

Chapter 1

Background: Marxist Theories of Revolution

Orthodoxy, Bernstein, and Sorel

The years from 1895 to 1915 did not go well for marxist revolutionary theory. Insofar as the orthodox version of marxism formulated and codified chiefly by Engels and Kautsky during the 1880s sought to predict determinate historical developments of capitalism and the revolutionary struggle against it, the record of accuracy was poor. Capitalism in Europe proved unexpectedly resilient, becoming firmly entrenched in the imperialistic stage that expanded markets world-wide and stabilized domestic profit rates. Consequently, accommodations such as increased compensation, reduced hours, official or unofficial recognition of unionization, and limited social safety nets became possible that substantially altered the strict adversariality of class relations. Politically, this allowed traditional elites to compete for the allegiance of expanding mass electorates, large segments of which proved slippery for the socialist parties that were supposed to be their natural match. The failure of many marxists to take the enormous conservative reservoirs of the peasantry into account aggravated this problem, particularly where the industrial proletariat was continuously resupplied from the countryside (as was the case in most of Europe).¹

All of these developments combined to introduce an element of indeterminacy into marxist revolutionary theory, creating a theoretical void that had to be filled.² Without “automatic Marxism,”³ the straightforward determinist rationalism of ‘historical logic’ to serve as the inevitable producer of capitalism’s overthrow and of the socialist realm of

¹Details of this account could be questioned by contemporary specialists on nearly every point (I am thinking in particular of the claim that peasants are conservative, a key point of contention in cultural studies). It corresponds, however, to the understanding of the situation that was available to marxists at the time, and consequently is accurate enough as a description of *their* world.

²In my usage, indeterminacy is always in relation to some determinism, as irrationality is always relative to some rationalism. Obviously, society is always determinate in the sense that things happen, in relationship to and conditioned by other things. The question is if the *expected* thing has happened for the expected reasons.

³Russell Jacoby, “Towards a Critique of Automatic Marxism: The Politics of Philosophy from Lukács to the Frankfurt School,” *Telos* 10 (Winter 1971).

freedom, marxist revolutionary theory was left without an account of how the revolution could be expected to happen. For those who noticed history's refusal to cooperate, the old determinism had somehow to be replaced with some other mechanism that did not rely on the historical certainty of rational progress.

Insofar as marxists are concerned with the liberation of humans from exploitation and unfreedom through their own (conscious) actions, the particular form of historical indeterminacy that naturally gives most pause is the conduct of human beings. The primary concern of those interested, in the early years of this century, in reframing the theory of revolution was to account for human conduct. The four marxists considered in this and the next chapter — Bernstein, Sorel, Lenin, and Lukács — illustrate the spectrum of responses to this problem from the first questioning of the theoretical hegemony of kautskian orthodox marxism to the immediate aftermath of the Russian revolution. In each case, they met the need to replace the deterministic account of human, and especially proletarian, conduct by introducing 'space-maintainers'⁴ into the theoretical void that were designed to circumvent the indeterminacy of mass action and motivation rather than analyzing, understanding, and theorizing it.

These space-maintainers sort readily into two basic strategies. Bernstein and Sorel responded to the indeterminacy of the social by accepting it and by incorporating it into their process-oriented politics undigested. Lenin and Lukács responded to indeterminacy by compressing it, by seeking to control complexity through enforced simplicity. The type of political action that these strategies enabled was correspondingly open or compressed, but each was predicated both on recognizing the impact of social-psychological multiplicity and on keeping it at arm's length.⁵

I. Marxist Orthodoxy

Following the deaths of Marx and Engels, creation of a marxist orthodoxy passed largely into the hands of the German Social Democratic party and its chief theorist, Karl

⁴Again, I use this term, like 'black box' later on, to denote an attempt to bridge a recognized theoretical problem rather than solving it. The appropriate image is the folded-up napkin under the short table leg. A discussion of what it might mean to 'solve' the problem of collective indeterminacy from a marxist standpoint will have to wait for the discussion of Gramsci, below.

⁵Those who wish to skip the details of this argument could jump to section VI, below.

