

GEORGES SOREL: HIS RELEVANCE FOR CRITICAL ORGANISATION STUDIES

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Abstract

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, in the 1870s and 1880s, in which role 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, 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 Schils (1961:16), 'a stern moralist and an apocalyptic seer'.

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 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 an 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 (2011:1, 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.’

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 oversight.

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 monarchists 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, issues, and so on, 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, is *Reflections on Violence* ([1908] 1961), though it could be argued that it is not his most significant, and he certainly did not think so (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 critical OT 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.

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 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.' (quoted 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 'by believing that they were based on the nature of things themselves.' (Sorel 1961: 27). Sorel requires effort on the part of the reader. We can see in his work, however, a poststructuralist approach to language and text, *avant la lettre*. In particular, it is important that the reader 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'. This cannot be seen simply as physical violence - Sorel was, for example, strongly opposed to sabotage and terrorism, because they are, in

essence, destructive - but relates to the creative violence of inevitable resistance to control, oppression, repression, to force: force enslaves, violence makes free. Violence is not aggression, it is resistance. 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. Schils (1961:17 footnote 6) 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).

Science

Given Sorel's view of language, it is not surprising that he was anti-positivist. While he affirmed the value of science *qua* science as a creative process, and its potential to alleviate the profound drudgeries of work, 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 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 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. He opposes, root and branch, the view of the social, characteristic of functionalist OT 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. For Sorel, of course, Einstein was still in the future and his science was that of Newtonian mechanics. His ontology was based on a realist natural world and a relativist social one - a view that very clearly resonates with the understanding of science that commonly informs critical organisation theory. 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. 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. 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. 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. Myth, qua myth, motivates. 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 Foucauldian terms, 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. 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 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 & 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 the link which poses a 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 built on various modifications of Marx's thinking that Sorel developed. 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 be again a place of suffering, brutality and injustice as bad as now' (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 later be articulated by Michels as the *iron law of oligarchy*.

It was the struggle between enemies that generated 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 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 bourgeoisie *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)nly 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, Mouffe, in *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism ?* (1999), defines an agonistic model of democracy that is remarkably consistent with Sorel's 'perpetual' class war. It might be thought that any mention of democracy would be antithetical to Sorel's position, yet Meisel (1951:150) 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' 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] faithfully retaining its essence' (1961:151). 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 Labour Party of the post-war consensus, particularly New Labour, 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:

‘... 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 (1979:322) 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.’

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. 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 of the workers within a democracy to 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)

- Schils's point about the tendency of the intelligentsia in Great Britain to be 'conspiratorial', rather than the more common sentiment among intellectuals of being 'separatist' and 'isolationist' (!961:14), may have some relevance for that aspect of CMS/COT which prefers to focus solely on micro-emancipatory initiatives.

The immediate post-World War 2 period saw a revival of interest in Sorel, of which the Schils 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' (Schils 1961:17). The society of *his* time, Schils implies, is not like that. But both such characterisations have more currency today than Schils 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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