

Against the hierarchy of knowledge: Georges Sorel, education and revolution

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Abstract—Georges Sorel's ideas about education are key to making sense of his critique of the Third Republic. Cutting across the heated debates over classical as opposed to modern curricula, Sorel drew on a complex account of the nature of scientific knowledge to offer a sustained defense of education within the factory and on the picket line as a source of individual autonomy. Sorel's refusal of the practices and modes of institutionalization of liberal education in his own time is a standing challenge for those who would defend liberal education today.

‘The sociologist members of the Bloc [des Gauches] think that violence will disappear when popular education becomes more advanced ... they hope to drown revolutionary syndicalism in the saliva of professors’.¹ On the basis of such venom, Georges Sorel (1847–1922) has been regarded as deeply anti-intellectual. Even before his death, Sorel was understood as an advocate of radicalism for its own sake, on the left as well as on the right. He remains best known today as a theorist of revolutionary syndicalism and as a proponent of violence and myth in politics. He has been easy to dismiss as simply, reactively, against the Republic and everything it did. This is a mistake.

Since the 1980s, historians on both sides of the Atlantic have substantially revised the longstanding narrative according to which Sorel was an embittered and isolated polemicist, simply one step on the path to fascism or totalitarianism. Without ignoring toxic elements of his political legacy, specialists now

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¹ G. Sorel and J. Jennings, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge, 1999), 43. Although a substantial selection of Sorel's writings have been translated into English by John Stanley, these translations are not widely available. I cite from the Cambridge edition of *Reflections on Violence*, and otherwise rely on my own translations. G. Sorel and J. Stanley, *The Illusions of Progress* (Berkeley, 1969); *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy* (New York, 1976); *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics* (New Brunswick, 1984); *From Georges Sorel. Volume 2, Hermeneutics and the Sciences* (New Brunswick, 1990); G. Sorel, E. Brandom, and T. Giordani, *Georges Sorel's Study on Vico: Translation, Edition, and Introduction* (Leiden, 2019).

understand Sorel as a thoughtful, if often obscure, critic of the reigning orthodoxies of his day. He was among the most original readers of Marx in the period of the Second International, but he was not only that. Academic journals published his dissections of some of the most advanced scientific and philosophical work of his time. Today his writings are recognized as a sustained engagement with theoretical problems at the heart of the social sciences.² Sorel remains a challenging figure. Yet the best new scholarship on him begins with the understanding that his radicalism was enmeshed in, and largely takes its meaning from, the intellectual mainstream of the French Third Republic.³

It is curious, then, how little attention scholars have paid to Sorel's account of education.⁴ The remaking of elementary education was a major achievement of the first decades of the Third Republic, and the years around 1900 saw substantial and controversial reforms of secondary and higher education. As Madeleine Réberieux remarks, 'the very foundations of a society seemed to be at stake' in the arguments surrounding these reforms.⁵ Sorel was attentive to debates over each part of the French educational system. Far from a simple object of vituperation, education was a crucial category in Sorel's thinking. To pursue it is to open a new window onto the workings of his social and revolutionary theories. The main goal of this article is to reconstruct and contextualize a Sorelian theory of education in its negative and positive aspects: both what he argued was bad about schooling in his own day, and what he thought it could and should become. At the same time, Sorel's thinking on education offers a way into his broader account of the Third Republic. Indeed, while Sorel famously changed his mind about many things, and shifted in some cases radically his political sympathies, his thinking about education remained remarkably consistent across his career.

² This is the perspective taken in J. Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue* (Berkeley, 1981). Fundamental in English, together with Stanley, remains J. Jennings, *Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of His Thought* (New York, 1985); in French, W. Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne: Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889-1914* (Paris, 2006). Essential scholarship continues to appear in *Mil-neuf-cent* (formerly *Cahiers Georges Sorel*). An important biographical contribution is M. Gervasoni, *Georges Sorel, una biografia intellettuale: Socialismo e liberalismo nella Francia della Belle époque* (Milano, 1997). A recent Marxist perspective is P. Gaud, *De la valeur-travail à la guerre en Europe: essai philosophique à partir des écrits économiques de Georges Sorel* (Paris, 2010).

³ Chapter four of K. Duong, *The Virtues of Violence: Democracy Against Disintegration in Modern France* (New York, 2020); T. Giordani, 'Redefining historical materialism in the peripheries of Marxism: Georges Sorel and Antonio Labriola between France, Italy, and Germany', in *Decentering European Intellectual Space*, eds. Marja Jalava, Stefan Nygård and Johan Strang (Leiden, 2018), 88–113; M. Simakova, 'Syndicalist Marxism for reactionary times: Sorel's revolutionary politics of production', *Stasis*, 8 (2019), 76–93.

⁴ The little attention this has received in recent decades has come almost entirely from an anarchist perspective. H. Lenoir, 'Georges Sorel et l'éducation', *Les Temps maudits*, 27 (2008), 83–98; B. Warren, 'Georges Sorel on Science and Education', *Discourse: the Australian Journal of Educational Studies*, 8 (1987), 77–89. Robert Louzon devoted pages to related issues in his lengthy introduction to G. Sorel and P. Delesalle, *Lettres à Paul Delesalle, 1914-1921* (Paris, 1947).

⁵ J.-M. Mayeur and M. Réberieux, *The Third Republic from Its Origins to the Great War, 1871-1914* (Cambridge, 1984), 110.

Approaching Sorel on the ground of education, both as an ideal and as an empirically existing set of interlocking institutions, highlights two features of his thought. First, Sorel's anti-statism was clear in his rejection of centralized state education. Sorel's understanding of *formalism* as an ever-present danger in education, particularly education oriented around examinations with the goal of producing a meritocracy, gives content to what seems otherwise a pure refusal of state action. Second, Sorel assigned a central place in his ideal revolutionary and syndicalist education to technology and scientific practice. The workshop is the creative heart of technological development, and that development in turn is the essence of science. These features of Sorel's thinking put him sharply at odds with mainstream socialism. For Jean Jaurès, the great socialist leader of the day, 'the Revolution does not begin in the workshop; it begins in the school'.⁶ Sorel took precisely the opposite position. Reconstructing it allows us to see much more clearly the core of his revolutionary thought and to evaluate it in a more satisfactory way.

This essay will explore Sorel's pedagogical ideas as well as their place in his broader social theory, gauging Sorel's engagement with and transcendence of the immediate political and institutional contexts of the French Third Republic. It looks first to Sorel's own time in school and his first career as a civil engineer; then to his early Marxist writings and polemics of the 1890s; to two experiments in educational innovation that concerned Sorel against the larger landscape of French educational reform; and finally to the theme of education in Sorel's later writings, including and after the *Reflections on Violence*. Sorel drew on a complex account of the nature of scientific knowledge to offer a sustained defence of technical training as education—rather than mere instruction—as, in fact, a source of emancipation and individual autonomy.

I

The obvious starting point for situating Sorel's theory of education is his own time in school. As an established intellectual, particularly in his later years around the First World War, Sorel had the reputation of a brilliant autodidact. This picture needs to be revised. He indeed had no formal training in the social theory for which he became known, but Sorel received a rigorous and elite education. He attended the *École Polytechnique* (EP), which together with the *École normale supérieure* (ENS) was the most prestigious higher-education establishment in France. Indeed, although the ENS tends to receive the most attention from intellectual historians, its influence was, according to one historian, 'less deep and less varied than that

⁶ Quoted in H. Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès* (Madison, 1962), 86.

of the *polytechniciens*.⁷ The EP was differently elitist than the ENS. Students paid a substantial amount to attend, for one thing. They required, for another, a certificate from a relevant official attesting that neither they nor their family had engaged in politically suspect or anti-social activity. Social conservatism was joined to a real immobilism in the curriculum. Even the physics classes Sorel took in the 1860s would have been materially the same as those taught in the 1830s.⁸ Sorel did well, in both years finishing near the top of his class and also serving as a prefect over his classmates.⁹ Sorel finished his studies at the specialized engineering school the *École des Ponts et chaussées* in 1869. He went first to Corsica, where he remained until June 1871. After serving for a few years at Mostaganem in Algeria, he spent the bulk of his career in the Roussillon, in the foothills of the Pyrenees in the southeast of France.

