In the opening of his letter to Daniel Halevy, which introduces *Reflections*, Sorel expressly eschews programatic writing in favor of a more eclectic and disjointed approach, and he is true to his word, moving somewhat haphazardly through matters of philosophy, history, and contemporary French politics. Some central concerns are discernible, however, even if they are not woven into a systematic whole, and this paper will focus on three. In the realm of philosophy, it is argued that Sorel’s defense of Bergsonian intuition against positivist (or “intellectualist”) philosophers such as Renan is laudable, but that it (perhaps inevitably) goes too far in the other direction, leaving scant room for the role of reason and persuasion in human affairs, and demanding considerable faith in Sorel’s own idiosyncratic perception of the mythic forces shaping human history. In the realm of turn-of-the-century French politics, Sorel is highly perceptive, and indeed prescient, about a number of developments away from revolutionary socialism and towards its democratic variant, albeit that such developments are anathema to his revolutionary commitments. Finally, in the realm of history, Sorel traces a persuasive account of the ways in which the excesses of the Terror of 1793 (which he considers the major source of prejudice against violence at the time of *Reflections* publication) were inherited, not invented, by Robespierre and the Revolution.

In the first half of his work, at least, Sorel certainly demonstrates himself capable of perceptive and undoctrinaire observations: praising Bernstein for at least being forthright about democratic socialism’s deviations from orthodox Marxism, for example, and crediting the industry of capitalists with a role in delivering France from its dangerous enchantment with the all-powerful

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1 Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 64. All references are to the 2004 Dover edition.
State. Ultimately, however, Sorel is subject to the same challenge of all partisan thinkers: walking the fine line between an accurate perception of reality, free of the ideological manipulations of your rivals, and the temptation of interpreting events in a way that reads into them the wisdom of your own views and the inevitability of your own success. Like the book itself, Sorel’s success here is somewhat haphazard.

**Myth and intuition**

Sorel places his philosophy squarely under the influence of Henri Bergson and his belief in the importance of intuition. In so doing, he sets himself in a somewhat complex opposition to the thinker Ernst Renan - noting that Renan is “continually wavering between his own intuition, which was nearly always admirable”, and the “scientific opinions” of the “intellectualist philosophy” of his day - a philosophy which Sorel means to attack, believing it to be fundamentally incapable of understanding the forces that drive history. Renan’s statement that “Human affairs are always an approximation lacking gravity and precision” is rightly skewered by Sorel - it is a sentence, and a sentiment, that perfectly embodies the frustrations of a positivist philosophy which could not get the messy business of human interaction to conform adequately to proper scientific laws of behavior.

The distinction between the two approaches is perhaps best seen in Sorel’s consideration of Renan’s attitude towards the different fates of Galileo and Giordano Bruno in relation to their heretically accurate cosmological views. For Renan, Galileo’s capitulation to the Holy See was appropriate - “the scientist need not bring anything to support his discoveries beyond good arguments”, whereas Bruno’s willingness to be burnt at Champ-de-Flore was telling; “A man suf-

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2 110-111.

3 43.

4 44; this is Sorel paraphrasing Renan.
fers martyrdom only for the sake of things about which he is not certain”\(^5\). Sorel considers that Renan “confuses conviction, which must have been very powerful in Bruno’s case, with that particular kind of certitude about the accepted theories of science, which instruction ultimately produces;” he concludes that “it would be difficult to give a more misleading idea of the forces which really move men”.\(^6\)

The implication here is that intellectualists such as Renan consider that the only proper basis for human action is certitude, in the scientific sense. Thus Galileo’s actions make sense: his arguments were sound, he was certain that he was right, and no more was needed. His capitulation to the Holy See could have no more impact on the accuracy of his proofs than would his choosing chicken over fish for his evening meal. To the scientifically minded Renan, therefore, to needlessly choose to be burnt at the stake in such circumstances - as Bruno did - is simply inexplicable. The only reasonable explanation is thus that the martyrdom was compensatory; that the Italian philosopher “wished to supplement his inadequate proofs by his sacrifice”\(^7\).

