

Georges Sorel and Critical Anti-Utopianism

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Abstract: This essay argues for a reevaluation of the topicality Georges Sorel's thought in political and historical circumstances wherein the degree to which western political thought has remained caught within the "illusions of progress" is becoming more apparent, and wherein the previously hegemonic effort to exile violence from reflection on the political is meeting its own crisis. In this context, I turn attention to the motives and implications of Sorel's "critical anti-utopianism", especially as these are outlined in his "Reflections on Violence": the juxtaposition of utopia with proletarian "myth" as putative emancipatory instruments; their areas of overlap; the association of myth with practical action and of utopia with abstract cerebration; the indivisibility of myth as opposed to the divisibility of utopian projections; the reformist nature of utopias as opposed to the radical potency of myth; the non-refutable nature of myth and its utility as a means of cultivating militant certainty without giving way to pseudo-scientific determinism; and finally, the non-patronizing character of myth, its "grassroots" nature, as opposed to the largely elitist and charisma-centered nature of utopias.

Subsequently, I dwell on two significant areas of overlap between the functions of Sorelian myth and utopia: first, their common orientation to a critique of the present social order, and secondly, their common, if differently accented, orientation toward some version of futurity (teleological in the case of utopias, anti-teleological in the case of myth).

Finally, I turn my attention to the usefulness of Sorelian myth in interrogating some of the more problematical aspects of Marxist theory, particularly its vitiation by vulgar determinism and by the temptations of passivity, on the one hand, and abstract messianism on the other. I focus on Sorel's critique of the pseudo-scientific pretensions regarding the nature of history, his exposure of the grave dangers that attend the mechanically stageist understanding of the historical process, and the compatibility of Sorelian myth with an "ethics of the real" that does not seek to minimize the role of contingency, risk, and anxiety when it comes to the tasks involved in projects of social change.

Keywords: *Georges Sorel, Myth, Critical Anti-Utopia, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin*

Why revisit Georges Sorel today? Why, more specifically, return to what I will be calling his "critical anti-utopianism"? From my standpoint, these questions are informed by two fundamental concerns. On the one hand, large-scale political unrest and violence, a sign of new and rather unexpected crises of political legitimation, have resurfaced in one Western parliamentary democracy after another: Greece (2010-2015), Spain (2011-2015, 2019-2020) France (2008-2010, 2016, 2018-2020), and even in that lynchpin of capitalist political stability, England (summer of 2011). It has been a turn of events for which not only governments, but also the dominant paradigms of philosophical-political thought in the West have proven unprepared: in retrospect, they seem indebted to the same "illusions of progress" bequeathed by the Enlightenment thought that we tend to assume we have overcome, and that Sorel saw it as imperative to expose and question.

What I would call the "philosophy of the Franco-German ascendancy" – a trend historically simultaneous with high rates of economic development, European Union consolidation and expansion and social as well as military peace within the continent (except

in the Balkans and in some of the former Soviet Republics) – could be synoptically framed in terms of two major paradigms which jointly dominated West European thought between the collapse of “actually existing” socialism in 1991 and the financial crisis that begun in the US in 2008. I am referring, on the one hand, to Jürgen Habermas’s conceptualization of politics in terms of communicative rationality and transparency; and, at the more speculative end of the spectrum, to Jacques Derrida’s Levinasian proposition of infinite receptivity and unconditional responsibility toward the Other¹. In both instances, “politics” becomes coterminous with a revitalized commitment to Kantian ethics, which in turn presupposes the validity of Enlightenment ideologies of progress that have been with us at least since Condorcet and that include, in John Stanley’s useful summary, the notion of civilization as “indefinitely perfectible” and of history as free from the possibility of catastrophic retrogression².

Neither of these paradigms seems to me to have been able to adapt well to the post-2008 climate of economic stagnation, rising social inequality, political polarization, and intensified state repression. The investment in the indefinite perfectibility of Western parliamentary democracies that seemed to prevail quite spontaneously after the Soviet collapse evaporated almost as suddenly around 2008 as it had become the only game in town after the formal end of the Cold War in 1991. Since the nature of human affairs abhors a vacuum, far-right populism did not miss the chance to step into the fray with its own set of authoritarian propositions for crisis management – particularly as regards collapsing faith in the efficacy of parliamentary democratic institutions and the established party system – in Europe and beyond. The fact that, by and large, a formerly hegemonic philosophical framework had demanded the ethical expulsion of violence from the political sphere (replacing it with rational deliberation in Habermas’s case or cultivated receptivity toward the im/possible demands of the Other in Derrida’s) does not seem to have prevented the eruption of violence in a variety of newer and older forms, including those of religious-political fundamentalism (Christian and Islamic), state repression and popular counter-violence, or anti-immigrant and anti-refugee terror, whether state-sponsored or “informal” in character.³ The historical horizon darkened just as Western thought was getting comfortable in its belief that it had defeated the “totalitarian temptation”, at least on its own geopolitical terrain.