Sorel would later lament that the EP tended to leave students less prepared to deal with real-world problems than they had been when they arrived. This is unusually chiefly because he was himself a *polytechnicien* and the school was typically able to command more loyalty from its graduates. In levelling such charges, Sorel echoed what historian Robert Fox calls a century-long tendency 'to blame the selection procedures and the educational experience that followed at the Polytechnique both for promoting an unduly abstract cast in French science and for leaving all but the most resilient *polytechniciens* unfit either for creative scientific work or for economically relevant employment'.¹⁰ Alice Ingold's pathbreaking study on Sorel's time as a civil engineer at Ponts et chaussées allows us to give content to the critique that his professional life may have enabled him to make of his schooling. From 1880 until he retired in 1892, Sorel's main work was managing disputes related to water use along the Tech river, south of Perpignan and near the Spanish border. The administration of the Second Empire had built irrigation canals upstream, largely inspired by political considerations, which raised real concerns that there would not be enough water left for older properties downstream. The politically motivated construction of canals had been defended with appeals to future progress. Sorel in 1891, in a report of his activities, described his own goal as replacing 'this purely theoretical regulation with one that is truly practical'.¹¹

⁷ F. Mayeur, *Histoire générale de l'enseignement et de l'éducation en France: Tome III De la Révolution à l'École républicaine (1789-1939)* (Paris, 2004), 437.

⁸ For details on the EP's curriculum, see chapter two of Terry Shinn, *L'École polytechnique: 1794-1914* (Paris, 1980).

⁹ For these and other details drawn from Sorel's records, see T. Giordani, 'The uncertainties of action: agency, capitalism, and class in the thought of Georges Sorel' (PhD, European University Institute, 2015), 41–3.

¹⁰ R. Fox, *The Savant and the State: Science and Cultural Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, 2012), 275.

¹¹ Quoted in A. Ingold, 'Penser à l'épreuve des Conflits. Georges Sorel Ingénieur Hydraulique à Perpignan', *Mil-neuf-cent*, 32 (2014), 11–52, 33; A. Ingold, 'Terres et eaux entre coutume, police et droit au XIXe siècle. Solidarisme écologique ou solidarités matérielles?', *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines*, 33 (2017), 97–126.

As a provincial notable, Sorel had already participated actively in local intellectual life. In 1889 he published two books, one a *Contribution à l'étude profane de la Bible* and the other a critical account of the trial of Socrates. Education was already a theme. Writing about Socrates, Sorel compared the crisis provoked in Athens by the rise of the sophists to the tensions between nominal democracy and wide acceptance of 'the hierarchy of knowledge' in French society. He cited Proudhon on the ruling class' awareness of the dangers of genuine education for the labouring classes.¹² In 1892, Sorel retired at the age of forty-five. Apparently as a point of pride, he refused the indefinite leave customarily granted to retiring civil servants of his relatively high status, thus drastically lowering his income.¹³ He moved to Paris and, as he would put it later, strove 'to free myself from what I retained of my education'.¹⁴ This involved pursuing a Parisian form of intellectual sociability—long conversations in bookstores and journal back offices, hours spent working at various libraries and attending seminars and lectures. In this context, Sorel encountered Karl Marx's *Capital* and entered the small but growing ranks of French socialism.

II

Problems associated with how secondary and university education fit—and ought to fit—into the larger social structure were central to Sorel's early public engagements after his discovery of Marx in 1893. 'Science dans l'éducation', which appeared in 1896, was one of several essays in which Sorel might be said to have experimented with the conceptual resources of Marxism to respond to these problems.¹⁵ Sorel's direct interlocutor, however, was conservative critic Ferdinand Brunetière and his pamphlet, 'Éducation et instruction', an invective against scientism and in favour of classical humanistic education.¹⁶ Shortly after receiving a prestigious appointment at the ENS in 1895, Brunetière visited the Vatican and on his return wrote what became a notorious essay on the bankruptcy of science.¹⁷ According to Brunetière, science simply could not provide the spiritual satisfaction and moral content that positivistic republicans claimed for it. Instead, Brunetière argued, literary study reveals to us essential features

¹² G. Sorel, *Le Procès de Socrate: Examen critique des thèses socratiques* (Paris, 1889), 180, 176–84.

¹³ He lived on investments and writing. Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne*, 21.

¹⁴ Sorel, *Reflections*, 5.

¹⁵ The long essay appeared in four installments over the first half of 1896 in *Le Devenir social*. This journal, of which Sorel was one of the principle editors and contributors, developed Marxism as a body of theory in France. It published translations of texts by Marx and Engels, but also Marxists from across Europe, from Plekhanov to Aveling. Sorel's important essay on Giambattista Vico was his next significant publication in this journal. E. Bandom, T. Giordani, *Georges Sorel's Study on Vico*.

¹⁶ F. Brunetière, *Éducation et Instruction* (Paris, 1895); A. Compagnon, *Connaissez-vous Brunetière?: Enquête sur un antidreyfusard et ses amis* (Paris, 1997).

¹⁷ F. Brunetière, 'Après une visite au Vatican', *Revue des deux mondes* (1895), 97–118.

of human nature, our own nature, to which science would always remain blind. Only through classical and literary study could one achieve the critical self-knowledge that was the hallmark of education as opposed to mere instruction.¹⁸

Before turning to Sorel's attack on this position, it is important to clarify what was at issue here. For Brunetière as for Sorel, the terms of debate over schooling in France were set by the decades-old policy of 'bifurcation' in secondary education between a classical and a modern track, which itself was bound up with argument over theory, practice, science and economic development. In the early years of the Second Empire, the *lycée* (secondary school) system had been split to create a new, modern track, supposed to be more technical and immediately useful, alongside the older classical curriculum. This modern track, or at least the cultural impulse he believed it to represent, was the target of Brunetière's ire. Questions about how higher education ought to be organized and what sorts of *lycées* should prepare young people for higher university or technical education were, on the one hand, dryly administrative; on the other hand, however, they clearly implied value judgments that directly concerned the Republican regime. By the early years of the Third Republic, this appeared to be a matter of national survival. As Ernest Renan had famously lamented, German universities, ultimately German science, were behind the recent triumph of Prussia.¹⁹ In response both to the German threat and to internal dissent, the Third Republic engaged in substantial reform of primary education and contradictory liberalizations of the educational system more broadly.

A similar concatenation of motives was at work in long-running efforts to reform France's system of higher education. One goal was to create universities, institutions that would be large, uniting at least four different faculties, with some autonomy in collecting and spending money from private donors. One senator argued that aggregating faculty into universities was necessary to avoid reducing 'science to industry and theory to practice'.²⁰ Yet it was not clear if this in fact would be the result of the reform, nor was there agreement about whether such yoking together would be good or bad.

