamin's text, and my criticisms already made of it, in relation to my broader questions of myth and violence, and the relationship to political theory. I will argue that (in the 'Critique of Violence') by portraying mythic violence as analogous with the legal-institutional status quo, and the divine as something other than this, Benjamin's violence is offering a cognitive or intellectual account of the limits on individual action – not a physical one. Mythical violence, in the 'Critique of Violence' thus stands as something which conceals justice from us. I argue that in simply assigning to law the negative value of mythical violence, Benjamin depoliticises law and conceals more than he reveals. Given Benjamin's reliance on Sorel, I argue that it is peculiar that Benjamin inverted the understanding of the proletarian general strike and instead chooses to use myth in the way that he does. Finally, I argue that Benjamin's posing of violence as both mythic and divine is a way of taking away questions of legitimacy from analysing violence: mythic violence is not portrayed as illegitimate, but rather representative of a violence that is always present in legal systems; equally, divine violence is the only way of effecting real change. This emphasises the role of violence in all political life. I pose Frazer and Hutchings' question of whether we can ever escape violence, arguing that Benjamin seems to see it is a tool of both oppression and emancipation

Benjamin's account of mythical violence, as I have here laid it out, can be summarised in Benjamin's claim that, "Far from inaugurating a purer sphere, the mythical manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence." (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.296) Throughout Section 2 I sought to interrogate this idea of mythical violence in relation to its counterpart, divine violence. Towards the end, I noted how Benjamin's account of divine violence is not analogous to Sorel's account of proletarian violence because it is not necessarily physical in nature. In this we can refer to my earlier discussion of *Gewalt*: for Benjamin *Gewalt* is always to be understood relationally to legitimacy and illegitimacy. *Gewalt*, as a relationally open concept, fundamentally gives rise to the polarisation of authoritative (mythic) and de-positing (divine) violence. Where Benjamin identifies divine violence as striving towards true justice through its de-positing, Sorel sees proletarian violence as a warrior virtue embodied in the lived practices of individuals. These are extremely different understandings of the meaning of proletarian violence: on the one (Benjaminian) hand, we have a violence oriented around the cognitive de-positing of law, whereas in Sorel we have a violence which is fundamentally agonistic and achieved through lived practices.

Divine violence, for Benjamin, can be manifested in education, along with the general strike. In relation to this, the force of law that is mythical violence, must be more than purely physical. As I laid this out throughout Section 2, mythical violence is not solely the use of physical violence by the state, but also the setting of boundaries through law. These boundaries represent both a legal limit and a limit on the actions determined by practical reason (which is itself bounded by law and the institutional framework). The force of law – mythical violence – is instead, as much an intellectual or cognitive limitation as a physical one. What myth represents, in the 'Critique of Violence', is an obfuscating and concealing of true relations of justice, which can be found through divine violence. Myth is thus portrayed as that which is untrue, and that which prevents people from seeing truth. Myth is equated to the constitution of the status quo. Given the importance of Sorel for Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', this seems a peculiar direction in which to take the concept of myth. Unlike Sorel's account, whereby myth created a cognitive image that could be realised through action, myth for Benjamin is a negative term which represents the concealment of truth and justice. Benjamin's account, moreover, represents a divergent strand of thought from the likes of Bottici and Sorel, who see myth as performing a function in society which is not solely determined by its relation to truth claims. For Benjamin, mythical violence is always

opposed to divine violence and thus always opposed to true justice. While Benjamin's bringing together of the power of law and the cognitive limits of institutional frameworks is powerful, his account of this as mythic seems to be an inadequate account of myth.

In portraying myth simply as false, Benjamin obscures more than he reveals. Sorel's account left open an account of the truth, but utilised the concept of myth as something which related as not-yet-true or inhabiting a sphere of the imagination. Benjamin's account, in contrast, creates a dichotomy between myth and truth. In doing this, Benjamin essentially characterises mythic thinking as untrue and unjust. Sorel's insights, lost in Benjamin's development of his work, shows us that in understanding myth in a relationship which stands beyond truth claims, we can understand actions and beliefs which are not explicable through truth claims. Sorel's account provided us with a means by which we could analyse and understand myths, whereas Benjamin's account essentially analogises mythic violence to ignorance of the divine truth. Such an account is, fundamentally, less analytically useful than Sorel's: it pulls us back into a relationship with truth and moves us further away from the conceptually explicative power of myth.

Benjamin's account of mythical violence is an account of stasis *qua* equilibrium *and* civil strife: it incorporates an essentially Marxist view of society as one bound together by a law which acts in one group's (the bourgeois) interest against another (the proletariat). It fails to recognise the dialectical processes involved in law-making, and the fact that law is always a sphere of contestation and not purely a monodirectional form of oppression. Without recognising law's multifaceted nature, and instead portraying it simply as false justice, we cannot expect to come to a real understanding of it, and how we might relate it to myth or to violence.

What Benjamin's account of myth does show us, however, is how his view of myth is necessarily aligned with his view of violence. Violence, as outlined in Section 2, is not akin to Sorel's account of creating a warlike mindset and way of life. Violence, rather, can be analogised with both the legal status quo and means of breaking out of that. The nature of it, however, is unclear. Marcuse begins his analysis by noting that Benjamin's understanding of violence is not a common understanding of violence: "The violence

that is dealt with in Benjamin's analysis is not that which is criticised everywhere else; especially not when it is the violence employed (or attempted) by those below against those above." (Marcuse, 2014 [1965], p.124) It is not a common understanding because, according to Marcuse, it specifically aims against the current hegemony of the establishment: the violence that Benjamin criticises is "that of the Establishment, that which preserves the monopoly on legality, truth and justice." (Marcuse, 2014 [1965], p.124) I think that Marcuse's interpretation, however, does not give Benjamin sufficient credit, nor does it get to the heart of Benjamin's understanding of violence. Benjamin is not only critiquing an establishment which has a monopoly on legality, truth, and justice (although he is also doing that). Benjamin, is, I suggest, critiquing the very nature of the state as holding the legitimate monopoly on violence, and critiquing the meaning of the concept of violence itself. If we took Marcuse's interpretation to be correct, then Benjamin's separation of mythical and divine violence would represent merely a rehashing of Sorel's force/violence distinction: mythical violence would be Sorelian force, and divine violence would be Sorelian (proletarian) violence. Benjamin's critique, however, offers a significantly more nuanced picture: it defines divine violence as critiquing the limits of practical reason as viewed within an institutional framework. Benjamin cleaves violence from its monopoly within the state and frames it in relation to justice (divine violence) and law (mythic violence). Benjamin's account pushes at the modern political understanding of politics as both pacified and (according to Weber) characterised by its monopoly on violence. Marcuse's understanding limits Benjamin's critical purchase insofar as the critique would only ever be of the state. In understanding Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' as I do, we are giving a more nuanced picture of the relationship between law, justice, truth, and violence: in working towards understanding violence in its relation to these other concepts, we can work towards a deeper understanding of the concept of violence itself.

To claim that Benjamin's text is more nuanced than Marcuse suggests is not to say that Benjamin's text is without problems. Benjamin's text has been portrayed, I would argue correctly, by Bernstein (2013, p.76) as extremely problematic. Bernstein asks: "we want to know why so many thinkers are drawn to this short text" (Bernstein, 2013, p.76). Bernstein's answer to his own question seems to be accurate: "I suggest that the reason why Benjamin's text is so alluring is that he incisively raises the key *questions* that any critique of violence must confront." (Bernstein, 2013, p.76) Moreover, these are not only questions that were relevant in early twentieth century Europe, but questions that are still relevant today: "The value of Benjamin's essay is in the *questions* that it opens

up and compels us to confront – questions that still haunt us – and not in any *answers* or solutions that he provides, because he doesn't provide answers." (Bernstein, 2013, p.76) Benjamin's text does not provide us with answers, but it does raise many questions relevant to a study of myth and violence.

This leads us to a question posed by Frazer and Hutchings in their discussion of Agamben and Derrida (which begins with a discussion of Benjamin, who influenced both): "can there be politics without violence?" (Frazer and Hutchings, 2011b, p.127), we must assert that, for Benjamin, all current politics is mythically violent. Moreover, to achieve an end to mythical violence, we must overcome it through (divine) violence. Benjamin's talk of a "purer sphere" (Benjamin, 2007a [1921], p.296) and the expiating power of divine violence, implies that there is an emancipatory end to his account. On Benjamin's view, then, we can go beyond mythical violence, through divine violence. Although Benjamin does not say it explicitly, we must assume that in a sphere of pure justice, we would live in a world of pure divine violence: violence would always be present, but if we would call this by the name of politics, is unclear. Here we must, however, return to Richard Bernstein's critique of Benjamin: Bernstein argues that we can sympathise with Benjamin viewing law as, at times, negatively violent: those laws which maintain racism, slavery and so on. But, Bernstein asks, what about those positive laws which gave civil rights to black Americans and sought to "put an end to these injustices" (Bernstein, 2013, p.73). According to Bernstein, "ultimately it is too simplistic to fail to discriminate the multiple positive functions of law – the ways in which law (based on the threat of violence) can further justice." (Bernstein, 2013, p.73) But Bernstein probes further and asks, "what would be the surrogate for law if the state were destroyed? Benjamin is silent about this. It is disingenuous to say that this falls back on means-end thinking. It is not adequate, and potentially disastrous (as we know all too well from history), to say that this must be decided by those who come after the revolution." (Bernstein, 2013, p.73) Bernstein goes on to argue that if we make the decision that we cannot maintain the state because it is unconnected with justice, then we cannot then ignore the equally hard – if not harder – question of the consequences of that: "otherwise we are not struggling but play acting" (Bernstein, 2013, p.74). There is a responsibility required in thinking through these consequences.

Derrida's interpretation of Benjamin's text highlights the way in which Benjamin's esotericism and lack of thinking certain things through can lead to problems arising

from his text. It is in this sense that Bernstein's criticism that Benjamin does not take full responsibility for his own argument becomes most clear: Derrida's most obvious and shocking mischaracterisation of Benjamin's thought is his association of divine violence with the gas chambers of the holocaust (Derrida, 1992, pp.62-63). McCormick describes this as "deliberate mischaracterisations of, and misassociations with, the thought of Walter Benjamin" (McCormick, 2001, p.395). This understanding of divine violence clearly goes against the grain of Benjamin's work. Yet, while it may be a mischaracterisation, it does hold some force: the bloodless, law-breaking violence that stands outside bounds of the legal status quo does shock us into questioning Benjamin's analysis. There is a way in which this does strike us as reminiscent of the gas chambers of the holocaust. It is, furthermore, this kind of shocking reinterpretation and restatement of Benjamin's work that reminds us that "One obeys them [laws] not because they are just but because they have authority." (Derrida, 1992, p.12). Derrida's essay offers us more than simply a mischaracterisation: it ultimately forces us to re-read Benjamin's essay and to take from it the requirement to challenge any account of justice, law, and truth. It "reminds us that the ceaseless questioning of force must be part of any agenda that aspires to justice. The questioning of force – legal or otherwise – must not be violently shut down by those who claim to bear the authority of a justice already attained." (McCormick, 2001, p.417) Not only, however, must we question force; we must question and critique those theories which purport to be themselves critiques of force (i.e. Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'). A critique which is open to the interpretation that Derrida applies requires rethinking and reappraising.

The crux of the problem with Benjamin's account, as I have laid out above, is that without any account of a post-legal society – an account which can be open to the interpretation Derrida applies – we are opening up the unknown and the unknowable. This is not to say that Benjamin's account is without insights: his distinction between mythical and divine violence offers us an interesting and possibly fruitful way of thinking through violence which does not rely on claims of a state's legitimacy, but rather moves the sphere of judgment away from legitimacy and towards justice.³⁰ To highlight that the law does not necessarily embody justice, however, is an important insight and one which holds open the promise of useful critical purchase. To argue for an overcoming of the unknown mythical nature of legal violence through a divine violence which takes us into the unknown, seems a problematic argument.

³⁰ How we identify justice is another matter.

What we also see in Benjamin's text is the depoliticization of law. In contrast, a politicisation of law may be more likely to provide the overcoming of what Benjamin describes as mythical violence's (i.e. the state's) force. In describing law as mythical violence, Benjamin removes it from the realm of human construction, deliberation, and contestation. Arguably, highlighting the contingent nature of law as reliant upon political power would allow a challenge thereof to be more effectively made. Benjamin's account also leaves us with the question, however, of what is violence: is it something physical which asserts or challenges power relations? Is it something cognitive? Is it something connected with the altering of another person's state of being? These questions are posed, and left open, by Benjamin's analysis. In my introduction I outlined that I took political violence to be a form of power expressed and exerted upon individuals or groups by other individuals or groups with political approval. While I take insights from Benjamin's separation of law from justice, I believe we cannot leave open the question of true justice before overcoming Benjaminian mythical violence: what Benjamin's account fundamentally shows us is the need to confront questions of justice when examining the concept of violence.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have sought to offer an exposition and critique of Benjamin's accounts of myth and violence. I began by outlining the historical and intellectual context of Benjamin's work, including interpretations of his oeuvre. I then moved on, in Section 2, to offer an explication and analysis of Benjamin's work alongside that of Weber. In Section 3 I focused on a critique of Benjamin's account, outlining the interest of 'Critique of Violence' in thinking on both myth and violence.

The insights we can draw from my critique of Benjamin's work is as an alternative way of thinking through myth and violence from Sorel's, but one which maintains the connection between the two. Myth, for Benjamin, is presented as that which conceals the truth and obscures true justice. Violence, moreover, is not – for Benjamin – purely related to physical and warlike actions. This conception of violence contrasts with how Sorel understands violence. I argued that Benjamin sees violence as a cognitive process as much as a physical one: divine violence is about trying to think beyond our current (mythical) rationality, bounded as it is by legal-institutional thinking. In contrast, the

status quo is also violent, albeit in a different (mythical) way. We see, with Benjamin, the interconnectedness of myth and violence. What we also see, however, is several areas where Benjamin's account is problematic: in ascribing to myth the value of false justice, Benjamin necessarily holds there to be an account of truth to be discovered. As I argued, when it comes to human/social constructions like the law, this is not necessarily a helpful way of approaching the subject and depoliticises something which – I argued – should not be depoliticised. Further, I argued that Benjamin's account is too open, and does not fully take into consideration the consequences of what it is arguing. Such an account, in thinking on important concepts like myth and violence, is insufficient.

Chapter 5

The Conflictual Nature of Myth in the Work of Carl Schmitt

Introduction

In this chapter I argue that Carl Schmitt's view of myth is centred around a conflictual account of nation states. I critique Schmitt's claim that his account of myth is descriptive, instead arguing that he slips from descriptive to prescriptive. This shows us a support for conflict within Schmitt's theoretical account. I focus on the two texts where Schmitt most fully discusses myth: *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* and *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. I show that, in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, Schmitt has a largely Sorelian view of myth, substituting Sorel's class based myth for a national one. Building on this, I move on to discuss Schmitt's later text *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. I use this to show how Schmitt situates images and symbols as part of a larger mythic narrative. Moreover, I show how Schmitt's references to the relation of images and symbols to political myth highlights the way in which myth is both created and sustained.

I begin, in Section 1, by outlining my choice of texts and my interpretative approach. I then, in Section 2, focus on Schmitt's *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. In my analysis I follow the structure of Schmitt's argument, identifying the subtle shift from a descriptive account of Sorel's theory of myth to a prescriptive account of myth based in the nation. I then move onto focus on Schmitt's case of Russia. Schmitt uses the example of Russia to argue the counterintuitive case that the Bolshevik revolution was really a nationalist revolution. In Section 3 I focus on Schmitt's use of myth in his *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. I use this section to show how Schmitt picks apart Hobbes' use of the image of the Leviathan, as well as the mythic traditions of which the Leviathan is a part. I situate Schmitt's work on myth within his own, supposedly descriptive, framework. In doing this, I show how Schmitt is claiming to offer a neutral account of political myth, something quite distinct from the

motivating political narrative put forward by Sorel (and most of the theorists I described in the introduction). In the final section I show how, even on Schmitt's own terms, his account fails to offer a descriptive account and is prescriptive. I supplement this analysis with insights from Tudor, Bottici and Habermas, arguing that Schmitt ultimately fails to successfully mask his normative agenda within his account of myth. I argue that the importance of this, for myth, is that it shows how even the idea of the modern nation state – often assumed to be an unproblematic element of political theories – requires mythic underpinning and justification.

Section 1: Approaching Schmitt's work

Before moving onto my readings of Schmitt's texts, it is worth explaining my choice of texts. I focus primarily, in this chapter, on Schmitt's *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* and *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. The reason I focus on these texts is because these are the two texts where myth receives its most detailed treatment. The final chapter of *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* features an essay on Sorel's concept of myth, and it is here that we find Schmitt most clearly expressing a view of what he takes myth to be. In *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* we see Schmitt assessing and analysing the mythical image of the leviathan throughout time, and how this has affected, and been affected by, Hobbes' textual interjection in this tradition. In approaching these two texts, written 15 years apart, we can see two ways in which Schmitt approaches myth. First, conceptually: Schmitt approaches myth in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* as a concept that may need further work in clarifying its nature. Second, analytically: in *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, Schmitt analyses the image of the leviathan as a nebulous entity which can be assessed and analysed in terms of mythic traditions. Both provide us with insights into Schmitt's understanding of myth and the central role he sees it as having in politics.