The new consensus – and it is one that is becoming ever stronger – that we have walked into a “dystopian” turn of the historical road with no clear end in sight good time is nonetheless an opportunity to rethink a number of assumptions. And my proposal here is that one of the sites for such rethinking could well concern the challenges involved in Sorel’s often maligned, or more frequently ignored, questioning of the illusions of progress and his related contribution to the theorization of violence as a phenomenon that saturates the sphere of the political, albeit in qualitatively different and competing (statist and anti-statist) incarnations and for equally competing political goals or ends (order-preserving or revolutionary).⁴

On the other hand – and given the decided coupling of the Enlightenment ideology of progress with the future-oriented character of literary and non-literary utopianism from the eighteenth century onward – Sorel’s work seems to me to also offer a particularly fruitful ground for re-examining some of my own generic and historical speculations on what I have called “critical anti-utopianism”. This is a tradition I have associated with the Left and

described in terms of a critique of the “inadmissible presuppositions” of utopianism which neither upholds the “desirability of the current social order” nor rejects “prospects of radical social change”.⁵ Though I described it as “the dominant trend in post-1968 Left social thought” and as a “distinctly late modern category”,⁶ whose roots lie in part with Marx’s critique of utopian socialism, Sorel’s work, properly speaking, belongs to neither of these two historical moments. It emerges as a self-conscious attempt to critically challenge and “modernize” classical Marxism in light of early twentieth-century trends in the development of capitalism (particularly as regards the usurious character of monopolies) and proletarian political experience in the long age of revolutions; but it also significantly predates, and remains fundamentally foreign to, the distinctly post-revolutionary and “post-essentialist” politics of the critical anti-utopianism of Foucault, Deleuze, Laclau or Negri.

Despite the somewhat anomalous status of its historical position, or perhaps because of it, the character of Sorel’s anti-utopianism seems to me particularly interesting from the standpoint of the present moment. In “The Politics of Utopia”, Fredric Jameson advanced the thought-provoking hypothesis that there is a correlation between the appearance of utopias and the “suspension of the political”, which is to say, the perception of political institutions as “both unchangeable and infinitely modifiable”⁷ (I would add, by way of clarification: “infinitely modifiable” on this or that micro-level precisely *because* they are accepted as essentially “unchangeable”). At the antipodes of such a situation, Jameson says, stand “periods of genuine pre-revolutionary ferment, when the system really seems in the process of losing its legitimacy”, when “grievances and demands grow more precise in their insistence and urgency”, and when, as a result, “the utopian imagination no longer has free play.”⁸ It seems to me that the present, like Sorel’s own early twentieth century, may well be such a period: one in which utopianism faces the challenge not merely of a negative and simultaneously dogmatically biased ethico-political judgment on its allegedly naïve, unworkable, or potentially dangerous premises (as is predominantly the case after the demise of the rebellious interlude of 1968 and up to the early twenty-first century), but also of the critique of its own inability to abandon abstract (that is, non-conjunctural and abstractly normative) thought for the sake of responding productively to a new, largely unpredictable and urgent situation, in which drastic change – for the better or, perhaps more likely, the worse – seems imminent.

“Better” and “worse” were not abstractly antithetical prospects for Sorel, who founded his critique of utopianism on a vision of the primacy of the class struggle – crucially, a process freed from teleological and millenarian expectations⁹ – as a driving force of historical development. It was in this framework that the “catastrophic revolution” of a general strike that would paralyze industry and throw the capitalist economy in disarray could be viewed as an act “at the service of the immemorial interests of civilization”¹⁰. Unlike “bourgeois philosophy”, for which violence was only “a relic of barbarism which is bound to disappear under the progress of enlightenment”¹¹, Sorel thought of direct proletarian action as the only force capable of saving “the world from barbarism”, because it was the only means of taking it off a track that led to the gradual, barely perceptible atrophying of all the civilization-building virtues – to the self-indulgence, somnolence, terminal degeneration and decay of a bourgeoisie that had completely forgotten its own revolutionary roots and deeds:

The danger which threatens the future of the world may be avoided if the proletariat hold on with obstinacy to revolutionary ideas [...] Everything may be saved if the proletariat, by their use of violence, manage to re-establish the division into classes and so restore to the bourgeoisie something of its energy. [...] Proletarian violence [...] may save the world from barbarism¹².