By the 1890s, secondary schools were the subject of intense debate. The modern track within the *lycée* system had become increasingly theoretical, so that, some complained, even the study of living languages was conducted in a useless way. Should its practical, almost vocational, origins be

¹⁸ The distinction itself had a long pedigree in the French tradition. P. Stock-Morton, *Moral Education for a Secular Society: The Development of Morale Laïque in Nineteenth Century France* (Albany, 1988); A. O'Connor, "'Source de Lumières & de Vertus': rethinking éducation, instruction, and the political pedagogy of the French Revolution', *Historical Reflections/ Réflexions Historiques*, 40 (2014), 20–43.

¹⁹ F. Mayeur, *Histoire générale*, 445–6.

²⁰ G. Weisz, *The Emergence of Modern Universities in France, 1863-1914* (Princeton, 1983), 55.

re-enforced? Many commentators defended the classical track against what they felt was a reckless turn to pure utilitarianism in education. In fact, the modern track never had the prestige of the classical one, and Sorel exemplified this. Like many middle-class students, he had passed through the classical *lycée* as preparation for entrance into the EP. Classical education was in no danger. French administrative and educational elites would continue to be drawn from *lycées* on the classical curriculum until after the Second World War.

The debates over bifurcation and more broadly the merits of classical and modern tracks reflected anxieties concerning science and democracy. Debate did not line up in any straightforward way with the major political divisions of the day. Although the modern track was not a creation of the Republic, it became associated with positivist impulses, as well as commercial interests, and therefore with republicanism.²¹ Classicism found defenders across the political field. Jaurès, for instance, argued forcefully for the virtues of classical education and against any re-enforcement of divisions between technical and literary education. For Jaurès, the essential unity of the spiritual ought to be reflected in the institutions of education, the *lycées* and the universities alike.²²

In criticizing republican education, Brunetière was really criticizing the foundations of the republican vision of society and politics. From his perch at the ENS itself Brunetière objected to meritocracy, asserting that 'the ... idea of exams [*concours*] has become inseparable from the ... idea of democracy'.²³ These exams were farcical in themselves but, he maintained, psychologically destructive. Supposed to promote civic equality through meritocracy, they instead institutionalized competitive hierarchy. Students mainly learned that school was just one more arena for competition. Turning the language of democracy against itself, Brunetière suggested that universal education was not really democratic at all.²⁴ In fact, he maintained, thanks to the thoughtless dogmatism and materialistic *instruction* of the Enlightenment, France was fast on its way to becoming as rigidly materialistic as China. True *education*, according to Brunetière, engaged the moral being of the individual, awakening the sense of human nature. It inculcated in the student those moral sentiments necessary for peaceful existence in common, 'the condition of existence for the idea of country'.²⁵ In itself, this was a commonplace at the time: schools were supposed to

²¹ V. Isambert-Jamati, 'Une réforme des lycées et collèges: Essai d'analyse sociologique de la réforme de 1902', *L'Année sociologique*, 20 (1969), 9–60; F. K. Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge: French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective, 1890–1920* (Cambridge, 1992); Mayeur, *Histoire générale*.

²² Goldberg, *Jean Jaurès*, 90–1.

²³ Brunetière, *Éducation et Instruction*, 34.

²⁴ Another example of such an argument is P. Leroy-Beaulieu, *L'État moderne et ses fonctions* (Paris, 1911), 331ff.

²⁵ Brunetière, *Éducation et Instruction*, 18, footnote.

encourage the spiritual unity that nearly everyone believed was necessary in a modern nation.²⁶

Sorel in broad strokes agreed with Brunetière's criticisms of the scientism implicit in some modern modes of education. However, he framed the problem differently and aimed at a radically different solution. Sorel was profoundly concerned with abusive understandings of science. He was an energetic critic of the rhetoric of 'scientism'. Sorel believed that the vocation of this 'scientism' was to follow Comte's trajectory and pass from science to religion, ultimately to defend a new obscurantist hierarchy. In the world of industrial production, Sorel believed, mere pretensions to science would rapidly fall away under the pressure to achieve results. In the classroom, however, and then perhaps the academy, there were ways to avoid the challenge of the real indefinitely. Sorel argued that this avoidance, this reversal of the proper order between reality and social power—because human beings can always be pressured and changed in a way that experimental facts cannot be—was common to humanistic and scientific education. *Formalism* is the name Sorel gave to what he identified as the negative dynamic common to liberal and to scientific education.²⁷

The EP was for Sorel an important example of how formalism might take hold and what might be dangerous about it. The goal of the school at its founding in 1794 had been to train capable engineers quickly. In order to do this a sophisticated curriculum was developed to give the young students, in a condensed form, the basic tools they needed to perform complex calculations rapidly; for instance to build bridges or target artillery. This, Sorel thought, was as it should be. 'Thanks to clever constructions, to transformations that put a fictive state in place of a real one, to coefficients of correction, one can, almost always, using a certain number of wisely chosen observations, find satisfactory solutions'—and these shortcuts were understood to have nothing to do with science itself.²⁸ Sorel retained this ambivalent attitude towards the EP's approach to teaching across his whole life. In the 1919 *De l'Utilité du pragmatisme* he picked out as positive and of themselves pragmatist those elements of mathematical pedagogy that prepare the student as rapidly as possible to *use* the material.²⁹

However, despite such moments of practicality, perverse formalist consequences flowed from the EP's mode of teaching. The formal and abstract apparatus of calculation was always, Sorel maintained, in danger of overwhelming the practical world to which it is to be applied. Utopian

²⁶ Alfred Fouillée, Émile Durkheim and Leon Bourgeois—philosopher, sociologist and politician of Republican syntheses—all frame their accounts of education in this way. A. Fouillée, *Les Études classiques et la démocratie* (Paris, 1898); L. Bourgeois, *L'Éducation de la démocratie française: discours prononcé de 1890 à 1896* (Paris, 1904).

²⁷ The term 'formalism' was regularly invoked in debate over educational methods in this period. A. Prost, *Histoire de l'enseignement en France, 1800-1967* (Paris, 1977), 247–8.

²⁸ Sorel, 'La science dans l'éducation', 133–34.

²⁹ G. Sorel, *De l'Utilité du pragmatisme* (Paris, 1919), 153–8.

programs for social reform led by technocrats were widely disseminated at the EP through the influence of Comte, or as Sorel hailed him, ‘Oh! Great metaphysician of opportunism and wholesale grocery!’³⁰ The school demonstrated the truth of Sorel’s version of Hegel’s famous dictum: ‘whatever is admitted as rational soon acquires the right to be realized.’³¹ Graduates of the EP frequently held positions of power as representatives of the central state; they engaged in large-scale civil engineering projects in the provinces or colonies. This position of power amplified the negative consequences of the natural tendency to impose the rationality of the schoolbook on the mess of human reality.

Yet to leave the matter there would be to oppose a shallow rationalism to an equally shallow anti-rationalism. In formalist thinking, the form is taken for the content, the equation or the schoolbook for the real world. Extreme formalism results in what Sorel calls the ‘utopia of the logical world’, which is the idea that the world obeys laws that one can express in a clear and distinct way.³² Engaging with debates in the philosophy of science of the day, Sorel maintained that no ground existed for assumptions that nature could be described by precise and elegant formulae.³³ Most of reality could never be brought under a clean Newtonian formula. This was a rationalist presupposition. Sorel accused the reigning rationalism of French university philosophy of adopting this utopia wholesale, asserting that its union with state power made for a dangerous combination. ‘The complete flushing clean of social systems, the elimination of anything that is obscure, imperfect, unintelligible ... seems possible’ because of the very real success of scientific activity, and indeed, Sorel said, such a cleansing was being pursued by republican educators.³⁴ Rational utopia depends on the supremacy of the intellect, spirit and will over matter, mere recalcitrant being. This supremacy was always socially coded. It meant the supremacy of those in the position of intellect—the professionals of thought, as Sorel often called them. The power of social groups that had successfully claimed the mantle of rationality for themselves sustained formalism. The position of the intellectual is therefore an important and ambiguous one—Sorel’s called for constant vigilance: ‘a utopian sleeps within each of us.’³⁵ Technical and political developments, enabled especially by formalist education, could give such utopian dreamers dangerous power.

