



No struggle, no emancipation: Georges Sorel and his relevance for Critical Organisation Studies*

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Georges Sorel was a controversial theorist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and was usually labelled, though not necessarily accurately, an anarcho-syndicalist. He wrote prolifically on the emancipation of the proletariat, though is now largely ignored by the left generally, and, in particular, by critical organisation studies. It is suggested that, perhaps surprisingly (given when he was writing), much of his way of thinking and his ideas on organisation resonate with the concerns of today's Critical Organisation Theory. We examine a number of significant aspects of Sorel's work – particularly, his approach to language and to science; the centrality of the concept of myth in his work; and the role that he accords to agonistics – and consider his relevance for an emancipatory organisation theory.

Introduction

Georges Sorel (1847-1922) was a very unconventional man, in his personal history, in his practice, and, above all, in his thinking. He was, one might say, a man of many apparent contradictions. He started his professional life as an Engineer in the Department of Public Works and was employed there in the 1870s and 1880s. He achieved the status of Chief Engineer and became a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur, but later became one of the foremost radical thinkers of the age, actively promoting revolutionary change. His domestic life belied the bourgeois style of his professional life, since he cohabited for many years with a semi-literate and very religious peasant woman, Marie David, and,

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after her death in 1898, although an atheist, he carried with him, until his own death 24 years later, a sacred image that she had given him (Berlin, 1979: 297). His first book was not published until 1889, after which he became a prolific writer, and a correspondent of some of the most familiar names of the time. He resigned from his engineering life in 1892, and moved to Paris. In 1899 he was an ardent Dreyfusard, but by 1909 he had become an opponent of the Dreyfusards, whose victory he saw as colonised by supporters motivated, not by a passion for moral justice, but by self-serving political reasons. He admired Mussolini (Sorel died before the 'March on Rome'), who reciprocated, and Lenin, who did not. His many detractors, of all shades of political opinion, characterise his thinking as erratic and weak. He also has, however, some notable supporters, and these find in his work threads that are both powerful and significant: for example, that creativity is the defining characteristic of being human; that there is no rational harmony in the world; that the proletariat is the carrier of true moral values; that there is no inevitable teleology of history, only the (unpredictable) outcomes that can be achieved through struggle; that to live is to resist, and that ceaseless struggle is the necessary precondition of emancipation. He was, in the words of Shils (1961: 16) 'a stern socialist moralist and an apocalyptic seer'. Indeed, for Humphrey, Sorel's 'place is beside Nietzsche and Freud as one of the great prophets of the modern age' (1971 [1951]: 218).

In this paper we propose to consider Sorel's relevance for contemporary critical organisation theory (COT). We find in Sorel a thinker who offers an analysis that is congruent with much contemporary thinking, especially poststructuralist thinking, in COT, but whose synthesis has something different and significant to offer: an emphasis on action. In a world so clearly teetering on the edge of disaster, where there is such a dire need for alternative thinking, and alternative action, but where it seems that many to whom we might look for such alternatives are like rabbits paralysed by the headlights, perhaps this is a good moment to revisit thinking that emphasises the importance, not just of understanding, but also of acting on the basis of that understanding.

Although Sorel was writing more than a century ago, Berlin, in his volume of essays *Against the Current* (1979: 331), comments that '(t)he world about and against which he was writing might be our own'. A similar point is made by others – see, for example, Portis (1980). We would suggest that precisely the same comment can be made today. Our intention here is to draw parallels between Sorel's thinking and some ideas which are central to much of COT. Clearly, COT is not a homogenised body of thought and contains much that is disputatious, disputable and contradictory. However, we suspect that most researchers in COT would subscribe to some, if not all, of the concerns of Sorel.

Llorente (2011; see also Llorente, 2012), lamenting the latter-day neglect of Sorel's work, summarises these concerns thus:

Sorel's works address[es] many of the central themes in emancipatory social theory: the permissible use of violence in political struggles; the possibilities and limits of parliamentarism; the role of intellectuals in revolutionary movements; the suitability of various revolutionary strategies and organizational structures available to the oppressed; the contrast between reform and revolution; the relationship between left-wing political parties and those whose interests they claim to represent; the transformation of the bourgeois state; and the moral aims of socialism. (2011: 1)

Given this apparent relevance, it seems strange that Sorel's work is so absent from COT, yet, as Llorente notes, notwithstanding the high regard that Sorel is held in by many, the contemporary political left appear to regard him as, generally, of little interest. We, too, would suggest that this is, to say the least, an unfortunate oversight¹.

More contradictions?

It is necessary to acknowledge that Sorel's work has often excited controversy. Sorel consistently declared himself of the left, but he has been claimed as their own by both left and right. He was involved, *inter alia*, with monarchism and with *Action Française*, he 'intrigued' Wyndham Lewis, and was claimed by Mussolini as a major influence. This ability to appeal to left and right is not unique – Nietzsche is a particularly well-known example and, more recently, postmodernism has proved similarly flexible. Sorel's writings appear to lack a coherent pattern, even though it could be – and has been (see, for example, Berlin, 1979) – argued that the idea of an emancipatory moral revival is a central motivating theme in his work. Sorel was, deliberately, not a systematic thinker – he despised system. Although focussed on a particular problematic, his method was to interrogate in depth relevant ideas, concepts and issues that had attracted his attention and interest. In a Deleuzean sense, his thought can be seen as nomadic. Sorel produced a large body of work much of which is not easily available, and its accessibility is also limited, from an Anglophone point of view, because much of it is not translated. His best known work and the one with which he is most closely associated (and our focus here), is *Reflections on Violence* (1961 [1908]), though Sorel himself did not regard it as his most significant work

¹ Although interest in Sorel seems to fluctuate, and is rare in Organisation Studies, there is a permanent and extensive interest located in the Société d'études soreliennes. The organisation maintains an archive of Sorel studies and publishes a journal, *Mil neuf cent: revue d'histoire intellectuelle*. See

<http://www.revue1900.org/welcome/index.php?accueil=1>.

