CHAPTER VII

INTELLECTUALS AND THE NEED FOR ACTION

"Those who read a great many books," said Anatole France, "are like eaters of hashish . . . books are the opium of the West. We are being devoured by them. A day will come when we shall all be librarians, and that will be the end."[1] There was at the end of the 19th century a climate of opinion which refused to allow itself to be so devoured and was reacting against the tyranny of words. It was a climate in which Bergson and Nietzsche were the principal intellectual influences, and from which Sorel was to draw much in his attack on intellectuals and intellectualism. Barrès, but not Maurras, would support such an attack, and all three, in the attempt to turn back the tide of decadence, would propose the necessity for heroic action and even violence.

SOREL AND THE ATTACK ON INTELLECTUALS

No matter how the political and social views of Sorel varied, his attack on intellectuals and intellectualism was a constant one. Intellectualism he equated with extreme rationalism, which he had attacked as incapable of understanding the complexity of phenomena, and which therefore was based on the conception that science could produce solutions to all problems.[2] History showed that rationalism had led to deplorable results. Through Greek rationalism, philosophy had become dogmatic, incapable of directing experimental research, and responsible for the lack of success in the common arts and mechanics. Greek rationalism was responsible for artificial abstractions, verbal analogies, words that ruled things. The deductive spirit of Greek science and geometry was in absolute opposition to the inventive spirit.[3] Its monist

1 Anatole France, *On Life and Letters*, 1:xii.

2 *Reflections on Violence*, p. 154.

3 Georges Sorel (pseudonym J. David), "L'Idéalisme de M. Brunetière," *Le Devenir social* (June 1896), 2:505.

superstition had become the vice of most classical philosophers.

In similar fashion, Sorel objected to the popularity and underlying premises of neo-Kantism. He disliked its popularity because Kant and his disciples had introduced into philosophy "a horrible chatter that had noticeably confused problems,"[4] and had thereby greatly contributed to its discrediting. He opposed its subjective and purely moral premises since these were in opposition to the objective certainty of science.[5]

Another objection he raised to rationalism was that of its inevitable optimism. Sorel criticized the optimism of the Sophists which led them both to regard the spectacle of the world as a very interesting panorama, and to conclude that everything had been made for amusement. Pessimism was the indispensable stimulant to creative energy, and every great movement, religious and political, had had a pessimistic conception of life as its basis.

In the contemporary world one could hope to find at most "incomplete developments," traces of fragmentary movements. Even then, observations had to be limited to the economic field. Intellectualism could never fully understand living reality, because it assumed an "invariant structure," a logical movement toward some definite end. In every complex body of knowledge it was possible to distinguish a clear and an obscure region, of which the latter was perhaps the more important. Intellectuals could not deal with the obscure part, the more important part of relationships. In morality, they could deal with problems of justice but not with relations between the sexes; in legislation, with the problem of duties but not of the family; in economics, with the problem of exchange but not of production. A very false idea of revolutions would be obtained if one supposed them made for the reasons that philosophers often attributed to their makers.[6] It was

[4] Sorel, "Vues sur les problèmes de la philosophie," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (1910), 18:611.

[5] Sorel, "La Science dans l'éducation," *Le Devenir social* (February 1896), 2:138.

[6] *Les Illusions du progrès*, p. 135.

unfortunate that the social reformers of the 19th century had been dominated by intellectualist conceptions and that for them pure logic had had the value of a social science. The clear, the simple, the distinct—in all these Sorel saw the same metaphysical illusion. Bergson, who was not so deluded, but who, on the contrary, had put mystery in the center of his philosophical preoccupations, was the vigorous tree in the center of the isolated steppes of modern philosophy. Scientific investigation had its honored place, but science was not the only method of knowledge.

The 19th century applications of so-called natural rights had not been happy. Social utopias constituted the clearest manifestation of the aberrations to which the theory of natural rights logically led. However, socialism was not a social science, nor was the revolution a scientific process.[7] Indeed, those revolutions inspired by idealism had been ferocious; the Terror in France had been the work of obstinate theoreticians. Sorel was true to his own maxim: "One dreads bringing too great a rigor into language because it would be in contradiction with the fluid character of reality and the language would be deceptive."[8]

Since intellectualism was incapable of understanding the real world, it was not possible to provide an intelligible exposition of the passage from principles to action without the use of myth. The myth could not be refuted, it was an appeal to a "deeper consciousness." It meant freedom from the "superstition of the book." Though Sorel anticipated the idea of myth in several of his books, in *Le Procès de Socrate, La Ruine du monde antique, Le Système historique de Renan*, and in his *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, and applied it to the demon of Socrates, the hysteria of Mahomet, the stigmata of Francis, and even the resurrection of Christ, it was not until the *Reflections on Violence* that he gave a full explanation of what he meant, and defined it as the image held by the participants in a movement of impending action in which their cause will triumph. Sorel paid tribute to those

[7] Sorel, "La Crise du socialisme," *Revue politique et parlementaire* (December 1898), 18:598-612.

