

Georges Sorel stands as one of the pivotal innovators of socialism in the late nineteenth century. He, in turn, was referred to as one “of the two original thinkers thrown up by socialism”—the doctrinal heir to Marx—and, later on, as “the key to all contemporary political thinking.”¹ As a follower of what he saw as “true-Marxism,” Sorel desperately sought to drive the masses, “the proletariat” into revolution against the bourgeois democracies that had corrupted Marx and, in his mind, ruined socialism. Ironically, Sorel’s philosophy and his desire to awake in the people a mentality for action eventually produced the ideological antithesis to socialism. Despite being an ardent socialist, he would lay the foundations for the fascism that would seize Europe in the aftermath of the First World War.

Born in France a year before the Revolutionary Year of 1848, Sorel fit into the same mold as any other disgruntled intellectual one could find at that time in Germany, Austria, Russia, and throughout Europe. He came from a reasonably well-off family but, nonetheless, found himself completely disillusioned with the culture into which he was born. Appalled by the decadence and corruption surrounding him, he was further distressed by socialism’s acquiescence to the bourgeoisie; he became preoccupied “with the phenomena of integration and disintegration, decadence and rebirth.”² He firmly believed that society needed to be destroyed and wiped away. Like Marx, he saw society’s greatest hope in the ascetic discipline that existed among the proletariat: only with the revolt of the working class could society be cleansed and purified.* Instead, the socialists of his day were negotiating within the confines of bourgeois

¹ Jacob Talmon, *Myth of the Nation and Vision of Revolution*, (Transaction, 1981) 451.

² Talmon 453.

* I find it interesting that where Sorel turned inward—to the proletariat—for his solution to France’s problems, a half-century later, Sartre sees redemption from the outside, from the colonies. Instead of some inward purification, Sartre, similarly disillusioned and disgusted with France, encourages the lowly colonized to rise against and humble his countrymen.

democracy itself instead of working to tear it down! Socialist politicians had become traitors and accomplices. Where Marx had espoused a vanguard to lead the proletariat to violent liberation, Sorel saw instead the socialist elites leading the working class into an alliance the bourgeoisie.

The result, Sorel admitted, was “capitalism achieve[d] a resolution of a problem which seemed insoluble.”³ Contrary to what Marx had predicted, capitalism, by facilitating democracy and allowing trade unions—Sorel called them syndicates—had succeeded in stalling the socialist revolution by improving the worker’s standard of living. As a result, the pure proletariat became corrupt, immoral, and worse yet, optimistic! Sorel, repulsed by the complacency modern socialism had with decadent society, believed that the socialists had moved “with remarkable ease from revolutionary wrath to the most ridiculous social pacifism.”⁴ As a self-proclaimed pessimist, he believed in the incessant suffering of man; he was obsessed with acquiring the will to overcome this misery and finding a pathway to deliverance from man’s wretched state of existence. This was Sorel’s socialism, and, as he made abundantly clear in his *Decomposition of Marxism*, he had no interest in achieving utopia. Instead, Sorel used socialism as the mechanism, by virtue of the myth of violent revolution, whereby man was able to purify himself of his weaknesses.

His words are full of references to religion and war. Sorel compared the proletariat, organized as it was into syndicates, to “the early Christians or the extreme Protestant sects waiting for a Second Coming or the monastic orders which arose to purify the Church.”⁵ Despite Sorel’s general disdain for religion, he found it extremely powerful, especially due to its mythical foundations. He appropriated the power of myth for socialism, and it became the duty

³ Georges Sorel, *The Decomposition of Marxism*, trans. Irving Horowitz, (The Humanities Press: New York, 1961) 239.

⁴ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. John & Charlotte Stanley, (Oxford University Press: New York, 1976) 194.

⁵ Talmon 462.

of himself and other true Marxists to create for the proletariat the “myth of the general strike.” This myth creates the impetus for a continued violence, an unending revolution, where the proletariat exterminates all that stands in its path. In actuality, he significantly amplified the importance of Marx’s original revolution by turning it into a religious creed of sorts. Whether the myth became reality was irrelevant, what it did was to keep socialism continually on the offensive, removing the temptation for socialist politicians to accept the current political order.⁶ The result was an entirely new form of socialism that ultimately led towards the creation of fascism.