I would also like to explain the absence of several texts which could feature in a study of Schmitt on myth. The 'Editors' Introduction' to Schmitt's *Political Theology II*, which is itself concerned with a kind of myth, contains an interesting discussion of the context of Schmitt's work on myth (Hoelzl and Ward, 2012, pp.1-29). Hoelzl and Ward (2012, pp.21-22) note that in the early 1920s, Ernst Cassirer published two major works on myth: *The Conceptual Form of Mythical Thinking* and *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Cassirer's work on *political* myth, however, did not appear until 1946 with his

Myth of the State (Hoelzl and Ward, 2012, p.22). Schmitt's own work on political myth begins around the same time as Cassirer's earliest works, but Schmitt does not reference Cassirer in his *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Instead, Schmitt's analysis of myth is based on the work of Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*. Hoelzl and Ward (2012, pp.26-27) then go on to draw a line of thought on myth from Schmitt's *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, via his work on Hobbes' *Leviathan*, to his *Political Theology II*. The link they draw is via Erik Peterson: they frame *Political Theology II* as the concluding phase of both a friendship and a theological dispute over the possibility of political theology (Hoelzl and Ward, 2012, pp.8-9; pp.24-27). On this understanding, Schmitt deals with Sorelian myth in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* and then shifts his focus by the time he writes *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. It is the point between Schmitt's text on Hobbes and his *Political Theology II*, however, that Hoelzl and Ward emphasise: it is here that they take the dispute between Schmitt and Peterson over the nature of political theology to play out, via a "confrontation between Eusebius of Caesarea and Augustine of Hippo" (Hoelzl and Ward, 2012, p.26). I will not draw this same line of thinking since I do not take *Political Theology II* to be a major text on *political* myth for Schmitt. While *Political Theology II* does open with discussions of the mythic, the text is concerned primarily, I suggest (echoing Hoelzl and Ward, 2012), with this theological dispute between Schmitt and Erik Peterson over the nature of political theology, done so via discussions of the figures of Eusebius and Augustine. While the relationship between myth and political theology is an interesting one that needs further examination, I am focusing here on myth in its political sense rather than in relation to theology.

I also do not take Schmitt's *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* to be a central text in understanding Schmitt's view on myth. This contrasts with McCormick whose analysis of Schmittian myth draws heavily on Schmitt's 1923 *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (McCormick, 1997). Most of McCormick's chapter is focused on expounding the relationship between Schmitt and the German tradition of technology critique, rather than a direct interrogation of myth. McCormick's critique of myth is centred around the relation of myth to Nietzsche and technology. In this chapter I am not dealing with what Schmitt describes as the economic-technical mode of thinking because this is related to a dominant mode of thinking, rather than about myth *sui generis* or a particular myth.³¹ Because of this, I choose to focus on the texts where

³¹ A particularly interesting comparative analysis of Sorel and Schmitt's criticisms of economic thinking could also engage quite directly with my own analysis here. Both Sorel and Schmitt

Schmitt most directly deals with myth: *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy and Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*.

The focus of McCormick's account of myth, and his use of *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, are not the only reason I choose not to utilise this text. Ernst Fraenkel takes up the matter of Schmitt's support for Catholicism, arguing that this is an aspect which features in his earlier work, but goes away as he himself turned away from Catholicism: "After [Schmitt] had turned his back on the Catholic Church, Schmitt lost his 'specific Catholic anxiety' as well as the realisation that the only essential rationality is the rationality of ends. He sought security instead in Sorel's theory of myth." (Fraenkel, 1969 [1941], p.207). I take another insight of Fraenkel's to give us a clue as to why Schmitt moved away from Catholicism and towards Sorelian myth, and I take this to be a key idea in understanding Schmitt's work on myth. Fraenkel associates both Schmitt and Sorel's thought with the belief in action and violence for their own sake, something which Fraenkel takes to be manifested in Schmitt's support for the Nazi regime. I disagree with Fraenkel's argument that Schmitt believed in violence for its own sake, but I agree with some of Fraenkel's premises.

According to Fraenkel, it was the collapse of general, or universal, ideas which drove Schmitt towards the Nazis. As Schmitt describes it himself: "One of the most important experiences which led me as a jurist to National-Socialism was the conversation with a world-famous American jurist. In 1932 he summarised his diagnosis of the contemporary world in one sentence: 'We are witnessing today the bankruptcy of *idees générales*' [sic]." (Schmitt, as quoted in, Fraenkel, 1969 [1941], pp.130-131) Fraenkel argues that, "The fact that the most brilliant political theorist of post-war [WWI] Germany adheres to a political movement, not because of its ideas, but because of its lack of ideas, is a symptom of the degree of development of that political estheticism [sic] that worships violence for its own sake." (Fraenkel, 1969 [1941], p.131) Or, as Fraenkel puts it later in his book, "power for the sake of power" (Fraenkel, 1969 [1941], p.202). It isn't clear, however, that the collapse of general ideas is the same as a "lack of ideas" (Fraenkel, 1969 [1941], p.131). In fact, Schmitt's support for Nazism would suggest a particular form, or cluster, of ideas: nationalism, racism, dictatorship, and so on. Although Schmitt is himself quoting an 'American jurist' in his comment on *idees*

criticise certain ways of thinking, and they both discuss and reflect upon myth. That these two things are related seems probable, but beyond the scope of my thesis.

générales, I take this to have remained with him for good reason: I take Schmitt to have subscribed to this belief in a collapse of *idees générales* and to have sought a response to it. I disagree that Schmitt ultimately resorted to a belief in violence for the sake of violence. Instead, I believe that Schmitt saw violence as a means of maintaining order (something I interrogate in detail in Chapter 6). I take Schmitt to have moved away from Catholicism's universal/general worldview, and towards a local one based in myth and the nation. It is this view which I take throughout this and the following chapter, and it is a central reason why I choose to focus on the texts that I do.

Considering the context of these texts may help shed further light on Schmitt's approach, and thus our approach to Schmitt's work. Schmitt's *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* was first published in 1923, with the bulk of the writing completed in the years leading up to 1923. It was in the context of violent conflict and struggles for power within the German state that Schmitt outlined his critique of parliamentary democracy. Ellen Kennedy points out that,

The first edition of Schmitt's essay on parliamentarism was completed before the onset of the most severe crisis of early Weimar, in the autumn and winter of 1923, but it had been written during and after the period of serious disturbances in Germany that persisted from November 1918. (Kennedy, 2000, p.xviii)

As I have already laid out in the introductory chapter, Germany in the post-war (WWI) and early Weimar period was an unstable and, at times, very violent place. It is important that we situate Schmitt's work within this context. As I have already outlined, it can help us to understand why Schmitt might lean towards a totalising view of democracy: a view of democracy that doesn't allow for internal conflict. Although the situation had not deteriorated to that which it would in 1923, Schmitt clearly identified weaknesses in the principles underpinning parliament: the principles of open discussion and the search for truth.

What we also see here is Schmitt's intellectual lineage from Sorel. I outlined, in Chapter 2, how Sorel opposes the political general strike from the parliamentary general strike. Sorel's criticism of politics was the bargaining, consensus and agreement of parliamentary government. This, Sorel argued, created weakness. Schmitt makes the

very same criticisms in his text. It is, moreover, in explicit relation to Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* that Schmitt's work on myth is situated. We see the intellectual lineage that begins with Sorel feeding directly into Schmitt's work: both his work on myth (which I discuss in more detail below), but also his critique of parliamentary democracy. Where Sorel has challenged the relationship of the political to power (and the monopoly of violence), Schmitt will reassert the power and importance of the political.³² Understanding this intellectual context, alongside the historical context, is important when approaching Schmitt's work: it shows us how Schmitt receives, understands and appropriates concepts and theories that fit with his approach.

The second edition of Schmitt's *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, and the edition on which the translation I use is based, differs little from the original (1923) edition. The only difference was that the expanded 1926 version included a reply to Richard Thoma's review of the work and sought to argue against Thoma's criticisms (Schmitt, 2000 [1926]; Kennedy, 2000, p.ix). Schmitt's reply to Thoma was an attempt to reject Thoma's argument that Schmitt preferred dictatorship and the irrational (Schmitt, 2000 [1926]; Kennedy, 2000, p.xiv). I interrogate this idea of the irrational in my discussion of Schmitt and myth, in the following section. I also discuss Schmitt, democracy and dictatorship in my analysis of Schmitt and violence in Chapter 6. What it is important to note here is that Schmitt's critique of parliamentary democracy and its principles is situated within this period in which parliamentary democracy was struggling to maintain order and stability. It is this order and stability, I will argue, that Schmitt sought in violence and myth.

Schmitt's *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* was published in 1938, well after the crises of parliamentary democracy (in Germany) were over. Unlike *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, Schmitt's *Leviathan* did not go through any revisions, with the original 1938 version being the basis for the 1996 English translation. What the English translation does include is a 1937 essay 'The State as Mechanism in Hobbes and Descartes' (Schmitt, 1996b). This idea of the state as machine is explored in more detail in Section 3, where I read Schmitt's work alongside Kant's.³³ When Schmitt wrote *Leviathan*, the crises of parliament had been replaced by the one-party rule of the Nazis. Thinkers such as Schwab (1996, pp.ix-x) see Schmitt's *Leviathan* as an allusive

³² I cover this aspect in more detail in Chapter 6.

³³ We see at this point, again, the early twentieth century reaction against the Enlightenment understanding of politics.

critique of Nazi rule. I do not focus on this here, but do wish to emphasise the importance of this shift in context.³⁴ Where the *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* was written against the backdrop of a failing parliamentary democracy, Schmitt's critique of Hobbes' mythical symbol of the leviathan, is done so from within a one-party state which uses mythical symbols. In *Leviathan*, Schmitt emphasises both the power and instability of myth. These are important factors to note when approaching Schmitt's work.

Section 2: Myth in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*

In this section I focus on Schmitt's short essay 'The Political Theory of Myth'. This essay ultimately appeared as the concluding chapter to his *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Müller, 2003, p.462). I show how Schmitt puts forward many central features to his understanding of myth. I argue that Schmitt foregrounds the importance of 'irrationalism', instinct and intuition, 'real life', particularism, war, and heroism, to his account of myth. The reasons are, he argues, that: people will never be ready for discussion and that unity of thought (conceived of as a totalising system) is a negative. Myth thus stands as opposed to universal ideas and stands for a particular, conflictual, and unreflective expression of the political community.

Schmitt begins his essay by describing the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and how it has succeeded. He argues that it has succeeded because of myth. I will return to examine the case of Russia more closely after I give a description and analysis of Schmitt's account. Beginning his discussion of the nature of myth, Schmitt notes that "The following exposition is based on Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence*, which allows the historical connection between these ideas to be recognised most clearly." (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.66) The ideas that Schmitt refers to are an "irrationalist motive for the use of force ... a new evaluation of rational thought, a new belief in instinct and intuition that lays to rest every belief in discussion and would also reject the possibility that mankind could be made ready for discussion through an educational dictatorship." (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.66) It is worth noting the relationship between

³⁴ Schwab's introduction to Schmitt's *Leviathan* introduces the major interpretative approaches to the text, cf. Schwab, 1996

Schmitt and Sorel here. Schmitt is drawing heavily on Sorel's ideas: we saw in Chapter 2 how Sorel's concept of myth was underpinned by a belief that men needed more than reason to motivate them. Sorel argued that sentiments, emotions, and passions needed to be evoked to motivate, and he argued that myth was what did this. It was through instinct and intuition, according to Sorel, that individuals came to believe in myth.

Schmitt's account, in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, begins with the same premises as Sorel: that individuals cannot be motivated through rational argument, but must instinctively and intuitively associate with a myth. When he moves onto Sorel's account directly, Schmitt claims:

Its centre 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 of the whole complex that is grouped around conceptions such as 'balancing', 'public discussion', and 'parliamentarism'. (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.68)

It is clear how Schmitt, the thinker of *Die Diktatur* and decisionism, would be drawn to Sorel's text: opposed as it is to balance, discussion and parliament. These represent the aim, and the assumption, that consensus should and can be reached.

Schmitt's then moves on to explain his understanding of Sorel's concept of myth:

Only in myth can the criterion be found for deciding whether one nation or a social group has a historical mission and has reached its historical moment. Out of the depths of a genuine life instinct, not out of reason or pragmatism, springs the great enthusiasm, the great moral decision and the great myth. In direct intuition the enthusiastic mass creates a mythical image that pushes its energy forward and gives it strength for martyrdom as well as the courage to use force. Only in this way can a people or a class become the engine of world history. Wherever this is lacking, no social and political power can remain standing, and no mechanical apparatus can build a dam if a new storm of historical life has broken loose. (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.68)

As well as standing in contradiction to discussion, balance and parliament, myth is – ultimately – the decisive factor in whether a social group has reached its historical moment. It is myth where the ‘genuine life instinct’ can be found. ‘Life’ includes intuition, enthusiasm, moral decision, and myth. Schmitt contrasts this to reason and pragmatism. Myth is, moreover, that which gives the strength for martyrdom and the ‘courage to use force’.

Within his discussion of Sorel, Schmitt describes Bakunin and Proudhon’s opposition to unity of thought: “The concrete individual, the social reality of life, is violently forced into an all-embracing system.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.67) Again we see Schmitt referring to ‘reality’ (‘the social reality of life’) and to concreteness. There seems to be, for Schmitt, something in the abstraction of rational thought or discussion which moves us away from ‘real life’. Schmitt goes so far as to ascribe the Enlightenment’s desire for central ideas: “The centralising fanaticism of the Enlightenment is no less despotic than the unity and identity of modern democracy.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.67) Moreover, he identifies this despotism of thought with the idea of ‘modern democracy’. Again, Schmitt is referring to parliamentary democracy. What we should be able to see here is how these ideas relate to Schmitt’s claim that we are witnessing the bankruptcy of *idees générales*: the Enlightenment’s attempts at centralising and unifying thought has not succeeded. While the context of 1920s Germany may be witnessing the bankruptcy of *idees générales*, Schmitt sees myth as a reaction to this. Myth, in contrast to the bankruptcy of *idees générales*, is an extremely powerful force in the modern world: “The great psychological and historical meaning of the social theory of myth cannot be denied” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.73). The Enlightenment ideal is to seek unity and agreement, whereas Schmitt is emphasising difference and conflict. Myth can serve this function.

Schmitt goes on to argue that the “bourgeois ideal of peaceful agreement, an ongoing and prosperous business that has advantages for everyone” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.69) is seen by this strand of thinking as “the monstrosity of cowardly intellectualism. Discussing, bargaining, parliamentary proceedings, appear a betrayal of myth and the enormous enthusiasm on which everything depends.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.69) Schmitt approves of Sorel for taking ideas of war and heroism seriously:

The warlike and heroic conceptions that are bound up with battle and struggle were taken seriously again by Sorel as the true impulse of an intensive life. The proletariat must believe in the class struggle as a real battle, not as a slogan for parliamentary speeches and democratic electoral campaigns. It must grasp this struggle as a life instinct, without academic construction, and as the creator of a powerful myth in which it alone would find the courage for a decisive battle. (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.70)

Again, we see the 'life instinct' appear: this time it is connected with struggle. Schmitt states that Sorel takes war and heroism 'seriously again', implying that they had been in the past. We must presume, moreover, that they had not been taken seriously for some time. We have already seen how Schmitt relates life instinct to intuition, enthusiasm, courage and so on. Schmitt, opposes it to reason and articulates his point directly: "Whatever value human life has does not come from reason; it emerges from a state of war between those who are inspired by great mythical images to join battle, and depends upon 'a state of war that the people agree to participate in, which is reflected in a certain myth'." (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.70, with inset quote from Sorel) While Schmitt is still here giving an account of Sorel's conception of myth, it is clear that his view of myth coalesces with Sorel's. Schmitt is using Sorel as a springboard for his own argument: he is taking the premises upon which Sorel's account of myth is based, and rearranging the conclusions. Sorel is represented by Schmitt as someone who is taking 'seriously' war and heroism. Schmitt is both creating a tradition and fitting himself within it: a tradition of thinkers who take seriously problems which have not been taken seriously by others.

Schmitt's focus begins to shift from an account of Sorel's conception of myth, to a question of the most successful myths. Müller argues along the same lines: "While supporting Sorel's assessment of the sheer power of myths, Schmitt disagreed, however, on what actually constituted the most powerful myth" (Müller, 2003, p.463). As I noted at the start of this section, Schmitt began by posing the question of how the myth of the proletariat had succeeded in Russia. Following his account of Sorelian myth, he begins to probe the nature of successful myths and give his own account of which myths are most successful:

Bellicose, revolutionary excitement and the expectation of monstrous catastrophes belong to the intensity of life and move history. But the momentum must come from the masses themselves; ideologists and intellectuals cannot create it. So the revolutionary wars of 1792 originated, as well as the epoch that Sorel along with Renan celebrated as the greatest peak of the nineteenth century, namely, the German war of liberation of 1813: its heroic spirit was born of the irrational life energy of an anonymous mass. (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.71)

The direct assertion that national myths trump others comes a few pages later: “Sorel’s other examples of myth also prove that when they occur in the modern period, the stronger myth is the national.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.75) Not only is it the stronger, but whenever class and national myth have come into conflict: “the national myth has until today always been victorious”. (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.75) Schmitt explains why he believes the national myth is the stronger: on Schmitt’s view it is shared “speech, tradition, and consciousness of a shared culture and education” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.75) which gives the national myth its strength. Not only is national myth based on historical factors, but also about the sharing of a common future: “the awareness of belonging to a community with a common fate or destiny, a sensibility of being different from other nations – all of that tends toward a national rather than a class consciousness today” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.75). It is clear that Schmitt supports the general approach taken by Sorel, but that he is much more supportive of national rather than class based myths.

It is also clear, for Schmitt, that national myths represent a non-idealised kind of thinking about politics. Describing Mussolini’s support for a national myth, he states: “Just as in the sixteenth century, an Italian has once again given expression to the principle of political realism. That principle, is the power of the national myth” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.76). Schmitt is, however, not solely positive about myth. He notes that: “The last remnants of solidarity and a feeling of belonging together will be destroyed in the pluralism of an unforeseeable number of myths ... But as the strongest political tendency today, one cannot ignore it.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.76) While Schmitt is clearly supportive of Sorel’s concept of myth, but viewed with the knowledge that the national myth will always trump the socialist, he is not unreservedly supportive. For Schmitt, as I will detail further in the following chapter, one of his central concerns is order. In particular, Schmitt is concerned with order within a state,

and sees the externalising of violence as a means of maintaining internal order.³⁵ Were an unforeseeable number of myths to take hold within a state, they would destroy the unity that he sees as arising from the national myth. Internal disorder, caused by the irrational intuition of myth, is a possibility for political communities. As he states, however, although myth carries dangers it is the 'strongest political tendency today'. It is difficult, as is often the case with Schmitt, to separate the normative from the descriptive. Given his later works, notably in *The Concept of the Political*, it would seem convincing to see Schmitt as supportive of a national myth, one which can maintain the strong and stark distinctions which he sees as necessary for political life: the fear being that myths may be so powerful that they divide a country internally and work against order.

