

are of the same kind, and are produced by a uniform process of "reasoning."

In the two preceding chapters I dealt with the first assumption, and attempted to show that it is important for a politician to realise that men do not always act on inferences as to means and ends. I argued that men often act in politics under the immediate stimulus of affection and instinct, and that affection and interest may be directed towards political entities which are very different from those facts in the world around us which we can discover by deliberate observation and analysis.

In this chapter I propose to consider the second assumption, and to inquire how far it is true that men, when they do form inferences as to the result of their political actions, always form them by a process of reasoning. . . .

[The truth is] that most of the political opinions of most men are the result, not of reasoning tested by experience, but of unconscious or half-conscious inference fixed by habit. It is indeed mainly in the formation of tracks of thought that habit shows its power in politics. . . .

Some men even seem to reverence most those of their opinions whose origin has least to do with deliberate reasoning. When Mr. Barrie's Bowie Haggart said: "I am of opinion that the works of Burns is of an immoral tendency. I have not read them myself, but such is my opinion," he was comparing the merely rational conclusion which might have resulted from a reading of Burns' works with the conviction about them which he found ready-made in his mind, and which was the more sacred to him and more intimately his own, because he did not know how it was produced. . . .

Writers on the "psychology of the crowd" have pointed out the effect of excitement and numbers in substituting non-rational for rational inference. Any cause, however, which prevents a man from giving full attention to his mental processes may produce the phenomena of non-rational inference in an extreme degree. I have often watched in some small sub-committee the method by which either of the two men with a real genius for committee work whom I know could control his colleagues. The process was most successful towards the end of an afternoon, when the members were tired and somewhat dazed with the effort of following a rapid talker through a mass of unfamiliar detail. If at that point the operator slightly quickened the flow of his information, and slightly emphasised the assumption that he was being thoroughly understood, he could put some at least of his colleagues into a sort of walking trance, in which they would have cheerfully assented to the proposition that the best means of securing, e.g., the permanence of private schools was a large and immediate increase in the number of public schools. . . .

## GEORGES SOREL: *Myth in History* \*

*Reflections on Violence*, from which the following excerpts are taken, originally appeared as journal articles (1906). They were later gathered together and published as a book for which the author provided a special introduction in the form of a letter to Daniel Halevy. This letter contains many of his key ideas: pessimism, anti-intellectualism (like Graham Wallas, he attacked the "intellectualist fallacy"), the decadence of the middle class, and especially the social myth and the role he thought it played in history. The text developed these ideas, enlarging on the general strike as the means of social revolution. His philosophy of history, although obviously influenced by Marx, was essentially un-Marxist. It owed something to the philosopher Henri Bergson, whom Sorel greatly admired. Georges Sorel (1847-1922), French engineer and syndicalist, is perhaps best remembered for the influence he is supposed to have had on fascist thinking through his idea of the "myth."

### On Pessimism

My *Reflections on Violence* have irritated many people on account of the pessimistic conception on which the whole of the study rests; but I know that you do not share this impression; you have brilliantly shown in your *Histoire de quatre ans* that you despise the deceptive hopes with which the weak solace themselves. We can then talk pessimism freely to each other, and I am happy to have a correspondent who does not revolt against a doctrine without which nothing very great has been accomplished in this world. I have felt for some time that Greek philosophy did not produce any great moral result, simply because it was, as a rule, very optimistic. Socrates was at times optimistic to an almost unbearable degree. . . .

The immense successes obtained by industrial civilisation has created the belief that, in the near future, happiness will be produced automatically for everybody. "The present century," writes Hartmann, "has for the last forty years only entered the third period of illusion. In the enthusiasm and enchantment of its hopes, it rushes towards the realisation of the promise of a new age of gold. Providence takes care that the anticipations of the isolated thinker do not disarrange the course of history by prematurely gaining too many adherents." He thinks that for this reason his readers will have some difficulty in accepting his criticism of the illusion of future happiness. The leaders of the contemporary world are pushed towards optimism by economic forces. . . .

