

Contributi/4

On Sorel and Bergson

The impact of Bergsonian ideas on Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*

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Taking issue against an established view, which reduces the interactions between Bergson and Sorel to a shared 'irrationalism', the article reconstructs successive phases of engagement between the two, focussing on the question of the effective impact of Bergsonian ideas on Sorel's *Reflections on violence*. It identifies two complementary dynamics of engagement: a first one dictated by a philosophical affinity on the conceptualization of human agency and a second, more instrumental one, determined by Sorel's need to find an established and popular philosophical support to his syndicalism. This latter issue was particularly urgent for Sorel, since his previous attempt to implant in France Labriola's and Croce's non-deterministic *materialismo storico* – the original theoretical foundation of Sorelian revisionism – had ended in failure.

Introduction

If the study of a philosophical thought is also the study of its use, Georges Sorel cannot be absent in a history of Bergson's philosophy. A contemporary and a personal acquaintance of Bergson, Sorel had been aware of the philosopher's work since the early 1890s and throughout his career he not only continuously engaged with his production, but also made frequent public remarks concerning the influence of Bergsonian ideas on his own writing. Though the Bergson-Sorel connection is widely acknowledged, it is an issue whose treatment in the available scholarship can be found wanting. Specialist philosophical literature on Bergson tends to avoid going beyond the mere acknowledgment of this connection. Conversely, Bergson is a central reference in Sorelian scholarship, although the examination of Sorel's engagement with the philosopher is generally unsatisfactory: the tendency to explain away the connection through dismissive

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and imprecise labels such as ‘vitalism’ and ‘irrationalism’ pervades this literature, particularly in its Anglophone variants.

The main purpose of this article is to rectify some the shortcomings of the available literature by focussing on the impact of Bergsonian ideas in Sorel’s most well-known text, the *Reflections on violence*. Replacing the widespread idea of a punctual and effectively unproblematic Sorel-Bergson relationship, the article develops a contextualisation of different phases of interactions between the two, offering in this way a framework for future research. The historical overview I develop begins by identifying a philosophical terrain shared by both thinkers since the late 1880s, revolving around questions of scientific truth, determinism, and freedom. It proceeds to delineate the main Bergsonian influence on Sorel, which is a conceptualization of freedom as creative, and hence unpredictable, activity. The reconstruction is then concerned with analysing, first, a period of detachment – approximately between 1894 and 1901-1902, determined by Sorel’s growing interest in Marxism and in social science – and, second, the reasons as to why Sorel, around 1905, in redrafting his *Reflections on violence* for their first French publication as articles, returned to Bergson. Sorel’s superimposition of Bergsonian references upon an already drafted text, I argue, can be accounted for in two ways.

On the one hand, I suggest that Bergsonism represented an established and, importantly, popular philosophical language on which Sorel could rely. From this perspective, the public success of Bergson’s courses at the *Collège de France* appears important. Insofar as these courses familiarized a wide audience with Bergsonism as a philosophical style – in terms of references, images, and tropes – they contributed to generating a public for the *Reflections*, a fact which Sorel was probably aware of. On the other hand, I suggest that, beyond this instrumental rationale, there is a sense in which these references are conceptually appropriate, since they are used in connection to notions of proletarian subjectivity, and hence deal to an extent with the issue of free agency. The Bergsonian influence on the *Reflections*, it follows, pre-dates the *Évolution créatrice* and results from Sorel’s engagement with the philosopher’s earlier works.

1. Beyond an established image

It is necessary to begin tackling the question of the relationship between Bergsonian and Sorelian ideas with a short critical examination of the available literature. The purpose of this exercise is to clarify to the reader how a certain understanding of the Bergson-Sorel relationship has solidified over the years and how it presents substantial shortcomings and interpretative risks.

If we look at philosophical studies, including the specialist philosophical literature on Bergson, we see that they have generally tended to regard Bergson’s connection with Sorel as a marginal issue: an issue which is regularly

acknowledged, often taken for granted, and seldom explored or problematized¹. The recent renaissance of Bergsonian studies spearheaded by Frédéric Worms has so far confirmed this trend: Sorel is a remarkable absence in the volume of the *Annales Bergsoniennes* dedicated to Bergson and politics². The reasons for this relative neglect are many and legitimate: they range from Sorel's disciplinary hybridity to his toxic reputation as a proto-fascist theorist of violence, from the unwillingness to take seriously his more properly philosophical work to the obscurity which still surrounds it. But perhaps the strongest reason is that an established understanding of the relation between the two theorists already exists, and has been developed, starting from the late 1940s, predominantly by Sorelian scholars. Despite its important shortcomings, this account still represents the default starting point for the exploration of this connection³. It is thus necessary to take issue against this literature and point out where it goes wrong.

The image of Sorel on which it relies, to start with, is imprecise. Invariably cast as an intellectual forefather of fascism, he is seen as an irrationalist in philosophy and as an expression of a late 19th century crisis of reason. This portrait however emerges from decades of historiographical conflation between Sorel and Sorelians, between a *belle époque* writer and some of his younger readers. If seen through the eyes of people like Édouard Berth, T.E. Hulme, or Benito Mussolini⁴, Sorel can indeed be said to be replacing the «rationalist» foundations of Marxism with the «anti-Cartesianism of Bergson» and «the

¹ Hisashi Fujita's perceptive essay on Sorel's myth and Bergson's theory of language is an exception to this trend. Though the 'revolutionary' interpretation of Sorel's argument in the *Reflections on Violence* is, to my mind, incorrect, the essay still represents an example of a thorough conceptual engagement on the similarities and differences between certain key ideas of both thinkers. See H. Fujita, *Anarchy and analogy: the violence of language in Bergson and Sorel* [2009], in A. Lefebvre and M. White (eds.), *Bergson, politics, and religion*, Durham, NC 2012, pp. 126-43.

² F. Worms (ed.), *Annales Bergsoniennes V. Bergson et la politique: de Jaurès à aujourd'hui*, Paris 2012. The only short discussion of Sorel is in C. Zanfi, *Le sujet en société chez Bergson: du moi superficiel à la société ouverte*, «Annales Bergsoniennes V», p. 223.

