CHAPTER ONE

Georges Sorel and the Antimaterialist Revision of Marxism

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE "CORRECTION" OF MARXISM

"I have reason to believe that the doctrines of *Réflexions sur la violence* are ripening in the shade. The sycophants of democracy would surely not so frequently declare them to be perverse if they were powerless."[1] This is how Sorel, in 1910, ended his major essay "Mes Raisons du syndicalisme" (My reasons for syndicalism), which definitely terminated his career as a socialist theoretician. Unlike claims in the hagiographies and apologies that have abounded recently, Sorel never sought to disguise the meaning and purpose of his thought.[2] He drew attention to the place where his main intellectual contribution was to be found: *Réflexions sur la violence*, "a book," he wrote, "that has a place of paramount importance in my work." Sorel considered this work to be so important that he admitted, in the prefatory note to the *Avenir socialiste des syndicats* (Socialist future of the syndicates), that he had thought for a long time "that it was inappropriate to put into circulation a little work whose main ideas might seem more than once not to harmonize easily with the main ideas" of the *Réflexions*.[3]

The *Réflexions*, together with *Les Illusions du progrès* and *La Décomposition du marxisme*, constitute a relatively well-structured whole that occupies a central position in Georges Sorel's work. The importance of *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* lies chiefly in the ideological panorama offered by this collection of essays, prefaces, and introductions dating from 1897 to 1914. Here one should also mention *Le Procès de Socrate*—a work that well illustrates the main preoccupations of Sorelian thought—*Introduction à l'économie moderne*, and the *Insegnamenti sociali della economia contemporanea*. In these last two works, Sorel dealt with subjects of which, by and large, he had an uncertain grasp, but which no socialist theoretician could afford to overlook. In these books, as in his other works on economics, he helped to lay the foundations of a theory of revolution based on private property. However, these writings by no means revolutionized the Marxist thinking of the period. For that, one had to await the appearance of *Réflexions*.

It is thus necessary to distinguish between Sorel's original offering, his real intellectual contribution to the movement of ideas at the beginning of

the century, and whatever is secondary. We should also remember that Sorel had his limitations and he knew them. He did not claim to be a Bergson or a Nietzsche. If he could immediately grasp the significance of a philosophical system and was capable of assimilating it quickly and making use of it, he was incapable of producing philosophical thought. He did not have the encyclopedic mind of Renan or the formation of Rudolf Hilferding or Max Adler; he did not have Taine's power of synthesis, he was not a writer of quality like Barrès, and by and large he disliked the spirit of Maurras's system, which was the mainstay of l'Action française. Sorel did not even trouble to work up his major writings. Thus, they all bear the imprint of what they originally were before being put into a volume: review articles hastily thrown into the ideological battle.

In Sorel, the expression of an extraordinary talent exists side by side with the most blatant crudities. Sorel believed that the Jews of eastern Europe ritually murdered Christian children. His political analyses and criticisms of parliamentary democracy scarcely rose above the level of invective; compared with those of his contemporary, the revolutionary syndicalist Robert Michels, his were laughable. Neither a metaphysician, nor a sociologist, nor a historian, nor even a writer of literature, but a philosophe in the eighteenth-century sense of the term, Sorel was fascinated, from the time of his earliest writings, by the role of myths in the history of civilizations, and he elaborated, in the course of a long process of intellectual fermentation and political involvement, an idea of real genius: the theory that heroic myths and violence were creative of morality and virtue. Grafted onto the Marxist view of history, this idea modified Marxism to such an extent that it immediately transformed it into a neutral weapon of war that could be used against the bourgeois order not only by the proletariat but by society as a whole.

It should also be pointed out that Sorel never sought to create a homogeneous ideological corpus, nor did he try to conceal what he called his "variations." Honest as he was, he never attempted to cover up the various stages of his development or, as he said, "the multiplicity of opinions I have successively adopted."[4] Indeed, he had no reason to do so. Despite appearances, his intellectual progress was perfectly coherent and followed a strict political logic.

From his *Procès de Socrate* to his famous appeal "Pour Lénine," Sorel hardly changed where the main issue was concerned: he always had a holy horror of bourgeois society and its intellectual, moral, and political values; of Cartesian rationalism, optimism, utilitarianism, positivism, and intellectualism; the theory of natural rights and all the values inherited from the civilization of the Enlightenment and generally associated, at the turn of the twentieth century, with liberal democracy. Socrates, Descartes and Voltaire, Rousseau and Comte, the "great ancestors" of the time of the French Revolution and their successors, headed by Jaurès—this, according to Sorel, was

the intellectual path that inexorably led to decadence. History, for Sorel, was finally not so much a chronicle of class warfare as an endless struggle against decadence. Opposite the forces of degeneration, one always found the agents of resistance: Anytus, representing the heroic society, confronted Socrates and the Sophists, those intellectuals of the Athenian democracy and first corrupters of martial values. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Pascal opposed Descartes and Voltaire, but religious feeling was no longer able to stem the rising tide of materialism or to prevent the collapse that followed. Fortunately, Nietzsche, Bergson, and William James heralded a movement of renewal capable of repairing the damage caused by Rousseau and Diderot, Condorcet and Auguste Comte.

Maurras and Lenin fulfilled the same function: both provided Sorel, each in his own way and at different times, with weapons with which to fight bourgeois democracy. At one time it was Maurras who was praised, because the "Action française seeks to persuade the educated youth that the democratic idea is in retreat; if he [Maurras] achieves his aim, he will take his place among the men who deserve to be called *masters of the hour*."[5] A few years later, Lenin was declared to be in the forefront of the battle against the accursed "plutocratic democracies." Sorel proclaimed him "the greatest theoretician socialism has had since Marx."[6]

From a purely analytical point of view, Sorel's work can easily be reduced to certain main lines of thought, which deserve our attention. Similarly, his accumulated writings, impressive in quantity if one considers the number of pages, in fact amount to a smaller volume. The breakdown gives us some twenty books and pamphlets, several dozen important pieces in journals, and hundreds of minor articles and book reviews. In reality, most of his books were created on the basis of already published articles or were simply collections of articles. Almost all his work was studded with repetitions and reiterations. The same themes recur ad nauseam, on many occasions transcribed word for word from one book to another.

The undeniable originality of Sorel's thought lies in the fact that it was a living reservoir that served as a receptacle and then as an agent of dissemination for all the ambiguities and difficulties of a period of gestation, the period that saw the elaboration of the new syntheses of the twentieth century: fascism, for instance, which is no easier to classify than the thought of Sorel. Sorel's work attracts yet disconcerts; it captivated a large segment of a whole generation of Europeans by its unexpected, nonconformist, and contentious character. The same could be said of fascism, in which many people found a heroic and dynamic quality at the opposite extreme from bourgeois decadence.

At the beginning of this "long march" one finds Marxism. In 1893 Sorel, a retired engineer, an autodidact who had read and reflected a great deal and already published two large volumes and a few articles, stated in a well-

known letter to the editor of the *Revue philosophique* that he had discovered in "modern socialism . . . a true economic science." As a good disciple of Marx, he asked for the "theorems" of socialism to be applied, for "that which is rational and proved ought to become real." He demanded, moreover, "that public authorities should act in conformity with the rules of a rational state," in accordance with the idea, deeply rooted in France, that the "rational principles of all societies" should "be reflected in legislation." Furthermore, if Sorel regretted that socialism had been "exploited by the Jacobins," he recognized that "the Jacobins were the only ones to come to its aid. Without them, moreover, would any legislative concessions have been obtained?" True to this way of thinking that advocated a constant exercise of political pressure, he boldly stated: "All changes must come about through force. It is true that this cannot be used in as brutal a manner as at the time of the Revolution."[7] The pages of the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* thus reveal to us a new adherent to the cause, ready to operate through the traditional channels.

This initial impression is confirmed by another position he adopted the following year. In the Marxist journal *L'Ère nouvelle*, Sorel declared that Marx's theory was "the greatest innovation in philosophy for centuries; it was the starting point of a fruitful transformation in our form of speculation. All our ideas must concentrate around the new principles of scientific socialism."[8] Also in *L'Ère nouvelle* he published at this period two long essays in which he spoke disparagingly of the "idealistic bric-a-brac" that the Marxists were reproached with neglecting.[9] In Marx, Sorel not only found a way of "discerning true from false science," but discovered an "exact, absolute science of economic relationships." "The transformation effected by K. Marx," he wrote, "had the consequence of setting . . . philosophy on its feet. For a long time, it had been made to walk on its head." Thus, one was finally able "to study the relationships of science and the economic environment and finally uncover the social principles so long neglected, by means of which it is possible to gain a rational knowledge of man."[10] At the end of his ideological journey, in 1910, after having carried out the deepest and most radical revision of Marxism of the beginning of the century, Sorel wrote to his Italian disciples, already working on the ideological synthesis that was to bring them to fascism, that at that time he had been "full of rationalistic prejudices."[11]

Indeed, these texts, which followed Sorel's discovery of Marx, reveal, in the words of Édouard Berth, an "orthodox Marxist Sorel."[12] And yet, at the same time as he involved himself in doctrine, his Marxism changed. Four years later, Sorel wrote his preface to the French translation of Antonio Labriola's *Essays on the Materialist Conception of History*. Labriola had discovered Sorel through the journal *Le Devenir social*. On 25 April 1895, he wrote to him a famous letter, which Benedetto Croce would one day see as

the beginning of theoretical Marxism in Italy.[13] Sorel, in turn, introduced Antonio Labriola to France. The Italian professor's Marxism had strong Hegelian qualities,[14] which seems to have been particularly acceptable to the French at that period. Antonio Labriola sought and found in Marxism much more than he was offered by the very strict and limited orthodoxy represented by certain aspects of the interpretation of Marxism that Kautsky or, in France, Paul Lafargue gave. Sorel at that time felt himself close to Labriola, whose Marxism was far more sophisticated than the Guesdist, "vulgar," and "positivist" version that explained history solely through economic factors.

Sorel's introduction to Antonio Labriola's work was a vigorous defense of historical materialism and of Marxism in general, and a defense of Marx against his detractors, the most vehement of whom at that period were the so-called French socialists. Their leader at that time was Rouanet, editor of *La Revue socialiste*; Sorel took it upon himself to refute an essay by Rouanet published in 1887 and entitled "Marx's Economic Materialism and French Socialism." He tried to "show how false and futile are the *great objections* that are made against Marxism."[15] The future writer of *Réflexions sur la violence* was at that time so concerned with the preservation of Marxist purity that he opposed Jaurès's attempted synthesis of Marxist materialism with a certain form of idealism. At the same time, however, Sorel insisted that the vulgar materialism, the simplistic determinism, and the celebrated "fatalism" of which Marx was so readily accused were in fact completely alien to him. Sorel insisted on the importance that the "great socialist philosopher" gave to both the "human turn of mind" and to morality: "Is not the development of *class consciousness* the crux of the social question in Marx's eyes?" But, he wrote, "to bring morality down to earth, to rid it of all fantasy, is not to ignore it. On the contrary, it is to treat it with the respect due to the works of reason." That, he suggested, was why there were "so many moral judgments in *Das Kapital*."[16]

If Sorel took up Marxism with such enthusiasm and stuck to it so faithfully, it was precisely because he perceived in it a moral content that was very important to him. It was true that socialism considered "*economic preformation* to be the condition for any change."[17] That was its strength and its originality, and it was precisely in this that it differed from the utopism of Fourier or Cabet,[18] but "that is no reason," wrote Sorel, "to consider it amoral."[19] Later he insisted on "the ethical character of the class struggle" and on the fact that, according to Marx, "the full development of a class" involves "a union of intelligence and heart."[20]

In the last years of the century, Sorel, driven by his interest in the ethical aspect of Marxism, drew close to the liberal revisionist current of the type represented by Bernstein. He approved of the return to Kant that was seen to be taking place in Germany. He said that in the largest and most impor-

tant socialist party, the one that had always set the tone for the Socialist International, some people had become aware that at the present time there was "a serious deficiency in socialist ethics"—namely, the belief that "the environment had an automatic effect."[21] Sorel deplored the vulgarization of Marxism that was especially prevalent among the French Marxists, and he condemned their Blanquist tendencies.[22] He could not accept the idea that the human being in society acts solely in consequence of the necessities of production, as Paul Lafargue claimed, for instance: "It is in the economic milieu, and only there," wrote Lafargue, "that the philosophical historian must look for the first causes of evolutions and social revolutions."[23] For Sorel this absolute dependence on the means of production was by no means self-evident. He did not believe that "religion and morality are to such a degree dependent on capitalist production and on the corresponding conditions of appropriation."[24]

If Sorel displayed much optimism with regard to the future of socialism, it was because he was convinced that "nearly all the Marxists strongly regret the exaggeration with which, for a long time, the beauties of materialism had been lauded."[25] Finally, he concluded his argument by recalling that "originally, socialism was a *philosophical doctrine*."[26] On this point, he was categorical: "Socialism is a moral question, inasmuch as it provides the world with a new way of judging all human acts, or—to use Nietzsche's famous expression—with a total revaluation of things."[27]

Precisely the importance that he gave to moral considerations in social life made Sorel involve himself enthusiastically in the Dreyfus Affair. In supporting the Dreyfusard camp, he was convinced that he was faithfully following Marx's teaching. "The International urges one to protest and to assert the rights of Justice and Morality," he wrote. For that reason when "the efforts of the proletariat have proved fruitless," the proletariat "gives its support to that element of the bourgeoisie that defends democratic institutions." Sorel was aware that when that happened, "the struggle took on a paradoxical character and seemed to contradict the very principle of class warfare,"[28] but he nevertheless believed that "a temporary coalition for a specific, noneconomic purpose between members of groups that the theoreticians of Marxism would regard as implacably hostile is not fatally injurious to the independence of socialist thinking."[29] The position the proletariat adopted is not arrived at merely through a theoretical analysis but represents a genuine popular reaction, for "when the people have been touched by the social spirit, they do not hesitate; they do not listen to the theoreticians. Without entering into any bargaining, they walk side by side with the bourgeois." Sorel pointed out that in the Dreyfus Affair the most authentically proletarian elements adopted that position most enthusiastically; the left-wing followers of Jean Allemane were the first to throw themselves into battle for "the defense of Truth, Justice, and Morality. This is proof that in proletarian

circles the ethical idea has not lost its importance."[30] The political conclusion that Sorel drew from this analysis was that "socialism, in France, is becoming more and more *a labor movement within a democracy*." This position was the most extreme he ever adopted, and it survived neither the consequences of the Affair nor the realities of the social conflicts at the beginning of the century. At this point, Sorel began to evolve an argument that he developed a great deal subsequently, although in a selective manner. He tried to dissociate Marx from Engels and took up the defense of Marx, not only against those Marxists who failed to take into consideration the evolution of his thought from the *Communist Manifesto* onward,[31] but also against Engels. This demonstrated a relatively profound knowledge of Marxism in relation to the French socialist milieu, whose doctrinal ignorance at that period was surprising.[32]

However, the main Sorelian contribution to Marxism was not the adoption of this position, which in fact was fairly common in the international milieu of the 1890s, but a revision and correction of the system intended to improve and complete it. Sorel conceived of the system elaborated by Marx as incomplete. Marx, he wrote, "seems to have feared more than anything else leaving a philosophical system that was too closed and rigid . . . ; he did not attempt to finish any theory," including that of value and surplus value. Accordingly Sorel called on Marx's disciples to undertake a "work of completion." This process lasted for ten years, and its results formed the heart of the Sorelian opus. Sorel was the first of those disciples who devoted themselves to an attempt to fill the gaps and reinforce the vulnerable points in order to "complete the work of their master."[33] This great enterprise of completion, wrote Sorel, would of course be carried out "by Marxist methods."[34] The question was first to know "what the metaphysical basis of this doctrine was," and then one would have to consider the fact that Marx "brought into operation a large number of psychological principles that were not generally expressed in a scientific form."[35]

The critique of Marxist economics was the real starting point of Sorelian revisionism and the criterion of all of revolutionary revisionism. As a good Marxist, Sorel made a considerable effort to understand his master's economic conceptions. In 1897 he set out to study "the Marxist theory of value," and he immediately discovered a "major deficiency"—that to treat this theory as something universal was an error. He agreed with Pareto that one cannot treat "economic problems, as provided by experience, in a strictly scientific manner."[36] Three years later, in the midst of the Bernstein debate, whose main lines he summarized for the benefit of the French public, the future author of *La Décomposition du marxisme* very clearly questioned the main principle of Marxist economics. "The Marxist theory of value," he wrote, "no longer has any scientific usefulness and . . . gives rise to a great many misunderstandings."[37]