\* Georges Sorel: *Reflections on Violence*, T. E. Hulme (trans.) pp. 7-11, 22-24, 28-33, 35, 84-85, 130-136, 298-299. Copyright 1916 by George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Reprinted by permission of George Allen & Unwin Ltd.



The optimist in politics is an inconstant and even dangerous man, because he takes no account of the great difficulties presented by his projects; these projects seem to him to possess a force of their own, which tends to bring about their realisation all the more easily as they are, in his opinion, destined to produce the happiest results. He frequently thinks that small reforms in the political constitution, and, above all, in the personnel of the government, will be sufficient to direct social development in such a way as to mitigate those evils of the contemporary world which seem so harsh to the sensitive mind. . . .

Pessimism is quite a different thing from the caricatures of it which are usually presented to us; it is a philosophy of conduct rather than a theory of the world; it considers the *march towards deliverance* as narrowly conditioned, on the one hand, by the experimental knowledge that we have acquired from the obstacles which oppose themselves to the satisfaction of our imaginations (or, if we like, by the feeling of social determinism), and, on the other, by a profound conviction of our natural weakness. These two aspects of pessimism should never be separated, although, as a rule, scarcely any attention is paid to their close connection.

1. The conception of pessimism springs from the fact that literary historians have been very much struck with the complaints made by the great poets of antiquity on the subject of the griefs which constantly threaten mankind. There are few people who have not, at one time or another, experienced a piece of good fortune; but we are surrounded by malevolent forces always ready to spring out on us from some ambush and overwhelm us. Hence the very real sufferings which arouse the sympathy of nearly all men, even of those who have been more favourably treated by fortune; so that the literature of grief has always had a certain success throughout the whole course of history. But a study of this kind of literature would give us a very imperfect idea of pessimism. It may be laid down as a general rule, that in order to understand a doctrine it is not sufficient to study it in an abstract manner, nor even as it occurs in isolated people: it is necessary to find out how it has been manifested in historical groups; it is for this reason that I am here led to add the two elements that were mentioned earlier.

2. The pessimist regards social conditions as forming a system bound together by an iron law which cannot be evaded, so that the system is given, as it were, in one block, and cannot disappear except in a catastrophe which involves the whole. If this theory is admitted, it then becomes absurd to make certain wicked men responsible for the evils from which society suffers; the pessimist is not subject to the sanguinary follies of the optimist, infatuated by the unexpected obstacles that his projects meet with; he does not dream of bringing about the happiness of future generations by slaughtering existing egoists.

3. The most fundamental element of pessimism is its method of conceiving the path towards deliverance. A man would not go very far in the examination either of the laws of his own wretchedness or of fate, which so much shock the ingenuousness of our pride, if he were not borne up by the hope of putting an end to these tyrannies by an effort, to be attempted with the help of a whole band of companions. . . .

#### New Views of Man and History

In the course of this study one thing has always been present in my mind, which seemed to me so evident that I did not think it worth while to lay much stress on it—that men who are participating in a great social movement always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. These constructions, knowledge of which is so important for historians, I propose to call myths; the syndicalist “general strike” and Marx’s catastrophic revolution are such myths. As remarkable examples of such myths, I have given those which were constructed by primitive Christianity, by the Reformation, by the Revolution and by the followers of Mazzini. I now wish to show that we should not attempt to analyse such groups of images in the way that we analyse a thing into its elements, but that they must be taken as a whole, as historical forces, and that we should be especially careful not to make any comparison between accomplished fact and the picture people had formed for themselves before action. . . .

In employing the term myth I believed that I had made a happy choice, because I thus put myself in a position to refuse any discussion whatever with the people who wish to submit the idea of a general strike to a detailed criticism, and who accumulate objections against its practical possibility. It appears, on the contrary, that I had made a most unfortunate choice, for while some told me that myths were only suitable to a primitive state of society, others imagined that I thought the modern world might be moved by illusions analogous in nature to those which Renan thought might usefully replace religion. But there has been a worse misunderstanding than this even, for it has been asserted that my theory of myths was only a kind of lawyer’s plea, a falsification of the real opinions of the revolutionaries, the *sophistry of an intellectualist*.