Sorel argued that ‘a good education ought to put [the student] in a position to know what he is doing and not to let him believe that he is doing science

³⁰ Sorel, ‘La science dans l’éducation’, 137.

³¹ G. Sorel, *La Ruine du monde antique: Conception matérialiste de l’histoire* (Paris, 1925), 136.

³² Sorel, ‘La science dans l’éducation’, 218.

³³ E. Coumet, ‘Écrits épistémologiques de Georges Sorel (1905): H. Poincaré, P. Duhem, E. Le Roy’, *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, 6 (1988), 5–51.

³⁴ Sorel, ‘La science dans l’éducation’, 219.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

when he is following a routine'.³⁶ Doubtless few would disagree—we could look back to Rousseau for similar injunctions to reality—but how to reliably provide such an education? Sorel argued that only an education taking place through labour itself could do so. But Sorel's ideal was a technician gradually and purposively enlarging control over the chaos of things as they simply happen to be. This put Sorel sharply at odds with the humanist classical alternative to the modern track that Brunetière, but also many other less politically ambiguous figures, such as Jaurès, mentioned above, or philosophers Alfred Fouillée or Frédéric Rauh, all staunch Republicans, found so congenial and necessary in modern democratic societies.³⁷

III

The late 1890s were the years of Sorel's apprenticeship in Marxism. He remained a theoretician, guarding his intellectual independence, and was often dismissive of the arguments made by other French socialists. His subsequent trajectory drew him away from the Parti ouvrier français, which gathered so-called doctrinaire Marxists as a group within the French socialist constellation, and towards the syndicalists; as it did so, he moved closer to debates within the university, critically at the very time that the Dreyfus Affair (in which Brunetière would adopt an anti-Dreyfusard stance) inspired young Dreyfusard intellectuals to see connections between their civic humanism and the democratic values that they saw as implicit in the reformist wing of socialism. Sorel was thus at once developing as a theorist of syndicalism and, at the same time, moving closer to some Dreyfusards and the anti-doctrinaire socialists around Jaurès. But this was a somewhat strained ideological position.³⁸

In the treatment of education in his important 1897 essay, 'L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats', we can see these tensions at work. Many of the criticisms Sorel brought against the trappings of humanistic or classical education were common currency on the socialist and anarchist left.³⁹ Sorel's starting point was scepticism and hostility: 'the State teaches to the people a reduced version of what is taught to the bourgeoisie'. The prestige of bourgeois culture—its whole content—could be expected to transform

³⁶ Sorel, 'La science dans l'éducation', 135.

³⁷ On Fouillée, L. McGrath, *Making Spirit Matter: Neurology, Psychology, and Selfhood in Modern France* (Chicago, 2020). On Rauh, Stéphan Soulié's substantial introduction in F. Rauh, *L'Expérience morale* (Paris, 2013).

³⁸ Julian Wright has recently examined this sector of French socialism. His focus on ideas about temporality passes beyond the revolutionary/reformist dichotomy and is, in terms of Sorel's trajectory, suggestive. J. Wright, *Socialism and the Experience of Time: Idealism and the Present in Modern France* (Oxford, 2017).

³⁹ Some parallels are to be found in earlier socialist proposals for educational reform, although in practice socialists tended to work on basic literacy and addressed also gender gaps. P. Pilbeam, *French Socialists before Marx: Workers, Women and the Social Question in France* (Montreal, 2000), chapter 5.

potential militants into mere publicists harmless to the reigning order. This is the danger of accepting a bourgeois model of full human being. ‘The goal of socialism is not to free workers by transforming them into journalists, novelists or orators’.⁴⁰ Revolution—autonomy—not class mobility should be the principle of socialist education and so the workers should reject state education. From this logic followed Sorel’s different attitude towards two new educational initiatives of the period—first the *Universités populaires* (UPs) and then the *Ecole des hautes études sociales*.

The UPs presented a concrete example of an alternative educational programme aimed at adult learners from the popular classes. They were a formative experience for many younger intellectuals around Sorel. Indeed Sorel himself was an important early influence on Charles Guieysse, secretary general of the national-level society for the UPs.⁴¹ This attempt at continuing, adult education was nonetheless a useful contrast with Sorel’s own ideas. The UPs were a post-Dreyfus phenomenon, promising to be a venue for the direct communication between representatives of intellectual culture with the people, workers themselves. UPs sprang up all over France in 1899, often at the initiative of workers, but with enthusiastic support from academics newly mobilized by Dreyfusard agitation.⁴² These institutions built on traditions of continuing education that already existed, for instance at the *bourses du travail* (labour exchanges), and became important locations for worker militancy. The UPs scheduled lectures at night, might have a library with hours tailored for working people and often provided space for socializing as a family. The movement left a powerful impression at least on the intellectuals who participated in it. Lucien Mercier, a historian of the movement, suggests that its greatest legacy for the French working classes was perhaps more the creation of a framework for the development of new and less exclusively homosocial forms of political sociability than any kind of obvious ideological or cultural conversion.

What would be the orientation of these new institutions? The sociologist Émile Durkheim, rapidly gaining prominence in university and centre-left intellectual circles, thought that the experiment would be splendid *if* it could be integrated into the university system so that a coherent and scientifically informed plan could be brought to the lectures given.⁴³ This was in keeping with the broader educational role he saw for sociology in France: to

⁴⁰ G. Sorel, *L’Avenir socialiste des syndicats* (Paris, 1901), 83.

⁴¹ On Guieysse’s position, and the early debates over the precise nature of the UP, L. Mercier, *Les Universités populaires, 1899-1914: Éducation populaire et mouvement ouvrier au début du siècle* (Paris, 1986), 51–53. For the relationship between Sorel and Guieysse, as well as the latter’s engagement with the UPs, C. Prochasson, *Les Intellectuels, le socialisme, et la guerre* (Paris, 1993), 28.

⁴² Between 1899 and 1914, a total of 222 UPs were founded. 38 in Paris, 31 in its outskirts and 153 elsewhere. 1899–1901 saw 80 per cent of the creations. Mercier, *Les universités populaires*, 59.

⁴³ É. Durkheim, ‘Rôle des Universités dans l’éducation sociale du pays’, *Revue française de sociologie*, 17 (1976), 189. Originally published in 1901.

teach the individual that ‘he is not an empire within another empire, but an organ in an organism’.⁴⁴ Durkheim, like Sorel, believed that modern societies such as France required scientific education, though for the sake of equality and citizenship rather than industry. Durkheim’s vision of sociology was supposed to fulfill very much the same kind of anti-formalist programme that Sorel had articulated: this is the meaning of what has been called Durkheim’s ‘social realism’.⁴⁵ For Durkheim this would mean above all institutionalizing sociology as a science of the reality of the moral being of society. To the degree that he thought the UPs could carry this science to workers as adults, he approved of them. To the degree, however, that the UPs sprang from the *bourses du travail*, this was not to be expected. Fernand Pelloutier, who more than any other individual was responsible for the national organization of the *bourses*, was an anarchist and a syndicalist who sought, quite explicitly, to make of the working class ‘a state within a state’.⁴⁶ Sorel was close to this conception of syndicalism, and after Pelloutier’s untimely death wrote a preface for the latter’s *Histoire des bourses du travail*. For Pelloutier and Sorel, the goal was always to build a specifically proletarian civilization.