Kautsky.⁶ Kautsky and Bernstein laid down the party line in the Erfurt programme, drafted in 1891 after the repeal of the Anti-Socialist law a year earlier.⁷ In his lengthy commentary on the programme published a year later, Kautsky stated the basic principles of orthodox marxism:

We consider the breakdown of the present social system to be unavoidable, because we know that the economic evolution inevitably brings on conditions that will compel the exploited classes to rise against this system of private ownership. We know that this system multiplies the number and the strength of the exploited, and diminishes the number and strength of the exploiting, classes, and that it will finally lead to such unbearable conditions for the mass of the population that they will have no choice but to go down into degradation or to overthrow the system of private property.⁸

These documents reaffirmed the revolutionary aspirations of marxism. But it is generally agreed that the foundational statements of marxist orthodoxy came at a time when the practice of the party was already moving away from any practical revolutionary intent, toward a reformist position based in part on the increasing influence of the unions and their more immediate concerns in party decision-making.⁹ This disjuncture between pronouncement and practice has led to the observation that “[a]lthough the party flatly refused to ‘make revolutions’ and in policy terms pursued an unambiguously reformist course, verbal radicalism continued to colour the image of Social Democracy with its revolutionary bombast.”¹⁰

Looked at from this angle, it appears that marxist orthodoxy was never a real option even for its own leading party. The union of revolutionary theory and reformist prac-

6Kautsky will stand in throughout this discussion for all others of like mind.

7The “Programme of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Erfurt 1891” may be found in Susanne Miller and Heinrich Potthoff, *A History of German Social Democracy: From 1848 to the Present*, trans. J.A. Underwood (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1986 [1983]), 240-42. As with most political manifestos, it states the issues in a summary and categorical fashion; Kautsky nuanced and expanded his position in other writings, without departing from the programme’s basic conception.

8Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)*, trans. William E. Bohn (New York: Norton, 1971), 90. The context of this quotation is filled with qualifications about the importance of willed human activity; it is difficult to reconcile them with programmatic passages like this one, which gives as the lone point of human decision ‘degradation’ or ‘overthrow’.

9This movement is implicit in *The Class Struggle* itself; see 91, immediately following the passage quoted. For a nuanced and detailed summary of the relationship of party and unions, see Carl E. MSchorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1955), 8-16. Schorske discusses other reformist influences as well.

10Miller and Potthoff, *A History of German Social Democracy*, 54.

tice was not difficult to maintain, however, because Kautsky's revolutionary theory required no particular action on the part of the party, whose role was to habituate the masses to political involvement through parliamentary activity, and then to seize and direct the revolutionary moment when it arrived. The revolutionary passivity of the party was thus fully validated, since its daily political practice was almost completely decoupled from the revolution itself, which was to arise from economic developments. The only meaningful action the proletariat itself could take was the revolutionary spasm, a step that was determined by economic necessity. Revolutionary politics was compressed to the very moment of revolution, itself a compressed political space containing only the class-conscious proletariat and bourgeoisie locked in mortal struggle. Obviously, this placed a great deal of pressure on economic developments to come through as expected, and allotted a very limited role to the conscious actions of humans in the production of their own liberation.

Despite, or perhaps in part because of its scarce linkage with party practice, the theoretical dimension of German orthodoxy was visibly influential throughout Europe. Theory at this level of abstraction can be stretched to fit a wide range of particular circumstances, and may be used to legitimate virtually any practice. To speak generally, then, orthodox theory's revolutionary expectations were based on two related projections. The first was that capitalism, as a historical mode of production, had an internal logic that forced it both to maximize and ultimately to exhaust its capacity to drive human productive capacity and relations forward.¹¹ The second was that this development of capitalism would necessarily have an intensifying effect on class conflict. Thus, the orthodox position at the turn of the century, granted individual variants, was that the very logic of capitalism — concentration, intensification of exploitation, the falling rate of profit — could be expected to generate a revolutionary situation. The revolution would then be made by the proletariat, brought to class consciousness by the same logic that had driven capitalism to its structural vulnerability.

Proletarian class consciousness was consequently an important part of the orthodox revolutionary formula; but, it was not particularly problematic. Indeed, the structural theory acted as a black box by removing the vastly complicated array of human relationships, motivations, and behaviors from consideration as part of the revolutionary dy-

¹¹In this it was no different from any preceding mode of production.

namic. Given a proletarian mass, the proper input of structural capitalist development was somehow to produce the proper output of class consciousness, free of tricky motivational admixtures.