Given that Schmitt sees national myths as more powerful than ones based on class, it is worth considering other sectional interests within a society. It is worth considering the place of women within Schmitt's view of a traditional and national political myth. Schmitt does not mention women within his description of myth. We must, as such, draw our conclusions from what Schmitt fails to say. The way in which Schmitt presents myth as based in tradition and shared culture (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.75) suggests that the interests of groups within society are to be grounded in pre-existing and historical precedents. For women, this presumably means a position of political inferiority and subservience to men. Such power relations based on gender, we must assume, are to be accepted in the same way as power relations based on class are accepted. Schmitt has, he claims, shown that national myths are stronger than those based on class. National myths must be stronger, too, than myths that challenge existing gender relations. The other possibility is that women have a part within the national myth: perhaps as homemakers, mothers and wives to the soldiers of the nation. In this way Schmitt would be able to consolidate interest groups within his totalising vision of a national myth. Either way, what Schmitt's account of national myths (based in tradition) as the strongest shows us is that his account is far from radical: it represents, in fact, a powerfully conservative unity of historically imagined power relations.

³⁵ For a discussion of Schmitt's concerns over internal unity and civil war cf. Palaver, 2007, pp.73-75

Case: Russia

Schmitt begins his final chapter of *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* by asking why the Bolshevik revolution that occurred in 1917 took place on Russian soil. Schmitt uses this as both an entry point for his discussion of Sorel's account of myth, and to begin his critique of Sorel's myth of the general strike. At first sight it would seem that a communist revolution would reinforce Sorel's argument, but Schmitt uses the case to argue that it was the nationalist elements of the myth which drove it forward. In this section I show how Schmitt makes this case, and what the importance of this is. I argue that Schmitt identifies features of the communist myth in Russia as being primarily national: the bourgeois is portrayed as a non-Russian figure, and it is the community of shared language and tradition which holds the Russian myth of communism together.

Schmitt begins his final chapter by posing the problem of understanding the success of Bolshevism in Russia: "The entire organisation of teaching and education created by the Soviet government for its so-called *Proletkult* is an excellent example of a radical educational dictatorship. But that does not explain why the idea of the industrial proletariat in the modern great city should have achieved such dominance precisely in Russia." (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.66) Russia was, at the time of the Bolshevik revolution, much less industrially developed than her Western European counterparts. There were not the same industrial or social relations that had led Marx to conclude that revolution was inevitable. Why then, Schmitt can be seen to be asking, did Bolshevism succeed in Russia? A page prior to this question, Schmitt has already suggested a direction towards which the answer may lie: "all modern theories of direct action and the use of force rest more or less consciously on an irrationalist philosophy. In reality, as happened in the Bolshevik regime, it appears that in political life many different movements and tendencies can be at work alongside each other." (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.65) It was not, Schmitt argues, a simple case of the communist idea triumphing in Russia.

After posing the problem of Russia, Schmitt goes on to elaborate and discuss Sorel's account of myth. Later on in the chapter, however, Schmitt returns to the case of Russia. Schmitt begins by asserting that: "The great psychological and historical meaning of the social theory of myth cannot be denied. And the construction of the bourgeois by means of Hegelian dialectic has served to create an image of the enemy

that was capable of intensifying all the emotions of hatred and contempt.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.73-74) The image of the bourgeois is not a peculiarly European phenomenon, and instead has “taken on the dimension of a world-historical construction through the work of Marx and Engels” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.74). What Marx and Engels did, according to Schmitt, was to make the bourgeois into “the last representative of a prehistorical humanity that was divided into classes, the very last enemy of mankind, the last *odium generis humani*. In this way the image of the bourgeois has been carried further away toward east with a fantastic, not only world-historical, but also metaphysical background.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.74) It is important that Schmitt is here talking about the image of the bourgeois. The bourgeois comes to represent something. A ‘metaphysical’ background is given which implies a non-material meaning to the image of the bourgeois. Schmitt continues his description of the image of the bourgeois in the east: “There it was able to give new life to the Russian hatred for the complication, artificiality, and intellectualism of Western European civilisation, and in turn be reinvigorated by it.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.74) The image of the bourgeois comes to represent, according to Schmitt, a Western European view of the world. The distinction was enough to reinvigorate the Russian people.

Schmitt identifies the image of the bourgeois with a myth: “The image migrated from the west to the east. But there it seized a myth for itself that no longer grew purely out of instinct for class conflict, but contained strong nationalist elements.” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.74). As noted in the previous section, myth – for Schmitt – comes from instinct and intuition. We see here how Schmitt sees a particular image – the bourgeois – as being identified with myth: not just the myth of class conflict but also the national myth. Where Sorel praises Lenin, Schmitt compares Lenin to Peter the Great. Schmitt argues that,

Today Russia no longer assimilated West European intellectualism, but on the contrary, the proletarian use of force here at least had reached its apotheosis – namely, that Russia could again be Russian, Moscow again the capital, and the European upper classes who held their own land in contempt could be exterminated. Proletarian use of force had made Russia Muscovite again. In the mouth of an international Marxist that is great praise, for it shows that the energy of nationalism is greater than the myth of class conflict. (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], pp.74-75)

Schmitt goes so far as to identify the ‘apotheosis’ – the culmination – of proletarian force, to be nationalism. What the case of Russia shows, for Schmitt, was that while a proletarian myth can exist, it is ultimately subordinate to the national myth.

Schmitt’s discussion of the national myth in Russia covers many important elements from his discussion of Sorel’s concept of myth. We saw in the previous section how Schmitt identifies a shared sense of national community with his argument that the national myth is the stronger: “Speech, tradition, and consciousness of a shared culture and education, the awareness of belonging to a community with a common fate or destiny, a sensibility of being different from other nations” (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.75). In his discussion of the image of the bourgeois in Russia, Schmitt identifies Russia’s uniqueness from Western Europe as the reason why the class distinction of the bourgeois becomes part of a nationalist rather than class myth. Schmitt’s argument is that it is the shared language, history, culture, and awareness of belonging to a community which provide the underpinning of a successful myth. What the case of Russia shows, for Schmitt, is how even what appears to be the success of a proletarian myth is, in reality, the triumph of a national myth. Schmitt’s aim is to show how those elements that Sorel has ascribed to the proletarian myth are actually found in national myth. What Schmitt is thus doing throughout his essay is simultaneously elaborating a supportive account of Sorel’s concept of myth, and refuting the theory within which it sits. Schmitt argues that Sorel’s concept of myth is functional, but that it is best understood within a national frame.³⁶

Section 3: Myth in *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*

What we see in Schmitt’s discussion of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is an account of myth which has shifted its focus somewhat from that of his analysis in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Schmitt is unconcerned, in the text on *Leviathan*, to make arguments insisting on the strength of the national myth over the class-based myth of the general strike. He is, moreover, less *insistent* upon the connection of myth with instinct,

³⁶ Although I cannot discuss it in detail here, I take Schmitt’s belief in the nation as a centre of myth to be based on his positive view of the *jus publicum europaeum* wherein sovereign states maintained an internal and international order within Europe (Schmitt, 2006 [1950]). In this sense I do not take Schmitt to have a purely opportunistic approach, but one grounded in a considered position.

intuition, and real life – although it still holds a key role in his understanding of myth. Instead Schmitt's focus is on unpicking the image of the leviathan from its role within several competing mythic narratives. This shows us that Schmitt's concern was not only with putting forward an argument in favour of a national myth, but also in teasing out the way in which mythic traditions are made up. What Schmitt proceeds to do throughout the text is separate out the image of leviathan, the great sea creature, from its meaning as found in Hobbes' text. Schmitt also seeks to understand the interpretation of the leviathan in several traditions. What Schmitt seeks to show through this analysis is how the image of the leviathan is involved – before and after Hobbes' interjection – in a number of divergent strands of thought, which become unified in the modern view of the state as a machine. Through an analysis of Schmitt's text on Hobbes, focusing on those points where he discusses myth most pointedly, we can glean a number of important insights on Schmitt's view of political myth.

The context of the writing of Schmitt's 1938 *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* was very different from that of his 1923 *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* was written in Weimar Germany, with a weak parliamentary democracy and rebellion on the streets. By the time of Schmitt's *Leviathan* text, the Nazi regime had consolidated power. Moreover, Schmitt had been removed from his position of academic power during a 1936 dispute over his true beliefs: there were accusations that his conversion to Nazism was merely opportunistic.

In what follows I will not reconstruct Schmitt's overall argument in detail, instead focusing upon those points at which his discussion meets ideas on myth. I will proceed by first describing the overarching structure of the argument. I then outline how Schmitt takes myths to be something secular. Secular myths, furthermore, involved with battle and creating sharp distinctions. I then go on to show how Schmitt sees the leviathan as either an image or a symbol which is involved in a mythic process or narrative, rather than being a myth in itself. What I highlight here is Schmitt's lack of clarity and his inconsistency in his use of the terms image, symbol, and myth. Despite his somewhat confusing approach to these terms, it is clear that, for Schmitt, myth is something which is always shifting and in a process of flux, so as to remain vivid and effective. I then go on to show how the effectiveness of a myth, for Schmitt, is judged on its impact on history – not on its influence on individuals. Schmitt argues that a successful myth must be a unity, and it is here that he describes Hobbes as a failed

mythmaker: Hobbes' leviathan did not contain the necessary unity to act as a successful myth. Having shown that, for Schmitt, Hobbes ultimately failed in his attempt to construct a political myth, I go on to show how the lacking unity of Hobbes' project – the separation of inner and outer – represented a failure to associate his myth with 'real life'. This separation of myth from 'real life' ultimately results in a 'mechanistic' way of viewing the state, and thus – for Schmitt – an undoubtedly weaker construction than a mythic one. Schmitt's analysis of myth in his text on Hobbes thus expresses and highlights a different set of concerns than his text on the *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, allowing us a more multifaceted interpretation of Schmitt's views on myth.

Schmitt's *Leviathan* can be approached in several ways. In his introduction to the text, Schwab identifies four common ways of approaching it: 1) in relation to Hobbes' political theory, 2) with regards to the Nazi state, 3) to understand Hobbes' importance to Schmitt, and 4) to understand Schmitt's theory of the state (Schwab, 1996, p.ix). The overall argument of the text is concerned with an exposition and critique of Hobbes' use of the *Leviathan*. Schmitt identifies the origin of the image of the Leviathan in the Hebrew Bible, and then traces its lineage in both Jewish and Christian traditions. He follows this through with a textual study of Hobbes' *Leviathan* and then onto its history within political theory. Schmitt identifies a number of weaknesses in Hobbes' account which, he argues, doomed the symbol of the Leviathan to fail. Through my analysis that follows, I focus on the relevant sections to my study of myth. I only bring in the context of the argument where it is relevant and necessary. This allows me to maintain my analytical focus.

Early on in his *Leviathan*, Schmitt discusses the ways in which the image of the leviathan has meaning. He describes how:

Th[e] ["depiction of the commonwealth as a huge man"] evokes an effective image, but by far not the extraordinary mythical power of the leviathan. When Nietzsche characterized the state as 'the most callous monster', a depiction that certainly transcends the merely philosophico-intellectual sphere and even lifts it into an 'irrational' domain, it was still more in the impressionistic-suggestive style of the nineteenth century than in the mythical sense of a secular image of a battle. (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.5)

What we see here is Schmitt's identification of myth with a 'secular image of battle'. Shortly after, Schmitt identifies some of the ways in which the symbol of the leviathan has attained meaning: "As a symbol of a political entity, the leviathan is, on the other hand, not just any 'corpus' or just any kind of beast. It is an image from the Hebrew Bible, one garbed during the course of many centuries in mythical, theological and cabbalistic meanings." (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.6) What we see Schmitt doing here is separating myth from theology: myth is concerned with a secular image of battle. It is, moreover, one of a number of things which can provide meaning to a symbol: along with theology and the Kabbalah. Whether these are the only ways in which things can attain meaning is unclear. What is clear, however, is that myth is concerned with providing secular meaning, and with battle. Schmitt again asserts how myths are connected with battle in his discussion of the image of the leviathan as a dragon: "Also, the myths of the battles against the dragons and all sagas and legends of dragon slayers such as Siegfried, Saint Michael, and Saint George may be traced to the leviathan" (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.7) We see Schmitt here separate myth from sagas and legends, which means that myth is something distinct from these types of narrative. Importantly, however, we see again the connection between myth and battle.

As Hobbes' leviathan is not concerned with battle, but rather with terminating a state of war (Hobbes' state of nature), we may assume Schmitt does not see the leviathan as a myth. In itself, the leviathan is not a myth, according to Schmitt. The leviathan is described by Schmitt as an image; an image that has come to have mythically symbolic meaning: "No illustration of or quotation about a theory of state has engendered so provocative an image as that of the leviathan; it has become more like a mythical symbol fraught with inscrutable meaning." (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.5) What we can infer from this is that myths can use symbols, and these symbols can have meanings. The exact relationship between symbols and myth, however, is not clear in Schmitt's text: having described the leviathan as an image, which has become more like a mythical symbol, he then goes on to describe it thus: "Numerous interpretations and transformations belong to the nature of mythical images; continuous metamorphoses, *in nova mutatae formae*, are in fact sure signs of their vividness and effectiveness." (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.7) The leviathan is, Schmitt argues, a mythical image, but it is akin to a mythical symbol. Quite how Schmitt takes the relationship between symbols and images, moreover, is unclear. What we can discern, however, is another feature of his take on myth: that mythical images are continually changing, in 'continuous metamorphosis', and that they transform to retain vividness and effectiveness.

The effectiveness of a myth, for Schmitt, does not come down to its effect on an individual. The effectiveness of a myth can only be assessed through its role in history: “At any rate, any exclusively biographical-psychological result, however important it may be, will not definitively answer our question, which is directed at ascertaining the influence of the political myth as an arbitrary historical force.” (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.27) Alongside making it clear that myth is something which should be assessed by its influence upon history, we also see Schmitt describe it as an ‘arbitrary historical force’. We must infer from this that there is not a myth which is ‘correct’ or ‘true’, but rather that any myth might take hold, and the way we judge it is through its effectiveness. If we assume that there is not a pre-given or pre-determined myth which necessarily will win out, we might ask how myths are created and by whom? Schmitt suggests that myths can be created by a single person: “Looked at from the perspective of comparing those who have created political myths – Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Vico – the great difference and peculiarity of Hobbes become apparent” (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.84). This does not, however, discount the possibility of another origin for myths.

We see that, according to Schmitt, there is something peculiar about the leviathan as a political myth: as I have already noted, Schmitt is unclear in his separation of image and symbol. Moreover, the subtitle of his text is *Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*; yet we see Schmitt also refer, above, to Hobbes as a political mythmaker. A few paragraphs later, Schmitt argues that what makes Hobbes different from others in creating political myths is that Hobbes didn’t really create a political myth:

In contrast, Hobbes is neither a mythologist nor a mythic figure. Only with the image of the leviathan did he approximate a myth. But it is precisely because of this image that he had spent his energies and failed in his endeavour to restore the natural unity. Although the image did not unequivocally conjure up a definite and a clear enemy, it contributed the insight that indivisible political unity was destroyed from within by the demolition work of indirect powers. (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.85)

We see two interesting points here: first, that the mythical image seems to need to ‘conjure up a definite and clear enemy’; second, that Hobbes only approximated a myth. The need for a definite enemy seems as though it could be connected to the

earlier point regarding myths being concerned with images of battle. As well as coming close to the Sorelian view of myths as images of battle, this highlights the conflictual nature of myths in Schmitt's account: a myth is not a myth without battle. It is interesting to note that (according to Schmitt) while Hobbes' failed to actually create a political myth, he did 'approximate' it. The crucial difference that Schmitt identifies here is that Hobbes failed in creating unity of the mythic image.

The way Hobbes failed to provide unity of the image, according to Schmitt, was in failing to follow through on the role of the sovereign in having total power. Schmitt claims that because of this, Spinoza could invert the all-powerful leviathan into a mechanism aimed at protecting individuals and individual rights. It was the separation of inner and outer, Schmitt claims, that created this. Müller argues that this comes from Schmitt seeing Hobbes' state as a machine: "However, 'substance' – or, put differently, the preconditions for concrete order – was then, according to Schmitt, to be supplied by the right kind of 'myth'. Hobbes' failure had been to reach for the wrong kind of symbol (or, perhaps, allegory, or simply: emblem) – which eventually led to the failure of the political construct as a whole." (Müller, 2011, p.63) Müller goes on to argue that Schmitt felt the Hobbesian state required a stronger sense of 'inner belief' from its citizens in the state project. This could only be done through the re-shaping of inner life, "And that re-shaping of inner life, according to Schmitt, was best achieved through the right kind of myth." (Müller, 2011, p.65). Müller argues that, for Hobbes, mythic power was represented through the figure of the sovereign, whereas Schmitt saw it as necessary to shift this into a myth of the state (Müller, 2011, p.63).

Hooker reinforces Müller's argument regarding Schmitt's relationship with Hobbes: "as the subtitle of [Schmitt's] 1938 work reveals (*Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*), Hobbes is by no means the hero of the piece" (Hooker, 2009, p.41). The question, as Hooker poses it, is "why has the modern state eaten itself away from the inside through a series of neutralisations and abandonment of its mythical force?" (Hooker, 2009, p.41) Hooker reiterates Müller's point that it is the separation of inner and outer that ultimately mark this collapse. What we see in this separation, moreover, is an element of myth that was used numerous times in Schmitt's analysis of myth in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*; that is, the idea that myth is somehow connected with life: "The philosophy of German idealism, first Kant in *Critique of Judgment* (1790), distinguished 'inner' from 'outer', culminating in the distinction between living

being and dead matter and thus draining the image of 'mechanism' from all mythical, all living character." (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.41) Myth is again analogised with life and living. The mechanism of the state becomes dead matter, separate from the living which relates to its mythic power. Myth is, moreover, taken to be what can overcome the problems created by the Enlightenment separation of myth from politics. The separation of inner from outer sucks the life out of the political. Given that we have seen myth analogised with life, we see how Schmitt takes the Enlightenment view of a rational polity (free from myth) to be drained of life.