³ There are however important exceptions to this trend. F. Azouvi, *La gloire de Bergson. Essai sur le magistère philosophique*, Paris 2007 is, for example, free from most of the shortcomings examined here, and offers interesting discussions of Sorel's (pp. 111-14, 208-10) and Berth's engagements with Bergson (pp. 211-14). Another exception is Philippe Soulez's *Bergson politique*, Paris 1989, in which we can read an interesting reflection on the posterity of Sorel's Bergsonism (pp. 331-50), and which also offers, through its extensive treatment of Politzer, elements for wider considerations on Bergson and French Marxism.

⁴ «[...] nel grande fiume del fascismo troverete i filoni che si dipartirono dal Sorel [...]», wrote Mussolini in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* in 1932. In the same year, in an interview with the French popular publication *L'Illustration*, he declared that «Georges Sorel a été mon maître. J'estime avec lui qu'à un moment donné la violence est nécessaire. La violence est morale». (17 September 1932, p. 82). The credit which some historiography accords to these acts of public self-representation by a dictator is probably unwarranted. For a preliminary clarification on Sorel and Mussolini, see M. Gervasoni, *Mussolini: un sindacalista rivoluzionario?*, in S. Di Scala and E. Gentile (eds.), *Mussolini socialista*, Bari 2015, pp. 73-97.

Nietzschean cult of revolt»⁵. Judgements such as this one, it should be noted, rely on a narrative connecting certain late 19th century intellectual currents to the advent of fascism: something which explains the emphasis on the immediate posterity of Sorel's ideas, but still does not allow the conflation between these ideas and their ensuing receptions. Though this established view is accurate on occasions, its excessive reliance on the testimony of a younger generation, which had experienced the Great War and Lenin's revolution, remains problematic, for it generates an interference between historiography and reception⁶. Relying on this established Sorelian avatar thus implies interpretative risks, and it must be replaced with a more historically accurate Sorel.

It is, moreover, important to underline Bergson's central role in this standard narrative, one in which the philosopher figures as a prominent 'irrationalist' ally of Sorel. The importance of Bergson in this literature is partly explained by its philologically naïve overreliance on the *Reflections*, a book punctuated by vocal Bergsonian references, and partly by the fact that Bergson, like Sorel, carries to a degree the reputation of an irrationalist⁷. It is thus easy to throw both thinkers into a poorly differentiated category of late 19th century irrationalism and to consolidate a specific understanding of their relation.

This reason/unreason dichotomy however does not do justice to the nuances of the debates of the time: the distinction it imposes is excessively broad, and generates a dangerous loss of complexity in which it is easy to fall into errors⁸. Most importantly perhaps, it prevents one from establishing variations, as it is difficult to trace changes and shifts in the relation between two thinkers who are said to be on the same, irrationalist, side of the barricade. This results a tendency to construe the Bergson-Sorel relation as punctual and immutable, and to express it in extremely synthetic judgements which often conflate different periods and distinct issues: «The Sorelian, voluntarist, vitalist, and antimaterialist form of socialism» writes for example Zeev Sternhell «used Bergsonism [...] and did not hesitate to attack reason. It was a philosophy [...] based on intuition, the cult of energy, and *élan vital*»⁹.

⁵ Z. Sternhell, *The birth of fascist ideology. From cultural rebellion to political revolution*, Princeton, NJ 1994, p. 24. The Nietzscheanism attributed to Sorel is largely misguided, and constitutes a prime example of the shortcomings of the available literature. Widely regarded as a major influence, Nietzsche is in fact virtually absent in Sorel's writing. He gets his only significant discussions in the *Reflections*. He is however important to Berth, and to a number of Sorel's associates. See W. Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne. Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante*, Paris 2006, pp. 172-4. See also the opening Nietzschean quote of J. Darville [É. Berth], *Satellites de la ploutocratie*, «Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon», I, 1912, p. 177.

⁶ This is why a new critical history of Sorel's receptions would be very useful. For a work of this kind, see E. Bandom, *Violence in translation: Georges Sorel, liberalism, and totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock*, «History of Political Thought», XXXVIII, 2017, pp. 733-63.

⁷ See for example the classic G. Lukacs, *The destruction of reason* [1962], Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1981, as well as L. Colletti, *Il Marxismo e Hegel*, Bari 1969, pp. 317-24.

⁸ See for example, M. Antliff, *Avant-garde fascism. The mobilization of myth, art, and culture in France 1909-1939*, Durham, NC 2007, p. 4.

⁹ Sternhell, *Fascist ideology*, p. 24.

The idea of an influence of the notion of *élan vital* on Sorel's syndicalism, however, is as widespread as easy to disprove: the *Reflections* were completed substantially before the first publication of Bergson's *Évolution créatrice*¹⁰. And yet, the view that in his syndicalist period Sorel was «greatly influenced by Bergson's conception of the *élan vital*, and regarded himself as the exponent of a social version of Bergsonian philosophy» remains widely accepted¹¹.

With the help of this example, it should be easy to see how the conventional understanding emerges and how it can go astray. Even setting aside the problematic overreliance on Sorel's first receptions, it is clear that from an insensitivity to context must derive the idea of a punctual engagement, which can then be rendered mistakenly as a direct influence of one of Bergson's most popular ideas, that of *élan vital*, on Sorel's most famous book. To rectify and make this picture more accurate, it is necessary to distinguish separate phases of interaction, and to track the shifts in stakes and concerns which accompanied them.

2. The first engagement: science, determinism, and freedom

The first explicit mention of Henri Bergson in Sorel's writings comes in 1894, in a long text entitled the *Ancienne et nouvelle métaphisique* (henceforth *ANM*): it is here that the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* is famously described as «un arbre vigoureux qui s'élève au milieu des steppes désolées de la philosophie contemporaine»¹². But the date of this first encounter is potentially misleading, and not only because the publication of Bergson's *Essai* dates from 1889. The *ANM* is a text which represents the endpoint and the most coherent formulation of Sorel's early epistemology – an epistemology developed through protracted engagement in debates on psychology, perception, as well as, more widely, on questions of scientific truth, natural determinism, and human freedom. These same debates were followed closely also by Bergson.

In other words, though the encounter occurred only in 1893-1894, it was made possible by a shared engagement on a very similar intellectual terrain, at whose centre lay epistemological questions. More materially, it was also enabled by the reading of the same publications, such as the *Revue Philosophique*¹³.