[8] *Matériaux*, p. 58.

thinkers who had speculated on the general idea of the myth. In *Le Procès de Socrate* he had found Plato to be superior to Aristotle by virtue of the former's appreciation of the value of myths and by the use he made of mythical expositions. He regarded Platonic myths neither as fables, nor as purely poetic inventions for amusement, nor mystic reveries, but as serious and scientific. He praised Vico's *ricorso*, a poetically creative state characterized by the construction of myths.

Through the teaching of Bergson, he understood that movement explained itself above all by means of images.[9] No philosophic system owed its success to the logical value of its arguments alone. Probably Marx had put forward the conception of a catastrophe only as a myth, illustrating in a very clear way the ideas of class struggles and social revolution.[10]

For Sorel, myths were not descriptions of things, but expressions of the determination to act. It was not reason that had guided and that continued to guide crowds in their passionate actions, but kinds of schematical ideological projections. Active groups were motivated by emotional appeals, which played an important but nonlogical role in history. A myth could not be refuted, since it was fundamentally identical with the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of the movement. In this way, the Knights of the Middle Ages had gone in search of the Holy Grail, and the soldiers of the Convention tramped through Europe. All the major historical movements propelling action had had myths—early Christianity, the Reformation, the French Revolution, militant Catholicism—and the next would be revolutionary syndicalism. While the effect of utopias had always been to direct men's minds toward reforms which could be brought about by patching up existing systems, contemporary myths led men to prepare themselves for a combat that would destroy the existing state of things.[11] Historically, ideologies had been only translation into an abstract form of the myths which impelled to the final destruc-

[9] *La Décomposition du Marxisme*, p. 60.
[10] *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, p. 396.
[11] *Reflections on Violence*, p. 33.

tion. In contemporary France syndicalism was such an ideology, and the idea of the general strike, because it made the concept of socialism more heroic, should be looked upon as having incalculable value, even though, like all myths, it might never come about. The general strike had a character of infinity because it put to one side all discussion of definite reasons and confronted man with a catastrophe.

The manner in which Sorel used the idea of the myth, with its emphasis on the General Strike and on violence, is indicative of the correctness of Cassirer's view that the myth reaches its full force when man faces an unusual and dangerous situation, that 20th century myths have been a recourse to desperate means, and that myth is not only far remote from empirical reality but is, in a sense, in flagrant contradiction to it.[12] Moreover, Sorel's view of intellectualism was always an extremist one. It was an excessive rationalism which neglected the place of emotions or of instincts in the human situation, which regarded progress as inevitable, which lacked appreciation of reality, and which was exclusively optimistic. It was in fact the same kind of extremist 18th century belief—that all problems could be solved by some simple, uniform method—which had led Graham Wallas in 1908 to warn against the tendency to exaggerate the intellectuality of mankind. Yet the warning Sorel gave of the dangers of excessive rationalism was a salutary one, and it is remarkable that he anticipated, 50 years before it arose, the opposition to what is now called scientism and historicism.

If Sorel was philosophically opposed to intellectualism, he was opposed to intellectuals for a variety of reasons. They were superficial, they were interested only in material benefits or in capturing power, they thought only of their personal interests and never of the general interest, they misunderstood the nature of science, they were interested in politics and in the strengthening of state power, their ideas were basically negative ones, they were attached to the bourgeoisie and to the petty-bourgeoisie and were opposed to the

12 Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, New York, 1955, pp. 55, 349-350.

best interests of the proletariat, they were incapable of leadership, they thought an end was definite and foreseeable and that solutions could be found to all problems, they thought of themselves as a sacerdotal caste destined, by their superior culture, to impose a new order on the world.