We should also draw attention to another point, which does not seem to have been sufficiently noticed. Although Sorel rejected the theories of value and surplus value, he also rejected the idea of the socialization of property. In an article in *La Revue socialiste* published in March 1901, he praised rural cooperation and then came to the conclusion that "socialization could not be accepted by the peasants if it were not given a new form. . . . One must therefore necessarily revise the doctrine." Sorel attacked the subject by going straight to the point. "For a very long time," he wrote, "the schools of socialism failed to pay attention to the great differences that exist between the *socialization of production* and *the socialization of commerce*." Consequently, "this revision should apply . . . first of all to the classic formula, *the socialization of production and commerce*." As a good Marxist, which he still wished to be, Sorel could not permit himself simply to deny one of the main principles of Marxism. He was unable to say that the social and economic reality, the evolution of capitalism, and the existence of an enormous mass of peasants who were resistant to Marxist socialism caused him to abandon the idea of socialization. No, Sorel—as was usual among Marxists, and in accordance with the aim he had set for himself—proceeded to improve and rectify the system. Consequently he sought first to dissociate Marx from Engels, and to support Marx against Engels, in order later to be able to dissociate the idea of the socialization of commerce from that of the socialization of property. Marx, wrote Sorel, would not have formulated the obvious truism "the socialization of production and commerce" without a reason, since the socialization of property necessarily implied that of commerce. Marx must therefore have "meant to say something other than what Engels makes him say." One must suppose that "he recognized that there were two distinct questions where his friend saw only one." But if Sorel rendered homage to Marx's intelligence, he also honored Marx's pet aversion. He expressed satisfaction at what he saw as a return to Proudhon, which he believed he also detected in Bernstein: "There is a new spirit in socialism . . . which corresponds to a doubt concerning the necessity of combining in an indissoluble manner the socialization of production and that of commerce—and of carrying out the revolution all at once."[38]

In his *Insegnamenti*, Sorel was still more explicit. He specifically distanced himself from the position Jules Guesde took at the congress of the Socialist International held in Paris in September 1900. There Guesde made the declaration, which became famous, that "the liberation of labor is subordinate to the question of expropriation, to the question of the transformation of capitalist property into Communist or social collective property." Sorel thought that "all this is obscure," and that the socialists, headed by Jaurès, persisted in making these problems even more incomprehensible. Once again, Sorel referred to Proudhon and the distinction between property and the economic sphere.[39] This distinction had already appeared in *Introduc-*

tion à l'économie moderne, a work to which he referred in *Insegnamenti* in a chapter entitled, precisely, "Socialization in the Economic Sphere." Sorel not only took up the classic Proudhonian positions ("the negation of property is a matter for weak minds"), but dissociated himself from Engels's famous preface of 1895 to *La Lutte des classes en France, 1848–1850*. In this preface, Engels insisted that the appropriation of the means of production was the characteristic that distinguished the form of socialism he called "modern" (by which he meant Marxist) from other varieties. The extension of this formula to the appropriation of the channels of commerce was for Engels a necessary consequence of this fundamental proposition. Sorel declared himself in total disagreement with Engels's conclusion.[40] In reality, he was opposed to a fundamental principle of Marxism and one of its major distinguishing features.

Thus, the first stage of Sorel's revision of Marxism naturally took the form of a revision of Marxist economics. It seems that at the time he wrote his work on economics, he was seeking to remove all possible doubt. "*To reform in a bourgeois society is to affirm private property*," he wrote. "This whole book thus presupposes that private property is an unquestionable fact."[41] Farther on, he reaffirmed his attachment to Proudhon's economic conceptions, and there too, as in the case of Marx, he wanted to complete Proudhon's work: "It is one of Proudhon's chief claims to fame to have determined, better than anyone had done hitherto, the domain of property and that of the economic sphere. I do not, however, believe he exhausted the question. . . . I am taking it up, and I will show how the socialization of the milieu can give rise to a great number of reforms that do not harm property."[42]

This conception of private property was in keeping with the analysis of capitalism that Sorel made in a long study published by *La Revue socialiste* in 1902. The aim of this study was to distinguish those elements in social and economic evolution which were prescribed and determined and those which were not: "In Marx, there are two radically distinct laws of historical development: the proletariat *can* be actuated with a free movement, of such a liberty that it moves toward the absolute ruin of the social edifice, while capitalism is subject to a movement of absolute fatality."[43]

Now, this idea of "capitalist fatality" was one of the main features of Sorelian thought, but it is to be understood in a special sense. According to Sorel, nothing could replace the modernizing capacity of capitalism; no historical force could fashion the future or create a new society in place of capitalism. It is capitalism that causes economic progress and can consequently lay the foundations of a future society.[44] For Sorel, "capitalist *fatality* has all the appearance of a physical phenomenon. *A combination of many chance factors produces the fatality of the movement*: if one examines an isolated fact,

it is not possible to assign it any cause and it is really a chance phenomenon, but the whole is so well determined that if anyone seeks to oppose the movement, he will inevitably be broken."[45]

What, then, is the mechanism that gives "this movement . . . the necessary character of natural movements"? Sorel's answer is significant: it is "the action of free competition, raised to the highest degree." Thus, the future depends on the free play of the market economy. Sorel asserted the impotence of the state before the force of "economic movement"; here he used arguments employed by Engels in his polemic against Dühring, and he paid tribute to the positive elements in the thought of Lassalle, who described "the rigidity of capitalist society—that system of *conjectures* which ends by setting up an iron chain between all things." Sorel did not fail to note that Engels's conception in this matter was close to that of "the most classical economists." Farther on, he summed up his thinking as follows: "The more deeply one examines the actual conditions on which Marxist economics is based, the more one finds that it resembles Manchesterian economics. We have already seen that it presupposes a complete judicial independence of employers and workers, the fatality of the capitalist movement, and the indifference or impotence of the state. These are the three great principles of classical economics."[46]

There is, in fact, a difference, but "only with regard to the distinction made by Marxism between the fatality of the movements of capitalism as such and the liberty of the labor movement."[47] This liberty, wrote Sorel, quoting Marx, consisted in the "conscious participation" of the workers "in the historical evolution." This "conscious participation is very easy wherever, capitalism being highly developed, there is an absolute separation between the *head* and the *arms* of industry, so that workers can move freely without ever having to feel a solidarity between their class and the capitalist class."[48]

Hence the conclusion "that touches the very principles of the doctrine":[49] the free play of economic forces gives rise to labor emancipation. The market economy creates the conditions for the appearance and development of class consciousness in the proletariat. Only economic liberalism permits the mechanism of class struggle to be set in motion. Everything that encourages the organization of the proletariat, its unity, and its discipline, everything that makes it into a fighting force, is positive, but everything that weakens it works against socialism. A policy that hinders the free play of economic forces is deplorable; economic protectionism, cooperative enterprises, the participation of workers in management, and the various forms of participation in government all distort this essential mechanism of socialism.[50]

Sorelians and "liberists" (free marketeers) were in complete agreement on the most extreme principles of economic liberalism. The term "liberism" was

employed in Italy by all the supporters of economic liberalism who strongly opposed both the political and philosophical content of liberalism and the Giolittian establishment. These people advocated an extreme economic liberalism but loathed any kind of intellectual infrastructure associated with the theory of natural rights or the principles of the French Revolution. It was therefore not surprising that the *Insegnamenti* appeared with a preface in which its author, Vittorio Racca, describing himself as an "impenitent liberist," wrote that he undersigned "Sorel's splendid volume with both hands."[51] Both sides rejected any social legislation, any protectionist measures, anything that could inhibit energies, neutralize the will to power, or interfere with free competition, that merciless struggle for life and victory. These elements of social Darwinism and primitive Nietzscheanism, common to the most extreme liberals and the revolutionary revisionists, clearly precluded any compromise with either political democracy or social democracy. This liberalism, a simplified and adapted form of social Darwinism, was supposed to express the laws of life and to represent the absolute necessity of progress. It was violently opposed to the theory of natural rights and the teachings of English utilitarianism. It was by definition the very negation of democracy.

This liberalism was also in close agreement, in this domain, with Marxism as described by Sorel and his disciples. Since Marxism was reduced to class struggle, it had a strong need for a Darwinian economy and could only be opposed to anything that distorted natural social antagonisms. This was why Sorelian Marxism necessarily resulted in a negation of liberal democracy and democratic socialism. Indeed, said the Sorelians, one can always speak of socialism in the sense of 1848, one can go back to pre-Marxist socialism, but one cannot practice both Marxism and democracy, the most powerful possible obstacle to social polarization and the normal development of social conflict. On this question, Sorel scarcely changed his opinion. In *La Décomposition du marxisme*, an important text, complementary to the *Réflexions*, in which Sorel summarized his thought at the International Symposium of Revolutionary Syndicalists in Paris in 1907, he returned to the ideas he had expressed in 1902. He stated that Marxism was close to the school "of *political* economics called Manchesterian . . . , which divides society into two classes between which there is no connection," and that "democracy can work effectively to prevent the progress of socialism."[52] If one wishes to be true to Marxism, one must therefore go back to the main principle: the promotion of class struggle.

Here we must stress this fundamental aspect of Sorelian thought: the revolutionary struggle depends on a market economy; it is determined by the most absolute economic liberalism. In practice, economic liberalism is a sine qua non of the coming revolution. But, at the same time, Sorel advocated the destruction of *political* liberalism, whose disappearance he regarded as a necessary precondition. Thus, this revision of Marxism proposed a new con-

ception of the revolution, which the Italian revolutionary syndicalists developed in turn and which became an essential element of early Italian fascism.

Sorel was aware of the great complexity of the problems he was trying to explain. "We know that things do not happen as simply as Marx supposed in 1847," he wrote. Not only did capitalism not develop as quickly as was supposed, but also "the labor movement was oversimplified by Marx." Here Sorel broached the great question that was to preoccupy him throughout the first decade of the century: "We have to admit that, at the present time, we do not yet know everything that ought to be done in order to bring the proletariat to effectiveness." One thing, however, was clear: "Socialism is . . . the organization of revolt, and a syndicate with a revolutionary orientation is the thing that is most specifically socialist."[53] Sorel henceforth remained true to this conception of struggle against bourgeois society. When he was forced to submit to the evidence and to resign himself to abandoning a proletariat more and more dominated by trade unionism and social democracy, he went off in search of another agent of revolution.

The great intellectual debate that shook European socialism, and to which Sorel desperately sought an outcome, was dominated by what he called the "decadence"[54] or the "decomposition" of Marxism. This last expression formed the title of the famous pamphlet in which Sorel analyzed the phenomenon then most commonly known as the "crisis" of Marxism.

This text belonged to a period when Sorel was at the end of the process of the revision of Marxism, even if in reality, as we have said, the Sorelian view of the intellectual problems faced by Marxism had not changed a great deal since 1900. In his opinion, the primary cause of this crisis of Marxism was the "immobility in which Kautsky claimed he was preserving it."[55] Thus, in a major article published in 1900 in which he analyzed the significance of Bernsteinian revisionism, Sorel attacked Kautsky for making Marxism look "like something very old."[56] He also showed much respect for the intellectual effort Bernstein made and for the courage he demonstrated in pointing out the weaknesses of Marxism: the theory of value, of course, but also "*historical necessity*" and, finally, Marxist dialectics. After glancing at the conceptions of Benedetto Croce, Enrico Ferri, Antonio Labriola, and Jean Jaurès, he finally got to Kautsky. "We are promised *science*," he wrote, "but we are offered only words: we are not given any new means of acting in the world."[57] This was Sorel's principal charge against him: Kautsky's triumph would mean "the definite ruination of Marxism." That is why he resolutely supported Bernstein. Bernstein, to be sure, had not created a new philosophy, but "his aim was not so ambitious. He wanted only to make us think for ourselves while preserving the core of Marxism."[58] That was precisely the aim which Sorel assigned to "the *new school* . . . Marxist, syndicalist, and revolutionary."[59] In the first decade of this century, the journal *Le Mouvement socialiste* was the center of this effort of renewal, but what was sup-

posed to be a renaissance of Marxism led finally either to the Cercle Proudhon or to Georges Valois's Faisceau and later to the Charte du Travail (Charter of Work) of the Vichy government.

Sorel, however, took only the revisionist method from Bernstein: the means but not the content. In supporting Bernstein against Kautsky and Liebknecht in 1900, Sorel was merely drawing attention to the innovative role of the German social-democratic theoretician, for the revisionism the French theoretician initiated was in fact at the opposite pole from Bernstein's. This revolutionary, antirationalist, and mythical revisionism was based on what Sorel believed to be a stratum of Marxist thought that nobody had suspected before him, on a "Marxism of Marx"—an original contribution to socialism expressing the genius of the author of *Das Kapital*, and completely different from the borrowing whose source was found in the "old socialist tendencies."[60] If this essential part of Marxism had long been concealed, it was because "there were not yet any major labor organizations that corresponded to it," and if Bernstein did not recognize it, it was because he had a good knowledge of only England and Germany.[61] Now that a new labor movement had come into being (he was speaking, of course, of the organized proletariat in France), Marxism had to be looked at in a completely new way. In the light of this renaissance of the revolutionary idea and action in France, associated in his mind with Fernand Pelloutier, who strongly advocated the principle of the separation of the classes and stipulated the necessity of abandoning any hope of political renewal, Sorel stated that "Marxism could not be transformed as Bernstein thought." It could not be transformed into a mere political theory, nor into a political party like the others, nor into an electoral machine disputing the labor constituency with other political organizations. In making it into a tool to prepare the proletariat for rebellion, the new school gave Marxism life, and in proceeding in a quite different manner from Bernstein, it had succeeded in uncovering the very essence of Marxism.

The following is Sorel's description of the contribution of the new school to the renaissance of Marxism: "It finally rejected all formulas that came either from utopism or from Blanquism, and thus purged traditional Marxism of all that was not specifically Marxist, and it sought to preserve only that which, in its opinion, was the core of the doctrine, that which assured Marx's prestige." The element that precisely represented "the value of the work" was its "symbolic parts, formerly regarded as of doubtful value." Bergson was mentioned here as teaching "that movement is expressed primarily in images, that mythical formulas are the clothing of a philosopher's fundamental thought, and that metaphysics cannot use the language appropriate for science."[62]

This text is one of the keys to the Sorelian approach; class struggle and the final catastrophe, those two main principles of Sorel's interpretation of

Marxism, are explained in terms of sentiments, myths, and images. The socialists were invited to consider the history of the church in order to find hope and consolation. The role of the revolutionary syndicates "that saved socialism" was compared to that of the religious orders in the rejuvenation of the old Catholic edifice.[63]

At the same time, Sorel maintained that "the present crisis of Marxism" could not be explained solely in terms of the debates between the theoreticians—whether the debate surrounded Bernsteinian revisionism or concerned the Dreyfus Affair; it was also caused by "changes that have taken place in social conditions."[64] This conclusion reinforced his tendency to consider Marxism as a weapon that would break the resistance of the world of matter.

It is true that, as Maximilien Rubel has demonstrated, Sorel read the writings of Marx known in his time in a way that was often approximative and selective; he probably did not have a sound knowledge of the first book of *Das Kapital*. Moreover, his knowledge of German was far from being sufficient to allow him to study the original texts. Leszek Kolakowski has claimed that Sorel often manipulated Marx in an arbitrary manner, as in the definition he gave of the concept of class.[65] Indeed, anyone who has taken the trouble to study Marx knows that the following definition of *class*, given by Sorel in his *Matériaux*, does not correspond to Marx's ideas: "A fully developed class is, according to Marx, a collectivity of families united by traditions, interests, and political opinions, which has reached such a degree of solidarity that one can ascribe to it a personality and regard it as a being that reasons and acts in accordance with its reasons."[66]

For Sorel, however, a deep knowledge of Marxist philosophy and economics was never really necessary in order to understand the value of Marxism as a weapon of combat. "The theory of surplus value is useless" for the purpose of waging "a ceaseless war" between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, he wrote in 1909.[67] In *Saggi*, he had already questioned the feasibility of turning socialism into a science.[68]

There was a clear reason for this attitude: at the beginning of the century, Sorel saw that science did not activate the masses. People do not sacrifice themselves for surplus value! This was why he sought to minimize the scientific aspect of Marxism. What was the use of the herculean efforts of Rudolf Hilferding, Max Adler, and, on a different level but in the same direction, Trotsky and Lenin? Will one start a revolution if one persuades the workers that Marxism is a science? Will one succeed in destroying democratic and liberal socialism and take away its proletarian followers?