(Berlin, 1979: 321; Meisel, 1951: 14). In *Reflections on Violence*, and of particular relevance to COT, he sees the emancipation of the working class achievable only through the conflict of the general strike. This has been seized upon to condemn Sorel, against the evidence of his own words, as the advocate of a mindless brutality. Our objective here is not to argue, *nolens volens*, for the relevance of Sorel's work, if only because some of it relates to historical conditions which no longer obtain. In any case, to do so would be contrary to the spirit of his writing. Rather, we look for relevance to our problematic of COT and treat Sorel, as we must, as a text.

Sorel is often labelled an anarcho-syndicalist, but although this seems highly appropriate in some respects, the fluidity of his thinking itself demonstrates the difficulties of such specific labelling, and his position on syndicalism changed over time, his early support for it later becoming criticism of it. Inevitably with thinkers not of our own time, no matter how timeless some of their understanding may be, there will be aspects that resonate only with the world as it was then. In Sorel's France most of industry was made up of small producers and the concept of syndicalism had real currency. The rise to dominance of the large, mainly capitalist, organisation was not typical of that era. However, since Sorel undoubtedly saw himself as a follower of Marx, and although he departs from some tenets of Marxism, we would suggest that Llorente's (2011: 4) argument for seeing him as an anarcho-marxist provides a more useful way of 'pigeon-holing' Sorel. Even so, it is important to be wary of any simplifications of Sorel's work. Ciccariello-Maher comments that study of Sorel discloses

a proliferation... of paradoxical pairings which constitute Sorel's positive project: to a science that is not science, we can add a progress that is not progress, a Marxism that is not Marxism, a violence that is not violence, a reason that is not reason,... a dialectic that is not the dialectic and... an anarchism that is not anarchism. (2011: 32)

Despite all these paradoxes, we would also note the comment from Stanley, that 'reading Sorel has become mandatory for modern scholars who wish an understanding of the theory of social science' (1981: 22). And, indeed, we will argue, for those who wish an understanding of modern organisations.

Reading Sorel

Just as there are contradictions in Sorel and in his work, there are also contradictions in Sorel scholarship. Some of the most basic of these relate specifically to issues of Sorel's work as text, and, especially of relevance in this instance, to issues of the text as translation. Although the *de facto* working

language of COT is English, it has been widely informed by scholarship which was not originally in English, but is used in translation. For some scholars this raises questions of the ‘purity’ of a text. However, from a poststructuralist point of view, purity of text is not really a relevant concept – a text is a text, it has utility, or not, for the reader, and this is what is important. Nonetheless, it can be both useful and instructive to examine some of the issues that arise from the relationship between an original text and its subsequent ‘life’ as a translation, and to consider how the selections and preferences of translators, and of commentators using those translations, might affect the signification of a translated text. This is particularly apposite in the case of Sorel.

With Sorel, there is no canonical literature, certainly with respect to an Anglophone organisation theory. There are two major works available in English translation: *Reflections on Violence* and *The Illusions of Progress*. The former first appeared in English as an authorised translation by T. E. Hulme, which was published in 1915². According to Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, of which there were several editions in French, originated in 1906 as a series of articles in *Le Mouvement Socialiste*. In the third edition, Sorel appended a short essay ‘Apology for Violence’, originally published in 1908 in *Le Matin*. This third edition would seem to be the basis of Hulme’s translation. Hulme’s translation has itself been the basis of subsequent editions of *Reflections on Violence* in English (see below). However, according to Jennings, in a new edition of *Reflections on Violence*, its earliest formulation was from 1905-6 in Italy, in Italian (1999: xxxv), (though Jennings [1985: 182] gives the 1906 *Le Mouvement Socialiste* articles as the origin). In this ‘new edition’ Jennings is styled as the book’s editor, but not as the translator. Indeed, no translation credit is given. However, in a short ‘Note on the translation’ (1999: xxxix) he says that ‘(t)he present text is a revised translation of that originally provided by Thomas Ernest Hulme. I had intended to use this translation in an unchanged form, but upon closer inspection decided that some, at times considerable, revision was necessary’. The implications of this are somewhat complicated when Jennings further informs us that ‘(t)he edition of the French text I have used is that published by Seuil in 1990, edited by Michel Prat. This itself is a reproduction of the eleventh edition, published by Marcel Rivière in 1950’ (1999: xxxix). He also notes, ‘(d)ifferent editions of the text have changed the order of its presentation. I have adopted what seems the most logical

2 We have opted for 1915, as given in the authoritative 1941 reprint published by Peter Smith in New York. However, other dates are also favoured, by others. For example, Meisel (1951) and Jennings (1999) both give 1914 as the first publication of Hulme’s translation in the US, and Meisel also gives 1914 for the UK, but Jennings gives 1916. Stanley (1969: ix) claims that it was translated by Hulme in 1920, or possibly (Stanley, 1976: 1) sometime soon after 1925, or possibly even 1950 (Stanley, 1981: 344). Unfortunately, Hulme was killed on the Western Front during World War I, in 1917.

pattern' (*ibid.*). Jennings does not develop his concerns about Hulme's translation and notes '... just one important example, I have translated Sorel's *lutte de classe* not as class war but as class struggle' (*ibid.*; see also Portis, 1980: 13). His only other example is his preference for retaining the French *syndicat* for trade union over Hulme's inaccurately anglicised 'syndicate'. Not highlighted by Jennings, but potentially more controversial, is his substitution of 'reformists' (e.g. Sorel/Jennings, 1999: 47) for Hulme's 'revisionists' (e.g. Sorel/Hulme, 1961: 64) – words with different signification now, but even more so when Sorel was writing. As regards Jennings's implication that he has reordered the text, in a comparison of the contents page of his and Hulme's versions the only substantial difference appears to be his preference for titling Chapter 2 as 'The decadence of the bourgeoisie and violence', which in Hulme was rendered as 'Violence and the Decadence of the Middle Classes'.