Sorel's personal expressions of distaste for intellectuals, as shown in *Reflections on Violence* and *La Révolution Dreyfusienne*, often bordered on the libelous. When "Agathon's" book, *L'Esprit de la nouvelle Sorbonne*, with its attack on the Sorbonne appeared, Sorel gave it a laudatory review under the title "Lyripipii Sorbonici moralisationes."[13] Sorel expanded his attack on intellectuals to cover the whole of recorded history. His first book, *Le Procès de Socrate*, was a bitter attack on Socrates and his disciples. Socrates had created the most deplorable confusion between law, ethics and science, and had introduced probabilism into ethics and lack of certainty into politics. His school was to be condemned for its optimism, for its desire to strengthen the state and to transform it into a church, and for its lack of attention to the problem of work. Socrates' chief disciple, Plato, was condemned because of the central place he had given to the philosopher in the ideal city state. In a later work, *Le Système historique de Renan*, Sorel attacked the philosopher-king, Marcus Aurelius, who had attempted to persecute Christians, failed, and thus demonstrated the impotence of official wisdom. Although Christianity had triumphed and had introduced the notion of the sublime, it too would have succumbed because of its theologians and doctors, if it had not been for the mystics.

In the 17th century the humanists, descendants of the Renaissance with its pagan love of life, had replaced the pessimism that had fostered the moral value of Christianity. The Protestants had attempted to conserve the old characteristics of religion, but Protestantism had been vanquished in its turn by intellectualism. In the 18th century, a stupid century,[14] the Philosophes, from Diderot to Voltaire, were "immoral

[13] *L'Indépendance*, April 15, 1911.

[14] Sorel, *La Ruine du monde antique*, Paris, 1924, p. 229.

buffoons of a degenerate aristocracy."[15] Only Rousseau escaped partially from this scathing criticism, and that was because he had upheld the dignity of workers. In the 19th century, Sorel criticized the Utopians, Fourier and Saint-Simon, for their desire to impose a strong state, Comte for the authoritarian attitude expressed in his assertion, "There is no liberty of conscience in geometry," which he made analogous to relations in society, and Renan for his intellectual dilettantism, which led to the exploitation of producers.

This historical analysis was significant for Sorel. He argued that one could not read the history of Christianity of the third century without thinking of the present and wondering if the alliance of French intellectuals with politicians could not have consequences very similar to those produced in the third century,[16] with its spectacle of corrupted philosophers and intellectuals who followed their personal interests and allied with those who exploited public credulity. Intellectuals were interested only in material benefits and personal advantages, and would be prepared to sacrifice the general interest to that end. Each of them aspired, like Caesar, to be first in a little group.[17] Unlike workers, they had no spirit of solidarity, they did not form a bloc; they had professional, not class interests.

Intellectuals were not thinkers, but men who had adopted the profession of thinking and who expected an aristocratic salary because of the nobility of that profession. It was because of this desire to maintain the level of their salary that so many intellectuals tried to prevent women from becoming members of the liberal professions, since they believed that a profession quickly lost its prestige when women entered it. They made the exploitation of thought and of politics their profession; they had no regard for ideas as such, but appreciated them only for their value in capturing power.[18] They had no industrial aptitude, but tried to persuade the workers that it was in the workers' interest for them to exercise power.

[15] *Les Illusions du progrès*, p. 133.
[16] Sorel, *Le Système historique de Renan*, Paris, 1906, p. 333.
[17] *Matériaux*, pp. 97-98.
[18] *La Révolution Dreyfusienne*, p. 30.

The Socratics had asked that government belong to the intellectuals,[19] but could one imagine a more horrible government than that of academicians? It was because of their exploitation of politics that they were capable of adopting attitudes so unexpected and so disturbing to public order. The creative hatred, the ferocious jealousy of the poor intellectual who hoped to send the rich speculator to the guillotine was an evil passion without socialist sentiment. Since rich men had ceased providing their revenues, poor intellectuals had pursued them with fanatical and ferocious hate.[20] Moreover, if intellectuals strove for the conquest of power, they could not want the disappearance of the state, since they would want to use it for their own benefit. Modern intellectuals were like the Socratics and like Calvin who supervised, directed, oppressed public opinion; opponents would be reduced to silence as disturbers of order. The end of intellectual projects like that of Saint-Simonism would be to transform industry according to a unitary, Napoleonic plan.