¹⁰ See S. Sand, *Quelques remarques sur Sorel critique de L'Évolution Créatrice. Quatre lettres inédites de Bergson à Sorel*, «Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle», I, 1983, p. 113.

¹¹ G. D. H. Cole, *A history of socialist thought. Volume III, part I: the Second International 1889-1914*, London 1956, p. 385.

¹² Sorel's work, originally published in four parts in the *Ère Nouvelle*, was reprinted unaltered in 1935 with a preface by Édouard Berth under the title of *D'Aristote à Marx*. For clarity's sake, it is from this edition that I shall be citing the text. G. Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx* [1894], Paris 1935, pp. 167-8.

¹³ We know that even before retiring and moving to Paris, while on his last posting in Perpignan, Sorel often borrowed the *Revue* from the local library, including the 1886 volume (borrowed in August 1889) containing an article by Bergson on hypnosis, *De la simulation inconsciente dans l'état d'hypnotisme*, «Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger», XXII, 1886, pp. 69-75.

There is a further point of contact between Sorel and Bergson's engagements in such debates: they were both formative engagements. For Bergson, this has to do with the young age of the philosopher, for Sorel with the intellectual marginality which he suffered at the time. But for both, these debates represented a point of entrance into the intellectual fray, and thus both found in them some of the most crucial philosophical problems of their respective careers. In order to understand both the sympathy of Sorel towards Bergson and the use he made of certain ideas of the *Essai*, it is thus necessary first to summarily reconstruct this context.

What has been often dubbed the late 19th century crisis of reason in fact amounted to a Europe-wide moment of contestation and redefinition of established understandings of rationality, both scientific and, derivatively, philosophical and ideological. To a considerable extent, the questioning of a model of scientific rationality based on determinism, prediction, and necessary laws was the work of practicing scientists¹⁴. But if the deterministic model had been seriously questioned in the scientific field, it nonetheless remained important in the field of philosophical and public representations of scientific rationality. This was especially true in France, where a certain narrative of progress and rationality which espoused scientific determinism was an important component of a discourse of legitimation of the still precarious republican regime. Under different philosophical guises, first Aristotelian and then Marxist, Sorel, in the years between 1886 and 1894, participated in this movement of contestation and redefinition. It is from this perspective that he first approached Bergsonian ideas.

The conceptual puzzle which animated the French epistemological debate of the late 1880s and the 1890s took as one of its dominant forms that of an exclusive alternative between asserting the capability of science to make claims about the natural world and the possibility of human freedom. The reason as to why such options were overwhelmingly conceived as alternative and in opposition is to be found in the still predominant deterministic understanding of science. If science produces timeless laws and if it is capable of prediction, it is because it deals with deterministic phenomena. But if determinism is true, it follows not only that science can make claims about the world, but also that human freedom is an impossibility and, at best, an illusion. The dichotomy is perhaps illustrated most clearly in an article – read and discussed by Sorel – by Charles Dunan on the notion of causality¹⁵. A critic of strict determinism, Dunan pursues in the second part of the article arguments which try to show

For Sorel's borrowings in Perpignan, see P. Andreu, *Notre maître M. Sorel*, Paris 1953, pp. 320-3. The point is not that Sorel read the piece, but rather that he engaged in the same debates.

¹⁴ For similar considerations on late 19th century irrationalism, see E. Garin, *Note sul pensiero del '900. 'Rinascita dell'idealismo', polemica antipositivistica e 'ragioni' dell'irrazionale*, «Rivista critica di storia della filosofia» XXXIII, 1978, pp. 209-23, 308-25, and 398-404, especially pp. 209-10.

¹⁵ C. Dunan, *Le concept de cause*, «Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger», XXII, 1886, pp. 497-524.

the impossibility of establishing closed and finite causal connections, suggesting, instead, that «chaque phénomène dépend à la fois de la totalité de ses antécédents dans le temps, et probablement aussi de ses coexistants dans l'espace»¹⁶. This means, of course, that scientific causality amounts to a mere simplification. Since it is impossible to fully reconstruct and isolate the causal chains which determine phenomena, «nous nous contentons parfaitement de solutions par à peu près suffisantes pour la pratique»¹⁷. What follows is that «le déterminisme philosophique ou scientifique est une doctrine qu'il est permis de trouver pauvre et stérile» and that full knowledge of nature is to be attained by non-scientific means¹⁸.

In spite of his reputation as an irrationalist, it is striking that Sorel, both in his discussion of Dunan and in the *ANM*, strongly rejects this solution¹⁹. While to a large extent sharing the uneasiness *vis à vis* determinism, he is not comfortable with the solution proposed here: the vindication of human freedom cannot be obtained at the cost of belittling the knowledge produced by scientific activity. In the conceptual puzzle outlined above, Sorel's awkward position is that of attempting to reconcile a strong conception of science, a commitment to the idea that science can make claims about the natural world, with the conceptualization of free human agency. The solution, elaborated most clearly in the *ANM*, will consist in a dualistic epistemology in which a deterministic natural world – which Sorel dubs the *milieu cosmique* – is known by a science elaborated in social and historical conditions, in the realm of what Sorel calls the *milieu artificiel*, a sphere in which human agency exists. What matters to us here, however, is the decisive help which Bergson's *Essai* offered to Sorel in the development of this epistemology. The Bergsonian input is most clear on a specific issue, that of the conceptualization of freedom as creative agency.

In his discussion of the *Essai* in the *ANM*, Sorel concentrates on two key ideas. First, he lauds Bergson for avoiding subjectivist excesses while still offering a valuable conceptualization of how science is to a substantial extent a human creation. In the conclusion of the *Essai*, we read that the forms which we apply to things are not entirely of our own making, but they must emerge from «un compromis entre la matière et l'esprit» and that despite the fact that we «donnons beaucoup à cette matière, nous en recevons sans doute quelque

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 507.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 520.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 523.