For Schmitt, the deadness of a mechanism is a peculiar feature of the modern world. Only in the modern world do mechanisms lose their mythical meaning. For Hobbes, according to Schmitt, mechanisms were mythical too: "For Hobbes, though, mechanism, organism, and work of art are still parts of the machine, conceived as products of the highest human creativity. Mechanism and the machine therefore had for him and for his age thoroughly mythical meanings." (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.41) It is not clear whether it is the identification of the mechanism as a creation of human artifice which distinguishes it as mythical, or whether it is the 'age' – the context – in which Hobbes was writing. As described above, a myth is dependent upon its influence on history. The effectiveness of a myth thus depends on the context within which it is set. While Schmitt certainly sees myths as constructed through human artifice, this does not mean that it is their defining feature. The fact that myths can shift and change their meaning, and the situation of images and symbols within these myths, is what defines their success. Myths must thus be the larger, ever-shifting narrative within which symbols and images are situated:

Hobbes used this image because he considered it to be an impressive symbol. He failed to realize, however, that in using this symbol he was conjuring up the invisible forces of an old, ambiguous myth. His work was overshadowed by the leviathan, and all his clear intellectual constructions and arguments were overcome in the vortex created by the symbol he conjured up. No clear chain of thought can stand up against the force of genuine, mythical images. (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.81)

It seems to be that, for Schmitt, when an image or a symbol is taken up within a mythic framework it takes on meanings and power which cannot be controlled by the person

who created that image, symbol, or myth. While these can be created by an individual, it seems to be beyond the power of an individual to control them. They are, seemingly, caught up in what Schmitt describes as a 'vortex' – some kind of maelstrom of ideas, beliefs, and meanings. It is, moreover, clear for Schmitt that whatever power 'intellectual constructions and arguments' may have, they are not as powerful as a myth. Mythical images are more powerful than any argument.

What we see from Schmitt's description of myth throughout his *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* is several interesting points, some of which relate to his earlier analysis in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, and some of which are new. We see, similarly to his earlier analysis, how myths are, on Schmitt's understanding, connected with battle and conflict. We see also how myth is somehow connected with a 'real life' which is more powerful than intellectual or rational constructions. We also see how Schmitt is here no longer concerned to argue in favour of a national myth, but merely suggests that myths can take different forms. We see, in contrast to the emphasis in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, Schmitt make more claims with regards to images and symbols, although he does not follow through or really draw out the implications of what he says on these. Despite not discussing potential implications of these within my own analysis, I showed how – for Schmitt – these seemed to need to be a part of a larger mythic tradition or narrative. What I also showed from Schmitt's discussion of myth was that, in Schmitt's understanding of myths, they can be made by a single person but may be thrown into a tradition over which they have no control. While the leviathan, as used by Hobbes, was not a myth in itself, it was taken up within a mythic tradition and was shaped by it. What we can infer from this is that myth, for Schmitt, is something of a broad narrative or tradition, which may be instantiated but not controlled by a single person. The swirling 'vortex' of myth seems to suggest an uncontrollable force, one which Schmitt argues is more powerful than any rational construction.

What we can take from Schmitt's discussion of myth in the *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* is a similar, but not identical, set of insights from those he made in his more detailed analysis of myth in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Schmitt sees myth as something connected with 'real life', and opposes this to rationalism. Here we see Schmitt's anti-Enlightenment understanding of politics: it is only through myth that life can be restored to the polity. Myth, on this view, connects

somehow to an element of life which cannot be reached by reason. This view of myth is made more particular by its focus on conflict and battle: in both texts battle is a necessary requirement for the myth, highlighting the conflictual nature of Schmitt's understanding of it. We also saw how myth was something which incorporated symbols and images, and was capable of shaping their meaning. I then showed how Schmitt highlighted the uncontrollable power of myth in shaping these meanings. Schmitt's view of myth in his text on Hobbes is thus as an encompassing narrative or tradition which involves multiple forces pushing on it in different directions. Myth is, on Schmitt's account, only able to stay relevant and effective if it shifts and morphs with these forces. To judge the effectiveness of a myth, we need to look at its role in history: the impact upon individuals is not the judge of a successful myth, its impact upon history is.

Section 4: Myth, Enlightenment, and History

In this section I build upon my account of Schmitt's use of myth. I argue that Schmitt's description of national myths being the most powerful is: at best, normative; at worst, incorrect. I use Bottici and Tudor to critique Schmitt's arguments on the myth of the nation state, arguing that where Schmitt purports to be dealing with material things he is, at times, dealing with abstract ones. Finally, I note that Schmitt's (and Sorel's) support for myth and conflict remains within the bounds of the 'Enlightenment' view of myth as obfuscating of reason and peace. I argue that, instead, they merely invert this and see this as a positive.

Schmitt's concern for unity, order and homogeneity in a political community is probed by Bottici. Bottici argues that, to underpin his account of unity and homogeneity, Schmitt appropriates a particular interpretation of Sorel's concept of myth: "Myths, according to Schmitt's reading of Sorel, are the direct expression of concrete life, of a Bergsonian *élan vital* that is alien and also hostile to discussion and rational mediation." (Bottici, 2007, p.227) This direct expression, according to Bottici, arises out of a homogeneous political group (Bottici, 2007, 232).³⁷ This 'concrete' and 'homogeneous' way of viewing a mythically productive political group is, for Bottici, problematic. Bottici argues that at the root of Schmitt's definition of homogeneity is a contradiction: he says that he wants it to be based in the concrete, but does not actually

³⁷ See also Tudor, 1972, p.109

follow through on this. Bottici argues that Schmitt names things which are concrete on the one hand, and then supplements these with abstractions on the other. In the concrete is included things such as “race and descent, language, tradition, a consciousness of a shared culture and education, the awareness of a community of fate, and a sensibility of being different in itself” (Schmitt, as quoted in, Bottici, 2007, p.232).³⁸ But, Bottici notes, what Schmitt describes as ‘tradition’, ‘consciousness of a shared culture’, and ‘sensibility’, are not concrete things in the way that Schmitt suggests. While they are very real, they are also changing and unfixed. What these concepts are actually concerned with, she argues, is identity. According to Bottici, Schmitt is interested in identity and not the ‘concrete’. What Schmitt is really interested in, on this view, is who one identifies with, and based on what. This is how Schmitt can claim that a single individual is able to identify with the will of the people just as well as can a million ballot papers. (Bottici, 2007, p.233) What we see from Bottici’s interrogation of Schmitt’s account of myth is that Schmitt’s purported claim to be concerned with the ‘concrete’ reality of a homogenous political group, may be based upon much more abstract notions than he suggests.

Bottici’s critique of Schmitt also points us towards another important feature of Schmitt’s account of myth: that is Schmitt’s purportedly neutral, rather than motivating, account of myth. In history, Schmitt argues, it is the national myth which is most powerful and most likely to provide the necessary force of unity (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.75). He is clear that it is the national myth over any other which has historically been the most powerful (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.75). This is, however, not an obvious argument to make. The Weimar and Nazi periods in which Schmitt wrote the two texts studied here was, in Europe, a time of flourishing of nation states. Historically, however, most of these had been part of multi-national empires. Even Schmitt’s case of Russia that I examined earlier is not a simple case of a national myth (hidden as a class myth): within the borders of the Russian Tsarist and Bolshevik states were numerous nationalities. If it was a non-Bolshevik myth that held these together then it was a myth of the Russian state rather than a myth of the Russian nation. If anything, Schmitt’s claims regarding the historical value of national myths seem more like normative arguments than historical claims: the case of Russia and the historical uniqueness of the modern nation state are not purely descriptive accounts. Where

³⁸ n.b. I use Bottici’s translation because it is a slightly different translation from the one in the standard English translation (from Ellen Kennedy).

Schmitt claims to be offering a neutral account, distinct from Sorel's forward-looking vision, he is actually offering his own argument in favour of nation states.

Schmitt contrasts the national myth – as a local or particular myth – to those attempts at reaching unity of understanding: the Enlightenment or liberal ideal (Schmitt, 2000 [1926], p.67). If we judge by history, then maybe there are other particular myths that may be possible and even more likely than a national myth: an Islamic Caliphate, a multi-national empire, or even a regional association. These do not seem, from Schmitt's standard of 'history', to be any less likely sources of myth than does the nation state. Schmitt's contentious argument for the strength of the national myth over any other shows us something else: that is the possible weakness of the myth of the nation state. As I have already argued, the nation state lacks some of the historical arguments that Schmitt makes for it. What this might show us is not just Schmitt's normative agenda, but – more importantly for my purposes – his belief in the conceptual necessity of a mythic underpinning to a stable polity. That Schmitt feels the need to provide a conceptual argument for the strength of the national myth actually exposes the need for it, and thus the weakness of it. Given the common use of appeals to nationalism in some forms of political rhetoric, the idea of the national myth does seem to have a certain appeal: what this may indicate, similarly to Schmitt, is the perceived weakness of the national myth rather than its strength. Myth, in this sense, comes to be about a vision of something that might have existed and might exist again. It becomes connected to the political insofar as it serves to justify the political situation. Myths of nations are not historically justified, but they may be politically justified in early twentieth century Europe.

Exactly how Schmitt envisages a myth functioning is unclear. While he argues in favour of a national myth, he does not argue that there needs to be a narrative. This is something which Tudor (1972) sees as necessary. Instead, Schmitt proposes a 'tradition' within which many symbols and images are included. Schmitt does not provide us with a detailed, or even clear, analysis of the distinction between symbols and images, and so the way this functions within a mythic tradition is unclear. Given that Schmitt portrays myth as a tradition rather than a narrative, it is worth asking how different Schmitt's conception of myth is from Sorel's account of a forward-looking myth, which inspires people to battle. If, as I have argued, the national was not a historically obvious location for myth, then Schmitt's account must be a normative, or

at least forward-looking account. Which is to say it may be based on a fictional past to create a vision of the future. Schmitt bases his myth in what I have claimed is a contentious notion: the idea that history has shown the national myth to be the strongest. If this is the case, then we may ask why Schmitt chooses the nation as a locus for myth. The answer, I suggest, is that Schmitt sees the nation as the easiest route to achieving homogeneity and thus order and stability. It is pluralism and disorder that Schmitt is seeking to overcome. As I have already mentioned, McCormick (1997) makes this very same point. In utilising the 'irrational' myth of the nation, Schmitt can create a unified vision which can be easily purged of extraneous elements. While I do not want to move into discussions of Schmitt's association with the Nazis, we do clearly see the Nazis using some kind of historically envisaged German nation to underpin their agenda of purging Germany of 'non-German' elements. We could see such a method cohering with Schmitt's work.³⁹

In the same way as Sorel, Schmitt does not really move beyond the Enlightenment view of myth as somehow opposed to peace through the obscuring of rational understanding. Myth is, instead, viewed from a different point of judgment: for Schmitt and Sorel, myth is good because it creates conflict rather than bad because it creates conflict; myth is good because people use their instinct and intuition rather than reflecting upon their actions; myth is good because it can unify contradictions rather than seek solutions to them. Myth is, moreover, opposed to universalist thinking and a single way of understanding the world – myth is particular, local, and specific. In this sense myth is not given a particularly new understanding but rather judged on new terms.

Throughout this section I questioned whether Schmitt's own assertion that myth should be judged according to history was little more than a veil behind which his normative arguments were hidden. I argued, instead, that Schmitt's account of nationalism was forward looking as much as it was based in the judgment of history. I then argued that Schmitt's account lacked clarity due to its unclear account of symbols and images, and the difficulty in identifying a mythical tradition. I argued that Schmitt's (and Sorel's) accounts of myth do not actually move beyond the Enlightenment view of myth as opposed to reason and peace, but rather that they change the terms of evaluation: myth becomes celebrated for not requiring reason and

³⁹ I build further on this notion of political homogeneity in my next chapter.

not aiming for peace. What this shows us is that Schmitt perceived a need for the modern nation state to require a mythical underpinning. Within many liberal frameworks the nation state is taken to be an unproblematic fact of political life. Schmitt's attempt at offering a (albeit hidden) mythical argument to underpin the nation state highlights just how important myth is, even to something which is taken to be unproblematic.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have interrogated Schmitt's understanding of myth. I began by outlining several interpretations of Schmitt's view of myth, situating the discussion within the broader framework of the thesis. I utilised Fraenkel, Bottici, Müller and McCormick's work to try and understand how Schmitt's concept of myth has been understood, and to situate my discussion within the existing scholarship. I then took a starting point for my own argument: the idea that Schmitt's work was framed in response to the modern collapse of *idees générales*. I argued that myth represented a means of locating a local and specific tradition which was not aimed at what Schmitt took to be the Enlightenment's universalising despotism. I argued that Schmitt ultimately ended up moving towards a historically unjustified view of the nation to ground his argument in favour of local myths.

To argue my case, I began by offering a close reading of the closing chapter of Schmitt's *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. I showed how Schmitt relied heavily on both Sorel's understanding of myth, and a number of non-specific and rather vague terms: 'real life', 'instinct', 'intuition' and so on. I interrogated the text, bringing out the way in which Schmitt's view of myth was similar to Sorel's in being based around a view of conflict and violence, but different insofar as it was based in the nation rather than (primarily) in class. I used the case of Russia and the Russian Revolution to show how Schmitt argues this case, and highlight some problems with it: I argued that, even on his own terms, Schmitt's belief in the nation is not justified. I suggested that Schmitt's view of the nation was an idealised view and not based in his own judgment category: history. In the third section I looked at the next text where Schmitt looks at the concept of myth in more detail: *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. I argued that this text shared many similarities with his *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, but also several differences: I argued that it was, similarly, arguing in favour of a

conflict based account of myth which appealed to 'real life', 'intuition' and 'instinct'. What I highlighted as well was the shift in emphasis: Schmitt did not extensively discuss the national myth, but rather focused on symbols, images, and the tradition of a myth. I showed how Schmitt's vagueness on much of this left his account open to criticism, but also indicated directions for the further study of myth. I argued that a better understanding of the nature and role of symbols and images and their relation to myth was necessary. Moreover, understanding the way in which myths fit within traditions and how they morph and change along with that tradition would be a useful direction for studies of political myth. In the final section I pushed further on Schmitt's account of myth, utilising the work of Tudor and Bottici to highlight Schmitt's normative agenda in his account of the national myth. What I drew from this was the conclusion that the myth of the nation state, just like any other political myth, needed support: I argued that Schmitt's account highlighted some of the weaknesses of the myth of the nation state rather than (Schmitt's aim) proving its decisive superiority to other forms of myth.

Chapter 6

The Inherent Violence in Carl Schmitt's Account of Democratic Order

If people are irrational, then one cannot negotiate with them or forge contracts; rather they must be mastered through cunning or violence.

Carl Schmitt⁴⁰

Introduction

In my previous chapter I sought to explain the role of myth within Schmitt's work. I began by arguing that Schmitt took the idea of a collapse of *idees générales* as a starting point for the identification of the requirement of myth. Myth could, Schmitt believed, be utilised to hold together national groups through a shared cultural homogeneity. In this chapter, I develop this line of argument. I argue that, for Schmitt, this collapse of *idees générales* was representative of a more general malaise within the existing political makeup of the world. I argue that this malaise, and the searching for a response to it, is a consistent theme in Schmitt's work. Schmitt, however, sought unity through more than just mythic means. Schmitt attempted to argue that violence was necessary for any truly political arrangement of the world: an arrangement necessary to ensure both order and a meaningful life. In this chapter I will show how Schmitt theorises his concept of the political. I show how this is underpinned by a peculiar, and violent, understanding of democracy. I show how, for Schmitt, this provides the meaning and stability he desired. I argue that to base an account of order and stability

⁴⁰Schmitt, 2014, p.7

upon the unpredictable and unreliable quality of violence, however, seems to be like building a house upon sand.

I begin, in Section 1, by outlining several key concepts that I use throughout this chapter. I establish the usage of violence, democracy, decisionism and the political as I use them throughout this chapter. I also use this section to highlight some key differences between Schmitt's conceptual and theoretical account of violence alongside Sorel and Benjamin's accounts. I move on from this, in Section 2, to give an account of Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*. Through this, I show how violence plays a fundamental role in Schmitt's political framework. To do this, I establish that, according to Schmitt, the political does not exist without violence (*qua war*). I show how Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* essentially sees the identification of possible war as the moment in which a national friend grouping is realised. I argue that violence is, in itself, meaningless (normatively empty) for Schmitt. I argue, however, that violence serves as a lynchpin which holds together the concept of the political: violence provides the means by which meaning and order is given to the political. In the following section I expand upon my analysis of Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*. I use Schmitt's *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* to outline a problem which takes us back, via *The Concept of the Political* and *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, to Schmitt's early text on *Dictatorship*. In this way, I use Schmitt's own framework to break open the violent aspects of his work. I show how, for Schmitt, democracy is envisaged as a particular form of general will, arranged so as to form a unified, fighting collectivity. In the final section I describe and outline what I take to be Schmitt's account of soldier-citizenship and how this constitutes a violent form of public freedom. What this ultimately shows us is the centrality of violence to Schmitt's thinking on the political.

Section 1: Concepts, Texts and Terms

Throughout this chapter I use several concepts and categories which first require clarification. Schmitt's concept of the political, his account of decisionism, his conception of war, and democracy will be briefly outlined here. I will, furthermore, detail where, and in what context, Schmitt uses the terms violence and war throughout his corpus, and show how this relates to my choice of texts.

My focus on texts in this chapter is less specific than it was in my previous chapter on myth. While I focus primarily on Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* and his *Dictatorship*, I also draw in evidence from *Political Theology*, *Leviathan in the State*, *Theory of Thomas Hobbes* and *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*. My reasoning for this is that Schmitt's discussions on sovereignty, the nature of the political, political theology, and democracy, appear throughout his corpus. There is a consistent concern with these that, I argue, represent a considered and consistent position. I do not take Schmitt's stance on these matters to change significantly. The reason I focus on the texts that I do is because they are the texts that deal most explicitly with war and violence, and thus provide me with the most insights for my own discussion.