For Sorel, the answer to these questions was obvious. Thus, he initiated a vast campaign against the rationalistic and scientific illusion. In the work entitled *Les Illusions du progrès*, which accompanied his *Réflexions*, Sorel stated not only that "there is both charlatanism and puerility in speaking of

a *historical determinism*,"[69] but that history is of "an inextricable complexity," which "the Marxist method (when correctly understood)" has the great advantage of preserving. Unlike the superficial Cartesianism, Marxism, wrote Sorel, has "a respect for this fundamental mystery which a frivolous science evades."[70] History, like economics,[71] belongs to the domain of mystery. The aim of socialism is not to solve this mystery but to transform the world by means of the extraordinary dynamism Marxism provided. "The experience of the Marxist theory of value," wrote Sorel, "shows us how important obscurity can be to give strength to a doctrine."[72] Rousseau and Hegel, who preferred shadow to light, he wrote, testified to this in their own way.[73]

This, he believed, was why the essence of Marxism lay in the symbolic and apocalyptic content of the system. The idea of the general strike was a translation into concrete terms of the Marxist apocalypse, and the sole real historical function of Marxism was to act as an instrument of war. If Marxism were to be given back its youth, one would first have to save the proletariat from those "oratorical, philanthropic, and demagogic forms of socialism that Jaurès was trying to revive," he observed in *Mes Raisons du syndicalisme*, a work that marked the final stage of his hopes for a syndicalist renewal. "Marxism," he wrote, "should be subjected to a revision that would ensure the preservation of anything fruitful it had brought to the study of societies, to the art of understanding the transformations of history, and to the conception of the revolutionary mission of the proletariat." In the last pages of this essay, a sort of ideological testament, which was published in Italy in 1910 by his pupils who had just brought about the union of revolutionary syndicalism and the nationalist movement, he explained what he was trying to achieve. While Bernsteinian revisionism wished to harmonize the theory with the practice of the socialist parties that had now become part of liberal democracy, Sorel wanted to carry out "the real revision of Marxism," which would be to create a theory of revolutionary action, of "direct action," "a doctrine of the labor movement that would be perfectly adapted to the form of labor struggle" advocated by revolutionary syndicalism.[74]

Sorel gave a definition of this central core of Marxism in one of his major articles, which appeared in *Le Mouvement socialiste* and which he later incorporated in *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* and published at the beginning of his study *L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats* under the title *Préface de 1905*. "Class struggle is the alpha and omega of socialism," he wrote. After twelve years of activity as a socialist theoretician, after having participated vigorously in the *Bernstein debatte*, after having been one of the first to be involved in Dreyfusism, Sorel came to the conclusion that it was class struggle that represented "what was really true in Marxism, what was powerfully original, superior to all formulas." What mattered was class struggle and not Marxist economics or Marx's historical conceptions, class strug-

gle and not the theory of surplus value or the concepts of alienation or of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Sorel gave the idea of class struggle a precise, coherent, and practical significance. He said that contrary to the opinion of the "orthodox" Marxists, it was not a "sociological concept used by scholars," but the "ideological aspect of a social war waged by the proletariat against the heads of industry as a whole." In this combat, "the syndicate is the instrument of the social war,"[75] and revolutionary syndicalism fulfills the essence of Marxism. Thus, Sorel believed, socialism ceased to be a theory, a pious wish, and became once more what Marx had always intended it to be: a weapon of war against the established order.

The first steps toward this approach were taken in 1897, in the essay "L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats." Directly attacking the methods of the socialist parties, Sorel claimed that according to the materialist conception of history, the definitive struggle for power was not a struggle to conquer the positions of the bourgeois in order to rig oneself out in their garments, but a struggle to divest the bourgeois political organism of any life and to transpose anything useful it may contain into a proletarian political organism created in accordance with the development of the proletariat.[76]

The proletariat, wrote Sorel, can emancipate itself only if it remains a "wholly labor" phenomenon, if it excludes intellectuals, if it refuses to imitate the bourgeoisie,[77] and if, drawing on its "feelings of energy and responsibility,"[78] it relinquishes the democratic heritage. Relinquishing the democratic heritage means first rejecting individualism, liberalism, and certain reforms, such as the celebrated "right to work," introduced by the French Revolution. The emancipation of the proletariat thus passes through a restructuring of society according to principles opposite to those of liberal democracy. Syndicalism believed that "the workers as a whole constitute a body," and that the syndicates were "social authorities" that "take the worker out of the control of the shopkeeper, that great elector of bourgeois democracy." In this way, a "new organization" comes into being, "independent of all bourgeois organizations," which can set up workers' cooperatives and encourage their growth, and which can create, in place of "*government by the citizens as a whole*, which has never been anything other than a fiction," and in place of a "*chaotic majority*" and a "purely ideal and utopian equality," a "*just and real organized equality*." In this way a "proletarian spirit" also comes into being. In this way, finally, autonomous workers' organizations are set up which run counter to the classical political organizations—that is, parties, pressure groups, and all the channels of transmission of bourgeois democracy.[79]

In order to preserve this labor autonomy, one had at all costs to prevent the reappearance of a coalition similar to the one that made the Dreyfus Affair possible. In Sorel's opinion, this alliance of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie represented an ideal model of a kind of "political revolution"

that is fatal for the proletariat, for the factor that destroys the mechanism of the conflict is democracy, which "mixes" the elements separated by economics. Nevertheless, Sorel was well aware that class antagonisms were never automatically or necessarily produced by capitalism. Capitalism does not *inevitably* produce class struggle; a capitalist "inevitability" exists only in the domain of economics, production, and technology. If capitalism develops as the result of a certain necessity, if the capitalists all have to try and improve their equipment, to find new outlets, to reduce their manufacturing costs, "nothing obliges the workers to unite and to organize themselves."[80] For this reason, capitalism can neither automatically cause social polarization and class antagonisms nor give rise to a combative way of thinking and a spirit of sacrifice. Class struggle materializes only where there is a desire, continually fostered, to destroy the existing order. The mechanisms of the capitalist system are able to give rise to economic progress, create ever-increasing wealth, and raise the standard of living. These mechanisms are a necessary but not sufficient precondition for nurturing a class consciousness. The capitalist system does not by its nature produce a revolutionary state of mind, and it is not by itself capable of creating the conviction that the bourgeois order deserves to be overtaken not only by a "material catastrophe," but also by a "moral catastrophe."[81]

Sorel was aware of the enormous changes that had taken place in the condition of the workers. He believed that political democracy, universal suffrage, social legislation, public education, and freedom of the press worked against the esprit de corps of the industrial workers. At the same time, one saw corporations regain a position of honor and an increasing intervention by both employers and the state in the affairs of the workers. "All this tends to mix together all that socialism had sought to separate and that Marx thought he had totally distinguished," wrote Sorel. Even if he thought these developments too recent or as yet of too little importance to have had "an effect on the present crisis of Marxism,"[82] Sorel nevertheless felt he had perceived a new phenomenon whose importance could only increase in the future, and which Marx could not have known about. True to his objectives of 1897, Sorel thus decided to correct and complete Marxism. In 1914, when very little remained of his Marxist beliefs, he recalled in his foreword to *Matériaux* the days when he had hoped "to be able one day, using the facts revealed in recent inquiries, to complete the brief guidelines that Marx and Engels had provided on the development of the working class."[83] Ten years earlier, Sorel would never have dared to couple the expression "brief guidelines" with the name of Marx, even if, already at that period, he felt that "these last years" had been sufficiently "rich in unexpected facts" to "invalidate those syntheses which seemed to be the best founded."[84]

In fact, Sorelian revisionism was deeply rooted in the social realities of his time and his immediate environment. It was not a mere intellectual exercise;

Sorel set about cultivating the mythical and apocalyptic aspect of Marxism against the background of the great strikes and the upsurge of syndicalism of the first years of the century. Strikes and violence were not metaphors. In the France of 1906, one of every sixteen industrial workers was a striker; they amounted, in all, to hundreds of thousands. Those who were in solidarity with the striking workers were more numerous still. The longer the strikes lasted, the bigger their effect. According to Madeleine Rebérioux, in 1902 strikes lasted an average of 22 days, more than three times the average thirty years earlier. In 1904 there were 1,026 strikes, about twice as many as in 1903; 271,097 workers stopped work, representing nearly four million lost working days. The movement peaked in 1906 with 438,000 strikers—a record that was not broken until the war—and 1,039 strikes of an average length of nineteen days. Some of these strikes caused terrible hardship; at the industrial complex of Forges d'Hennebont, between April and August 1906, 1,800 workers sustained themselves with crabs fished at low tide and a little bread, and at the end of the strike, a striking worker's family lived on 750 grams of bread a week. Soldiers began to shoot; at Longwy in September 1905, at Raon-l'Étape in July 1907, and in the Lens Basin after the catastrophe of Courrières blood flowed after the cavalry came on the scene. Social tensions reached their climax on 1 May 1906. For the first time, a labor movement on a national scale had been systematically organized; new possibilities seemed to open up. Some leaders of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) thought a general strike was taking shape in the strike movement that followed the cessation of work on 1 May 1906. The building, furnishing, and printing trades as well as automobile and metro workers were affected.[85]

The year 1906 was also when *Réflexions sur la violence* and *Les Illusions du progrès* were published. Revolutionary syndicalism was a reflection of this epic period of strike action, and it built its theory around it. It hoped to see the emergence of a heroic proletariat, ready for every sacrifice and conscious of its mission. Sorel was sufficiently clear-sighted, however, to be aware of the other side of the picture: it was not the fate of civilization that preoccupied the striking workers but their living and working conditions. Their demands centered on the eight-hour working day and not the end of bourgeois culture.

Moreover, on 13 July 1906, a law was passed making obligatory a twenty-four-hour weekly day of rest. Economic growth went side by side with legislation improving the workers' conditions (for instance, the law for the protection of women's wages in July 1907 and the law on the retirement of industrial and agricultural workers in April 1910). If the first of May frightened the propertied classes, if the combativeness of the workers was impressive, French capitalism—the same was true in Italy and Germany—found the means to confront the challenge and to meet social demands.[86]

Clemenceau's policy of rupture with the workers organized in syndicates was not enough to cause a general revolt. Even the first of May 1906 did not mobilize the working class as a whole, nor even the entire CGT.

Here one saw the full ambiguity of a situation that was by no means limited to France. The strike actions of the Italian working class were larger in scope and had a greater effect than those in France. In the opinion of Rosa Luxemburg, the Russian Revolution of 1905 had originated in a general strike. Paradoxically, this very ardor and militancy demonstrated the limits of the phenomenon, for it was the German, French, and Italian socialist parties—all reformist—that clearly gained ground. Sorel knew that the social agitation of the CGT could not conceal the gains of the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO, French Socialists), and in the final analysis Jaurès's party (the SFIO) reaped the benefit. Between the time of the foundation of the party—representing a victory for the moderates—and July 1914, membership increased from 44,000 to 90,000. In 1906 the SFIO had 900,000 votes, in 1910 1 million, and in 1914 1,400,000, sending 57, 76, and finally 101 representatives to the Chamber of Deputies. In Provence and Languedoc, the Socialist party had overtaken the radicals. Here, then, was a party that was not a mass party nor a workers' party, nor, even less, a revolutionary party, which in the space of two normal legislatures showed itself to be a large parliamentary formation backed by a large number of electors.[87] In Germany, the situation was similar: the Socialist party, as everyone knows, was at that period the largest political party in the empire.

This was the situation to which the revolutionaries had to find a response. On the one hand, there was an undeniable upsurge of labor militancy and bloody confrontations with the bourgeois state, and on the other hand an almost continuous economic growth that made it possible, through reforms that deeply modified the living conditions of the working class, to diminish considerably its revolutionary ardor. This conjunction of circumstances revealed the true significance of the Sorelian theory of myths: it was intended to develop the class consciousness of the proletariat, to encourage its combativeness, to structure a labor elite properly organized in syndicates, and to create a deep psychological gulf between this avant-garde and the ruling bourgeoisie. This psychological gulf had to be deepened day by day through a constant rejection of social reforms; thus social polarization would be accomplished through willpower, and the atmosphere of a crisis of capitalism, which because of economic growth had failed to develop, would become a reality.

Here one can clearly see the social intention of the theory of myths. Since capitalism did not bring society to the final stage of its maturation, since it did not seem that in the immediate future the bourgeois order would collapse of its own accord, since labor violence based on material demands did

not raise the proletariat to the level of a historical force able to give rise to a new civilization, and since it became obvious every day that the material interests of the proletariat, and not only of the socialist politicians, disposed it to compromise with the bourgeoisie, new factors had to be introduced into social relationships. A total moral revolt would replace the struggle for better conditions, the psychological method would replace the traditional mechanistic approach, and irrationalism would replace the classical Marxist content of socialism. Since it appeared that the masses could not be activated by reason, since socialism persisted in representing, as the old Guesdist tradition maintained, the "party of the stomach," and since capitalism did not collapse and social polarization did not happen, one had artificially to create a process of rebellion of a new type, suitably adapted to the new social conditions. This was the function of the theory of myths that lay at the heart of the antimaterialist revision of Marxism.

ANTIRATIONALISM AND ACTIVISM: THE SOCIAL MYTHS

Sorel showed an awareness of the new possibilities of a mythical interpretation of Marxism as early as his "Préface pour Colajanni," written at the end of 1899. That means that at the height of his social-democratic period, when he seemed to conceive of socialism as an element of modern democracy, he was already laying the foundations for a revision of Marxism of a new kind, which later contributed to a new type of revolutionary ideology.

The starting point of Sorel's thinking on the symbolic and mythical aspect of Marxism was the idea of class. Seeing that an absolute "class" did not exist, and despite the fact that Marx himself, who often confused logical constructions and phenomena, was not always aware of it, Sorel maintained that "the Marxist theory of classes is an abstraction." This amounted to saying it was an intellectual construction or a methodological necessity. Indeed, wrote Sorel, "the *dichotomous division* of society," which is regarded as being characteristic of Marxism, the opposition of "the have-nots to those who have," does not exist in reality. It is obvious, he wrote, not only that "the middle class does not disappear" and its social importance does not diminish, but also that the idea of class can hardly be applied to the petit bourgeoisie. Sorel believed that the middle class was a diversified entity within which existed a great mobility. For socialism, this "excessive complexity of the social structure" represented an insurmountable obstacle as long as one confined oneself to sociological analyses and accepted the unwieldiness of sociology; but things were quite different when one regarded this famous "dichotomous division" not as the expression of a social reality, but as a methodical necessity. Marx alone, wrote Sorel, was responsible "for the obscurity of his doctrine of class struggle," because "he found it very difficult

to separate in his thinking what was properly *scientific* from what was properly educative." Sorel believed that the value of the Marxist theory of class struggle could be compared to "that of an artistic image intended to make us assimilate an idea." It was in this way that the socialist militants had to understand the "*revolutionary idea*" if they were to render it comprehensible to the masses. Sorel's meaning was that the "dichotomous division" was really an "abstraction" that enabled social conflicts to be placed within a theoretical framework, and that it had a mobilizing and ideological value inasmuch as it allowed social conflicts to be organized in accordance with an entirely coherent view of history.[88]

In this light—and bearing in mind that "to concern oneself with social science is one thing and to mold consciousness is another"—Sorel examined the next-to-last chapter of *Das Kapital*, which he held to be the true conclusion of Marx's masterwork. On one hand, he considered that all the hypotheses underlying the conception of the future in Marx, which hardly corresponded to the economic realities of 1867, were of little interest if taken literally. On the other hand, if one took the trouble to interpret "this *apocalyptic text* . . . as a product of the spirit, as an image created for the purpose of molding consciousness, it . . . is a good illustration of the principle on which Marx believed he should base the rules of the socialist action of the proletariat." As Sorel said, the "Préface pour Colajanni" had a position of the greatest importance in the development of his thought. "I believe it was here," he wrote, "that for the first time I indicated the doctrine of myth that I developed in *Réflexions sur la violence*."[89]

Indeed, from that moment on Sorel initiated the process that he believed would complete Marxism. This process continued with *Introduction à l'économie moderne*, in which he attacked one of the leaders of Italian socialism, Enrico Ferri, whom he saw as one of those "retarded people who believe in the sovereign power of science" and who thought that socialism could be demonstrated "as one demonstrates the laws of the equilibrium of fluids." Here Sorel joined battle with positivistic sociology, for which he substituted a pragmatic and relativistic sociology that was justified and could be justified only by its practical utility.[90]

He wished to base this new sociology on the critique of traditional philosophy by Bergsonian philosophy. Reflecting Bergson's question "whether the time had not come to abandon the old Greek method created for geometrical purposes in order to attempt to find reality, motivation, and content," Sorel declared that "knowledge obtained through concepts . . . is as ill-adapted to social facts as could be." He also went a stage farther, drawing, this time, upon the theories of Vico, whom he called "that great Neapolitan," and whom he regarded as one of the chief authorities "for the Marxist. In history," he wrote, "there is first of all . . . a popular wisdom that feels things and expresses them poetically before reflective thought succeeds in under-

standing them theoretically."[91] This wisdom, he claimed, is in fact an intuition of real social movement that enables it to be grasped before it has run its course and before discursive thought can retrace its development.[92]

Thus, in the opinion of Sorel, not the scientific method but "a theory of social myths" would enable the existing difficulties of socialism to be overcome. He believed that myths had played a considerable role in human thought, which the history of philosophy had not yet understood precisely. In this connection, Sorel referred characteristically to the Platonic myths,[93] which he had already discussed in *Le Procès de Socrate*.[94] A myth, he believed, is a symbol whose function is to transpose relationships of ideas into relationships of facts, which are their image. Paul Kahn said that a myth comes into being whenever symbols assume a narrative and dramatic form and consequently involve characters and action.[95]

Sorel ascribed to his theory of myths a comparable function. This theory, however, was delineated roughly in *Introduction à l'économie moderne*; it was fully developed only in *Réflexions*, which he began to write in 1905 and published in *Le Mouvement socialiste* in the first half of 1906. He thus sought to give Marxism an entirely new significance. Sorel thought he had penetrated "Marx's underlying thought"; he believed he had discovered "the hidden mechanism of the doctrine," whose existence the "official Marxists" led by Kautsky ("too alien to any philosophical reflection") were incapable of even suspecting.[96] Strangely, Sorel launched an attack at this stage on Émile Vandervelde, the rising star of Belgian socialism and one of the best-known spokesmen of democratic revisionism. Sorel defended against him a number of classical Marxist dogmas that democratic socialism at the beginning of the century regarded as obsolete. Whether he took his inspiration from Bernstein or he simply drew conclusions from the social and economic reality, Vandervelde considered three fundamental elements of Marxist thought to be outmoded: the iron law of wages, identified as that of ever-increasing pauperization, the law of capitalist concentration, and the law of correlation between economic and political power.[97] Other socialist theoreticians rejected a far larger proportion of the Marxist heritage. Why did a revisionist like Sorel so strongly defend those aspects of Marxism which he himself had attacked in the socioeconomic studies before *Introduction à l'économie moderne*?

