

## A PREMATURE FASCIST? — SOREL AND MUSSOLINI

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WHILE GEORGES SOREL was still alive he endorsed Lenin who thought very little of him. When Sorel was dead he was acclaimed by the Duce of fascist Italy as his foremost teacher,<sup>1</sup> although Sorel had never publicly endorsed Mussolini.

While it is comparatively easy to extricate Sorel from his self-confessed position as a Communist—the task of dissociating him from a cause he never avowed presents much difficulty.

The puzzle will never be solved unless it is realized that there were many facets of Georges Sorel's personality—in the case at hand, two: the partisan of the proletariat who had no use for the state, any state; and the student of historic forces, capable of considerable enthusiasm for any sign of a moral revival in Europe even if it took the forms of nationalism and strong-man rule. It appears that Sorel considered both of his intellectual attitudes as compatible if the working class had made genuine advances during this process of moral revival. Then the autocrat could have been forgiven for using and even strengthening the old techniques of ruling, so that a plea "For Lenin" was in order, although Lenin might be a Russian and a statesman first, and an internationalist and syndicalist second.

Did Mussolini likewise satisfy the two facets of Sorel's personality mentioned above?

When Sorel died in 1922, Lenin had been ruling Russia for five years, while Mussolini, though not invested with official power until two months later, in all but name, was already the conqueror of Italy. Sorel had been following the latter's career with close attention, and is said to have predicted Mussolini's spectacular future as early as in 1912,<sup>2</sup> while Mussolini had been quoting Sorel year in and year out in his capacity as a socialist

<sup>1</sup> The French journalist, Emile Schreiber, asking the Duce whether it was true that he had been inspired by the author of the *Reflections on Violence*, was told: "That's quite correct. Georges Sorel has been my master." *L'illustration*, No. 4672 (September 17, 1932).

When a Spanish reporter representing the Madrid A B C asked Mussolini: "Which of the three had the greatest influence on your development, Nietzsche, Jaurès, or Sorel?" Mussolini answered: "Sorel." (Gaëtan Pirou, *Georges Sorel*, Paris, 1927, p. 53). Unless otherwise stated, all translations have been made by the author of this article.

<sup>2</sup> "Our Mussolini is not an ordinary Socialist. Believe me: one day you may see him at the head of a sacred battalion saluting the Italian flag with his sword. He is a fifteenth century Italian, a *condottiere*! It is not known yet, but he alone has enough energy and ability to restore power to the government." (Jean Variot, *Le Père Sorel*, in *L'Eclair*, Paris, September 11, 1922, as quoted by Pirou, *op. cit.*, p. 53.)

This startling prediction is not included in Jean Variot's final collection of the master's pronouncements, *Propos de Georges Sorel* (Paris, 1935). There, he has Sorel merely state: "I have heard about him before the war" (p. 56).

Another disciple, René Johannet, reported in his *Eloge du Bourgeois Français* (Paris, 1924), p. 338, that Sorel told him after the Italian Socialist Congress of Ancona in 1914: "This young man will make himself a name in the world." But that was at the time when Mussolini was a left-winger with syndicalist leanings.

editor and party leader.<sup>3</sup> The development of both men shows a remarkable parallelism, with the old philosopher always a step ahead of the young politician. Both had been Marxists before they broke away from the official party that had become reformist, although it was still mouthing the old revolutionary phrases. Both had become exponents of syndicalist, direct and non-political action. To be sure, Mussolini did not need Sorel in order to develop his own form of radicalism,<sup>4</sup> but he could use Sorel's terminology to good advantage. The theory of violence elevated the crude vernacular of syndicalist propaganda to the dignity of a literary idiom.

Later on the two men parted ways for a while when, around 1910, Sorel, disappointed in French syndicalism, looked for other allies in his perennial struggle against the republic of "merchants, intellectuals and politicians."<sup>5</sup> Unlike Mussolini, Sorel did not wait for World War I to rediscover that stubborn fact, the nation. With his hypersensitive flair for forecasting social trends, Sorel tried to harness the new current for his revolutionary purpose, only to be showered by that staunch left-winger, Mussolini, with a torrent of abuse which makes Lenin's one acid remark about Sorel appear quite gentle in comparison.<sup>6</sup>

Sorel's flirtation with French nationalist and monarchist circles did not last long. In 1914, while Italy was still a neutral in the war, Mussolini became the socialist patriot and interventionist, whereas Sorel had long since returned to the internationalist camp, decrying imperialistic carnage and restating most emphatically his old, proletarian allegiance.<sup>7</sup>

If Sorel had been impressed for a moment by Charles Maurras, "the most eminent theorist monarchy has ever had,"<sup>8</sup> he soon decided that brilliant pamphleteering alone would not bring about the downfall of the Third Republic. To achieve this purpose, revolutionary action was required.