Before elaborating further on the significance of such issues for potential students of Sorel, it is appropriate to explain our own use of *Reflections on Violence*. As noted above, Hulme's translation was variously reprinted and the version which we have used is that of 1950/1961. This 'American' edition is the most comprehensive, with extra appendices by Sorel and an Introduction by Shils. A reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper questioned, quite reasonably, why we chose to use Hulme's translation, rather than the much more obvious, more modern edition by Jennings. There are a number of reasons for this.

As there is clearly no authoritative *urtext* as regards *Reflections on Violence*, commentators use a variety of sources. For example, Berlin (1979) uses a 1972 French version, whereas Jennings (1985), (as opposed to Jennings [1999] above), refers to a version published in Paris and Geneva in 1981. Horowitz (1961) uses the sixth French edition of 1925 (unfortunately, none of these record the name of the publishers). Meisel (1951) gives a useful overview of the various editions to that date. Some authors offer partial translations of their own, e.g. Stanley (1976). Since authors do not usually offer an explanation of their choice of source we must assume that they use that which they find most suitable for their purpose. As regards our own particular preference, we were attracted by Shils's very positive, well regarded and useful 'Introduction'. We find less utility in Jennings's 'Introduction', which is, we feel, unlike that of Shils, negative, calling the book 'profoundly disturbing' (Jennings, 1999: xxi). He continues,

Sorel not only takes violence as his subject but, more importantly, is prepared to equate it with life, creativity and virtue. Was this not Sorel's own illusion? And was it not, perhaps, one of the illusions that served most to disfigure the twentieth century? (Jennings, 1999: xxi)

It is this sort of superficial imputation that often obfuscates Sorel's work. Whether we like it or not, life, creativity and virtue are recognisable products of twentieth century violence, even if we deplore the fact that violence was their progenitor. We might point to the suffragettes, the recession of fascism, decolonialisation, advances in medicine, and, indeed, the artistic flourishing that has accompanied these. Yet Jennings then goes on (in our view, appropriately) to play down Sorel's advocacy: 'the violence endorsed by Sorel was not very violent at all' (*ibid.*), and to see it, (in our view, inappropriately), as amounting 'to little more than a few heroic gestures'; he continues:

at the centre of his thought was the distinction between the violence of the proletariat and that deployed by bourgeois politicians and their intellectual ideologues through the State. It was the politicians and ideologues, and not the proletariat, who resorted to wholesale acts of terror and repression in order to secure their own dominance. (Jennings, 1999: xxi)

Whether appropriate interpretations or otherwise, these comments do not seem to be consistent and his own conclusion would appear to make Jennings's initial concerns redundant.

There were other, more functional, but no less relevant, reasons for using the earlier version of Sorel's text. Since Jennings's version is relatively recent, there is much extant writing on Sorel which uses the Hulme translation. This becomes significant when we recall that Jennings is unhappy with this translation and has sought to reorder the contents, creating difficulties for comparing texts. It might be thought that, as Jennings has 'improved' on Hulme's translation, it is likely to be of greater utility to scholars and therefore worth the inconveniences noted. However, the provenance of the Jennings version is not clear, as he does not claim to have provided a new translation from the French, but to have revised Hulme's translation – in effect, a translation of a translation. Jennings has not expanded on his reason for this, other than saying it was 'necessary' (1999: xxxix). We can only speculate as to whether Hulme's translation was incorrect, dated or, perhaps, just aesthetically displeasing. Jennings's example above, and such comparisons as we have made ourselves, leave us unconvinced of the 'added value' of his 'translation'. The edition by Jennings does contain much useful information on Sorel, though, as with all claims regarding Sorel, it should be used circumspectly.

We have drawn attention to the above problems because they present a degree of undecideability which the student of Sorel must deal with. As noted later in this paper, this undecideability extends to *interpreting* what Sorel, or, perhaps more correctly, 'the Sorels', said – there is no single Sorel, only many Sorels. And this caveat applies, not just to different editions and different translations, but also to

issues of content. For example, we noted earlier that Sorel was made a Chevalier of the Légion d' Honneur, the ribbon of which he 'never failed to wear' (Meisel, 1951: 163). However, according to Horowitz (1961: 12), he rejected the award, as well as a pension from the government, though Stanley (1976: 6) claims that he did receive a state pension. There are other mysteries too: in our copy of the 1961 edition the translation is credited to Hulme and Roth on the title page, but to Roth and Hulme on the cover. Either way, there is no indication of what is Roth's contribution. However, according to Stanley (1969: ix), Roth contributed the translations of the three appendices, that is, Appendix 1 'Unity and Multiplicity', Appendix 2 'Apology for Violence', and Appendix 3 'In Defense of Lenin'. As one might by now expect, this also does not appear to be the case. 'Apology for Violence' first appeared in the third French edition, introduced by Sorel himself. It appears in translation in the 1941 edition, which means that Hulme was the translator, rather than Roth. The website of the venerable and learned American Historical Association (2014, <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2003/in-memoriam-jack-j-roth>) is even more generous to Roth (born 1925): 'In 1950, along with T. E. Hulme, he translated Sorel's best-known work, *Reflections on Violence*'. However, Hulme was a casualty of the First World War, dying in 1917. Jennings (1999: xxxviii) mistakenly credits the 1972 reprint of the 1961 edition as the first appearance of the two extra appendices.

For Sorel's other major translated work, *The Illusions of Progress*, which concerns us less in this paper, the situation is less fraught than it is with *Reflections on Violence*, the translation by Stanley (1969) being the standard work. Similarly with the shorter work, *The Decomposition of Marxism*, translated by Horowitz (1961).

