

**Violence as Pure Praxis:
Benjamin and Sorel on Strike, Myth and Ethics**

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Though for the Western political tradition violence is usually deemed merely *instrumental*, and thus neither essential to, nor constitutive of, the *bios politikos*, Walter Benjamin's "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" ["Critique of Violence," 1921] and Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* [*Reflections on Violence*, 1908] constitute an exception.¹ In very different ways, both texts put forward a notion of violence which comes to coincide with *pure praxis*, that is, with pure political action, in great contrast with a political tradition which rather identifies in violence a *non-political* or *anti-political* form of action. In Benjamin's case, the ambiguity of the term *Gewalt* is not secondary to the argument: in German, it can mean *force*, *power*, *might* and *violence*, depending on the context; it reunites thus *potestas* and *violentia* in a dialectics that Etienne Balibar values as positive and fructuous.² The French *violence*, on the contrary, presents a univocal connotation, though Sorel, as we will see, redefines it to his own purposes.³ However, the explanation cannot be limited to the terminology, but must rather be pursued in their notion of *praxis*.

The history of the reception of the two texts is marked by this dissonance. *Réflexions sur la violence* is the work that made Sorel's name for the posterity; it also earned him the title of apologist of violence, and the high esteem in which people like Maurras or Mussolini held this work

branded it as pseudo- or pre-fascist.⁴ “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” on the other hand, is the only part that survives of a projected large-scale study on politics, which was never completed.⁵ It is an extremely dense and esoteric text, relegated by the first wave of Benjamin scholarship to the juvenile, pre-Marxist (thus less “digestible”) phase of his work. Even for subsequent interpreters, though, this work sounded apparently out of tune with the Benjamin of the 1930s and its tone remains suspicious for the “liberal” thought: if Habermas brands Benjamin’s hermeneutics “conservative-revolutionary,” Derrida’s famous reading of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” in “Force de loi” approaches the text – especially the issue of a pure, divine violence – with suspicion, and in a more recent work Beatrice Hanssen places the essay squarely “in an antiliberal tradition that does not shun force to achieve its transformative sociopolitical agenda.”⁶ The past thirty years saw, however, a reassessment of the two texts. A new interest in Sorel, especially in France and Italy, led to a more “sober” re-evaluation of his work beyond the stigma of fascist-like apologist of violence.⁷ Derrida’s essay assured new interest in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” and the extensive use Giorgio Agamben makes of it in his work, together with a deeper understanding of Benjamin’s early writings, produced a number of new interpretations.

This literature, though, rarely combines or compares Sorel’s and Benjamin’s writings in depth. The two texts come from cultural and theoretical traditions which are very distant and produce two different discourses. They meet of course in Benjamin’s “use” of the *Réflexions* in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”; however, critical interpretations always underline the theoretical divide between them, whereby the literature on Benjamin rarely goes into an analysis of Sorel’s text, and the literature on Sorel usually mentions Benjamin’s reading as a footnote. Benjamin himself, while acknowledging his debt to Sorel, highlights the difference between the latter’s *politischer* (“political”) considerations and his own *rein theoretischer* (“purely theoretical”)⁸ analysis (*GS* 2.1:193/*SW* 1:245).⁹ Exhaustive accounts of Benjamin’s reading of Sorel do exist,¹⁰ but none attempts a comparison between the two notions of pure praxis. Noteworthy in this direction are two essays: Werner Hamacher’s seminal “Afformative, Strike,” on Benjamin’s notion of strike, and Stathis Gourgouris’ “The Concept of the Mythical,” on Sorel’s (and Schmitt’s) myth.¹¹ Their perspectives, arguments and scopes are different, but both insist on the notion of pure praxis and its relation to violence.

The aim of the present study is to follow Hamacher’s and Gourgouris’ lead and attempt to explain how in the two authors violence comes to be equated to pure praxis. The hypothesis that guides and justifies a comparison is that Benjamin’s lasting interest in the *Réflexions* testifies for a deeper understanding of a text often – and still – underrated. Without trying

to “benjaminiaze” Sorel, this essay will attempt a reading of his work in the light of some issues which guide Benjamin’s approach to the question of violence. The analysis will focus on the philosophy (or philosophies) of history in which, in different ways, the related concepts of strike, myth and ethics receive their peculiar meanings. In the case of Benjamin, I will use a number of texts and fragments on which Benjamin worked during – or slightly before and after – the preparation of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”; not only the explicitly “political” texts, but those which help understanding his politics. The evident assonances to Benjamin’s later works will not be pursued. As for Sorel, *Réflexions* is itself a collection of articles, published first in the Italian journal *Il Divenire sociale* between 1905 and 1906 and then re-elaborated for publication in book form in 1908. The book exposes the author’s *reflections* on the subject of violence over an extended period of time; the analysis will thus be limited to this text.

1. Strike

1.1. The meaning of “strike” in Benjamin’s and Sorel’s texts has been thoroughly discussed and analysed in the literature. The argument must be here briefly rehearsed in order to set the terms of our question. In the first pages of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” the concession of the right to strike unveils a “*sachliche Widerspruch der Rechtslage*” (“objective contradiction in the legal situation”) because it is the only case in which the application of *Gewalt* by a non-State power is *zulässig* (permissible). When the right to strike is taken to its extreme consequences in the revolutionary general strike, it is declared illegal by the State (“*das Streikrecht ‘so’ nicht gemeint gewesen sei,*” “the right to strike was not ‘so intended’”). The State thus acknowledges a form of violence whose ends sometimes it regards with indifference (the improvement of work conditions or salary), but in different circumstances (the revolutionary general strike) confronts with violence. The contradiction and paradox here is that the exercise of a right, legally sanctioned by the law, can sometimes be considered as violent; or: the strike as a fulfilment of a right contravenes, when it employs violence, the legal order that guarantees that right in the first place (GS 2.1:183-84/SW 1:239-40). This contradiction opens up a space for the critique of State *Gewalt*.

The first important characterisation of the strike is made here: it is defined as an *Unterlassung von Handlungen* (omission of actions) and thus essentially *ein Nicht-Handeln* (nonaction). Non-action is deemed equivalent to non-violence, thus the strike is considered *non-violent non-action*. A nonaction is not considered as violence by the State power and thus its threat passed unperceived; or, better: when the omission of an action

amounts to a simple *Abbruch von Beziehungen* (severing of relations), then it can be considered non-violent, or a *reines Mittel* (pure means). The right to strike conceded by the State power to the workers is intended merely as an *Abkehr* (withdrawal) or *Entfremdung* (estrangement) from a violence indirectly exercised by the employer. However, if the omission of action takes place with the readiness to resume work under changed circumstances, then the omission includes a moment of violence in the form of *Erpressung* (extortion). In this second case, the right to strike becomes just another means to an end, the right to use force in attaining certain ends (GS 2.1:183-84/SW 1:239). In the case of the general strike, Benjamin writes, the strikers' conduct can be called *aktiv* and the strike can be called *Gewalt*, as the strikers exercise their right to strike "*um die Rechtsordnung, kraft deren es ihm verliehen ist, zu stürzen*" ("in order to overthrow the legal system that has conferred it"); otherwise, the strikers' conduct is *passiv* and the exercise of the right amounts merely to *Erpressung*, "extortion" (GS 2.1:185/SW 1:240). This distinction will be later explored through Sorel's work.

The State thus concedes the right to strike against its interests and precisely "*weil es gewaltsame Handlungen, denen entgegenzutreten es fürchtet, hintan halt*" ("because it forestalls violent actions the State is afraid to oppose"): denying such a right could produce reactive violence, but conceding it the State eventually comes under a greater danger. "*Furcht vor gemeinsamen Nachteilen, die aus der gewaltsamen Auseinandersetzung zu entstehen drohen*" ("The fear of mutual disadvantages that threaten to arise from violent confrontation") can provide *reinen* (pure) instead of *gewaltsamer* (violent) means, that is, it can induce men "*zum friedlichen Ausgleich ihrer Interessen diesseits aller Rechtsordnung zu bewegen*" ("to reconcile their interests peacefully without involving the legal system," GS 2.1:192-93/SW 1:245). However, in the case of the revolutionary general strike, it provokes a contradiction that threatens the existence of law itself. What is important to note, for the moment, is that the strike is identified, under certain conditions, with a politics of pure means: means which are "pure" insofar as they are *diesseits* (beyond) the legal system, the violent order of the law.¹²

1.2. Sorel is credited by Benjamin for having first distinguished the two possible kind of strike. As it is well known, these are the "political general strike" and the "proletarian general strike." The two strikes are in *extrême opposition* ("diametrically opposed to one another," RV 196/148), and, Benjamin emphasises, "*zwischen ihnen besteht auch in der Beziehung auf die Gewalt ein Gegensatz*" (they are "antithetical in their relation to violence," GS 2.1:193/SW 1:245). The political general strike corresponds to that

“passive” exercise of the right to strike which is based on the principle of “extortion”: organised by the “politicians” and “intellectuals” of the class struggle, it merely aims at bringing down one political class in order to substitute it with another one. Sorel writes:

La grève générale politique concentre toute cette conception dans un tableau d'une intelligence facile; elle nous montre comment l'État ne perdrait rien de sa force, comment la transmission se ferait de privilégiés à privilégiés, comment le peuple des producteurs arriverait à changer de maîtres.

The political general strike concentrates the whole of this conception into one easily understood picture: it shows how the State would lose nothing of its strength, how the transmission of power from one privileged class to another would take place, and how the mass of producers would merely change masters. (RV 226-27/171)¹³

Far from threatening the rule of law, the political general strike is a simple change of masters for the working class and its goal is the inversion of power-relations and the preservation – and strengthening – of State power.