As evidenced by their spectacular initial growth, enthusiasm for the UP was high at first among the working classes. But disappointment rapidly set in at the unresponsiveness of the largely bourgeois and academic lecturers. The gala opening at the flagship UP in the faubourg Saint-Antoine in 1899 was emblematic of these failures. It was so fashionable that attendees who had arrived by carriage almost totally filled the lecture hall. Few workers, arriving on foot, were able to find a seat for the lecture supposedly inaugurating the new era of their intellectual emancipation.⁴⁷ This was a mild form of the relation that Sorel wanted, above all, to avoid between the intellectuals and workers. And Sorel kept his distance from the UPs in their moment of greatest flowering, 1899–1901, even though these years overlapped with the period when Sorel was potentially closest to ‘moderate’ or reformist strands of left-wing debate.

Yet Sorel was by no means irredeemably hostile to all institutionalized education. Probably through his pro-Dreyfus engagement, Sorel became involved first in the Collège libre des sciences sociales and then acted—together with Guieysse and the publisher Félix Alcan—as an administrator for the college’s more durable successor, the École des hautes études sociales. In addition to his work as an administrator, Sorel delivered a few public lectures at the collège and then at the école. The école, housed across the street

⁴⁴ É. Durkheim, *La Science sociale et l’action* (Paris, 1970), 110. From the 1888 ‘Cours de science sociale’.

⁴⁵ R. A. Jones, *The Development of Durkheim’s Social Realism* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁴⁶ F. Pelloutier, *Histoire des bourses du travail, origine–institutions–avenir* (Paris, 1902), 146; J. Julliard, *Fernand Pelloutier et les origines du syndicalisme d’action directe* (Paris, 1971).

⁴⁷ Mercier, *Les Universités populaires*, 41.

from the Sorbonne, was dedicated not to the education of the working class but rather to supplementing the university's courses with a focus on concrete and contemporary problems. We do not have details about how Sorel took the position, but it makes sense in terms of his politics at that moment: Dreyfusard and willing to work with the Republic. But what are we to make of this relatively long involvement, which ended quietly with his departure in 1906?⁴⁸ Sorel's departure at least makes sense. His *Reflections on Violence* had appeared in *Mouvement socialiste* beginning in 1905. The école was becoming more official, closer to the state and perhaps increasingly under pressure from the now officially constituted socialist party. The ideological disjunction perhaps risked becoming embarrassing for the école. For our purposes, what matters here is that Sorel was not opposed to institutions of higher education, although he was certainly unhappy about their connection to the state. He was willing himself to participate in them when they seemed, at least potentially, autonomous from the university system and did not seek to subordinate the proletariat to the bourgeois 'hierarchy of knowledge'.

Indeed, hierarchy was always a key target. Like some revolutionary syndicalists, Sorel attacked the language of talent or merit. In the context of an economy that is collectivizing and a society that is democratizing, the language of talent is only a way to reproduce hierarchy with a good conscience: 'of all aristocracies the most perfidious, the hardest, the least open to scientific understandings of society is, without a doubt, the aristocracy of talents: it reaches such a degree of intellectual corruption that it has no doubt about the legitimacy of its appropriations'.⁴⁹ Classical liberal education, with its pretensions to general or encyclopedic knowledge, as well as the emphasis on direct familiarity with texts, on the ability to speak about them, Sorel claimed, was a way of retaining aristocracy, particularly the social habits associated with it, within and despite democracy. For Sorel this was a historical argument; he identified liberal education with the salon culture of the *ancien régime*. Sorel saw in the elites of the Third Republic an alliance between newer and older modes of legitimation, a commercial and industrial bourgeoisie allowing itself to be governed ideologically by courtier-intellectuals.

This interpretation of the republican settlement was reflected in Sorel's analysis of academic philosophy in its role as ideology. Hierarchizing

⁴⁸ C. Prochasson, 'Sur l'environnement intellectuel de Georges Sorel: l'École des Hautes Études Sociales (1899-1911)', *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, 3 (1985), 16–38. Neither of the two recent biographies of Dick-May, the organizing spirit behind the école, offer additional evidence about Sorel's involvement. According to Rozenblum, the lecture series that the collègue ran in response to the early stages of the Dreyfus Affair—on 'Questions morale' and in which Sorel participated—was quite successful. S.-A. Rozenblum, *Dick May: Une femme architecte des savoirs* (Versailles, 2019), 85. More detailed is M. Fabre, *Dick-May, une femme à l'avant-garde l'un nouveau siècle (1859-1925)* (Rennes, 2019).

⁴⁹ Sorel, *La Ruine du monde antique*, 75.

formalism, Sorel argued, is inherent to any attempt to build institutions on the principles of classical learning:

Capitalism has its metaphysics, as the church and the monarchy have theirs. It can hardly help but arrange things in the order that corresponds to the necessities of ... commercial production. It therefore places moral philosophy (the philosophical translation of the police) above all others and declares that science ... may develop within the limits established by the needs and interests of capitalism.⁵⁰

The emptiness at the centre of any attempt to apply rationalism to social reality would always be filled with hierarchy, that is, domination of one class by another. Sorel's writings hammered away at this theme: 'morality is only an annex of the police, of the gendarmerie, the prison. It is a supplementary way of keeping the mass of workers on a regular schedule'. This kind of teaching takes priority, and 'is indeed what they teach at the Sorbonne, only they are careful not to emphasize the capitalist viewpoint'. Or, yet more simply, 'the beautiful is still what pleases ... those who govern'.⁵¹ For Sorel, this would always be the meaning of idealism. Worse, this idealism was inherently elitist and tended to corrupt and sabotage otherwise promising efforts at popular education.

Sorel's larger historical vision drew on Vico, Marx and Tocqueville, but Proudhon was arguably the writer through whom he most consistently approached the historical existence of the French labour movement. After his example, Sorel urged workers to seek their education within their own institutions and to be wary of academic learning.⁵² Sorel repeatedly pointed his readers to Proudhon's posthumous political testament, the 1863 *De la Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*. For Proudhon, one must first admit that basic human dignity is only compatible with the presupposition that instruction, like virtue, is a lifelong project.⁵³ Even during the period of youth in which, necessarily, one is focused entirely on it, 'instruction must include apprenticeship'. Rousseau himself could be cited on the negative consequences of separating 'literary teaching' from 'industrial apprenticeship'. Society was in the process of transformation, and 'the instruction demanded by the new Democracy must be in every way quite superior to what the middling sort of worker receives today'. The future will require 'a diligently liberal education, worthy of universal suffrage', consistent with

⁵⁰ Sorel, 'La science dans l'éducation', 137.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵² For instance G. Sorel, 'Proudhon', *Pages libres* (1901), 401–2; *L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats*, 82–86. On Proudhon, S. Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (New York, 1984); S. Vincent, 'Interpreting Georges Sorel: Defender of Virtue or Apostle of Violence', *History of European Ideas*, 12 (1990), 239–57.