<sup>3</sup> An extensive account of Mussolini's Sorelian as well as anti-Sorelian editorials is to be found in Gaudens Megaro, *Mussolini in the Making* (Boston and New York, 1938), pp. 228-245.

<sup>4</sup> "His temperament and home surroundings would seem sufficient to indicate why he had little or nothing to learn from 'literary' apologists of violence or force like Nietzsche and Sorel." (Megaro, *ibid.*, p. 104.)

"Those who ramble about Mussolini's intellectual father . . . would do well to pause and consider the influence of his real father." (*Ibid.*, p. 318.)

<sup>5</sup> A phrase coined by Edouard Berth, Sorel's most faithful disciple, and used as title of an essay expounding the syndicalist credo: "Marchands, Intellectuels et Politiciens," serialized in *Le Mouvement Socialiste* (Paris), July 15, 1907—March, 1908.

<sup>6</sup> Lenin had referred to Sorel as "that notorious muddle-head" in his *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. (*Collected Works*, London, 1927, Vol. XIII, p. 249.)

<sup>7</sup> Not only did Sorel speak of himself as "an old man who insists on remaining, as did Proudhon, a disinterested servant of the proletariat" (*Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, 1st ed.; Paris, 1919, dedication); he also added for the second edition (Paris, 1921), an appendix, *Exégèses Proudhoniennes* (pp. 415-449), in which he tried to prove from Proudhon's correspondence that the great French libertarian had never been a nationalist.

Henri de Lubac in his study of Proudhon (*The UnMarxian Socialist*, trans. R. E. Scantlebury, New York, 1948), disagrees with Sorel. Henri de Lubac calls Proudhon a genuine patriot and "the numerous passages quoted by Sorel . . . merely show that he was not a lover of the blind chauvinism or jingoism of the mob" (p. 56).

<sup>8</sup> This statement and the quotations of the following paragraph are cited from Jean Vaxiot, *Propos de Georges Sorel*, op. cit., pp. 122 ff.

Maurras alone among the right-wing radicals had understood that the strong state he envisioned needed a strong social basis, and it is this insight which made his teachings so attractive to quite a few French workers. But would Maurras act? Sorel did not think so. French monarchism had become infected by the spirit of bourgeois reaction. "The real enemies of the Action Française," according to Sorel, "stand on the right." After the war which in his opinion was inevitable, the two forces, nationalism and Marxism, would confront each other. "After the foreign war, civil war. It is always like that." Which one of the two extremes would prevail? In France, very likely, neither one. The parliamentary system, Sorel thought, might be able to carry on, after having corrupted every counter force.

From Sorel's viewpoint, the outlook in Italy seemed to be more promising. There, the same *rapprochement* between syndicalist and nationalist groups had taken place on an even larger scale, since the people were socially more discontented and the regime was much weaker than in France. The revolutionary wing of the Italian proletariat was more powerful and more active than its French counterpart, while the nationalist protest was less—if at all—dependent on monarchism as a solution.<sup>9</sup> The nationalist propaganda for a strong state was felt to be directed against the cynicism and graft of the liberal regime rather than against the existing institutions of the labor class. If in France Sorel and his friends had for a moment expected that the revolutionary initiative might come from the right, in Italy the future seemed to favor left-wing revolution, with a specifically Italian twist.

The future brought precisely that result, but with the added feature, entirely unforeseen by Sorel or anyone else, that the proletarian leader of the revolution turned against his own class, by sacrificing syndicalist principles to the nationalist concept of the omnipotent state.

The fact that Sorel was not prepared for a *fascist* Mussolini is no discredit to Sorel's analytical ability, when it is remembered that as late as April, 1920, the budding Duce still declared: "I start with the individual and strike at the state . . . [not at] this or that state, but against the state in itself. . . . Down with the state in all its forms and incarnations: the state of yesterday, of today, and of tomorrow; the bourgeois state and the socialist state."<sup>10</sup>

If Sorel did not comment on this or any similar pronouncement coming from the same source, it was because at that time hundreds of Italian syndicalist orators were saying exactly the same thing. The anarchist Mussolini could not impress Sorel as very original. Besides, the

<sup>9</sup> In Italy monarchy was a reality and closely associated with the parliamentary, liberal regime.