As a text which I focus on in this chapter, it is worth exploring the history of Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*. Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* was first published as an article in 1927, and later in book form in 1932. It was then revised again in 1933. The 1932 edition differed from the 1927 version in that it included an article written by Leo Strauss in response to the first edition (Schwab, 2007, p.5). The 1932 edition also included substantial revisions of Schmitt's positions in light of Strauss' essay. The debate over the shifts between these three editions is outlined in a number of texts: Heinrich Meier (1995) and William Scheuerman (1999) putting forward conflicting arguments over the relative importance of Leo Strauss and Hans Morgenthau on Schmitt's textual revisions. Richard Bernstein (2013, pp.16-17) considers the question over which edition to use and concludes that while the shifting positions between the editions is both interesting and important, if we must choose an edition it makes sense to choose the "canonical" edition of 1932 (Bernstein, 2013, p.16). I follow him in this decision to use the 1932 edition.

With Schmitt's *Dictatorship* there is only one edition to use. The text was first published in German in 1921 and written alongside his *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. The English translation of *Dictatorship*, however, did not appear until 2014 and remains the only English version available. The edition used in this thesis is this 2014 edition, translated by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward. Although Hoelzl and Ward note the difficulty in translating much of *Dictatorship*, this is largely down to the array of specific military and legal terminology Schmitt uses, an array of terminology from a period spanning 2500 years (Hoelzl and Ward, 2014, p.xxxvi-xxxvii). The late

translation of this work means that it is often omitted from writings on Schmitt and that there is limited interpretative work to draw on.

Schmitt opens his most famous work, *The Concept of the Political*, with the following line: “The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political.” (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.19) It is important to remember that the political is not synonymous with the state: the political is something that can exist regardless of the state formation. The political is thus a distinct category, not the state, but not below the state. The state is merely the modern manifestation of the political, and it is this that Schmitt deals with. Schmitt is, throughout, clear on the distinction between the state and the political.

Throughout this chapter I argue that Schmitt's concept of the political is, at root, a violent concept because of the necessary potential violence which realises the political. It will help first to clarify what I mean by violence, as we have already seen with Sorel, Benjamin, and others, that the term is not always employed in its common usage. The words ‘violent’ and ‘violence’ are used very infrequently by Schmitt throughout his corpus. Schmitt’s study on *Dictatorship* features the most numerous occurrences of violent and violence. In this they appear a combined total of 7 times (Schmitt, 2014 [1921]). What Schmitt refers to much more frequently is the term war. To use *Dictatorship* again as a comparison, the term war appears 67 times (Schmitt, 2014 [1921]). The discussion of war and violence is equally common in the (much shorter in length) *Concept of the Political* which features 27 uses of the word war and only three uses of the words violent or violence (Schmitt, 2007a [1932]). This is paralleled in all of Schmitt’s texts: the terms violent or violence appear infrequently, but the term war appears much more commonly. What, in this chapter, I will be referring to with regards to violence, is war. Schmitt does not, like Sorel, define his concept of the political around violence but rather around an existential conflict which requires the possibility of killing. In Schmitt's work violence is thus best conceived of as political violence *qua* war. War is, in the same sense as Hobbes, conceived of as a climate rather than an event: the predisposition towards war rather than the event of war (Hobbes, 2011 [1651], pp.88-89). When I argue that Schmitt’s account of the political is violent, I am referring to the fact that citizens must be disposed towards the possibility of fighting in a war. It is this that ultimately leads me to describe Schmitt’s account of democracy as soldier-citizenship.

For Schmitt, it is the sovereign who decides upon the state of exception. As Schmitt states in his *Political Theology*: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.” (Schmitt, 2005 [1922], p.5) This decision is an act carried out by the sovereign which directs the political in a particular way. This decisionism comes from the argument that the decision of the sovereign is what defines him as sovereign. This decision does not come from nowhere, but rather is a choice amongst the different options available in a given situation. This is a point noted by David Pan: “It is significant here that the decision is a decision and not a construction, which is to say that the sovereign's decision involves a choice amongst a number of previously existing, competing conceptions of collective identity.” (Pan, 2009, p.57) Furthermore, “Though the designation of the enemy may seem to be an arbitrary act of political will by a sovereign, the sovereign's decision is always bounded by the available cultural understandings of both that which might constitute the group's way of life and that which would threaten this constitution.” (Pan, 2009, p.58) This is the usage of decisionism and the sovereign act of decision as it appears throughout this chapter. The idea of ‘decisionism’ is not critiqued or addressed directly in my chapter.⁴¹

As stated, the decision is based upon a choice of options which are created by the conditions in which the sovereign decides. These conditions are arranged politically, and for Schmitt it is through an account of democracy that we need to understand politics. Schmitt's understanding of democracy, however, is not a common one. For Schmitt, the pre-existing cultural association (made up of a body of people) that makes up a political friend grouping is the *demos*. When I use the term democracy throughout, therefore, I am referring to this account of democracy as the body politic rather than as any kind of majoritarian, representative or electoral system. Schmitt, rather analogises electoral politics with the exertion of combined private wills rather than a general will or common good. Democracy is an important idea for Schmitt, and one which I return to later in the chapter.

Underpinning Schmitt's views on democracy is his view of human nature. Schmitt is clear that we cannot create a serious political theory with a positive view of human nature underpinning it. As he states in *Concept of the Political*: “All genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil” (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.61). I highlight this here,

⁴¹ For more detailed interpretations of Schmitt on decisionism, cf. Hirst, 1999; Pan, 2009; Žižek, 1999

despite it not being a consistent subject of interrogation throughout this chapter, because understanding that Schmitt sees humans as inherently liable to act evilly is imperative to understanding why a theorist so concerned with order sees violence as an inherent part of that order.

Section 2: The Inherent Violence of the Concept of the Political

In this section I highlight the inherent violence in Schmitt's concept of the political. It will be shown that at the heart of Schmitt's concept of the political is an antinomy that cannot be resolved within his own schema without recourse to giving violence a meaningful role in the creation of order. The friend/enemy distinction will be shown to be necessarily premised upon a violent disposition which both stands outside of the political and defines it. I argue that Schmitt here conflates a descriptive or ontological account with a normative account. This normative account shows us that Schmitt sees the need for something which is absent, or receding, from the modern world. I argue that this is an intensesness to life which is absent from a world which lacks politics. The lens through which I will be analysing Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* is that of violence. It has been common to analyse Schmitt's political theory with regards to themes such as sovereignty, the exception, dictatorship, international law, and so on. By interrogating Schmitt's account of the political, through the lens of violence, I will shed light upon elements of Schmitt's thought which can otherwise be missed. Through the analysis it will be shown that violence is *central* to the whole of Schmitt's concept of the political, thus questioning the validity of those that may wish to rehabilitate Schmitt's constructive theoretical work. Which is to say, violence is not just a part of Schmitt's concept, but the central element which holds it together. It will become clear that what that rehabilitation may lead to is what Habermas describes as "driv[ing] out the Devil with Beelzebub." (Habermas, 1989, p.138). What this shows us is that attempts at defining the *demos* or the make-up of the political must always struggle with the concept of violence. Moreover, utilising a Schmittian inspired account of the *demos* is not the way to achieve a violence-free account of democratic order.

It is important to first outline the way in which Schmitt conceives of the political. In doing so, it will become clear how violence lies at the very heart of Schmitt's concept of the political and, in fact, serves to define it. There are limited texts which offer a thoroughgoing critique of Schmitt's view of the political as something which is defined

primarily through violence. Many of the critiques of Schmitt come from the view of him as a critic of liberalism. John McCormick, David Dyzenhaus, and Chantal Mouffe represent some of the most well-known uses of Schmitt in this vein. Gabriella Slomp's monograph *Carl Schmitt and the Politics of Hostility, Violence and Terror*, however, offers a full-length treatment of violence in relation to Schmittian theory. Slomp situates Schmitt's work within the context of 1920s Weimar: she argues that the liberal state of the 1920s was failing in its duty to protect (Slomp, 2009, p.6). It is in this context of a collapse of liberal order, Slomp argues, that Schmitt frames his account of the political around violence. Slomp argues that while many political theories assume security to be a function of the political, Schmitt makes it the essence (Slomp, 2009, p.8). What Slomp also importantly identifies is the key relationship between politics and violence as it sits within Schmitt's work.

Slomp argues that, through his work, Schmitt distinguishes several different ways in which the relationship between violence and the political has been seen within the history of political thought (Slomp, 2009, p.130). Slomp argues that, on Schmitt's interpretation, the relationship between violence and politics can be categorised through a number of key examples (Slomp, 2009, p.130). These are that for Hobbes, hostility and politics are mutually exclusive; for Lenin, hostility is politics; while for Clausewitz, war and politics are on a continuum (Slomp, 2009, p.130). Schmitt, Slomp argues, is closest to Clausewitz: politics must contain both hostility and friendship (Slomp, 2009, p.130). This provides us with another theme that I will emphasise throughout my own discussion of Schmitt: the importance of the friend aspect of the friend/enemy distinction. What I show in the rest of this chapter is how this relationship between violence and politics, and the importance of the friend grouping (or, the *demos*), shows us insights into the nature of political violence. I begin with a similar premise to Slomp, namely that we need to fully understand the centrality of violence to Schmitt's account of the political if we want to fully comprehend it. As Slomp describes it: "The present work has argued that critical clarification of real, conventional and absolute hostility is fundamental to a correct understanding of the friend/enemy principle" (Slomp, 2009, p.128). While my own account and that of Slomp's have a shared concern for the centrality of violence, my account differs in its focus. What I do is to begin with some of Slomp's premises and to then situate this within my own discussion of the mythic nature of Schmitt's account of identity.

To outline his account of the political, Schmitt analogises the political to other value judgements. He asks: “Let us assume that in the realm of morality the final distinctions are between good and evil, in aesthetics beautiful and ugly, in economics profitable and unprofitable. The question then is whether there is also a special distinction which can serve as a simple criterion of the political and what it consists” (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.26). The 'simple criterion' which Schmitt identifies is the ability to identify between friend and enemy. As he states: “The specifically political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.” (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.26). This 'simple criterion', though, is far from simple. Even within the simple criterion itself we have two decidedly unclear, and potentially ambiguous, terms: 'friend' and 'enemy'. Schmitt is clear that the enemy need not be something which we, morally, aesthetically, or economically find different to our own way of life. Rather, the enemy is another political grouping who threaten our own, political, way of life, through their own political way of life or existence (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.27). Schmitt is trying to distinguish his own, political, concept, from other value judgements.

There is, for Schmitt, something specifically political in the antagonism between friend and enemy. The enemy is not just someone who is disliked, but a threat to one's own political way of life. “The enemy is *hostis* not *inimicus*” (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], pp.28). That is, he is a public (political) enemy rather than a private (non-political) one. It is a quirk of both German and English that we have the same word (enemy) for public and private enemy (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], pp.28-29). The Latin *hostis* and *inimicus* makes the distinction that our languages cannot. *Hostis* implying, alongside enemy, notions of foreigner, otherness and stranger, while *inimicus* carries with it ideas of foe and antagonist. To make the point clear, Schmitt notes that, “The enemy in the political sense need not be hated personally, and in the private sphere only does it make sense to love one's enemy, i.e., one's adversary.” (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.29). The Christian notion of 'love thy enemy' extends only to private enemies, not to public ones. Hence how, Schmitt argues, Christian crusaders waged war in the Holy Lands in the name of the Lord (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.29). The enemy there was public, not private. Thus, to wage war against a public enemy is legitimate, while to come into conflict with a private enemy is not. Schmitt takes this idea and, drawing on Hobbes, applies it to the modern state. He argues that the political should not and cannot tolerate conflict within its borders. We must bear in mind here that this political grouping is not synonymous with the state, but rather presupposes it.

While considering the nature of a political enemy, we must remember that half of Schmitt's concept of the political is concerned with the 'friend'. The concept of the friend is based around a culturally homogeneous body of people constituting a society (which in turn underpins the state) (Beilefeldt, 1998; Pan, 2009; Schwab, 2005). This is tied to the idea of a 'way of life' or *lebensform* (Levi, 2007, p.30). It is, I would also argue, a racial homogeneity. In Schmitt's 'Intermediate Commentary on the Political', (*Theory of the Partisan* from 1963), he adds a caveat to his previous description of the political: "I would like to retain a further ... characteristic of the *true* partisan ... the telluric." (Schmitt, 2007b [1963], p.20, emphasis added). In describing a 'true' feature of the political as the telluric – that is, coming from the soil – Schmitt is identifying his account of the *demos* with an autochthonic account of identity. In other words, Schmitt is identifying the *demos* with the natives of an inhabited space. This culturally and racially homogenous group becomes specifically *political* (it becomes part of a friend/enemy grouping) when it decides upon an enemy. The enemy is not simply conjured up by violence, but rather becomes an enemy in the violent assertion of the friend grouping. As Pan describes it, quite rightly criticising Žižek: "Far from imagining the political friend-enemy distinction as that which grounds an order *ex nihilo* from an 'abyssal act of violence', Schmitt always conceives of the political as a characteristic that a pre-existing cultural association can take on" (Pan [with inset quote from Žižek] 2009, p.58). There is, on this interpretation, a cultural association pre-existing the political, and in deciding upon its existence as a friend grouping with identifiable enemies, it becomes political. Violence defines the political relationship, giving meaning to the friend grouping.

Violence is at the heart of the Schmittian definition of the political because the act of deciding upon the friend/enemy distinction requires a commitment to be willing to go to war with the enemy. As Schmitt states: "War is just the extreme realization of enmity. It need not be a common occurrence, nor something normal, neither must it be an ideal or something to be longed for; but it must persist as a real possibility, if the concept of an enemy is to retain meaning." (Schmitt, as quoted in Kennedy, 1998, p.101).⁴² An enemy must, therefore, be existing and available as a potential opponent in

⁴² The translation used here is from Ellen Kennedy, although the translation in the standard English edition of *Concept of the Political* is somewhat different. I have used Kennedy's here, and later in the chapter, because it is clearer and more elegant. The original translation is: "[War] is the most extreme consequence of enmity. It does not have to be common, normal,

war for the concept of the political to retain its meaning. There is, therefore, no means by which the political can be conceived of outside of this potential for war.

Before I move on to interrogate Schmitt's account further, it is worth reiterating a point I made at the outset of this chapter. When discussing war, I consider Schmitt to be referring to a climate of war rather than a specific incidence of battle. It is the 'real possibility' of war rather than actual battle. In this I take Schmitt to be working with the Hobbesian understanding of a state of war, where:

Warre consisteth not in Battell onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known ... For as the nature of Foule weather, lyeth not in a showre or two of rain; but in an inclination thereto of many days together: So the nature of War, consisteth not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto (Hobbes, 2011 [1651], pp.88-89)

It is this disposition, or possibility of battle, that I take to be Schmitt's meaning when he describes the "real possibility" (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.33) of war. There is a degree of conceptual slippage in Schmitt's account here: Schmitt makes it extremely clear that all of his concepts deal with what he describes as the concrete, and not the abstract. The friend/enemy distinction is specifically tied to what he terms concrete groups of people, and Schmitt consistently refuses to accept abstractions such as class or race as being able to be determinants of the friend/enemy distinction (Slomp, 2009, p.34). As Schmitt states: "The friend and enemy concepts are to be understood in their concrete and existential sense, not as metaphors or symbols." (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.27). Schmitt's concern to remain within the realm of what he argues is the concrete and substantive, and not to ascend into abstraction, is consistent throughout his works. For Schmitt, only the corporeal body of the culturally constituted political community is enough to form something which can be described as political. There is, as I stated, a degree of conceptual slippage here. Schmitt utilises a terminological sleight of hand in describing war as both concrete and real, but also using the term in the sense of a "possibility" (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.33) of war. A "real possibility" (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.33) is ungraspable unless we consider it in the light of a Hobbesian

something ideal, or desirable. But it must nevertheless remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid." (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.33)

understanding of a climate of war. Were Schmitt referring simply to moments of physical conflict then he would not have referred to the 'possibility' of war; were he referring to an abstract idea of conflict then, presumably, he would not have utilised the idea of it being a 'real possibility'. Therefore, I take Schmitt to be referring to a climate of war, rather than a violent event. This, however, does not mean that the moment of identifying a state of war is not an event in itself. The event of identifying a climate of war is especially important because it is this which I take Schmitt to see as defining the political.

This concern for the concrete means that the friend/enemy distinction, which is based around the potential for conflict, becomes – in its very essence – defined by a possibility of physical violence. War, and the potential for war, the most obvious manifestation of political violence, is at the very heart of Schmitt's concept of the political. Internal order is secured through external violence. Habermas argues that this comes from Schmitt's experience of the First World War: "Schmitt was fascinated by the First World War's 'storms of steel' ... A people welded together in a battle for life and death asserts its uniqueness against both external enemies and traitors within its own ranks." (Habermas, 1989, p.129) Because of its very real grounding in concrete people, the possibility of actual killing, Schmitt's definition of the political becomes an extreme definition, a limit-definition. "Thus, in the expressionistic style of his time, Carl Schmitt constructs a dramatic concept of the political in the light of which everything normally understood by the word must seem banal." (Habermas, 1989, p.129) This is a point reiterated by Richard Bernstein (2013, p.22) who argues that by ignoring everything that we would normally associate with the political – things like voting, debate, elections and so on – then Schmitt's concept is not only a limit-definition, but a limiting definition. It is limiting, moreover, because it ignores many things (voting, debate, elections) which we could quite reasonably describe as concrete: that Schmitt only aligns the concrete with the potential for conflict *qua* war highlights the violence-driven nature of his account of the political.