In 1918, ten years after the publication of his *Reflections of Violence* (1908), Sorel saluted the “immortal glory” of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and praised Lenin’s revolutionary genius, despite the fact that by his own admission, there was little relationship between his own brand of anarcho-syndicalism and the ideological foundations of the Russian revolution¹³. Though Sorel’s own brand of revolutionary pragmatism had little influence on the radical practical politics of his time (ironically, it did have significant posthumous influence on the politics of the Right, particularly in Italy)¹⁴, and though it was itself maligned, even during his lifetime, as simplistically utopian in its voluntarism¹⁵, it was also receptive to the path by which Lenin effected his own unapologetically anti-utopian version of polemical opposition to western, Social-Democratic reformism: “how grateful will not the future have to be towards the Russian soldiers of socialism! How lightly will the historians weigh the criticisms of the rhetoricians charged by democracy with denouncing the excesses of the *Bolsheviks*¹⁶! New Carthages must not triumph over what is now the Rome of the proletariat”¹⁷.

Sorel proudly asserted that, though it was frequently denounced as a “chimera”, the proletarian general strike – the cornerstone of his anarcho-syndicalism – was not at all a “utopia.” In his view, this was unshakably proven by the fact that “parliamentary socialists”, whom he detested, attacked the idea of the proletarian (as distinct from the “political”) general strike with passion while they were quite happy to tolerate “the senseless hopes which the utopians have always held up before the dazzled eyes of the people”¹⁸. His 1907 letter to Daniel Halévy, often deployed as a preface to *Reflections on Violence*, usefully epitomizes the main constituents of his left-wing anti-utopianism: first and most fundamentally, Sorel’s anti-utopianism presupposes a parallel subscription to “myth”, by which Sorel designates “collections of images which, taken together and through intuition alone” are capable of evoking the “mass of sentiments” of a social group and hence of inspiring it with hope, determination, and the capacity for courage and for sacrifice.¹⁹ In short, “myth” in its Sorelian sense does much of the valuable affective work of utopianism in keeping hope for social change alive but without replicating its quietist implications.

Many of Sorel’s post World War II readers have found in this privileging of myth in conjunction with courage and the willingness to sacrifice something akin to the seeds of fascist ideology. In my view, such readings are problematically anachronistic. Setting aside the difficulty of defining “fascist ideology” with any precision (given the unabashedly opportunistic shifts of ideological orientation one finds in historical fascism, imperialist nationalism and hierarchical race theory constituting its most stable, yet also non fascism-specific ingredients), they tend to overlook the fact that Sorel, like Lenin, denounced the First World War, or that he never sponsored Mussolini, despite the latter’s professions of admiration for Sorel.²⁰ Perhaps more importantly, the retroactive absorption of Sorelian “myth” into the nationalist mythologies of fascism forgets that the distinction between a

militant version of hope (of hope as an affective dispensation connected to courage) and its dilution into impotent quietism and passive expectation for change is just as important in Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (or, to take other examples, in liberation theology and the Civil Rights Movement)²¹ and that it is at least as old as the political radicalism of the early nineteenth century:

When one fled past, a maniac maid,
And her name was Hope, she said:
But she looked more like Despair,
And she cried out in the air:
'My father Time is weak and gray
With waiting for a better day;
See how idiot-like he stands,
Fumbling with his palsied hands!²²

Second, in Sorel's thought the relationship between myth and utopia is in no way simply antithetical. Rather, it is cast as one that may involve *both* their fusion, in the majority of cases, *and* their mutual exclusion, in a minority of "pure" instances. Thus, on the one hand, Sorel will admit that "there are very few myths which are perfectly free from the utopian element."²³ On the other hand, he will conceptualize the proletarian general strike and "liberal political economy" as reverse instances of a disjunction between the two: the former is to be understood as a myth divested of utopian elements, while the latter will be grasped (long before Žižek) as the epitome of "a utopia", an ideal society "as difficult to realize as that of Plato", that is nonetheless "free from any element of myth".²⁴

Third, Sorel tends to understand myths as forms of an expression of "a will to act"²⁵ while, on the contrary, utopias are viewed as merely "intellectual" (in other words, cerebral) products. They are "descriptions", products of model-building with a purely speculative function, combinations of "imaginary institutions" comparable enough to real ones as to allow the mind "to reason about them".²⁶ Fourth, while myths – very much like sovereign power in its traditional conceptualization by Hobbes, Bodin, and others – are indivisible unities which cannot be broken down so as to provide technical means towards practical ends without losing all their potency and value,²⁷ utopias are "construction[s]" which "can be broken into parts" and of which "certain pieces have been shaped in such a way" as to be able to serve "future legislation".²⁸

Fifth, contemporary myth is geared toward the destruction of "the existing state of things"; the myth of the general strike, particularly, is a myth of "absolute revolution", without any reference to the reconstitution of a state and the reinstatement of the rule of law. It thus partakes of a sublimely "infinite quality"²⁹ while utopias have a finite, all-too-human orientation. They "direct men's minds towards reforms", contending themselves with "patching up the system", hence also lending themselves and their propagators to far easier accommodation by run-of-the-mill parliamentary politics.³⁰ Essentially, this vision of utopia as a paltry idyll dwarfed by the epic qualities of "myth" is the very antithesis of that popularized during the Cold War by Karl Popper: for the latter, "utopia" is synonymous with "holism" and thus with a radical perception of the need for change and, inescapably, with

violence.³¹ It is precisely the kind of thought that fails to orient itself toward “piecemeal” reform, hubristically aspiring to change everything. In Popper’s words:

[Marxists] retained Marx’s holistic and Utopian belief that only a brand-new ‘social system’ can improve matters. [...]