Orthodox marxism's revolutionary theory was founded, as it turned out, on a strict determinism, based on a reductive theory of human behavior that relied on the economic logic of classical liberal rationalism. While Marx¹² and his orthodox followers had always been aware that people frequently make decisions based on premises other than those of economics-driven self-interest, or 'irrationally', for Kautsky and marxist orthodoxy these deformations were expected in the last analysis to be corrected by the developing logic of capitalism.¹³ They did not look upon the facts of sociological consciousness as obstacles to the formation of true class consciousness in the proper fullness of time. Their revolutionary theory made little attempt to account for class consciousness as anything but an automatic outcome of the structural development of capitalism, and consequently was highly vulnerable to the failure of capitalism to develop as scripted. During the 1890's this failure began to provide damning evidence of the inadequacy of the theory to achieve its own analytical and practical objectives.¹⁴

II. Bernstein

The first serious challenge from within marxism to the adequacy of marxist revolutionary theory came from Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein had been close to the inner circle

¹²The founder's best observations in this vein are to be found where he was more directly concerned with political analysis, for example in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

¹³An excellent, though unsympathetic, account of Kautsky's scientism, belief in historical necessity, and "naturalistic interpretation of human consciousness" can be found in Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism, Volume 2: The Golden Age*, trans. P.S. Falla (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978). Kautsky's views lend themselves readily to caricature, but he was not stupid; the conditions under which the SPD operated in the late 19th century, coupled with residual theoretical optimism for which the founders were responsible, enforced restricted theoretical possibilities. For example, Dick Geary argues that the isolation of the SPD within the German political system and the predominance of non-proletarians in the mass political mobilization made Kautsky's anticipatory passivity a proper reflection of German political reality. *Karl Kautsky* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987). It was for a later period to enable the exploration of the problems under discussion here.

¹⁴Again, it is important to distinguish theoretical from practical awareness. These people were not blind or stupid, so their writings are full of practical suggestions about educating the proletariat to their real interests, training them through practice, etc. But since class consciousness was never problematized *theoretically*, such tactics never received the examination that could have revealed their rationalist presuppositions.

in Marx's and Engels' later years and had collaborated with Kautsky. But following the death of Engels in 1895 he began to express doubts about the revolutionary project which he elaborated most comprehensively in *Evolutionary Socialism*.¹⁵ For a marxist, Bernstein's solution to the problem of revolutionary consciousness was the most radical of those considered here. He rejected the revolutionary event entirely and suggested that the new structures and relationships of modern capitalism demanded a different strategy altogether.

Bernstein accepted, for the most part, the determinist theory of revolution held by Kautsky: that the revolution must be a direct and unmediated product of the historical development of capitalism and the class struggle. But, since neither capitalism nor the class struggle was working out as expected, he wondered how the revolution could be expected to follow.

No one has questioned the necessity for the working classes to gain the control of government. The point at issue is between the theory of a social cataclysm and the question whether with the given social development in Germany and the present advanced state of its working classes in the towns and the country, a sudden catastrophe would be desirable in the interest of the social democracy... [I]n my judgment a greater security for lasting success lies in a steady advance than in the possibilities offered by a catastrophic crash.¹⁶

In *Evolutionary Socialism*, Bernstein set out to demonstrate that the actual development of capitalism demanded a rethinking of marxist aspirations and made orthodox revolutionary theory dangerously utopian.

Bernstein reviewed the discrepancies in orthodox marxist predictions at length. In particular, he focused on the survival of small- and medium-sized industries, the flexibility of modern capitalism in coping with crises, and the failure of the middle classes to be absorbed into the high bourgeoisie above and the proletariat below.¹⁷ All of these factors,

¹⁵Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, trans. Edith C. Harvey (New York: Schocken, 1961). The book followed a series of articles on 'Problems of Socialism', and a letter to the SPD Congress in 1898. Both had sparked considerable debate. It first appeared in early 1899.

¹⁶Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, xxviii.

¹⁷"If the collapse of modern society depends on the disappearance of the middle ranks between the apex and the base of the social pyramid, if it is dependent upon the absorption of these middle classes by the extremes above and below them, then its realization is no nearer in England, France, and Germany to-day than at any earlier time in the nineteenth century." Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, 72.