In contrast to this, the proletarian general strike sets itself the sole task of destroying State power, abolishing the State and the legal order maintained by it:

La grève générale supprime toutes les conséquences idéologiques de toute politique sociale possible ; ses partisans regardent les réformes, même les plus populaires, comme ayant un caractère bourgeois.

The general strike destroys all the theoretical consequences of every possible social policy; its supporters look upon even the most popular reforms as having a bourgeois character. (RV 167/126)¹⁴

The syndicalists, Sorel argues, do not propose to reform the State, “*ils voudraient le détruire*” (“they want to destroy it”), because they want to realize Marx’s idea that the socialist revolution “*ne doit pas aboutir à remplacer une minorité gouvernante par une autre minorité*” (“ought not to culminate in the replacement of one governing minority by another,” RV 142/107). For Sorel, parliamentary socialists are but “*des enfants de la bourgeoisie*” (“offspring of the bourgeoisie”) “*ne savant rien en dehors de l'idéologie de l'État*” (“who know nothing outside the ideology of the State”); they are therefore disoriented and bewildered by, and look with terror on, proletarian violence (RV 30/18). They would understand “*que l'on fasse une insurrection lorsqu'on se sent assez solidement organisée pour conquérir l'État*” (that

the people may attempt an insurrection when they feel sufficiently well organized to take over the State”), but violence with no such an aim “*ne saurait être qu’une folie et une caricature odieuse de la révolte*” (“seems to them only folly and an odious caricature of revolt,” RV 31-32/19-20). They thus merely replicate State *force*. Sorel, with some terminological funambulism, differentiates the terms *force* and *violence*, whereby

la force a pour objet d’imposer l’organisation d’un certain ordre social dans lequel une minorité gouverne, tandis que la violence tend à la destruction de cet ordre.

the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order. (RV 219-20/165-66)

Force aims at authority, whereas *violence* at the destruction of authority.

Against the picture of progress put forward by reformist and parliamentary socialism, Sorel feels the need for socialism to place “*le tableau de la catastrophe que la grève générale fournit d’une manière vraiment parfaite*” (“the picture of the complete catastrophe furnished so perfectly by the general strike,” RV 167-68/126). A catastrophe that will be “*absolue et irréformable*” (“absolute and irrevocable,” RV 206/155), will dispel all the reformist illusions about “*les droits primordiaux des hommes*” (“the original rights of man”) and “*Justice immanente*,” and will lead to the ruin of the institutions by which politicians and intellectuals live (RV 29-30/18). The myth of the general strike “*comporte une révolution absolue*” (“implies an absolute revolution,” RV 37-38/24).¹⁵ As such, Sorel emphasises, the proletarian general strike “*renferme tout le socialisme prolétarien*” (“contains within itself the whole of proletarian socialism,” RV 200/150).

1.3. It is curious to note that Benjamin, while in the first mention of the strike calls *Gewalt* the “active” exercise of the right to strike (in Sorelian terms, the “proletarian general strike”) and not the passive one (“political general strike”), when discussing Sorel’s concepts he inverts the terms and states that, whereas the political general strike is *Gewalt*, “*da sie nur eine äußerliche Modifikation der Arbeitsbedingungen veranlaßt*” (“since it causes only an external modification of labour conditions”), the proletarian general strike, as *reines Mittel*, is *gewaltlos* (non-violent). And he explains:

Denn sie geschieht nicht in der Bereitschaft, nach äußerlichen Konzessionen und irgendwelcher Modifikation der Arbeitsbedingungen wieder die Arbeit aufzunehmen, sondern im Entschluß, nur eine gänzlich veränderte Arbeit, eine nicht staatlich erzwungene, wieder aufzunehmen, ein Umsturz, den diese Art des

Streikes nicht sowohl veranlaßt als vielmehr vollzieht.

For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the State, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes as consummates. (GS 2.1:194/SW 1:246)

The contraposition between the verbs *veranlassen* (to cause) and *vollziehen* (to consummate) is important: where the former implies a forceful – one could say “violent” – causing (*lassen*), an “inducing” which can become a “forcing” (*verpflichten*), the latter conveys a sense of “fulfilment” (*Vollziehung*, *Vollbringung*, *Vollendung*). *Veranlassen* belongs to the category of *Erpressung* (extortion) and thus to a politics of means and ends, means to an extortion aimed at the redistribution of violent power, to the “violent” politics of the political general strike. A politics of pure means instead has its *Vollziehung*, its fulfilment, in itself, and thus “consummates” the strike as pure, absolute revolution. As belonging to the category of non-violent, pure means, the proletarian general strike is a form or manifestation of that *reine, unmittelbare Gewalt* (pure, immediate violence) Benjamin later in the essay names *göttliche Gewalt* (divine violence): a violence that is *rechtsvernichtend* (law destroying), *vernichtet grenzenlos* (boundlessly destroys boundaries), is *entsühnend* and *schlagend* (expiating and striking), and is “*auf unblutige Weise letal*” (“lethal without spilling blood,” GS 2.1:199/SW 1:249).

Here we have the terms of the problem: on the one hand, strike as political praxis is considered *aktiv* and thus *Gewalt*, *lethal* and *annihilating*, and its *destructive* character is exalted in its *absoluteness* and *irrevocability*; on the other, as *Nicht-Handeln* (non action), it is named *gewaltlos* (non-violent) and thus *pure means*, *pure mediacy*, and its fulfilment consists in an omission. To try to explain this ambiguity we need to situate strike within a sort of “constellation” constituted by myth, ethics and praxis in the two authors.

2. Myth

2.1. Divine violence is set by Benjamin against the *mythic* violence of law; on the other hand, Sorel describes the proletarian general strike as the most powerful *myth* in the class struggle. The meaning of myth for the two thinkers must thus be explored and explained. Benjamin and Sorel propose two definitions of myth which are not alternative, and not properly in opposition either; they are rather *heterogeneous* and play different, non-

comparable roles in their thought. To affirm therefore that Benjamin subsumes Sorel's notion of general strike *minus* myth is imprecise.¹⁶ The two notions of myth must rather be analysed in relation to the notion of *praxis* as moral action, with which they constitute an inseparable complex.

Benjamin's notion of myth was strongly influenced by Hermann Cohen's philosophy.¹⁷ This concept is strictly connected and inseparable from those of *Schicksal* (fate) and *Schuld* (guilt).¹⁸ In "Schicksal und Charakter" ("Fate and Character," 1919), Benjamin relates *Schicksal* to *Schuld*, but not, he specifies, as it is intended in the ethical sphere; in fact there is no correlation between fate and the concept that in the ethical sphere accompanies guilt, namely *Unschuld* (innocence): "*Beziehung auf die Unschuld kommt also im Schicksal nicht vor*" ("There is [...] no relation of fate to innocence"). Nor to *Glück* (happiness). Happiness is, rather, "*welches den Glücklichen aus der Verkettung der Schicksale und aus dem Netz des eignen herauslöst*" ("what releases the fortunate man from the embroilment of the Fates and from the net of his own fate"). "*Soweit etwas Schicksal ist,*" Benjamin concludes, "*ist es Unglück und Schuld*" ("Insofar as something is fate, it is misfortune and guilt"). The order of fate thus cannot be a religious order; it is rather identified by Benjamin as the order of *Rechts* (law), where "*einzig und allein Unglück und Schuld gelten*" ("misfortune and guilt alone carry weight"). "*Die Gesetze des Schicksals, Unglück und schuld, erhebt das Recht zu Maßen der Person*" ("The laws of fate – misfortune and guilt – are elevated by law to measures of the person"). The order of law mistakenly confuses itself "*mit dem Reiche der Gerechtigkeit*" ("with the realm of justice") (which rather belongs to a religious, or at least moral, order); it is in reality merely "*ein Überrest der dämonischen Existenzstufe der Menschen [...der] sich über die Zeit hinaus erhalten, welche den Sieg über die Dämonen inaugurierte*" ("a residue of the demonic stage of human existence [...] which] has preserved itself long past the time of the victory over the demons"). Law as the realm of fate is thus the realm of a natural, "demonic" necessity, a remnant of the lower stages of human development. It was not in law, but in tragedy, Benjamin writes, that man breached demonic fate for the first time and understood the possibility of freedom. A "moral" freedom which consists in "*im Erbeben jener qualvollen Welt sich aufrichten*" ("rais[ing] himself and shaking that tormented world"), the world of natural, demonic necessity (GS 2.1:174-75/SW 1:203-204). The important corollary here, which will be repeated in "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," is that:

Das Recht verurteilt nicht zur Strafe, sondern zur Schuld. Schicksal ist der Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen. Dieser entspricht der natürlichen Verfassung des Lebendigen, jenem noch nicht restlos

aufgelösten Schein, dem der Mensch so entrückt ist, dass er niemals ganz in ihn eintauchen, sondern unter seiner Herrschaft nur in seinem besten Teil unsichtbar bleiben konnte.

