Georges Sorel, Émile Durkheim, and the Social Foundations of *la morale*

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Georges Sorel (1847–1922), the theoretician of intransigent revolutionary syndicalism, was among the most creative opponents of the Third Republic. Historian Martin Jay has called Sorel's work "a clarion call for revolutionary violence."\(^1\) Certainly he remains associated with anti-liberal radicalism and political violence. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) seems to have stood at entirely the opposite end of the political and intellectual spectrum. He was called, pejoratively, the "high priest" of the Third Republic and was perhaps its most subtle and rigorous ideologue. While Sorel has remained a productively marginal figure, Durkheim has always been acknowledged as a founder of modern sociology, together with Karl Marx and Max Weber.\(^2\)


\(^2\) Although the introduction to the 2005 *Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* emphasizes the contradictory nature of Durkheim's legacy. I have also made use of Lukes' still classic biographical treatment (see also the more recent one by Fournier) and the interpretive work of sociologist Anne Rawls.
The argument of this essay is that despite the clear political antagonism between the two, ideas essential to the work of Sorel and of Durkheim have a great deal in common, particularly concerning the generation of *la morale* from social practice. Indeed, the political and philosophical antagonisms between them take on full significance only against the backdrop of these fundamental agreements. In what follows, I sketch out concrete connections that did exist between the two—for the most part Sorel's writing on Durkheim—and then draw connections between some of the major concepts associated with each, in particular between Sorel's myth and Durkheim's collective effervescence.

This essay contributes to a reevaluation of the place of Georges Sorel's work in the intellectual history of the Third Republic. The trajectory of Sorel's thought, the problems with which he wrestled, do not constitute external criticisms of the philosophical underpinnings of the Third Republic. Rather, they are internal to the traditions on which the ideologues of the Republic built. This claim is both empirical and analytic. This suggests that Republican philosophies such as *solidarisme* were not so instrumentalist or inflexible as they have sometimes appeared. The explicitly Republican philosophy of the Third Republic was not politically univocal, but rather contained within itself the possibility of a genuine radicalism.

This essay builds on the body of Sorel scholarship that has solidified over the past two decades, but also takes inspiration from work on the period more generally. The resurgence of scholarship on *solidarisme* in recent years has demonstrated the wealth and significance of this body of thought. Jacques Donzelot's 1984 essay on the invention of the social has been

particularly productive as an analysis of Republican social theory, and his positioning of Sorel as a symptom of the attempt to repress politics is implicitly the target of friendly criticism here. No one, perhaps, has done more than Pierre Rosanvallon to integrate the later nineteenth century into the conceptual history of French politics. Rosanvallon also positions Sorel as a pathological deviation from the order of institutionalized representation that he argues emerged at this moment.\(^3\) Both Donzelot and Rosanvallon put Sorel beyond the pale of the French Republican praxis that their histories construct; yet, as I argue here, to do so covers over the ambiguities and complexities of Republicanism in this period.

One such complexity is the mere existence of Sorel's long review article on Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method*. Sorel wrote the piece in late 1894, and it appeared at the front of the very first issue of a new journal of theoretical Marxism, *Le Devenir Social*.\(^4\) Sorel calls Durkheim "an adversary of the first order" for socialism, which he means as a compliment.\(^5\) He ends the essay by suggesting that Durkheim's logic might bring him one day into the socialist fold. If that were to happen, Sorel writes, "I would be the first to claim him as my master. No scholar is as well prepared as he to bring the theories of Karl Marx into higher education; he is the only French sociologist

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\(^4\) *Le Devenir Social* is sometimes referred to as the first journal of theoretical Marxism in France. George Diamandy, a medical student in Paris from Moldavia, seems to have been the motivating force behind the journal. See the account in Jean Maitron, *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris: Éditions ouvrières, 1964). For some context, see Madeleine Rebérioux's essay in *Esthétique et Marxisme* (Paris: UGE–10/18, 1974).