Intellectuals had more effect as a harmful than a helpful force. History had many examples to bear this out, and the abuse of sophisms that had corrupted socialism was not one of the least examples showing the danger of professional intellectuals. The incommensurable stupidity of M. Homais was the natural product of the influence of the man of letters on the French bourgeoisie for almost a half century.[21] Intellectuals were not competent to understand great historical movements in general, and their theories had little relevance to the working-class movement in particular. In fact, there was only an artificial link between socialist theories and the proletarian movement, since the theories were already old and decrepit.[22]

Sorel was concerned both with attacking the supposed superiority of intellectuals and their hold over the proletarian movement, and also with asserting the ability of the workers

[19] *Le Procès de Socrate*, pp. 7-8, 183, 237-238.
[20] *La Ruine du monde antique*, p. 273.
[21] *Les Illusions du progrès*, p. 134.
[22] Sorel, "Les Syndicats industriels et leur signification," *La Revue socialiste* (August 1902), 36:174.

to take charge of their own movement. The role of the intellectuals was at best an auxiliary one. Some of them, badly paid, discontented, or unemployed, became members of the "intellectual proletariat," but attached themselves to the petty-bourgeoisie, and tried to turn socialism into reaction and utopian socialism. The proletariat, despised by the petty-bourgeoisie, could hope for nothing from the poets, philosophers, and professional do-gooders who lived at its expense and who were interested not in the dictatorship of the proletariat but in the representative dictatorship of the proletariat. Since intellectuals would suffer professionally from a proletarian revolution, those who "had embraced the profession of thinking for the proletariat"[23] must therefore be acting in their own interests. Sorel agreed with Kautsky that "the interests of the proletariat are diametrically opposed to those of the Intelligentsia."

Sorel thought his greatest claim to originality was in having maintained that the proletariat could emancipate itself without the help of middle-class intellectuals. The makers of machines did not need the guidance of theoreticians; the workers had to rely on themselves to ameliorate their conditions of life.[24] The idea of the superiority of intellectuals was false. Qualities of leadership were not exceptional, and were often found among manual workers, perhaps more often than among intellectuals. If the worker accepted control by the intellectuals, he would always remain incapable of governing himself. Theories were born of bourgeois reflection; the task of the proletariat was to march forward without imposing upon itself any ideal plan. "I do not believe," Sorel said, "that one stirs up the masses with writings. . . . It is necessary to galvanize people by an untiring drive, by a struggle that goes beyond manifestos, by the formation of a real army.[25]

Like Sorel, Barrès was opposed to the idea that intellectualism could provide an understanding of life, partly because intellect played but a small part in human action, and partly

[23] *Reflections on Violence*, pp. 37, 151.
[24] *Matériaux*, pp. 65, 307.
[25] Jean Variot, *Propos de Georges Sorel*, p. 124.

because people were not even masters of the thoughts born in them. The thoughts were inevitably determined by a person's given milieu. In the *Culte du moi* trilogy, Barrès argued that communication takes place mainly through vibrations, by manifestations of sentiment rather than by a process of ratiocination. In the *Romans d'énergie nationale* trilogy, he asserted that communion with the earth and the dead, the family, the province, and the nation would provide a substitute for reason. There was no liberty to think, for one could live only according to one's ancestors.

Barrès has the dubious distinction of having first used the word "intellectual" as a term of opprobrium. For Barrès, an intellectual was an individual who was deluded by the idea that society must be founded on logic, and who failed to recognize that it rested on prior necessities perhaps foreign to individual reason. Chief among these prior necessities were the ideas of the strengthening of France and restoration to it of the territories lost in 1870. Intellectuals thought of France not for its own sake, but as a means of serving something else.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

Maurras and Barrès joined with Sorel in his insistence on the need for action and in advocacy of the heroic figure who was so lacking in the Republic. Change had to take place through the hero, either as the embodiment of true values, or as the leader of the attack on the contemporary institutions.

The death of French energy, Barrès argued, meant the decadence of the country.[26] The regeneration of its energy, especially as expressed by the hero, would be the means of renaissance for the regime. Barrès was concerned therefore with the hero both in fiction and in history. The artist was great, he said, as he possessed an idea of the hero. In fiction, his leading characters were all concerned with aspiring to heroism and the affirmation of their will. Barrès' leading figure, Sturel, in *Les Déracinés*, was seeking internal animation

[26] Maurice Barrès, *Taine et Renan*, ed. V. Girard, Paris, 1922, p. 103.

through expenditure of energy, presentiment of danger, knowledge of risk, ability to face the unforeseen and to support misfortune. In history, Barrès talked of the common traits of all the heroes of France, from Vercingétorix to Boulanger and Marchand. "It is possible that in all places Nature is beautiful, but I recognize its temples only on the tombs of great men."[27] The tomb of Napoleon, the professor of energy, was not, for young men, a place of peace; it was the meeting place of all the audacious energies, wills, and appetites. Barrès confessed to loving the man of the 18th Brumaire and along with him, five or six heroes, men who knew how to walk on the waves and, because they had confidence in themselves,[28] were not engulfed.