This becomes more and more evident when Sorel invoked Nietzsche’s notion of *master* and *slave* morality; Sorel believed that the Proletariat, properly motivated, had all of the necessary traits to become what Nietzsche had called “the blond beast.” Sorel was referencing the archetypal Roman legionnaire or Homeric hero whose disciplined bravery had “cleared a path for [them] on land and sea, everywhere erecting imperishable monuments for good or evil.”⁷ He equated this momentous bravery with what he called a “heroic mentality.” Sorel saw the acquisition of this mentality as essential for the proletariat’s ultimate destiny: the accomplishment of feats of glory.

This philosophy was so alluring because it advocated immediate violent action. This spoke to and, indeed, empowered a generation of malcontent intellectuals who had grown tired of waiting for Marx’s historically preordained revolution. What was remarkable was that, while Sorel began with Marxist terminology, he transformed the proletariat from the faceless mob seen in *The Communist Manifesto* into a “dazzling manifestation of the *individualist strength* in the

⁶ Sorel 203.

⁷ Sorel 213.

aroused masses.”⁸ The working man would willfully subordinate himself to the collective in an act of complete individualism—something previously absent in the development of socialism. Sorel’s doctrine allowed individuals to take the course of history into their own hands.

Additionally, by the end of Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*, he had moved from traditional socialism to advocating what could be considered a principled anarchism. This sort of anarchy created a dilemma because the “heroic mentality” that fueled it demanded continued political and social success, and “any failing appear[d] malevolent, perverse, and treasonable.”⁹ As a result, the distance between principled anarchy and “democratic centralism (perhaps better called totalitarian democracy) is not a very long one.”¹⁰

Here are the seeds of fascism. While Sorel himself was never a legitimate fascist, his ideas took hold with men who would become the founders of this new ideology. Jacob Talmon illustrates this with a brief history of post-war Italy, a place where Sorel, in fact, was better known than in his native France. Italy clearly represents the best example of fascism’s rise, and its leader, Benito Mussolini, stands as a figure that embodies Sorel’s philosophy in action. Like Sorel, he began as a socialist, rising to lead Italy’s socialist party, but then became disillusioned with the inability of socialism to take any sort of concentrated action on behalf of his people. As a result, he embraced the ideas of a “heroic mentality” and the destiny of the strong to violently conquer the weak. He broke with the socialists but lacked the mandate to proceed with his new vision for Italy—for that, he would have to wait for the First World War.

Ironically, several years previous Sorel had predicted, in the rare event of a massive international war, that moderation and social peace would fade. As a result, strong men,

⁸ Sorel 221.

⁹ Talmon 468.

¹⁰ Talmon 468.

warriors, would come to power, and proletarian violence would ensue. This suggestion is nowhere more accurate than in the Italian case. There, as a result of Italy's profound sense of frustration and unfulfilment with its position in the world after the First World War,* elites desired a "baptism of fire and blood" to reestablish the old imperial vision behind the Italian nation.¹¹ This desire of a return to "Rome" combined with the failures of Italian forces preceding the war, gave Mussolini everything he needed to eliminate his opponents and seize complete power.

In Italy, Mussolini was able to reconcile Sorel's socialism with the powerful force of nationalism at work in the country. He limited Marx's revolution—Sorel's General Strike—to the national level, stripping it of its international elements. In fact, Mussolini called Italy the "Proletarian Nation." Under him, absolute loyalty to the state was required; Italian imperial ambitions were legitimated as the natural expansion of a superior culture that was the proletariat. Sorel's philosophy now came full circle in Italy, and the result was fascism. He positioned this not as an alternative to socialism but as the heir to it. What began as an attempt to realign socialism with Marx ended up creating an entirely new ideology.

This ideology of fascism is, in many respects, nothing but a perversion of socialism. Nonetheless, the doctrinal positions of the two begin far apart: socialism emphasizes the classless collective and fascism preaches the individuals worship of the state. The difference is more significant than it seems, but the socialism and fascism's entanglement with the idea of revolution puts them both on the same course to authoritarian terror. That, unfortunately, remains the ultimate legacy of Georges Sorel—even into the twenty-first century.

* In the course of this semester, the continual reoccurrence of Nietzsche's original idea of *ressentiment* has struck me as nothing short of remarkable. Perhaps I am exaggerating the importance of the idea, but it rings true to me, and I have recognized again and again in all our readings—almost to the point where I consider the paradigm of being an intellectual.

¹¹ Talmon 482.

Works Cited:

Sorel, Georges. *The Decomposition of Marxism*. Trans. Irving Horowitz. The Humanities Press: New York, 1961.

Sorel, Georges. *Reflections on Violence*. Trans. John & Charlotte Stanley. Oxford University Press: New York, 1976.

Talmon, Jacob. *Myth of the Nation and Vision of Revolution*. Transaction Press, 1981.