¹⁹ Sorel's rejection of a view of science as convention, as an entirely human construction, or as a useful fiction is evident in many of his early epistemological writings, which are animated by a strong and almost moral commitment to the vindication of science. For the discussion of Dunan see G. Sorel, *La cause en physique*, «Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger», XXVI, 1888, pp. 464-80. For a rejection of conventionalism, see his *Deux nouveaux sophismes sur le temps*, «Annales de philosophie chrétienne» XXXVII, 1892, pp. 243-63 and 301-15. As stated, however, the most comprehensive epistemological work of this period remains the *Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique*.

chose»²⁰. Following this Bergsonian lead, Sorel argues that the quantifiable world which must be the object of knowledge of science is not a given, but emerges through a process of active confrontation and engagement between the deeper, inner self and the external world. Science is «une adaptation sociale de l'individu aux conditions de la nature physique»²¹. It is this process of social adaptation to nature which creates a measurable and discrete world capable of being subject to explanation in terms of laws. He approvingly quotes the *Essai* to substantiate this point: «à mesure que se réalisent plus complètement les *conditions de la vie sociale*, à mesure aussi que s'accroît davantage le courant qui entraîne les états de conscience du dedans au dehors, petit à petit ces états se transforment en objets et en choses»²².

From this endorsement of the Bergsonian separation between the deep and the social selves and of the process through which the world of science emerges, Sorel moves on to a new conceptualization of free agency. The stake of the problem of free agency is the one outlined previously, namely that the fact of human liberty imperils the conquests of science: «s'il y a liberté, il n'y a pas de connaissance possible»²³. To preserve liberty without endangering science, Sorel requires a conceptualization of free agency which avoids the suspension of determinism. To prepare the terrain for such an understanding, he draws copiously on Bergson. Since the idea of an undetermined act is paradoxical to Sorel, it follows that the acts which we call free must still be determined by something. This determination comes from the Bergsonian inner self:

Pour M. Bergson la liberté consiste bien toujours dans l'individualité psychologique: mais nous pénétrons, avec lui, sur le véritable terrain du problème. Ce moi fondamental, c'est l'être total agité par l'émotion et débarrassé de tout ce qui provient de l'extérieur. L'auteur a bien raison, quand il voit dans la vie affective ce qui est vraiment et absolument individuel [...]²⁴.

In other words, a certain determination remains, but it comes from the un-mediated inner self. As such, it is effectively beyond the reach of scientific knowledge, because, as seen above, scientific knowledge is only possible through a process of active confrontation with external matter, a process whose absence defines the *moi fondamental*. To attempt such a study – an explanation of the inner self in terms of laws – is, in other words, to fall into a category mistake, and thus it follows that certain psychological processes (those which produce free acts) are ultimately unamenable to the discrete categories through which we examine physical nature. To be sure, Sorel is fully aware that what this implies is

²⁰ H. Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris 1889, p. 170. See also Azouvi, *Gloire de Bergson*, pp. 111-12.

²¹ Sorel, *Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique*, p. 169.

²² Bergson, *Essai*, p. 104, cited in Sorel, *Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique*, p. 169. Emphasis added by Sorel.

²³ Sorel, *Ancienne et nouvelle métaphysique*, p. 177.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 178.

that determinism remains and that, in the last instance, freedom remains illusory. «Sans doute» he writes «ce n'est pas là une vraie liberté, dans le sens attaché à ce mot dans l'usage courant; c'est seulement l'indépendance de l'être»²⁵. This should not surprise us too much. As we have seen, Sorel's position in these years is marked precisely by this difficult drive to reconcile a strong conception of science, which he still connects to determinism, with the possibility of human freedom. The preservation of determinism, in other words, is one of the theoretical objectives Sorel pursues, and it will only be later, through a reading of Vico, that he will abandon this commitment. In 1894, determinism is still important, which means that indeterminism has to be denied, and reduced to «l'action émotionnelle dans la vie»²⁶.

But the Bergsonian input is still decisive, because, on Sorel's reading, it allows for the conceptualization of a psychological sphere which is safeguarded from explanation in terms of causal laws and from which agency can spring. The gaps in Sorel's argumentation are not important here, what is important is to see how, with Bergsonian support, he can find an argument for a theory of freedom as creative agency. The realm of this freedom is the historical world of mankind, the *milieu artificiel*:

C'est l'existence du milieu artificiel qui est la condition fondamentale de notre liberté ; les anciens métaphysiciens se proposaient, sur le libre-arbitre, un problème inintelligible de mécanique : ils voulaient que des machines puissent produire des effets indéterminés [...]. Nous sommes libres en ce sens que nous pouvons construire des appareils qui n'ont aucun modèle dans le milieu cosmique ; nous ne changeons rien aux lois de la nature, mais nous sommes maîtres de créer des séquences ayant une ordonnance qui nous est propre²⁷.

It should be underlined that this view of freedom as creative power, though it has clear points of contact – underlined as we have seen by Sorel himself – with certain passages of the *Essai*, is an idea which Sorel had developed autonomously between 1888 and 1894, and to which he will subscribe for the rest of his career²⁸. There is thus a certain truth to the idea that Bergson here represents for Sorel a philosophical ally more than an influence, the harbinger of a more elaborate philosophical language which Sorel can use to support his own ideas. Though this may indeed be correct, such a formulation carries the risk of underestimating Bergson's impact. Not only the conceptualization of the deep self is essential, as we have highlighted, in the justification of the theory of freedom as agency, but one should not underplay the positive, legitimating effect which the formulation of sympathetic ideas on behalf of someone fully

²⁵ Ivi, p. 179.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 264.

²⁸ As perceptively remarked by Isaiah Berlin, the idea of humans as a species defined by creativity is foundational in Sorel's work. See I. Berlin, *Georges Sorel* [1974], in H. Hardy (ed.), *Against the Current*, Princeton, NJ 2013, p. 376.

embedded within the institutions of knowledge of the Third Republic such as Bergson could have on a heterodox and still relatively marginal intellectual such as Sorel.

3. Bergson and the Reflections on violence: an instrumental use?

As we have seen in the initial section, the *Reflections on violence* are the text from which most scholars derive the idea of an important Bergsonian influence on Sorel. And the *Reflections* are, indeed, a text replete with Bergsonian references, in which Sorel himself seems to explicitly convey this idea. Mention of Bergson's ideas, moreover, occurs when Sorel tries to elucidate the 'mythical' character of the proletarian strike: from the introduction – in which the ideas of the *Essai* and, to a lesser extent, of the *Introduction à la métaphysique*, are mobilized to this effect – to the chapter on the *grève prolétarienne*, Bergson's name almost always appears in connection to what Sorel calls the 'catastrophic conception' of socialism. It is easy to see how the dominant understanding was formed: Bergson's irrationalist philosophy of intuition furnished the metaphysical foundation of Sorel's theory of blind violence.