Law condemns not to punishment but to guilt. Fate is the guilt context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living – that semblance, not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it but only invisible in his best part. (GS 2.1:175/SW 1:204)

Every judgement by law thus blindly “*Schicksal mitdiktier[t]*” (“dictate[s] fate”), it imprisons man within the circle of a natural, demonic necessity, reinstating this necessity, striking the natural part in him/her, rather than raising man above the “demonic stage” and into the ethical sphere: “*Der Mensch wird niemals hiervon getroffen, wohl aber das bloße Leben in ihm, das an natürlicher Schuld und dem Unglück Anteil kraft des Scheins hat*” (“It is never man but only the mere life in him that it strikes – the part involved in natural guilt and misfortune by virtue of semblance”). This is clear in the temporality of fate: “*Der Schuldzusammenhang is ganz uneigentlich zeitlich, nach Art und Maß ganz verschieden von der Zeit der Erlösung oder der Musik oder der Wahrheit*” (“the guilt context is temporal in a totally inauthentic way, very different in its kind and measure from the time of redemption, or of music, or of truth”). Unlike the time of redemption, or the time of truth, that is, a time of ethics and decision, the time of fate “*ist eine unselbständige Zeit*” (“is not an autonomous time”), being parasitically dependent on the higher order of necessity, and thus “*hat keine Gegenwart [...] und auch Vergangenheit und Zukunft kennt sie nur in eigentümlichen Abwandlungen*” (“has no present [...] and knows past and future only in curious variations”) (GS 175-76/SW 1:203-204). This is a temporality imprisoned in the a-temporal straightjacket of necessity, what Hamacher calls “Guilt History.”¹⁹

The complex myth-fate-guilt also informs the essay “Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften” (“Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” 1919-1922).²⁰ Benjamin argues that “*Das Mythische ist der Sachgehalt*” (“the mythic is the real material content”) of Goethe’s book: it consists in the exposition of a “*schicksalhafte Art des Daseins, die in einem einzigen Zusammenhang von Schuld und Sühne lebende Naturen umschließt*” (“fateful kind of existence, which encompasses living natures in a single nexus of guilt and expiation. (GS 1.1: 140, 138/SW 1: 309, 307). This “mythic” is defined as the “*Einbeziehung sämtlicher Sachen ins Leben*” (“incorporation of the totality of material things into life”), that is, humanity’s subjugation to “*mythische Natur*” (mythic nature) and its “*dämonische Kräfte*” (daemoniac forces) (GS 1.1:139,

132, 151/ SW 1:308, 303, 317). In the domain of myth, *das Wesen* (essence) is *Dämon* and *das Leben* (life) coincides with *Schicksal* (GS 1.1:157/SW 1:322). Fate is thus defined: “*Unaufhaltsam dagegen entfaltet es sich im verschuldeten Leben. Schicksal ist der Schuldzusammenhang von Lebendigem*” (“fate unfolds inexorably in the culpable life. Fate is the nexus of guilt among the living,” GS 1.1:138/SW 1:307). *Das Schicksalhafte* (the fateful) is described as “*die Schuld, die am Leben sich forterbt*” (“the guilt which is bequeathed through life,” GS 1.1:138/SW 1:307). Again, Benjamin specifies that it is not a question of a *sittlicher* (ethical), but rather of a *natürlicher* guilt, “*in die Menschen nicht durch Entschluß und Handlung, sondern durch Säumen und Feiern geraten*” (“which befalls human beings not by decision and action but by negligence and celebration”):

Wenn sie, nicht des Menschlichen achtend, der Naturmacht verfallen, dann zieht das natürliche Leben, das im Menschen sich die Unschuld nicht länger bewahrt als es an ein höheres sich bindet, dieses hinab. Mit dem Schwinden des übernatürlichen Lebens im Menschen wird sein natürliches Schuld, ohne dass es im Handeln gegen die Sittlichkeit fehle. Denn nun steht es in dem Verband des bloßen Lebens, der am Menschen als Schuld sich bekundet. Dem Unglück, das sie über ihn heraufbeschwört, entgeht er nicht. Wie jede Regung in ihm neue Schuld, wird jede seiner Taten Unheil auf ihn ziehen.

When they turn their attention away from the human and succumb to the power of nature, then natural life, which in man preserves its innocence only so long as natural life binds itself to something higher, drags the human down. With the disappearance of supernatural life in man, his natural life turns into guilt, even without his committing an act contrary to ethics. For now it is in league with mere life, which manifests itself in man as guilt. He does not escape the misfortune that guilt conjures upon him, every one of his deeds will bring disaster upon him. (GS 1.1:139/SW 1:308)

The “mythic” is the prison of a life reduced to “natural life,” that is, “mere life,” guilt and misfortune, which drag the human down and bring disaster upon them: the eternal recurrence of violence.²¹ The ethical sphere is envisaged as a breaking from the daemonic complex of myth-fate-guilt which is proper to natural life, a breaking into “something higher”: *übernatürlichen Lebens* (supernatural life), a life properly human that would originate proper human history.

2.2. In “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” too, *Schicksal* is described as the realm

of necessity, the one and inviolable order to which “*gerade das Bestehende und zumal das Drohende [...] angehört*” (“what exists, and in particular what threatens, belongs”). It is in this realm of necessity that the *Rechtsdrohung* (legal threat, the threat of the law) originates: “*schicksalhaft gekrönte Gewalt [ist die] Ursprung [des Rechts]*” (“violence crowned by fate [is] the origin of law”). In law-as-threat, fate seems imperiously to show itself (GS 2.1:188/SW 1:242). “*Das Schicksal*,” Benjamin writes, “[*liegt*] *der Rechtsgewalt in allen Fällen zugrunde*” (“Fate [...] in all cases underlies legal violence”) and myth is where fate above all manifests itself, thus “*die mythische Gewalt in ihrer urbildlichen Form ist bloße Manifestation der Götter*” (“mythic violence in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods”). The Greek gods epitomise here natural history and their immediate violence “*der rechtsetzenden [Gewalt] sich [...] identisch erweisen möchte*” (“proves [...] identical to lawmaking violence”) and establishes *Macht* (power) as *Recht* (law):

Rechtsetzung ist Machtsetzung und insofern ein Akt von unmittelbarer Manifestation der Gewalt. [...] Macht [ist] das Prinzip aller mythischen Rechtsetzung.

Lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence. [...] power [is] the principle of all mythic lawmaking. (GS 2.1:197-98/SW 1:248)

Macht as the fateful manifestation of the mythic gods/nature is what guarantees all lawmaking violence, and is as such extraneous to *Gerechtigkeit* (justice), to the ethical sphere. Law does not condemn to *Strafe* (punishment) but to *Sühne* (retribution), which befalls as *fate* the unwitting and unsuspecting victim. To remain in the realm of nature (and law) means to be subjected to a necessity that, ambiguously but with certainty, condemns us. Unlike the clarity and univocity of *Gerechtigkeit*, fate and law present a *mythische Zweideutigkeit* (mythic ambiguity) that may not be infringed: this ambiguity is precisely what imprisons the human within the mythic cycle of guilt and retribution, not allowing any space of freedom, of moral action.

Law as a manifestation of the mythic thus condemns the human to remain imprisoned within natural life; it condemns them to the guilt of *bloße Leben* (mere life), whose symbol is *Blut* (blood). “*Die mythische Gewalt ist Blutgewalt über das bloße Leben um ihrer selbst*” and “*fordert Opfer*” (“Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake” and “demands sacrifice,” GS 2.1:200/SW 1:250). This is why mere life cannot be “sanctified”: it is not only *falsch* (false), but even *unedel* (ignoble) to put *Dasein* (existence), that is, mere life, higher than a *gerechtes Dasein* (just existence), an existence that enters the ethical sphere and is thus properly

human. There is no sacredness in the mere fact of being alive, because mere life is “*die gezeichnete Träger der Verschuldung*” (“the marked bearer of guilt”), of an existence that is condemned to remain imprisoned within natural history (GS 2.1:201-202/SW 1:251). If, therefore, “*zeigt die mythische Manifestation der unmittelbaren Gewalt sich im tiefsten mit aller Rechtsgewalt identisch*” (“the mythic manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence”), then its destruction becomes obligatory, and this poses the question of a “*reinen unmittelbaren Gewalt*” (“pure immediate violence,” GS 2.1:199/SW 1:249), a violence that is purely destructive and annihilates the realm of necessity, myth. The political question regarding violence is thus the question of a violence eliminating its own reproducibility, a violence that, qualitatively different from instrumental or mythic violence, would interrupt the natural, cyclic and mimetic circle of violence as response to violence.

2.3. Sorel’s perspective is, unlike Benjamin’s, historical and socio-economical. What he names “myth” is not the realm of necessity but rather what allows for a breaking out of it. In his Marxist perspective, the realm of necessity is identified as an historical product, that is, a *semblance* of necessity, a *fiction*, which consists in considering *natural*, *necessary*, *a-historical* and *immutable* the result of a contingent historical process.²² This alleged necessity is the fiction of the *droit naturel* (natural law): economists have asserted for a long time that “*les relations créées sous le régime de la concurrence dans le régime capitaliste sont parfaitement justes, comme résultant du cours naturel des choses*” (“the relations created under the capitalist regime of competition were perfectly just, because they resulted from the *natural course* of things”). The *droit naturel* is based on a tautology: “*le juste est bon et l’injuste est mauvais*” (“what is just is good and what is unjust is bad”), the a-historicity of which accords perfectly with the philosophy of *force* (RV 26/15). Capitalist society sees itself as a fully organized body, a *machine* working *automatically*, *naturally*. This capitalist phantasmagoria (to use a Marxian/Benjaminian term that Sorel never used), wrapped in the semblance of *naturalness*, imprisons any velleity of free, ethico-political praxis.²³ What can and must disrupt this phantasmagoria is pure revolutionary action, which Sorel identifies in the myth of the proletarian general strike.

Sorel’s myth is thus envisioned as a sort of *impetus* to overcome this *inertia*: the necessary prerequisite for revolutionary political praxis are a feeling for certainty, hope and anticipation. Myth must inspire these feelings without recurring to the old utopianisms, historical scientisms and the optimism of progressive philosophies, it must provide “certainty without determinism,”²⁴ the necessary emotional impetus without proposing images of

the future. The “catalytic power of mythic imagination” is what propels the undoing of State violence.²⁵ Thus the definition:

Les homes qui participent aux grands mouvements sociaux, se re-présentent leur action prochaine sous forme d'images de batailles assurant le triomphe de leur cause. Je proposait de nommer mythes ces constructions.

