



Syndicalist Reactionary Sorel's Revolutionary Politics of Production

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Abstract

This article explores Georges Sorel's political and social thought during the period in which his passage to revolutionary syndicalism took place. In contrast to the established view on Sorel as a reactionary thinker, it presents him as a Marxist critic of reactionary tendencies in the politics of his time. Drawing on three of his works written during 1905–1909, it provides a

synthesis of his political critique and presents his analysis of progressivism as a major illusion of modernity. In respect to Sorel's social theory, the article reconstructs his conceptualization of production and proletarian subjectivity. It argues that the new forms of sociality emergent within the forces of production represent revolutionary attitudes of producing classes, which also find their expression in syndicalist politics.

Keywords

Class, machine, myth, production, progress, reaction, syndicalism, Sorel

History played a dirty trick on Georges Sorel. His work has served as a source of inspiration for people belonging to very different sides of the political spectrum, which has mired its most attentive readers in permanent controversies. Sorel is as easy to debunk as he is to romanticize, given that he switched his radical politics—and the theoretical arguments that sustained it—too easily. At best he is known as a socialist, entangled in contradictions, who cared for matters of religion and morality to a suspicious degree; at worst—a poet of violence and vitality, who aestheticized political struggle. It is not surprising that his thought, mainly seen through his famous *Reflections on Violence*, has often been regarded as an example of reactionary radicalism¹. At the time it was written, however, Sorel makes a *reactive*² rather than a reactionary move: he takes the uncompromising position of a revolutionary : syndicalist in response to those tendencies that signalled that the road to socialism as a “society of producers” was becoming closed off . The very term “reactionary” is conceptually deficient and situational. It is often used in a pejorative sense, as an opposition to either revolutionary, reformist, or even traditionalist ideas; moreover, it is attributed equally to political ideologies, attitudes, policies, and regimes³. As

¹ It is very common to reckon Sorel among reactionary thinkers. Such an interpretation dates as back to Sorel's contemporaries, such as, for example, his younger “comrade”, Marcel Mauss (Halévy 1938: 230) and extends to the most recent studies on conservatism (Robin 2018: 72).

² Shlomo Sand also stresses the reactive character of Sorel's writings, which were all affected by immediate political events (Sand 1985: 8). It is important not to confuse reactive with reactionary, even though reactionary politics is always reactive.

³ Despite its permanent presence in contemporary political vocabulary, the concept of reaction is vague, resulting in its theoretical and political ambiguity. A few studies that attempt to elucidate its meaning and political significance are worth

for Sorel, he is permanently concerned with reaction as a dynamic configuration of various forces and their actions, which also define the way certain ideologies function and transmute. Drawing on his writings, it is possible to see what, in specific historical circumstances, constitutes a society's reactionary character, and how various strands of its development may impede the realization of popular demands. It is also possible to see how reactionary politics can be conceptualized and counterattacked from the Left, and how socialist thought itself can be altered against numerous political temptations and challenges.

Revisiting Sorel's work seems worthwhile today when the global political climate is characterized by moral panic, an upsurge of right-wing populism, the spread of nationalist sentiment and the rise of politicians promising new eras of greatness. First, Sorel shows us that reactionary politics is not necessarily conservative, or resisting of progressive change: it is, in fact, perfectly compatible with an ideology of progress, which stems from the optimism of the power holders, reasoning their success. Second, he warns us against using morality as a means to a political end. Finally, he reminds us that the social question is inseparable from the question of production that defines the forms of our sociality no less than economic oppression.

In this article, I focus precisely on Sorel's ideas, developed during his syndicalist period of 1905–1909. Three of his key works were published at that time—"The Decomposition of Marxism"⁴ (2009 [1908]), *The Illusions of Progress* (1969 [1908]), and *Reflections on Violence* (2004 [1908]) that remains his most widely read text⁵. Without attempting to construct a system of political categories of his most ambiguous concepts, I will deal with the broader plane of his theory, both contextual and theoretical. In other words, I will be pre-occupied with the ground, rather than the most prominent figures, of his thought. I thus intentionally avoid debates on the concept of violence, which has hypnotized both politicians and theorists for more than a century. In the first part, I will examine Sorel's critical observations on politics of his time and its "illusion" of progress,

mentioning. For the intellectual history of reaction as a concept, see Starobinski (2003); for reaction as a type of political rhetoric and ideology, see Hirschman (1991).