\(^5\) All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own. Georges Sorel, "Les théories de M. Durkheim," *Le Devenir Social* 1, no. 1 (1895): 2.
with a sufficient philosophical preparation and . . . critical spirit.”

Although Sorel quibbles about various points with Durkheim's exposition of social science methodology, he has only one fundamental objection to it. He admires Durkheim's rigor in constructing "social facts" as objects of scientific knowledge, in particular his insistence on reducing causation to a problem of category. (Sorel approves of this and identifies it with Aristotle.) In order to explain and justify these social facts, however, and despite explicit claims that he avoids it, Sorel argues that Durkheim's method requires that one posit the existence of a real thing called society. For Sorel, this way of thinking about categories introduces an essence where previously there were only relations: "Clearly, this doctrine is borrowed from an old conception of metaphysics." We would perhaps today rephrase Sorel's objection thus: Durkheim has naturalized categories, rather than investigating their construction. Sorel agrees with Durkheim that the milieu is a crucial object of study, but he rejects the basic Durkheimian position that social phenomena are facts. The milieu is, for Sorel, not an objectively existing field susceptible at least in theory of full definition, but rather only graspable in relation to a given object at a given moment. It has no essence and is not knowable in itself.

Other disagreements flow from the very different positions Sorel and Durkheim occupied in the intellectual field. Durkheim was an eminently practical sociologist. His work is fundamentally concerned with moral education and his position

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7 Georges Sorel, "Les théories de M. Durkheim," *Le Devenir Social* 1, no. 1, 14. Sorel was not peculiar in his insistence that modern science dealt with relations rather than essences. Here is Henri Poincaré, from the introduction to his 1902 *Science and Hypothesis*: "[T]he aim of science is not things themselves, as the dogmatists in their simplicity imagine, but the relations between things; outside those relations there is no reality knowable." Henri Poincaré, *Science and Hypothesis* (London: Walter Scott, 1905), xxiv.
is—according to Sorel—that of the ruling class. This position authorizes his use of the distinction between normal and pathological social phenomena: normal is whatever allows the ruling class to continue its business. The moral engagement of the scientist, for Durkheim, comes from the study of moral phenomena—the phenomena of morality—in the world. For Sorel, on the other hand, science produces morality because it is the encounter of the free will of the individual with the necessities of unyielding reality. It is, in fact, the production of necessity through free will, and therefore a transparently moral activity. An asceticism grows up out of the practice of experimental discipline. Another way of putting this is that for Durkheim, the subject position from which the scientist speaks is always above the plane of social reality and conflict, while for Sorel it is always within social conflict.

Although Durkheim's position as an arch-universitaire and Sorel's as an autodidact must be kept in mind, their distance should also not be overstated. If Sorel always maintained his rhetorical opposition to the University, he nonetheless commonly attended thesis defenses at the Sorbonne. Sorel's primary site of intellectual sociability was the bookstore/publishing house—most famously that of Charles Péguy, but he also frequented Paul Delesalle's shop. He was nonetheless involved as an administrator in such bourgeois institutions as the École des Hautes Études Sociales, and spent a great deal of time at the

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"ante-chamber of the Chamber," the Musée Social.\textsuperscript{10} Certainly Durkheim's nephew and collaborator Marcel Mauss, much more interested in practical socialism than his uncle, knew about Sorel. The bulk of Sorel's publications were in specifically socialist journals, but he also published in the \textit{Revue Philosophique} and the \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale}, the two major journals of professional philosophy at the time, both also venues for Durkheim. Although Sorel was never involved with Durkheim's \textit{Année Sociologique}, he did publish in competing sociology journals of which Durkheim would have been aware, such as the \textit{Revue Internationale de Sociologie} and, in Italy, the \textit{Rivista Italiana di Sociologia}. So, while the institutional distance between Sorel and Durkheim is crucial to understanding their work, the degree to which their intellectual worlds overlapped is equally so. Sorel had substantial connections to mainstream intellectual institutions, several of which would have implied sharing a space of intellectual sociability with Durkheim.