Bernstein argued, brought into question the logic of radical class opposition that the marxist revolutionary event required. Far from having only this extreme means of achieving self-determination, the proletariat had access to more controlled forms of political involvement. Consequently, Bernstein held that the proper strategy of the SPD and of working class organizations in general was to push for the continued strengthening of democratic institutions. “And so the conclusion of this exposition is the very banal statement that the conquest of democracy, the formation of political and social organs of the democracy, is the indispensable preliminary condition to the realization of socialism.”¹⁸

Laclau and Mouffe have argued that the essence of Bernstein’s revisionistic break with orthodox marxism lies in the strategic shift from reliance on the structural development of capitalism to “autonomous political intervention.”¹⁹ In the context of an argument that the decisive feature of the ‘crisis of marxism’ in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was increasing distress over the “fragmentation and division characteristic of the new stage of capitalism,” they point out that revisionism’s essential characteristic was the attempt to establish wiggle space in which the working class could engage in political action free from the chains of structural determination (in other traditions this is sometimes referred to as the ‘problem of agency’). In effect, the difference was that orthodoxy attempted to cling to a radically restricted political universe in which the only meaningful political action available to the proletariat was the revolutionary spasm. As space for mass participation in politics opened up it became increasingly difficult to sustain this universe; indeed, as Bernstein pointed out, the actual policy of the SPD was one of exploiting these openings.²⁰

Bernstein declared that the liberating revolutionary event itself is, in a practical sense, a figment of the theoretical imagination. He thought it unlikely that such a catas-

¹⁸Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, 163.

¹⁹Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 30. (Although a heated opponent of revisionism, Luxemburg shared this interest in the political dimension of revolution.) Laclau’s and Mouffe’s argument is highly relevant to that developed throughout this study. It has spawned considerable debate complete with loyal adherents and outraged opponents. Their rejection of the errors of marxism is peculiarly overzealous; see the Appendix.

²⁰Bernstein lamented that the influence of the working class and its allies could be much greater “...if the social democracy could find the courage to emancipate itself from a phraseology which is actually outworn and if it would make up its mind to appear what it is in reality to-day: a democratic, socialistic party of reform.” *Evolutionary Socialism*, 197.

trophic event could produce the solidarity and sense of collective will that would be necessary to sustain the revolutionary project in the long term. More importantly for the issues under discussion here, his observations on the dynamics of working class formation and relationships gave him little reason to believe that such concerted motivation and action were likely in the first place. In the context of a skeptical evaluation of other socialists' assessment of working-class preparation, Bernstein argued that

[w]e cannot demand from a class, the great majority of whose members live under crowded conditions, are badly educated, and have an uncertain and insufficient income, the high intellectual and moral standard which the organization and existence of a socialist community presupposes. We will, therefore, not ascribe it to them by way of fiction.²¹

This realistic appraisal of the sociological consciousness of the working classes, while impressionistic and primitive, was devastatingly penetrating in comparison to the official orthodox fantasies. Indeed, orthodox marxist theory was caught in the vise of a political strategy that required tremendous consciousness and commitment from working masses whose sense of class, let alone revolutionary preparation, was rudimentary at best.

The interesting practical result of this dilemma was the legitimation of party tactics based on almost complete contempt for the revolutionary preparation of the workers, since the strategic expectation was that at the proper time the workers' preparation would fall into place.²² This was clearly a space-maintainer. Further compounding this problem was the absence of, indeed fundamental resistance to, any theoretical apparatus suited to analyzing or even confronting these data. Orthodox theory was altogether unable to account, at the level of theory,²³ for workers whose consciousness did not conform at least embryonically to the expected pattern.

²¹Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, 221. Note that Bernstein accepted the premise of the proletariat's potentially unitary class interests, and based on this did not exclude the possibility that the proletariat could achieve such standards — at some stage.

²²The spartacists (a revolutionary group led by Rosa Luxemburg) simply reversed this dilemma by accepting the same revolutionary theory as orthodoxy, but attempting to force the issue of worker consciousness through contrived revolutionary situations. That both of these tactical accommodations are equally logical outcomes of the revolutionary theory that turn of the century marxists had to work with only serves to demonstrate the radical inadequacy of the theory to its own aspirations.

²³*Anecdotally*, marxist writing is full of such accounts.

This is the theoretical knot that Bernstein attempted to sever at a stroke. To do so he was willing entirely to abandon the traditional marxist commitment to revolution as a discrete event. In return, he offered the opportunity for an open political practice that was attentive to the multiple layers and moments of sociological political consciousness and able to withstand the failure of that consciousness to conform to any particular pattern. Bernstein's was consequently a perfectly coherent response to the conflict between the revolutionary aspirations of marxism and its failure adequately to explore the historical dynamics of revolutionary practice.