Our purpose in such an extensive excursion into the contradictions in Sorel scholarship is to alert the reader to the danger inherent in *any* authoritative statement on Sorel or his works (and that includes, of course, our own). Does this lessen the potential utility in Sorel for COT? We would argue that it does not. For example, many of the areas of dispute are issues of record, and might be, and, indeed, ought to be, eventually resolved. Equally, once the reader is aware of this variety, it is not a serious problem for a poststructuralist approach to Sorel's work – it just means that there are many texts, rather than only a few. It makes Sorel's *oeuvre* more extensive than it at first seems. We suspect Sorel would not be unhappy about this multiplicity, in that it makes his students labour to gain an understanding – he railed against simplistic, glib, superficial knowledge, and argued that what one *struggles* to understand is, in the end, better understood (see, for example, Sorel, 1961: 27). However, all this provides a graphic illustration of the signification of the phrase 'this is a text'. It is abundantly clear

that this text can be, and is, read very differently by different readers – hence, for example, how it becomes possible for both left wing and right wing thinkers to claim Sorel as an influence, and the attendant disagreements about whether Sorel himself was of the left or the right. The disputes and contradictions on the part of Sorel’s translators and commentators represent choices and preferences on *their* part, not on his, and, at some level, are intended to, and do, have an impact on how the work is read. So, now let us return to our own interpretation of this work.

Interpreting Sorel

It is relevant here to emphasise that we do not write as Sorel scholars, nor do we have any wish (impossible as it would be) to attempt to provide a definitive interpretation of Sorel’s work. We write as critical students of organisation, from an explicit poststructuralist perspective. Our intention here is threefold: to examine Sorel’s work as a text that can illuminate COT; to show the commensurability between Sorel’s work and a poststructuralist approach (see also Ciccariello-Maher, 2011³); and to illustrate its relevance to contemporary concerns in the theory and practice of organisation. To this end, we have identified four aspects of Sorel’s work, namely his approach to language, his view of the role of science in the social, the place of the concept of myth in his thinking and the significance of what we now call agonistics in his prescriptions for action.

Language

Sorel’s writing supposedly exhibits a ‘notorious vagueness’ (Meisel, 1951: 18), which has been seen by his critics as evidence of lack of rigour in his thinking. However, at least part of this apparent vagueness is attributable to a concern about the use of language that seems very familiar to contemporary ears. His approach to language was very particular, and he decried attempts to use

3 Ciccariello-Maher, writing from the ‘critical anarchist left’, has already affirmed a link between Sorel and poststructuralism. Indeed, he claims that ‘(t)he work of Georges Sorel simultaneously prefigures and surpasses later poststructuralism’ (2011: 30). His particular interest is focused on the resonances between Sorel’s work and that of Foucault, and he argues that it is Sorel’s ‘persistent but generally unfounded association with fascism’ that has prevented the author of *The Illusions of Progress* ‘from entering into the annals of poststructuralism’s prehistory’ (2011: 30), and finds that ‘(o)n both the question of reason and that of science, Sorel’s anticipation of Foucault is pronounced’ (2011: 32). We would agree that there are a number of points in Sorel’s work where the poststructuralist reader will think of Foucault, and, indeed, find that *The Illusions of Progress* is remarkably ‘Foucauldian’.

language so that meanings might be fixed and controlled, might constrain the boundaries of both thought and action. In defending himself against the charge of imprecision Sorel asserted:

We must beware of too much strictness in our language because it would then be at odds with the fluid character of reality; the result would be deceptive. (cited in Meisel, 1951: 19)

Sorel was opposed to reductionism, the creation of artificial order, of one-size-fits-all, the one best way, there is no alternative, dogmas. He was a theorist of uncertainty and disorder, of chaos, and opposed to consoling certainty and comforting unity. He bemoans the rules of scholastic writing where ideas are packaged to give the impression of symmetry, coherence and completeness, requiring no effort of comprehension, and which the reader absorbs uncritically, 'believing that they were based on the nature of things themselves' (Sorel, 1961: 27). Sorel requires effort on the part of the reader. There can be seen in his work, however, a poststructuralist approach to language and text, *avant la lettre*.

In particular, and deriving from this approach, it is important that the reader retains a critical awareness of the range of possible significations that can be attached to language and does not jump to the assumption that terms and concepts used by Sorel that have commonplace contemporary currency must, therefore, have commonplace contemporary meanings and significations. An especially relevant example is the meaning he attaches to 'violence'. It is ironic, given Sorel's awareness of the elusive quality of language, that, in the special instance of 'violence', he chose to 'adopt a terminology which would give rise to no ambiguity' (1961: 171). He uses the term 'force' to define the imposition of a particular social order by the state, which 'acts directly on labour, "to regulate wages", i.e. force them within the limits suitable to surplus value making, to lengthen the working day, and to maintain the labourer himself in the normal degree of dependence' (Sorel, 1961: 173, emphasis in original). The term 'violence' is reserved to define attempts to overthrow that order – in other words, to define *resistance to oppression*. Perhaps, had Sorel couched his arguments in terms of 'resistance', those commentators frightened by the very mention of 'violence' might have been less dismissive in reading his work.

'Violence' in Sorel's work cannot be seen simply as physical violence *qua* violence – and Stanley argues that 'Sorel is now generally agreed to have criticized violence more than he advocated it' (1981: 311) – but relates to the creative violence of inevitable resistance to control, oppression, repression, to force: force *enslaves*, violence *makes free*. Sorel was, for example, strongly opposed to sabotage and terrorism because they are, in essence, destructive (see, for example, Sorel, 1961: 118; see also various discussions in, for example, Humphrey, 1971: 184;

Berlin, 1979: 330; Portis, 1980: 72 and 102; Stanley, 1981: 240; Jennings, 1985: 40). 'Violence' is not aggression, it is resistance to force. Violence is action, and, as is the case with all action, what defines its value is function and motive: what it is meant to achieve and how it is meant to do that. Shils (1961: 17n6) comments: 'Sorel was no sadist and no admirer of brutality. Violence without the charismatic excitement and association with a sublime far-off end, was not regarded by him as genuine violence'. The same wider point can be made about the concept of the general strike, a far cry from the kind of event that such a concept might customarily evoke today (see below).