And yet, there are good reasons to problematize this. To start with, it should be noticed that there is more than a decade between the discussion of freedom in the *ANM* and the *Reflections*, and that this period is marked, at least until 1904, by an almost complete absence of Bergson in Sorel's writing. It is highly revealing, from this perspective, that a work as important as *Matière et mémoire*, published in 1896, went virtually unnoticed by Sorel. Such a long period of disengagement deserves attention, not only because it casts heavy doubts on the idea of a Bergsonian foundation of Sorel's syndicalism, but because it helps in establishing the correct context to the *Reflections*. The most important aspect to highlight is the fact that it was a disengagement dictated by a precise evolution of Sorel's thought, which resulted in an abandonment of the philosophical discussions outlined in the previous section in favour of a more thorough engagement with questions of sociological and historical theory from a Marxist perspective. In other words, while Sorel certainly did keep an eye on Bergson's work²⁹, and though, as we shall see, the question of free agency remained central, the bulk of his intellectual energies were dedicated to demonstrating that «le socialisme est en état de figurer dans le mouvement scientifique moderne»³⁰.

For the last half of the 1890s, Sorel's work revolved around the articulation of a Marxism capable of overcoming the standard objections of historical teleology and economic determinism which were directed against it in France. It is fundamental, moreover, that in this effort of implantation of Marxism in France, Sorel sought assistance not in Bergson, but in an Italian historicist

²⁹ «Je vous signale», he writes to Croce on the 5th of June 1900, «un livre de Bergson sur le *Rire et la signification comique*, qui a paru chez Alcan». See *Lettere di Georges Sorel a B. Croce*, «La Critica» XXV, 1927, p. 362.

³⁰ Sorel to Croce, 20/12/1895, in *Lettere di Sorel a Croce*, p. 38.

tradition which he encountered in his position as editor of the Marxist periodical *Devenir Social*. This brought him to a close reading of Vico's *Scienza Nuova* and to protracted interactions with a young Benedetto Croce and with Antonio Labriola, from which he heavily borrowed. Rejecting determinism in the two classical Marxist guises mentioned above, Sorel's revision of Marxism consisted in a theory of history revolving around the fact of human collective agency, conceptualized along the lines of what we have seen in the *ANM*. This erection of human agency to the fundamental fact of the social world was accompanied by transformations in Sorel's epistemological views: abandoning the idea of explanation in terms of causal laws, Sorel, with the help of Vico's *verum ipsum factum*, embraced a genetic and historicist view of social scientific knowledge³¹. This made Sorel's Marxism into a theory of class, a theoretical focus which was translated politically in terms of anti-parliamentarism and the injunction to proletarian institutions to «rester exclusivement ouvrier»³².

It is important, to understand the relevant philosophical foundations of the *Reflections*, to dwell on the constant – though largely unsuccessful – attempts by Sorel to promote this Italian take on Marxism in his native France. Not only Labriola and Croce's writings were given ample space in the *Devenir Social*³³, but Sorel also insisted for the publication of Labriola's theoretical works in French, writing an important preface for the volume³⁴. This effort of implantation, though eventually unsuccessful, did produce some results. Labriola's translation, for example, was reviewed by both Charles Andler and Émile Durkheim³⁵. On a more personal level, the operation greatly helped Sorel establish himself as an expert on Marxism in France, to the point that in 1902 he was invited to lecture and discuss Marxism in the important *Société Française de Philosophie*, in a session in which Bergson was present though – significantly – silent³⁶. But in both cases, the Italian

³¹ Sorel's genetic view of knowledge, borrowed from Vico and Labriola, consisted in the idea that a given social phenomenon must always be explained in terms of the process through which it emerges from a creative historical subject. On the Vichian roots of this historical epistemology, see I. Berlin, *Vico's concept of knowledge* [1969], in Hardy (ed.), *Against the current*, pp. 140-50.

³² G. Sorel, *L'avenir socialiste des syndicats*, «L'Humanité nouvelle», II, 1898, p. 445. On Sorel's Marxism as a theory of class, it is significant that his last socialist work, a collection of essays, was entitled *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*.

³³ Labriola's *In memoria del manifesto dei comunisti* was written on Sorel's request for the *Devenir Social*, thus appearing first in France and only subsequently in Italy.

³⁴ A. Labriola, *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire*, Paris 1897. For evidence of Sorel's insistence on the importance of the French translation, see Labriola to Croce, 23/4/1896, in S. Miccolis (eds.), *Antonio Labriola: Carteggio*, vol. IV, Napoli 2004, p. 45.

³⁵ E. Durkheim, *La conception matérialiste de l'histoire*, «Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger», XLIV, 1897, pp. 645-51 and C. Andler, *La conception matérialiste de l'histoire d'après M. Labriola*, «Revue de métaphysique et de morale», V, 1897, pp. 644-58.

³⁶ *Séance du 20 Mars 1902 : le matérialisme historique*, «Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie», II, 1902, pp. 91-122.

materialismo storico failed to make a significant impact: it was tamed and reduced to the reassuring and familiar category of «matérialisme économique»³⁷.

The failure of this operation of implantation is of great significance in explaining the abundance of Bergsonian references in the *Reflections*. Having tested directly the resistances of French theorists in accepting a different, non-deterministic, understanding of Marxism, Sorel, in presenting to the public a work which he probably understood was going to be successful, sought a different, more established, and increasingly popular theoretical support: Bergsonian philosophy.

