3 Georges Sorel and the Nouvelle Ecole

In 1899, after a direct appeal on his behalf by Jean Jaurès to the minister of commerce Alexandre Millerand, an impoverished Fernand Pelloutier took up temporary employment at the Office du Travail, his task to complete a statistical enquiry on trade unions in France. The unlikely intermediary between Pelloutier and these two representatives of reformist socialism was Georges Sorel.

Sorel first became acquainted with Pelloutier through L'Ouvrier des deux mondes for which he produced three substantial articles and subsequently he wrote the preface for Pelloutier's Histoire des bourses du travail. Sorel was unambiguous in his assessment of Pelloutier's achievements. This 'great servant of the people' had spurned the role of socialist theoretician and intellectual in order 'to convince the workers that they would easily find amongst themselves men capable of directing their own institutions'. In his efforts to secure that end Pelloutier had created, in the bourses du travail, a set of institutions that embodied 'a conception of socialist life'.

Sorel's own route to syndicalism was less direct than that taken by Pelloutier. Born in 1847 of middle-class parents and educated in Paris, first at the Collège Rollin and then at the prestigious Ecole Polytechnique, Sorel spent the greater part of his working life employed as an engineer in the Ministère des Ponts et des Chaussées. He remained throughout his entire life outwardly conventional, the epitome of bourgeois respectability and sobriety. The bookshops of Charles Péguy and Paul Delesalle, rather than a trade union meeting, were his chosen field of action. Yet it was in that environment — as Boris Souvarine recently testified — that Sorel exercised enormous influence, moulding the thoughts of a new generation of Parisian Left Bank inhabitants and fostering — primarily in the forms of Hubert Lagardelle and Edouard Berth — what he himself was to describe as the 'nouvelle école' of socialism. The 'nouvelle école', Sorel wrote, was 'Marxist, syndicalist and revolutionary' and its function was to purge traditional Marxism of all that was not specifically Marxist in order to preserve the 'heart' of the doctrine: the notion of class struggle. Marxism was no longer to be seen as a 'philosophie de tête' but as a 'philosophie de bras' and its principal physical manifestation, as the instrument of social war, was to be the syndicat.

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The first products of Sorel's prodigious intellectual energy began to appear in 1886, whilst Sorel was stationed in the southern town of Perpignan. Until his death in 1922 there followed a regular stream of books, articles and book reviews encompassing the principal political, philosophical, religious and scientific issues of the day. Amongst his earliest writings those that touched upon politics display no interest in socialism but they do, nevertheless, betray the sentiments of an outsider, disenchanted with the official Parisian culture and mores of the Third Republic. *Le Procès de Socrate*, published in 1889, directed its fire against the intellectual and political élite of French society, castigating its vulgarity and opportunism and its lack of moral seriousness. Beneath lay Sorel's sense of the moral decay of contemporary France, rooted in his acceptance of the traditional values of rural, Catholic France and articulated by constant reference to Proudhon, not as anarchist but as the defender of an austere moral code.

Sorel first turned his attention to socialism in general and Marxism in particular in 1892, the year of his retirement from government service and his move to Paris. He initially saw Marxism as a science, a doctrine capable of providing an objective understanding of both society and economic activity and hence of putting an end to the moral and philosophical uncertainties of his day. Sorel quickly distanced himself, however, from the 'orthodox' interpretation of Marxism as a science capable of providing predictive knowledge of future societal development and from 1896 onwards began a fundamental re-interpretation of Marxism that was to lead eventually to his espousal of syndicalism.

In his re-reading of Marx, Sorel sought to make a return to the 'spirit' of the original texts. Accordingly he denied the scientific validity of the so-called laws of capitalist development (deployed by Marxists to justify their belief in the imminent demise of capitalism) and endeavoured to disencumber Marxism of the accretions associated with Engels, most notably the dialectic. Having thus deprived the Marxist movement of the certitude of its ultimate victory Sorel contended that Marxism should be properly seen as an ethical doctrine. The vision of the 'catastrophic' collapse of capitalism derived from the 'orthodox' postulates of the immiserisation of labour and the increasing ferocity of capitalist crises was replaced by that of a moral struggle in which an ethically vigorous working class would overturn the values of bourgeois society. Socialism, Sorel wrote, 'stands before the bourgeois world as an irreconcilable adversary threatening it with moral catastrophe'.

For Marx, Sorel asserted, the class struggle was not simply a clash of material interests. It was a conflict about rights, about principles of social and economic organisation. The workers sought not only their economic emancipation but also the abolition of class distinctions and the achieve-