We must, at this stage, pause to consider a further implication of Schmitt's outline of the political: if the political is specifically defined around a potential for conflict, what are we to make of those who are unable or unwilling to fight? It seems possible to see a conscientious objector (or another objector) as standing outside of the political. Bernstein (2013, p.24) points out, there is a gap between Schmitt's account of the

individual and his account of the public. Bernstein asks: “What is the relation between individual enmity and public enmity? How do we explain the transition from an existential threat experienced by an individual and the existential threat experienced by a group?” (Bernstein, 2013, p.24) This pushes on the tension between individual and group responses to existential threats. It is not clear how Schmitt would relate those who are unwilling to fight to the political community. What about, moreover, those forbidden from fighting? Children could, quite conceivably and quite reasonably, be understood as not fully political agents. Women, however, were also forbidden from fighting during this period (Goldstein, 2001, p.59). Are we to assume that Schmitt’s understanding of the political is one which excludes women? Situating it historically would seem to suggest that it may do. If political agents are only those who can go to war, it would seem as though women are excluded from Schmitt’s account of the political. I will return to this subject in Section 3.

We can approach the violence inherent in Schmitt’s account from another perspective, by asking what the political world would be if it did not contain any possibilities for violence; that is, if it was stripped of conflict and war. Schmitt is clear on this point: he argues that any conception of the political which did not contain the potential for war and violence would, in fact, no longer be political. It would, moreover, contain no ‘meaningful antitheses’ sufficient to motivate men to die, something Schmitt sees as negative. As he states:

A world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics. It is conceivable that such a world might contain very many interesting antitheses and contrasts, competitions and intrigues of every kind, but there would not be a meaningful antitheses whereby men could be required to sacrifice life, authorised to shed blood, and kill other human beings. For the definition of the political, it is here even irrelevant whether such a world without politics is desirable as an ideal situation. The phenomenon of the political can be understood *only in the context of the ever present possibility of the friend-and-enemy grouping*. (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.35, emphasis added)

And as we have seen, the friend/enemy grouping *must* be conceived around a really existing and potentially violent threat.

Schmitt is here not explicitly defining whether what he terms the political is good or bad. Rather, he seems to be simply describing it as a factual statement regarding his theory. Yet if we look a little closer we can see the barely hidden violence in Schmitt's theory: "there would not be a *meaningful* antitheses whereby men could be required to sacrifice life, authorised to shed blood, and kill other human beings." (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.35, emphasis added) For Schmitt, then, the political is the only thing which is meaningful enough to provide us with a reason to kill or be killed. Yet – as we have seen – the political is premised on, and organised around, the potential for violence. Violence is, for Schmitt, a non-normative concept (it has no meaning itself) and yet it gives meaning to the normatively empty (but ready to be filled with meaning) concept of the political. In *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt explicitly states that war has no normative meaning: "War, the readiness of combatants to die, the physical killing of human beings who belong to the side of the enemy – all this has no normative meaning, but an existential meaning only" (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], pp.48-49). The meaning only comes from its relationship to the existence of a community. We can assume that individual (private) conflict that led to murder would not be a good thing, and yet organised killing by a friend group against its enemies is an assertion of the political and thus meaningful.

Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* is a response to the perceived failure of the Enlightenment attempt at universal meaning. It is based, fundamentally, in a local and specific belief. As we have seen, a world without the potential for war and violence is a world without the political. Furthermore, a world without the political is a world without meaning. Yet, it is the non-normative violence of war which gives meaning to the meaningfulness of the political. Without violence and war, then, the political is no longer an existing concept and the world is without meaning. This interpretation suggests Schmitt's critique is about much more than just liberalism, democracy or the modern state. Schmitt is, as I argued at the outset, approaching the collapse of *idees générales* and attempting to locate a meaningful order in the world (cf. Chapter 5; and, Fraenkel, 1969 [1941], pp.130-131). This, he argues, comes from the arrangement of political nation states whose members are willing to die for it. This ensures the internal order and stability he craves, while providing the meaning required for political unity within the state. Schmitt does not see violence alone as sufficient to hold a state together, but violence can give meaning to a friend grouping – and it is this meaning which maintains the unity of a people. Schmitt puts this across succinctly in his *Roman*

Catholicism: “No political system can survive even a generation with only naked techniques of holding power. To the political belongs the idea, because there is no politics without authority and no authority without belief.” (Schmitt, 1999 [1923], p.17). Violence cannot maintain a state, but a violence which creates the political distinction of friend and enemy can.

While I am arguing that violence plays a role in Schmitt’s account of order, Slavoj Žižek focuses on the inherent violence in Schmitt’s account and comes to a different conclusion. What Žižek argues at the beginning of his argument is: “The basic paradox of Carl Schmitt’s political decisionism – the rule of law ultimately hinges on an abyssal act of violence (violent imposition) which is grounded in itself; that is, every positive order to which this act refers, to legitimise itself, is self-referentially posited by this act itself”. (Žižek, 1999, p.18). There are two ways in which Žižek’s analysis is unsatisfactory though: on the one hand, he goes too far, and on the other, not far enough.

First, Žižek’s account of violence springing forth from the abyss is to go too far. On this matter we can agree with Pan (Pan, 2009, p.58), that the Schmittian act of decisionism is, as it implies, an act of decision. It does not spring from the abyss, creating value *ex nihilo*, but is rather the realisation of a pre-existing cultural association (Pan, 2009, p.58). It is important to pause for a moment and consider the importance of this claim: that the act of political violence is the point of realisation for a political friend grouping, capable of identifying their enemy. The act of violent decisionism, the identification of a potential opponent in war, is the point at which the political is realised, and is no longer just a friend grouping but a truly political friend/enemy grouping. This realisation is the point at which the political comes into being, through the violent act of war. Prior to this, the political is merely latent within the friend grouping, but it is not political on Schmitt’s account. Žižek’s account thus goes too far in ascribing to Schmitt the creation of the political solely from a violent act springing forth from the abyss. There is already the potential for the political, on Schmitt’s account, but it is not realised until an enemy grouping is identified.

I argued that Žižek went both not far enough and too far. Žižek does not go far enough when he talks about violence: it is not the 'rule of law' which hangs on an 'act of

violence', but the entire concept of the political. We might interpret Žižek's understanding of law, here, as at root Benjaminian. We saw how Benjamin saw law as arising out of an act of violence that was institutionalised and formalised (cf. Chapter 4). When Benjamin cited the story that both rich and poor are equally forbidden from sleeping under bridges, he was highlighting how power relations are formalised into law. Here, Žižek falls into the trap of conflating Benjamin's understanding of violence with Schmitt's. If we accept that, for Schmitt, violence is the point of genesis of the political, then the act of decisional violence is the point at which the political is realised. It is, thus, not the rule of law which is created out of violence, it is the definition of the political. The political stands outside of the law, and underpins the law. William Rasch's essay on Schmitt and democracy is worth noting here: Rasch argues that the Weimar constitution is interesting in that its opening line asserts: "The German people ... has given itself this constitution" (Rasch, 2016, p.325). That is, *das Volk*, the collective singular. It is not a collection of individuals but a single collective body. Rasch argues that Schmitt does not see the political as arising alongside the constitution, but rather that the constitution is a part of the people's power *qua* political (collective singular) people (Rasch, 2016, p.325). The existence of the people, for Schmitt, presupposes the constitution (Rasch, 2016, p.325). Violence does not, as Žižek claims, create the law. Violence creates the political insofar as the people assert themselves as a single friend-grouping (Rasch, 2016, p.325). This political friend grouping is what then creates the law.

It has been argued throughout this section that Schmitt's concept of the political is an inherently violent concept. That is, an understanding of the political which is necessarily premised upon the potential for violence. Schmitt's view requires the realisation of a pre-existing political community (i.e. a nation) through a potential act of political violence/war. Without this violence, the political – for Schmitt – is absent. Schmitt's view is thus inherently violent. Moreover, because Schmitt conceives of the political community as the location for a meaningful life, meaning is predicated on a violent conception of community. This is a distinct view, however, from Sorel's violent conception of civilisation: Schmitt is not advocating a state of perpetual conflict to maintain a warrior mindset. What Schmitt is giving is an account of the political which places the potential for war at its centre. I will show through the following section how Schmitt uses this to underpin his account of democratic order.

Section 3: Schmitt contra Hobbes

3.1: Schmitt's account of the *demos*

In this section I begin by distinguishing my own interpretation of Schmitt from the communitarian one. I argue that Schmitt's understanding of the *demos* needs to be understood as an argument about a racially homogeneous nation, and *not* simply about a civic community of shared cultural values. I move on to pose the relationship between Hobbes and Schmitt as a means through which to read Schmitt's view of democracy and the implications of this. I show how Schmitt sees Spinoza as inverting Hobbesian state theory. I argue that Schmitt offers (what he understands to be) a democratic response to the problem of unity posed by Spinoza's inversion of Hobbesian state theory. I show how this ultimately creates the model for a totalising form of political organisation which goes against the grain of liberal and individualist views of politics: exactly what Schmitt is seeking to achieve. The purpose of this section is, then, to show how for Schmitt the political must be conceived of as a fighting collectivity and not just a community of shared values. That is, the political must be conceived of as a single body and not as a collection of individuals. That body must, moreover, be willing to engage in life and death struggle with other similarly constituted bodies. If my interpretation is correct, Schmitt's vision of a culturally homogeneous, fighting collectivity, organised around internal stability (through uniformity of belief) and an external war-preparedness, becomes a quite unpalatable prospect.

I would like to first differentiate myself from the communitarian interpretation of Schmitt. There are some, such as Chantal Mouffe, who argue that the political homogeneity that Schmitt supports does not need to be based around things such as nation or race (Mouffe, 1998, pp.170-174). According to Mouffe, the problem that Schmitt poses is more about how to construct a political community that is strong enough for people to identify with (Mouffe, 1998, p.159-160). This argument fits well with Mouffe's own support for agonism because she then goes on to argue that an agreed democratic sphere would allow for the contestation of identity within it (Mouffe, 1998, 171-173). I do not agree that Schmitt's account allows for this degree of democratic contestation, nor that it could be envisaged in such a way. I have already shown the centrality of violence to a friend grouping. What I show throughout this section is how Schmitt does not allow any space for democratic contestation, but quite

the opposite: I show how Schmitt's understanding of the *demos* is a culturally and racially homogeneous group which does not allow for individual liberties.

I begin by using Schmitt's *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* to open up a problem which I then pursue back through Schmitt's texts. I argue that Schmitt insists that Hobbes' theory failed insofar as it did not prevent its inversion into a theory based around the individual. This individually conceived notion of the political is necessarily doomed to failure, for Schmitt, because it does not provide the unity, stability and order required to keep the political together. I argue that Schmitt's work on *Dictatorship* provides us with a way of thinking around this problem: namely, that Schmitt conceived of the political in the sense of a *demos* with something akin to a general will or common good knowable by the sovereign.⁴³ In identifying the individual as a citizen, and not as a subject, I argue that Schmitt poses the collectivity as a fighting collectivity: a community of soldier citizens.

Schmitt's relationship with Hobbes has been oft commented upon. Schmitt is often seen in the tradition of Hobbes, and as the legitimate heir to Hobbesian state theory. He has been described as completing the circle that Hobbes left open (Slomp, 2009), and as an authoritarian liberal in the Hobbesian tradition (Schwab, 1996, xxi-xxii). Such a view of Schmitt's work is, however, somewhat missing the point. Schmitt was not a Hobbesian, though he did have much admiration for the man from Malmesbury, and did take many insights from Hobbes. Schmitt was, rather, a peculiar thinker of a kind of executive or sovereign democracy. Where this relates to my focus of violence and myth is through the vision of the community. As I outlined in the previous chapter, Schmitt perceives the locus of political myth to be in the nation. The political, as I argued earlier in this chapter, is best conceived of as national. What this democratic strand of Schmitt's thought implies, through its vision of a common good and eschewing of individual rights, is that the violence that creates the political is done so via a totalising view of the *demos*.

Schmitt saw liberal conceptions of the state as having an insufficient account of the political (and too great a freedom for the individual) to prevent conflict within their

⁴³ Note that while some of the language here may have echoes of Rousseau I am not offering a comparative analysis of Rousseau's visions of democracy, although such a study may offer interesting insights into democratic thinking.

borders. This all begins, according to Schmitt, with Hobbes' social contract (Schmitt, 1996a [1938]). That is, the origin of modern state theory including liberal state theory. For Schmitt, the concern with Hobbes' contract is that it contains within it the idea that there is a distinction between private and public conscience (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.56). This is described by Schmitt as a “barely visible crack” (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], pp.57-58). Schmitt claims that with Spinoza this concession to individualism is inverted and becomes the defining feature of the Hobbesian state *qua* liberal state (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.57). Thus, the liberal state that develops from the 17th century on is, in fact, an inverted Hobbesian state. Hobbes' conception of the state, exploited in a way that it was always open to be, is therefore insufficient:

The state's power, however, determines only the external cult. Hobbes laid the groundwork for separating the internal from the external in the sections of the *Leviathan* that deal with a belief in miracles and confession. The Jewish philosopher [Spinoza] pushed this incipient form to the limit of its development until the opposite was reached and the leviathan's vitality was sapped from within and life began to drain out of him. (Schmitt, 1996a [1938], p.57)

Schmitt, therefore, perceives a need to remove this 'barely visible crack' from Hobbes' theory. A state 'sapped from within' is insufficient to provide the order he craves. I will use this problem, posed by Schmitt in his 1938 text on the *Leviathan* as a way to read back to his text on *Dictatorship*, utilising *The Concept of the Political* and *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* alongside it. I show that Schmitt seeks to overcome this problem via the importation of an argument for an account of democracy based around the idea of a homogeneous *volk* or community. Given the previous section's insistence on the violence of Schmitt's concept of the political, this section will seek to supplement it by showing that Schmitt's violent concept of the political is underpinned by a totalising vision of the group constituting the political. Through this it will become clear that Schmitt's view of political order is based around a militarily ordered community of soldier citizens.

In his early work *Dictatorship*, Schmitt looks at Rousseau's view of the general will and his idea of the social contract. Schmitt cites favourably Rousseau's take on the social contract: an attempt to reconcile freedom with modern politics (Schmitt, 2014 [1921], p.103). Schmitt sees the general will as marking a strong sense of collective identity,

one which does not have to deal with the specifics of individual cases but can rather look at the good of all (Schmitt, 2014 [1921], p.103). We must think of Rousseau's social contract in contrast to Hobbes'; that is, under Hobbes' conception the individual is granted a concession, whereas in Rousseau's s/he is not:

The implication of this statement [that the general will carries with it “certain qualities of value, which either exist or do not exist”] can abolish democracy, because one has to note that, according to *Contrat social, volonte generalé* is independent of the form of government. It is part of its nature to be the will of the collective, but single individuals can be mistaken about their own true will; their will can also be governed by passions and hence not be their free will. (Schmitt, 2014 [1921], p.103)

What Schmitt notes here is, primarily, two things: first, that the general will need not be manifested via a democracy (in the governmental sense of the word); second, that individuals do not necessarily know their own true will and may need to be directed by someone with knowledge of the common good. Looking at this second point, this is a more comprehensive conception of collectivity than Hobbes, with his 'barely visible crack'. Instead, no concessions are given to the individual. As I established in the previous section, the act of deciding upon the political ultimately rests on the sovereign act of deciding upon the friend/enemy distinction. Which is to say, when a possibility of war is identified, the political comes into existence.

In Schmitt's discussion of Rousseau, he frames the relationship between the individual and the political within the tension between right and power. This tension is ultimately resolved through the sovereign: “The justification is given in a sentence formulated by Rousseau himself: in certain circumstances human beings must be forced to be free.” (Schmitt, 2014 [1921], p.105). The sovereign must represent the general will, regardless of private wills. This decisive act – the act that unites the community and thus forces individuals to be free – is premised upon a community with a general will. This is what constitutes the decisive *political* act which is lacking from Hobbes' social contract (on Schmitt's view): namely, the enforced freedom of becoming part of a culturally homogeneous community – both in mind as well as body.

I suggest that reading Schmitt's account of democracy from within my discussion of Rousseau points us towards an understanding of Schmitt's conception of the *demos*. Schmitt's requirement is not the same as Hobbes' requirement of individual obedience in return for individual protection, it is about a community constituting itself. William Rasch argues this same point in his essay on Schmitt's defence of democracy:

A more substantial source of authority (of *legitimacy*, to use Schmitt's language) was needed, and during the 1920s and 1930s Schmitt increasingly found that source to be 'the people', a collected political body (not simply a collection of bodies) with felt obligations to 'the nation'. The authority of *respublica* was to be located not in law but in the popular constituent power that animated the law. (Rasch, 2016, p.313)

On this view, the people could not come after the law, because the people are what provides the constitution making power to create law (Rasch, 2016, p.313). Rasch also points us towards an important element in Schmitt's account: namely, that it is through this collectivity that we can achieve freedom.

3.2: The Soldier-Citizen as Public Freedom

I take Schmitt's understanding of the citizen to be opposed to ideas of citizenship which are based in liberal idea of citizenship. Instead, I take Schmitt's understanding of the citizen as being based around what I term a 'soldier-citizen'. I use this section to highlight why I take Schmitt's account of the political to best be understood as a soldier-citizen. I then go on to show the relationship of this to Sorel's account of warrior or martial virtue, and to Schmitt's account of democracy.

The core of Schmitt's argument on freedom comes from two theses, first the famous statement from *Political Theology* that "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." (Schmitt, 2005 [1922], p.5) And secondly his argument that the sovereign can best represent the will of the people, even if they may not realise it:

If it appears that the majority is prone to corruption, then a virtuous minority can use all means of force in order to establish *vertu*. The terror it exercises cannot even once be called coercion – it is only the means to help the free egoist to recognise his own free will; to awaken the *citoyen* in him. The *Contrat social*, in which direct self-government of the people is promulgated as an inalienable right, is a fundamental axiom; hence it serves as justification for dictatorship and provides the formula for the despotism of freedom. (Schmitt, 2014 [1921], p.104)

The awakening of the *citoyen*, the citizen, is thus distinct from Hobbes' conception of the individual as subject. This, I propose, is a way of understanding what Schmitt calls democracy. The citizen is the active participant within the political system, determined as this is on Schmitt's view by a violent conception of the political. Schmitt's citizen is thus an extreme definition; he is (at the very least potentially, always) a soldier-citizen.