Durkheim appears in one of Sorel's most enduringly influential essays, "L'avenir socialiste des syndicats," first published at the very beginning of 1898 in Augustin Hamon's ecumenically anarchist \textit{Humanité Nouvelle}. Sorel gives a central place in this essay to Durkheim's argument that moral ideas are generated and supported through professional life. "L'avenir" is a classic statement of workerist syndicalism. It was reprinted several times in different forms during Sorel's life. One prominent obituary even, perhaps as an act of kindness, described the essay as his most influential one.\textsuperscript{11} The argument is clear enough: the \textit{syndicat} is the kernel of the collectivist society


\textsuperscript{11} "Nécrologie: Georges Sorel (1847–1922)," \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale} 29 (Supplement) (1922).
of the future. Its task is to develop itself according to its own immanent principles, without the guidance of party leaders or intellectuals of any kind. Sorel writes, "To summarize . . . in a formula, I would say that the whole future of socialism is in the autonomous development of the worker syndicats." Sorel held that although it was impossible to predict the future, in the sense implied by the fatal necessity of catastrophic revolution put forward by the vulgar Marxists, it was both possible and necessary to evaluate the preparedness of the proletariat for the revolution.

Revolution had a very specific meaning for Sorel. It was neither the seizing of state power (against the orthodoxy of the German Social Democrats) nor the destruction of state power (and here he parts ways with the anarchists), but rather the replacement of one juridical and moral order with another. Sorel understood Revolution as, in an oft-repeated formula, the struggle for the law. Preparedness must therefore be evaluated in terms of moral and juridical development. The division between intellectual and physical labor is the cornerstone of the bourgeois-capitalist social and juridical order because it allows administrators and other intellectuals to extract greater compensation for their labor as qualitatively distinct from that of the other workers. The syndicats are a form of organization based concretely on the process of production, a process in which it is impossible to separate labor of the mind from that of the muscle. The major juridical characteristic of the syndicats is their rejection of this division, and they are prepared for revolution to the degree that they function without it. The historical task of the syndicats, as Sorel sees it, is to develop

12 Emphasis in original. Georges Sorel, L'avenir socialiste des syndicats (Paris: Librarie G. Jacques, 1901), 60. This is to be contrasted with Sorel's earlier view of syndicats, in which they were not capable of such autonomy: "[A]t bottom, what is a syndicat if not an association in which the law is required to support the principle of collectivism?" Georges Sorel, "Geblesco—La propriété rurale à Rome, en France, en Roumanie," Le Devenir Social 1, no. 4 (1895): 496. It is important to bear in mind that the syndicats of which Sorel later speaks are open-shop, voluntary organizations.
themselves as institutions and on this basis becoming, in effect, a society within a society, a state—though differently—within a state.

Sorel turned to Durkheim's 1897 monograph *Suicide* in order to think about the all-important process of moral development. According to Sorel, Durkheim explained in this work that neither lecturing on morality, nor teaching it in school, nor even preaching it from the pulpit, would call it into existence. All of these methods were not only ineffectual, but also assumed incorrectly that we already know the nature of the morals demanded by the given society. This was precisely Sorel's purpose. After all, what the syndicats needed was a new morality. Sorel takes Durkheim's argument to be that "the point is not to know what is the best morality, but only to determine if there exists a mechanism capable of guaranteeing the development of morals [la morale]"—and Durkheim himself finds this mechanism in "professional groupings."13 Sorel's reading here is astute. Indeed, Durkheim took a strong line on the necessity of professional groups for moral life, saying in one of his lectures, "It is not for economic reasons that the corporative regime seems to me indispensable, but for moral ones. It alone allows the moralization of economic life."14 Put differently, moral ideals not only get their force from being embedded in structures of practical action, but are immanent to these structures. Although Durkheim's practical proposals are too centralized for Sorel (corporatist rather than federalist), at the core of Durkheim's thought Sorel sees a concept of morality (the ideal) developing out of concrete practice (the material).