A philologically informed reading of the *Reflections* offers great support to this thesis. It is remarkable, firstly, that a substantial part of the Bergsonian references appear in the introductory 'letter' to Daniel Halévy. Written in 1907³⁸ after the completion of the *Reflections*, this is a text whose declared aim is that of offering explanations to the French «grand public» for whom the 1908 edition was intended: it must thus be read as a self-conscious act of public representation on behalf of Sorel³⁹. It is in the interrogation of the *Reflections's* layered editorial history that we find further confirmation of this thesis. Though scholars tend to rely on different editions of the 1908 text, it is fundamental to point out that this version represents the end point of a writing process which began in the summer of 1905 and was achieved in 1908: first published as a series of articles in Italian in the *Divenire Sociale*, then collected in a volume in Italian, the *Reflections* went through a redrafting for their publication in French, still as articles, in the *Mouvement Socialiste*, and were finally published in French as a volume – with the addition of the 'letter' to Halévy – in 1908⁴⁰. If we confront the different versions, we discover, for example, that Bergson is mentioned only once in the Italian text, and that Bergsonian references multiply with the republication for the *Mouvement Socialiste*. Sorel himself offers an explanation:

Les deux chapitres sur la grève générale, qui ont paru dans le *Divenire Sociale* étaient sensiblement plus courts [...] mais ils m'ont paru obscurs sur certains points ; j'ai mieux développé les parties qui me semblaient d'une intelligence difficile, surtout celles qui ont une affinité avec la philosophie de M. Bergson, parce que cette philosophie est encore peu vulgarisée et qu'elle a une importance majeure pour tous les raisonnements relatifs aux faits sociaux⁴¹.

The key word here is *affinité*, signalling a precise relation between Bergsonian and Sorelian ideas, one of proximity but not of influence. As Willy

³⁷ The expression is used by Durkheim in his review, p. 644. On Durkheim's misreading of Labriola, see A. Tosel, *L'impensé de la sociologie française, ou Labriola lu par Durkheim*, «La Pensée», CCXLIII, 1985, pp. 98-113.

³⁸ G. Sorel, *Lettre à M. Daniel Halévy*, «Le mouvement socialiste», XXII, 1907, pp. 137-65.

³⁹ G. Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, 2nd ed., Paris 1910, p. 1.

⁴⁰ See S. Sand, *Bibliographie des écrits de Sorel*, in J. Julliard and S. Sand (eds.), *Georges Sorel en son temps*, Paris 1985, pp. 425-66.

⁴¹ G. Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence : la grève générale prolétarienne*, «Le mouvement socialiste», XVIII, 1906, p. 256.

Gianinazzi has shown and as close reading of the different versions confirms, Bergsonian language is essentially superimposed upon an already cogent and self-standing argument⁴².

4. A rapprochement: Sorel and Bergson in the early 1900s

Though there is much truth in the theory that Bergson is mobilized in an effort to garner theoretical support through the employment of an established philosophical language, it would be mistaken to understand Sorel's return to Bergson as a purely instrumental move. Treating it as a mere appeal to authority would ignore the very real *affinité* which characterized the two thinkers in the relevant period. It would obscure the conceptual proximities which explain not only the choice of specific Bergsonian texts, but also their deployment in precise parts of Sorel's argument in the *Reflections*. It is important to understand that these two dynamics, the instrumental and the conceptual one, are both at work in determining Sorel's *rapprochement* to Bergsonian philosophy.

Starting from 1900, the disengagement which had marked the latter half of the 1890s was reduced. Sorel's ascendancy in the Parisian intellectual world, occasioned in part also by his public engagement in the Dreyfus controversy, brought him closer to the philosopher, to the point that he got to know him personally: this could have occurred either at the courses at the *Collège de France* or in the gatherings of the *Société Française de Philosophie*⁴³. This proximity to Bergson meant, of course, also a renewed engagement in the main streams of the French philosophical debate of the time, a debate in which issues of agency, science, and determinism were still very much central. For example, if we look at the subjects discussed in the meetings of the *Société*, we see that, from the inaugural 1901 session on the epistemic status of physical laws to the debate on the 'psycho-physical parallelism' in the same year and to repeated treatments of the notion of moral liberty, this set of philosophical problems was still very much alive.

The recent publication of some of Bergson's courses at the *Collège* offers us more substantial hints on the dynamics and reasons of this Sorelian return⁴⁴. At first, these courses seem to offer little of relevance to the *Reflections*. Not only they focus on issues which, on a superficial reading, have little to do with a book concerned with proletarian violence, but they also in large part consist of histories of philosophical articulations of the problems of time of free will, and the history of philosophy is a very marginal register in the *Reflections*. And yet, their examination can shed light on the dynamics of Sorel's *rapprochement* to Bergson.

⁴² See Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne*, pp. 169-72.

⁴³ The earliest document in which Sorel refers to a personal acquaintance with Bergson is a letter to Croce dated 4/12/1903. *Lettere a Croce*, «La Critica», XXVI, 1928, pp. 34-5.

⁴⁴ See H. Bergson, *Histoire de l'idée de temps. Cours au Collège de France 1902-1903*, Paris 2016 and *L'évolution du problème de la liberté. Cours au Collège de France 1904-1905*, Paris 2017.

To start with, it is important that in these courses Bergson, especially in the opening sessions, complemented the historical treatment with more general considerations on the philosophical problems of time and free will in themselves. In addition to a history of philosophy, in other words, the courses offered an engaging introduction to the basics of the Bergsonian reflection on selfhood, science, and action which had characterized the philosopher's work since the *Essai*. The opposition between scientific truth and contingency, for example, is underlined repeatedly by Bergson, sometimes in ways which strikingly mirror Sorel's considerations in the *ANM*: «la science exige un certain déterminisme et [...] s'il n'y a pas un certain déterminisme dans le cours de l'histoire, l'histoire n'est pas une science».⁴⁵ The connection between freedom and agency, a key theme for both Bergson and Sorel, is continuously asserted, such as when Bergson makes of it the key aspect of modern notions of liberty: only in modern philosophy free will becomes «une espèce de création [...] idée absolument inverse de l'idée antique»⁴⁶.

The limitations of language and analytical thought in grasping the fluidity of reality and of the self, to make another example of a classical Bergsonian problem, are repeatedly reminded to the audience. Taking up an issue which he had already dealt with in *Matière et Mémoire*, in the course on the idea of time Bergson declares that «le signe est donc d'essence discontinue; en supposant que la réalité soit une continuité, elle ne peut jamais être exprimée que par une manière discontinue»⁴⁷. Failure to understand the practical and action-oriented nature of language and analytical thought, Bergson continues, leads to the impossibility of understanding the deep self: «c'est cette tendance idéalisante, idéalisatrice de notre psychologie naturelle qui vicie quelquefois d'une manière profonde l'observation de soi-même, la psychologie introspective»⁴⁸. The kind of understanding which is possible of deep interiority, and of the free agency which springs from it, cannot then be conceptual, but must be intuitive, from within: «la liberté est donnée dans une intuition, qui est co-extensive à l'action; c'est l'action se saisissant elle-même dans son accomplissement»⁴⁹.