Sorel's conception of the ambiguity of text is central to his work and important in appreciating his approach. But his approach to interpreting the meaning of a text – a method which he called 'diremption' – has caused some uncertainty among commentators. An editorial footnote in Sorel (1961: 259) wails: 'Not able to find English equivalent – perhaps Sorel coined it'. This is not the case, however.⁴ Commentators often resort to repeating Sorel's own minimalist explanation without further development (for example, Meisel, 1951; Stanley, 1981; Jennings, 1985), or merely mention it in passing (for example, Horowitz, 1961; Portis, 1980). Hughes (1958), however, engages with the idea more fully. Diremption, he argues, consists in

wilfully wrenching out certain aspects of reality from the context that enveloped them and examining them independently one from another. To juxtapose a number of mutually incompatible statements, Sorel argued, meant to illuminate aspects of reality that might otherwise have passed unobserved. (Hughes 1958: 92)

Space precludes a full articulation of the link, but there does seem to be a strong resonance here with the concept of deconstruction so central itself to poststructuralism.

Science

Given Sorel's view of language, it is not surprising that he was anti-positivist – he argued that 'positivists... represent, in an eminent degree, mediocrity, pride, and pedantry' (Sorel, 1961: 142). He affirmed the value of science *qua* science as a

4 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'dirempt' is recorded in English in the 16th century, and 'diremption' was used by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century. Usage of the term 'diremption' appears to be mainly ecclesiastical. By the 19th century it is found in theological/philosophical texts. It is currently to be found in philosophical writings, particularly with reference to Hegel, Heidegger and, interestingly, Derrida. However, it is used, principally, in its literal sense of 'tearing apart'. In distinction to this, Sorel's use is as a methodology, comprising, not just the separation, but also the interrogation, of that which has been dirempted. It is this *process* that suggests parallels with deconstruction.

creative process, and its potential to alleviate the profound drudgeries of work, insisting that ‘we should be mad if we handed the management of industry over to sorcerers, mediums and wonder-workers’ (Sorel, 1961: 149). But he was adamantly opposed to the penetration of science, and the adoption of scientific templates, in the realm of the social, the human. Specifically, he opposed the idea that the social could be measured by, explained by, and perfected in accordance with, natural science. He was happy to acknowledge an absolute science of what he calls ‘physical mathematics’, but beyond this, Sorel argued, is ‘the immense domain which occupies almost the entire reach of our consciousness: here the operations of our daily life take place. Here, logic operates very poorly’ (cited in Meisel, 1951: 266-7). Sorel was convinced of the role and significance of the irrational in human thought. Horowitz, in a useful summary of Sorel’s view of science, and its relevance to the social, notes:

It is clear to Sorel that if science cannot inhibit the forms taken by social practice, neither is science in a position to promote practice. It is therefore necessary to move beyond the orbit of science, beyond the probabalism of calculus, and locate the mainsprings of action in non-rational behaviour. (Horowitz 1961: 144)

Sorel opposed, root and branch, the view of the social, characteristic of functionalist Organisation Theory and which was already becoming prominent in his own time, as explicable by the rules, practices and methodologies of natural science. The purpose of such practice could only be to impose artificial order and control, to de-humanise, and to deny the inherent disorder and struggle of existence. The very idea that science can solve all social problems, Sorel argued, was ‘the *middle-class conception of science*’ (1961: 141, emphasis in original). He continues:

it certainly corresponds very closely to the mental attitude of those capitalists, who, ignorant of the perfected appliances of their workshops, yet direct industry, and always find ingenious inventors to get them out of their difficulties. For the middle class science is a mill which produces solutions to all the problems we are faced with: science is no longer considered as a perfected means of knowledge, but only as a recipe for procuring certain advantages. (Sorel, 1961: 141)

Sorel inveighed against what he called ‘little science’, ‘which believes that when it has attained clarity of exposition that i(t) has attained truth’ (1961: 142) and which characterises the then dominant Functionalism in sociology. He comments that ‘(t)he *little science* has engendered a fabulous number of sophistries which we continually come across, and which go down very well with the people who possess the stupid and mediocre culture distributed by the University’ (1961: 147). (For an interestingly commensurate contemporary view, see Lecourt, 2001).

Sorel was very well-read in the philosophy of, and developments in, the natural sciences and the emerging relativist paradigm – indeed Hughes notes that Sorel has been seen as ‘an inadequately recognised precursor of relativity in science’ (1958: 166). Thus, for example, he was influenced by Henri Poincaré’s insistence on the gap between nature and its understanding, and by his idea that ‘the evolution of scientific thought depends in large measure on accepting fundamental physical principles as “articles of faith”... which reside in the models of scientists rather than inhere as properties of nature’ (Horowitz, 1961: 143). Although contemporary developments such as The New Physics might elide these distinctions further, it is still an easily recognisable position today. Sorel’s ontology was based on a realist natural world and a relativist social one and that is a view that very clearly resonates with the understanding of science that commonly informs COT.

Sorel sees nature as chaotic, necessarily made comprehensible through an order imposed on it by humans. Some of this understood order may be derived from science, but, in the realm of the social, perceived order relies, not on science, but on religion, myth, tradition, fantasy, experience, the mystical, the subjective. Such an approach not only resonates with a poststructuralist understanding of sense-making, but also with aspects of the contemporary understandings of ‘physics as metaphor’, which have also had some influence in COT. The idea is neatly captured by Capra (1983: 339): ‘(s)cience does not need mysticism and mysticism does not need science; but men and women need both’.

Myth

One of the major influences in the development of contemporary COT was the emergence in the 1980s of an awareness of the importance of the symbolic in understanding organisation. One major element of this interest focused on myth. Although the use made of ‘myth’ was varied, there was an underlying theme of myth as sense-making – cognitive attenuator, analytical framework, ontological category, etc. (see, for example, Jackson and Carter, 1984). The concept of myth also has a major place in the work of Sorel. As a corollary of his view of the significance of the irrational in human behaviour, he was convinced of the power of myth, and, especially, of its power to motivate action: ‘myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act’ (Sorel, 1961: 50). In particular, he saw the development of a myth, or of myths, of emancipation as prerequisite to achieving revolutionary change. Myth, *qua* myth, motivates.