It is wrong to see here simply either a Durkheimian influence on Sorel (in which Marcel Mauss believed) or a

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13 Sorel, *L'avenir socialiste des syndicats*, 54. As Sorel wrote in July 1898, in an oblique reference to the Dreyfus affair, "[T]he only way we have to cultivate a sentiment is to indulge in it each time the occasion presents itself." Georges Sorel, preface to *Formes et essence du socialisme* by Saverio Merlino (Paris: Giard et Brière, 1898), xv.

Sorelian influence on Durkheim (although this too has also been suggested).\(^{15}\) Although Sorel clearly read the early Durkheim avidly, it is because he was surprised to find in the bourgeois university something like an ally for positions he already held. In the wake of the Dreyfus affair, Durkheim radicalized his commitment to the secular Republic and Sorel turned from a broadly liberal socialism to Revolutionary Syndicalism. The political gulf between them became unbridgeable, to the point that one might well see Reflections on Violence as anti-Durkheim. Although Durkheim probably knew something about Sorel, there is no material evidence of an influence in this direction.\(^{16}\) Indeed, the search for influences is beside the point here. Sorel and Durkheim tried to solve the same methodological and philosophical problems with similar resources and results. The affinities between their bodies of work, therefore, have consequences for the historical meaning of the philosophical tradition on which they drew as well as for the context that gave them similar problems to solve.

In order to investigate these consequences on the basis of Sorel's sustained engagement with Durkheim, it is legitimate to compare texts written by Sorel and Durkheim after the political situation had clearly placed them at odds with one another. The last part of this essay presents resonances between Sorel's concept of myth, elaborated in Reflections on Violence (1908), and Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence, the meaning of which he explained most fully in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912).\(^{17}\) Reflections is the book that made Sorel

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\(^{15}\) On Mauss's views, see Marcel Mauss, "Socialisme et Bolchévisme," Le Monde Slave 2, no. 2 (1925); "A Sociological Assessment of Bolshevism (1924–1925)," Economy and Society 13, no. 3 (1984): 331-74. Larry Portis suggests that Durkheim, and also Bergson, owed something to Sorel. See his contribution to Julliard and Sand, eds., Georges Sorel en son temps.

\(^{16}\) Only one of Sorel's books was reviewed in Durkheim's Année Sociologique: François Simiand, "Sorel, Introduction à l'économie moderne," L'année Sociologique 8 (1905).

\(^{17}\) Reflections on Violence first appeared in book form in 1908, but Sorel had begun publishing in Italy texts on violence that would go into the book as early as October 1905.
famous as a theorist of revolutionary syndicalism, and it is still today his most read work, containing his now classic pronouncements on myth and violence. *The Elementary Forms*, a monumental exercise in armchair anthropological theorization and Durkheim's last completed project before his death at a relatively young age, has recently come to be recognized by some as his most significant and productive book.

One of Durkheim's basic arguments in *The Elementary Forms* is that the truth of religion is best sought in the rituals through which it is enacted. Ritual, for Durkheim, is the physical substrate of collective effervescence, its renewal and re-inscription within the collective. The continual reactivation of moments of collective effervescence by ritual practice is the mechanism through which social forces are exerted on the individual. Durkheim describes the relation thus: "The moral effectiveness of the ritual, which is real, brought belief in its physical effectiveness, which is imaginary."18 To make this a little more concrete, we can take one of Durkheim's examples: although a rain dance can have no literal effect on the weather, it has a real effect on those who perform it through the activation of moral forces latent in the fact of a social gathering.19 It helps to hold society together. This moral effect—collective effervescence—can take many forms depending on the kind of collective activity—ritual—that is its substrate.

Sorelian myth is a less precise concept, but can be defined as an ideation from the practical material existence as an aggregation of individuals as a collective. This ideation is experienced by the individual as an exterior, or historical, force. Sorel wrote, "myths . . . are not descriptions of things but expressions of the will to act."20 Sorel had concluded by the end of the Revisionist crisis that the Marxist idea of the catastrophic revolution was a myth, although one appropriate for intellectuals.