Such considerations lead us back to our plea for piecemeal, and against Utopian or holistic, methods of social engineering. And they lead us back to our demand that measures should be planned to fight concrete evils rather than to establish some ideal good. [...]

Marx was the last of the great holistic system builders. We should take care to leave it at that, and not to replace this by another Great System. What we need is not holism. It is piecemeal social engineering³².

Needless to say, it has been Popper’s view of utopia as going “too far” rather than Sorel’s view of it as not going *far enough* that has dominated post World War II anti-utopianism, and it is precisely this fact that makes Sorelian anti-utopianism so marginal to contemporary discussions of the political implications and allegiances of “anti-utopianism”³³.

Sixth, unlike utopias, which are vulnerable to falsification by historical reality, a myth, Sorel argues, “cannot be refuted”, since it is “identical to the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement”³⁴. Such a myth is irrefutable because, to put it otherwise, it is not an externality but something immanent to and constitutive of the revolutionary subject. Proletarians prepared to clash both with the state and with their capture by the empty promises of electoral Left politics, Sorel observes,

may be deceived about an infinite number of political, economic, or moral questions; but their testimony is decisive, sovereign and irrefutable when it is a question of knowing what are the ideas which most powerfully move them and their comrades, which most appeal to them as being identical with their socialist conceptions, and thanks to which their reason, their hopes and their way of looking at particular facts seem to make but one indivisible unity.

Although, Sorel asserts, with myth “we are not in the domain of ideologies”, since “lofty reflections about philosophy, history or economics” will not help us understand its workings³⁵, it is equally the case that myth is as immune to refutation as religion, despite its differences from it. Ernest Renan, he notes with some amusement, “was very surprised to discover that socialists were beyond discouragement”. “No failure proves anything against socialism”, since failure, in Beckettian fashion, simply functions as an injunction of the need to “try again” and “fail better”: “the experience of labor 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”³⁶.

Finally, while a utopia remains a personal invention and is thus ultimately the personal property of its inventor, who “believes that no one is better placed than he is to apply his system”, contemporary myths are not matters of personal invention. They belong to no one in particular and thus are not expressions of an intelligentsia’s benevolent tutelage of a mindless working mass. Unlike the utopians, Sorel proudly asserts, “we [...] have invented nothing at all, and even assert that there is nothing to be invented [...] our greatest claim to

originality consists in having maintained that the proletariat can emancipate itself without needing to seek guidance from those members of the bourgeoisie who consider themselves experts in matters of the intellect³⁷. Despite some important disagreements with Marx (an issue to which I will return shortly), Sorel here essentially repeats one of the core elements of Marx's own critique of utopianism, namely the critique of its didactic and patronizing pretensions vis-à-vis working-class agency. As Darren Web has relevantly remarked: "What irritated Marx about the utopians was their messianic conviction that the emancipation of humanity depended entirely upon the realization of their own particular visions. For this quite clearly implied a process of liberation 'from above' and just as clearly implied that the workers were unable to liberate themselves"³⁸. For all the virulence of his polemics against social-democracy and the parliamentary Left, Sorel also remained wary of the prophetic and messianic pretensions of the utopians.

Despite these vital differences, there are – perhaps inevitably, given the revolutionary rather than conservative nature of Sorel's rejection of utopianism – two significant areas of overlap between his notion of myth and that of utopia: First, Sorelian myth is not a legitimizing device³⁹ aimed at salvaging and stabilizing the existing social order as fascism very much was, for all its violence and terror⁴⁰. On the contrary, it is the repository and at the same time, the expression, of a will to destroy it⁴¹. It thus does not forego or abandon the critical aspects of utopia, its counter-ideological functions, if one is to recall Karl Mannheim⁴². Second, and as Vincent Geoghegan was correct to note⁴³, Sorelian myth does not exclude the political orientation toward futurity. Sorel concedes that "there would be no social philosophy, no reflection about the process of evolution and even no important action in the present without certain hypotheses about the future"⁴⁴. Though "myths must be judged as a means of acting on the present"⁴⁵, and though, *pace* Marx, "there is no process by which the future can be predicted scientifically", it nonetheless remains true that "we are unable to act without leaving the present, without considering the future, which seems forever condemned to escape our reason"⁴⁶. Myths are thus, like utopias, means toward the "framing of the future", though it is crucial that they approach this task non-teleologically⁴⁷. Their function is to "give an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of *immediate* action upon which the reform of the will is founded"⁴⁸. Clearly, then, Sorelian myth antagonizes utopia on partly utopian terrain: it is an attempt, on the one hand, to radicalize its political valences and implications; and, on the other, to re-connect such radicalization to collective psychology and imagination in ways that the "scientific" bend of official Marxism in Sorel's own time effectively disallowed⁴⁹.