⁴ This fifty-page pamphlet seems to me particularly underestimated as an insight into Sorel's thought and beyond: here Sorel presents a clear summary of his views on Marxism both as theory and as a movement and justifies its fusion with tactics of revolutionary syndicalism.

⁵ Dates provided here refer to the first editions of these texts published as books. Apart from "The Decomposition of Marxism", the first versions of the other two texts were published earlier, in 1906, as a series of articles.

whose ideological formation he traces back to the seventeenth century. This critique, combined with his unorthodox approach to Marxism, elucidates his passage to the ardent advocacy of revolutionary syndicalism. In the second part, I will deal with Sorel's social theory, precisely with his conceptualization of productive activity. As I will argue, Sorel identifies a specific kind of social relations emergent within the system of production; relations of class, which, at the same time, go beyond class struggle and become a prerequisite for proletarian subjectivity.

1. Against Moralization, For the Politics of Class

Reflections on Violence, Sorel's most controversial and widely read work, conveys quite a pessimistic conception of reality, which, as the author himself notes, annoyed many (2004: 8). The annoyance of the readers was not unjustified: the first decade of the twentieth century was marked by many democratic advances and the empowerment of the Left in France and beyond. Thanks to the Dreyfus affair, the public sphere became immensely politicized, and intellectuals started to see political engagement as their duty. *Laïcité* was formally enshrined in law and the Church was separated from the French State. The French socialists were united into one section of the International under the lead of Jean Jaurès, who made the idea of transition to a socialist republic more acceptable than ever. Furthermore, the French syndicates, legalized twenty years before, grew into a weighty political force and witnessed their "heroic period" (Cole 1963: 356). The Second International was heated with debates on the political strategy to be adopted by the socialist movement, with new insights and challenges coming from Germany, Italy, and Russia, as well as France. Sorel, nonetheless, insisted on the presence of reactionary tendencies, haunting both international socialism and the political landscape of the "Radical Republic", and saw their theoretical and ideological underpinnings being reinforced. The latter, as he believed, were part and parcel of a progressist utopia, which sought reconciliation with the social order instead of smashing its institutional fortifications. But how were these tendencies manifested and what exactly constituted their reactionary character?

Reconsidering the political meaning of the Dreyfus affair, Sorel concludes that it turned out to be nothing but the war of "the enlightened public" against "the officers and the priests" (Sorel 2004: 101). The former knocked the final nail in the coffin of the French nobility and buried the remnants of the *ancien régime*, but this only

fostered the bourgeois way of doing politics. Instead of the struggle in solidarity against those in power, politics became the sphere for exercising one's rhetorical eloquence and moral supremacy—a contest between individuals pursuing their fame and seeking career opportunities. This is why even parliamentary socialists who used to “speak of breaking up everything” in the Third Republic tended to “attack the men in power rather than power itself” (Sorel 2004: 107).

When it comes to politics, it is vanity and not money that usually prompts conversion of revolutionaries into bourgeoisie (Sorel 2004: 124). Intellectualized political engagement, exemplified by such figures as Émile Zola, tempted socialists and reinvigorated a “politics of the heads” — rather than a “politics of the hands,” which had promised to drive capital and bureaucracy out of social life. Socialist politics ceased to build socialism from below and started to transform into the already existing politics of politicians. This was the process of top-down democratization (which Sorel, in fact, often identifies with “democracy” as such): leaving the state and its apparatus of force intact, it threatened the structures of the future society of producers, that were still juvenile, and therefore both promising and fragile. For Sorel, such a “democracy” served the best interests of the state and the well-off classes, who sought social peace and total reconciliation safely mediated by politicians and intellectuals:

Popular education, for example, seems to be wholly carried on in a bourgeois spirit; the whole historic effort of capitalism has been to bring about the submission of the masses to the conditions of the capitalist economic system, so that society might become an organism; the whole revolutionary effort tends to create free men; but democratic rulers adopt as their mission the accomplishment of the *moral unity* of France. This moral unity is the automatic discipline of the producers who would be happy to work for the glory of their intellectual leaders. (Sorel 2004: 172–73)