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19 Ibid., 540.
rather than workers. The Marxist catastrophic revolution cannot be disproved by political economy because its main virtue is not in its literal correspondence to reality or its predictive accuracy. Sorel's insistence that when analyzing myths, "We should be especially careful not to make any comparison between the outcomes and the pictures people had formed for themselves before the action," has been taken as evidence of anti-rationalism. Sorel's point is the same as Durkheim's. The historian should not investigate and evaluate a myth as one might do with, say, Ferdinand de Lesseps's plan to build a canal in Panama. In the latter case, success or failure depends on the similarity between intention and result. The investigator can legitimately ask whether the means were adequate to the goal and can make inferences about the plausibility of similar plans. Such literal criteria and inferences make no sense in reference to myth. The historian can, however, track the effect of moral uplift and strengthening of the collective that is associated with the successful myth.

Reflections takes as its subject the revolutionary syndicalist myth of the general strike. In the myth of the general strike, although each participant truly believes in the strike, the effect is not and probably cannot be an actual general strike and the overthrow of capital. Each time a syndicat, after exercising the moral self-discipline required of a strike, finally comes to blows with the forces of order, its members cannot but conceive of this conflict as a climactic battle—at stake is their very moral personhood. The particular material conditions of the industrial workshop, Sorel argues, generate the idea of work-stoppage, complete breakdown, overthrow, and replacement of the existing system, as the solidarity demanded by a successful strike implies a certain moral practice. Just as, in Durkheim's example of the rain dance, the collective practice has a literal goal to which it is not adequate, the ritual or practice nonetheless has the real effect

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21 For the first explicit formulations of this, see the conclusion to Georges Sorel, Introduction à l’économie moderne (Paris: Jacques, 1903).
22 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections on Violence, 20.
of shaping the subjectivity of the individuals who make up the collective around a moral ideal.

In his empirical descriptions of the general strike and other myths, Sorel lays stress on practice, emotion, and the sentiment of catastrophe. He writes:

> Every conflict which gives rise to violence thus becomes a vanguard fight, and no one can foresee what will come out of such skirmishes; the great battle never materializes, but each time that they come to blows the strikers hope that it is the beginning of the great *Napoleonic battle* . . . in this way the practice of strikes engenders the notion of the catastrophic revolution.²³

Compare that passage with the following:

> The great ideals on which civilization rests have, across the ages, been constituted in moments of effervescence . . . [at these moments], the ideal tends to become one with the real. This is why men have the impression that the day is near when it [the ideal] will become reality itself and the kingdom of God will be realized on earth.²⁴

This is Durkheim from a lecture in 1911 in which he describes the contemporary and historical relevance of moments of collective representation in a way not possible in the anthropological and ethnographic frame of *The Elementary Forms*. Durkheim probably has in mind here the moral fervor associated with parties on both sides of the Dreyfus affair.²⁵ Yet his indifference to the rationality of the ideal, his emphasis on the apocalyptic imagination, and the necessity of collective

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action to generate these ideals—all this sounds very much like Sorel.

Durkheim and Sorel agree that morality—as a historically locatable force acting on the consciousness of the individual—is generated through collective practice. La morale is available for rational investigation, but cannot be reduced to the application of a priori principles to existing situations. Morality is real and imperative, but is also historically and socially relative. Durkheim and Sorel, each employing his own vocabulary and set of references, nonetheless express deeply similar ideas about how ideals are born from material practices and then become forces acting on individuals within these practices. A fuller treatment of Sorel and Durkheim could usefully compare their respective accounts of the generation of rationality itself through collective practice, as well as the place each gives to affect in collectivity. Some dissimilarities are important. For instance, a Durkheimian effervescence can be created intentionally, while a myth by definition cannot be. This disagreement makes sense given the institutional positions from which each wrote. Durkheim was interested in reproduction, Sorel in production. For similar reasons, Durkheim focused on logic, and Sorel on technology—still, the arguments work in the same way.