The point I am making is not simply that Bergson drew on his previous work for the lectures at the *Collège*: it is, more accurately, that the protracted exposition to Bergson's long-developed views familiarized the audience with his philosophical style and with his understanding of specific conceptual puzzles. A lot of the more general considerations offered by Bergson in his courses, in other words, consist of what François Azouvi calls *philosophèmes*, i.e. highly condensed and highly accessible syntheses of Bergsonian ideas. Their insertion in the middle of the historical overviews developed by Bergson in his lectures accustomed the public with a range of references, with a philosophical language, and with a set

⁴⁵ Bergson, *Évolution du problème de la liberté*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Bergson, *Histoire de l'idée de temps*, p. 55.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 57.

⁴⁹ Bergson, *Évolution du problème de la liberté*, p. 69.

of problems. As previously remarked, it is conceivable that, having attended the courses, Sorel noticed this and sought to use the growing familiarity of the French public with Bergsonism to give to his own *Reflections* a wider audience. This constitutes a first reason as to why the courses matter in explaining Sorel's return to Bergson.

It must be added, however, that some of the conceptual ground on which Bergson was threading was not only familiar to Sorel, but also still relevant in the drafting of the *Reflections*. In fact, precisely insofar as they drew on Bergson's previous work and synthesized the philosopher's views on free will, science, and subjectivity, the courses intervened on a number of issues which still were of interest to Sorel. If, politically, Sorelian syndicalism is associated with anti-parliamentarism, we must not forget that, theoretically, it revolved around the attempt to make space for human agency and for its understanding in social science. As such, it was fully compatible with this statement by Bergson in his course on the problem of liberty:

On ne croit plus au destin en ce qui concerne l'individu, mais on croit au destin dès qu'il s'agit des peuples. L'histoire de la sociologie c'est le vieux fatalisme en général ; il y a des exceptions, mais au fond c'est le fatalisme [...] le fatalisme historique raisonne généralement comme si c'était à ce qui croient à la contingence des événements historiques, à la contingence des événements humains, à faire la preuve, à eux à démontrer la liberté, la liberté du peuple dans ce qu'on pourrait appeler la création de son histoire⁵⁰.

Though the more substantial philosophical support for Sorel's anti-determinist revision of Marxism had been offered by Vico and Labriola, the relevance of these Bergsonian considerations to Sorel's theoretical project is evident. More in general, the question of determinism in history had always been central to Sorel's reflection on social science. In his early Marxist days, before the encounter with Italian historicism, Sorel had, for example, criticized Durkheimian sociology for failing to appreciate «l'action considérée dans l'agent», which amounted to «ce qui est vraiment humain dans la sociologie»⁵¹. At the time of the courses there was, in other words, still enough of a shared conceptual ground between the two thinkers to justify Sorel's pertinent use of Bergsonian language in the drafting of his book. As we shall see, the question of historical determinism, the connection between freedom and agency, and the kind of understanding we can have of human action are all important subtexts of the *Reflections*.

5. Notions of subjectivity in the *Reflections on violence*

Though the timing of these courses is consistent with the editorial chronology of the *Reflections* – the course on free will takes place mere months

⁵⁰ Ivi, pp. 41-2.

⁵¹ G. Sorel, *Les théories de M. Durkheim*, «Le Devenir Social», I, 1895, pp. 168-9

before the beginning of the initial drafting – the question of their relevance partially remains. In other words, how are these insights on subjectivity, science, and agency important to a text concerned with social conflict? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand that contrary to the established view, the *Reflections* are not a book about revolution, but, instead, one about class, and hence about collective subjectivity.

Written in the midst of the second industrial revolution, in a context marked by the beginnings of the welfare state and the related rise of ideologies of social peace, the *Reflections* essentially grapple with one problem: how to preserve the class identity of the proletariat in a moment in which capitalist development is failing to produce the social polarization which Marx saw as essential to the emergence of a proletarian revolutionary subject. As Sorel writes:

[...] Nous sommes en présence d'un fait nouveau et fort imprévu: une bourgeoisie qui cherche à atténuer sa force : faut-il croire que la conception Marxiste est morte ? Nullement, car la violence prolétarienne entre en scène en même temps que la paix sociale prétend apaiser les conflits [...] [elle] enferme les patrons dans leur rôle de producteurs et tend à restaurer la structure des classes au fur et à mesure que celles-ci semblaient se mêler [...] ⁵².

As can be clearly evinced, Sorelian violence is not revolutionary, and the overthrow of bourgeois rule is not its objective. The objective of Sorelian violence is, optimistically, class formation, and pessimistically class preservation. But to achieve this, bare violence is insufficient. As Sorel continually repeats through the book, what matters is the 'ideological' or 'educational' effect of violence, i.e. the capacity of episodes of social conflict to generate class identity. For violence to have this effect, a myth is needed. Episodes of violent confrontation with the representatives of the bourgeois class must be approached, experienced, and narrated through ideological lenses to have the desired effect: this mildly violent and highly ideological practice of social conflict is what Sorel calls the *grève prolétarienne*. The political myth is thus nothing else than the embryo of revolutionary class consciousness, an embryo which, if applied to a practice of social conflict, can guarantee the flourishing – or at least the preservation – of proletarian subjectivity.

This link between myth and subjectivity is important because, in its connection with free agency, it represents a common ground between Sorel and Bergson. This explains why Bergsonian references are overwhelmingly deployed in connection to the idea of myth, i.e. because myth is where deep subjectivity is forged. Though Bergson reasons predominantly on an individual level while Sorel on a collective one, they both reflect on free agency, which they see as the essential component of subjectivity. Hence, it is unsurprising to see Sorel, after a discussion of the *Essai* and of the connection which it postulates between the deep self and creative activity, explain the psychology of action in this way:

⁵² Sorel, *Réflexions*, p. 110.

On devrait abandonner l'idée que l'âme est comparable à un mobile qui se meut, d'après une loi plus ou moins mécanique, vers divers motifs donnés par la nature. Quand nous agissons, c'est que nous avons créé un monde tout artificiel, placé en avant du présent, formé de mouvements qui dépendent de nous. Ainsi notre liberté devient parfaitement intelligible⁵³.