The answer was related to the place that the theory of myths now held in his thinking: Sorel was becoming increasingly aware of the power of myth and of the role it can play as a catalyst for social action. He believed that the salient question was no longer whether the Marxist analysis of capitalism was scientifically correct, whether it simply reflected the economic realities of a certain period, or whether it provided a universally valid explanation—questions that preoccupied social democrats like Ferri, Turati, and Jaurès, orthodox Marxists like Kautsky, and people of Antonio Labriola's ideological

orientation. No, that was not the question at all. Because he believed that these debates were beside the main point—the revolutionary action of the proletariat—he decided to initiate the veritable metamorphosis that he was to bring about in Marxism. This metamorphosis became fully possible only when Sorel had liberated himself from his old "rationalistic prejudices," like those, for instance, which he still at that period expressed in an article entitled "The Social Value of Art."[98] The rationalistic conception of aesthetics underlying that article of 1901 would have been unthinkable a few years later. The idea of a permanent struggle against the bourgeoisie required an antirationalistic revision of Marxism. Before this found its full expression in *Réflexions sur la violence* and *La Décomposition du marxisme*, a first sketch of it was given in the last pages of *Introduction à l'économie moderne*.

If Sorel refused to abandon these celebrated "dogmas" of Marxist thought, held by the great majority of European socialists to have lost their scientific validity on account of the direction that the evolution of capitalism took, it was because he had understood that there was no relationship between the truth of a doctrine and its operational value as a weapon of combat. If the most questionable elements of Marxist thought were suddenly so important to Sorel (he said they contained "something essential to the life and progress of socialism"), it was solely because of their apocalyptic character. "It is probable," he wrote, "that Marx already presented the catastrophic conception only as a myth that very clearly illustrated the class struggle and the social revolution." What mattered was that "the *contested theories*" were "necessitated by modern revolutionary action." Sorel claimed that these theories, "which the scholars of socialism no longer accept, but which the militants consider as axioms beyond all question," ought to be "treated as myths."[99] In this connection, Sorel insisted that "Marx was much more felicitous in his expositions of the revolutionary movement than in his perceptions of earlier episodes." According to Sorel, Marxism was thus above all a philosophy of revolutionary action. Sorel also quoted Bernstein, who "a few years ago advised the socialists to concern themselves with the *movement* and not with the *end* to which the revolution will perhaps conduce."[100] At the same time, he wrote, "I wonder if it is possible to give an intelligible explanation of the passage from principles to action without employing myths."[101] The theory of myths thus became the true underpinning of Sorelian thought and the mainspring of the revision of Marxism by the "new school." Launched by people who hoped that "socialism would renew the world,"[102] the Sorelian revision of Marxism was created to provide a theoretical framework for the labor revolt that smoldered at the beginning of the century, and for the purpose of saving an entire civilization from decadence.

For the Platonic conception dominant in *Le Procès de Socrate*, the theory of myths replaced the Bergsonian conception outlined in *Introduction à l'économie moderne* and fully developed in *Réflexions sur la violence*. Sorel

used myth as a real operational tool, as a means of generating action, and he conferred on it an absolute value. He then took myth out of the sphere of the intellect and placed it in that of affectivity and activity. Thus, the Sorelian myth possessed two characteristic dimensions: on one hand, it was a new type of thought, and on the other hand it aimed to give rise to a new type of political action. Mythical thought, Sorel believed, was opposed to reflective and discursive thought; it was a religious way of thinking that rebelled against the rationalistic. This type of thought had an immediate function: to mobilize the masses and to change the world. Sorelian myth had an incomparable power of evocation and incitement to action; it was regarded as an inexhaustible source of regeneration, moral improvement, and heroism.[103] Myth was thought and action; it was a creator of legend, and it enabled the individual to live that legend instead of living out history. It enabled one to pass beyond a detestable present, armed with a faith that nothing could destroy. That is why myths and rationality were opposed in Sorel. Because of this opposition he regarded myth as a social force. By galvanizing the masses, it permitted the social and economic reality of the beginning of the century to be surmounted.

Here, precisely, was where the originality of the Sorelian revision of Marxism lay. This way of thinking refused to bow to reality; it sought to be true to the revolutionary impulse of Marxism even if that meant abandoning its intellectual content. Thus, in relation to every variety of Marxism, Sorel appeared to be an absolute rebel. The theory of myths permitted the obstacles of the material world to be overcome and enabled the proletariat to fulfill its historic role. Hence, thanks to this irrational element of myth, a social polarization was effected. Class struggle, which the mechanisms of capitalism were unable to bring about, now became a historical force. The social reality that Sorel had analyzed and found to be terribly complex was suddenly of a luminous simplicity. The great question of human motivation was likewise suddenly simplified. Myth thus appeared to be an instrument of an extraordinary efficacy and possessed, moreover, the advantage of being totally immune to any failure. And finally, it defied classical rational analysis, thus rendering its active potential almost infinite.

Sorelian myths were "systems of images," that is, constructions that enabled "people who participate in great social movements" to conceive "their next action as images of battle ensuring the triumph of their cause." As "outstanding examples of myths," Sorel mentioned "those which were invented by primitive Christianity, by the Reformation, by the French Revolution"; in a similar manner and to the same degree, he wrote, "the general strike of the syndicalists and Marx's catastrophic revolution are myths." Sorel was perfectly aware of the importance of the invention of this irrationalistic interpretation of Marxism. "In employing the term *myth*," he wrote, "I believed I had made a lucky find, because in this way I avoided any discussion with

people who wish to submit the general strike to a detailed criticism and raise objections to its practical possibility." The potential of this "theory of myths" lay in the fact that it not only eluded "any control by intellectualistic philosophy" but gave an intelligibility to historical phenomena, psychological reflexes, and modes of behavior "that intellectualistic philosophy cannot explain." Sorel claimed that "intellectualistic philosophy"—that is, traditional philosophy—revealed its impotence whenever it had to explain the propensity to self-sacrifice of the soldiers of the Napoleonic armies, Roman virtue, or the Greeks' love of glory. What could rationalism do with "the myth of the Church Militant?" he asked. Sorel concluded that "intellectualistic philosophy truly suffers from a radical incompetence with regard to the explanation of the great historical movements."[104]

Sorel did not examine the content of myths. He never even defined the term *myth*. He focused on myths' social function; his myths were "social myths" that had to be regarded "as means of influencing the present."[105] "I wished to show that one should not seek to analyze such systems of images by breaking them up into their component parts, that they have to be accepted in their totality as historical forces, and that one should above all avoid comparing accomplished facts with the representations that had been accepted before the action."[106]

The Sorelian "social myth" was "a picture" whose true dimensions could be grasped only "when the masses are stirred up." It "could not be broken up into parts that could be interpreted as historical descriptions," and it offered the immense advantage of being "safe from all refutation."[107] Sorel returned to this idea several times: "It is thus of little importance whether myths contain details that do in fact form part of future history. They are not astrological almanacs; it can even happen that nothing that is in them comes to pass, as was the case with the catastrophe expected by the early Christians."[108]

In a passage of great importance, where he again insisted on the impotence of rational analysis with respect to the new conception of human behavior he had put forward, Sorel summarized his thought as follows:

> Myths must be regarded as means of influencing the present. Any discussion about relating them concretely to the course of history is senseless. *It is only the myth as a whole that matters*: its parts are of interest only insofar as they set off the idea contained in its construction. There is therefore little use in speculating about the incidents that can happen in the course of the social struggle or about the crucial conflicts that can bring victory to the proletariat. Even if the revolutionaries would be entirely mistaken in fantasizing about the idea of the general strike, this idea could be a factor of the utmost importance in the process of preparing the revolution if it embodies in a perfect manner all the aspirations of socialism and if it gives revolutionary thought as a whole a precision and exactitude that other ways of thinking could not have provided.

> To appreciate the significance of the idea of the general strike, one must thus abandon all the forms of discussion that are usual among politicians, sociologists, and people who lay claim to practical knowledge. One can concede to one's adversaries all they are trying to prove without in any way diminishing the value of the thesis they believe they are refuting. It is of little importance if the general strike is only a partial reality or only a product of the popular imagination. The whole question is whether the general strike contains all that the socialist doctrine expects of the revolutionary proletariat.[109]

Sorel claimed that although there had seldom been "any myths entirely devoid of an utopian admixture," the "present-day revolutionary myths" were "almost devoid of it. They enable one to understand the activities, sentiments, and ideas of the popular masses entering a decisive struggle." The general strike was a myth of this kind. "The element that makes the general strike so important," he wrote, is its "value as a motive force." The idea of the general strike demonstrated once again that one "can talk endlessly about rebellion without ever giving rise to a revolutionary movement if there are no myths accepted by the masses." However, from the moment one "introduces the myth of the general strike, which amounts to an absolute revolution," everything becomes easy, clear, and well defined. First, socialism regains the sense it had for Marx, who also saw it as having the function of a revolutionary apprenticeship for the proletariat. It ceases to be "a doctrine entirely expressed in words" which can easily be deflected toward the middle of the road—that is, toward democratic socialism. Since "the myth of the general strike became popular and was soundly entrenched in people's minds,"[110] a new, young, and vigorous force rose up "in the face of that noisy, talkative, and mendacious kind of socialism that is exploited by the ambitious of every sort, amuses a few wags, and is admired by the decadent."[111]

Sorel's great ambition, as we saw, was, "instead of commentating" the texts of Marx, as "his wretched disciples had done for so long," "to complete his doctrine." For this purpose, he had recourse to Bergson; "by using the insights we owe to Bergsonian philosophy" he hoped to "deepen the theory of myths," which he made the center of his revision of Marxism. From Bergson, Sorel learned that "to act freely is to regain possession of oneself; it is to replace oneself in pure duration." "We enjoy this liberty," wrote Sorel, "above all when we make an effort to create within us a new man with the purpose of transcending the historical frameworks that confine us."[112] This idea is of absolute importance for an understanding of Sorel's thought; according to his conception, the individual formed in the syndicates was a producer and a warrior, nurtured on heroic values, like the early Christians, the Roman legionnaires, the soldiers of the revolutionary wars, and the disciples of Mazzini. He was a combatant avid for glory, full of abnegation, and ever ready for sacrifice, like the soldiers of Napoleon. Sustained by myths, these men did not expect concrete and immediate results; they abhorred the

useful and were enamored of the sublime. They were the only people able to dominate history.

From Bergson, Sorel learned that "movement is the essence of the affective life. It is thus in terms of movement that one should speak of the creative consciousness." And farther on he wrote: "When we act, that means we have created an entirely artificial world placed in front of the present and formed out of movements that depend on us. In this way our liberty becomes entirely intelligible." The operational conclusion that Sorel drew from this was that "these artificial worlds generally disappear from our minds without leaving a trace, but when the masses are aroused there is a phenomenon that can be described as a social myth."[113]

Where the correction and completion of Marxism were concerned, Bergson's teachings were very convenient, for they enabled the rationalistic content of Marxism to be replaced by "revolutionary myths." It was no longer a question of economic or sociological laws or of historical or political analysis. Myths, wrote Sorel, "are not a description of things, but expressions of will,"[114] and "groups of images that can evoke as a totality through intuition alone, before any reasoned analysis, the mass of sentiments that correspond to the various manifestations of the war waged by socialism against modern society."[115] Later, the same formula was repeated word for word, although in an abbreviated form, to describe the general strike in terms of myth.[116] Again, the myth was described as "identical with the convictions of a group," convictions of which it was "the expression in the language of movement,"[117] and it presented itself "to the spirit with the insistence of instincts in all circumstances of life."[118] It was thus logical that it permitted an "intuition of socialism that language was unable to provide with perfect clarity."[119] Sorel was aware of the analogy between "revolutionary socialism" thus conceived and religion. He knew that anything that claimed to be above science and beyond criticism was comparable to religion. Here Sorel once again had recourse to what he called the "new psychology": Bergson, he wrote, "taught us that religion was not alone in occupying the depths of the consciousness. The revolutionary myths have a place there to the same degree." By a suitable employment of this method, Sorel hoped to make possible the "apprenticeship, preparation, and reconstruction of the individual in view of a gigantic operation."[120]

Bergsonian philosophy not only had the function of completing Marxism, but also replaced what was essential in Marxism, and while retaining the vocabulary and the revolutionary objective of Marxism, it radically altered its content. It was no accident that Sorel extolled the virtues of Bergsonian thought precisely in those places where he deplored Marx's "numerous and sometimes enormous" errors. In Sorel's view, Bergsonian thought, while divesting it of its rationalist content, restored all the dynamism of Marxism, held, as it was, in the stranglehold of a Kautsky-type orthodoxy, or, even

worse, mired in the idle prattle of reformism. Under the influence of Bergsonian anti-Cartesianism, Marxism, in Sorel's eyes, became once again what it ought never to have stopped being: an ideology of action inspiring a proletarian movement devoted to the destruction of the existing order. Sorel believed that revolutionary syndicalism represented the fullest practical application of Bergson's thought. "In concentrating all of socialism in the general strike," he wrote, the revolutionary syndicalists were applying a method that "has all the advantages that total consciousness possesses over analysis in Bergson's doctrine." Moreover, he added, "Movement, in Bergsonian philosophy, is regarded as an indivisible whole—which brings us precisely to the catastrophic conception of socialism."[121]

Thanks to Bergson, revolutionary syndicalism succeeded in liberating itself from "official" Marxism. Taking its inspiration from Bergson, it yielded to the facts and went back to the roots. Only in this way, wrote Sorel, does one achieve "what Bergson calls an *integral experience*." Sorel was convinced that through Bergsonian spiritualism it was possible to break free from the shackles of social-democratic scholasticism and from Marx's heavy yet flimsy German-manufactured explanations, and, by following "exactly the contemporary transformations of the proletarian idea," to "perfect Marxism."[122] Bergson enabled socialism to liberate itself from the "vain and false science" that supposed "that everything can be ascribed to a mathematical law."[123] Sorel called this "petty science," which was opposed by philosophy and which he associated with positivism. Positivism, he said, had threatened to kill philosophy, but philosophy "is not dead and has had a splendid reawakening thanks to Bergson." Metaphysics had regained its "rights by showing people the illusion of so-called scientific solutions and by taking the spirit back to the mysterious region that *petty science abhors*." Positivism ("petty science"), which with Comte had succeeded in creating a caricature of Catholicism, was disparaged, he wrote, even in cultivated circles that now mocked "the rationalism formerly in fashion at the university." In this connection Sorel mentioned Pascal, who had protested "against those who consider obscurity an objection to Catholicism," and firmly supported him as the figure who, like Brunetière at the turn of the century, was in his opinion the most anti-Cartesian philosopher of his time.[124]

Sorel thought that precisely this mysterious and obscure aspect of a system of thought or of a social phenomenon constituted its greatness. It enabled one to avoid having to take one's stand "on utilitarian grounds," and it allowed one to have, for instance, a total faith in the general strike "even while knowing it is a myth."[125] The obscurity of socialism did not prevent it

> from being easy to represent the proletarian movement in a complete, exact, and compelling way by means of the great construction that the proletarian soul conceived in the course of social conflicts and that is called the general strike.