There are, of course, many ways of thinking about citizenship: we might think about something like a property-owning democracy, or the difference between republican and liberal citizenship. On my view, Schmitt puts forward an account of citizenship which is based solely in the *possibility* of going to war. Schmitt's account of citizenship is thus best conceived of as an account of soldier-citizenship. There is no citizenship, for Schmitt, without the possibility for war. As I have already mentioned, for Schmitt a world without the political could exist but it would simply not be political. It would not contain the “meaningful antitheses whereby men could be required to sacrifice life, authorised to shed blood, and kill other human beings.” (Schmitt, 1996, p.35) If this interpretation of Schmitt as suggesting a form of soldier-citizenship holds, it provides us with some key points on thinking about political violence.

We should recall Sorel's aligning of peace with weakness: “For France this prolonged peace has been a cause of moral and intellectual weakness, as well as economic weakness, the spirit of enterprise having become less virile.” (Sorel, 1984 [1903-1905], p.317) In Chapter 3 I analysed Sorel's presuppositions for this view, as well as the conclusions that he drew from this. I argued that, for Sorel, the need for violence was to maintain the energy and vitality that was needed for a moral civilisation. I argued that Sorel had a view of warrior virtue which that was underpinned by a particular view of psychology. Schmitt's support for violence does not seem to be underpinned by an account of warrior virtue in the same way as Sorel's: Schmitt does not have an account

of civilisational regeneration or an account of psychology which sees a *need* of violence for morality. As Kennedy makes clear: “Schmitt neither idealizes war nor does he regard struggle as a virtue (Kennedy, 1998, p.101) In contrast, Schmitt separates morality from the political, arguing that they exist, not independently, but with different values (Schmitt, 2007a [1932], p.26). Schmitt does not see struggle and war as a source for morality.

Why, we must ask, does Schmitt’s understanding of citizenship and freedom emerge from violence? Why is Schmitt’s understanding of the citizen based around the idea of a soldier citizen? I outlined in Section 1 that Schmitt believes that a serious political theory must be based on the idea that man is evil: “All genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil.” (Schmitt, 1996, p.61) Assuming that Schmitt takes his own work to be serious, he must thus presuppose that man is evil. Schmitt, I suggest, sees violence as an aspect of man that must be accommodated within political theory. As I outlined in the previous chapter, Hobbes’ myth of the leviathan was not holding Schmitt’s contemporary liberal state together. Schmitt saw a need for a more totalising view of political unity – the need for the people (collective singular) rather than a collection of individuals. This, we must infer, is the role that Schmitt’s soldier-citizen performs: the unification of a people through a military othering. Violence in Schmitt’s theory is thus not a good in itself. It doesn’t serve a regenerative, moral or psychological function. Instead, violence is something that can be harnessed to provide unity and cohesion to a state. Violence, for Schmitt, is what presupposes his democratic account of order. It is in this sense that we can agree with Rasch’s interpretation that: “Within Schmitt’s democracy liberty must become a public, not private, virtue, a collective freedom of the political body and a freedom on the part of the citizen.” (Rasch, 2016, p.320) While I will not go into detail on Schmitt’s account of democracy again, it is interesting to note that: first, Schmitt feels the need to legitimise his theory via the use of democracy. Second, Schmitt surreptitiously brings in a radical account of democracy to underpin his account. Third, and finally, that Schmitt still seeks to incorporate an account of democratic public liberty into his – seemingly totalitarian – account of the state.

This combination of totalising collectivity and sovereign decisionism, is, I argued, the basis for Schmitt's definition of freedom. Schmitt states that: “When people are good, they only need to rise up and grasp their freedom” (Schmitt, 2014 [1921], p.103) This

act of grasping, the decisionist act, is the moment of achieving freedom. Schmitt sees knowledge of the common good as potentially being manifested within a single individual. When we conceive of this in light of the discussion of the realising act of violence inherent in the political, we can see that in constituting a political friend grouping (with a necessary enemy), those that constitute that group are achieving and grasping their freedom. Freedom is thus, for Schmitt, premised upon a non-individually conceived notion of freedom, and rather a freedom based in the really acting collectivity. This collectivity need not be defined by democracy in the electoral sense of the word, but rather in a democratic ideal that views the *demos* (as people) as the embodiment of the general will.

If, as I have argued, Schmitt's understanding of the *demos* is based around an understanding of soldier-citizenship, we must ask what role there is for women within Schmitt's theory. I have already identified several concerns with Schmitt's 'traditional' notion of myth (cf. Chapter 5) in this area. It is worth adding that Schmitt's outline of a 'soldier-citizen' was written during a period when women were unable to serve a soldierly role within most states' armies (cf. Goldstein, 2001, pp.59-127).⁴⁴ If the outline of Schmitt's soldier-citizen is accepted, then we must also accept with it the result that women would be excluded from Schmitt's account of the *demos*. While women would, of course, be present within any nation state, we must assume that they would not be *political* actors or agents. This highlights the gendered account of politics as it exists within Schmitt's work: in associating political agency with an historically exclusionary practice (that of making war), Schmitt is both gendering and restricting his account of the *demos*.

The interpretation of Schmitt's account of freedom given here is thus an unusual one: it sees Schmitt as utilising a conception of singular collective identity to underpin his notion of the state. This is positioned relationally, in opposition to the individualistic conception of collectivity as seen in Hobbes.⁴⁵ Although it could be argued that Schmitt is the heir to the Hobbesian conception of the state, Schmitt is certainly a critical heir.

⁴⁴ The Tsarist and, later, Bolshevik regimes both employed small numbers of women in front line positions. These were the only states in Europe to do so. For a discussion of historical instances of female combatants, see: Chapter 2 of Goldstein's *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Goldstein, 2001)

⁴⁵ I am not here making my own interpretation of Hobbes account of the relationship between individuals and the group, but rather referring to Schmitt's interpretation of Hobbes as having left open a 'barely visible crack' of individualism. For a fuller discussion of this, see: Stanton, 2011

Moreover, his solutions to the failings he identifies in Hobbes' conception of the state are most definitely not Hobbesian insofar as Schmitt's own interpretation of Hobbes stands.⁴⁶ Schmitt's sense of collectivity arises as a response to what he perceives to be the deeply conflict-ridden nature of the modern state. Hobbes' 'barely visible crack' is what, Schmitt argues, allowed these conflicts to arise, and thus a stronger sense of collectivity is needed. Hence, Schmitt turns away from Hobbes.

Schmitt utilises a conception of the general will or common good, manifested within a sovereign dictator, to underpin his theory of the state. The sovereign is both the embodiment of the general will and the figure who, through his decisionist act, creates the political. This combination of national collectivity and sovereign decisionism is thus the basis for Schmitt's conception of freedom. The collectivity will always overcome internal conflict so long as it has the sovereign to act upon the general will/common good. There will be a guarantee, in this sense, of the freedom of individuals, even if they must be forced to be free. What this must lead us to conclude is that Schmitt's view of violence – war – is a very unstable and unaccountable one: the political is brought together through violence, and yet this violence is decided upon by someone (or some group) with the knowledge of the common good or general will. Individuals have no recourse within this schema, as this is where the problem with Hobbes' account arises.⁴⁷ Instead, Schmitt sees the political in a necessarily total way: no divergence from the community or group could be admitted within Schmitt's framework. Violence is the unstable foundation for all of Schmitt's desire for order. Foundations built upon instability do not seem a secure footing for an account of order.

Conclusion

After outlining some key terms, I began this chapter by looking at how Schmitt put forward an account of the political which is fundamentally violent. To do this I looked at what Schmitt states regarding war and violence in relation to the political. It became clear that, for Schmitt, only a world which contained within it the very real possibility of armed conflict could still be termed a political world. That is not to say that a world

⁴⁶ Again, cf. Stanton, 2011, for a discussion of this.

⁴⁷ It is worth here referring back to Schmitt's 'slippage' when he is discussing concepts and categories: in Section 2 I outlined the tension in Schmitt's assertion that it is the individual who decides upon public enmity. I believe this fits with my interpretation of Schmittian citizenship, and helps to further highlight the difficulty in picking apart Schmitt's normative arguments from his descriptive or ontological outlines.

without war would be impossible, simply that it would no longer be political. This means that the interrelationality of Schmittian polities is necessarily a violent one. My discussion of the violence within Schmitt's framework went deeper than this though: I discussed the very *inherent* and *internal* nature of violence to the Schmittian political grouping. Thus, what we saw in Section 2 was a description and critical analysis of Schmitt's concept of the political viewed through the lens of violence. It became clear that Schmitt's concept of the political was, at its core, based on a belief that only political violence *qua* war could realise and legitimise the political friend grouping. Building upon this, I argued that Schmitt located the source of meaning, value and order within the modern world within the political. Given the violent nature of the political, this means that violence gives meaning to any kind of meaning that an individual can have in their life. Thus, if we wish to maintain a view of the political based in a Schmittian conception of the *demos* then we must accept this fact: namely, that war is a fundamental part of the political as Schmitt conceives it.

Following my discussion of the violent nature of Schmitt's conception of the political, I looked at how Schmitt conceived of the nature of the *demos*. I read Schmitt against Hobbes, arguing that Schmitt takes a peculiar approach to democracy: an approach to democracy in which individuals only achieve freedom through their association with a political community of which they are both creators and soldier-citizens. Schmitt, in this sense, gives a much stronger sense of community than does Hobbes and his heirs. What this chapter has shown is how Schmitt conceived of violence as an essential component for order and meaning in the political realm. Schmitt uses violence as the means of distinguishing between a political grouping and a non-political one. In outlining Schmitt's position, however, we see several important questions for political violence: is it necessary for statehood and international stability? Does violence provide a means of maintaining order? Is a soldier-citizen a positive account of citizenship and freedom?

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Myth, Violence and Political Theory

Introduction

What I will argue in this final chapter is that myth and violence deserve a more prominent role within thinking on political theory. Drawing on the arguments I have made throughout my thesis, I seek to show how myth and violence are subjects which provide insights for political theory. Through my thesis I have related political myth and violence to several central issues of political theory: justice, law, the state, the nature of a political community, understandings of freedom, democracy, order, history, civilisation, and morality. My analyses showed both how these relate to myth and violence, but also how understandings of myth and violence can inform understandings of these. These insights come specifically from my engagement with Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt. From this engagement I have, moreover, interrogated the relationship between political thinking and myth/violence. The insights that I have sought to make clear throughout my thesis should be useful for theorists of political theory generally; political myth and political violence specifically; as well as scholars of Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt. I argued at the outset of my thesis that there was a deficit of myth and violence in political theory stemming from the Enlightenment's separation of myth and violence from politics. What my thesis has indicated, through a detailed study of myth and violence (and related concepts), is that this deficit should be challenged.

I begin, in Section 1, by giving an overview of my thesis, recapping my main arguments and strands of thinking. I move on, in Section 2, to give my own understanding of political myth and political violence. I also give my own account of the relationship between the two, and their relationship to politics. I argue that political myth is best understood as something which still exists in the modern world, has a non-binary relationship to truth (i.e. it is neither true nor false), and has an unspecified form. Crucially, I argue that myth inhabits a sphere of the political imagination which relates

it to a sense of identification. I take violence to be a form of power expressed and exerted upon individuals or groups by other individuals or groups with political approval. What I mean by this is that political violence is the force exerted, in multifarious forms (both physical and non-physical, tacit and explicit), by political groups upon individuals or groups. I go on to suggest that the combination of violence and myth may come down to their relationship to the Enlightenment myth: that in obscuring them from political thinking, the conditions in which the two could go together was created.

In Section 3, I use the evidence of my thesis to show how political theory could be enhanced through greater engagement with political myth and political violence. What I argue is that the theorists I have herein discussed raise questions and problems for political theory which myth and violence can help us in approaching. I outline how the Enlightenment myth of politics (being myth and violence free) is only one way of approaching political theory. I seek to show how the concepts of myth and violence give us other ways of approaching it.

Section 1: Overview of Thesis

I began the thesis by noting the relative absence of commentary on myth and violence in much political theory/philosophy. Using Kant's work, I outlined what I take to be the Enlightenment myth: that politics is a sphere in which myth and violence are, or should be, absent. I moved on to show how this has then continued into the modern liberal tradition with myth and violence being something which should not be a part of political thinking. I argued that this type of political theory (aimed at creating normative ideals) had its place, but that political theory would benefit from greater methodological pluralism within the field. I then moved on to locate the thesis historically: I situated the thinkers within the early twentieth century. I noted the 'crisis of reason' that was going on within contemporaneous intellectual life, and I noted the major impact of the First World War. I then situated Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt, within their more specific historical context. I explained how crises in France and Germany may have influenced the writing of the texts I studied. I then moved onto outlining the concepts of myth and violence, and their relationship to politics.

In studies of myth, I identified several recurring issues: the relation of myth to truth, the role of emotions in politics, and the human need for meaning. I argued that Bottici's account of myth was the most convincing and would form the basis for my own, working, approach. Bottici's account provides us with a way of accounting for modern political myths, as well as understanding how and why they continue to exist: the human desire for meaning, coupled with the need for understanding, explained why myths continue to exist into the present. Moreover, the account of them as sitting somewhere outside of the dichotomy of truth/falsehood, and instead always in a place of not-yet or not-provable truth, highlighted some of the difficulties in grasping their conceptual content. What I disagreed with Bottici on was her account's support for a narrative form: I argued that there was no seeming necessity to the form of myth being restrained by a narrative make-up. Having outlined approaches to myth, I distinguished myth from ideology. I argued that myths needed to be understood holistically and in their context, while ideologies could be taken apart and assessed objectively.

I moved on to introduce the concept of political violence. I introduced Fanon, Sartre and Arendt's approaches. I showed how Fanon and Sartre both saw violence as positive in its effects upon individuals. I showed how Sartre saw violence as the fundamentally productive feature of man. I then showed how Arendt saw violence and politics as mutually exclusive. Building upon these accounts, I argued that as a working concept I would understand violence as a form of power expressed and exerted upon individuals or groups by other individuals or groups with political approval.

I next showed how Frazer and Hutchings' project took the examination of the relationship between politics and violence to be a central aim. I argued that their approach was a good one. I argued that I would be approaching my thesis in a similar way, but with the added conceptual triangulation point of myth. I argued that our understanding of myth and violence plays a central role in whether we consider them proper objects for political theory. I showed how understanding myth as falsehood, and violence as harmful, may well lead us to thinking these are things to be exorcised from politics. I argued that in conceptualising myth and violence more deeply, we can explore their relationship to politics more thoroughly.

To argue for a deeper conceptualisation of myth and violence in relation to politics I introduced the work of Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt. I used this to show how these three thinkers conceived of the relationship between myth, violence and politics. I disagreed with all their accounts, arguing that their combination of myth and violence obscured as much as it revealed. I argued that this combination of myth and violence was, possibly, a reaction against the Enlightenment view of politics as myth and violence free. By working beyond these dichotomies, I argued we could gain a better understanding of myth, violence, and their relationship with politics.

In Chapter 2 I argued that to understand Sorel's account of myth we need to understand his oeuvre and the aim of his work. I argued that Sorel was concerned with achieving a morally virtuous society to prevent the decline of civilisation. For Sorel, this could only be achieved through a warrior or martial lifestyle, which in turn could only be motivated by myth. Myth, for Sorel, was argued to be a forward-looking vision of battle which arises out of men's instinct and intuition. My analysis of myth in this chapter raised several key questions and problems. I argued that failing to understand Sorel's explicitly violent and conflict-driven account of myth would miss these important elements of Sorel's account. It would, moreover, represent a failure to engage with Sorel's understanding of civilisation and history which sees no possibility of emancipation and the need for struggle to create virtue. This analysis highlighted the importance of understanding related concepts and topics: it showed how a particular understanding of history affected Sorel's understanding of myth. It also showed how we needed to understand the role of violence to fully understand Sorel's account of myth, and it pushed further on the question of why so many myths seem to relate to violence or war. What it also showed is how Sorel's account of myth is deeply connected to his understanding of psychology and his account of pessimism.

I moved on, in Chapter 3, to examine Sorel's use of violence. I argued that Sorel was primarily interested in violence insofar as it could regenerate morality and civilisation through creating a warrior mindset: violence was, for Sorel, the only way in which a morally virtuous society could exist. I began by offering a typology of Sorelian violence and then used this to assess Sorel's own account. In doing so, I highlighted Sorel's understanding that politics was not a violence-free sphere. I argued, contrarily, that Sorel saw law as, at root, violent, and thus that politics within the state was already violent. What this meant was that combating the force of the state with the violence of

the proletariat was pitting (one form of) violence against (another form of) violence. I moved on to show how Sorel primarily supported a form of violence that I described as war, arguing that this was underpinned by a mythic account of motivation. This, I argued, was how Sorel primarily saw morality as being achieved: instrumentally through violent mythic conflict. I then argued that Sorel's account of violence was unclear and, at times, contradictory, as shown in the case of Norway. In the case of Norway, it appears Sorel was arguing for a constitutively violent society as a morally good one.

In my chapter on Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' I built upon my analysis of Sorel's work. I argued that Benjamin's accounts of both myth and violence were distinct from Sorel's: I argued that Benjamin saw violence as a cognitive force centred upon the limits of legal-institutional rationality. I argued that mythical violence represented the hegemony of the current ruling class, and maintenance of the status quo. In contrast, I argued that divine violence represented a challenging or overcoming of this mythical violence and a realisation of true relations of justice. I argued that Benjamin's account had many insights: I highlighted how thinking about violence in a non-physical way was useful, and that Benjamin's positing of an explicit relationship between myth and violence maintained the link that Sorel had made. I agreed with many of the interpreters of Benjamin's text that it was very open. I criticised Benjamin's text for this openness, arguing that something which could have Derrida's reading (of the holocaust as divine violence) applied to it was an insufficiently worked through account. I also argued that in leaving open the question of what a world would look like without law, Benjamin failed to take responsibility for his thinking. I argued that in analogising myth with falsehood, Benjamin necessarily had to have an account of truth or the good: without one of these Benjamin's account does not stand up. Finally, I argued that in describing law as mythical violence (*qua* falsehood) Benjamin essentially depoliticised law and took it out of a sphere of contestation and made it into something to be overcome. This showed us that an account of myth and violence needs to think through the consequences of its reasoning. Leaving an account too open, or without consequential thinking, can lead to the problems of Benjamin's text. It also showed us one way in which the conceptual nature of myth and violence can lead us to its relationship to law, justice, and hegemony.