<sup>10</sup> Megaro, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

founder of fascism spoke for a group of urban syndicalists,<sup>11</sup> while Sorel's speculations about a possible Italian revolution developed in a different direction. Sorel knew that the Italian economy was preponderantly one of peasants, and of poor peasants at that, badly exploited by their landlords who were barons on a latifundian scale in the backward South of the country. In contrast to the leaders of Russian Marxism, Sorel seems to have entertained hopes that the class struggle—in Italy, at any rate—might be decided in the rural sector rather than by the industrial proletariat. More than twenty years before the March on Rome, Sorel had written an introduction to the French edition of an Italian Socialist's work<sup>12</sup>—an introduction which Sorel later published independently under the title "National Socialisms."<sup>13</sup> Still later he included it in a collection of miscellaneous older writings<sup>14</sup> which appeared after the war, when Mussolini's break with the reformist Socialist party was already a fact of public knowledge.

"There are," Sorel wrote, "at least as many kinds of socialisms as there are great nations."<sup>15</sup> In Italy, he believed, socialism might evolve along the line of the rural cooperative which was becoming increasingly popular with the poor tenant farmers. Was this perhaps to be the proletarian institution with which they would fight and win the class struggle in Italy? Sorel tended to believe it:

If the system of agricultural cooperatives is really the school that is preparing the Italian peasant for socialism, then it is clear that socialism is destined to be developed by our neighbors along lines highly significant for the future. . . . More than once Italy has been the educator of Europe; she could well assume that role once more, because she seems to have reached a stage favorable to the development of doctrines which would bring about a revival of socialism. . . .<sup>16</sup>

This prognosis of an Italian peasant revolution does not occur anywhere else in Sorel's work; that he incorporated it into a book to which he attached particular significance, without any change or annotation, does not necessarily indicate that he still believed in 1919 what he had written in 1901. His general faith in a coming Italian revolution, however, remained unshaken. In 1912, at a time when his opinion of French syndicalism was very low indeed, he told Jean Variot: "I do not believe that Italy's future will be the result of a normal, evolutionary process. I believe

<sup>11</sup> The first assembly of the new party took place in March, 1919, at Milan, the capital of Italian industry, and was attended by 145 persons, in the main Syndicalists; the meeting sent a message of sympathy to workers who had occupied a factory at Dalmine. The intellectual make up of the initial fascist group was sharply distinct from that of the middle-class elements who were to join later on. (Erwin von Beckerath, *Wesen und Werden des fascistischen Staates*, Berlin, 1927, pp. 19, 20, 24.)

<sup>12</sup> G. Gatti, *Le Socialisme et l'agriculture* (Paris, 1901).

<sup>13</sup> "Socialismes nationaux," *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* (Paris, April, 1902), pp. 33-63.

<sup>14</sup> *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, pp. 201-237.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

the syndicalist Italian youth, the most serious-minded of Europe, will make Italy greater because it knows best that the socialist theories, infected by democratism, are no longer tabu."<sup>17</sup>

However, up to this period no reference can be found to Mussolini, at that time chief of the radical wing of Italian socialism which had driven the reformists into secession.<sup>18</sup> The name "Mussolini" occurs for the first time in Sorel's correspondence with Benedetto Croce, and the reference is not a favorable one. On November 28, 1914, when Italy, still a neutral in the war, although being prodded by D'Annunzio and Mussolini toward intervention, Sorel complained about Giovanni Papini's recent popularity: "That does not surprise me too much, but it saddens me. After having adhered to the Futuristic movement, now he goes and becomes one of the lieutenants in the new Socialist party founded by Mussolini. It is to be feared that fifteen years of serious work in Italy have been in vain. . . ." <sup>19</sup>

If he had not fully appreciated the impact of the new nationalism before, now, during the war which he hated and despised, Sorel saw the warmongers of the right unmasked: "I am not extremely surprised by the turn the discussion among Italian nationalists is taking . . . they are behaving like street Arabs. . . . Italian nationalism reveals, at this occasion, its democratic soul just as our *Action Française* has done . . . the majority of our great idealists are at bottom demagogues complaining about democracy when the circulation of their newspapers is disappointing. . . ." <sup>20</sup> On May 26, 1915, shortly after Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Entente, Sorel wrote: "So the die has been cast . . . let us hope Italy will not have to suffer too much in consequence of her folly. . . ." <sup>21</sup>

Sorel is not to be found in the camp of Italian interventionism in which Benito Mussolini figures so conspicuously. Sorel was saddened by the southern ally's heavy losses in the field, but not without hope that

<sup>17</sup> Variot, *Propos de Georges Sorel*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> After the Socialist party congress at Reggio Emilia in July, 1912, the defeated right-wingers set up their own Italian Reformist Socialist Party while Mussolini, who had been instrumental in their expulsion, was made a member of the executive committee of the official party and, in December of the same year, editor-in-chief of the party organ, *Avanti*.