He was constantly stressing the need for *élan*. It was, in fact, "less by their doctrines than by their *élan* that men lead us."[29] It was this more or less tense energy that accounted for the value of an individual or race. In the past, the *élan* had been expressed in different ways. In the atmosphere of the *Last Supper* of da Vinci, one could see the internal life attaining its greatest intensity, and the human spirit embracing all aspects of reality. In Michelangelo, Barrès saw the effervescence of the man wanting to be God. The Sistine Chapel was one of the immortal reservoirs of energy. Barrès always looked back to the bravery and heroism of the Middle Ages, chronicled in legends, epics, and history. One of the useful ways in which the *élan* could be developed was through "intercessors," intermediaries between nature and the Infinite. Among these intercessors were Constant and Saint-Beuve, two saints of sensibility who were of great assistance in self-analysis.

In contemporary society, it was socialism that was being organized to utilize the considerable force it had accumulated.[30] Barrès' interest in socialism, in spite of his electoral

[27] *Mes Cahiers*, III:213.

[28] Maurice Barrès, "Napoléon, professeur d'énergie," *Le Journal*, April 14, 1893.

[29] *Amori et dolori sacrum*, p. 64.

[30] Barrès, *Toute Licence sauf contre l'amour*, Paris, 1892, p. 62.

programs, was less an absorption with economic problems than a passion for self-development. His collaboration in the Socialist movement was one of communion with the soul of the masses, a stimulation of his *élan*.

Barrès was even willing to allow that cosmopolitans might have as much ability as Catholics to give expression to this *élan*. He regarded Marie Bashkirtseff as a representative of the eternal force which made heroes emerge in each generation.[31]

But the real contemporary means of inspiring action was the man on horseback, Boulanger. In him, the French people would be able to envision the modern army, penetrated by the spirit of all classes—an army in which nonprofessional soldiers could play such a large part. Boulanger, in contrast with the old legalist in the Elysée who was incapable of an appeal that could touch the masses, had a brilliance which was always appealing to a warlike nation and was capable of summoning French reserves of energy. It was disillusioning for Barrès later to admit that Boulanger had been for 30 years an official, for three years an agitator, and for one year a melancholic.

In Barrès' demand for action, hate, an emotion that was dominant in the soul, might be a more important sentiment than love in that it could propel the greatest amount of energy in a single direction. The most intense and beautiful hatred was produced by civil wars, and the best of civil wars took place in the corridors of the Palais Bourbon.[32]

Yet Barrès, with his taste for combat—seeing the struggle of Jacob against the angel as one of the most beautiful warlike images, and Jacob as embodying the heart of life—and continually deploring the lack of energy, never reconciled this feeling for action with his attraction to symbols of death and decadence. The writer who so stressed action and *élan* also thought that the most beautiful thing in the world was "a man, falling to pieces." With such complexity of motivation,

[31] Barrès, *Trois Stations de psychothérapie*, Paris, 1891, p. 68.
[32] Barrès, *Du Sang, de la volupté et de la mort*, Paris, 1910, p. 130.

a temper of moderation becomes impossible, and the emphasis is inevitably placed on destruction.

For Sorel as well as Barrès, the problem was how to produce a renaissance of energy in a society dominated by politicians as empty of ideas as of grandeur of soul, by rhetoricians and money-dealers, a society—interested neither in the sublime nor in eternal glory but only in enduring. Sublimity was dead in the middle class and therefore the bourgeoisie was doomed not to possess any ethic at all. Sorel, who in 1914 had written to Croce that the great problem was to live without religion, was, as his disciple Berth suggested, haunted by the sublime. To introduce the sublime into society meant action, the necessity for tension, the desirability of struggle, the need for the heroic. Movement was the essence of emotional life, and it was in terms of movement that one could speak of creative consciousness. Conscious action was vital because "movements toward greatness are always forced and movements toward decadence always natural."[33] It was unwise to neglect the enormous power of mediocrity in history.