It is indisputable that Sorel was neither a systematic philosopher nor free of contradictions in his own thought. My contention, nonetheless, is that for all the complications and inconsistencies it brings into the picture, the concept of "myth" is a useful instrument by which to interrogate certain entrenched assumptions within Western Marxism. I begin with the most important of these: Sorel's myth, unlike utopia, allows for the possibility of separating the subjective (and subjectivizing) effects of "certainty" regarding victory in the political struggle from any positivistically "scientific" notion of historical "determinism." John L. Stanley thus aptly remarks that Sorel "insists that by accepting the idea of the general strike, even though we know it is a myth, we are proceeding exactly as a physicist does who has complete confidence in his science, although the future will look upon

it as antiquated”⁵⁰. “Certainty” is here, as it is in a contemporary philosopher like Badiou, a matter of subjective consistency (an adequation between a mode of being and a mode of acting) rather than a property inhering in things themselves.

This conception of certainty is intended as antagonistic not merely to “utopia” but also to Marxism, including the Marxism of Marx himself, since Sorel does not hesitate to highlight the pernicious continuity between certain key ideas and passages in Marx and bourgeois conceptions of progress as a property inhering within the material relations of production. Toward the end of the *Illusions of Progress*, he thus notes:

the march toward socialism will not come about in a manner as simple, as necessary, and consequently as easy to describe in advance as Marx had supposed. Marx’s Hegelian leanings led him to admit, without being generally aware of it, that history advances (at least with regard to peoples considered to be blessed with a superior civilization) under the influence of the force of the mysterious *Weltgeist*. [...] Like all romantics, Marx supposed that the *Weltgeist* operated in the heads of his friends. [...] Fortunate happenings [...] lend themselves rather well to a division into periods that can be defined, each one by a characteristic that can enter into a logical order. [...] But we must be careful not to mistake such scholastic schemes for laws operative in the future⁵¹.

For Sorel, Marx fails to disentangle himself adequately from utopians to the extent that he fails to see through the fundamentally ideological character of the stageist conception of history popularized by Hegel. The corollary is the incubation of tendencies in Marxism that are particularly pernicious for at least three discrete reasons: a) in propagating the illusion of the existence of “objective” historical laws, they tend to lull the working class into a false sense of security and to remove it from the tasks of action in the present⁵²; b) in creating a scholastic and abstract unity among different economic and political phenomena, they lay the ground for dogmatism and for the “enlightened” political despotism that accompanies it⁵³; and c) they produce not so much a vision of history that can allow the working class to prevail in the class struggle as the vision of history appropriate to its winners, to the ruling class⁵⁴. This last is of course a point that has become highly familiar in Western Marxist circles via its impact on Walter Benjamin, and particularly on his polemical rejection of “historicism” in his “On the Concept of History”: “with whom does historicism actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor. [...] Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate”⁵⁵. Since, for Sorel, there is no predetermined path in historical development and since contingency plays a major role, myth is a pedagogical instrument adapted not to the speculative serenity of historical prediction but to the dire emergencies of the present. It is thus aligned with Machiavellian virtù⁵⁶ rather than with the teleological thought of German Idealism, particularly in its Hegelian guise.

We would do well to reflect further on the matter of the compatibility of Sorelian myth with an “ethics of the real”; I borrow the term from Alenka Zupančič⁵⁷ to refer to Sorel’s interest in the idea of (proletarian) comportment in the absence of unifying and universal norms of ethical behavior, his interest in proletarian virtue and courage as subjective qualities summoned forth by the *absence* of a “manual” or “cookbook” for

socialist transition; and thus, by the “enormous element of the unknown” that any attempted “passage from capitalism to socialism” contains – the “frightening” and “intimidating” character of an absolute and irrevocable break with the present order⁵⁸. From this perspective, much of the apparent “determinism” involved in Hegelian-Marxist thought (and in its epigones) can be read in terms less of epistemology than of a psychic *reaction against the anxiety of the new*– a crucial issue in all genuine revolutionary conjunctures. Vitaly, however, given the paradoxical interplay of revolution and repetition in the philosophy of history of the nineteenth century⁵⁹, Sorel’s thought allows us to perceive such anxiety as not simply or unambiguously caused by radical novelty, but also by its apparent opposite, the specter of a return to what has supposedly been terminally superseded by progress:

We should now ask ourselves an important question about which orthodox interpreters of Marx do not seem to be too much concerned: should the three stages [usury, commerce, industrial production] be considered as successive (or at least designed to push former stages back into a region of historical impotence), or rather should they be considered as capable of indefinitely preserving their right to existence [...]? After 1847 capitalism seemed to be so exhausted to Marx that it had become incapable of producing new stages in its economic development. [...] Long before the American Trusts were spoken of, the great financiers had gained millions by merging nine companies of railroads. Thus, it was demonstrated that usury capitalism had not spoken its last word⁶⁰.