Nevertheless, Bernstein's solution fell back on a very ordinary liberal rationalism.²⁴ While the structural development of capitalism could not be expected to produce pure classes with unitary purposes, advances were nevertheless to be made through the natural evolution of democratic process. Bernstein recognized that the political consciousness of the working classes was multi-determinate and resistant to any single monolithic rationalist theorization. But his response was to rely on the micro-rationalisms of political process and debate, coupled with the enforced macro-rationalism of democratic outcomes: the free market of the liberal democratic polity, complete with an invisible hand to assure the satisfactory regulation of the whole. While this solution makes Bernstein a hero of socialism to liberals like Peter Gay,²⁵ from the standpoint of the historical trajectory of revolutionary marxist socialism it was a step backward from very promising (although deeply contradictory) beginnings. On the threshold of the 20th century, Bernstein made the observation that was to distinguish the best formal social theory of the new century from all that had come before, then revealed himself still to belong to the 19th century in his conclusions.

Bernstein's recognition of what I call the multiplicity of mass consciousness was short-circuited by his contentment with democracy as the mechanism of socialist advancement. In effect, he abandoned not only the revolutionary event, but exploration of the revolutionization of consciousness altogether. Bernstein's modification of the marxist agenda consequently tends to demonstrate that the indeterminacy of pluralistic democrat-

²⁴This has arguably been the dominant political ethos of the SPD since World War II.

²⁵Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx* (New York: Collier, 1952). This is frequently cited as the best treatment of Bernstein. Gay's sympathy for his subject comes rather one-sidedly from a liberal standpoint, however, so the book is of less use for those who wish to explore Bernstein's significance *within* marxism.

ic politics is incompatible with the structured aspirations of historical marxist socialism. Bernstein's ultimate willingness to let sociological consciousness dictate the progress of socialism²⁶ decisively distinguishes his from the more active attempts to salvage the marxist revolutionary project of Sorel, Lenin, Lukács, and Gramsci.

III. Sorel

The debate between Kautsky and Bernstein was not simply a German affair, and its ramifications throughout European socialism serve to illustrate both the transnationality that marxist theory enjoyed at the turn of the century, and the peculiar national twists that made real communication rare.²⁷ In France, Georges Sorel looked upon the debate as an opportunity to settle accounts with the type of rigid, dogmatic theorizing that Kautsky represented.²⁸ Like Bernstein, Sorel rejected a socialist strategy based on some notion of the final result; and he identified the crucial moments of political action in the process of change rather than its issue.²⁹ Sorel also was aware of the volatility and multiplicity of social psychology, to which he ascribed a tremendous creative energy. And Sorel showed a willingness to rely upon the working-out of collective psychology as the basis for the revolutionary process. But for Sorel, the mechanism of that process was not to be formal democracy, but violence.

Throughout his career as a writer and theorist (begun comparatively late in life) Sorel continuously attacked modern society in general and French society in particular for their loss of moral vitality, the heroic virtues that lead to real human development and progress.³⁰ The consequence of his single-minded pursuit of this theme was that Sorel was

²⁶To be fair, his idea was that democratic involvement would gradually modify sociological consciousness in a socialist direction.

²⁷For example, both the German Bernstein and the French Sorel acknowledged the influence of Italian Benedetto Croce's critiques of marxism on their own revisions. See B. Croce, *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* (Bari: Laterza, 1961) for his collected essays on the subject. But Croce's reading of marxism was idiosyncratic and far from well-understood.

²⁸This opposition appears explicitly in the essay "Polemics on the Interpretation of Marxism: Bernstein and Kautsky," originally published in 1900 and now in *From George Sorel*, ed. John L. Stanley, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (New York: Oxford UP, 1976), 148-75.

²⁹"For Kautsky and his partisans, every action is judged in relation to what they call the 'final end.' But how can we evaluate the value of a current action or a social reform as a means toward a regime placed in an *indeterminate future*?" Stanley, ed., *From George Sorel*, 157.