Sorel again drew historical parallels to illustrate his argument. In *Le Procès de Socrate*, he expressed admiration for Xenophon, the man who was an example of heroic behavior and who attacked Socrates, the adversary of the heroes of Marathon. The Socratics were responsible for the fall of Athens because they had destroyed the heroic conception that gave the city its moral basis. "Let us salute the revolutionaries as the Greeks saluted the Spartan heroes who defended Thermopylae and helped to preserve the civilization of the ancient world," urged Sorel.[34] If Christianity had become the master of the Roman world, it was due to the intransigence of those leaders who, like Tertullian, would not admit any conciliation or accept any lessening of antagonism between the Church and the State. Similarly, Calvinism was to be admired. It showed that the enthusiasm accompanying "the will to salvation" would provide the courageous man with sufficient satisfaction to maintain his spirit.

[33] *La Critica* (January 25, 1911), 26:343; (November 14, 1914), 27:114.
[34] *Reflections on Violence*, p. 99.

This desirable enthusiasm and spirit was lacking in the French contemporary scene. The bourgeoisie had risen as the auxiliary of the crown, and had benefited from the struggle between the monarchy and the Fronde. A class that had risen in this way could not act as a class of actual rulers would.[35] It was concerned only with the immediate interests of its members. It had lost all idea of the mission of the state or of its own mission as the leading class. Its cowardice showed that it was condemned to death. Only two events could prevent the stultifying of the middle class: a great foreign war which might renew the energy that was lacking, and which in any case would doubtless bring into power men with the will to govern, or a great extension of proletarian violence. Since Sorel thought the first was unlikely, it was necessary to have the latter. Employers as well as workers would benefit from the struggle, because the knowledge of the revolutionary tendencies of the proletariat would act on the bourgeoisie as a moral force capable of arousing it from the lethargy to which its too easy prosperity had led it.[36]

Sorel attacked not only the refusal to fight but the very idea of pacifism. It was war above all that explained the juridical genius of Rome. In France the solidity of the Republican regime was due not to reason or some law of progress but to the wars of the Revolution and the Empire which had filled the French soul with an enthusiasm analogous to that provoked by religion. Sorel approved Proudhon's justification of force, agreeing that war makes man greater.[37] He criticized the prevailing British pacifist feeling which was closely associated with the intellectual decadence there. The trouble was that they did not take war seriously; in the Boer War, they went to war as if they were gentlemen going to a football game.

Sorel was disturbed not only by the pacific nature of the bourgeoisie but also by its preoccupation with the future. Even more unfortunate was middle-class influence on Social-

[35] *Les Illusions du progrès*, p. 80.

[36] *Reflections*, pp. 82-83; *Matériaux*, p. 412.

[37] Sorel, "Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon," *Revue philosophique* (July 1892), 34:45.

ists, who were led to think about future society and to plan utopias. But utopianism was illusionary; to know the present was to be practical. The desired final state was secondary; what was essential was the knowledge of how to act.[38] The question was no longer what society should be like, but what the proletariat could accomplish in the actual class struggle. And for Sorel, it was only the syndicalist movement that studied the Socialist movement from the point of view of the present, not from that of the future.

Sorel ridiculed the "worldly socialism" of the Dreyfusard financiers, the mutualist organizations that fostered social peace, acquired a stake in society, and had a body of officials acting in a bourgeois spirit, consumers' cooperatives which, like all democratic societies, were incompetent, dishonest, and self-seeking, and trade unions that were interested only in arbitration.[39]

Sorel thought Marx was wrong to believe that a democratic regime made revolution more accessible because under it the class struggle became easier to understand. In fact, the exact opposite was the truth, and the workers were led to a trade union mentality. Sorel attacked reformism and rejected social legislation, the eight-hour day, profit-sharing schemes, workers' insurance, and cooperative schemes. All promoters of social reforms were victims of illusions; to believe in reform of bourgeois society was to affirm the principle of private property. Social legislation was useful only if it assisted the progress of revolutionary syndicalism. Sorel broke with his friend and colleague, Lagardelle, because the latter had tried to convince himself that they had been associated together in order to surpass, not to destroy, democracy. To preserve democracy would be to perpetuate the omnipotent politician.[40]

The bourgeois conception of life was incapable of giving rise to the vital noble instincts, to heroism, and the sublime,

[38] Sorel, "L'Ethique du socialisme," p. 135.

[39] Sorel, "Notes additionelles à l'avenir socialiste des syndicats," *Le Mouvement socialiste* (September 1, 1905), 17:10; *Matériaux*, pp. 111, 154; *Reflections on violence*, p. 63; *Les Illusions du progrès*, p. 211.