Once polarized by the Dreyfus affair, the French were to be unified on a new moral basis, regardless of the unsurpassable economic division between them. This signified a *moralization of politics*, which, for Sorel, was utmost reactionary in character: it was to conceal the class conflict and minimize the chances of the workers' autonomous political development⁶. The bourgeoisie invented its

⁶ It is possible that Sorel's conceptualization of proletarian “violence” was, to a certain extent, a provocation, aimed to expose political hypocrisy and cowardice

“moral schemes” in order to seem “more Christian, more philanthropic, or more democratic”, accomplishing their “social duty” (Sorel 2004: 182). First, these schemes were driven by the fear of the masses, seen as both ignorant and rebellious, as standing close to the semi-criminal, “dangerous classes,” allegedly devoid of morality. Second, secularization necessitated a new “opium of the people”—alternative ideological constructions “as the means of continuing to live off the production of others” (Sorel 2004: 238).

A morally unified French society was imagined as a revitalized organism, or an unproblematic whole, which parts, set in motion by circulating capital, are perfectly coordinated by discipline⁷. For Sorel, such a “totalizing” approach is both epistemologically incorrect and politically conservative. Be it represented by organicism, mechanicism, or their later derivatives, when applied to social life it notices neither contradictions nor historical potentialities; it fails to grasp social phenomena in development of its constitutive parts, that is, in the way that determines “the character of their activity by pushing them towards independence” (Sorel 2004: 263)⁸. Politically, it posits social conflicts as either non-existing or insignificant, including the line of cleavage between classes.

The moralism that Sorel criticizes is historically situated and pragmatic. And yet, the ideology behind it has its own genesis: it stems from *optimistic progressivism*, which implied morality as automatically generated by the accumulation of knowledge, so that progress as such was once understood as universally moral. Progressivism, for its most zealous advocates, such as Condorcet and Turgot, originated from “the adornment of the mind that, free of prejudice,

of the agents of “force” (intellectuals, bourgeoisie, all representatives of the state apparatus) through “the great aversion felt by moralists for acts of violence” (Sorel 2004: 184).

⁷ Apart from coordination as governance, Sorel gives an example of how these relations could be coordinated by the transcendental principle of “absolute duty,” which presupposes relative detachment from historical circumstances and is so dear to the moralists (Sorel 2004: 262).

⁸ Sorel briefly mentions “diremption” as an adequate method for social philosophy: it does not project all qualities of the whole onto its multiple parts and therefore enables to grasp the possible trajectories of their development, contained in existing social phenomena in embryo (Sorel 2004: 263). Here Sorel himself seems to transpose his politics of class cleavage on the territory of theory: diremption is separation, a divorce, which results from an antagonistic relationship with no possibility for reconciliation. I tend to interpret Sorel’s concept of diremption as a specific version of Bakunin’s political *schism*, understood in class terms and gaining epistemological value. According to other interpretations, diremption as a method could have been developed in an implicit debate with Hegel’s dialectics (see Laskowski 2014; Brandom 2016).

sure of itself, and trusting in the future” and created a philosophy assuring the happiness of all who possess the means of living well,” be these means property or knowledge (Sorel 1969: 22). A peculiar mutual determination of these two means—reason seen as individually possessed and knowledge yet to be accumulated—may be seen to characterize the very project of Enlightenment. Investigating the formation of progress as ideology, however, Sorel goes back to the seventeenth century—the times when royal power, which “seemed infinite,” recognized in science a new source that “could never be lacking to rulers who had affirmed the completeness of their divine right” (Sorel 1969: 13). The idea of progress was a byproduct of such an optimistic illusion, demanding philosophical justification, different from the pessimist conceptions of original sin and predestination; later on, progress became an optimistic illusion itself⁹.

Given his pessimism and critique of moralization, one particular piece of Sorel’s analysis of the seventeenth century is noteworthy: the line he draws between Descartes and Pascal. For Sorel, it was Descartes, who, thanks to fair and unfair interpretations of his philosophy, was made a hero of the French salon society which blended science, literature, politics and moral judgement altogether under the reign of the self-assertive reason. This is how salons, a foretype of the future press, combined their blind belief in science with “superficial reasoning” and “noble sentiments” (Sorel 1969: 27). Pascal, in his turn, pre-emptively criticized “using pseudo-mathematical reasoning to answer social and moral questions”¹⁰ and warned against passionate thinking that was “better suited to conversation than to true scientific study” (Sorel 1969: 16, 18). But what did Descartes do after all?