As noted, Sorel saw no progress without struggle, and the vehicle of struggle which Sorel advocated was the general strike – or, more specifically, the *myth* of

the general strike. What Sorel meant by this is not entirely clear, but the general strike should not be understood as a rational, analysable, programmable project. It should be seen as an idea, a vision, something to believe in, a motivating ideal to work towards. For Sorel, it bore no relation to the 'real'. Indeed, Sorel is quite clear that myth and fact should never be allowed near each other. However, as the general strike is a myth it can never happen. Thus, the general strike is, in a Derridean sense, undecideable (see also, for example, Baudrillard's [1995] *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*). What remains is some sort of instrumental action – for Hughes, Sorel defined 'social action as the visible expression of the psychological reality of myth' (1958: 96). Laclau and Mouffe note: 'Sorel's philosophy... is one of action and will' (2001: 38). Sorel further refines his argument by differentiating between the revolutionary general strike and the merely political strike. The political strike is not revolutionary in its aim, indeed it is more focussed on a renewal of stability. The political strike is a pursuit of concessions, of fine-tuning the status quo, of seeking incremental improvement or of minimising dysfunctions – what Berlin succinctly describes as 'mere haggling' (1979: 320). In the language of more recent theory, it represents an acceptance of the established discourse, an acceptance of the rules concerning what kind of questions are admissible. It is an acknowledgement of the given asymmetries of power (see, for example, Foucault, 1971). The political strike is merely an incremental step beyond, for example, collective bargaining – another of Sorel's *bêtes noires* – asking for oppression to be lessened. For Sorel, the general strike should not be about 'asking', nor should it accept any rules established by 'the enemy'.

Ironically, this understanding of the role and function of myth, as an idealised vision that motivates, though very rarely articulated as such, informs much of modern day organisation practice. But, in this context, rather than myth being emancipatory, as Sorel hoped, it functions equally well as a means of repression. So, for example, (something that Sorel would surely have found unsurprising, if deeply regrettable), today one problem for those with an emancipatory interest is to explain the persistence of class domination in a condition of mass enfranchisement: 'How can people possibly reach the point of shouting: "More taxes! Less bread!?"' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 29). Are the working class deceived by repression disguised by an empty emancipatory rhetoric, the myth of consensual participation, constructed and delivered by the mechanisms of Derrida's (1994) 'techno-mediatic power', an unholy alliance of politics, mass media and academia? Or are they willing victims who prefer the material benefits of capitalism to autonomy, Deleuze and Guattari's insane capitalism, which has colonised desire? Myth as a motivator of action can function either as a revolutionary emancipatory force or as one of obedience and compliance – clearly, neither is inevitable. As Deleuze and Guattari have noted:

It is only too obvious that the destiny of the revolution is linked solely to the interests of the dominated and exploited masses. But it is the nature of this link which poses the real problem... It is a question of knowing how a revolutionary potential is realised, in its very relationship with the exploited masses or the "weakest links" of a given system. (1984: 377)

Clearly, the issues and concerns that energised Sorel more than a century ago are just as much to the fore in contemporary COT.

Agonistics

Contrary to a more orthodox Marxism, Sorel did not support the goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Rather, he advocated a continual struggle between class interests – what would be described now as agonistics. This could be seen as a counter-intuitive argument from someone so closely associated with the teachings of Marx, but was built on various modifications of Marx's thinking developed by Sorel. Indeed, Hughes suggests that 'for Sorel, Marxism... eventually became a body of imprecise meanings couched in symbolic form' (1958: 96). This was by no means to diminish the significance of Marx's work, but was 'to redefine it as "social poetry"... that almost always hit home' (*ibid.*). It was Sorel's view that, were the workers to gain absolute power, they would replicate the asymmetries of the bourgeois domination that he, and they, sought to overturn (history would seem to bear out this prediction) – Meisel quotes the Belgian Labour Party politician Emile Vandervelde as providing a succinct articulation of Sorel's position: 'If the workers should triumph without having accomplished the equally indispensable moral evolution, their reign would be abominable and the world would again be a place of suffering, brutality and injustice as bad as now' (cited in Meisel, 1951: 272). In the event of achievement of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', Sorel anticipated an alignment of interests amongst the governing elites and a distancing from those they served, an understanding that prefigured what would soon be articulated by Michels as the *iron law of oligarchy* (1915 [1911]).

It was to be the struggle between enemies that would generate a creative dynamic:

Unless the enemy – not the parasitic intellectuals and theorists, but the leaders of the capitalist forces – are themselves energetic and fight back like men, the workers will not find enemies worthy of their steel, and will themselves tend to degenerate. Only against a strong and vigorous opponent can truly heroic qualities be developed. (Berlin, 1979: 313)

Although some commentators see in Sorel's work a desire for the utter elimination of the bourgeoisie (see, for example, Jennings, 1999: xv), others profoundly disagree with this interpretation – for example, Stanley (1976: 3)

argued that he ‘is not attacking the bourgeois class *per se* – only its degenerate form’. The elimination of the bourgeoisie would, as Berlin comments, deprive the proletariat of the conflict necessary to sustain its emancipation – ‘(o)ny conflict purifies and strengthens’ (Berlin, 1979: 313). The bourgeoisie, although morally corrupt and parasitically lethargic, also embodies an entrepreneurial spirit – which includes science – that, according to Sorel, needs to be retained and enhanced. Opposing this is the creative skill of the worker, the producer imbued with the ideals of socialism. Production is a creative, synergetic process from which social benefit and economic progress is derived, and, in the hands of the *free* worker, entails a virtuous morality. In Sorel’s schema, production is both the *raison d’être* of the workers and, morally, theirs to command:

The proletariat must work henceforth to free itself from everything except inner direction. It is by movement and action that the workers must acquire juridical and political ability. Its first rule of conduct should be: *to remain exclusively worker...* (Sorel, 1976: 93, emphasis in original)

This does not mean that they are also the best commanders of the state: ‘Least of all Sorel wanted the proletarians to conquer the government, Sorel did not believe in any need for the workers to possess the state...’ (Meisel 1951: 15). Let the bourgeoisie administer, since that is what they are good for. It is in this role that their class identity will be strengthened, and that will provide the engine of conflict that is necessary for proletarian emancipation to be realised and sustained.