⁵³ P.-J. Proudhon, *De la Capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (Trident, 1989), 354.

the mutualist principles of workers' institutions.⁵⁴ Proudhon nonetheless had insisted on freedom of education, which in this context meant first that the state would have no monopoly on schools—only on establishing certain basic regulations and requirements—and second that parents could, within limits, move their children in and out of schools. Naturally, Proudhon thought, worker associations would play a large role in providing education.⁵⁵ Sorel lamented that, despite an encouraging general return to his ideas, 'Proudhon's proposals on teaching have hardly been followed'.⁵⁶

Some of Proudhon's recommendations, however, were being followed. Worker organizations had indeed begun to challenge the state's monopoly on schooling—the UPs were only the most spectacular example of this. Pelloutier, for instance, with whom Sorel was in close contact, was intimately engaged in building new institutions of worker militancy, particularly the *bourses du travail*. The language of moral education was central to Pelloutier's anarchism.⁵⁷ He saw the central task of anarchists as 'the work of moral, administrative, and technical education necessary to make a society of free men viable'. To pursue this task was to work for 'government of the self by one's own self' not by mere preaching, but by proving 'experimentally to the crowd of workers, within their own institutions, that such a government is possible'. It would be by actively engaging in such education, Pelloutier suggested, that the *syndicats* follow what is increasingly felt to be their social mission, that is, to be neither mere tools of economic self-defence nor dumb cadres of a revolutionary army, but 'to sow within capitalist society itself the seed of free groups of producers through whom ... our communist and anarchist idea must be realized'.⁵⁸ Sorel's polemic was less exalted: 'let us leave the vanities of ideological instruction to the intellectual proletariat and attend to a truly socialist task, to the production of producers able to manage themselves in the workshop'.⁵⁹ It is to Sorel's positive articulation of this vision that we now turn.

IV

The educational systems of the Third Republic were, Sorel believed, irredeemably antagonistic to the emerging proletarian civilization. Pelloutier had written that syndicalists should 'seek out in the current social system

⁵⁴ Ibid., 354.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 362–3.

⁵⁶ Sorel, 'Proudhon', 402.

⁵⁷ Indeed this language was central to revolutionary syndicalism more broadly. See the evidence to this effect in G. Friedman, 'Revolutionary unions and French labor: the rebels behind the cause; or, why did revolutionary syndicalism fail?', *French Historical Studies*, 20 (1997), 155–81, 159ff.

⁵⁸ F. Pelloutier, *Le Congrès général du parti socialiste français, 3-8 décembre 1899* (Paris, 1900), viii.

⁵⁹ Sorel, *L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats*, 86.

the elements of a new system'.⁶⁰ This included finding the elements of a new mode of education in the interstices of the old. In this field, as in all others, the trade unions should peel the state's functions away from it one by one, replacing them with institutions of and for the workers. Sorel believed indeed that the *bourses du travail* had already begun to move in this direction in the early 1890s, with technical educational programs for themselves. And at least certain representatives of the working class had demonstrated their will to independence by endorsing, in principle, the creation of primary schools for their children in competition with state institutions, even if it meant putting themselves on the same side as the Catholic Church on the issue of freedom of education.⁶¹

Sorel's theory of education, then, was an attempt to grasp the principles immanent to the mode of production brought about by capitalism and carry them out of production into other institutions. In contrast to the UPs, which were built on the assumption that the bourgeois intellectual could and should teach the worker, Sorelian education would aim to unhook the distinction between manual and intellectual labour from social categories.⁶² The 'hierarchy of knowledge' should not be allowed to reinforce social hierarchy. Education within the *syndicats* would be linked to technical productive activity and thus shaped by the social relations themselves born in production. These relations and principles included a thicker sort of egalitarianism, as well as renewed notions of justice and ethics but also—and this for Sorel was the central world-historical accomplishment of capitalism—scientific reason. 'The emancipation of man implies', Sorel wrote, 'an ideal identification of matter and mind [esprit] in the artificial milieu, a complete intelligibility of operation, a perfect illumination of the economic sphere by thought'.⁶³ There is the horizon towards which pedagogy aims. In contrast, the categories of manual as opposed to intellectual labour, the basis of the cultural dominance of the bourgeoisie, were expressed in the dualisms rather proudly inscribed into the French philosophical tradition, especially as the university presented it. The heir to German idealism may have been the German working class, but the revolutionary *syndicat* would inherit and displace the problematic of French philosophy from Descartes

⁶⁰ Pelloutier, *Histoire des bourses du travail*, 64.

⁶¹ Pelloutier refers to the discussion: 'La Fédération des Bourses du Travail de France: ses congrès', *Le Mouvement socialiste*, 4 (1900), 625. For Sorel, it is significant that Marx himself endorsed this path in his critique of the Gotha program, a text central to Sorel's understanding of Marx's practical politics. K. Marx, 'Une lettre de Karl Marx: Remarques critiques sur le programme socialiste', *Revue d'économie politique*, 8 (1894), 768. The *écoles libres* were important sites for social assertion and contestation, especially outside the larger cities, throughout the nineteenth century, E. C. Macknight, 'The catholic nobility's commitment to écoles libres in France, 1850–1905', *Historical Reflections/ Réflexions Historiques*, 43 (2017), 18–41.

⁶² On the retention, rather than overcoming of class difference, chapter four of C. Bouglé and G. Séailles, *Pour la Démocratie française: Conférences populaires* (Paris, 1900).

⁶³ Sorel, 'La science dans l'éducation', 457.

to Bergson or Durkheim. It made sense to Sorel to reground education in technical production in a way parallel to the Republican placement of philosophy at the crown and culmination of the *lycée* curriculum. Sorel's assertion was that sensitivity to the resistance put up against theories by the things in themselves—a sensitivity that educators everywhere have sought to inculcate—could reliably be encouraged only by familiarity with the practice and technology of industrial production.⁶⁴

Education should not be too much at odds with the main tendencies of society at large. Like Durkheim, Sorel held that 'an educational system is worthwhile only to the degree that it is in harmony with a given organization [of society]'.⁶⁵ So the problem of education naturally and rapidly expanded into a problem of sociology. Durkheim saw education as integrative: discipline, the internalization of the authority of society as transcendent fact, was congruent with moral education.⁶⁶ Morality itself, now that it had shed its sacred justification, could refer only, ultimately, to society as such. Sorel, however, was rather wary of claims to intersubjectivity of the sort Durkheim made. For Sorel, morality was still a kind of self-transcendence, but one that remained attached to practices embedded in institutions. The key difference here is that Sorel wanted to identify a kind of education appropriate to emerging proletarian institutions, while Durkheim sought to defend the rationalist, secular and republican order that he believed already existed. If Durkheim centred education on the science of sociology, Sorel centred education on industrial—but not necessarily capitalist—production.

Education, Sorel argued, must be anti-formalist. Industrial production could provide an effectively anti-formalist education because, Sorel argued, science is essentially technological and therefore, in the modern world, bound up with industrial production. Precision machines *are* scientific formulae, and vice versa: '*to invent a mechanism is to discover a theorem that one represents by means of perceptible sizes ... Mechanical invention differs from science (as it is usually understood) only in the mode of expression*'.⁶⁷ The form would be different, and the machine would have priority because only it offers what Sorel calls 'social certainty'.⁶⁸ The factory would become an enormous experimental laboratory where the certitude of knowledge is put to the test a thousand times a day: '*the machine is a reasoned*

⁶⁴ Reference to the things themselves, to the facts, as the beginning of wisdom was not unique to Sorel. In different forms it was common among positivist republicans. Jones emphasizes the importance of this cognitive/rhetorical position for Durkheim, putting it at the centre of his whole sociological project. R. A. Jones, *The Development of Durkheim's Social Realism* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁶⁵ Sorel, 'La science dans l'éducation', 111.

⁶⁶ On Sorel against Durkheimian sacralization, G. Sorel, 'La religion d'aujourd'hui', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 17 (1909), 413–47, 434.