The social ontology of premodern times could be modelled as a cross with community on the horizontal line, God on the vertical, and a human being in their intersection. Descartes projected this cross on a plane of *res extensa*, placing God at the point of origin, the point of intersection of the axis, as its creator. A human being

⁹ Progress as *illusion* should not be confused with *myth*. For Sorel, myth is a dynamic image that comes from “conviction”; it stems from collective common sense and manifests the popular will. Illusion, in its turn, results from a “certitude” resting on a static, complete theory and abstract calculations, which asserts the invincibility of reason.

¹⁰ This is similar to what Sorel himself would be saying about Bergson and the likening of history to the living being. Although Sorel is often seen as a definitive vitalist in a Bergsonian fashion, he critically approached the concept of the *élan vital*, as well as the project of “creative evolution” as such for its tendency to biologize social life. (On the affinities between Sorel and Bergson, first of all, see Stanley 1981; Sand 1983; and Giordani 2018).

was equated with *res cogitans*, and took the place of a lone observer, able to look at his own coordinates from above. God was made absent in the world, and the negativity of original sin that once defined human nature and earthly life was extracted, subsumed by methodical doubt, and thereby forced to validate positivity of reason. As Sorel argues, methodical doubt, which was introduced as a secular instrument, a part of mechanical apparatus granted to all, smuggled in with it “aristocratic modes of thought to philosophy” (Sorel 1969: 19). Descartes’ method resembled “elaborate mechanisms,” which aristocracy and clergy tended to put between reality and themselves; mechanisms forming political and epistemological fortifications of their power. Pascal, in his turn, wrote for those restricted to their common sense obtained from traditions; for the believers, whose worldview and way of association belonged to the order turning obsolete:

These new pagans—violent, imperious, and capricious—were not, however, completely shut off from any possibility of returning to Christianity, because they regarded the miracle as a distinct possibility; now a miracle is a material experience of the divine presence in the world. [...] Descartes seemed to encourage those who considered experience of miracles impossible. (Sorel 1969: 15)

Despite such conservatism, Sorel sympathizes with Pascal and his Jansenist pessimism¹¹. He finds the mythologized present more adequate and egalitarian than a calculated future: instead of opportunistic accommodation to the course of change, it can mobilize anyone to rely (that is “to wager,” in the Pascalian lexicon) on the principle of self-organization of the social life, which is irreducibly contingent:

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

¹¹ Leszek Kolakowski was apparently the first to note the impact Jansenism had on Sorel’s thought (1978: 149–74). Yet, it would be unfair to explain Sorel’s appeal to Pascal by his implicit theological profile. The conflict between Jesuits and Jansenists evolved into a political matter: while the latter were later prosecuted by the authorities, the former were to become a model for secular reasoning of the salon society.

teach us why, in a given place and at a given date, this unique conjunction of causes came about. (Sorel 1969: 171)

In this perspective, Cartesianism can indeed be related to causality, later projected onto the plane of social and political history. Sorel's critique of Descartes, however, is largely guided by political reasoning. He employs Descartes' figure as a symbol of innovative and peaceful compromise, reminding us of the debate between Jesuits and Jansenists. The former reduced morality to the moral intent of the individual, which could be "directed"—and adjusted—in the course of any action taken for the sake of *moralizing* its effect¹². The latter insisted that a source of morality and its strict criteria should be found outside of the reasoning selves, be this criteria social or theological. For Sorel, the "moral casuistry" of the Jesuits resembles socialist reformism and, more specifically, the probabilism of Jaurès, his "soft and conciliatory method" and "humanitarian platitudes," with which he flirts with intellectuals and calms down the bourgeoisie, afraid of the masses of workers and the possibility of their self-government (Sorel 2004: 70, 72).