[40] Letter to Croce, January 25, 1911, in *La Critica* (September 1928), 26:345.

which rested on a pessimistic conception of life. Whereas optimism led to the glorification of passion, the sanctification of cynical individualism, to utilitarianism, a school of moral skepticism, and the formation of utopias, pessimism, with its strong ethics, was necessary for creative activity and the march to deliverance. Sorel's pessimism was not the result of a theory of the world based on original sin, nor was it the romantic pessimism expressed in elegant posturing. Pessimism was valuable as a guide to action: on the one hand because it took account of the obstacles that stood in the way of the satisfaction of human wants, and on the other because of its appreciation of the natural feebleness of man. Sorel's pessimism was in reality the outcome of his belief that the transformation of society was an heroic task requiring heroic qualities. Sorel preferred Corneille to Voltaire because the former created tragic plots whereas the latter, in harmony with his century, knew only success and optimism.

The hidden unity in the theory of Sorel, argued Johannet,[41] was the idea of heroism. It was the pole around which his meditations turned. Sorel's theory seems an excellent illustration of Bergson's belief that heroism is a return to movement and emanates from an emotion akin to the creative act. Yet Sorel made clear his difference on this point from Bergson. In a letter to Berth in February 1911, Sorel said he had never supposed an *élan vital*, a popular instinct leading humanity toward superior social forms; he had demonstrated that almost all the views proposed by Bergson in reality had their origin in political and economic phenomena.[42]

Although Sorel was always certain of the need for the heroic, he was curiously changeable about the means of deliverance. He had criticized Christianity for its influence on military decadence through the vulgarization of the idea that victory depended on moral, not material, causes.[43] But in 1889 he asserted that the Bible would be the means of regeneration, that it was the only book that would instruct the

[41] René Johannet, *Itinéraires d'intellectuels*, Paris, 1921, p. 193.

[42] Quoted in Pierre Andreu, "Bergson et Sorel," *Les Etudes Bergsoniennes* (1952), 3:57-58.

[43] *La Ruine du monde antique*, p. 42.

people and initiate them to heroic life. Sorel always paid tribute to the effect of religion on action, as in 1909 when he approved both William James's bemoaning of the feeble part played by heroism in life, and James's demand of religion that it excite heroism.[44] Nor in 1898 could Sorel offer a very heroic solution. The most effective guarantees one could institute against despotism, he wrote in that year,[45] were those provided by working-class associations: cooperatives, *syndicats*, mutual societies. Temporarily he thought that the bourgeoisie might regenerate society, but he quickly turned to the myth of the proletarian revolution, and of the general strike. The renewal of the vital energy would come from the proletariat. It would, unaided by theoreticians or intellectuals, create its own institutions and fight its own class struggles. It was not simply a matter of asking favors, but of profiting from bourgeois cowardice in order to impose the will of the proletarians. The militants of the proletariat were without doubt mystics, if one meant by that disinterested individuals, ready to sacrifice their lives.[46]

With faith in its mission, the proletariat, making use of fighting where necessary, would dedicate itself to the noble role of producer, careful of technical and moral progress, leading society in the direction of economic progress, and directing the free workshop. Sorel, in this argument, was challenging the belief in the natural superiority of the upper class and its automatic assumption that it should rule.

But myth and reality became confused for Sorel. The ideas of a people, he argued, always corresponded to the conditions of existence of a very limited group. During the Napoleonic wars very few soldiers became generals, but all acted as if they had the baton of the marshal in their knapsacks; there were not many Americans who became millionnaires, and yet all American life operated as if each citizen was destined to become head of a great enterprise.[47]

[44] Sorel, "La Religion d'aujourd'hui," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (1909), 17:257.

[45] Sorel, "La Crise du socialisme," p. 609.

[46] *Matériaux*, p. 356.

[47] *Le Système historique de Renan*, pp. 142-143.

But if, as Sorel argued, an elite is both inevitable in human history and desirable for the successful capture of power, it is difficult to see how the whole proletariat could possess these noble qualities attributed to a minority, unless Sorel, like Barrès, was basically concerned with the heightening of sensibility and the moral qualities of that minority alone. It is in fact noticeable that the qualities Sorel chose—daring, energy, strength—are the martial qualities of the aristocracy. The Sorelian hero, chaste and sober producer, admirer of industrial technique and of law, a kind of ascetic worker, inheritor of the virtues of artisans, soldiers, and monks,[48] is a figure somewhat withdrawn from reality. Both he and Barrès, in attacking uniformity, were in effect like John Stuart Mill, pleading for uniqueness.