⁶⁷ G. Sorel and E. Berth, *D'Aristote à Marx (L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique)* (Paris, 1935), 208.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 212–13.

representation of material forces, because it obliges these energies to manifest themselves according to determined movements, the understanding of which covers that of causal laws, thus put to the test in every workshop'.⁶⁹ Sorel insisted on the link between objectivity and practice, assigning a special place in his account of the history of scientific thought to the advent of precision machines in industrial production. Scientific knowledge decisively changed character and took on new social significance through the economic transformations we continue to refer to as the industrial revolution. As workers tinker with machines, or develop new ones, they are not just increasing the efficiency of production, but potentially expanding the boundaries of human capacity. '*Science is social, it is within the economic milieu*', worked out by the labourer in the *atelier*.⁷⁰ Even the historical beginnings of rationalist science are available there: the precision machine is simply elementary geometry in motion.

Science, since it is a way of thinking rather than a body of knowledge, can begin anywhere and move outward as much as the task or temperament demands. Indeed, rather than limiting the horizon of the individual, factory-centred education could be the beginning of a whole person: 'A truly complete scientific education can be had only in the workshop, where real work is done in the relations of real production'.⁷¹ And this was modern science, not just know-how. Sorel believed that it was impossible for individuals to appropriate capitalist techniques of production in the way that craft techniques had been monopolized in the past. Modern production is inherently collective.⁷² One immediate goal of worker education into autonomy, after all, was to prevent capitalists from monopolizing this technical knowledge. The underlying tendency of the era was to push subaltern groups into technical instruction, thus marking them out from higher classes who received a classical, liberal, humanist education.⁷³ Syndicalist education would avoid this mere vocationalism because it would be carried out *not* under the supervision of the state or through the benevolence of capitalists but would be the responsibility of the syndicates themselves. It would produce autonomous workers, not docile ones.

It is also necessary to distinguish Sorel's commitment to apprenticeship and technical education from attempts to revive the craft-arts. The goal was also not to reproduce the old, dying if not yet dead, class of artisan laborers, but Sorel did not discard the artistic. For instance, Sorel understood the craft revivalism of William Morris as a way of returning meaning to labour by going back to some imagined medieval world. Pelloutier had found congenial Morris' desire to make art and production coterminous.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 205.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 193.

⁷¹ Sorel, 'La science dans l'éducation', 365.

⁷² Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne* (Paris, 1903), 205.

⁷³ A. Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, 2010).

Sorel, perhaps aware of how Morris had subsequently been drafted into a different French fine-arts tradition, in which the artist's special creative capacity heals social wounds, found that it was just a 'luxury accessory'.⁷⁴ Even in rejecting such luxury craftsmanship, in 1899 Sorel sounded notes that later modernists would repeat: apprenticeship 'must be real work and the theory must be a deduction drawn from the practical methods that the student has learned to use'.⁷⁵ Although these methods were necessarily mechanical, labour around machines need not be alienating: 'Never has the worker required such great capacity [*habilité*] as since mechanics took a central place in labour. Machines are precision instruments that must be run with intelligence, maintained with love, the faults of which must be constantly observed with an eye to improvement'. It is nonetheless true that, in the present, 'what is missing ... to assure progress ... is *artistic sentiment*'. Such a spirit is not discouraged by the nature of machine production itself. Rather, 'we frequently see workers imagine quite ingenious mechanisms, proving the existence of a well developed artistic sense; — but everything is done to destroy this sentiment through dull, pedantic, and abstract teaching'.⁷⁶ Sorel was not envisioning bohemian elitism, nor any particular relation to something called art, but rather a fully internalized motivational structure that demands effort to achieve excellence in unpredictable ways.

While I have argued for the continuities in Sorel's thinking, a significant transition certainly took place between 1903 and 1906. A full accounting of that shift is beyond the scope of this article. Any explanation of Sorel's own changing position must take account of the fact that the very landscape of French politics, especially on the left, shifted in these years as well. In short, however, we can say that Sorel radicalized. He had supported initiatives such as the *bourses du travail* that sought to take advantage of the state's resources to build new institutions. He had believed that socialists should accept Millerand's entrance into a cabinet of Republican defence. By 1905, neither administrative nor electoral involvement any longer seemed acceptable. Proletarian institutions had turned out to be more vulnerable to cooptation than he had believed them to be. A revived republican anti-clericalism under Emile Combes revealed a frightening ambition for ideological control over the schools in the name of *laïcité*.⁷⁷ Sorel also saw socialist involvement in the drive towards full separation in 1905 as a betrayal. Here were socialists doing the work of the republicans.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ D. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley, 1989), 138–39.

⁷⁵ G. Sorel, 'L'enseignement manuel', *Le Mouvement socialiste*, 1, 2 (1899), 104–6, 104.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁷ G. Sorel, 'Tavernier – La religion nouvelle', *Revue générale de bibliographie française*, 3 (1905), 168.

⁷⁸ R. Fabre, 'Une Séparation révolutionnaire? Allard et Vaillant...Les ultras de la commission Briand', *Cahiers Jaurès*, (2005), 7–32.

If much had changed, however, there are also essential continuities, particularly in Sorel's ideas about education, that we can trace in part through reference to artistic production. In the concluding chapter of the *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel examined art as an anticipation of the production of the future. Sorel wanted 'to ask how it is possible to conceive of the transformation of the men of today into the free producers of tomorrow working in workshops where there are no masters'.⁷⁹ This formulation has the advantage of focusing our attention on two points. First, Sorel was very clear that *people must be different*—which is to say that a transformation must take place in the material and moral worlds that we not only inhabit, but that shape us at every level. Second, this transformation cannot be imagined apart from a newly organized workplace, one without masters. 'The question must be expressed accurately; we pose it not for a world that has already arrived at socialism, but solely for our own time and for the preparation of the transition from one world to the other; if we do not limit the question in this way, we shall find ourselves straying into utopias'.⁸⁰ How would it be possible to ensure the requisite level of commitment to labour without bosses and without the coercive apparatus of capitalist competition? A variety of possible collectivist solutions—nationalism, for instance—are ruled out because, as Sorel wrote, 'the revolutionary syndicalists wish to extol the individuality of the life of the producer'.⁸¹ And yet:

Every time ... we approach a question relating to industrial progress we are led to regard art as an *anticipation* of the highest form of production ... This analogy is justified by the fact that the artist does not like to reproduce standard models; the *infinite nature of his will* distinguishes him from the ordinary artisan, who is mainly successful in the unending reproduction of models which are not his own. The inventor is an artist who exhausts himself in pursuit of the realization of ends that ordinary people generally regard as absurd or mad; — practical people resemble artisans. In every industry one could cite significant advances which originated in small changes made by workers endowed with the artist's taste for innovation.⁸²

Artistic creation combined the technical capacity and the psychological disposition that Sorel believed any imaginable socialist future would require of its workers. That was from the beginning the telos of Sorelian education.

Like artistic creation itself, Sorelian education would be a lifetime pursuit. And it could hardly be otherwise if workers were not to be thought of as

⁷⁹ Sorel, *Reflections*, 238. On Sorel and art more generally, W. Gianinazzi, 'Georges Sorel ou l'art comme préfiguration du "travail de l'avenir"', in *L'Art social en France. De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*, eds. N. McWilliam, C. Méneux and J. Ramos (Rennes, 2014), 313–22.