<sup>19</sup> "Lettere di Georges Sorel à B. Croce" [hereinafter cited as *Letters to Croce*], *La Critica*, Vol. XXVIII (Napoli-Bari, 1930), p. 115.

The vanguard of Italian painters and poets led by Marinetti first teamed up with the nationalists led by Corradini. In 1919, a delegation of Futurists attended the first meeting of the Fascist party. (Cf. von Beckerath, *op. cit.*, p. 19.)

On October 20, 1914, the executive committee of the Socialist party rejected Mussolini's semi-interventionist formula of qualified neutrality; he thereupon left the party and founded for his followers a new, interventionist organ, *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

<sup>20</sup> "Letters to Croce," January 19, 1915, *La Critica*, Vol. XXVII (1929), p. 117.

"What Sorel wants to say is that the positivist and intellectual, Maurras, repudiated only the political side of democracy and not its philosophical foundations." (Pirou, *op. cit.*, p. 46.)

<sup>21</sup> "Letters to Croce," *La Critica*, Vol. XXVII (1929), p. 121.

something good might come out of the slaughter. On January 9, 1916 he confided to Croce: "I believe Italy is marching toward the republic . . . the Socialists act with a sagacity of which I would not have thought them capable, by keeping themselves in reserve for the hour of collapse. Most certainly many Catholics adopt the same viewpoint."<sup>22</sup>

Sorel drew great comfort from a statement made by one of the "street Arabs," the nationalist leader Corradini, saying: "Will the syndicate kill off parliamentarism? That is indeed our opinion." Sorel copied these lines for his friend Delesalle and added triumphantly: "Truth is on the march!"<sup>23</sup> A few months later, however, he was no longer so sure the Italian Socialists would exploit their opportunity. "I am told," he wrote Croce on December 25, 1918, "that the Socialist party may win a majority in the coming elections. This eventuality will put them to a harsh test; they could not do otherwise than replace unitary monarchy by a federal republic."<sup>24</sup> Sorel, the pluralist, speaking as the enemy of the centralized state, was hoping for a syndicalist order of the associated producers.

The awakening must have been rather rude even for this old pessimist when Mussolini at last showed his hand. The end of Sorel's correspondence with Croce, which coincided with the end of Italian liberalism as well as proletarian freedom, does not tell the whole story, since the recipient of these letters, when he published them, was forced to use discretion so as not to antagonize fascist censorship.<sup>25</sup> The few references to fascism do not indicate a change of mind; it is barely possible that Croce, who consistently refused to kowtow to Il Duce, suppressed some observations of Sorel's favorable to Mussolini, in order not to seem to curry his favor. However, this is not very likely. The gloomy tone of these last letters is unmistakable. "I am passionately interested in the affairs of Italy, which present themselves under such a mysterious aspect," Sorel wrote to Croce on July 30, 1920. They reminded him of "the last days of the Roman Republic. The unrest instigated by the financial magnates recalls to us the times of Crassus." The Italian intellectuals were bought and "the people who listen to them do not know that the writers, lawyers and politicians are the agents of finance capital. It seems to me the Socialist party too is not altogether blameless in this matter."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Sorel, *Lettres à Paul Delesalle, 1914-1921* (Paris, 1947, p. 145), hereinafter cited as *Lettres to Delesalle*.

<sup>24</sup> "Letters to Croce," *La Critica*, Vol. XXVIII (1930), p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> In announcing the publication of the correspondence which lasted from 1895 to 1921, Benedetto Croce reserved the right to omit passages of Sorel's letters, "especially of those written during the last years," meaning letters in which Sorel censures the fascist movement. ("Letters to Croce," *La Critica*, Vol. XXV, 1927, p. 38, note.)

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. XXVIII, pp. 191-192.

If this statement does nothing else, it reveals a deeply disturbed Sorel: he tried to be the "detached" observer, lumping together impartially the Socialists with all those who committed the ignominious "treason of the intellectuals" in Italy's fateful hour; but his past loyalties were stronger than his will to objectivity: like any other orthodox Marxist, he dismissed Mussolini as the modern replica of Clodius and Milo.

As the struggle neared its end, Sorel felt sorry for the defeated Socialists. "The Italian situation," he wrote on March 25, 1921, "resembles very much that of Ireland; the Socialists are treated somewhat like the Sinn Feiners are treated by the Black and Tass" [sic].<sup>27</sup>

In but one published letter, the last he wrote to Croce,<sup>28</sup> did Sorel give credit to Mussolini's movement, if only for forcing socialism into decisive action before it was too late: "The adventures of fascism are, perhaps, at present, the most original social phenomenon in Italy; they seem to me to surpass by far the combinations of the politicians." It appeared to Sorel that Mussolini had already accomplished one thing: to instill "in a growing number of rural Socialists" the desire to enter the government. But their leader, Turati, "is hesitating because he is afraid his socialist personnel might not be up to governmental standards; however, he will end by taking the big plunge because even a brief delay would turn his abstention into a *gran rifiuto*." When Turati finally made up his mind, in July, 1922, it was too late; by then the Socialist party had lost the last remnant of its bargaining power.