> One should always remember that the perfection of this form of representation would immediately disappear if one sought to split the general strike into an accumulation of historical details. *It must be regarded as an undivided whole; and the passage from capitalism to socialism must be conceived as a catastrophe whose process defies description.*[126]

Sorel believed that by evolving within this mythical and irrational sphere socialism would succeed in overcoming the "crisis of Marxism" that "*petty science*" had "greatly contributed to creating."[127] The "characteristic of infinity" of the myth of the general strike at one and the same time gave socialism "such a high moral value and inspired so great a loyalty,"[128] and gave it that absolute confidence in the future which constitutes the greatness of true revolutionary movements, for ever since it had become a work of preparation, ever since it had been nurtured by the myth of the general strike, "a failure," he wrote, "could not prove anything against socialism."[129] Ever since it had expressed itself in the myth of the general strike, socialism had ceased to be a mere model or an intellectual construction or abstraction.

This, according to Sorel, was precisely the great difference between myth and utopia: a utopia is only an intellectual construction that can be analyzed and discussed and that can be refuted. A utopia directs people toward reforms, while "our present myths lead people to prepare themselves for a battle to destroy what exists."[130] They also enable one "to explore with profit the whole vast domain of Marxism."[131] What therefore remained of Marxism after it had been voided of its hedonistic and materialistic substance to the benefit of the mythical, voluntarist, vitalist, and quasi-metaphysical content proposed by Sorel was its function as an instrument of revolution. From being a heavy, ossified, and powerless machine, Marxism, revised, improved, and completed by Sorel, had now become an impressive mobilizing force.

The heroic episode of the strikes thus found its ideological justification. The myth of the general strike, wrote Sorel, had given rise to a "rich and sublime socialist ideology,"[132] an ideology of struggle that made "the fundamental principles of Marxism" intelligible for the first time. Indeed, this new significance of a Marxism voided of its rationalist content and transformed by Bergsonism permitted the ideas of class and of class struggle to be given back their original function. The strike, wrote Sorel, gave reality to the "dichotomous thesis" of a society "split into two fundamentally antagonistic groups." Owing to the strike, society was "clearly divided into two camps, and only two, upon a battlefield." The myth of the general strike gave strikes a completely new significance. Because of it, each particular conflict had the character of an "incident" in a general "social war," and every local strike, however insignificant in itself, created "the prospect of a total catastrophe." The idea of the general strike ensured that "socialism always remains young" and "the split is never in danger of disappearing."[133]

The myth of the general strike, the mobilizing myth par excellence, had another great advantage. Sorel had learned from Le Bon that the "crowd" is essentially conservative. Sorel had great respect for Le Bon, whom he regarded as "one of the most original scientists of our time," and was one of the first people to acclaim his work. Sorel understood the importance of the psychological factor in the process of integrating working-class elements into the bourgeois order: "Self-love, even more than money, is the great motive force in the transition from revolt to the bourgeoisie." But this did not apply only in rare or exceptional cases; "the psychology of the laboring masses was so easily adaptable to the capitalist order that social peace" could easily be bought by the bourgeoisie. To arrest the process of the integration of the proletariat into the bourgeois order, to tear the producers out of the grip of the intellectuals, and to "make the socialist idea more heroic"—these were the functions of the concept of the general strike, and it was in this way that this concept, according to Sorel, reflected Marx's true thinking.[134]

The intellectual, emotional, and psychological motive force of a reformed and heroic Marxism, the theory of myths found its concrete expression in proletarian violence. Here we are not using naive metaphors, but we are speaking of immediate political solutions for the purpose of altering a blocked situation. Since Marxist expectations had not been fulfilled, and since the proletariat had not been "united and organized by the sheer mechanism of production"[135] and did not find itself face-to-face with a vigorous capitalist class that was "frankly and loyally reactionary,"[136] since, in short, the revolution did not and would not take place on its own, the defective deterministic mechanism had to be replaced with a will to revolution. The theory of myths thus became the motive force of the revolution, and violence became its instrument. The use of the theory of myths and the advocacy of violence made Marx accessible: "Marx wished to tell us that the whole preparation of the proletariat depended solely on the organization of a stubborn, growing, and passionate resistance to the existing order of things."[137] This preparation was made through "the *direct and revolutionary method.*"[138]

But, after all, Marx had not foreseen the new situation that had arisen. He had not been able to imagine a bourgeoisie that would avoid a fight, agree to reduce its power, and be willing to purchase social tranquillity at any price. Nor had he predicted that capitalism, which would modernize the world with unprecedented speed, would fail to accomplish its social purpose and to create a united, organized proletariat, conscious of its power and mission. Marx could not foresee that modernization would have results that from the technological point of view were extraordinary but from the social, moral, and political points of view were disastrous. He was able to anticipate neither the bourgeois decadence nor the proletarian decadence. He could not conceive that the socialist parties, those proletarian parties once conscious of their mission, would become instruments of class collaboration and would

concoct democratic socialism. Marx could not imagine that in order to save the proletariat and, at the same time, civilization as well, it would be necessary to create everything artificially: class consciousness, will to struggle, social polarization. He could not picture a situation in which, in order to prevent civilization from sinking into decadence, one had to restore the appetites of the bourgeoisie and the ardor of the proletariat. He could not foresee a state of affairs in which the official syndical organization became "a variety of politics, a means of getting on in the world," any more than he could conceive of a situation in which "the republican government and the philanthropists took it into their heads to exterminate socialism by developing social legislation and reducing employers' resistance to strikes."[139] In that case, "should one believe the Marxist conception is dead? Not at all, for proletarian violence comes on the scene just at the moment when social tranquillity tries to calm the conflicts. Proletarian violence encloses the employers in their role of producers and restores the structure of the classes just as the latter had seemed to mix together in a democratic quagmire." Sorel added that "the more the bourgeoisie will be ardently capitalist and the more the proletariat will be full of a fighting spirit and confident of its revolutionary force, the more will movement be assured." This was especially the case because he considered this division of classes to be "the basis of all socialism." This is what created "the idea of a catastrophic revolution" and would finally enable "socialism to fulfill its historical role."[140]

In a key passage of his *Réflexions*, Sorel described the role of violence as follows:

> This violence forces capitalism to preoccupy itself entirely with its material role and restores to it the bellicose qualities that it formerly possessed. A growing and solidly organized working class can force the capitalist class to remain vigorous in industrial combat. If, in the face of a bourgeoisie that is wealthy and eager for conquest, a united and revolutionary proletariat rises up, capitalist society will attain its historical perfection.
>
> Thus, proletarian violence has become a central factor of Marxism. We should add, once again, that it would have the effect, if properly employed, of suppressing parliamentary socialism, which would no longer be considered the master of the working class and the guardian of order.[141]

However—and this is an essential element in his thought—violence in Sorel is not solely an instrument; it constitutes a value in itself inasmuch as it "serves the primary interests of civilization." It "thus appears as something very beautiful and very heroic," for "not only can proletarian violence ensure the future revolution, but it seems to be the only means by which the European nations, deadened by humanism, can regain their former energy." By means of proletarian violence the world will be saved from barbarism, and the revolutionaries will enter into history like the defenders of Thermopylae, who "helped maintain the light in the ancient world."[142]

Undoubtedly, the barbarism in question is found in bourgeois decadence and in the rejection of heroic and martial values. War, precisely, was for Sorel the source of morality par excellence: "Lofty moral convictions . . . do not depend on reasoning or on the training of the individual will; they depend on a state of war in which men agree to participate, and which is expressed in precise myths." The religious struggles and the revolutionary wars, the fight against the devil or for liberty, the sacrifices of the early Christians or the Protestant sects, the struggle of the liberals against the ancien régime or of the German socialists persecuted by Bismarck, are many illustrations of one and the same truth, namely, that only people who live in a state of permanent tension are able to attain the "sublime." The idea of the sublime is mentioned fourteen times in the eleven pages of the *Réflexions* where Sorel deals with this question! This expression is synonymous with the epic and the heroic, with sacrifice, abnegation, and altruism. Morals can exist only when people lead the hard life of the combatant and when the sense of duty is paramount. It is totally incompatible with utilitarianism, materialism, egoism, and probabilism. That is why, wherever one has the idea of the general strike, wherever the struggle is fiercest, wherever blows are exchanged, the "consequences are far-reaching and can give rise to the sublime."[143]

Just as there are two types of general strike—the proletarian and the political—and two socialisms—proletarian socialism and the socialism of the politicians—so, according to Sorel, there are two different kinds of war: the heroic kind celebrated by poets which inspires the noblest and purest sentiments and the war whose object is to divide the adversary's spoils and to "allow politicians to satisfy their ambitions." The syndicalist general strike is related to an ancient tradition: "The proletariat organizes itself for battle . . . subordinating all social considerations to that of combat. It has a very clear sentiment of the glory attached to its historic role and of the heroism of its militant attitude; it aspires to the crucial test in which it will give the full measure of its value."[144]

For Sorel, certainly, proletarian violence did not necessarily require a great show of brutality, apart from that which is inherent in acts of war. Sorel, who never had much respect for the French Revolution and the "great ancestors," hated Jacobinism. If, on one hand, he was careful to distinguish proletarian violence—the violence of soldiers avid for honor and glory, a "neutral" violence, if one may say so, devoid of hatred or ferocity—from the bourgeois use of force, which represented a kind of state terrorism,[145] he took pains, on the other hand, to distinguish proletarian violence from revolutionary terror. He considered Danton and Robespierre as despicable as Jaurès, whom he regarded as "capable of all ferocities against the vanquished." In his opinion, Jaurès, who in his *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* "mixed a philosophy sometimes worthy of M. Pantalon with the politics of a purveyor of guillotines," was the prototype of the blood-

thirsty democratic politician, as were the "terrorists" of 1793. Political customs hardly change, and Robespierre, through the legitimate function of the parliamentary institutions of that period, was put to death on the day he no longer enjoyed a majority in the National Convention. As against this, Sorel declared that proletarian violence "has no connection with these penalties," and there is no need "for blood to be shed in torrents."[146]

Ferocity and brutality, according to Sorel, were characteristic of Jacobin and bourgeois democracy; they were natural to a government of intellectuals, just as the cult of the state (which, in Sorelian thought, was merely an aspect of bourgeois power) was shared by all politicians, whether socialist, liberal, or conservative. Sorel hated political authoritarianism, of whatever kind; the bourgeois state and the dictatorship of the proletariat were in his opinion very much alike. Like Bernstein, he thought that the dictatorship of the proletariat would only divide society into "masters and enslaved" and could only result in bringing the proletariat under the orders of a small group of politicians. Consequently, Sorel wanted the suppression of the state, which, at the same time, would mean the end of the reign of intellectuals, heads of political parties, and parliaments. In order to eliminate the pernicious effects of democratic socialism and to counter the "elite of politicians" who wanted to use the state in order to rule over the proletariat and enslave it, revolutionary syndicalism wished to create a workshop of freemen. Against this "prudent socialism" which could conceive of no other solution than to "change masters" in favor of the "mass of producers," Sorel appealed to the spirit of rebellion of these same producers who were the only people able to save civilization from the abyss into which bourgeois decadence was drawing it. Thanks to proletarian violence, he wrote, "the modern world possesses the primum mobile that can ensure the morality of the producers."[147]

In his celebrated article "Apologie de la violence," published in *Le Matin* on 18 May 1908, Sorel gave a summary of his thought. Thus, according to this article, a strike was a phenomenon of war, and social revolution was an extension of this war of which each major strike was an episode. The social war, "calling forth the honor that develops so naturally in every organized army," gave "revolutionary syndicalism a great civilizing value," just as formerly war "gave the ancient republics the ideas that are the ornament of modern culture." Similarly, the revolutionary syndicalists, for whom socialism boiled down to "the idea, the expectation, the preparation of the general strike," in undertaking this "grave, fearful, and sublime work . . . raise themselves above our frivolous society and make themselves worthy of teaching the world new paths."[148]

Sorel maintained that in order to save morality and ensure its permanent survival, one had to "change its motivations," one had to summon up the forces of enthusiasm, sacrifice, asceticism, love of glory, and altruism. One

had to arouse violence, destroy utilitarianism, materialism, liberalism, and democracy (corrupt and corrupting by nature), and suppress the base and servile parliamentary socialism.[149] In other words, one must destroy all ideologies based on the idea that the well-being of the individual is the purpose of any social organization. One must liberate oneself from positivism as from the banal and complacent optimism of materialists of every kind.

Pessimism is another key element for understanding Sorelian thought. That too was a fundamental aspect of the revision of Marxism. The *Réflexions*, Sorel insisted, were based on pessimism, "a doctrine without which nothing very lofty is achieved in the world." If "Greek philosophy did not have great moral results, it was because it was generally highly optimistic. Socrates was, sometimes to an almost intolerable degree."[150] In *Réflexions*, Sorel returned to what he had already said in his first work, *Le Procès de Socrate*, in order to condemn optimism once more. In *Les Illusions du progrès*, he continued at length to develop his case against Cartesian rationalism and the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

In these themes we can see the true continuity of Sorelian thought. Sorel searched a great deal, but he never changed his fundamental concepts. Antirationalism and pessimism, the cult of heroic ages and values, and a horror of the Enlightenment were basic to his thinking from *Le Procès de Socrate* to his introduction to *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*. In *Le Procès de Socrate*, he distinguished between two types of ethics: a warrior ethics and an intellectual ethics. The warrior stood for the heroic values of the ancient city, the intellectual for the decadence of the Enlightenment. "In the new Athens . . . ," wrote Sorel, "the ancient civilization, religious and heroic," was destroyed by the Sophists.[151] The prototype of the dialectical, reasoning Sophist, corrupter of morals and manners, was Socrates.[152] All the innovators were condemned with him; the decadence began with the contempt with which the new philosophers regarded Homer, symbol of ancient society.[153] Then came the emancipation of women, "the new social organization based on the fictive family," and the democracy of Pericles.[154] The horror Sorel felt for the open society of the fifth century, the "electoral regime" where "capabilities were overlooked for the benefit of politicians and the déclassés," was exceeded only by his abhorrence of the idea of a "government of scholars."[155] The result of the philosophers' actions, according to Sorel, would be that "there would no longer be any soldiers or sailors, but only skeptical and witty shopkeepers." Ancient society, "based on military discipline, the preparation for war," was ruined by "these famous dialecticians," and that is why Athens descended "to the level of the Italian republics."[156] The intellectuals had taken over from the protagonists of the closed society, who, for their part, "thought that one could form heroic generations only by the old method of nurturing youth on heroic poems."[157] Sorel concluded by describing the cardinal sin of the intellectuals: "The great weak-

ness of the Socratic schools was their optimism. One cannot rouse the masses by singing the praises of order, harmony, and the rationality of existing things."[158]

In contrast to the moral and intellectual corruption disseminated by the Socratics, ancient civilization was sustained by Homeric myths, and as long as these myths survived and the spirit of the heroes of Marathon prevailed, ancient Greece was strong, because brave and disciplined. Here for the first time Sorel expressed the idea, which he never abandoned, that a civilization based on myths is always superior to a rationalistic and materialistic civilization. Socrates and the Sophists were thus guilty before the tribunal of history, and the condemnation to death of Socrates, that carrier of the germs of decadence, must be regarded as a measure of public safety. The obsession with decadence and the hatred of the bourgeois values and spirit were throughout his intellectual career the two great permanent features of Sorel's thought. The theoretician of proletarian violence came to Marxism precisely because, from the beginning of his development, he was preoccupied with the problem of discovering the factors that cause the end of a civilization and those which, on the contrary, permit a regeneration and a new departure. He also came, however, because he believed he had found in Marxism the most extraordinary weapon of war against bourgeois society ever invented. Sorel was concerned with the problem of decadence from his first book; in *La Ruine du monde antique*, he castigated the bourgeois spirit because it was hostile "to the ancient conception of the heroic society." He thought that the same principle applied in all modern countries; if "the military spirit grows weaker and the bourgeois spirit becomes predominant, the social idea grows weaker also."[159] The disintegration of the modern world can be averted only if "the worker in heavy industry replaces the warrior of the heroic society, and machines replace weapons."[160]

Because he was a moralist whose thinking was haunted by the specter of decadence, Sorel regarded politics first as an ethics. For this reason, he reproached Socrates for having "confused morality, law, and knowledge" and consequently for representing "only probabilism in morals, the arbitrary in politics."[161] This was Sorel's main accusation against Socrates: "That whole philosophy leaves us without moral certitude. The good is assessed according to a probabilistic scale of values."[162] That is why Sorel thought that Socrates' accusers were by no means wrong in claiming that he threatened society and corrupted youth: his ethics "were detestable" and socially destructive.[163] Indeed, all of Sorel's work was marked by a search for moral certitude, a way of achieving "moral reform."[164]

Sorel's follower Édouard Berth was quite right in claiming in his article on Sorel in *Clarté* on the occasion of Sorel's death that Sorel's main concern was "to discover if any force existed that could save the modern world from a ruination similar to that which overtook the ancient world."[165] Sorel

thought it natural for human nature to slide toward decadence.[166] This drift toward catastrophe therefore had to be stopped; society had to be saved from death and regenerated. If individuals are to resist passions and temptations, to preserve and develop a sense of duty and honor, they need to find something outside themselves that escapes the corrupting influence of modern life. It was to the search for this all-important element that Sorel devoted his entire existence, and that is why his ideas varied so much, without his ever concealing his own variations.