And it is equally unsurprising to see the Bergsonian notion of intuition – referenced from the *Introduction à la métaphysique* – used to explain the kind of cognizance that it is possible to have of a myth. Since the myth of the general strike emanates from the deepest revolutionary feelings of the proletariat and thus is, however embryonically, the expression of a collective subjectivity, it follows that it can only be apprehended intuitively, from within. For the proletariat to grasp its own subjectivity, it must «faire appel à des ensembles d'images capable 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»⁵⁴. This method, continues Sorel, «a tous les avantages que présente la connaissance totale sur l'analyse, d'après la doctrine de Bergson»⁵⁵. This also implies that, contrary to a very established opinion, the Sorelian myth is falsifiable. Since it is the emanation of a subjectivity in the process of self-construction, it follows that it must resonate with this subjectivity, that it must be, in other words, authentic. To ascertain this authenticity, empirical elements are redundant, but subjective testimony is decisive:

Nous avons à interroger les hommes qui prennent une part très active au mouvement réellement révolutionnaire au sein du prolétariat, qui n'aspirent point à monter dans la bourgeoisie et dont l'esprit n'est pas dominé pas des préjugés corporatifs. Ces hommes peuvent se tromper sur une infinité de questions de politique, d'économie ou de morale, mais leur témoignage est décisif, souverain et irréformable quand il s'agit de savoir quelles sont les représentations qui agissent sur eux et sur leur camarades de la manière la plus efficace [...]⁵⁶.

As we can see, though superimposed on an already coherent and self-standing argument, the use of Bergsonian ideas is not only fully pertinent, but also reveals the enduring centrality of the set of problems on science, determinism, and, above all, subjectivity as free agency which we examined in previous sections. Issues of biology, of vitalism, of *élan vital* are thus alien to the text – the only reference to the *Évolution créatrice* will be added in the second

⁵³ Ivi, pp. 36-7.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 161. As Gianinazzi has remarked (*Naissance du mythe moderne*, p. 170) the initial Italian version speaks of «un insieme di immagini capaci di evocare istintivamente i sentimenti che han loro origine nella guerra impegnata dal socialismo contro la moderna società». As we can see, the notion of intuition is superimposed subsequently without altering greatly the argument. See G. Sorel, *Lo sciopero generale*, «Divenire sociale», I, 1905, p. 375. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ Sorel, *Réflexions*, p. 161.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 168.

edition of 1910 and must be reconducted to a different phase of engagement between the two.

6. Conclusion

The publication of the *Évolution créatrice* inaugurates a different phase, which, if not less important, is irrelevant to the understanding of the Bergsonian references in the *Reflections*. After 1908, it should be remarked, the conditions of engagement change radically: the success of the book will give to Sorel a public persona which he did not have before, resulting in a multiplication of his references to Bergson as well as in a diversification of the debates in which they occur. Philosophically, the last phase of Sorel's life is marked by a radicalization of the historicist tendencies which had always marked his reflection, and this colours significantly his interactions with Bergson. It is this historicism, for example, which animates the respectful critique that he will dedicate to the *Évolution créatrice*, essentially questioning the legitimacy of Bergson's leap from the psychological to the cosmological scale, and protesting that what is left out – the crucial socio-historical middle ground – represents a more fertile field of enquiry⁵⁷. The main axes of engagement with Bergson, in this period, are two, and concern the investigation of the role of philosophy *vis à vis* the natural sciences and religious experience⁵⁸. Both axes are informed not only by Sorel's radicalized historicism, but also by the philosophical discovery of pragmatism in France, an endeavour to which both thinkers participated actively⁵⁹.

By way of conclusion, it may be observed that in this essay we have outlined two dynamics of engagement which, at a superficial glance, might appear as opposite. On the one hand, as we have seen, there is a substantial conceptual affinity between Bergsonian and Sorelian ideas, and it is this affinity which, in spite of a number of still important differences between the two, allowed the engagement to occur. On the other hand, we have highlighted an instrumental use of Bergson on behalf of Sorel: in the wake of his failure to implant a non-deterministic Marxism centred on agency in France, Sorel resorted to Bergsonism in an attempt to offer to his syndicalism theoretical foundations which were not

⁵⁷ See G. Sorel, *L'évolution créatrice*, «Le mouvement socialiste», XXII, 1907, pp. 257-82, 478-94 and XXIII, 1908, pp. 34-52, 184-94, 276-94. For a discussion of Sorel's critique of *Évolution créatrice* see C. Zanfi, *Bergson, la tecnica, la guerra. Una rilettura delle due fonti*, Bologna 2009, pp. 91-92.

⁵⁸ Beyond the *Utilité du pragmatisme*, the most systematic treatments of the issues are G. Sorel, *La religion d'aujourd'hui*, «Revue de métaphysique et de morale», XVII, 1909, pp. 240-73 and 413-47 (a text in which Bergson is however only a marginal reference) and G. Sorel, *Vue sur les problèmes de la philosophie*, «Revue de métaphysique et de morale», XVIII, 1910, pp. 581-613 and XIX, 1911, pp. 64-99.

⁵⁹ For a preliminary account of Sorel's engagement with pragmatism, I allow myself to refer to my *Introduction au pragmatisme de Georges Sorel*, «Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle», XXXII, 2014, pp. 93-110.

only fully embedded in the main streams of contemporary French thought, but which had reached a considerable level of popularity beyond the academy⁶⁰.

The relation between these two modes of engagement is, in fact, one of complementarity: it was precisely the rising popularity of Bergson's philosophy which brought Sorel back to the philosopher, and which convinced him to restart an engagement from which he had previously moved away. It is on this second level, that of Bergson's popularity, that the impact of the courses at the *Collège* on Sorel's *Reflections* can be appreciated most fully. While the philosophical content of the courses did not differ greatly from that which had marked the initial engagement between the two, the rising popularity of Bergsonian ideas in French culture made them particularly appealing to a Sorel who was about to publish a book self-consciously addressed not to his usual audience, but to the *grand public*.

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⁶⁰ See F. Azouvi, *La gloire de Bergson*, pp. 59-130 and 173-234.