For a last time, Sorel reverted to those rural syndicalists on whom he had set such great hopes at the beginning of the century. But Italian socialism had already made its final Great Refusal when, in 1920, it had not dared to follow up the occupation of the factories by decisive political action.

The unexploited "constructive" strike<sup>29</sup> of the north Italian workers was the Gettysburg of the Socialist confederates; Sorel did not live to see Appomattox. "What a sad future we have before us," he wrote Croce, and he comforted himself with the thought that, being seventy-four years old, he would not see "the still worse days to come."

If the letters Benedetto Croce saw fit to print impress us as coming from a man extremely circumspect in his evaluation of Italian fascism,

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>28</sup> August 26, 1921. Croce, disturbed by Sorel's silence following this letter, asked for news, "but his physical condition did not permit him to answer me, and a year later, having been suffering for a long time, he passed away." (*Ibid.*, p. 195, note 2.)

<sup>29</sup> Mussolini vaguely endorsed the action of Italian labor: "Whether the factories belong to the workers rather than to the industrialists does not interest me. What is important is that people should work." Quoted by Stephen Raushenbush, *The March of Fascism* (New Haven, 1939), p. 173. Cf. also Megaro, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

the correspondence with Paul Delesalle,<sup>30</sup> published in liberated France, shows the intimate Sorel who speaks his mind without restraint. Here, if anywhere, it is possible to find out what Sorel really thought of Mussolini.

The first fact that impresses the reader of the *Letters to Delesalle* is the total lack of any reference to fascism before 1921. The explanation is that Sorel's interest in the years immediately following the first World War, was concentrated on Lenin's Russia; and that the French recipient of Sorel's letters was not, as Croce was, preoccupied with Italian affairs. When the topic was first mentioned, in a letter dated February 2, 1921, it was done in a single sentence: "In Italy, fascism does not seem ready to calm down; only a few days ago, Ferri was chased from his class room by the students of Rome."<sup>31</sup> This passage sounds noncommittal to the point of callousness, considering the fact that Enrico Ferri, professor of law, and leading Socialist was an old acquaintance of Sorel's. However, it is apparent that Sorel did not mean it that way, for soon afterwards, on March 19, 1921, he wrote: "Everybody in Italy expects new elections soon; I am very much afraid that they will result in a Parliament inclining the fascist way. . . ."<sup>32</sup> After having thus stated unequivocally where his sympathies lay, Sorel made one of his inspired guesses, a speculation backed up by no evidence whatsoever but one that time eventually proved to be uncannily accurate: "I am convinced that the clandestine, but real chief of the Fascists is the King—the King, who, in 1915, forced Italy into the war in order to destroy socialism."<sup>33</sup> One may refuse to follow Sorel in making Victor Emmanuel III personally responsible in both instances, but it is a fact that before the war the royal government had been greatly disturbed by the upsurge of proletarian unrest. The *settimana rossa* of 1914 was a clear warning signal of worse to come, and the Socialist party of Italy had fought intervention to the last moment, only to be stabbed in the back by their own left-winger, Benito Mussolini. It is known now that the only two forces on which the King could rely after the war, the Italian civil service and the army, did give Mussolini at least passive assistance and often active encouragement. The fascist terror squads somehow had access to army arsenals and public transportation. Sorel noted in the same letter: "As long as fascism continues to dominate the street, socialism will be weak, because the triumphant violence of the syndicates had been the essential element of its strength."

<sup>30</sup> *Letters to Delesalle*, p. 145.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



Sorel, unlike most Italian Socialists, knew the score: the Italian working class had lost the initiative in the class war, it was put on the defensive. Hence the theorist of violence as a means of keeping the two main classes of modern industrial society distinct and "in form" could have no quarrel with that fact, provided Mussolini's terror was indeed nothing else but the bourgeois answer to the proletarian provocation. As his reference to the King as the secret head of fascism reveals, Sorel at that point still unreservedly identified fascism with reaction. It is convenient to refer in this connection to a letter dated April 9, 1921, in which Sorel, speaking of the Italian peasants who, in fear of fascist terror, deserted the Socialist party en masse to put themselves under the protection of the blackshirts, came to the conclusion that "the whole of Europe is, without any doubt, fated to experience a new Thermidor. . . ." <sup>34</sup>