Although sharing Marx’s desire for the triumph of socialism, Sorel did not share Marx’s teleology of capitalist development and worker emancipation. There was no inevitability of history for Sorel. Workers must fight for their emancipation and any compromise with the capitalist interest delays this emancipation – such compromise merely allows workers to be more thoroughly exploited, because they become complicit in their own subordination. Therefore, Sorel argued, it is crucial that workers reject the blandishments of capitalism, which ‘black ingratitude’ (Sorel, 1961: 91) will encourage the exploiters to withdraw their panaceas and intensify direct oppression, which will in turn reassure the workers of the need to resist utterly that oppression – and so the ‘cycle’ of emancipation can be energised. As Fredrick Douglass (1857: 22) noted in the context of nineteenth century slavery, ‘If there is no struggle there is no progress.... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will’.

Sorel’s advocacy of the necessity of, and the inherent creativity of, the struggle again resonates with contemporary thinking. For example, Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]: 36ff) enlist Sorel’s work in their riposte to the degeneration of class politics into Third Way unitarism, or, at best, a pluralism revolving round merely

technical differences. They seek to restore the idea of the centrality of inherent antagonisms, arguing that:

antagonisms are not *objective* relations, but relations which reveal the limits of all objectivity. Society is constituted around these limits, and they are antagonistic limits. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xiv, emphasis in original).

They go on to argue further that this restoration of the centrality of antagonism

forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of a rational consensus, of a fully inclusive “we”. For us, a non-exclusive public sphere of rational argument is a conceptual impossibility. Conflict and division... are neither disturbances that unfortunately cannot be eliminated nor empirical impediments that render impossible the full realization of a harmony that we cannot attain.... Indeed, we maintain that without conflict and division, a pluralist democratic politics would be impossible. To believe that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible... far from providing the necessary horizon for the democratic project, is to put it at risk. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xvii-xviii)

Mouffe, in *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?* (1999), clarifying the distinction between antagonism and agonism, also defines an agonistic model of democracy that is remarkably consistent with Sorel’s ‘perpetual’ class war. Distinguishing between ‘the political’ (antagonistic) and ‘politics’ (agonistic), she defines ‘the political’ as ‘the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society, antagonism that can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations’, while ‘politics’ is defined as ‘the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of the “political”’ (Mouffe, 1999: 754). It might be thought that any mention of democracy would be antithetical to Sorel’s position, yet Meisel argues that it is not democracy *per se* that Sorel despises – it is the perverted manifestation of the democratic ideal ‘confectioned by and for the demagogues and orators for purposes of power politics’ (Meisel, 1951: 150) that is anathema to him. Sorel’s venom was focussed on *fin de siècle* France, but his criticism applies *a fortiori* to a twenty-first century democratic system committed to maintaining a politically illiterate electorate, propagandised by a right wing oligarchic news media, committed to support of a pro-business, privately educated, elite delivering a manufactured and artificial consensus. As Berlin notes, Sorel’s ideas ‘mark a revolt against the rationalist ideal of frictionless contentment in a harmonious social system in which all ultimate questions are reduced to technical problems, soluble by appropriate techniques’ (1979: 331-2).

In Meisel’s view, ‘Sorel rejects the democratic form, [while] retaining faithfully its essence’ (1951: 151). The task is to find an emancipatory praxis for democracy.

Mouffe, rejecting a Habermasian-style deliberative democracy, argues that it is not a question of abandoning consensus, because that is already only a myth, already does not exist. She insists that

the model of “agonistic pluralism” that I am advocating asserts that the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs. Far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence. (Mouffe, 1999: 755-6)

This could have been written by Sorel himself.

It is not surprising, given Sorel’s view of democracy-in-practice, that he also eschewed parliamentary socialism. He argued that participation in the parliamentary process leads to contamination by bourgeois values and the oligarchic tendency already noted. In what could be seen as a description of the British Labour Party of the post-war consensus, particularly New Labour (and its many imitators elsewhere), Sorel says that Parliamentary Socialists need simultaneously to fool the workers, ease the anxiety of the middle-class and placate the rich (1961: 120). The proletariat should never put faith in participation in the established political process, the status quo of the exploiters, to ‘negotiate’ emancipation:

We can... imagine what would follow from a revolution which brought our official Socialists of today to power. Institutions remaining almost what they are today, all the middle-class ideology would be preserved; the middle-class state would dominate with its ancient abuses.... (Sorel 1961: 96)

What is ‘given’ can always be taken away – emancipation can only be won, can only be taken. The classes are, and must be, separate and only this separation can provide the necessary energy for the struggle. This isolationism also extends to workplace relationships. Berlin captures Sorel’s uncompromising position thus:

proletarians who allow themselves any degree of cooperation with the class enemy are lost to their own side. All talk of responsible and humane employers, reasonable and peace-loving workers, nauseates him. Profit-sharing, factory councils that include both masters and men, democracy which recognises all men are equal, are fatal to the cause. In total war there can be no fraternisation. (Berlin, 1979: 322)

Sorel recognised that such ‘fraternisation’ was precisely what the exploiters sought to achieve:

history shows us that the whole effort of capitalism has been to bring about the submission of the masses to the conditions of the capitalist economic system...

(D)emocratic rulers adopt as their mission the accomplishment of... moral unity...
This moral unity is the automatic discipline of the producers.... (Sorel, 1961: 178)

The tendency of the past hundred years in the UK, both in politics and in labour relations, from the simple Whitley Councils to that most refined expression of the incorporated worker, Human Resource Management, has, of course, been precisely that which Sorel cautioned against. And he accurately predicted the kind of conditions that would ensue, a situation in which emancipation is still as much a distant dream as it was when he was writing.