Seeking to liberate revolutionary thought from the magnetic pull of “illusions of progress” foreign to the proletariat was Sorel’s ultimate wager, as well as an organic element of his antipathy toward utopia. In this respect, he remained at least as orthodox as Marx, with his frequent hostility towards “programs of the future”⁶¹ and his subscription to a certain Jewish *Bilderverbot*⁶², a proscription of “casting an image” of this or that aspect the future.⁶³ This is a feature that may well have played an important role in attracting Benjamin to Sorel⁶⁴; in so doing, it marks the existence of certain affinities between Sorelian anti-utopianism and so-called “negative utopia”⁶⁵, thus enabling Benjamin to develop his own brand of a radically critical and non-teleological Messianism, one that was interested in linking radical skepticism toward the compensations of the imaginary to the courage required of radical mass activism in dark times.

Notes

¹ See, e.g.: Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston, Beacon Press, 1985; Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford University Press, 2000); *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York, Routledge, 2001); and the text they co-signed, “February 15, Or, „What Binds Europeans Together: Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in Core Europe”, in Daniel Levy et al. (eds.), *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: Transatlantic Relations After the Iraq War* (London and New York, Verso, 2005, pp. 3-12).

² John Stanley, “Translator’s Introduction”, in Georges Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969, p.xx.

³ It should be noted that Habermas and Derrida attempted to address the question of fundamentalist terror in a joint publication before Derrida’s death in 2004. See Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003.

⁴ Sorel, like Benjamin after him, distinguishes order-preserving and conservative *force* from order-defying and revolutionary *violence*. See Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings and T.E. Hulme, ed. Jeremy Jennings, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 15, pp.165-173; and see John L. Stanley, “Editor’s Introduction”, *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy*, ed. John L. Stanley, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2002, p. 43. Sorel thought of revolutionary violence as *qualitatively* different than its statist counterpart. This is in part, I think, because the general strike is premised on a subtraction of labor power from the workings of the capitalist economy instead of the active commission of violent deeds; and in part because of his emphasis on the proletarian love of labor and creativity. For all his thematization of “violence”, then, Sorel expected such violence to be “minimally brutal” – in fact, far less so that both the violence of the *ancien régime* and of French Revolutionary terror (see Stanley, “Editor’s Introduction”, *From Georges Sorel, op.cit.*, p. 44; and Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., pp. 105-106, 108).

⁵ See Antonis Balasopoulos, “Anti-Utopia and Dystopia: Rethinking the Generic Field”, in *Utopia Project Archive, 2006-2010*, ed. Vassilis Vlastaras, Athens, School of Fine Arts Publications, 2011, p. 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia”, in *New Left Review*, II 25 (January-February 2004), pp. 43-44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44. See also Perry Anderson’s critical response to the second leg of this double speculative schema in “The River of Time”, *New Left Review*, II 26 (March-April 2004), pp. 68-69.

⁹ Thus, as Stanley observes, Sorel disagrees with Marx’s utopian positing of a future end of class conflict, for instance; for Sorel, such social pacification “would be bound to end in decadence.” “Editor’s Introduction”, *From Georges Sorel*, ed. cit., p. 31.

¹⁰ The fact that Sorel is highly critical of millenarianism suggests that the phrase “catastrophic revolution” ought to be read with caution. In “The Ethics of Socialism” (*From Georges Sorel*, ed. cit., pp. 106-108), Sorel proposes that the maturation of the socialist movement involves a “transition from the hope of the perfect life to the practice of a tolerable life”, and thus a transition from utopia and “the expectation of a revolutionary cataclysm” to practice and to science. “I do not think that the social revolution could resemble a scene from the Apocalypse”, he notes elsewhere (“The Socialist Future of the Syndicates”, *From Georges Sorel*, ed. cit., p. 85).

¹¹ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹³ See *ibid.*, “Appendix” III: In Defense of Lenin”, pp. 286, 289.

¹⁴ See Jack J. Roth, “The Roots of Italian Fascism: Sorel and Sorelismo”, in *Journal of Modern History*, 39:1 (1967), pp. 30-45; the case of Sorel’s importance for Italian fascism has most extensively and controversially been made by Zeev Sternhell in *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994.

¹⁵ See Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., p. 223.

¹⁶ Karl Kautsky, the formerly leading figure of western Marxism, was one such “rhetorician”.