As a study of Athenian society and thought in the time of Socrates, *Le Procès de Socrate* is of only slight interest. One finds, for instance, the statement that "the *Symposium* and the *Republic*" are "two books that dishonor the Greek genius."[167] But the main point of the work lies elsewhere. Throughout the book, Sorel's intention is to draw a parallel between Socratic times and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to him, Socrates, Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, the Jacobins, and the politicians of the end of the nineteenth century belonged to the same lineage.[168] Socrates and the Sophists destroyed Homeric morality; that of the modern world was undermined and then destroyed by the eighteenth century, Jacobinism, positivism, democracy, the money grubbers, and the intellectuals. Sorel was on the side of Anytus. He too opposed the pleasure-seeking bourgeoisie who corrupted the age and practiced the cult of success. He wanted an austere society and a revival of pessimistic values basic to Christian morality.

ANTI-CARTESIANISM AND PESSIMISM

For Sorel, deeply influenced by Eduard von Hartmann,[169] pessimism represented the spearhead of the great struggle against decadence. Pessimism had three aspects. First, it was "far more a metaphysics of morals than a theory of the world"; it was "the conception of a path toward deliverance." Second, it was an awareness of objective obstacles "to the satisfaction of our imaginations." Third—and this was its substance—it was the expression of "a profound conviction of our natural weakness."[170] Only a civilization steeped in pessimism could achieve greatness, for it embodied the great historical forces and the great human virtues: heroism, sacrifice, and asceticism. Pessimism gave birth to the idea of apocalypse and originated the idea of myth. In early Christianity, wrote Sorel, "we find a pessimism that is wholly developed and fully armed." The consciousness of "belonging to a sacred army . . . produced many heroic actions, created a courageous propaganda, and gave rise to serious moral progress." Greek pessimism, steeped in heroism, was the product of "poor, warlike mountain tribes," while the optimism of the philosophers came into being among rich, commercial urban populations "that could regard the world as a huge emporium full of

excellent things with which to satisfy their cupidity." Sorel pointed out that oriental asceticism is often considered a remarkable manifestation of pessimism, while sixteenth-century Calvinism "offers us a spectacle that is perhaps even more instructive"; the dogmas of sin and predestination "correspond to the two primary aspects of pessimism: the wretchedness of the human race and social determinism."[171]

Optimism, wrote Sorel, contains all "the illusions of a commonplace philosophy." Beguiled by the successes of material civilizations, the optimist is of the opinion that universal happiness is going to come automatically to everyone. Sorel, like Hartmann, believed that the contemporary masters of the world were propelled into an optimistic mode of thought by economic forces. Materialistic, egoistic, and superficial, the optimist in politics is "an unstable and even dangerous person because he is unaware of the great difficulties presented by his projects." If, by some misfortune, that person is in a position of great power, "the optimist can lead a country to the worst catastrophes." Instead of explaining "the evolution of things by historical necessity, he is liable to do away with people whose ill will seems to him dangerous to the general happiness." Moreover, "the optimist passes with a remarkable facility from revolutionary anger to the most ridiculous social pacifism."[172] This has been seen as a portrait of the Jacobin or the social democrat, Robespierre or Jaurès—all "partisans of natural rights," all fanatical proponents of rationalism.[173]

The series of articles entitled *Les Illusions du progrès*, which had been published in the journal *Le Mouvement socialiste* from August to December 1906 before being collected into a volume, continued the condemnation of rationalism begun in *Réflexions*. Here Sorel went into the history of ideas; he claimed to approach the subject as a "Marxist historian."[174] In what did this Marxist attitude consist? Sorel quoted a passage of the *Communist Manifesto* containing the famous sentence "The dominant ideas [*herrschenden Ideen*] of a period have always been those of the dominant class." Thus, since "the theory of progress was conceived as a dogma at the period when the bourgeoisie was the rising class," anyone employing the Marxist method must "investigate how it [the theory of progress] depends on the conditions in which one observes the formation, ascension, and triumph of the bourgeoisie."[175] The conception that the dominant class produced the dominant idea of its period and the principle of class struggle were the essence of Sorelian Marxism in 1906. It was a Marxism perceived as a method, a working tool, and a weapon of combat, a Marxism whose rationalistic core was completely rejected. Sorelian revisionism wanted to preserve Marxism, but by divesting it of its postulates and its rationalistic philosophy. One could easily apply to Sorel the explanation that he himself gave to another major change in the intellectual history of Europe: "The Voltairean spirit disappeared," he wrote, "when a literary revolution made the tools used by Voltaire ridicu-

lous. One could find few more remarkable examples of the influence of matter over thought."[176] And indeed, when Bergson and Nietzsche, Hartmann, Le Bon, and William James rendered the Marxist equipment obsolete, Sorel went off in search of a new weapon of combat.

The rejection of rationalism was the keystone of Sorelian revisionism, but Sorel did not confine himself to a criticism of positivist vulgarization, which at the beginning of the century was after all fairly commonplace. He chose a more difficult path and decided to attack the core of rationalism: Cartesianism. Undoubtedly, his criticism was often puerile. Thus, he used a second-rate writer like Brunetière as a support against Descartes.[177] But this hardly mattered; Spengler did much the same thing. By and large, what mattered was not the scientific value of the work but its impact and significance.

Sorel said that from the point of view of historical materialism, Cartesianism was a remarkable example of "the adoption of an ideology by a class that found in it the formulas that could express its own inclinations." This "garrulous rationalism" attacked religion; it was "resolutely optimistic"—which could not fail to please a society that wanted to enjoy itself freely—and it "reduced ethics to a rule of expediency that demanded a respect for established customs." This meant that "there was no Cartesian morality," and consequently everything to do with Cartesianism was no more than "literature conducive to nothing useful or certain." Descartes "never seemed to have been preoccupied with the meaning of life"—something suitable to people "who aspired to be liberated from the Christian yoke." Cartesianism was ideal for a society in which morals were slackened and in which superficiality, levity, scientific vulgarization, and "good sense" were dominant; it was an appropriate philosophy "for frequenters of salons." No one typified Cartesianism better than Fontenelle, that clever, mediocre, and influential vulgarizer. That society in which the fear of sin, the respect for chastity, and pessimism were disappearing, where women's morals were dissolute to say the least, and where Christianity had faded away to the point of vanishing, that society which wanted to have a good time and enjoy itself, needed to justify its behavior; it was thus only natural that the end of the seventeenth century should enthrone Descartes. French philosophy was henceforth distinguished by those "very special rationalist characteristics that make it agreeable to people of society."[178]

Cartesianism was also held to be the origin of the idea of "infinite progress."[179] Sorel wrote: "Pogress will always be an essential element in the great current that extends to modern democracy, because the doctrine of progress allows one, in full tranquillity, to enjoy the wealth of today without being concerned about the difficulties of tomorrow. It pleased the old society of idle aristocrats; it will always please the politicians whom democracy brings to power and who, threatened with an impending fall, want to use all the advantages that the state provides in order to profit their friends." Carte-

sian philosophy, according to Sorel, thus laid the foundations on which modern democracy was built. This democracy was a regime imbued with a science that had the pretension of inventing nature, in the manner of Descartes, and that had nothing in common "with the deep investigation of problems characteristic of true science based on prosaic reality."[180] In *Réflexions*, Sorel, we may remember, called this petty science. This "*bourgeois science*,"[181] he wrote, was all that rationalism could produce. This petty science gave people an unbounded confidence that through the use of reason they could resolve all the difficulties of daily life after having resolved all those which existed in cosmology. For that reason, wrote Sorel, if nowadays "one dares to protest against the illusion of rationalism, one is immediately considered an enemy of democracy."[182]

Sorel now turned to the eighteenth century and launched an attack on Condorcet, who completed the work of Turgot. Condorcet, he wrote, was an apologist for the vulgarization of knowledge, which was to favor democracy, and he approved "the change from literature to journalism, from science to the rationalism of the salons or discursive assemblies, from original investigation to declamation." This light-headed century, whose ideology was that of a bunch of clerks, gave itself up to "an orgy of abstractions." The greatest of these abstractions—Maurras called them "vapors"—was the contractual ideology, based on a conception of the individual as an atom of society and an abstract citizen. Locke's theory of natural rights was explained as being a perception of society as a simple commercial corporation. This rational, utilitarian, and optimistic doctrine passed into the teachings of the physiocrats, while the *Contrat social* "exalted the role of reason identified with the general will."[183]

Frivolous and superficial, the eighteenth century heralded the reign of men of letters, molders of opinion; it bequeathed to contemporary democracy "a secular, patriotic, and bourgeois catechism" that consecrated "the domination of charlatans." In order to describe the spirit of modern democracy, Sorel already invoked the authority of Léon Daudet, who called it a "philosophy of quasi-illiterates." Sorel, however, was not even sure whether democracy, which was based on a vulgarization of the vulgarization of the eighteenth century, merited that description. For that reason it was necessary first to cut the people off from the literature of the age of Voltaire and to liberate the proletariat from the hold of intellectuals infected by the culture of the Enlightenment. Next, one had to lay the foundations of a culture based on work and the experience of the workshop ("the feelings of affection that every truly qualified worker has for the forces of production confided to him") and on high-quality production regarded as an anticipation of art. The worker's relationship to the machine, the sense of sublimity engendered by the war of the proletariat against its masters, and the feeling of grandeur to be felt in revolutionary syndicalism could "serve as the basis of a culture that

bourgeois culture could only envy." Based on a pure morality and a classical culture, the producers' civilization could escape democratic mediocrity and prevent the world from sinking into decadence.[184]

Socialism, furthermore, was to be something other than the moral and material corruption of democratic reformism. At the end of *Les Illusions*, Sorel recalled the wish he had expressed in 1899 that "socialism be transformed into a philosophy of morals. This change would infuse grandeur into a movement that lacked it at that time to more or less the same extent as democracy itself." For Sorel, the answer to the problem thus stated had been outlined in *Réflexions*, for only a revision of Marxism (the Sorelian revision, naturally!) could make socialism adopt a path in keeping with "the laws of greatness and decadence."[185]

Moralistic, spiritualistic, and antirationalistic, this revised, corrected, and truly transformed socialism invoked the authority of Pascal and Bergson ("between whom," wrote Sorel, "there was more than one similarity to be established")[186] against its mortal enemies, the intellectual progenitors of all evils, Socrates and Descartes. Sorel was fascinated by Pascal, just as he was dazzled by Bergsonian spiritualism. Pascal opposed atheism and was enthusiastic about miracles; he was thus held to be the perfect antithesis of Descartes, who cleared "the way for the Encyclopedists in reducing God to very little."[187] At a single stroke, which he hoped was definitive, Sorel rejected the core of the intellectual heritage of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Descartes, Locke, and Rousseau; rationalism, optimism, the theory of progress, the theory of natural rights, and the conception of society as a collection of individuals. Sorel detested the atomistic conception of the individual that had prevailed since the time of Hobbes and Locke. He held it responsible for liberalism, democracy, and denatured socialism. At the same time, consistent with himself, he deplored the secularization of French life, a process, he said, that would never have taken place without a slackening of manners and the disappearance of morality.

Sorel, it should be pointed out, abandoned socialism around 1909, but his revolutionary appetite remained as strong as ever. Activism was the natural and necessary consequence of the theory of myths. Practice, for him, preceded theory, and only action really counted. The effectiveness of an act was much more important to him than its intrinsic qualities; neither Kantianism, nor the stoics, nor Proudhon, he said, seemed to have had much influence. In order for someone to throw himself or herself into action, "the conviction" has to "dominate the entire consciousness and to operate before the calculations of reflection have time to come into play."[188] That was why Sorel rejected any intellectual structure, which he called a utopia and to which he opposed the power of the mobilizing myth.

Unlike a myth, a utopia, wrote Sorel, may be broken up into its component parts; it permits one to have an idea of the future and to speculate about

that future.[189] The rationalists—that is, the utopians—those "worshippers of vain and false science,"[190] deaden their capacity for action by refusing to submit to the forces of instinct and imagination. Bearers of abstractions, manufacturers of systems, optimists because they are rationalists, from Socrates to the niggling parliamentary socialists, the intellectuals have always corrupted everything: the Greek city undermined by Socratism, the austere classical culture steeped in faith, asceticism and pessimism destroyed by triumphant Cartesianism, the proletariat led astray by glib speakers and social climbers from the universities. The new proletarian barbarism, bearer of sublimity, altruism, and socialism, had to be defended at all costs against the intellectual corruption of the "*civilized* socialism of our official doctors."[191] These same "doctors of *petty science* . . . ," wrote Sorel, "loudly declare that they will allow in their thinking only ideas that are clear and distinct. This, in fact, is an inadequate rule for action, for we do nothing great without highly colored and sharply drawn images that absorb all our attention."[192]

It should be pointed out that this was an attack not on bourgeois intellectuals (who were suspect to labor militants more or less everywhere in Europe), but on rationalism, intellectualism, and positivism, and in fact on the scientific method itself where it was applied outside the limited area of the exact sciences.

If the proletariat was incapable of fulfilling its revolutionary role, this did not mean that the revolution had to be abandoned and the world delivered up to intellectualist and bourgeois decadence. With Sorel, one had a new kind of revolutionary impulse, based on a new form of rejection—the rejection of a civilization that was undoubtedly bourgeois, but also rationalistic, deeply optimistic, and secular. The entire humanistic tradition was called in question, that is, the idea of the perfectibility of the individual and the unity of the human race. Of this rationalistic and fundamentally materialistic system whose utilitarian and instrumentalist concepts he detested, Sorel retained only the idea of class struggle and that of the catastrophic polarization that can be created by the power of the myth of the general strike. The ink expended on *Réflexions*, *Illusions*, and *La Décomposition du marxisme* had no sooner dried than the concept of class disintegrated, and all that remained of the Sorelian revision of Marxism was a horror of bourgeois, rationalist, and secular civilization and an unshakable determination to destroy it.

Antirationalism was the real key to Sorelian thought in the first decade of the century. It was consequently natural that it should be the main theme of the foreword to his collection of essays gathered under the title *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, in which, on the eve of the Great War, he summarized his position.

In this foreword, after having recalled his condemnation in *Les Illusions* of the "intellectualists of the eighteenth century" who had so praised both natural rights and "the ideas of progress, of regeneration and creation, of

universal reason," Sorel once again attacked the rationalists who went astray "in historical scientism." Against the rationalism that "contaminates our symbols," that eliminates "as far as possible the psychological forces it encounters on its path" and dispatches us into utopia, Sorel invoked the pragmatism of William James. After his revision of Marxism, even Hegel was not acceptable to Sorel. Hegelian rationalism was replaced by James's pragmatism. Hegel, that "philosopher who managed to pass himself off as profound," was consigned to historical oblivion at the same time as "the founder of scientific socialism," who had been guilty of hoping "that the journals of social democracy would provide the proletarians with a teaching that would ensure the triumph of rationalism in a hyper-Hellenic world."[193] The Sorelian revision of Marxism now rejected not only the orthodox (Kautsky, Guesde, and Lafargue) and the reformists (Jaurès, Turati, and Enrico Ferri), but also Antonio Labriola.[194] The rejection of a whole culture steeped in rationalism, and the wish to see it disappear, made Sorel repudiate both Marx and Engels—naturally—and the Marxists of his own generation. Édouard Berth was right to see in *Réflexions* a clear sign of the end of Sorelian Marxism. In his conclusion to *Les Méfaits des intellectuels*, written in 1913 and symbolically entitled "The Victory of Pascal," Berth wrote: "In his *Réflexions sur la violence*, Sorel sought precisely to rescue the syndicalist philosophy from that insipid optimism, and his letter to Daniel Halevy, which is its preface, demonstrates the full historical value of pessimism. In this, syndicalism clearly separated itself from orthodox Marxism and even from Marxism as such, which still operated entirely on the plane of an optimistic and scientistic conception of life, that is to say, on a bourgeois plane, on an eighteenth-century plane."[195]

Sorel was perfectly aware of the evolution of his thought. On the eve of the war, when he was preparing the publication of *Matériaux*, he reminded the reader that in 1910 the Italian translation of his long article "Mes Raisons du syndicalisme" had been preceded by a short note announcing that the writer was now abandoning "socialist literature." The reasons that led him to this decision, he wrote in 1914, "have lost none of their cogency since then." At that time Sorel adopted as his own Croce's famous aphorism that "socialism is dead." But if socialism was dead, it was not only because of the intellectual process that Sorel described as the "decomposition of Marxism," but also for a far more serious reason. If the "magnificent epic" that Marx had dreamed up turned out to be only a mirage, if "the revolution foretold by Marx was chimerical," it was because the "heroic proletariat, creator of a new system of values, called upon to found, in a very short time, a civilization of producers on the ruins of capitalist society," did not exist anywhere and probably never would.[196] This proletariat, which Sorel still described in *Réflexions* as being in the process of organizing itself "for battle by separating itself completely from the other parts of the nation . . . , by subordinating

all social considerations to that of the struggle," this pure and upright, pessimistic and ascetic proletariat that was supposed to regard itself as "the great motive force of history,"[197] showed itself to be as much corrupted by utilitarianism as the bourgeoisie. If the German workers "enrolled in the forces of democracy," it was because "the common man does not participate in a new enterprise unless seduced by the mirage of enormous benefits that seem almost certain and that are anticipated as coming to pass in a short time."[198]

For Sorel, this was undoubtedly the turning point. Ever since he wrote *L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats*, all his socialism was based on the principle that the "new school" had not invented anything, as there was nothing to invent; the producers in their workshops created socialism, and the role of the intellectuals—who had to place themselves at the service of the proletariat—was only to provide the theory of the labor revolt. And now the discovery of a proletariat so similar to the bourgeoisie in its motives, preoccupations, ideas, and behavior dealt a death blow to Sorelian socialism.