Moreover, it is difficult to see how anyone who stressed as much as did Sorel the necessity for juridical principles which could only be the outcome of stability could combine this with the desirability for *élan*, movement, and revolution. What would be the purpose of all the violence and activity if it were not to engender a system of rules; what would be the purpose of the myth stimulating action unless it were action for the mere sake of action?

For Maurras, force was not, as for Sorel, a method of spiritual or moral development; it was simply a means of attaining power. "We did not have to await the ardent oration of Gohier nor even the curious meditations that Sorel entitled *Reflections on Violence* to say and write, perhaps the first of our generation, that it might be necessary to use violence."[49] Maurras was aware that he could not capture power by constitutional means. The Action Française was neither an electoral bureau, nor a group of spectators, nor a simple party or political opposition, nor a philosophic school to change ideas and manners. It was a conspiracy to prepare a state of mind through which to make a *coup de force*, a coup directed against the regime that had killed France. The true

[48] René Salome, "Le Lyrisme de M. Georges Sorel," *Revue des Jeunes* (January 25, 1923), 13:162.

[49] *L'Action française*, September 21, 1912.

object of the movement was the establishment of the monarchy, the act of instituting the royalty, the royalization, the monarchization of the country.

Maurras, impressed on this occasion by a British example, believed himself to be writing for Monk, the Monk who awaited the suitable opportunity that would allow him to arise and make himself the servant of the needs of his country.[50] A study of the needs of France and of its confused aspirations dictated, authorized, and made legitimate the use of force in the making of the monarchy. Any Republican, who had lost his faith in the Republic could be Monk: it might be the Minister of the Interior, a prefect of police, or a questor of the Chamber. The task was to prepare and organize a *coup de force* together with the formation and diffusion of a state of mind that would allow that coup to succeed.

Maurras was the defender of order, but only of the right kind of order. His opponents, "those who opposed our street fights,"[51] took for order what was really their stagnant ideas, and the periodical recourse to the "electoral fair."

There was between the extreme Left and Right a remarkable reliance on the conception of the *élan vital*,[52] and on the idea of violence as the only cure for the evils of a bourgeois civilization. This was the result of a fusion of ideas between the syndicalists, providing a theoretical justification for their small movement, their lack of funds, their minority control, and the Right, with its stress on French strength, on an offensive spirit, and on hierarchical authority and quality. Sorel anticipated the later criticism of the Cartesian world which pointed out that not only was it a mechanical world in which all wants were finitely determined but also a static one. Therefore, since the norm was inertia, the need was for action and heroes. Sorel, argued Guy-Grand, attempted to give to activ-

[50] *Enquête sur la monarchie*, pp. 487-488, 596.

[51] *La Contre-révolution spontanée*, p. 118.

[52] J. Bowditch, "The Concept of the Elan Vital," *Modern France*, ed. E. M. Earle, pp. 32-43.

ity a metaphysical value analogous to intuition,[53] but in fact it has not and cannot have such a moral value.

The argument of Sorel, Barrès, and Maurras aptly illustrates what Isaiah Berlin has shown to be the essence of 20th century political thought—finding the process, natural or artificial, whereby the problems are made to vanish altogether.[54] The process attempts to alter the outlook giving rise to the problem, rather than accept the premise of 19th century thought that social and political problems exist and that they can be solved only by the conscious application of truths on which all can agree. Philosophies of life of the kind that Sorel, Barrès, and Maurras expounded claim that they indicate the limitations of bourgeois rationalism which is threatening to obscure and devitalize everything that is alive in the world. These philosophies may be useful as a check on absolute rationalism, but, as Mannheim has suggested,[55] they constitute a latent opposition to the rationalist world, exalting the idea of "becoming" in the abstract, but severing all connections with the world that is actually coming into existence. The three writers may have suggested that they had a more intimate view of the nature of reality than that possessed by democratic thinkers, but neither the logic of their theories nor the political conclusions they drew from them justify such an opinion.

[53] Georges Guy-Grand, *Le Procès de la démocratie*, Paris, 1911, p. 211.
[54] Isaiah Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," *Foreign Affairs* (April 1950), 28:351-385.
[55] Karl Mannheim, *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology*, p. 162.