In my first chapter on Schmitt I argued that Schmitt's account of myth is centred around an account of national political groupings organised by conflict. I argued that Schmitt had an understanding of myth which was heavily based in Sorel's account, but focused on national groups rather than class. I outlined how Schmitt sought to fit this within a tradition, to highlight how mythic images and symbols change over time. I argued that Schmitt's account was in response to what he took to be the collapse of *idees générales*: in reply, Schmitt sought an account of myth which was local and specific. In my analysis of Schmitt's account, I concluded that while he mentioned ideas such as 'instinct', 'intuition', 'real life', as well as concepts such as symbols and images, Schmitt did not sufficiently explain these. This highlighted the need for an examination of related concepts to myth: without fully understanding what Schmitt means by these, we cannot fully understand his account of myth. It also highlighted how Schmitt inverted Sorel's understanding of myth and altered it from a forwards-looking account of battle to a backward-looking account of tradition, culture and language.

In Chapter 6, 'The Inherent Violence in Carl Schmitt's Account of Democratic Order', I argued that Schmitt's concept of the political, his understanding of democracy, and his notion of international stability, were all based in violence *qua* war. Schmitt used violence as the defining feature of the political, and I argued that this means violence gives meaning to the lives of individuals and communities. It is through their lives as, what I termed, soldier-citizens, that Schmittian citizens achieve freedom. In positing a view of violence as creative of unity, order, and freedom, Schmitt challenges ideas of violence as negative or destructive. Such an account leads to questions regarding the necessity of violence in human life (just as did Sorel's), and whether we need to accommodate violence within politics rather than seeking to overcome it.

Through these analyses, my thesis raised several questions, problems and issues related to the concepts of myth and violence. It also, moreover, challenged many of the theoretical underpinnings of these accounts. I go on, in the following section, to explain more specifically how this relates to political theory, and how myth and violence are useful concepts within it.

Section 2: Understanding Political Myth and Political Violence

In this thesis I have sought to highlight the importance of myth and violence to political theory. To argue for this, I need to put forward a conceptual account of both, and to show why they can be important concepts for political theory. What I have showed throughout my analysis, is that there is no single account of either political myth or political violence. Both concepts have multiple understandings, and are underpinned by different theoretical perspectives. I believe that there are areas in which understandings of political myth and political violence can be enhanced, some in which they can be challenged, and some areas in which a diversity and plurality of understandings is welcome. Informed by my introductory accounts of myth and violence, as well as my more detailed analysis of Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt, I now explain my own understanding of both concepts, how they relate to one another, and how they relate to politics. In doing this, I seek also to restate the claim from my introduction that in understanding the historical and intellectual context of the three thinkers studied here, we can gain further conceptual and theoretical insights into myth and violence.

Cassirer (2007 [1946]), Tudor (1972) and Flood (2002) all argue that myth is something pre-modern or based around a false claim to truth. I believe Bottici's (2007; 2012) account of myth as failing to conform to the 'Enlightenment' understanding of truth/falsehood is more convincing. For Bottici, myth is not provable as either true or false because it inhabits a part of the political imagination rather than political reality or logic. If we take this view of myth as inhabiting part of the political imagination, we can better understand its relationship to truth/falsehood. We saw with Sorel how myth was always a vision of a coming action, and with Schmitt how it was based in a tradition or view of the past. I do not take the direction of the myth, past or future, to be important here: what is important is that myth is not based on something that, *necessarily*, either has existed, continues to exist, or will exist. Rather myth is a point of reference and identification for individuals seeking understanding and/or meaning. When we look at political myth this manifests itself in terms of group identity: e.g. class, nation. Neither of these things *exist* in the sense of being true or false, but are rather ideas, beliefs and ways of understanding which condition our view of the political world. This is why myth does not correspond to dichotomous notions of truth. It is also, moreover, why myth is not something which can be overcome by Enlightenment understandings of truth and reason: the validity of a myth is not

provable or testable. It is, as Sorel and Schmitt argue, successful insofar as it remains meaningful to a political group: its validity is attested only by its continued use. It is worth noting the distinction with Tudor's account here: Tudor argues that a successful political myth is one accepted as true (Tudor, 1972, p.132). I do not believe myth must be accepted as true, in this sense, but rather as meaningful.

The reason why myth cannot be overcome is, further to the above point, also connected to the human need for significance and meaning. On the general premise of this I agree, again, with Bottici. Bottici's argument is, drawing on Gehlen, that we are 'deficient beings' and create culture to make up for this deficiency (Bottici, 2012). I do not think such a strong argument needs to be made about the nature of man. Instead, I propose to look back, again, to Sorel and Schmitt: they argue that myth can be seen to be needed because it exists. I believe that bringing in claims over the status of humans as 'deficient beings' is unnecessary for arguing that myth is important: so long as there are political ideas inhabiting a sphere of the political imagination which provide meaning or understanding to political groups, then we can accept that myth is still a relevant category. It is, however, this meaning-providing function that emphasises why myth is an important category for political theory. We should here refer to the question of Tager's that I noted in Chapter 2: why would somebody die for their beliefs? (Tager, 1986, pp.626-627) The reason, I propose, is that political ideas are, and will continue to be, some of the most powerful and potent means of expressing identity and meaning that humans can conceive. These, I argue, are characterised by political myth.⁴⁸

Political violence is, I believe, a more problematic concept to work with: none of the three thinkers I focused on think that violence should be overcome. Benjamin and Sorel believe violence is a positive means of overcoming the problems of contemporary politics. Schmitt uses it to fundamentally define his account of the political. In my introductory chapter I described political violence as: a form of power expressed and exerted upon individuals or groups by other individuals or groups with political approval. I argued that political violence did not have to be manifested physically, nor did it have to be harmful. I argued that it did, however, need political consent and it did need agreement between individuals. I showed how Sorel saw violence as understood in a morally virtuous and regenerative way. Violence, in Sorel's view, is positive if it is part

⁴⁸ There are, certainly, other beliefs that people would die for (e.g. religion), but these are not the subject of this thesis.

of a war or part of a constitutively violent society. I disagree with Sorel that violence *qua* war, even if backed by myth, is creative of a particularly moral outlook. I disagree, further, with the idea that a good society is necessarily physically violent. My study of Benjamin showed how violence can be manifested physically and non-physically. I believe Benjamin is correct in making this point. I do not, however, subscribe to Benjamin's separation of mythical and divine violence. In ascribing a negative view to the mythical violence that emanates from the state, Benjamin discounts the possibility of a state engaging in positive violent action. I think this is incorrect. If we accept that law is a form of violence, then it seems reasonable to accept that there are some laws which are good. In understanding political violence in this way, we may better pursue the question of the relationship of political violence to the state. Rather than the simplistic characterisation we find in Sorel and Benjamin (i.e. state violence is bad violence), we could begin to recognise that certain forms of state violence are good, as well as bad. Equally, political groups who are not part of a state could also be seen to be engaging in good or bad political violence. We could also describe the many non-physical and non-bloody manifestations of political violence as just that: political violence. This would allow us a much more nuanced approach to political violence.

There is no simple characterisation of whether political violence is a positive or a negative, and for this reason I disagree (to a large extent), with all the authors focused on here. All of them see violence as, in some sense, good. Instead, in describing political violence in the way that I have, I seek to highlight the difficult questions, issues and problems that political violence raises. Considering these, it becomes even more important to focus on harmful and negative manifestations of violence. There are examples of violence which have proved liberating and emancipatory, but there have also been many instances of violence which are oppressive. There are no easy answers, but a fuller understanding of the many forms and examples of violence will provide us with the conceptual and theoretical tools to approach these questions more fully.

I outlined the conceptual difficulties with Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt's accounts: I argued that these accounts raised questions about different types of violence but did not provide us with answers. I showed how Sorel raised the idea of bureaucratic violence and Benjamin of non-bloody violence. We need to understand more fully what these might mean, what they might look like and what value they have. Form, also, needs further clarification in discussions of myth: following the three thinkers here, I

do not see a necessarily narrative form to myth. This is in contradiction to all recent work on myth. To me, myth seems to be capable of expression in an idea or an image just as much as a narrative. This is an insight taken from Sorel's understanding of myths as images. I take the important elements of political myth to be its nature as a means by which individuals gain meaning upon which they believe or act. The concepts of myth and violence, as I have presented them throughout this thesis, are concepts which are being worked upon and refined all the time. Through my thesis I have shown, via an investigation of the work of Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt, certain areas where thinking on these concepts requires enhancement, challenging and diversification.

As well as clarifying the concepts of myth and violence, we need to understand why so many thinkers focus on mythologies of violence. I do not take violent myths to be the only form of myth, yet they seem to be the most prevalent in terms of studied myths in recent works. I suggested that one possible reason for this is that both concepts are excluded from Enlightenment views of politics (and understandings which take the Enlightenment view as their starting point). In investigating this relationship between myth, violence and politics, we can better see how myth and violence relate conceptually. The Enlightenment myth sees politics as exclusive of myth and violence. On the Enlightenment view, both concepts are harmful to the ideal of a reasonable and pacified polity.

Sorel, in a sense following the Enlightenment view, sees myth and violence as things which can be destructive of politics. For Sorel, however, this is a positive as it allows for morally regenerative violence to come into existence. What it also shows us is why myth and violence may go together in Sorel's work: he essentially shares the Enlightenment view that violence which originates within bureaucratic politics is bad.⁴⁹ We saw how Benjamin understood (divine) violence as overcoming of the status quo of politics (mythic violence). For Benjamin, this divine violence was a positive. In contrast to Sorel, however, it was not myth which motivated people to act against politics, but a manifestation of the divine. With Benjamin, myth was analogised with politics *qua* bourgeois state. Benjamin's analysis thus undermines the Enlightenment view of politics as free from myth and violence. What Benjamin's analysis does is to highlight a way of viewing the bourgeois state as having myth and violence present within it. Benjamin utilises myth and violence together to undermine the Enlightenment

⁴⁹ Though as we saw in Chapter 3 he certainly supports a number of forms of violence.

separation of politics from myth and violence. In this way, while both Benjamin and Sorel utilise myth and violence, the relation to politics is distinct. Schmitt's understanding, in contrast to Sorel and Benjamin, is that myth is present within political communities and serves to underpin the political, which is defined through external violence. Schmitt's understanding is distinct from the Enlightenment view in that it sees myth as a necessary part of political life. Given that violence is what defines the political, we see the necessary connection between myth and violence. Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt thus show us distinct ways in which the relationship between myth and violence can be theorised.

The reason why myth and violence go together may well be down to their exclusion from Enlightenment thinking: as I outlined in the introduction to the thesis, these thinkers were all responding to the early twentieth century crises of reason and politics. The understanding of politics as a violence and myth free sphere was being challenged by historical events and various other thinkers. The relationship between myth, violence and politics is different in each of those thinkers looked at here. In seeking to incorporate myth and violence within their theories, Schmitt and Benjamin can each be seen as working against the Enlightenment view of politics as a myth and violence free sphere. Sorel, moreover, seeks to use myth and violence to work anti-politically against the modern state. All sought to utilise the concepts of myth and violence to positively inform their theories in direct contrast to the Enlightenment understandings which were, and remain, dominant. What this suggests is that in defining politics as myth and violence free, the Enlightenment view of politics may have created the conditions in which these concepts were seen (by Sorel, Benjamin and Schmitt) to be the solutions to contemporaneous problems in political thinking. If we do not accept the Enlightenment binary between politics and myth/violence, we can leave open the question of whether myth and violence are *necessarily* a part of politics. Instead, we can begin to think about them as two useful concepts to add to political theory's toolbox.

In this section I have attempted to offer a working conceptual account of myth and violence, and their relationship to politics. I sought, moreover, to offer an argument as to why myth and violence were taken together in these three thinkers. This thesis is not intended to be the final point in understanding myth and violence but a contribution thereto. It is, moreover, hoped that in complicating the issue of myth and violence's

relationship to politics, this thesis can contribute to opening political theory to myth and violence more broadly.

Section 3: How Myth and Violence challenge the Enlightenment Myth

I began this thesis by outlining the Enlightenment myth, and the liberal understanding of political theory. These saw politics as a sphere which should be free from violence and myth. I argued that this was a myth. Not false, but a way of providing a meaningful way of thinking about politics. I argued, however, that it is not the only way, and that political theory should be broader in its conceptual toolbox. Drawing on evidence and arguments from throughout my thesis I will now explain why political theory could benefit from a greater discussion of myth and violence. I show, moreover, how the Enlightenment myth was challenged by Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt.

In my introduction I showed how Rawls, following the Enlightenment view, ignores myth and violence because he does not see it as a part of a just society and therefore beyond the purview of his *Theory of Justice*. The importance of Rawls' work for a large part of modern political theory cannot be underestimated. Myth and violence, however, are not absent from all political theory. There are notable exceptions, a few whom have appeared in my thesis: Marx, Hobbes, Weber, Machiavelli.⁵⁰ For the purposes of my argument, we can place Hobbes with Kant and Rawls: all see the state as a violence free area. While Rawls does not consider this in depth, Hobbes certainly does. For Hobbes, the state is how we take ourselves out of the "warre ... of every man against every man" (Hobbes, 2011 [1651], p.88). Life within the state is analytically and conceptually non-violent. It is, moreover, a place where reason can be used publicly to achieve justice. The concepts of myth and violence challenge this myth.

Schmitt's account of violence *within* the political is in line with Rawls': for Schmitt one of the fundamental functions of the state is maintaining internal order. As I showed throughout Chapter 6, this is connected with a deeply troubling account of homogeneity and external violence. If we understand violence from Schmitt's view (i.e.

⁵⁰ Some of these thinkers are often described as being part of a 'realist' or *realpolitik* tradition: Weber, Clausewitz, Machiavelli. Not to be confused with realism in international thought, which generally includes Hobbes and Machiavelli, as well as Thucydides and others.

as war) then internally the political is a violence-free concept. I disagree with this approach. In my analysis of Sorel's work, I showed how the origins of law can be seen as a bureaucratisation or abstraction of a physical violence. In Benjamin we saw a similar account of the law as the codification of an original physical violence. Rather than describing the law as non-violent, their accounts show how we might describe the law as a different kind of violence. This form of violence might be non-bloody and non-physical, but is ultimately able to express a political power upon individuals or groups. As we learned from reading Benjamin alongside Weber, the inherent power of law is not solely due to this physicality. The law uses violence in its cognitive power over individuals. If we accept this, then it is impossible to accept that the state is violence-free. Rather, the state is characterised by the violent power of law. This is the insight I take from Benjamin and Sorel's work. Political theories which see violence as extraneous to the polity are unable to identify this violent power of the law. Benjamin and Sorel's accounts have shown us a useful insight into theorising the relationship between law, justice, and violence. Sorel and Benjamin's accounts have fundamentally challenged the Enlightenment myth that politics is violence free.⁵¹

Myth has, as I have already outlined, been ignored by much political theory. While several political theorists do recognise the importance of violence, very few recognise the importance of myth. Because of its presentation, frequently, as something false or untrue (even within thinking on political myth), myth is taken to operate on a different register to political theory. This is especially prescient given how we have seen from my discussions of Sorel, Benjamin, and Schmitt that a lot of political theory could be described as mythic (in some sense): we saw how Schmitt saw the leviathan as a mythic symbol, how Sorel described Marx's work as a myth of "catastrophic revolution" (Sorel, 1999 [1908], p.20), and how Benjamin saw Weber's account of legal rationality as embodying mythical violence. If we do away with the idea that myth is false or untrue, and accept my argument that myth's importance comes from its acceptance as meaningful, we can begin to see how the idea that myth is not present in politics can be challenged. We can add, moreover, that if my own account of the Enlightenment myth is accepted, then the dearth of myth and violence from political thinking must be confronted.

⁵¹ n.b. that I am not here discussing Sorel's positive account of violence which is distinctly anti-political, but rather the force of the state. As I identified in Chapter 3, this is in itself just one form of violence.

What I have sought to show throughout my thesis are some of the important things that the three authors I focused on can tell us about politics. I take the central conceptual insights for political theory that can be drawn from my discussion to be: that violence can be understood as present both within and without political communities; that myth continues, and will continue, to give meaning and significance to individuals within political communities. Moreover, I have sought to provide insights into the nature of political myth and political violence. I have aimed to show that: Enlightenment understandings of myth as falsehood are insufficient; that myth is not necessarily connected to a narrative form; and, that myths do not have to look in a particular direction (past/future). Finally, I have sought to show that: political violence can be understood in non-physical and non-bloody ways (as well as physical); that political violence is useful in understanding power within political relationships; and, that political violence, as human construction, can always be challenged and unmade. What my approach, and those of others (e.g. Bottici, Challand, Bernstein, Frazer and Hutchings) working in similar ways, does is to offer new ways of approaching problems which have often remained a fringe aspect of political theory and to offer arguments in favour of their inclusion within political theory more generally.

Through situating this thesis within the intellectual and historical contexts of the Enlightenment view of politics and the crises of the early twentieth century, I sought to highlight the broader contribution I take this thesis to be making. There are, as I have outlined, specific conceptual insights that can be taken for myth, and violence. What this thesis is also seeking to highlight is the Enlightenment myth of politics as a myth and violence free sphere. I have sought to highlight the Enlightenment myth, and to show how three early twentieth century political thinkers challenged this dominant understanding of political theory. It is hoped that this thesis can contribute to attempts at broadening the scope of political theory, of challenging the dominance of the Enlightenment myth, and that myth and violence can be utilised as relevant conceptual tools for political thinking.

Postscript

I have shown throughout this thesis that there is much more work to do on the concepts of political myth and political violence, as well as on their interrelation. This thesis has sought to offer a contribution to these themes: it has sought to raise

questions, highlight problems, compare understandings, and offer arguments in certain directions. And so, we do not need to conclude with Blumenbergian question of “what if there were still something to say, after all?” (Blumenberg, 1985, p.636), because we know that there is very much more to say.

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