⁸⁰ Sorel, *Reflections*, 238.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 244.

disposable. Capitalism, with its continual destruction and renewal of technology, enforces a 'perpetual apprenticeship'. Technological development can be expected to continue in a socialist future, although animated now by imperatives other than the extraction of surplus value.⁸³ Sorel assumed that all workers would have to learn continuously to keep abreast of their fields. But in so doing they would ground themselves in practical realities. Workers in possession of their own technology would learn not to take the theory for the reality: 'the socialist workshop will bring together producers whose minds are always prepared to criticize learned practices'. But, also, by making every worker actively aware of the technical givens of production, the hierarchies established in a socialist factory would be only task-oriented ones. Workers would still be guided by foremen, but they would be 'analogous to the assistants of a chemistry professor', while 'engineers will speak to their men like a teacher to his pupils'.⁸⁴ The division of labour in this way could continue without generating social domination. The most important post would be that of direct supervision. Foremen in late nineteenth-century France were, Sorel believed, the most resistant to change and education because these challenged their immediate individual domination over the workers. The role must be filled by someone 'having the observational qualities that one finds among the best employees in a laboratory'.⁸⁵ To form such individuals would be the work of a lifetime, which is why they could not be made in school. This was not the ideal of the universally educated man in full; it was, rather, an institution supposed to encourage and support self-conscious and curious individuals. Such people would be critical not only in the narrow technical sense, but also politically aware.

Sorel's recognition that capitalist factories were sites of social domination as well as economic production was integral to his account of emergent scientific rationality and social structure.⁸⁶ The modern factory system, Sorel claimed, was a social articulation of the dualism that dominated philosophical thought. Although there is an emergent rationality within production itself that militates against such social separation, in contemporary production 'the administrator and the technician are separate and are often in open struggle ... this conflict allows not the slightest doubt about the separation of intellectual operations'.⁸⁷ The capitalist mode of production, illuminated by the light of class struggle, was a sociological manifestation of the dilemmas of scientific rationality itself. This struggle was the source of technological change and also of social change. The same struggle that, at the level of production, indicated the pitfalls of scientific formalism

⁸³ Sorel, 'La science dans l'éducation', 137.

⁸⁴ G. Sorel and Y. Guchet, *Les Illusions du progrès: suivi de, L'avenir socialiste des syndicats* (Lausanne, 2007), 231.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁸⁶ G. Sorel, 'Éducation bourgeoise', *La Jeunesse socialiste*, 1 (1895), 169–71. This early text is one of several reproduced in M. Charzat (ed.) *Georges Sorel* (Paris, 1986).

⁸⁷ Sorel, 'La science dans l'éducation', 350.

provided the *syndicats* as institutions with lessons in anti-formalist social science. Sorel expressed this in the borrowed language of Durkheimian sociology: ‘Syndicalists think about all social facts by connecting them to episodes in the struggles daily undertaken over their salaries’.⁸⁸ Struggle for and over production would be an education at once individuating and consciousness-raising. In conflict with the forces of nature, workers would fashion themselves. In conflict with bosses or with the state, workers would be bound to one another and refine their political consciousness. This practical education within emergent productive institutions would construct at once the new man and the socialist future.

V

Sorel and the revolutionary syndicalists alongside whom he elaborated the theory of education that this article has sought to reconstruct would, for most of the twentieth century, be rejected by those at the centre of the revolutionary tradition as focused on economic issues to the exclusion of the properly political. Indeed, the strong version of this critique sees Revolutionary Syndicalism, and Sorel as its theorist, as essentially obsolete, the structurally reactionary ‘socialism of the skilled workers’.⁸⁹ Even scholars interested in Sorel specifically have seen his political thought as limited by the belated nature of French industrial development.⁹⁰ Certainly it is not wrong to see Sorel in the context of what Gérard Noiriel formulates as the ‘simultaneous backwardness and precocity’ of, respectively, French industrial and democratic development in the later nineteenth century.⁹¹ Not wrong, but also insufficient. Of more explanatory value are the transformations—mentioned above—taking place in this period within socialist politics. Sorel’s movement across the political field was driven in part by a rejection of increasingly well-organized electoral socialism. Does Sorel’s rejection of existing democracy, matched with his apparent misunderstanding of the direction of industrial development and unionism, not relegate him fully to the nineteenth century? The profound re-organizations of production that took place in France especially during the First World War and attendant transformations in working-class life, the enthusiastic uptake of Taylorism even in the Soviet Union and the internationalization of the Fordist idea might all be thought to have rendered Sorel’s view of worker autonomy simply obsolete.⁹² Indeed in the era of the Fordist factory

⁸⁸ G. Sorel, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’un syndicat?’, *Pages libres*, 5 (1903), 241–57, 248.

⁸⁹ B. Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement: The Socialism of Skilled Workers* (Berkeley, 1976).

⁹⁰ Gaud, *De la valeur-travail*.

⁹¹ G. Noiriel, *Workers in French Society in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 1990), 95.

⁹² T. Stovall, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919: Consumer Struggles, Transnationalism and Revolution* (Cambridge, 2015); S. Link, *Forging Global Fordism: Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the Contest over the Industrial Order* (Princeton, 2020).

the idea that workers should exert control directly over the process of production—should fashion themselves through production—seemed either absurd or a profoundly antidemocratic sop to management, depending on how seriously it was taken. To see Sorel—or, indeed, the whole period—in this light is to accept a fantasy of the later twentieth-century social democratic order as the horizon for political thought.

Yet this reflection does highlight the assertion, or axiom, of political theory according to which Sorel's educational thought unfolded. Sorel held that meaningful equality requires that social relations be mediated by a non-human project. A socialist society is one that does not rely on the oppression of people by other people. Its organizing principle, then, cannot be the establishment of hierarchy amongst people (by talent, class, knowledge or even majority). But this does not mean the absence of constraint on the individual. Any attempt simply to subtract or bracket away the materiality of the social world as irrelevant conceals domination without overcoming it. It is not simply an unfortunate historical coincidence that humanist education glorifies the culture of a slave society. This is why he held that technological science rather than humanistic learning should be the basis of human freedom. For Sorel, it is only in labour that we find objectivity, and in the modern world this labour is collective and technological. Institutions from which domination is absent, we might take Sorel to have been saying, are best constructed not only or first through democratic action but through a certain kind of engagement with materiality.

In 1974, Sorel appeared in the closing paragraphs of Harry Braverman's classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Braverman quotes Sorel: 'the modern factory is a field of experiment constantly enlisting the worker in scientific research'.⁹³ For Braverman this is clearly false, but he suggests that it could be made true through an authentic form of worker's control. What would be required, according to Braverman, is combining real scientific education with high-technology industry and returning substantive control over these processes of industrial production to the workers themselves. The 'ever emptier' education in fact provided in the late twentieth century robs 'humanity of its birthright of conscious and masterful labor'.⁹⁴ It ought to be replaced with education that takes place in and through production. Braverman, this is to say, ends his classic text on the degradation of work in the twentieth century by arriving where Sorel was at the end of the nineteenth. We are today nearly as far from Braverman as he was from Sorel. If Braverman was an escapee from Fordism, perhaps Sorel can help us today to imagine fully human education as we ourselves escape from the dream that ever-increasing technical mastery will end work altogether.⁹⁵

⁹³ H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998), 444.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁹⁵ A. Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (New York, 2020).

Sorel began with the understanding that social control and technical control were not separate. He wanted to seek emancipatory modes of education; our world wrestles in its own way with the problems of control and autonomy at the intersection of technology and work.

Sorel's theory of education, the relation he understands it to form between individual and collective, passed necessarily through the institutions of production, was centred on applied techno-science, and denied the social utility of abstract reason. However, it did still aim at the desired result of liberal education: a morally mature and intellectually autonomous individual. We have only to look at the contemporary relation between educational institutions and the larger economy, where the first prepares increasingly disposable workers for the second, to see how radical a change in underlying structures would be required to place education firmly *within* rather than under economic activity. Sorel's refusal of the practices and institutions of liberal education in his own time, then, could serve as a provocation for those who would like to do more than defend the remnants of liberal education in the present.