Men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. I proposed to give the name of “myths” to these constructions. (RV 32/20)

These myths are described as “purs” (pure), they partake of a “*caractère d'infinité*” (“infinite quality”): not *descriptions* of things, but rather “*expressions de volontés*” (“expressions of a will to act”), they are “*identique[s] aux convictions d'un groupe,*” of “*l'activité, les sentiments et les idées des masses populaire se préparant à entrer dans une lutte décisive*” (“identical to the convictions of a group,” of the “activity, the sentiments and the ideas of the masses as they prepare themselves to enter on a decisive struggle”), and thus “*indécomposable[s] en parties qui puissent être appliqués sur un plan de descriptions historiques*” (“unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical descriptions”).²⁶ “*Il faut les prendre en bloc comme des forces historiques*” and “*il faut surtout se garder de comparer les faits accomplis avec les représentations qui avaient été acceptées avant l'action*” (“they should be taken as a whole, as historical forces” and “we should be especially careful not to make any comparison between the outcomes and the pictures people had formed for themselves before the action,” RV 32/20). Myth is a *figure*, Gourgouris notes, whose importance lies more in its potentiality and less in its eventuality.²⁷ Ordinary language is insufficient to this task; therefore myths congeal into

des ensembles d'images capables d'évoquer en bloc et par la seule intuition, avant toute analyse réfléchie, la masse des sentiments qui correspondent aux diverses manifestations de la guerre engagée par le socialisme contre la société moderne.

collections of images which, taken together and through intuition alone, before any considered analyses are made, are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestation of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society. (RV 150/113, emphasis in the original)²⁸

Therefore, the *whole* of socialism is concentrated in the *drame* (drama) of

the general strike, a sort of theatrical representation where the Hegelian reconciliation of opposites has no place and “*tout est bien dessiné, en sorte qu’il ne puisse y avoir qu’une seule interprétation possible du socialisme*” (“everything is clearly mapped out, so that only one interpretation of socialism is possible,” RV 150/113).²⁹ The Bergsonian tone of these statements is evident and Bergson’s influence is repeatedly and explicitly acknowledged by Sorel.³⁰ Myth is assimilated to Bergson’s “*connaissance totale*” (“integral knowledge”), a form of knowledge that is *intense, instinctive, total, indivisible* and *instantaneous*. A knowledge that acts on time, but not by engulfing it into a utopian projection of the past; rather, it forces on the future the instinctive hopes of a whole class. Myths must thus be considered as “*des moyens d’agir sur le présent*” (“a means of acting on the present,” RV 155/116). A passage summarises this point:

Et cependant nous ne saurions agir sans sortir du présent, sans raisonner sur cet avenir qui semble condamné à échapper toujours à notre raison. L’expérience nous prouve que des constructions d’un avenir indéterminé dans les temps peuvent posséder une grande efficacité et n’avoir que bien peu d’inconvénients, lorsqu’elles sont d’une certaine nature ; cela a lieu quand il s’agit de mythes dans lesquels se retrouvent les tendances les plus fortes d’un peuple, d’un parti ou d’une classe, tendances qui viennent se présenter à l’esprit avec l’insistance d’instincts dans toutes les circonstances de la vie, et qui donnent un aspect de pleine réalité à des espoir d’action prochaine sur lesquels se fonde la réforme de la volonté.

And yet we are unable to act without leaving the present, without considering the future, which seems forever condemned to escape our reason. Experience shows that the framing of the future in some indeterminate time may, when it is done in a certain way, be very effective and have few inconveniences; this happens when it is a question of myths, in which are found all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party or of a class, inclinations which recur to the mind with the insistence of instincts in all the circumstances of life, and which give an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action upon which the reform of the will is founded. (RV 152-53/115)³¹

The necessary precondition of pure revolutionary praxis is “*sortir du présent*” and “*construire*” the future in a way that is *not determined*.³²

Myth is thus a sort of narrative, composed of images, words, beliefs, shared by the individuals belonging to a certain group, collective convictions intuited as integral experience. Marco Gervasoni compares Sorel’s

myth to a *language*, which at the same time enters a relation of *use* with, but also shapes the mentality of, the social actors. This is an important point: far from being a *mere means* to a (political) end, Gervasoni points out, Sorel's myth "configures a discourse"; it thus presents no *teleology*, neither instrumental nor eschatological, since the development of socialism described by myth should be continuously revised and modified.³³ According to Gourgouris, the absence of a *telos* is completed by the absence of an *archē*: Sorel's myth has no singular core, it follows no *principle*, has no *origin*, it is an historical, but nevertheless *pure, form*. It is *pure praxis*. Sorel's politics are therefore, for Gourgouris, *non-instrumentalist*, "founded on a mediation of the epistemology of praxis as an *anarchist* act (i.e., an act without *archē* or *telos*)"; myth is the moment of ethical decision, the moment of *krisis*.³⁴

If myth constitutes for Benjamin the daemonic cycle of natural history, which must be broken by the blast of the ethical, for Sorel it is instead that very human (that is, ethical) decision which disrupts the inertia of the present and inaugurates a new historical epoch. Both authors, however, identify as pure, ethical praxis this moment of rupture.

3. Ethics

3.1. Benjamin and Sorel, though from very different theoretical and ideological perspectives, and with a different terminology, both theorise as pure praxis a breaking from the constraints of a cycle of (mythic or phantasmagoric) necessity, a suspension of the continuum of *archē* and *telos* in the instantaneous and disrupting moment of the ethical. It is in this sense that their notion of pure praxis is essentially *an-archic*: unbound from an *archē* and a *telos*, from an origin and a principle which determines it in advance.

This *an-archic* praxis entails a rejection of utopia. Benjamin puts the political general strike into the category of *rechtsetzend Gewalt* ("lawmaking" or "law-positing" violence), whereas the proletarian general strike is defined as *anarchistisch* (GS 2.1:194/SW 1:246). He thus embraces Sorel's rejection of utopia, of any kind of program, because they are inherently *rechtsetzend*, they impose a law onto the future. Sorel argues that "true" Marxism "*condamne toute hypothèse construite par les utopistes sur l'avenir*" ("condemns every hypothesis about the future constructed by the utopians"). As evidence that this was Marx's position, he mentions Lujo Brentano's story about a letter allegedly written by Marx in 1869 to his friend Edward Beesly, who had published an article on the future of the proletariat. Marx, Brentano relates, had looked upon Beesly as a revolutionary

up till then, but, he wrote, henceforth he would look upon him as a reactionary because “*qui compose un programme pour l’avenir est un réactionnaire*” (“whoever draws up a programme for the future is a reactionary”).³⁵ There is no need for programmes of the future, “*les programmes sont réalisés déjà dans l’atelier*” (“the programmes are already worked out in the workshops”); utopias are always composed “*avec du passé et souvent du passé fort reculé*” (“of the past and often of a very far-off past” RV 171, 410-11n/128-29, 128n).³⁶

Utopias, Gourgouris notes, are “projections” and are thus linked to the present by *analogy*: the present is their *archē* and they do not escape its conditioning.³⁷ All but pure praxis. All but pure revolutionary action.³⁸ The socialist revolution must instead constitute “*une transformation irréformable*” (“an irrevocable transformation”), “*une separation absolue entre deux ères de l’histoire*” (“an absolute separation between two historical eras”), which “*ne permettrait pas un retour en arrière*” (“would permit of no turning back”); “*l’inconnu énorme*” (the enormous element of the unknown) that it contains, “*ce qu’a d’effrayant*” (“its terrifying nature”), has always inspired fear and the utopians “*ont employé tout leur art littéraire à essayer d’endormir les âmes par des tableaux si enchanteurs que toute crainte fût bannie*” (“used all their literary art in the endeavour to lull anxiety by pictures of the future so enchanting that all fear might be banished”). Politicians, including socialist reformists, have always embraced the utopian “*science bourgeoise*” in order to reassure the bourgeoisie and promise not to allow the people to “*s’abandonner à ses instincts anarchiques*” (“to give themselves up entirely to their anarchical instincts”); the same politicians and intellectuals have always accused this anarchism “*d’avoir seulement des idées négatives*” (“of having negative ideas only”), and thus of *nihilism* (RV 172-73, 154/129, 204; emphasis in the original).³⁹

3.2. Benjamin’s rejection of programs and images of the future – a constant in his thought – comes from a different tradition,⁴⁰ the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, but leads however to the same definition of pure praxis as fundamentally *an-archic*, with neither *archē* nor *telos*. Benjamin’s early anarchism, Uwe Steiner notes, is a common topic, but has not been analysed in depth.⁴¹ A thorough examination would go beyond the scope of this study; however, this is a fundamental point for the exploration of Benjamin’s early notions of ethics and politics and must be mentioned. A specification made in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” is fundamental: anarchism is here mentioned not only in contraposition to lawmaking utopia, but also in an earlier and short discussion of pacifism. If pacifism as the critique of militarism limits itself to the refusal to acknowledge any constraint toward persons and by declaring “*Erlaubt ist was gefällt*” (What pleases is permitted),

then it becomes a *kindischen Anarchismus* (childish anarchism), which “*schaltet nur die Reflexion auf die sittlich-historische Sphäre und damit auf jeden Sinn von Handlung*” (“merely excludes reflection on the moral and historical spheres, and thereby on any meaning in action”) (GS 2.1:187/SW 1:241). Benjamin’s anarchism cannot thus be taken as a naïf rejection of authority, but must be put in relation to the *Sinn von Handlung* (meaning of action) in the moral-historical sphere (*sittlich-historische Sphäre*). In this sphere, which the philosophy of history must differentiate from the sphere of natural history, the *moral* meaning of action lies precisely in an *an-archic* form of praxis, a praxis that brakes from the mythic *archē* of natural history. This moral praxis must thus be a *caesura*, and here the relation to *Gewalt* is fundamental.