Finally, someone who persisted in rejecting the existing order had no choice but to turn toward the true revolutionary force that emerged at the beginning of the century. The Sorelians shared with nationalism a horror of bourgeois democracy, the eighteenth century, the secular spirit, and the French Revolution but also a respect for classical tradition and culture. Sorel's vigorous campaign against the philosophy of the Enlightenment explains his attractiveness for the Maurrassians; this was the common ground between the revolutionaries, who had come from a Marxism divested of its materialistic and rationalistic essence, and the integral nationalists, promoters of a nationalism likewise divested of its materialistic and rationalistic essence—that is, its liberalism, its individualism, and its conception of society as an aggregate of individuals. Antimaterialism was undoubtedly the common denominator and meeting point of the two nonconformist currents of the period.

THE JUNCTION OF SORELIANISM AND NATIONALISM

Sorel came round to integral nationalism during the summer of 1909. In April of that year, after having read the second edition of *Enquête sur la monarchie*, he had already expressed his admiration for Charles Maurras, the founder of l'Action française.[199] Three months later, on 10 July, he published in Enrico Leone's *Divenire sociale*, the leading journal of Italian revolutionary syndicalism, a rousing tribute to Maurrassism, which *L'Action française* reprinted on 22 August under the title "Antiparliamentary Socialists." This article announced a meeting "at the summit" of integral nationalism and the Sorelian version of revolutionary syndicalism—a meeting, but

not a real operational synthesis, which was to be achieved by the younger generation of French and Italian Sorelians.

The short introduction *L'Action française* gave to Sorel's article shows the significance of the support of the intellectual leader of revolutionary syndicalism for the Maurrassians. Never had Sorel been praised so effusively; never anywhere, except in the circle of his convinced disciples, had he received so many expressions of admiration. The fact that "the brilliant and profound theoretician of antidemocratic socialism, the already much admired author of *Réflexions sur la violence* and *La Révolution dreyfusienne*," had in fact done no more than produce a flat and stale little article in which he reiterated his oft-repeated attacks against liberal democracy in *La Révolution dreyfusienne* hardly mattered. What mattered was his conviction that "the Dreyfusian revolution has singularly impaired France's moral forces." "A vigorous protest," he wrote, "had to be made against this spirit of decadence: no other group except Action française was able to fulfill a role requiring both literacy and faith. The friends of Maurras form an audacious avant-garde engaged in a fight to the finish against the boors who have corrupted everything they have touched in our country. The merit of these young people will appear great in history, for we may hope that due to them the reign of stupidity will come to an end some day near at hand."[200]

The Maurrassians honored him with a shower of praise; in one place they spoke of Sorel's "incomparable power of analysis" and saw him as "the most profound critic of modernist ideas";[201] in another he was hailed as "the most penetrating and powerful of the French sociologists." And why all this? Because, together with Barrès and "our master Édouard Drumont," he had acclaimed the "new and profound manifestation of French patriotism represented by Péguy's *Le Mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc*," that "magnificent work," as he wrote in *L'Action française* of 14 April 1910, which "will perhaps count as one of the masterpieces of our literature." Thanks to that work, he wrote, it would be possible to put an end to "lies" and "Gambettist cock-and-bull stories," and to "the Dreyfusard revolution," which "would have been impossible if patriotism had not been made ridiculous by the mountebanks of opportunism." Patriotism, he wrote, could not exist without its Christian essence; the nationalist revival was closely connected with the upsurge of Catholicism. Any writer who wished "to speak worthily of the fatherland," had to evoke the "Christian supernatural." So "strongly Catholic an affirmation" was symptomatic of a situation in which "all the boors feel that the political power they enjoy today is threatened," for in imbibing this text "the reader constantly finds himself face to face with the eternal soul of France." For Sorel, Péguy's Catholic patriotism added an extra dimension to the great antirationalist crusade: "Patriotism is thus presented in a manner that will by no means suit the rationalists. . . . Art triumphs here over false science satisfied with appearances, and it attains reality."[202]

Sorel did not suddenly become a nationalist in the vulgar sense of the term; he did not adhere to a crude and chauvinistic patriotism. He did not bow down before Barrès, who had now become a simple conservative politician, rich and covered with honors. A tirade by Déroulède left him unmoved. He did not suddenly develop a royalist soul. Sorel was not Jules Lemaître. He was not drawn by the rationalist and positivistic aspects of the Maurrassian system either; nor was he attracted by the authoritarian and disagreeable personality of the founder of L'Action française. Sorel himself, a sour old man who was generally regarded as a turncoat and who had fallen out with everyone he had to do with since his entry into political life, was by no means easy to get along with. His "variations," whose internal coherence is apparent to the historian, finally made him appear an eccentric, unstable, and baffling figure to his contemporaries. Croce was affectionately disposed toward him, but Antonio Labriola in 1898, Jaurès and Bernstein in 1906, and Lagardelle in 1910 regarded him as an unpredictable character, always liable to take off in a totally unexpected direction.

In reality, his positions, concluding a process of intellectual development lasting several years, were of an extreme consistency. Sorel acted not on a sudden flight of fancy but in consequence of his affinity with certain essential aspects of L'Action française. In advocating violence and in exhorting the proletariat to a fight to the finish against the bourgeois order, liberal democracy, the eighteenth century, and the French Revolution, in praising the virtues of Christian pessimism, was he not at the same time asking the revolutionary worker "to recognize the principle of historical heredity"? He insisted, in connection with the Napoleonic regime, on the "enormous role of conservation in the greatest revolutions."[203] It is obvious that such ideas could not fail to please the Maurrassians. At this stage, Sorel's thought looked like a French variant of the "conservative revolution" that flourished above all in Germany, where it was the local variant of fascism. This school gained celebrity through the work of Oswald Spengler, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, and Ernst Jünger.[204] A conservative revolutionary—that was Sorel in 1912.

If Sorel was drawn to the Maurrassian movement, it was because he needed to find a new source of revolutionary energy. It was not the royalism that attracted him, but the "ardent youth that enrolled in L'Action française."[205] It was despite its royalism, not because of it, that Sorel approached this movement. The Action française of that period, one should recall, differed enormously from the movement of patronesses, landed proprietors, and naval officers who dominated it in the 1920s. Indeed, the Camelots du Roi, the students of L'Action française, still set the tone in the Latin Quarter in the interwar period, but the movement no longer claimed to have a popular base or to fuse the "national" element with the "social." That, however, was the ambition of Maurrassism at the beginning of the century.

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle was right to speak in 1934 of the "popular zest of the fascism" of Action française before 1914,[206] and Pierre Andreu, who had a good knowledge of Sorel, was equally correct to entitle his 1936 article on Sorel and the rapprochement between the syndicalist theoretician and the nationalists "Fascisme 1913."[207] "If I was drawn by l'Action française," wrote Drieu, "it was to the degree that it was connected through the Cercle Proudhon to the upsurge of the syndicalist revolution."[208]

Once again, it is worthwhile to turn to Pierre Andreu—the Pierre Andreu of the 1930s—who understood Sorel particularly well: "Of Marxism," he wrote, "Sorel retained only class warfare. This warfare was for him the essence and hope of socialism. He did not oppose socialism to capitalism; he opposed the proletariat to the bourgeoisie, seeing it as a heroic war. Sorel attacked the bourgeoisie much more than the capitalist system of production. He violently criticized all socialist systems; he did not criticize capitalism."[209]

At the same period, another observer, Thierry Maulnier, who was no less involved and no less perceptive, observed that contrary to all appearances Sorel never really changed. Hostile to democracy, he turned toward Maurras or toward Lenin according to circumstances. In Lenin, Maulnier wrote, Sorel saw "the retaliation of the man, the leader, the creator, against democratic vulgarity, the retaliation of proletarian *violence* against the socialist betrayal."[210]

In the years preceding the cataclysm of August 1914, the Action française was the only real movement of opposition. On the Left, the process of integration into the republican consensus was considerably accelerated. The revolutionary syndicalism of which Sorel was the theoretician failed to get off the ground, and the masses of workers took the path of democratic socialism. Even Gustave Hervé, symbol of opposition to the democratic republic, abandoned an extreme antipatriotism well before the time of mobilization. Toward 1912, he, the publisher of *La Guerre sociale*, like Lagardelle, who continued to publish *Le Mouvement socialiste*, made his peace with the established order. The only current that still struggled against the established order, of which democratic socialism was also a part, was the Maurrassian movement, the only one not only to oppose the regime, its institutions and practices, but also to deny its spiritual foundations. The Action française proclaimed the absolute incompatibility of nationalism with the republican regime, seeking the total destruction of the latter, and made it its objective to gain control of the forces capable of defeating liberal and democratic ideas. The Action française wanted to form a "Brigade de fer" (Iron Brigade) that would vanquish liberal democracy, just as in ancient times "the Macedonian phalanx overcame the democratic mob of the peoples of Asia."[211] This was an objective, a way of thinking and a language that could not fail to appeal to Sorel. All in all, the young militants of the Action

française with their vigorous, violent leaders, engaged in a daily combat against the despised and hated bourgeois republic, were not only Sorel's natural allies but his only possible ones. For him as for the Maurrassians, the legitimacy of democracy was spurious, contrary to nature, and the very embodiment of evil.

This encounter of people who voluntarily placed themselves outside the democratic system was greatly facilitated by the efforts of the Action française, from the first years of its existence, in labor circles in general and among revolutionary syndicalists in particular. Maurras and his followers knew that there was nothing to be done with the SFIO and its various segments. On one hand, French socialism had now reached the point of no return on the path of democratization, and in this it had done no more than follow the same process as the other socialist movements of western Europe. On the other hand, the Dreyfus Affair had proved to be a factor of integration. The Action française thus turned toward Sorel, the author of *La Révolution dreyfusienne*, a violent criticism of the famous Affair and a vigorously stated attempt to undo its consequences.[212] Sorel now became a symbol and a hope. In nationalist circles in those years,[213] Sorel's contribution opened new possibilities to the forces of revolt in their struggle against the republican consensus.

Indeed, from the beginning, the Maurrassian movement had followed developments in the nonconformist Left with a sustained interest. This novel socialism, based on a profound revision of Marxism—a socialism that questioned neither private property nor profit nor the liberal economy as a whole, but only liberal democracy and its philosophical foundations—aroused much sympathy in the Action française. From 1900 onward, Maurras began to prepare the way for an opening toward the nonconformist Left. "A *pure* socialist system would be devoid of any element of democratism," he wrote.[214] While Maurras undoubtedly attacked Marxist egalitarianism and internationalism, he at the same time declared that "*a socialism liberated from the democratic and cosmopolitan element* fits nationalism as a well-made glove fits a beautiful hand."[215] Jacques Bainville, Jean Rivain, and Georges Valois carefully scrutinized all manifestations of revolt against liberal democracy, universal suffrage, the eighteenth century, and the heritage of the French Revolution, every political action and above all every idea that gave grounds for hope of an impending rupture between the proletariat and the Republic. The appearance of these "antidemocrats of the extreme Left," these "antidemocratic socialists."[216] was appreciated in these circles at its true value, and the youthful Action française regarded it as beyond price.

The Maurrassians were among the first to recognize the full significance of Sorel's work. Jean Rivain did not await the "downfall of the brutes" in order to hail the work of the "most listened to" among "the collaborators of *Le Mouvement socialiste*, the organ of revolutionary syndicalism," the writer

of works "of the very first order." This nationalist author did not even take the trouble to analyze *Réflexions*, so self-evident did the conclusions of this book seem to him. His understanding of Sorel's intellectual development and his knowledge of his work were sufficiently precise to cause him to linger over *L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats* and *Introduction à l'économie moderne*. Rivain pointed out, for instance, the elitist character of Sorel's ideas on corporations and cooperatives.[217] Indeed, Sorel thought that if the cooperatives "succeeded, it was because they eliminated the inefficient and had among them a group of people capable of managing affairs in the capacity of employers. They were real associations of small entrepreneurs." In a footnote, Sorel added: "The Greek philosophers would no doubt have called them aristocracies."[218] Rivain understood very well that Sorelian socialism implied the disappearance of neither the capitalist economy nor private property. But this conception demanded elites, and it had a violently anti-democratic and anti-Rousseauist character. It is unnecessary to go into the details of his analysis, which was intelligent, well argued, and supported by long quotations. Rivain perfectly understood the Sorelian view of democracy and the revolutionary tradition. On the "revolutionary philosophy," he wrote, Sorel made "a declaration of principle that could have been taken from *L'Action française* and that we could have signed."[219]

On 7 December 1911, Georges Valois, who was then responsible for contacts with the nonconformist Left, declared at the Fourth Congress of the Action française: "It was not a mere accident if our friends encountered the militants of syndicalism. The nationalist movement and the syndicalist movement, alien to one another though they may seem, because of their present positions and orientations, have more than one common objective."[220] Valois here was only repeating earlier observations. Already in 1908, Jean Rivain had quoted him as saying that the common objective of the syndicalists and the Action française was "the destruction of the republican and democratic regime."[221] Undoubtedly, this merciless criticism of the democratic political culture, its philosophical foundations, and its principles and practices was the meeting point of Sorel and of the Action française. Sorel was attracted by the craving for grandeur, power, and violence that he sensed among the young Maurrassians. He applauded their absolute rejection of the existing moral and political order.

In 1910 Sorel saw Valois a great deal, and it was he who got Édouard Berth and Valois together.[222] At that time the idea of the national-socialist journal *La Cité française* came to fruition. Because of petty personal rivalries, this journal never saw the light of day, but the prospectus that in July 1910 announced its forthcoming appearance well expressed the significance of the enterprise. It was signed by Sorel. "This journal is addressed to people of sense who have been revolted by the stupid pride of democracy, by humanitarian nonsense, and by fashions from abroad, who wish to work to

restore to the French spirit its independence and who are determined, in order to achieve that goal, to follow the noble paths opened by the masters of national thought."[223] These ideas were developed in the "Déclaration" of *La Cité française*:

> The founders of *La Cité française* represent various forms of general opinion, but they totally agree on the following point: if one wishes to solve in a manner favorable to civilization the questions that are posed in the modern world, it is absolutely necessary to destroy the democratic institutions. Contemporary experience teaches that democracy is the greatest social danger for all classes of society, and especially the working class. Democracy mixes the classes in order to permit a few groups of politicians, associated with financiers or dominated by them, to exploit the producers.
>
> One must therefore organize society outside the sphere of democratic ideas; one must organize the classes outside democracy, despite democracy, and against it. One must arouse the consciousness of themselves that the classes must possess and that is at present stifled by democratic ideas. One must awaken the virtues proper to each class, in the absence of which none can accomplish its historical mission. . . .
>
> For this struggle we ask, of all those who recognize its necessity, an enthusiastic cooperation and the most absolute devotion.
>
> *Édouard Berth, Georges Sorel, Jean Variot, Pierre Gilbert, Georges Valois.*[224]

Six months after the failure of *La Cité française*, *L'Indépendance* appeared, taking up the objectives of the abortive project of Sorel and Valois. If the *Cité française* never got off the ground because of Georges Valois's animosity toward Jean Variot, and if, out of fidelity to the latter, Sorel decided to obstruct this first joint enterprise of the revolutionary syndicalists and nationalists, he was entirely free to run *L'Indépendance* as he pleased.

The review appeared from March 1911 to July 1913; forty-eight issues came out in all—one every two weeks. Throughout its existence, the journal searched in vain for the proper formula, the correct format, the editorial staff suitable for its founder, assisted mainly by the Tharaud brothers and Jean Variot. In October 1912, Barrès, Bourget, and Francis Jammes joined the editorial staff, but this modification was not sufficient to give bite, color, or even character to the review. Berth and Valois took no part in it, and although it declared that it considered "workers' demands as legitimate as national demands,"[225] *L'Indépendance* did not succeed in distinguishing itself from the weekly *L'Action française*.