The intellectual attitude of Sorel, the social scientist, would have loved nothing better than to accommodate Sorel, the sympathizer with organized labor, by relegating the new phenomenon, fascism, to the camp of counter-revolution. But somehow, it would not work. The thermidorian Mussolini defied the scheme of the *Reflections*. He continued to flout all the rules of the game: by reviling monarchy, by threatening the Church, and in parliament by consistently voting with his enemies against his friends. Was it possible that he, the anti-Socialist, might yet help socialism to win its battle? Not a few Italian radicals thought so at the time. On April 18, 1921, Sorel quoted, without comment, a speculation of his Italian friend, Missiroli<sup>35</sup> to the effect that Socialists and Fascists might arrive at an understanding and unite in a republican front: "The day the call for the republic would be sounded forcefully and taken up in earnest by the Socialists, that day would see the end of all resistance." <sup>36</sup>

Sorel tried very hard to sound detached, even flippant when writing: "You cannot imagine in what a sorry situation the Italian Prolos find themselves. . . . One has to read, as I do, the Italian press every day in order to understand the magnitude of the disaster." <sup>37</sup>

But if there was any doubt left about Sorel's personal feelings, another letter dispelled it: "The situation of the Italian Socialists is really very discouraging." <sup>38</sup> For a writer of Sorel's reticence, this was as much as an avowal of utter depression. As was his habit when he wanted to say something intensely personal, Sorel borrowed somebody else's voice. It

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>35</sup> Mario Missiroli, liberal journalist and editor of the Bolognese newspaper *Resto del Carlino*. Missiroli fought a duel with Mussolini in May, 1922; later he turned fascist.

<sup>36</sup> *Letters to Delesalle*, p. 223.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218. The comment was written on April 9, 1921.

will be remembered that once he had quoted without comment Proudhon's lament of 1860 in his *Illusions du progrès*.<sup>39</sup> This time he copied a postcard in which another Italian friend, Enrico Leone<sup>40</sup> analyzed the rout of the Italian left, concluding his report by saying:

"I did not care to register with the Socialist party which has started its crusade against the Communists in order to gain absolution from the Fascists for its past sins. What cowards! But the Communists, with their ideas about a strong state and dictatorship, are even more remote from us than the others. It is the will of destiny that a syndicalist keep aloof from all parties and limit himself to cultural tasks."<sup>41</sup>

Between fascism and communism, the syndicalist *Candide* had no choice but to turn his back on it all and to "cultivate his garden" in the expectancy of better times. Occasionally he still hoped against hope: so great was Sorel's distaste for fascism that he was ready to forget, for the time being, his older dislike of the ruling bourgeoisie and its liberal state; he came out for a defensive alliance between the Socialists and the government. On July 13, 1921, he wrote about the Socialists: "They know by now they are no longer a match for their enemies. The Italian press thinks the Socialists have become ripe for the government. . . ." And Sorel told Delesalle something he did not tell Benedetto Croce:<sup>42</sup> that he himself had joined his voice to the chorus of Italian newspapers advocating that the Socialist party enter into an anti-fascist government coalition: "A while ago I wrote in the *Carlino* that the Socialist peasants could very well force their leaders to come to an understanding with the government, so as to be able to defend the proletarian institutions against *les fascistes*."<sup>43</sup>

The enormity of this concession will be clear to anyone who knows that a political deal with the bourgeoisie had been Sorel's "great tabu" ever since he had freed himself from the decisive experience of his youth, the popular-front "illusions" of the Dreyfus revolution.<sup>44</sup>

Now he was willing to sacrifice his dearest principle in order to salvage the institutions of the Italian working class threatened with annihilation by fascist incendiarism.

<sup>39</sup> Georges Sorel, *Illusions du progrès* (3d ed.; Paris, 1922, pp. 378-379), where Sorel cited Proudhon's lament of 1860: "All traditions are used up, all beliefs abolished. . . . We shall not see the new age; we shall fight our battle in deepest night. . . ."

<sup>40</sup> Enrico Leone, co-founder, in 1905, of the periodical *Il Divenire Sociale*, which became Sorel's principal Italian mouthpiece.

<sup>41</sup> *Letters to Delesalle*, p. 222.

<sup>42</sup> Sorel's last letter to Croce was written six weeks later. ("Letters to Croce," *La Critica*, Vol. XXVIII, p. 195.)

<sup>43</sup> *Letters to Delesalle*, p. 236.

<sup>44</sup> This great event in the history of the Third Republic is dealt with by Sorel in his booklet, *La Révolution Dreyfusienne* (Paris, 1909).