³⁰Sorel was a passionate opponent of any decadence from heroic moral life. One of his first books, *The Trial of Socrates* (1889), includes a critique of Socrates on the grounds that he was indeed cor-

never committed to the more usual sorts of consistency. He was relatively unconcerned with the specific goals of the widely divergent political movements to which he attached himself at various times. What attracted him was his perception that a movement was committed to unyielding struggle, and thus could serve the cause of moral revitalization.³¹ Yet, it is important to stress that while the goals of the movement were not critical, the fact that it was a movement was of decisive importance. Sorel's fundamental insight was that moral revitalization can only occur collectively, never individually.³² And his confidence in the power of collective struggle to produce the correct moral attitudes was such that he may well have been unable to imagine a negative outcome from such moral solidarity.³³

Once Sorel's single-mindedness is recognized, it is a relatively easy task to sketch out the essentials of his conception of solidarity and moral renewal. Sorel's *idée fixe* was that all that is interesting and beautiful in human existence stems from collective commitment to heroic values. This commitment need not require conflict: in the last section of *Reflections on Violence* Sorel spoke of the production process as potentially a form of art, where the ethic of the producers could be embodied in the spirit of invention and the striving toward perfection. "This striving towards perfection which manifests itself, in spite of the absence of any personal, immediate, and proportional reward, constitutes the secret virtue which assures the continued progress of the world."³⁴ But in order for the ethic of rupturing the Athenian youth away from the traditional heroic values of Greek society. A good discussion of this is in John Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981), 26-56.

31 "It is not a matter of knowing what is the best morality, but only of determining if there exists a *mechanism capable of guaranteeing the development of morality*." "The Socialist Future of the Syndicates," in Stanley, ed., *From Georges Sorel*, 91.

32 In this he was a member of his generation of French intellectuals. On this basis, and others, a comparison with Durkheim is fruitful.

33 In light of infamous comments of admiration made about Sorel by Mussolini, it is worth noting that Sorel died within two months of the fascist seizure of power, and was thus not conversant with the results of fascist solidarity. I would venture to guess that if he were to have remained true to form, Sorel would have been disgusted by the Italians' meek acceptance of fascist domination, which he would have ascribed to force rather than violence.

34 Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T.E. Hulme (New York: Peter Smith, 1941) 292. He explicitly distinguished this *active*, collective, ethical notion of progress from the bourgeois theories of progress that he criticized in *The Illusions of Progress*, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969). Sorel argued that the bourgeois notion of progress as immanent and inexorable trivializes human effort and allows the bourgeoisie to divert its energies into unproductive activity, fueling moral degeneration. Interestingly, this was exactly his opinion of

the producers to have a chance, the source of the moral degeneration of European society had first to be confronted head-on.

Sorel believed that the bourgeoisie, firmly in control of the field at the turn of the century and far from their heroic class beginnings in the struggle against the Old Regime, had grown soft and fearful. Worse, its cowardly policy of concessions to the workers made the latter soft as well. The bourgeoisie no longer acted as a class, but as an aggregate of individuals all out to save their own skins.³⁵ The perfect illustration of this degenerate situation, for Sorel, was the shameless way in which the parliamentary Socialists led by Jaurès were able to use the mere threat of proletarian violence to wring concessions from the feeble bourgeois. The result was a moral wasteland, where no one believed strongly in anything and the passions that make humans most interesting were dulled. The class war was defused by the decadence of one of the parties in conflict, the middle class, with the result that "...one part of the forces which were to further the development of capitalism is employed in hindering it, an arbitrary and irrational element is introduced, and the future of the world becomes completely indeterminate."³⁶

Sorel was adamant that "all our efforts should tend to prevent the bourgeois ideas from coming to poison the rising class."³⁷ He insisted that it was only through violence that the moral vitality of modern society could be rescued. By violence Sorel meant collective action based on solidarity and informed by deep moral passion and commitment. These elements are inseparable for Sorel; there can be no moral commitment without active participation in a community. He believed that this collective moral commitment had to be mediated by something he called a myth, a concept very close to what Durkheim called a collective representation.³⁸ Both the collective representation and the myth function as sources of social cohesion and motivation, but non-rationally, since they supply no formal linear relationship between aspirations and actions, between process and end.

orthodox marxism as well.

35H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 179.

36Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 87.

37Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, 157. His ethical position here was not unlike Nietzsche's critique of slave morality, while the analysis on which it was based resembled Durkheim's analysis of anomie suicide. These analogies may serve in passing as examples of the interlocking critiques of modern society, based on a reassessment of the value of instrumental rationality, that began to characterize much of the intellectual landscape of late-19th century Europe.

38I will discuss Durkheim's positions and their relevance to problems of marxism in Chapter 5.

Consequently, their realm is entirely that of social psychology, and for Sorel their impact remains opaque to formal rational analysis or projections in terms of interests, values, or goals.