Conclusions?

Our intention in this paper has been to suggest parallels between the ideas and understandings of Sorel and some interests and aspects of COT. If these parallels seem to be robust, what utility could we find in Sorel for COT?

The emergence of COT as a counter to the hegemony of a managerialist functionalism has furnished an impressive body of analysis of organisation(s) that has improved explanatory power, and which no longer takes capitalism as either a given or a good. But, although we understand much better the forces and the systems that dominate, there has, so far, been little effect on practice. The more we illuminate the mechanisms of repression, the more intense they become. Perhaps the inherent weakness of COT is its aversion to prescription. Sorel does not suffer from this debility. Sorel is convinced about what is needed and how it is to be achieved. It must be stressed, however, that Sorel's work is prescriptive about means, not about ends (another very Foucauldian stance – see, for example, Foucault 1980; 1991). As Berlin comments, '(h)e ignores practical problems; he is not interested in the way in which production, distribution, exchange, will be regulated in the new order, nor in whether there is any possibility of abolishing scarcity without performing at least some tasks that can hardly be described as creative' (1979: 314). Sorel is not prescriptive about what change should be achieved – that must, necessarily, be left to those who act to bring change about. What he does prescribe is the means to achieve it.

One of the more substantive contradictions in Sorel, as he was himself well aware, is that he prescribes action while remaining unengaged himself. More than that, he is a bourgeois intellectual insisting that the proletariat must act, while condemning those outwith the proletariat telling them what to do. He is not alone in this contradiction, the inevitability of being complicit in that which is analysed and criticised – it also afflicts, for example, the poststructuralists. And it is also a problem that besets COT. COT is a middle class preoccupation with, at least in part, a normative concern for the oppressed, including the working class.

However, given the limited possibilities for conducting anti-capitalist, anti-managerialist, emancipatory experiments in capitalist organisations, COT is restricted to suggesting alternative praxes. Starting from the assumption that the world is socially constructed (a view shared by Sorel), and the assumption that, therefore, things do not have to be the way they are, and convinced that enlightened action can ameliorate the human condition, the profound utility of critique lies in *the generation of possibilities*.

The thrust of Sorel's argument in *Reflections on Violence* can be summarised as follows: emancipation will not occur without a struggle on the part of the oppressed; as the powerful will use force to resist a challenge to their domination, those seeking to liberate themselves must also react with force (violence in Sorel's terminology); the necessary context in which this contest will be played out is that of the General Strike. Many western liberals today would have no trouble with this sentiment as applied to such phenomena as the Arab Spring, or, historically, to black emancipation or to women's suffrage. What is important here is acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the claim of such groups that they are the victims of oppression. What is not acknowledgeable is the legitimacy of the claim that workers within a democracy might be oppressed. If this were to be allowed, then the General Strike would become justified, and there could be nothing more terrifying to the bourgeoisie than the General Strike. Thus, notwithstanding intensification of labour, infantilisation of the workforce, mass unemployment, absence of a living wage, zero hours contracts, unsafe working conditions, it is unacceptable, within the dominant discourse, to claim that the working class should be seen as oppressed. It is, of course, hardly acceptable to speak of a 'working class' at all, since that belies the assertion that we are all the same, and 'all in it together'. The difficulty with this is that the bourgeoisie has everything to gain from acceptance of this assertion, and the working class everything to lose. But is emancipation really so scary? We must remember that Sorel seeks, not an elimination of class, but a strengthening of class identity. He sees a genuine plurality of interests between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie which he does not seek to elide. In the UK, in particular, the denial of any kind of class interest has been a feature of the dominant neo-liberalism of the last several decades, in favour of a myth of supposed equality of opportunity and a spurious meritocracy, organisationally given a dangerous legitimacy through a unitarist Human Resource Management. Sorel would not have been surprised by this. He believed that the UK was very unlikely to be the first place for emancipation to be achieved:

That the general strike is not popular in contemporary England, is a poor argument to bring against the historical significance of the idea, for the English

are distinguished by an extraordinary lack of understanding of the class war ...
(Sorel, 1961: 123)

In his 'Introduction' to the 1950 American edition of *Reflections on Violence* Shils makes a similar point:

The modern intelligentsia in all countries except Great Britain have, ever since the 18th century, been in various forms of opposition to the prevailing society and the authorities who rule it. (Shils, 1961: 13)

The immediate post-World War 2 period saw a revival of interest in Sorel, of which the Shils edition is an example. However, Shils sees the utility in Sorel's work in terms of the historical and the cautionary, and limits its validity to a dissensual society in crisis, a society that, for Sorel, had only two possibilities:

one, *decadence*, in which the ruling class of politicians and property owners, lacking in self-esteem, corrupted by the niggling procedures of the pursuit and exercise of office, and too cowardly to be violent, resorts to fraud and cunning to control a mass lost in hedonistic self-gratification and individualism

and another

renascence, in which the aspirants to rule or those already ruling, inflamed with enthusiasm, their minds on remote goals, caring nothing for the immediate consequences of any action, but performing it because it is morally imperative. (Shils, 1961: 17, emphases in original)

The society of *his* time, Shils implies, is not like either of these. But both such characterisations have more currency today than Shils could, perhaps, have imagined. Indeed, it may be that, once that is accepted, all that is now necessary is for the illusion of consensus to be recognised for what it is, and the dissensus characteristic of contemporary societies to be acknowledged. This then would offer a basis for change.

And perhaps then Sorel has something to offer. His ideas resonate with contemporary critical theory. The world we live in is, indeed, not dissimilar to the one Sorel predicted were capitalism to remain unchallenged, and it still needs change, in many ways and on many levels. Most of all, his emphasis on action distinguishes him as a theorist with ideas about how to achieve that necessary change.

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