In the fragment “Das Recht zur Gewaltanwendung” (“The Right to Use Force,” 1920), Benjamin emphasises that: “*kein prinzipieller Widerspruch zwischen Gewalt und Sittlichkeit, andererseits aber [...] ein prinzipieller Widerspruch zwischen Sittlichkeit and Staat (bezw. Recht) erblickt wird*” (“no contradiction in principle can be discerned between *Gewalt* and morality,” whereas “a contradiction in principle is perceived between morality and the State [or the law]”). An exposition of this standpoint is identified as one of “*den Aufgaben meiner Moralphilosophie*” (“the tasks of my moral philosophy”). In this context, *Anarchismus*,

sehr wohl für eine Theorie gebraucht werden darf, welche das sittliche Recht nicht der Gewalt als solcher, sondern allein jeder menschlichen Institution, Gemeinschaft oder Individualität abspricht, welche sich ein Monopol auf sie zuspricht oder das Recht auf sie auch nur prinzipiell und allgemein in irgend einer Perspektive sich selbst einräumt, anstatt sie als eine Gabe der göttlichen Macht, als Machtvollkommenheit im einzelnen Falle zu verehren.

may very well be used to describe a theory that denies a moral right not to force as such but to every human institution, community, or individuality that either claims a monopoly over it or in any way claims that right for itself from any point of view, even if only as a general principle, instead of respecting it in specific cases as a gift bestowed by a divine power, as perfection of power. (GS 6:106-107/SW 1:232-33, translation modified)

Mythic law is *in principle* in contradiction with morality, whereas *Gewalt* is not. The use of *Gewalt* cannot be made into a “general principle” (*prinzipiell und allgemein*),⁴² rather, an *an-archic* moral philosophy would recognise and “respect” (*verehren*) it as a divine (superhuman) “gift” (*Gabe*). How to interpret this passage in relation to the *Sinn von Handlung* and the notion of

praxis? We can compare it to a passage of the *Elective Affinities* essay, where Benjamin thus defines *Entscheidung* (decision)⁴³:

Denn im tragischen Worte des Helden ist der Grat der Entscheidung erstiegen, unter dem Schuld und Unschuld des Mythos sich als Abgrund verschlingen. Jenseits von Verschuldung und Unschuld ist das Diesseits von Gut und Böse gegründet, das dem Helden allein [...] erreichbar ist.

For in the tragic words of the hero, the crest of decision is ascended, beneath which the guilt and innocence of the myth engulf each other as an abyss. On the far side of Guilt and Innocence is grounded the here-and-now of Good and Evil, attainable by the hero alone. (GS 1.1:176-77/SW 1:337)

The decision is here the *tragic* praxis which breaks from the daemonic abysses of myth into the ethical sphere. Ethics as the properly human is possible only when the natural cycle of guilt and retribution is broken in the unrepeatable, an-archic “here-and-now” (*Diesseits*) of the moral decision about good and evil. The meaning of this decision is though problematic. *Gewalt* as *critical* caesura cannot be claimed as a right, not only by human institutions or communities, but also by any *Individualität* (individuality); it can only be *respected* as a *gift* in specific cases, a gift bestowed by a *göttlichen Macht* (divine power) as *Machtvollkommenheit*, a coming to perfection of a divine power. Individual agency is here limited to an act of *respect*.

The issue is in fact not human agency, but rather the unfolding of a messianic process. The fragment “Welt und Zeit” (“World and Time,” 1919-1920) attempts a definition of “politics” in relation to this process. “World” here identifies the natural, mythic condition, which “time,” as the process of fulfilment in the revelation of the divine, brings to an end. The end of the world is precisely the *Zerstörung* (destruction) of, and *Befreiung* (liberation) from, natural history. In *die kommende Welt* (the world to come), the world in which divine revelation has been fulfilled, “*echte göttliche Gewalt kann anders als zerstörend [...] sich manifestieren*” (“authentic divine power can manifest itself *other than destructively*”), but the breaking of the divine into the secular world “*atmet [...] Zerstörung*” (“breathes destruction”). In other words, “*In dieser Welt ist höher: göttliche Gewalt als göttliche Gewaltlosigkeit. In der kommenden göttliche Gewaltlosigkeit höher als göttliche Gewalt*” (“In this world, divine power is higher than divine powerlessness; in the world to come, divine powerlessness is higher than divine power”).⁴⁴ Divine *Gewalt* as the caesura that annihilates cannot be made into a general principle or *oberstes Prinzip* (supreme principle), in fact, any *Prinzip* (*archē*) at all, and constitute the base of any organization. *Das*

Soziale (the social) as expression of these organizations is still bound to natural history because it is “*Manifestation gespenstischer und dämonischer Mächte*” (“a manifestation of spectral and demonic powers”).⁴⁵ The divine in this world can manifest itself “*nur in der revolutionären Gewalt*” (“only in revolutionary force”) which is nevertheless identified not with “*unmittelbarer göttlicher Einwirkung*” (“direct divine intervention”), but rather with its *Zurücktreten* (retreat). The “*Gebiet der Politik, des Profanen, der im religiösen Sinne gesetzlosen Leiblichkeit [ist]*” (“the zone of politics, of the profane, of a bodily realm that is without law in a religious sense”) is thus identified with a *retreat*, a zone in which nature/mythic law is suspended and thus constitutes the caesura of the ethical sphere, but also where human agency plays no part. “*Meine Definition von Politik*,” Benjamin writes, is “*die Erfüllung der ungesteigerten Menschhaftigkeit*” (“My definition of politics: the fulfilment of an unimproved humanity”), the messianic end of the world and of natural history, which includes law and the “social.” (GS 6:98-99/SW 1:226-27). The task of *Weltpolitik* (world politics), as identified in the “Theologisch-Politisches Fragment,” is thus to strive for this fulfilment, which implies the *Vergängnis* “*diejenigen Stufen des Menschen, welche Natur sind*” (“passing away of those stages of man that are nature”), and whose method must therefore be called *Nihilismus* (GS 2.1:204/SW 3:306).⁴⁶

Divine *Gewalt* as the messianic caesura entails a nihilistic *Zerstörung* (destruction) as *Befreiung* (liberation) from mythic natural history. However, this destruction is not, as Hamacher would say, “performative,” but it is rather a “suspension.” Hamacher points us to a passage in the *Elective Affinities* essay which elucidates this point. Thus Benjamin describes *die Ausdrucklose* [the expressionless]:

Das Ausdrucklose ist die Kritische Gewalt, welche Schein vom Wesen in der Kunst zwar zu trennen nicht vermag, aber ihnen verwert, sich zu mischen. Diese Gewalt hat es als moralisches Wort. Im Ausdrucklosen erscheint die erhabne Gewalt des Wahren, wie es nach Gesetzen der moralischen Welt die Sprache der wirklichen bestimmt. Dieses nämlich zerschlägt was in allem schönen Schein als die Erbschaft des Chaos noch überdauert: die falsche, irrende Totalität – die absolute. Dieses erst vollendet das Werk, welches es zum Stückwerk zerschlägt, zum Fragmente der wahren Welt, zum Torso eines Symbols.

The expressionless is the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling. It possesses this violence as a moral dictum. In the expres-

sionless, the sublime violence of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. For it shatters whatever still survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality – the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol. (GS 1.1:181/SW 1:340)

Sublime, critical *Gewalt* as the expressionless, the *Cäsur* (caesura) in the artistic media – which Benjamin explains with the help of Hölderlin – is “*das reine Wort, die gegenrhythmische Unterbrechung*” (“the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture”), in which expression comes to a halt, a “standstill” (*sich legt*) (GS 181-82/SW 1:340-41, emphasis added). Likewise, divine, pure *Gewalt* is the annihilating *Unterbrechung* which brings natural history and mythic law to the standstill of their messianic fulfilment.⁴⁷

We can read now the striking conclusion of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”: neither *rechtsetzende Gewalt*, which Benjamin calls *die schaltende* (executive), nor *rechtserhaltende Gewalt*, which he calls *die verwaltete* (administrative), but only *göttliche Gewalt* may be called *die waltende* (GS 2.1:199, 202-203/SW 1:249-50, 252). Here the “fructuous” ambiguity of the verb *walten* – from which *Ge-walt* derives – makes the translation extremely problematic. If we translate *waltende* as “sovereign,” as in the Harvard edition, we must keep in mind that here *walten* cannot be intended as its almost-synonymous *herrschen* (to dominate, to govern), or *gebieten* (to command); better solutions could be *wirken* (to act) or *ausüben* (to wield, to exercise), or even *dasein*, which presents the advantage of losing any “performative” connotation. *Pure Walten* as *pure praxis*, the pure ethical sphere which disrupts myth and violence, with no *archē* or *telos* and not entrappable within the limits of representation, is to be read as the *standstill* of any *Walten/praxis*.

3.3. Sorel, too, puts a high moral emphasis on what he identifies as *violence*. On this point, though, Benjamin’s and Sorel’s thoughts are not only incommensurable, but properly antithetic. It is here, and not on the issue of myth, that their works really diverge. It is not only that their metaphysical premises are extremely distant, or that the arguments put forward in the *Réflexions* fragmentary, confused, often inconsistent or even contradictory. These arguments finally amount, quite consistently, to a kind of *metaphysics of action*, which is not only heterogeneous, but properly antithetic to Benjamin’s notion of pure praxis as “standstill.” Sorel’s profound humanism is necessarily antithetic to Benjamin’s messianic anti-humanism.