In Sorel's theory of revolution the key myth was the myth of the general strike, a remote and cataclysmic goal that was to unite the workers in firm class solidarity and force the bourgeoisie also to re-commit itself as a class. The general strike was not in itself new to the marxist bag of tricks, but for Sorel its value shifted from a practical goal-oriented strategy to a motivating ideal. The myth was not intended to 'come true'; rather, it served as a shared source of motivation, to hold the community together in its commitment to a common purpose. And the myth of the general strike represented the full flowering of proletarian solidarity and moral vitality — it was the irrational force that could lead the workers to engage in violence against the bourgeoisie and the whole capitalist system, thus frightening the flabby and concessionary bourgeois into renewed class consciousness and vigor.³⁹

The value of proletarian violence was to disrupt the impulse toward moderation and concession, and to confine the employers to their role as producers, thus emphasizing the separation of the classes.⁴⁰ The goal was essentially to 'up the ante' to the point that only total confrontation, and hence, irrevocable transformation are possible. The general strike was to sweep away any tendency toward reform in complete catastrophe⁴¹ by forcibly totalizing, i.e. by reducing all social relationships to, the conflict between capitalist and worker.⁴² "The idea of the general strike has such power behind it that it drags into the revolutionary track everything it touches."⁴³ Strike tactics, therefore, were for

39Sorel believed that Marx's own revolutionary theory was based on myth. This point is made explicitly in "The Decomposition of Marxism," trans. Irving Louis Horowitz and included in his *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason: The Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1961), 248. "An objection has been raised that Marx never seems to have recognized that he has employed mythical images; it is rather that he was sometimes so impassioned that this passion prevented him from viewing reality clearly. People sometimes forget that men of action would lose all power of initiative if they reasoned with the rigidity of a critical historian." Note 1. This essay was published in 1908.

40Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 90.

41Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 147.

42Here we have the same compression of conflict to class that in Lenin was accomplished politically and in Lukács, philosophically. But Sorel was far more explicit about the importance of the classist compression as an appearance.

43Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 145.

Sorel the legitimate inheritors of the marxian conception and were to rearm the possibility of total class conflict in a world where the forces of conciliation were defusing it.

Even so, Sorel was acutely aware that in practical terms, a coordinated general strike was unlikely. This is why he invoked the mythic power of the idea of the general strike, as well as the indeterminacy of its result. The power of the strike is that it makes a “striking appeal to the mind;” it captures the imagination of all who are touched by it, building a “stubborn, increasing, and passionate resistance to the present order of things.”⁴⁴ The point of the myth, however, was not to attempt to make any actual description of the future, but simply to act as the mechanism of bringing it about. “The myth must be judged as a means of acting on the present; any attempt to discuss how far it can be taken literally as future history is devoid of sense.”⁴⁵ The nature of the conflict, the dynamic of its occurrence, and its result are thus all subsumed under the power of proletarian violence, guided by the myth of the general strike. The rescue of the marxian conception of the class war is put back into the hands of the proletariat, once again made conscious of its role in the dialectic of labor and capital.

Sorel based his realignment of marxist strategy and aspirations on the complete rejection of marxism’s rationalist premises. In a passage worth quoting at length, Sorel provided a devastating critique of the failure of marxist revolutionary theory to provide clues to revolutionary action:

[The] proletariat could not carry out the mission assigned to it by Marx unless there existed in its heart a distribution of feelings strong enough to lead each member, because of his special talents, to carry out the particular task that harmonizes effectively with the common work. Socialists have examined in only a very insufficient way the conditions which further or hinder such a state of mind... Social change could not have the absolute character required by inexorable logic if the revolutionary class did not possess qualities giving it a composition much more advanced than that of any other class. Judging that it would be beyond their strength to realize such a deep, mysterious and new reform, the leaders of socialism content themselves with organizing proletarian political parties — an easy enough thing. The rest is supposed to follow in due time, by the natural play of minds, when the politicians have sufficiently explained to the electorate the laws of historical development.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 148.

⁴⁵Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 135-6.

The quoted passage is only part of an extended attack on the rationalistic abstractions of marxist revolutionary theory, which for Sorel resemble the rigidified pseudo-analyses of jurists who ignore “the psychological motives that cause individuals to act. They hide real men under what they call legal persons, types of social groups that are supposed to live almost like automatons according to usages fixed in jurisprudence.”⁴⁷ Sorel considered social process, consciousness, and motivation to be so inescapably fraught with the non-rational⁴⁸ (or differently rational) that no social theory based on a single set of rationalist presuppositions could depict or direct them without “constricting reality within the bounds of skeletal abstractions.”⁴⁹

Sorel put the problem of collective psychology and its impact on revolutionary theory at the center of his conception of marxism. But his solution mirrored the indeterminacy of Bernstein’s theory of democratic evolutionism in its failure to satisfy the structured aspirations of marxist revolutionary socialism.⁵⁰ In both Sorel and Bernstein, the multi-

46Georges Sorel, *Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat*, excerpted in Stanley, ed., *From 1515-Georges Sorel*, 240. This collection of essays appeared in 1919. The quoted passage is from the Introduction.