It is revolutionary syndicalism that Sorel finds free of the moralizing habit, devoid of the intellectualism of Marxist doctrinaires, and, most importantly, disclosing the meaning of the class cleavage. For Sorel, Marxism should definitely be updated in accordance with the challenges of the time. It has to finally get rid of the old baggage of utopian socialism, once aimed at "directing the capitalist industry" for the sake of its further expansion and fair distribution of wealth (theories to which trade unions owed a lot). At the same time, it has to resist those new modifications, which prompted its political distortion, such as Bernstein's revisionism with its evolutionary socialism. For Sorel, this is possible only *via* building on revolutionary syndicalism as proved to be labor-based and therefore, immune to socialist "deviations". The latter are represented, on the one hand, by Blanquism with its radical conspiracies, inciting "revolt of the poor"; on the other hand, by politics of administration, promoted by trade unionism no less than by German and French parliamentary socialists. The Marxist answer to the social question is political, but it is revolutionary politics of class—neither of a secret revolutionary society, nor of a national party, nor of a trade union:

¹² This is exactly what Pascal mocks in his *Provinciales* (1994: 45). Sorel notes their popularity, which signified the public disposition to Jansenism, a possibility unrealized due to political reasons (Sorel 1969: 4).

Marxism differs from Blanquism especially in its discounting of the idea of party, which was basic to the classic revolutionary conception; instead, Marxism returned to the *idea of class*. [...] We have a society of producers who have acquired ideas fitting to their position and who consider themselves as having a unity entirely parallel to national bonds. It is no longer a question of directing the people but of leading the producers to think for themselves, without the help of a bourgeois tradition. (Sorel 2009: 242–43)

Here Sorel argues that the syndicalist strike is not alien to Marxist strategy, but is rather its key political element. As a class-based movement, revolutionary syndicalism resists a theoretical “decomposition of Marxism” on the level of praxis. Furthermore, it could guard the proletariat from its incorporation into the bourgeoisie, and social revolution from its gravitation toward the purely political.

2. Society of Producers and Its Self-production

By appealing to revolutionary syndicalism, Sorel earnestly asserts that a socialist politics requires returning to the site of production, which is the locus of the proletarian subjectivity being born and nurtured. At the same time, he makes a paradoxical statement on the character of productive activity:

Socialism is necessarily very obscure, since it deals with production, i.e. with the most mysterious part of human activity, and since it proposes to bring about a radical transformation of that region which it is impossible to describe with the clearness that is to be found in more superficial regions. (Sorel 2004: 139)

In order to unravel this mystery, Sorel calls to abandon scholastic methods and look at a construction native to “the proletarian mind”: the general strike as a *myth*. Here, the mythical character of the battle does not refute its empirical basis—it magnifies it: the general strike as an idea is engendered by the already existent practice of strikes, and not vice versa (Sorel 2004: 281). Apart from creating “the epic state of mind,” such an idea “bends all the energies of the mind towards the conditions that allow the realization of a freely functioning and prodigiously progressive workshop” (Sorel 2004: 250). But what is a “prodigiously progressive” workshop and how is

it possible to think of its activity beyond the framework of optimist progressivism, especially if it is so “mysterious”?

Sorel’s explanation would start with the critique. He shows that the bourgeoisie who once set their hopes on capitalist production see the latter as almost automatically progressing *via* large-scale industry, and this is exactly what continues to foster their optimism. Promising growing profits and furthering the development of industrial technologies, large-scale production does not encourage the creative faculties of workers. On the contrary, the worker becomes more and more enslaved by machinery and his “morality is reduced to a training in docility intended to assure order” (Sorel 1969: 157). Such rendering of workers’ skills to “the instinct of an insect” confines the chances of invention and bounds up development of proletarian intelligence.

Since it was not yet possible to construct rapid and precise machinery, it was necessary to have men trained to a very advanced degree of automation, carrying out what mechanical devices could not yet do. Provided that tasks were reduced to a little movement of the hand or foot, one could succeed in obtaining a prompt and exact execution when habit had surpassed all thought. (Sorel 1969: 196)

Marx’s detailed analysis of the role of machinery in large-scale industry is informative here. In regard to manual implements, he distinguishes between “man as mere motive power” and “man as worker or operator”; that is between purely physical, bodily force and manipulation with a tool—manipulation that is always, as one can imagine, to a certain extent ingenious. While the former could be substituted by wind, water, or steam (simply in imitation of muscular power), the latter is replaced by a mechanism operating numerous tools and set in motion by the former, that is the motive power in any possible form (Marx 1990: 497). This new mechanism is Marx’s definition of machine of the industrial era as of an element of the whole complex of machinery. It is already clear from this definition how intellectual faculties become separated from manual labor (it is a hand that once carried out the ingenious operating function!) and why factory machines do not free the worker from work, but deprive the work itself from all content (Marx 1990: 548).