In the *Réflexions*, violence is inextricably bound to *virtue*: thus its pri-

mary character is not *instrumental* but rather *moral*.⁴⁸ Sorel repeatedly states that the myth of the proletarian general strike “*donne au socialisme une valeur morale si haute et une si grande loyauté*” (“gives socialism such high moral value and such great honesty,” RV 38/24) and emphasises the “*haute valeur éducative*” (“high educational value,” RV 205/154) of proletarian violence.⁴⁹ The metaphor of war is central to this construction: proletarian struggle, and in particular the proletarian general strike, is compared to, and described as, a war in the proper sense. “*La grève est un phénomène de guerre*” (“The strike is a phenomenon of war,” RV 369/279), Sorel writes, and recurs to many comparisons, especially with the Greek antiquity, “*les guerres de la Liberté*” (“the wars of liberty”) during the French Revolution, and “*la bataille napoléonienne*” (the Napoleonic battle).⁵⁰ War certainly not as the continuation of politics with other means, not as the deployment of State *force*, from which the general strike as moral praxis must be distinguished; rather, a war thus defined:

Tout ce qui touche à la guerre se produit sans haine et sans esprit de vengeance en guerre on ne tue pas les vaincus ; on ne fait pas supporter à des être inoffensifs les conséquences des déboires que les armées peuvent avoir éprouvées sur les champs de bataille ; la force s'étale alors suivant sa nature, sans jamais prétendre rien emprunter aux procédures juridiques que la société engage contre des criminels.

Everything in war is carried out without hatred and without the spirit of revenge; in war the vanquished are not killed; non-combatants are not made to bear the consequences of the disappointments which the armies may have experienced on the field of battle; force is then displayed according to its own nature, without ever professing to borrow from the judicial proceedings which society sets up against criminals. (RV 141/106)

This emphasis on the war metaphor, as commentators highlight, stems from the influence of Proudhon, whom Sorel greatly admired, and especially of his work *La Guerre et la paix* (*War and Peace*, 1861).⁵¹ In turn, Proudhon's notion of the intrinsic morality of war carries a strong Hegelian mark. This morality consists of breaking the inertia of the world and being so the motor of history. What interests Sorel is then not war as a *fact*, but rather a “warring spirit,” the *esprit* of the warrior, which should form and inspire the striker.

The striker, like the soldier in the wars of liberty, considers himself “*un personnage ayant à faire quelque chose de très important dans la bataille*” (“an *individual* having something of importance to do in the battle”), and es-

pecially *un home libre* (a free man); he resembles thus an Homeric or Napoleonic hero. Battles are described as “*des accumulations d’exploits héroïques, accomplis par des individus qui puisaient dans leur enthousiasme les motifs de leur conduite*” (“collections of heroic exploits accomplished by individuals who drew the motives of their conduct from their enthusiasm,” RV 240-41).⁵² The emphasis on heroic and passionate individualism is very strong: the general strike, like the wars of liberty, “*est la manifestation la plus éclatante de la force individualiste dans des masses soulevées*” (“is the most striking manifestation of *individualistic force in the rebellious masses*,” RV 319/243). However, this brand-new ethics, which represents “*le plus haut idéal moral que l’homme ait jamais conçu*” (“the highest moral ideal ever conceived by man”), is also said to consist of “*ce que l’on a toujours regardé comme étant les plus hautes vertus*” (“what have always been regarded as the highest virtues,” RV 298/228).⁵³ It can be reduced to “*un état d’esprit tout épique*” (“an entirely epic state of mind,” RV 329/250), or, in a sentence:

Cet effort vers le mieux qui se manifeste, en dépit de l’absence de toute récompense personnelle, immédiate et proportionnelle, constitue la vertu secrète qui assure le progrès continu dans le monde.

The striving towards excellence, which exists in the absence of any personal, immediate or proportional reward, constitutes the secret virtue that assures the continued progress of the world. (RV 248)

It is evident that this ethos is strongly informed by a notion of the sublime. The morality of praxis resides in an enthusiastic and disinterested *esprit dynamique*, in the end, in the exaltation of action for action’s sake, action deprived of a project. It is true that this praxis is identified with strike, that is, an omission, a *non-action*, and exemplified in myth, an *an-archic* rupture in the continuum of representation, a *purely* destructive negation. However, this rupture does not consist, as for Benjamin, in bringing praxis to a “standstill,” its *dynamis* is rather antithetic to it, it is *effort, striving*; it remains, using Hamacher’s terminology, highly “performative.”

4. Conclusion: Politics

Pure praxis as a form of action with no *archē* and no *telos*, *an-archic*, pure *gesture*. This pure gesture, however, must overcome a (natural or phantasmagorical) *inertia*, must break from a constrictive and immobilising cycle, and is thus *caesura*, *Gewalt*, *violence*. And this is its ethico-political significance. On the other hand, the caesura consists precisely in a *suspension*: it is *strike*. The paths of the two thinkers diverge when Benjamin

inserts this praxis into an anti-humanistic, messianic vision of redemption, whereby the rupture coincides with a *retreat*, and is thus *standstill*; whereas Sorel insists on a dynamic, performative, pure gestuality. In the case of Benjamin, this schema, stripped – though not excessively – of certain esoteric terminology and somewhat adapted to a Marxist language, will constitute the model for his later political and historiographical insights. To force this schema on Sorel might seem a dubious operation, insofar as it runs the risk to interpret him from a Benjaminian perspective. However, his theories, though certainly confused and often inconsistent, offer nonetheless some ground for a re-evaluation and re-interpretation, a ground that Benjamin sized. His lasting interest in the *Réflexions* could testify for a deeper understanding of a text whose ambiguity marked the history of its reception.

A final issue remains to be touched, albeit only tangentially and in the form of a question left open: what kind of politics is established by violence as pure praxis? Benjamin's and Sorel's revolutionary thought is marked by a fundamentally pessimistic nihilism, which, as Jan-Werner Müller writes, goes "beyond intention and instrumentality, but also beyond any intersubjective understanding."⁵⁴ For the Benjamin of these years, the "social" is always and necessarily an instance of myth; though *Unterredung* (talk) is singled out, in "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," as a technique of civil agreement, language as non-violent because inaccessible to mythic violence, as Hamacher has shown, is never performative, never performs communication, but rather suspends it. Ethical, political praxis is not pointed outwards, towards a *Mitsein*; it is rather engulfed by a messianic process of redemption. Sorel widely uses the Marxian terminology of class, proletariat, collective subjects and collective actions; however, the Bergsonian traits of his concept of myth – intuitive, indivisible, unquestionable – and the sublime individualism of his ethics of action, again exclude any form of confrontation or communication. Benjamin's messianic anti-humanism and Sorel's intuitive vitalism finally exclude politics as a plural event. For the Western (liberal) political tradition, based of the dual concept of *praxis* and *lexis* and established in various models of "communicative action" or "politics of friendship," Benjamin's and Sorel's revolutionary nihilism results ultimately *anti-political*.

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NOTES

- ¹ I want to thank Olivia Guaraldo for her insightful and stimulating comments on a first draft of this essay.
- ² Etienne Balibar, "Gewalt," *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, vol. 5, ed. Wolfgang Fritz Haug (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2002), 1270–1308. Werner Hamacher argues, however, that in the context of Benjamin's text "there is no doubt that any translation other than *violence* runs the risk of euphemizing the problems in question here," Werner Hamacher, "Afformative, Strike: Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" trans Dana Hollander, in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 127n. In the translation of Benjamin's essays and fragments here quoted, the term is inconsistently rendered as *violence*, *force* or *power*; I will thus mostly retain the German term in order to emphasise it.
- ³ *Violence* probably combines *vis* (force) and *latus*, the past participle of *ferre* (to carry), and has thus the sense of "to carry force at or toward."
- ⁴ The list of the literature on Sorel-as-apologist of violence – which very often focuses on the "Sorelians" rather than on Sorel's work – would be very long. Few examples are Giuseppe L. Goisis, *Sorel e i soreliani: le metamorfosi dell'attivismo* (Venice: Helvetia, 1983); Jack J. Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1980); a particularly venomous critique can be found in Bernard-Henry Lévy, *L'idéologie française* (Paris: Grasset, 1981).
- ⁵ As emerges from the correspondence (cf. *GB* 2:54, 109, 119, 127, 177, and *GB* 3:9), the project was planned in three parts: 1) "Der wahre Politiker" ("The True Politician"); 2) "Die wahre Politik" ("The True Politics"), to be divided into a) "Der Abbau der Gewalt" ("The Decomposition of Violence," perhaps "Zur Kritik der Gewalt") and b) "Teleologie ohne Endzweck" ("Teleology without Final Purpose"); 3) a philosophical criticism of Paul Scheerbart's utopian novel *Lesabendio*. On the background and development of this project, cf. H. Folkers, "Recht und Politik in Walter Benjamin," in K. Garber und L. Rehm (eds.), *global benjamin*. Internationale Walter-Benjamin-Kongreß (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1999), Bd. 3, 1724-48, and the excellent Uwe Steiner "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political," *New German Critique* 83 (Spring-Summer 2001), 43-88.
- ⁶ Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979); Jaques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1989-1990); Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 3. These assessments of Benjamin's essay are not at all dismissive; they are examples, though, of the perduring "liberal" mistrust towards it.