Such a view is problematic for Sorel, because it fails to accord with what he considers to be a self-evident truth of human behavior - that men and women are driven to action by non-rational and unscientific urges: by the belief that dying to make a point about freedom of thought, in the case of Bruno, or for the sake of glory, in the case of the Napoleonic wars, is a worthwhile and meaningful thing to do with one’s life. This fundamental truth of human nature is missing from intellectualist philosophy because it cannot be justified in properly scientific terms.

This philosophical distinction is important to Sorel because one of his major contributions is derived precisely on an intuitive, anti-positivist basis: that of the fundamental importance of myth in human history. (Ironically, one of the main ways that Sorel defends the importance of myth is

\(^{5}\) 44-45. \\
\(^{6}\) 45. \\
\(^{7}\) 44.
through the emphatically rational claim that one cannot explain certain historical events, or indeed the entire realm of religion, without it.) Sorel argues that those involved in a “great social movement always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph”\(^8\); he points to those involved in early Christianity, the Reformation, the French Revolution and the followers of Mazzini (a hero of Italian unification) as examples\(^9\). Sorel considers that this strength of belief is attributable to myths, and he adds the general strike and “Marx’s catastrophic revolution” as further examples.

Sorel is somewhat opaque about the precise nature and substance of a myth - at one point, following Le Roy, it seems close to a mass solipsism\(^10\), at another point, it is described as something that “cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement”\(^11\). It is perhaps grasped best through intuition itself, by way of the concrete historical examples provided - a wholly inspiring, potentially spiritual identification with a grand struggle of historical import.

While the motive force of such phenomena is undeniable, it is possible to overstate the case. So, for example, Sorel argues that “objections urged by [the intellectualist] philosophy against the revolutionary myths would have made an impression only on those men who were anxious to find a pretext for abandoning any active role, for remaining revolutionary in words only”\(^12\). Here, rational argument - or at least rational argument of a type that Sorel does not agree with - has been removed as entirely from the calculus of human decision-making as non-rational urges have been for the intellectualists; acceptance of the arguments of Bernstein or the Parliamentary Socialists is, for Sorel, attributable solely to cowardice. Sorel’s partisanship is
evident here - for it is surely the case that rational argument has a role to play in human development and history; there seems little that is mythic, for example, in three densely argued volumes of *Capital*.

“*Intermingling in the democratic marsh*”

Sorel is a committed revolutionary Marxist, and is accordingly greatly concerned about any reduction in tensions between the classes - he wants to resist at all costs their “intermingling in the democratic marsh”\(^{13}\). Sorel perceives two threats in this respect; first, that appeals to “a natural and Republican equity, above class prejudices and hatreds”, have been brought to bear on some of the “old chiefs” of the working class\(^{14}\), which, along with efforts to educate the working class out of its violent ways, is threatening to sap that class of its revolutionary zeal.

Equally, the social dislocation wrought by the Dreyfus affair - which saw many in the upper middle class, as well as the popular press, side with the socialists and anarchists in support of Dreyfus against conservative, pro-government forces - revealed to the Parliamentary Socialist Jaures that this class was “terribly ignorant,-gapingly stupid, politically absolutely impotent”; in other words, ripe for political assimilation, utilizing a suitably “broad Socialism”\(^{15}\).

Sorel thus confronts the spectre of social peace, a disastrous outcome for the revolution. From the properly historical perspective, “the more ardently capitalist the middle class is, the more the proletariat is full of a warlike spirit… the more certain will be the success of the proletarian movement”\(^{16}\). He therefore sets out his prescription to ensure a return to properly antagonistic confrontation: the use of proletarian violence. “To repay with black ingratitude the benevolence of those who would protect the workers, to meet with insults the homilies of the de-

\(^{13}\) 92.

\(^{14}\) 70.

\(^{15}\) 85.

\(^{16}\) 88-89.
fenders of human fraternity, and to reply by blows to the advances of the propagators of peace”\(^{17}\); this is Sorel’s program. Such a step will drive the respective classes into the type of fundamental antagonism that will no longer allow their leaders to advocate, and benefit from advocating, evolutionary socialism and peaceful coexistence of the classes.