One found the same themes there: nationalism, anti-Semitism, the defense of culture, classicism, the Greco-Roman heritage, and the struggle against the university and secular education. *L'Indépendance* waged long campaigns against Gambetta and the national defense (the Republic, it claimed, was the creation of Bismarck) and paid a rousing tribute to the

royalist revolt in the south of France.[226] Despite the collaboration of Pareto, Le Bon, and Claudel, it did not succeed in establishing its own identity and failed to supply the needs for which it had been set up. In the period of *L'Indépendance*, Sorel became a mere representative of the Action française and a tool of Maurras. Already in 1910 he had espoused the mediocre quarrels of the Action française and vigorously defended the Maurrassian movement against the conservative Right, which, like all dissidents and revolutionaries, he detested.[227]

L'Indépendance covered the same ground; despite the declaration of good intent in the statement of policy of the new review—"*L'Indépendance* will not be the instrument of any political party or literary movement"[228]—one has the impression of reading a mere supplement to *L'Action française*, but one that was far less well produced, trenchant, and sophisticated than the original. That is hardly surprising. Did not Sorel say in 1912 that "the defense of French culture is today in the hands of Charles Maurras"?[229]

Sorel was at that time so much under the spell of Maurras that he turned his review into an organ of anti-Semitism in no way inferior to Édouard Drumont's old *La Libre Parole* or Jules Guérin's *L'Antijuif*. We know that for the Action française anti-Semitism was a methodical necessity, a real historical requirement. "Everything seems impossible or terribly difficult," wrote Maurras in March 1911, "without the providential appearance of anti-Semitism. It enables everything to be arranged, smoothed over, and simplified. If one were not an anti-Semite through patriotism, one would become one through a simple sense of opportunity."[230] Sorel supported this opinion and threw himself into a long and violent anti-Semitic campaign. He signed a long article in praise of Urbain Gohier, the most celebrated living anti-Semite, whom he encouraged to continue "maintaining that the French must defend their state, their customs, and their ideas against the Jewish invaders who want to dominate everything."[231] In "Aux temps dreyfusiens," he made all kinds of threats against the Jews and held them responsible for the decadence of France.[232] The issues of 1 and 15 May and of 1 June 1912 contained the three parts of a voluminous essay entitled "Some Jewish Pretensions." Here one learned that the Jews, and particularly their intellectuals and writers, sought to conquer France and were "opposed to the spiritual heritage of the society into which they were admitted through the hazards of migration."[233] The issue of 1 July 1913 contained "Jewish Words on the French," a communication claiming to have been addressed to the review by a certain Isaac Blümchen. The aim of this text was to show to the French the nature of the evil that threatened them, apparently revealed by a Jew. The "Notes de la quinzaine" and the "Échos" of the issues of April 1912 and February and April 1913 were similar.

Nor was this all. In all of western Europe between the end of the Dreyfus Affair and the beginnings of Nazism, *L'Indépendance* was one of the few

publications that still dared to brandish against the Jews the accusation of ritual murder. It did so more than once, as if it were an undisputed historical fact,[234] quite in keeping with the frequent allusions to the stigmata of Saint Francis and the blood of Saint Janvier which occur in Sorel's letters to Croce, a correspondence in which he proliferated observations on miracles and anti-Jewish remarks. This was no doubt one aspect of his attraction for the irrational. Anti-Semitism was one of the elements in the junction with integral nationalism. In Sorel's letters to Mario Missiroli, anti-Semitic remarks became obsessive;[235] they proliferated in his correspondence with Berth and Lagardelle. At the same time, like many self-respecting anti-Semites, Sorel expressed friendship for particular Jews, admiration for a "good Jew" like Bergson, or a certain fascination for ancient Judea, or an enthusiasm for modern Zionism.[236]

Sorel's anti-Semitism was not a consequence of his subservience to Maurras; a genuine community of ideas existed. Moreover, his easy and rapid integration into the Maurrassian political current, although a passing phenomenon—not much more so than his Dreyfusard phase or his phase of Leninist sympathies—demonstrated his faith in the capacity of nationalism to create a rupture. While the proletarian elites, corrupted by all the evils and vices of the bourgeoisie, exhibited their moral bankruptcy, nationalism, sure of its future, was steadily on the rise. Everyone agreed about this, from the extreme Left to the extreme Right. "We are witnessing a revival of nationalism. It is overflowing at the brim," wrote Francis de Pressensé in April 1911.[237] Two years later, at the sixth congress of the Action française, Valois stated categorically: "Today it is nationalism that carries the forces of reason and sentiment that will henceforth be responsible for social transformations." This "ascension of nationalism," he said, had the result that "one sees national values replacing socialist values in the public mind."[238] Valois and Berth both felt that a new sensibility was coming into being, that dissident circles were preoccupied with new needs. *L'Indépendance* of the old Sorel, who with *Réflexions* and *Les Illusions* seemed to have said his last word, was a total failure. Apart from his adherence to nationalism, it was years since Sorel had expressed a new idea. Berth and Valois, whom Sorel had encouraged to work together at the time of the preparations for launching *La Cité française*, now decided to continue this mutual collaboration. On 16 December 1911 there was an initial meeting of the Cercle Proudhon, and the first *Cahier* of the Cercle appeared in January of the following year.

The "Déclaration" of the Cercle, published at the beginning of this first *Cahier*, reiterated not only the ideas, but also the formulas—sometimes word for word—that had been used in the preparatory texts for the appearance of the abortive *Cité française*. The prospectus announcing the appearance of *La Cité française* had concluded with an invocation of the authority of Proudhon, "the only great socialist writer to have appeared in France."[239] In all respects—with regard to its content, spirit, and formulation—the new

review undertook to take up the stillborn project of *La Cité française* at the point where Sorel had been obliged to abandon it. The first two paragraphs of the "Déclaration" at the beginning of number 1 of the *Cahiers* set the tone:

> The founders—republicans, federalists, integral nationalists, and syndicalists—having resolved the political problem or dismissed it from their minds, are all enthusiastically in favor of an organization of French society in accordance with principles taken from the French tradition which they find in Proudhon's works and in the contemporary syndicalist movement, and they are all completely in agreement on the following points:
>
> Democracy is the greatest error of the past century. If one wishes to live, if one wishes to work, if one wishes in social life to possess the greatest human guarantees for production and culture, if one wishes to preserve and increase the moral, intellectual, and material capital of civilization, it is absolutely necessary to destroy democratic institutions.[240]

Why did Sorel not participate personally in the launching of these *Cahiers*, which were identical in intention to *La Cité française*? They were, after all, exactly in his line of thought. Indeed, he had some doubts about the Maurrassians' sincerity with respect to Proudhon, and at a certain moment he advised Berth not to have anything to do "with an affair that cannot yield good results."[241] Nevertheless, as Pierre Andreu noted in his introduction to Sorel's unpublished letters to Berth, after these first guarded reactions, Sorel "seems to have been won over by the antidemocratic fervor of the Cercle."[242] This being the case, why the reserve?

The only answer that seems convincing has to do with Sorel's character rather than his ideas. He was not made for teamwork, and he had probably lost the taste for journalistic adventures with their inevitable quarrels and rivalries of personality such as those which had accompanied the attempted launching of *La Cité française*. The founders, it should be said, did everything to make their allegiance plain: the Cercle placed itself under the aegis of Proudhon and Sorel. Moreover, the contemporary thought that inspired the Cercle was undoubtedly Sorel's. The content of the *Cahiers* fully attests to this. If the first of the *Cahiers* (January–February 1912) was devoted to Proudhon, the second (March–April) was divided between Proudhon and Sorel (Gilbert Maire contributed an article entitled "The Philosophy of Georges Sorel"), the third, a double issue (*Cahiers* 3–4 [May–August 1912]), was devoted to a "Homage to Georges Sorel." This *Cahier* contained, notably, "Sorel's Work and the Cercle Proudhon," an interesting article by Henri Lagrange, one of the most promising young Maurrassians, who died in the First World War.[243]

Even more significant, Sorel never repudiated the syndicalist-nationalist synthesis of the Cercle Proudhon. The Cercle, we should note, never published an homage to Maurras, only to Sorel, and invoked the authority of

Maurras less than that of Sorel. Maurras, for his part, published a little article in the *Cahiers*,[244] Sorel only a short letter.[245] If these two authority figures kept their distance from an affair directed by the younger generation, one can have no doubt about the presence of their shadows. Nevertheless that of Sorel definitely seems to be the most easily discernible.

It should be remembered that Maurras had his own publications, just like Sorel, who, when the *Cahiers* were started, continued publishing of *L'Indépendance*. The initiative for the Cercle fell to the radical elements, those who were searching for a new political path and set off on the adventure with all the enthusiasm of youth.

Consequently, even if the Cercle was not Sorel's creation, he never denied it his patronage, his name, or his reputation; he never questioned its right to be inspired by his work and to draw the appropriate conclusions. He who was so quick to excommunicate, to criticize, to protest, he who was so touchy (he broke with Péguy over a trifle), never said a word against the ideas propagated by the *Cahiers*. Although the entire Left—including the staff of *Le Mouvement socialiste*, which violently attacked the "split"[246]—regarded him as a traitor, Sorel never produced an article or a word in print that gave one to understand that the socialist-national synthesis had been elaborated against his will or even independently of him. There was nothing to prevent him from doing so; he edited his own review, he continued to write—a great deal—and yet he kept his silence. At a time when the Italian and to a lesser degree the French press were flooded with commentaries on the subject, which caused a great stir, this silence could be interpreted only as assent. Did not Sorel, after *L'Indépendance* had ceased to appear, propose his work to Berth as a source of material? "I suggest that you read the chapter I wrote on the organization of democracy. It contains, I think, quite a few important ideas. If Rivière cannot use it for the volume *Matériaux pour une théorie du prolétariat*, I should like it to appear in the *Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon*."[247]

It was not therefore for intellectual or political reasons that the name of Sorel did not appear in the editorial committee of the *Cahiers*. The real reason was that the "grouser of Boulogne-sur-Mer" (*sic*), as one of his most celebrated Italian disciples, Angelo O. Olivetti, described him,[248] was not suited to collective enterprises. The authoritarian, often mean side of his personality, his inability to collaborate for any length of time with anyone who did not efface himself before him, had already been apparent twelve years earlier, when *Le Mouvement socialiste* was at its beginnings. Instead of playing the role of the sage of revolutionary socialism, as his age or even his intellectual stature required, Sorel never ceased to display a caustic bitterness, to show his claws whenever Lagardelle failed to follow his advice to the letter, and to launch malicious attacks and make offensive remarks every time something or somebody displeased him.[249] At the moment when Berth

and Valois were beginning a new adventure, Sorel, after many lost battles, was an old man disinclined to get back into harness in the editorial room.

However, in order to demonstrate his solidarity with the socialist-national synthesis, to show which side he was on, he wrote a warm preface to Édouard Berth's *Les Méfaits des intellectuels*. This leaves no doubt on the matter. Written in January 1914, this important text makes it clear that the writer of the preface was in perfect agreement with the author concerning the contents of the book. One should remember that the purpose of the book was precisely to crown the work of the Cercle Proudhon by systematizing it. This was Berth's description of this synthesis, which did not elicit the slightest reservation from Sorel:

> From the fraternal alliance of Dionysius and Apollo emerged the immortal Greek tragedy. . . . Similarly, L'Action française—which, with Maurras, is a new incarnation of the Apollonian spirit—through its collaboration with syndicalism—which, with Sorel, represents the Dionysian spirit—will be able to give birth to a new *grand siècle*, one of those *historical achievements* which afterward for a long time leave the world dazzled and fascinated.[250]

Such was the historical significance of Sorelianism. Its true dimensions began to appear only at the moment of passing of the old nineteenth-century world in the summer of 1914. In January of that year, Sorel already quoted William James to the effect that "on the stage, only heroism has the great roles."[251] Like his Italian disciples, who lived in expectancy of that event, Sorel too awaited the revolution of the war. For a long time, the long European peace had seemed to him not only "a cause of moral and intellectual weakness," but also a cause of "economic weakness, the spirit of enterprise having become less virile." He added: "There is no doubt that this situation will not last indefinitely: very little is needed to arouse a warlike sentiment in France, and such an arousal would cause an upheaval in all of Europe. A great war would have the effect of eliminating the factors that today encourage a taste for moderation and a desire for social tranquillity."[252]

Sorel said the same elsewhere. He looked forward to "a great foreign war that would bring to power men who have the will to govern, or a great extension of proletarian violence that would make the bourgeois recognize the revolutionary reality and give them a distaste for the humanitarian platitudes with which Jaurès beguiles them."[253]

And yet, when war broke out—the war he had awaited so much—Sorel judged it very harshly. He realized very quickly that liberal democracy was not on the point of giving way.

Yet Sorel was not a political man; he had neither the instincts of a Mussolini nor the reflexes of the other Italian syndicalist theoreticians and leaders—Michels, Panunzio, Orano, Olivetti, De Ambris, Bianchi, and that extraordinary leader of men, Corridoni. He did not seize the opportunities

provided by the European war. Sorel, we should remember, had little knowledge of the outside world. Old and exhausted, he judged things as they seemed from Ambérieu-en-Bugey, where in September 1914 he wrote Berth a despairing letter, expressing his anguish and his contempt for everything and everyone. For the Union sacrée, first of all, that coalition which put together Albert de Mun and Maurras with Hervé, Vaillant, and Jules Guesde, was in his opinion motivated not "by the necessity of defending the basic possessions of the nation," but by a "hatred for the notions of discipline that Prussia had retained"; for the pope, next, who "was going to make peace with the authors of separation," and finally for Maurras, who "never," he wrote, "had a serious idea of what the social forces in a monarchical country should be."[254]

Sorel soon sensed the coming victory of the wretched coalition that, he wrote, would "finish off everything serious, grand, and *Roman* that is still in Europe."[255] And yet, the first successes of the new revolutionary, antimaterialistic, anti-Marxist, and antiliberal wave were not far away. They were confirmed almost as soon as Sorel died. The nascent Fascist ideology derived its initial basic content from the syndicalist-nationalist synthesis. This synthesis would not have been possible without the original contribution of Sorel, Sorel who had preached hatred for the heritage of the eighteenth century, for Voltaire and Rousseau, for the French Revolution, for rationalism and optimism, for liberal democracy and bourgeois society; Sorel who had advocated a total rejection of democratic egalitarianism, of majority rule, of humanitarianism and pacifism; Sorel who had sought respect for the right of elites to lead the flocks of the society of the masses and demanded veneration for classical culture and a strong faith in the power of tradition and heredity; Sorel who regarded Catholicism as a source of discipline and hence as a fundamental component of the civilization to be defended every day against the forces of destruction; and Sorel whose aim had been to restore to European civilization the grandeur of the Christian, pessimistic, and heroic ages.

And yet (this was an important element in the Sorelian synthesis that underlay fascism), what mattered in Catholicism was its social virtues—discipline, chastity, pessimism—and not its faith. Like all the rebels of the beginning of the century, like Barrès and Maurras, Sorel was interested not in Christian metaphysics but in Christianity as the nucleus of an order that could ensure the future of civilization.

The fate of civilization and not that of the proletariat or the nation preoccupied Sorel. The proletarian community or the national community was never anything other in his eyes than an instrument of the great change he hoped for. For that reason this revolution never touched the foundations of capitalist economy. Sorel's anticapitalism was limited strictly to the political, intellectual, and moral aspects of the liberal and bourgeois system; he never

tried to question the foundations, principles, and competitive mechanisms of the capitalist economy. The Sorelian revolution sought to eradicate the theory of natural rights, abolish the rights of man, and uproot the utilitarian and materialistic foundations of the democratic political culture; it never touched private property. When the idea of the proletariat began to replace that of the producer, the Sorelians progressively elaborated their master's revolutionary theory and laid the foundations of a revolutionary capitalism—a capitalism of producers, hostile to the plutocracy and high finance, the stock exchange, the middlemen, and the money grubbers. This revolutionary theory was strongly attached to the market economy, to competition, and to the nonintervention of the state in economic activity.

A new vision of political ideals thus came into existence, one that sought to mobilize the masses by means of myths. It supported the idea of violence, creative of virtue. It envisaged a moral, intellectual, and political revolution. It required a spiritualistic revolution with an intense pessimism and a fundamental antirationalism.

At the moment of putting the final touch on his activities, when he wrote the preface to the book of the disciple who was to continue his work, Sorel showed that he was well aware of the nature of the forces that had been set in motion:

> I am convinced that, in fifteen or twenty years' time, a new generation rid, thanks to Bergsonism, of the phantoms created by the intellectualist philosophers since Descartes, will listen only to people able to explain the theory of evil. . . . It has happened several times that I have looked into the abyss, but without daring to enter. There was a moment when I considered commentating a few texts by Pascal at the end of *Les Illusions du progrès*, but I thought it wiser not to broach a subject so odious to our contemporaries. I believe, however, that I can recognize from a few indications that the era which will assign the metaphysics of evil its proper place is already beginning to emerge.[256]