Adopting a Proudhonist vision of all property as theft, it is possible to say that owning the forces of production is stealing the simplest instruments of a worker’s ingenuity, starting with his own hands

as operating forces, and therefore expropriating the very ability to create. Sorel, however, does not simply look back to the good old days of handicraft and manual implements, as a luddite of sorts. His stance is more nuanced. What should be taken into account first when it comes to production, are “the feelings of attachment [*sentiments d’affection*] inspired in every truly qualified worker by the productive forces entrusted to him” (Sorel 1969: 155). Unexpectedly, he notes, this attachment could be found within the property relations that he despises—in the peasant’s devotion to the farmland and the plants he cultivates, in the artisan’s adherence to the tools, materials, and the workshop at which he works. Such an attachment is a specific bond existing between the one who works and the domain of the efforts made, which, in its affective form, incites scientific experiment and artistic virtuosity in the most mundane and routine activity. “All the virtues attributed to property would be meaningless without the virtues engendered by a certain way of working” (Ibid.)—a creative manner that fosters one’s engagement in the process of work. Hence, workers’ “sentiments” both serve as a constitutive and affective element of property relation, and are at the same time more fundamental, exceeding the property form.

One’s “feelings of attachment,” however, should not be understood as a necessary connection with objects that are “ready-to-hand” and habitually help to sustain one’s existence. Matters of existence and possessiveness aside, Sorel reveals how and why workers’ “attachment” contributes to the qualitative, “prodigious” progress of production (of operations, of technologies, and of workers themselves), which is why socialism has to take them into account. The argument about attachment to the forces of production at one’s disposal goes beyond feelings as such, or the possible virtues associated with them (engagement, devotion, responsibility). Affective attachment toward productive tools, or machines, are generated by one’s ability “to recognize their imperfections”¹⁵. This recognition drives a dissatisfied worker to experiment and to set the whole operation anew basing on new principles and new movements—in other words, to invent.

Invention is not a gradual improvement, propagated by capitalists from above with the help of science serving their interests. Neither it is a quasi-evolutionary creative process determined by intuition understood as a disinterested instinct that is “capable of reflecting upon

¹⁵ Sorel does not specify whether such an ability is sensuous or cognitive. However, it is fair to assume that this ability is experience-based and precedes any abstract knowledge: it does not stem from clear understanding what exactly the imperfections are but, on the contrary, prompts their detection.

its object, and of enlarging it indefinitely”¹⁴ (Bergson 1911: 194). It is a product of relations of production seen on a micro-level—the product of a non-satisfactory, and therefore productive interaction of each particular worker with each particular object of operation. Together they form a dynamic social cell perfect in its imperfection—the germ of a future productive collective, from which capitalists are excluded. Therefore, it is not enough to simply own productive forces in order to become a producer, it is absolutely necessary *to be* these forces, that is to own them on totally different, ontological grounds. In the latter case, property as a social relation—that is property as theft, to put it again in the words of Proudhon—ceases to exist, releasing productive affection to the machine (and one’s own skills, I may add), which are both the means and objects of perpetual creation.

It is now worth following Sorel’s example and briefly return to the seventeenth century. The social ontology lamented by Pascal represented two kinds of intertwined relations: *human-to-community* and *human-to-God*. In the seventeenth century, social life was changing, and scientists and *litterati* contributed to its modification: it was modified into *human-to-human* relations, a relation between two abstract humans¹⁵. Whether it was thought of as penetrated by love to one’s neighbor, sustained by the natural right, driven by an accumulated resentment or guided by the categorical imperative, it entered into decline by the end of the nineteenth century. This means that social relations were to be considered in a different, new way. Sorel seeks a model of sociality that exhibits the place that a subject takes in the system of production and reveals the embryonic elements of the socialist condition—a “society of producers.” It is then possible to suggest that Sorel alludes to sociality generated from within of productive forces, which is exemplified by the bond existing between workers and their tools—*human-to-machine* relations. Clearly, for Sorel it is from these relations, neglected by the social scientists of his time, a proletarian subjectivity—an autonomous and intelligent collective of workers, becoming conscious of themselves—is being born:

I said that not much attention has been paid to the relations between the worker and the machine, but a great deal has been

¹⁴ It should be emphasized that while Bergson’s theory of intuition is present in Sorel’s concept of myth, it is absent from anything that refers to the reality of the factory: intuition is granted no importance in inventive process of production.