47Sorel, *Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat*, excerpted in Stanley, ed., *From Georges Sorel*, 236. On the next page, he concludes: “Thus abstract theories, dependent on considerations belonging to the beautiful, the true and the just [Sorel’s code for Platonic abstraction], become the object of a superstitious respect at certain times.”

48Rationalism is such a powerful normative presence in academic discourse that its negation presents enormous terminological difficulties. ‘Irrational’ is a term controlled by rationalism as the negation of itself, and consequently carries pejorative connotations that are not easily discarded. ‘Non-rational’, while awkward, is less compromised. The terms will be used more or less interchangeably here. In the Procedural Interlude, I will discuss the merits of a conception of ‘different’ or ‘local’ rationalities.

49Sorel called his own analytic procedure *diremption*. It involved deliberately removing fragments of social phenomena from their context in order to understand them in isolation. Sorel pointed out that this was the actual practice of most social philosophers; the distinction of his usage was that he entertained no illusions that the whole could subsequently be reconstructed, except in a *symbolic* manner that could provide a provisional guide to action. The obvious epistemological consequence of this procedure may be called irreducible analytical pluralism. Sorel was content with this consequence. See Sorel, *Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat*, excerpted in Stanley, ed., *From Georges Sorel*, 228ff. Quotation 229. Contrast his procedure with Lenin’s aspirations to omniscience, discussed below.

50Gramsci, who like most Italian socialists early in this century had been exposed to Sorel, pointed out that a social order based on strict adherence to spontaneity would actually be a realm of total determinism. Apart from the purely logical plausibility of this critique, it is also that of a good marxist, whose faith was that the world can be consciously and systematically constructed. *SPN*, 129.

plicity of sociological consciousness, once recognized, was not theorized but instead incorporated into political theory as pure instrument.⁵¹

While Sorel admired Bernstein for his attacks on rigidified marxist dogma and for restoring some element of human activity to socialist practice, he did not believe that the retreat from commitment to revolution was the correct form of ‘decomposition’ (or decomposition) of marxism.

...Marxism will not be transformed in the way Bernstein had thought. ... Completely dedicated to the preparation of proletarian revolution, it is not worthwhile to argue with the rulers of society.... Besides, Marxism is not in a position to submerge itself in other political parties, revolutionary as they may be, because the latter are obliged to function like bourgeois parties, shifting their attitudes according to the requirements of electoral circumstances and making compromises.... This is so because Marxism remains unalterably committed to the idea of total revolution.⁵²

Here Sorel drew his conclusions from his arguments about the irrational bases of collective action, the moral component of struggle, and the mythic or symbolic strategies necessary to tap into these energies. Strikingly, in Sorel’s opinion the only way to salvage marxism’s revolutionary core was to discard every element of rationalist expectation and scientific pretension, both the utopian substrate and the positivistic overlay. All that is left is fundamental commitment to proletarian revolution and a will to struggle no matter the cost or outcome. It is hardly a surprise that Sorel occupies an isolated position in the history of marxism. The sacrifice of any sense of end or certainty was too much for later marxists,⁵³ and while Sorel might have claimed that they simply reburied the mythic linkages that he had exposed, the search for a revolutionary praxis was never again as radically surgical.

51One way to put this is that they succeeded in *naming* the black box, without however looking inside. Especially in Sorel’s case, this is hardly a criticism; the notion of applying a necessarily rationalist theorization to the essentially non-rational would have made no sense to him. Here is why marxism may be doomed to perpetual crisis. On this basis Kolakowski argues that “[f]or Sorel... belief in the myth was to be a complete substitute for sociological knowledge....” *Main Currents of Marxism, 2: The Golden Years*, 161.

52Sorel, “The Decomposition of Marxism,” in Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason*, 249.

53...with the exception of the current sometimes called ‘existential marxism’. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O’Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969 [1947]). The analogy can be pushed beyond this one point only with care.