The correspondence ends on this note, except for one more testimonial Sorel passed on to his friend Delesalle. It comes from Vilfredo Pareto who informed him of a fascist raid on the Bolognese newspaper to which Sorel had contributed many articles: "For reasons of local politics the Fascists became enraged against the *Carlino*, they wanted to kill Missiroli; nothing less would do! Missiroli had to resign as editor precipitously. . . . The *Carlino*, in order to avoid similar incidents, was forced to adopt a nationalist line. . . ." <sup>45</sup>

Sorel sent no more articles to the *Resto del Carlino*. If he had flirted once with a highly theoretical nationalist movement in France, the brutal reality of fascism stunned him into silence. He would not write for Mussolini's gagged press. But whatever his feelings as a syndicalist and "disinterested servant of the proletariat," the historian Sorel remained fascinated with the European event that was fascism. As a partisan of the defeated working class, he could not help being resentful and dejected; still, the old engineer and student of the industrial revolution was able to do Mussolini justice. The Duce, harsh taskmaster of his backward, pre-industrial Italians, attained stature in the eyes of the moralist who believed that the machine age, correctly understood, meant more work and not less, an ever greater effort toward a new heroism that was no more that of the battlefield but of the workshop. Seen in this light, the man who tried to bring Italians "up to date" assumed his place by the side of that other founder of a modern industrial society, Lenin. It is in his conversations with Jean Variot <sup>46</sup> that Sorel gave Mussolini, the builder, the recognition he had to withhold from the demagogue and destroyer of free institutions.

His interlocutor had asked him "the" question: Are Lenin and Mussolini disciples of Georges Sorel? The old man was obviously pleased with the question, and his answer was a double, though delighted disclaimer. Did Lenin have to be a reader of Sorel in order to become Lenin? "Frankly, I don't believe it," <sup>47</sup> was Sorel's reply. As to Mussolini, Sorel is reported to have said:

my works have been more read in Italy than in France. . . . It is possible, it is even probable that Benito Mussolini has read me. But, attention! Mussolini is a man no less extraordinary than Lenin. He, too, is a political genius, of a greater reach than all the statesmen of the day, with the only exception of Lenin. . . . He is not a Socialist *à la sauce bourgeoise*; he has never believed in parliamentary socialism; he has an amazing insight into the nature of the Italian masses, and he has invented something not to be found in my books: the union of the national and the social—something I have studied without ever developing the idea. This national-social approach, so characteristic of his method, is Mussolini's exclusive property, and I could not possibly have inspired it, either directly or indirectly. <sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Letters to Delesalle*, p. 237.

<sup>46</sup> *Propos de Georges Sorel*, pp. 53-57, 66-86 passim. The time is March, 1921, and the mood is oddly at variance with the letters so fearful of fascist victory which Sorel wrote in that same month to Benedetto Croce.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

A moment later, Sorel reconsidered and conceded the possibility that Mussolini might have taken a leaf from the Sorelian theory of violence after all, "violence understood as a mere means to impose certain ends," Sorel said, adding hastily: "But again, all this was in the air. . . ." <sup>49</sup>

Sorel was clearly reluctant to claim his share of Mussolini's work, and he minimized his own influence by confining it to fascist tactics, while denying all responsibility for Mussolini's central concept. But even the merely partial acknowledgment forced Sorel into giving to his original theory of violence a peculiar twist which all but canceled the precise meaning it had possessed in his *Reflections*. Violence became again the commonplace term it had been before Sorel used it to distinguish the struggle of the labor class that has to rely on its own strength, from bourgeois force that employs the power of the state to impose its class domination. Now it appeared that violence and force had become identical again. Sorel tried in vain to salvage part of his theoretical property by saying: "Violence is, to me, an intellectual doctrine"; when he went on to explain it as "the will of a powerful intellect who knows what he wants." <sup>50</sup> Sorel, it would seem, explained away the unique contribution to modern political theory associated with his name.