¹⁷ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., p. 292.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁹ See *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 113, 115, 117, 118, 210, 226-228, 242. John L. Stanley emphatically adds that “for Sorel the myth is not a tale” (“Introduction to the Transaction Edition”, *From Georges Sorel*, p. xii) – it does not operate as a narrative, largely because, in conformity to Sorel’s rejection of teleological and determinist thinking, it does not posit any ending, whether happy or tragic.

²⁰ See John L. Stanley, “Editor’s Introduction”, ed. cit., pp. 4, 12.

²¹ See Tom Moylan’s *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, esp. chapter 3, “Denunciation/Annunciation: Utopian Method”, and chapter 7, “On the Utopian Standpoint of Non-Violence”, pp. 69-84, 165-180.

²² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Mask of Anarchy: Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester” (1819), verses 22, 23. <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/anarchy.html>

²³ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., p.28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29; and Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London Verso, 2010, pp. 35-42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28. Stathis Gourgouris correctly notes that in Sorel’s view utopias remain linked to the present “by analogy”, whereas myth is “beyond analogy”, being indefinite and indeterminate. See his “The Concept of the Mythical (Schmitt with Sorel)”, *Cardozo Law Review* 21 (1999), p. 1502.

²⁷ See Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., pp. 29, 117, 120.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

³¹ See Karl Popper, “Utopia and Violence”, in *Conjectures and Refutations*, London, Routledge, 2002), pp. 477-488.

³² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 2: *Hegel and Marx*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 130, 134.

³³ See, indicatively, Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London and New York, Verso, 2005. According to Jameson, “anti-Utopian” works “are informed by a central passion to denounce and to warn against Utopian programs in the political realm. This passion, which is of course at one with Burke’s denunciation of the French Revolution as well as with more contemporary anti-communisms and anti-socialisms, is clearly quite distinct from the monitory fears and passions that drive

the critical dystopia, whose affiliations are feminist and ecological as much as they are Left-political” (p. 199). On this basis, Jameson proposes “the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism” as “the best working strategy” for the contemporary Left (p. xvi). Clearly, the case of Sorelian anti-utopianism, like that of Marxian or Leninist anti-utopianism (compared to which it is perhaps even more pronounced), cannot be understood by being contextualized within the Burkean, counter-revolutionary tradition Jameson names here, which is why I insist on the need to preserve the category of the “critical anti-utopia” as a necessary supplement to Tom Moylan’s notions of the “critical utopia” and the “critical dystopia” – see Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, New York and London, Methuen, 1986, esp. pp. 10-11, 41-46.

³⁴ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., p. 29.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 117.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁸ Darren Webb, *Marx, Marxism and Utopia*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, p. 25.

³⁹ The misconception of the function of Sorelian myth as legitimist in character may well be the key to his usurpation by fascism. On the irreconcilability between Sorel’s insurrectionary understanding of myth and Carl Schmitt’s legitimist approach to it, see Jan Werner-Müller, “Myth, Law and Order: Schmitt and Benjamin Read, *Reflections on Violence*”, *History of European Ideas* 29 (2003), pp. 462-468; and Gourgouris, “The Concept of the Mythical (Schmitt with Sorel)”, pp. 1488-1490, 1502-1503, 1511, 1514. On Sorelian myth as disruptive of the ideological naturalization of a “realm of necessity” see Carlo Salzani, “Violence as Pure Praxis: Benjamin and Sorel on Strike, Myth and Ethics”, *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique* 16 (2008), p. 29.

⁴⁰ See Eduard Berth’s remarks, as quoted by John L. Stanley, “Editor’s Introduction”, ed. cit., p. 4.

⁴¹ See Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., pp. 17-18, 19-20, 63, 83, 148-149, 153-155, 161, 170-171, 281; and Salzani, “Violence as Pure Praxis”, ed. cit., pp. 22-23.

⁴² On the relationship between utopia and ideology see Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, New York, Harcourt, 1985, pp. 192-204; and my own older and more recent forays into this subject in Antonis Balasopoulos, “Unworldly Worldliness: America and the Trajectories of Utopian Expansionism”, *Utopian Studies* 15.2 (2004), pp. 8-15; and Idem, “Conrad, Ideology and Utopia”, *Strange Vistas: Perspectives on the Utopian*, ed. Justyna Galant and Marta Komsta, Bern: Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 59-61.

⁴³ See Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2008, p. 94.

⁴⁴ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., p. 40.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁷ See Gourgouris, “The Concept of the Mythical (Schmitt with Sorel)”, ed. cit., p. 1502.

⁴⁸ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, op. cit., p. 115; emphasis added.

⁴⁹ On this, see Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., pp. 23-24, 46, 131-133; and Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism*, op.cit., pp.94-95.

⁵⁰ John L. Stanley, “Translator’s Introduction”, in *From Georges Sorel*, ed. cit., p. xxxviii.

⁵¹ Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, pp. 207-208; also see Ibid., p. 193; and Sorel, “Is there a Utopia in Marxism?” and “Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat”, in *From Georges Sorel*, ed. cit., pp. 145-146, 234.