The philosophical resources and questions held in common by Sorel and Durkheim suggest some conclusions first about repositioning these two figures, and then about their broader context. Placing Sorel in terms of mid-to-late nineteenth-century philosophical defenses of Republican governance is a major departure from scholarship on Sorel as it has been consolidated over the past three decades. That Sorel was not eccentric to Third Republican social thought means we should look again at the political diagnoses he made of the Republic. For instance, his analysis of the place of the Catholic Church within the anti-

26 However, Schmaus is skeptical of the idea that Durkheim possesses an account of the social generation of rationality. See Warren Schmaus, *Rethinking Durkheim and His Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
clerical Republican State—in the Empire—is in retrospect quite perceptive. In contrast, resonances with Sorel have the effect of focusing our attention on what Durkheim failed to question in his own work. One crucial unquestioned foundation of Durkheim's thought was the nation-state as a unit. Indeed, in a sense his whole career was dedicated to justifying rather than criticizing it.\(^\text{27}\) This implicit frame of his social theorization is perhaps the most important and telling difference between him and Sorel. Sorel's use of what we might otherwise call Durkheimian ideas suggests the radical potential inherent in Durkheim's thought, but also in self-consciously republican philosophy more generally as it evolved in the later nineteenth century.\(^\text{28}\)

The sources of these ideas about the relation of ideal to material, about the origins of moral valuations and even of reason in collective practical action, need to be sought in nineteenth-century French philosophy, an understudied and undervalued field. We should look back, for instance, to precursors such as Alfred Fouillée, a major reference point in the late nineteenth century and unjustly neglected today. If, as has been argued recently, much of the rich twentieth-century tradition of cultural theory in France is in fact indebted to Durkheim, then his affinities with Sorel suggest that the early Third Republic more broadly deserves scrutiny as foundational for twentieth-century theoretical and philosophical movements that explicitly disavowed it as sterile and bankrupt.\(^\text{29}\)

\(^{27}\) This is in sharp distinction to certain Marxist critics of Durkheimian sociology, who argue that Durkheim's great blindness was to class. See especially, André Tosel, "L'impensé de la sociologie française, ou Labriola lu par Durkheim," *La Pensée* 243 (1985): 98–113.

\(^{28}\) Steven Vincent's argument that Sorel should be seen as belonging to the classical republican tradition is a productive one. The present essay is in part an attempt to deepen and further contextualize it. See K. Steven Vincent, "Interpreting Georges Sorel: Defender of Virtue or Apostle of Violence," *History of European Ideas* 12, no. 2 (1990): 239–257; and "Citizenship, Patriotism, Tradition, and Antipolitics in the Thought of Georges Sorel," *The European Legacy* 3, no. 5 (1998): 7–16.

\(^{29}\) See Charles C. Lemert, *Durkheim's Ghosts: Cultural Logics and Social Things* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). This way of
If Sorel was of the Third Republic, rather than simply against it, then we need to reconsider the nature of the intellectual foundations of the Third Republic. From the perspective of the long history of French Republicanism, the early Third Republic is often regarded as the moment in which democracy was first successfully managed or contained. For Jacques Donzelot, this occlusion of politics is negative and generates pathological reaction; for Pierre Rosanvallon writing in the tradition of François Furet, it is the normalization of politics, a healthy experimentation with forms of representation. Donzelot and Rosanvallon agree in seeing Sorel as a symptom or aberration. The above discussion of Sorel's commonalities with Durkheim, the great theorist of this order, troubles this reading of Sorel. It suggests that the Third Republic, far from being the incubator of normal politics, however valued, was at its intellectual core a radical and potentially revolutionary project.

understanding Durkheim, and the connections I have drawn here to Sorel, have the effect of making particularly sharp the critique of Durkheim undertaken in Judith Surkis, Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).