¹⁵ As Sorel reminds us, the “abstract man” was not a pure fantasy: it “had been invented in the theories of natural law in order to replace the man of the third estate” (1964: xlv).

written on the relations of the bourgeoisie with their businesses, their pleasures, and the social organs that protect their interests. Books on collective psychology, which abound today, speak of nothing else. (Sorel 1969: 157)

Such relations are based on actual practice that is historically specific. At the same time, it is possible to notice that their analysis, offered by Sorel, has theological overtones, again reminiscent of the seventeenth century. They deserve attention not because they could seem indicative of Sorel's implicit religiosity. On the contrary, they help to elucidate trajectories of secularization, which Sorel found compatible with Marxist politics. For example, limitations of productive forces, manifested on the level of their operation, clearly echo the Pascalian view on reason as necessarily limited. For Sorel, recognition of these limitations stokes a fire that transmutes the initial pessimism of machine operator into a powerful force of creation: the ability to sense them prompts conversion of a worker into an inventor. The *sine qua non* of this ability—"feelings of attachment"—derives from love as *caritas* (a gift of love that has transformative power), and therefore these "feelings," infusing such an ability with love, make it virtuous¹⁶. The very Jansenist interpretation of the doctrine of the original sin and grace efficacious through itself also obtains its secular and materialist manifestation. The negativity that was once attributed to a human being and the human order is found in the limited function of the machine; a worker does not know exactly from where the concrete imperfection of a tool originates (it is always already imperfect!) and why it is always already there. Such negativity is also a myth, to a certain extent, and this is precisely why attention to concrete limitations of a tool mythologizes the process of work the way the idea of the general strike mythologizes and mobilizes workers for the political struggle. Recognition of the flaw of the machine turns a worker into a producer who is always ready "to wager" on the contingency of operation, and therefore carries out his work as a sequence of inventive moves. From this follows Sorel's complex understanding of a proletarian subjectivity—a producer, whose productive capacity is the synthesis of the qualities of the premodern artisan, empiricist scientist and large-scale industry worker. Such a subjectivity, which I would call an "organic engineer," is rendered dormant by the actual

¹⁶ Such a secular reinterpretation of *caritas* could be counterposed to the moralizing tendencies of secularization, expressed in charity as the politics of "social duty."

conditions of industrial labor, and therefore could be attributed to the already existing class.

In order to reveal this subjectivity in terms of class, it is necessary to pay attention to what internalizes and reproduces class relations—to the productive forces themselves, and to examine their internal organization. As I argued above, they comprise a new form of sociality: the relations between the worker and the machine. Their interaction, on which the “mysterious” activity of production rests, is a particular historical form that hides in itself the grain of pure creativity, indispensable to “real” (social, as well as technical) progress: “This striving towards excellence, which exists in the absence of any personal, immediate or proportional reward, constitutes the secret virtue that assures the continued progress of the world” (Sorel 2004: 248). These relations, however, are still of struggle. Sorel indeed compares the virtues of producers with those of warriors, which is why Jan-Werner Müller assumes that Sorel was concerned not with the class of proletarians but with war aimed at “creating a collective body hardened (and ennobled) for and through struggle” (Müller 2011: 99). And yet, this “will to struggle,” identified by Müller, is only one side of the coin. Furthermore, the workers are already struggling, and there is no point in calling for a total mobilization for the sake of a triumphant victory. First, workers struggle with the resistance of the material, that is, put bluntly, the struggle with nature on the level of physical matter. Second, they struggle with the machine’s “imperfections,” limiting the variability of operation and demanding both maintenance (that is, servitude) and calling for invention (that is, art and science). Third, they struggle with “capital’s material mode of existence,” which, appearing in the form of the machine, “becomes a competitor of the worker itself” (Marx 1990: 554, 557). Once the operative power had been transmitted to machinery, the worker was not only deprived of it but also forced to compete with the instrument of work. At the same time, any machine still has this operative moment internalized, so it is possible for a worker to gain access to it and draw it back in the process of their interaction. Sorel hopes that the relations of mutual enslavement and competition could be transformed into creative cooperation: the machine could become not only something to be maintained and used but also to be reinvented, while the worker could learn from it, that is, learn to operate in different, creative ways. That is why, again, Sorel compares the class of producers with not only warriors but also with artists. The formation of a proletarian subjectivity becomes the struggle of creativity that bears the stamp of