- ⁷ The establishing of the Société d'Etudes Soréliennes in 1983 and the publication of the *Cahiers Georges Sorel* from the same year are signs among others. In 1989 the journal changed name and continued publication as *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*.
- ⁸ It must be emphasized, with Uwe Steiner, that "politics is, for Benjamin, in the first order a philosophical problem, which remains a persistent foundation of his later political remarks and leads to frequent misunderstandings," Steiner, "The True Politician," 46.
- ⁹ All references to Benjamin's and Sorel's works are made parenthetically in the text. All references to Benjamin's works are provided both to the German text of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (Collected Writings), ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols in 15 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–89), or the *Gesammelte Briefe* (Collected Letters), ed. Christoph Götde and Henri Lonitz, 6 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995–2000) (hereafter cited as *GS* and *GB*, respectively), and to the English translation of the *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996–2003) (hereafter cited as *SW*). All references to Sorel's *Réflexions* are made both to the French text *Réflexions Sur La Violence* (Loverval: Labor, 2006) and to the English translation *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Thomas Ernest Hulme, Jeremi Jennings ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), hereafter cited as *RV* followed by the page number of the French and English editions.
- ¹⁰ Cf. for example Chryssoula Kambas, "Walter Benjamin liest Georges Sorel: 'Réflexions sur la violence'," in *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin* ed. Michael Opiz and Erdmut Wizisla (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992), 250-69 [first published in French as "Walter Benjamin lecteur des *Réflexions sur la violence*," *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 2 (1984), 71-87]; and Jan-Werner Müller, "Myth, Law and Order: Schmitt and Benjamin Read *Reflections on Violence*," *History of European Ideas* 29 (2003), 459-73.
- ¹¹ Cf. the already quoted Hamacher, "Affirmative, Strike"; and Stathis Gourgouris, "The Concept of the Mythical (Schmitt with Sorel)," *Cardozo Law Review* 21 (1999-2000), 1487-514. By Gourgouris cf. also "Enlightenment and *Paranoia*," in *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 119-49.
- ¹² The notion of "pure means," which is central to the essay, is extremely ambiguous and difficult to define. For Peter Fenves it is highly paradoxical; he writes: "Means can be defined as such only if they are means to certain ends, and means are even more dependant on the ends they serve than ends are on the means through which they are accomplished. For pure ends – or to use Kant's term, ends-in-themselves – are those that do without means and are therefore, in their own way, immediate. [...] The idea of a pure means, by contrast, cannot issue into that of a 'means in itself', for something can be declared to be 'in itself' only on the condition that it is in the Aristotelian sense 'perfect', which is to say, at its end. One can speak of a pure means only if the end in view of which means are defined as means is not so much nullified or emptied of content as indefinitely put off, delayed, extended, distended, or perhaps enfolded on – rather than 'in' – itself.

Means cannot be purely severed from the ends they serve, but they can be purified of these ends on the condition that the conclusive end, the final purpose, or the *Endzwecke* in which ends cease to function as further means be suspended for a time or withdraw into its own space. [...] only by exposing the space in which and the time during which final purposes are suspended can one disclose the dimension of pure means," Peter Fenves, "Out of the Order of Number: Benjamin and Irigaray toward a Politics of Pure Means," *Diacritics* 28.1 (Spring 1998), 46-47.

¹³ Another passage quoted by Benjamin goes:

Le renforcement de l'État est à la base de toutes leur conceptions ; dans leurs organisations actuelles les politiciens préparent déjà les cadres d'un pouvoir fort, centralisé, discipliné, qui ne sera pas troublé par les critiques d'une oppositions, qui saura imposer le silence et qui décrètera ses mensonges.

The strengthening of the State is at the basis of all their conceptions; in the organizations which they at present control, the politicians are already preparing the framework of a strong, centralized and disciplined authority, which will not be hampered by the criticism of an opposition, which will be able to enforce silence and which will give currency to its lies. (RV 214/162)

Réflexions sur la violence will be translated into German only in 1928 with the title *Über die Gewalt*. Benjamin thus read it in the original and used his own translation in "Zur Kritik der Gewalt." It is interesting to note that, in the translation of these passages, he used *Staatsgewalt* for the French *État*, *Gewalt* for the French *pouvoir* (which in the English translation is rendered with "authority") and *Kraft* or *Macht* for the French *force* (GS 2.1:193-94).

¹⁴ And also:

Cette grève générale marque, d'une manière très claire, son indifférence pour les profits matériels de la conquête, en affirmant qu'elle se propose de supprimer l'État.

This conception of the general strike manifests in the clearest manner its indifference to the material profits of conquest by affirming that it proposes to suppress the State. (RV 213-14/161)

¹⁵ The passage continues: "*Vous savez, aussi bien que moi, que ce qu'il y a de meilleur dans la conscience moderne est le tourment de l'infini*" ("You know, as well as I, that all that is best in the modern mind is derived from the torment of the infinite," RV 37-38/24). Willy Gianinazzi notes that Sorel prefers the term *absolu*, derived from both German Idealism and Bergson, to *pur*, which presents religious connotations; he thus explicitly emphasises the assonance, but also the difference, between Sorel's and Benjamin's notions of redemptive violence. Cf. Willy Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne: Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2006), 91.

¹⁶ As, for example, Müller does. Cf. "Myth, Law and Order," 469-70.

¹⁷ In various texts, especially in *Ethik des reinen Willens* [*Ethics of Pure Will*, 1907], Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) insisted on the connection between guilt, nature and natural history. Werner Hamacher touches on this point in "Guilt History: Benjamin's Fragment 'Capitalism as Religion'," *Cardozo Law Review*.26 (2004-2005), 887-920; on Cohen's influence on Benjamin, more generally cf. Astrid Deuber-

Mankowsky, *Der frühe Walter Benjamin und Hermann Cohen: jüdische Werte, kritische Philosophie, vergängliche Erfahrung* (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk 8, 2000), and in English, by the same author, "The Ties between Walter Benjamin and Hermann Cohen: A Generally Neglected Chapter in the History of the Impact of Cohen's Philosophy," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 13.1-3 (2004), 127-45.

¹⁸ It is certainly true, as some note, that Benjamin lacked a coherent and consistent theory of myth, and that his encounter with Surrealism and Brechtian theatrical theory led him, as Gourgouris writes, to a "more dialectical understanding of myth." However, in the texts we are concerned with, myth takes a precise and definite connotation, with a consistent and recurrent terminology. Cf. Burkhardt Lindner, "The Passagen-Werk, the Berliner Kindheit, and the Archaeology of the 'Recent Past'," *New German Critique* 39 (Fall 1986), 38-40; Gourgouris, "The Concept of the Mythical," 1490-91. For an overview of the concept of myth in Benjamin cf. Günter Hartung, "Mythos," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 552-72.

¹⁹ Cf. Hamacher, "Guilt History."

²⁰ Published in *Neue Deutsche Beiträge*, 1924-1925.

²¹ Cf. Müller, "Myth, Law and Order," 469-70.

²² Sorel's pages on this subject can be better compared with the analysis of the capitalist *phantasmagoria* in the later, more "Marxist" Benjamin.

²³ Sorel writes :

Lorsqu'on est parvenu au dernier terme historique, l'action de volonté distinctes disparaît et l'ensemble de la société ressemble à un corps organisé, fonctionnant tout seul; les observateurs peuvent alors fonder une science économique qui leur paraît aussi exacte que les sciences de la nature physique.

When we reach the last historical stage, the action of independent will disappears and the whole of society resembles an organized body, working automatically; observers can then establish an economic science which appears to them as exact as the sciences of physical nature. (RV 168-69)

²⁴ Cf. John Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1981), 220-21.

²⁵ Gourgouris, "Enlightenment and *Paranoia*," 141.

²⁶ Gourgouris writes: "Anticipating the usual objections, Sorel quickly clarifies that myths are neither illusions nor facts. Myths are incommensurable to facts because they may exceed facts, much like revolutionary desire (or utopian vision) can never be exhausted in the fact/event of revolution. On the other hand, myths are not illusions, because myths are demonstrable historical forces – imagined alterities of society that make historical action possible. The main characteristic of myth, according to Sorel, is infinity, which is also said to include a sense of indefiniteness. Socialism, as a theory only, is ultimately reducible to its words [...]. But praxis, exemplified for the anarcho-syndicalist Sorel, in the act of the general strike, [...] is irreducible, indefinite, and infinite, both because it is irreducible to its parts (that is, singular), and also because it is interminably reproducible each time anew," Gourgouris, "The Concept of the Mythical," 1499-1500.

²⁷ Gourgouris, "Enlightenment and *Paranoia*," 142.

²⁸ With very similar words Sorel writes:

[la grève générale est] le mythe dans lequel le socialisme s'enferme tout entier, c'est-à-dire une organisation d'images capable d'évoquer instinctivement tous les sentiments qui correspondent aux diverses manifestations de la guerre engagée par le socialisme contre la société moderne. Les grèves ont engendré dans le prolétariat les sentiments les plus nobles, les plus profonds et les plus moteurs qu'il possède ; la grève générale les groupe tous dans un tableau d'ensemble et, par leur rapprochement, donne à chacun d'eux son maximum d'intensité ; faisant appel à des souvenirs très cuisants de conflits particuliers, elle colore d'une vie intense tous les détails de la composition présentée à la conscience. Nous obtenons ainsi cette intuition du socialisme que le langage ne pouvait pas donner d'une manière parfaitement claire – et nous l'obtenons dans un ensemble perçu instantanément.

[the general strike is] the *myth* in which socialism is wholly comprised, i.e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society. Strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, the deepest and the most moving sentiments that they possess; the general strike groups them all in a coordinated picture and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum intensity; appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness. We thus obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness – and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously. (RV 156-57/118)

²⁹ Sorel writes:

Les docteurs de la petite science sont vraiment difficiles à satisfaire. Ils affirment bien haut qu'ils ne veulent admettre dans la pensée que des idées claires et distinctes ; - c'est en fait une règle insuffisante pour l'action, car nous n'exécutons rien de grand sans l'intervention d'images colorées et nettement dessinées, qui absorbent toute notre attention ; - or peut-on trouver quelque chose de plus satisfaisant que la grève générale à leur point de vue ?