Why did he do that? It must have been that Sorel could no longer convince himself that fascism was identical with thermidorian reaction. As long as he lived, the fascist movement retained its militancy against both proletarian socialism and bourgeois liberalism. It was to retain this ambivalence even afterwards. To be sure, the middle and upper classes, putting themselves wholeheartedly under fascist protection, lost less in the process than did the Italian masses, but the price that had to be paid for the preservation of economic privilege was high. The regime abolished the economic as well as the political autonomy of the capitalist class, and had Mussolini's Social Republic of the last two years after 1943 survived, it might have ended by enslaving the bourgeoisie no less than the workers.<sup>51</sup> In short, fascism, while preserving the framework of capitalism and tolerating the entrepreneurs and financiers as individuals, was destroying their power as a class. The new regime had to do so in pursuance of its own ends: only by "terminating" the class struggle could the Fascists emerge as the parasitical ruling class which defied both liberal and socialist opposition and interpretation.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>51</sup> In the last two years of his life, Mussolini, in order to regain the allegiance of the north Italian masses, reverted to the slogans of his syndicalist youth. The First National Assembly of the Republican Fascist Party, which met at Verona on November 14, 1943, adopted a Program Manifesto which introduced, among other "attractions," the so-called *consigli di gestione*—management production committees—in which organized labor was to play a major role. For details see Muriel Grindrod, *The New Italy* (London and New York, 1947). Appendix I, pp. 95 ff., gives the text of the neo-fascist Program Manifesto.

It is this nationalist notion of social unity that should have aroused the suspicion of Sorel, the revolutionary, but it was the social revolutionary, or pseudo-revolutionary character of Mussolini's nationalism that attracted him. The abjuration of Sorel's past belief becomes fully intelligible only in the light of the new factor, emerging in Europe after the first World War almost simultaneously in two places as far distant from each other as Russia and Italy: Sorel blunted his concept of class violence to the point of pointlessness so as to include the specific national element which he was one of the very first to discern in both fascism and bolshevism. He felt no qualms in doing so because he was persuaded that Lenin as well as Mussolini, although both retained essential characteristics of the past, still signaled an advance beyond the European *status quo*. If these leaders did not destroy the state once and for all, they did at any rate destroy the democratic state, synonymous, to Sorel, with decadence.

Lenin and Mussolini—these two names occur in Sorel's last pronouncements almost interchangeably, and while he is more eloquent about the Russian ruler, he never fails to mention Mussolini in the same breath. As psychologists they rank, in his opinion, even above a Napoleon who gave plumed hats to his generals and tried to model a new aristocracy after the old one. In contrast to him, "Lenin and Mussolini, so different from one another in their social concepts, meet squarely in being both almost to perfection great conductors of the people, which they do not use but serve." Sorel was "fully convinced that Mussolini is no less disinterested than is Lenin."<sup>52</sup>

One month after he made this exuberant statement, Georges Sorel died. Two months later, as Sorel had expected, Benito Mussolini, as Prime Minister of His Majesty, the King, made himself master of Italy. Lenin's creation proved to be more durable; possibly, Sorel would have reconsidered his evaluation of Lenin's Italian counterpart had he foreseen Il Duce's sorry end.

Mindful of his own definition of class reconciliation as the *idée maitresse* of democracy—exactly the idea which he considered as a sign of decadence—Sorel today would probably term fascism a perverted form of mass democracy. Its elite, with all its outward insistence on the Sorelian virtues of thrift, austerity and heroism, would appear to be a group of Catilinarian characters rallying around a master demagogue who, in the blackshirt of a twentieth century "little corporal" was imposing on his nation a plebiscitary sham of democracy, while adapting the distributive welfare state of our time to the standards of Italian poverty. Nothing was so distasteful to Sorel as the equalitarianism of the dole, and he never

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<sup>52</sup> *Propos de Georges Sorel*, p. 86.

tired of distinguishing the revolution of the modern industrial proletariat from the eternal mass rebellion of the poor. If he hated democracy because it tended, in his view, to corrupt the worker by lifting him up to the level of bourgeois sloth, he should have hated even more a regime that leveled all distinctions downward, transforming the classes into a great mob.

Mussolini, he might have decided, did start out well, only to end as another imitation of Napoleon,<sup>53</sup> and his downfall very likely would have given satisfaction to the heart of the old "servant of the people" who recognized power when he saw it and who, on occasion, fell for its pretenders when they promised to use power as a lever to achieve the ends of Georges Sorel.

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<sup>53</sup> In the opinion of Sorel's disciple, Edouard Berth, who did not share his master's low opinion of Bonaparte, the Napoleon of our time is Lenin. "Enough of Mussolini's masquerade!" Berth exclaimed in his work, *Du 'Capital' aux 'Reflexions sur la Violence'* (Paris, 1932, p. 246), and in an earlier book he dismissed Mussolini with the contemptuous words: "If Latin civilization cannot find another incarnation than this adventurer and bad comedian, then it is very sick indeed." (*Guerre des Etats ou Guerre des Classes*, Paris, 1924, p. 11.)

Robert Louzon expressed himself in a similar vein: "That Mussolini's pretension to a spiritual relationship with Sorel could be taken seriously is an indication of how much we are living in the era of the Great Lie, the lie which is always one of the aspects of decadence." (*Letters to Delesalle*, Introduction p. 63.)