the class struggle, therefore creative action is performed in spite of, not thanks to, actual conditions. This is the idea on which Sorel's prefigurative politics rests: first, the class struggle cannot be won once and for all; second, it demands the virtue of continuation of what is to be done against all odds¹⁷:

No failure proves anything against socialism, as it has become a work of preparation; if it fails, it merely proves that the apprenticeship has been insufficient; they must set to work again with more courage, persistence and confidence than before; the experience of labour has taught the workers that it is by means of patient apprenticeship that one can become a true comrade at work; and it is also the only way of becoming a true revolutionary. (Sorel 2004: 31)

In all these struggles, as Sorel believes, it is necessary to be a hero even if—and specifically because—the prospect of a decisive battle is a myth: the powerful image of the final fight expresses “the will to act” and not the will to conquer. It creatively mythologizes daily existence and underlies workers’ “heroism,” expressed in their continuous participation in a series of strikes. Here Sorel asserts an equivalence between emerging proletarian subjectivity and revolutionary attitudes—the basis both for the “prodigious workshop,” and, more importantly, for the autonomy of labor in relation to capital.

Conclusion

Sorel's socialist thought, as it evolved during the first decade of the twentieth century, is marked by explicit hostility toward the course of change that France seemed to be taking in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair. Symbolic reunification of the Republic on a moral basis signified a politics of reconciliation, aimed at the harmonization of society despite the class antagonism that was tearing it apart. For Sorel, this was indicative of reactionary tendencies, threatening to reinforce the power of the bourgeois state together with its intellectual and bureaucratic defenders, gripped by the ideology of progress. Reformist attitudes which prevailed among

¹⁷ Sorel proudly mentions Renan's comment on socialists who are never discouraged and look for a new solution after each “abortive experience” because “the idea that no solution exists never occurs to them, and there lies their strength” (Renan, quoted in Sorel 2004: 31).

the members of the Second International and their Marxism in the phase of its theoretical “decomposition,” were also paving the way for political compromises. In Sorel’s view, all this put a veritable social revolution toward the “society of producers” on hold, so he suggests that a political kernel of Marxism can be found in revolutionary syndicalism and its tactics of strikes, which expresses the significance of the class struggle and exercises workers’ revolutionary capacities.

As Sorel shows, the idea of civil unity based on the construction of an abstract human, which once replaced social ontology based on the intersection between the communal and the theological, became an outdated myth. It did not fit the times of growing industrialization, and this is precisely why other myths, such as the one of the general strike, emerge in popular imagination. Furthermore, the productive forces themselves, whose development characterize the industrial era, engender a new form of sociality. It is exemplified by the process, in which a class (the socio-economical) and a machine (the technological) interpenetrate on a horizontal, immanent plane of production. From this process a productive subjectivity emerges—a class of producers, who already express the best virtues of the warriors (heroism), the scientists (experiment) and the artists (operative virtuosity), even though they are deprived of them by the capitalist organization of production. The ambiguous relation of workers with machines is permeated by class struggle, manifested in mutual servitude and competition; at the same time, it contains the element of affection, which can result in the worker’s desire to both actively learn from and reinvent it—a desire driven by the fundamental limitations of any forces of production.

Albeit the new forms of sociality, emergent from the system of production, social change is not granted automatically by technological development or political decisions taken by politicians. From the moment class struggle appeared, it became—and remains—a never-ending battle, even when the very concept of class seems outdated, limited, or unproductive. In capitalist modernity, from which our contemporaneity has not yet escaped, class struggle extends well beyond the factory and the socio-economic conditions in which people live and labor. It is a struggle between myths and illusions, a struggle residing in attitudes to the instruments of work, and in every action taken, where habit and compromise place one’s productive subjectivity under threat. Opposing the politicization of production to the moralization of politics, Sorel reminds us that all these struggles await their political articulation.

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