The professors of the *little science* are really difficult to satisfy. They assert very loudly that they will only admit into thought ideas that are clear and distinct; - as a matter of fact, this is a rule which is insufficient for purposes of action, for we do nothing great without the help of warmly coloured and sharply defined images which absorb the whole of our attention; - now, is it possible to find anything more satisfying from their point of view that the general strike? (RV 186-87/140)

³⁰ Though Sorel's philosophy of violence is often assumed to be the application of Bergson's biological vitalism, Jeremy Jennings points out that Sorel never used Bergson's key concept, the *élan vital*, and in fact published in *Le Mouvement socialiste* a critical review of Bergson's 1908 book *L'Evolution créatrice*, where he stated his opposition to Bergson's use of biological analogies to explain social phenomena. Cf. Jeremy Jennings, *Syndicalism in France: A Study of Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 109. For criticisms of Sorel's Bergsonism, cf., among others, Goisis, *Sorel e i soreliani*, pp. 165-66, and Paolo Pastori, *Rivoluzione e*

continuità in Proudhon e Sorel (Milan: Giuffrè, 1980), 199n.

- ³¹ Richard Vernon thus comments on this passage: “Sorel is most Bergsonian here, for Bergson, too, argued that what is often regarded as prediction of the future is really only a stretching forward of the present, a mental act which is appropriate to static physical systems but inappropriate to vital phenomena. Vital development is characterized by the emergence of genuine novelty which cannot be deduced from the patterns abstracted from past behaviour; similarly, Sorel held that historical development involved genuine novelty and that the future could never be assumed away,” Richard Vernon, “Rationalism and Commitment in Sorel,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34.3 (July - September 1973), 413.
- ³² Bergson’s philosophy, Gourgouris notes, provides the theoretical armature of Sorel’s myth because it postulates the possibility of personal and social “catalytic moments” where “an imagined alterity is achieved by invoking the experience of the past – not in order to repeat it, but in order to peel off the accumulated inertia of culture on the way to a rejuvenated history. The general strike exemplifies a moment of imagined alterity, whether it will actually succeed or not,” Gourgouris, “The Concept of the Mythical,” 1500-01.
- ³³ Marco Gervasoni, *Georges Sorel: una biografia intellettuale. Socialismo e liberalismo nella Francia della belle époque* (Milan: Unicopli, 1997), 303.
- ³⁴ Gourgouris, “The Concept of the Mythical,” 1500n, emphasis in the original; Gourgouris, “Enlightenment and *Paranomia*,” 149.
- ³⁵ Lujo Brentano (1844-1931) was a German economist and socialist; Edward Spencer Beesly (1831-1915) was an English historian and positivist and a member of the First International.
- ³⁶ A utopia is for Sorel “*le produit d’un travail intellectuel*” (“an intellectual product”):
elle est l’oeuvre de théoriciens qui, après avoir observé et discuté les faits, cherchent à établir un modèle auquel on puisse comparer les sociétés existantes pour mesurer le bien et le mal qu’elles renferment ; c’est une composition d’institutions imaginaires, mais offrant avec des institutions réelles des analogies assez grandes pour que le juriste en puisse raisonner ; c’est une construction démontable dont certains morceaux ont été taillés de manière à pouvoir passer (moyennant quelques corrections d’ajustage) dans une législation prochaine. [...] l’utopie a toujours eu pour effet de diriger les esprits vers des réformes qui pourront être effectuées en morcelant le système.
- it is the work of theorists who, after observing and discussing the facts, seek to establish a model to which they can compare existing societies in order to estimate the amount of good and evil they contain; it is a combination of imaginary institutions having sufficient analogies to real institutions for the jurist to be able to reason about them; it is a construction which can be broken into parts and of which certain pieces have been shaped in such a way that they can (with a few alterations) be fitted into future legislation. [...] the effect of utopias has always been to direct men’s minds towards reforms which can be brought about by patching up the system. (RV 43-44/28-29)
- ³⁷ Gourgouris, “The Concept of the Mythical,” 1501-02.
- ³⁸ Willy Gianinazzi notes the striking similitude between the oppositions

utopie/mythe and *force/violence*: just like utopia, on an ideological level, atrophies the freedom to invent and create, so force, on a political level, creates that school of obedience which founds the State; myth and violence constitute their respective negations. Cf. Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne*, 90-91.

³⁹ This exaltation of an *action deprived of a project* marked the history of Sorel's reception: it lends itself easily to voluntaristic readings which exalt the revolutionary whim of privileging action for action's sake. Cf. among others, Goisis, *Sorel e i soreliani*, 125.

⁴⁰ Though a Jewish element is also present in Marx's refusal of figuring the future.

⁴¹ Steiner, "The True Politician," 69n. To my knowledge, the only study entirely devoted to the topic – albeit not only in Benjamin's early works, but in his thought as a whole – is Michael Lowy, "L'anarchisme messianique de Walter Benjamin," *Les Temps modernes* 40e année 447 (October 1983), 772-94.

⁴² *Verallgemeinerung* (generalisation), Benjamin writes in "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," "*dem Merkmal der Gerechtigkeit [...] widerspricht*" ("contradicts the nature of justice," GS 2.1:196/SW 1:247).

⁴³ *Decision* is etymologically related to *caesura*: the English *decision* comes from the Latin *de-* (off) and *caedere* (to cut), the German *Entscheidung* is composed of *ent-* (off, from) and *scheiden* (to divide), and both echo the Greek *krisis*, from *krinein* (to separate).

⁴⁴ A similar fragment, "Die Bedeutung der Zeit in der moralischen Welt" ("The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe," 1921), adds an important point: if the mythic logic of law is that of *Vergeltung* (retribution), in the *moralischen Welt* (moral universe) (which is opposed to that of law) it is *Vergebung* (forgiveness) that comes out to meet the mythic world. It is time (to which retribution is indifferent) which constitutes the "*laute Sturm der Vergebung*" ("tempestuous storm of forgiveness"), a "*reinigende Orkan*" ("purifying hurricane") which, in the process of obliterating the traces of guilt and misdeeds, "*die Erde darum verwüsten müßte*" ("must lay waste to the world"). "*Gottes Zorn [braust] im Sturm der Vergebung durch die Geschichte, um alles dahinzufegen, was in den Blitzen des göttlichen Wetters auf immer verzehrt werden müßte*" ("God's fury roars through history in the storm of forgiveness, in order to sweep away everything that would be consumed forever in the lightning bolts of divine wrath," GS 6:97-98/SW 1:286-87).

⁴⁵ I find therefore ambiguous Hamacher's emphasis on strike/pure violence as the manifestation of sociality *tout court*, the "sheer mediacy of all social relations," "one which does not permit itself to become effective in any form other than as the bare minimum of its existence," Hamacher, "Afformative, Strike," 120-21.

⁴⁶ As it is known, the dating of this fragment remains a puzzle: Scholem dates it from the early 1920s, and the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, Tiedemann and Schweppenhauser, sided with him; Adorno recalls that Benjamin read it to him in San Remo in late 1937 or early '38, and dates it from this period; the editors of the English translation in the *Selected Writings* preferred Adorno's thesis. I use it here for the consonance of motifs and terminology with the other texts under scrutiny.

⁴⁷ A study of this point can be found in Ashraf Noor, "Walter Benjamin: Time and Justice," *Naharaim: Zeitschrift für deutsch-jüdische Literatur und Kulturgeschichte*,

1.1 (August 2007), 38-74.

⁴⁸ Cf. Goisis, *Sorel e i soreliani*, p. 31. Christopher Finlay emphasises that, as such, violence is fundamental in the transformation, and thus construction, of a “revolutionary subjectivity.” Cf. Christopher J. Finlay, “Violence and Revolutionary Subjectivity: Marx to Žižek,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 5.4 (2006), 382.

⁴⁹ These values are set against what Sorel calls “*lâcheté bourgeoise, qui consiste à toujours céder devant la menace de violences*” (“bourgeois cowardice, which consists in always surrendering before the threat of violence”): the bourgeoisie is condemned to death and disappearance because of its moral lassitude and decadence (RV 86/62-63). This however constitutes a problem for the class struggle: the doctrine of the catastrophic revolution, conveyed by the proletarian general strike, is applicable only if the opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat is extreme and irreconcilable. This is why Sorel opposes reformism, humanitarianism and all doctrines of social peace, which have *abrutie* (stupefied) the European nations; he wants therefore a capitalist class that be *énergique* (energetic) and “*franchement et loyalement réactionnaire*” (“frankly and consistently reactionary,” (RV 234/178), so to re-gain “*les qualités belliqueuses qu’il possédait autrefois*” (“the warlike qualities it formerly possessed”). Proletarian violence can force the decadent bourgeoisie to seek its former energy and thus reach its historical perfection (RV 107/78). Sorel writes:

Si une classe capitaliste est énergique, elle affirme constamment sa volonté de se défendre ; son attitude franchement et loyalement réactionnaire contribue, au moins autant que la violence prolétarienne, à marquer la scission des classes qui est la base de tout le socialisme.

If a capitalist class is energetic, it is constantly affirming its determination to defend itself; its frank and consistently reactionary attitude contributes at least as greatly as proletarian violence towards keeping distinct that cleavage between the classes which is the basis of all socialism. (RV 234/178)

⁵⁰ The great Napoleonic battle is “*celle qui écrase définitivement les vaincus*” (“the one that will crush the vanquished definitively,” RV 86/63), the critical and definitive caesura in history.

⁵¹ Goisis writes that, according to Guy-Grand, *La Guerre et la paix* was greatly admired in the syndicalist circles and was considered Proudhon’s masterpiece. In it, the syndicalists saw the exaltation of agonism as lifestyle and shared the main premise, what they called the kernel of Proudhon’s thought, the discovery of a warring spirit. Cf. Goisis, *Sorel e i soreliani*, 64-69.

⁵² On the strike compared to war, cf. RV 211/159ff.

⁵³ Hannah Arendt notes that “the new values turn out to be not very new. They are a sense of honour, desire for fame and glory, the spirit of fighting without hatred and ‘without the spirit of revenge’, and indifference to material advantages,” Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 70.

⁵⁴ Müller, “Myth, Law and Order,” 469-70.