**Responsibility for the Terror**

In his third chapter, Sorel addresses what he terms “prejudices against violence”, clearly aware that responses to violence in France at the time were significantly shaped by the tumultuous history of post-1789 France, and in particular by the Terror of 1793. In doing so, Sorel attempts to formulate the Terror as properly an inheritance of religion and bourgeois statism, and to redirect any concern about the actions of revolutionary socialists who obtain state power towards his opponents, the Parliamentary Socialists, positing them as the “worthy successors of the Inquisition, of the Old Regime, and of Robespierre”\(^{18}\).

Sorel views the development of nineteenth century France through his chosen prism of myth - he notes that by 1814, national institutions such as “the Parliamentary system, Napoleonic legislation, and the Church established by the Concordat” had been inviolably established by the “prestige of the wars of liberty”\(^{19}\). Even where rulers ruled in “the least liberal manner”, these institutions were not seriously threatened; this fact “could not be explained by the power of reason and by some law of progress; its cause lies simply in the epic of the wars which had filled the French soul with an enthusiasm analogous to that provoked by religions”; even the episodes of the Terror were able to be “envelop[ed] in a dramatic mythology”\(^{20}\). Such mythic enthusiasm was not permanent, however, and after the “disasters of 1870”, everything changed - the

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\(^{17}\) 91.

\(^{18}\) 115.

\(^{19}\) 100.

\(^{20}\) 101.
bloodiness of the battles did much to sap the power of the myth of violence. Such unpleasant memories are, Sorel notes, why it was now such an article of faith among Parliamentary Socialists that violence is to be abhorred\textsuperscript{21}.

Sorel, however, wishes to demonstrate the the Terror, properly considered, has roots that run far deeper than simply the revolution of 1789. Sorel traces it back to the Inquisition, and then to the Old Regime’s techniques for using the penal procedure to “ruin any power which was an obstacle to the monarchy”\textsuperscript{22} and to “make a terrible and profoundly intimidating example”\textsuperscript{23}. Such techniques, Sorel argues, were “piously gathered up” by Robespierre and the Revolution.

Furthermore, Sorel argues, recent legal and economic developments mean people are far less in thrall to the French state than they were in 1793; while they may be no more human or more sensitive, they are “no longer dominated to the same extent that our fathers were by this superstition of the God-State, to which they sacrificed so many victims”\textsuperscript{24}. While this is the case, however, Sorel considers that the “old ideas” of the Terror are not completely dead. Rather, they are maintained by those revolutionaries who crave state power - the Parliamentary Socialists, who Sorel is convinced would not be immune to the historical evidence that “revolutionaries plead ‘reasons of the State’ as soon as they get into power... Parliamentary Socialists do not escape the universal rule; they preserve the old cult of the State; they are therefore prepared to commit all the misdeeds of the Old Regime.”\textsuperscript{25} In contrast, the revolutionary Syndicalists seek to abolish the state. Sorel argues, therefore, that they could not very well invoke it in the name of Terroristic executions.

\textsuperscript{21} 104.
\textsuperscript{22} 107
\textsuperscript{23} 108.
\textsuperscript{24} 111.
\textsuperscript{25} 113.
Clearly, Sorel’s work is no objective history, and serves a propagandistic role in disassociating the Terror from revolution. While there may be some truth to the claim that many of the techniques were inherited, some of Sorel’s claims are eminently challengeable. For example, the claim that the Syndicalists would not engage in post-revolutionary violence because they would have abolished the state in the process of revolution is tenuous, and rests on envisioning an historically unprecedented type of revolution. Equally, Sorel’s claims that proletarian violence is properly considered an “act of war”\textsuperscript{26}, and is therefore qualitatively different from Terroristic violence, is one that merits further consideration.

\textbf{A Final Question}

There is no small amount of tragic irony in the footnote to page 86, noting that “The hypothesis of a great European war seems very far fetched at the moment.” Consider for a moment a history in which all of Sorel’s hopes were manifest: increasingly savage proletarian violence led to a wave of successful socialist uprisings across Europe in the early years of the twentieth century. Making the not inconsiderable assumption that working class solidarity could trump nationalism and abort the First World War, what level of revolutionary violence would we be willing to tolerate to see that occur?

\textsuperscript{26} 115.