⁵² See John L. Stanley, “Translator’s Introduction”, ed. cit., pp. xxxiii-xxxiv, Stanley, “Editor’s Introduction”, ed. cit., pp. 32-33, 39, and Sorel, “Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat”, ed. cit., pp. 232-233, 244, all in *From Georges Sorel*.

⁵³ See Ibid., pp. xiii, xx-xxiii; Stanley, “Introduction to the Transaction Edition”, ed. cit., p. xiii, Stanley, “Editor’s Introduction”, ed. cit., pp. 10, 23, 40; Sorel, “The Socialist Future of the Syndicates”, p. 85; Sorel, “Is there a Utopia in Marxism?”, pp. 134, 137; and Sorel, “Polemics on the Interpretation of Marxism: Bernstein and Kautsky”, pp. 164, 173; all in *From Georges Sorel*.

⁵⁴ Stanley, “Editor’s Introduction”, in *From Georges Sorel*, ed. cit., p. 37.

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, *Selected Writings 1938-1940*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 391. Theses XI, XII and XIII in Benjamin’s text manifest a similarly direct debt to the three prongs of the Sorelian critique of the ideology of progress I have outlined above.

⁵⁶ See Nicolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, esp. pp. xxx-xxxii, xli, 7, 13, 18, 20-25, 31-35; and Neal Wood, “Some Reflections on Sorel and Machiavelli”, *Political Science Quarterly* 83:1 (March 1968), pp. 76-91. Regarding Sorel’s idea of justice, John L. Stanley relevantly notes that “the problem of distributive justice, either as regards rotation of offices or distribution of wealth is made by Sorel into a secondary question and replaced by the idea of virtue in the producers”. Such virtue, Stanley shows, was grounded in ancient ideals of the farmer-soldier. See “Editor’s Introduction”, *From Georges Sorel*, ed. cit., pp. 23-24, 28, 39-40.

⁵⁷ See Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*, London, Verso, 2000, p. 4. Clearly, Zupančič’s approach to Kant is very different from that of either Habermas or Derrida, as Slavoj Žižek immediately observes in his Foreword (*Ethics of the Real*, ed. cit., p. vii).

⁵⁸ See Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., pp. 129-130, 140, 154. “The utopians”, Sorel remarks, “used all their literary art in the endeavour to lull anxiety by pictures of the future so enchanting that all fear might be banished; but the more they accumulated fine promises, the more did thoughtful people suspect traps – and in this they were not completely mistaken, for the utopians would have led the world to disasters, tyranny and stupidity if they had been listened to” (p. 129).

⁵⁹ See Antonis Balasopoulos, “Repetition: Thinking Between G.W.F. Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* (1837) and Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)”, *Philosophica* 54 (2019), pp. 81-97.

⁶⁰ Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, ed. cit., pp. 192, 208.

⁶¹ See Karl Marx’s reported letter to Edmund Spenser Beesly, quoted in Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., pp. 128-129. For similar remarks regarding Marxism’s incompatibility with the utopian casting of an “ideal of the future” see Ibid., pp. 74, 114, 118-119, 132, 153-154. Such insistence does not prevent Sorel, however, from speculating on the character of

production in a post-revolutionary context, noting, among others, that art should be regarded as “an *anticipation* of the highest form of production” (p. 244), and that the artistic “striving towards excellence, which exists in the absence of any personal, immediate, or proportional reward” (p. 248) may well anticipate the “ethics of the producers” of a socialist future.

⁶² See Müller, “Myth, Law and Order”, p. 469. It is interesting, given the frequent allegations of Sorel’s connection with right-wing anti-Semitism, that for him the revolutionary proletariat “works subterraneously” and “separates itself from the modern world as Judaism separated itself from the ancient world” (*Reflections on Violence*, ed. cit., p. 226). Earlier, Sorel remarks that socialism should be “exceedingly careful” to avoid falling “to the level of what Engels calls bombastic anti-Semitism”, though “the advice of Engels on this point has not always been followed” (Ibid., p. 153).

⁶³ See Theodor Adorno’s remarks in his conversation on utopia with Ernst Bloch in “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing”, in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁴ I am referring to Sorel’s decisive impact on Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (1921), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, Vol. 1: 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 236-252. Scholem recalls that Benjamin read Sorel’s book in 1919 and commended the book to him. He adds that Sorel “occupied” Benjamin “for a long time to come.” See Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, New York Review of Books, 2003, p. 104.

⁶⁵ On “negative utopia” see “‘Theologica Negativa’ and ‘Utopia Negativa’: Franz Kafka”, in Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe. A Study in Elective Affinity*, London, Athlone Press, 1992, pp. 71-94; and Ilan Gur-Ze’ev, “Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer: From Utopia to Redemption”, *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1998), pp. 119-155.

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