If this were true, I should not have been exactly fortunate, for I have always tried to escape the influence of that intellectualist philosophy, which seems to me a great hindrance to the historian who allows himself to be dominated by it. The contradiction that exists between this philosophy and the true understanding of events has often struck the readers of Renan. Renan is continually wavering between his own intuition, which was nearly always admirable, and a philosophy which cannot touch history without falling into platitudes; but, alas, he too often



believed himself bound to think in accordance with the *scientific opinions* of his day.

The intellectualist philosophy finds itself unable to explain phenomena like the following—the sacrifice of his life which the soldier of Napoleon made in order to have had the honour of taking part in “immortal deeds” and of living in the glory of France, knowing all the time that “he would always be a poor man”; then, again, the extraordinary virtues shown by the Romans who resigned themselves to a frightful inequality and who suffered so much to conquer the world. . . .

The mind of man is so constituted that it cannot remain content with the mere observation of facts, but always attempts to penetrate into the inner reason of things. I therefore ask myself whether it might not be desirable to study this theory of myths more thoroughly, utilising the enlightenment we owe to the Bergsonian philosophy. . . .

Bergson asks us to consider the inner depths of the mind and what happens there during a creative moment. “There are,” he says, “two different selves, one of which is, as it were, the external projection of the other, its spatial and, so to speak, social representation. We reach the former by deep introspection, which leads us to grasp our inner states as living things, constantly *becoming*, as states not amenable to measure. . . . But the moments at which we thus grasp ourselves are rare, and that is just why we are rarely free. The greater part of our time we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colourless shadow. . . . Hence we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we are acted rather than act ourselves. To act freely is to recover possession of oneself, and to get back into pure duration. . . .

It seems to me that this psychology of the deeper life must be represented in the following way. We must abandon the idea that the soul can be compared to something moving, which, obeying a more or less mechanical law, is impelled in the direction of certain given motive forces. To say that we are acting, implies that we are creating an imaginary world placed ahead of the present world and composed of movements which depend entirely on us. In this way our freedom becomes perfectly intelligible. Starting from a study of these artificial constructions which embrace everything that interests us, several philosophers, inspired by Bergsonian doctrines, have been led to formulate a rather startling theory. Edouard Le Roy, for example, says: “Our real body is the entire universe in as far as it is experienced by us. And what common sense more strictly calls our body is only the region of least unconsciousness and greatest liberty in this greater body, the part which we most directly control and by means of which we are able to act on the rest.” But we must not, as this subtle philosopher constantly does, confuse a passing state of our willing activity with the stable affirmations of science.

These artificial worlds generally disappear from our minds without leaving any trace in our memory; but when the masses are deeply moved it then becomes possible to trace the outlines of the kind of representation which constitutes a social myth. . . .

As long as there are no myths accepted by the masses, one may go on talking of revolts indefinitely, without ever provoking any revolutionary movement; this is what gives such importance to the general strike and renders it so odious to socialists who are afraid of a revolution; they do all they can to shake the confidence felt by the workers in the preparations they are making for the revolution; and in order to succeed in this they cast ridicule on the idea of the general strike—the only idea that could have any value as a motive force. One of the chief means employed by them is to represent it as a Utopia; this is easy enough, because there are very few myths which are perfectly free from any Utopian element.

The revolutionary myths which exist at the present time are almost free from any such mixture; by means of them it is possible to understand the activity, the feelings and the ideas of the masses preparing themselves to enter on a decisive struggle; the myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act. A Utopia is, on the contrary, an intellectual product; it is the work of theorists who, after observing and discussing the known fact, seek to establish a model to which they can compare existing society in order to estimate the amount of good and evil it contains. 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 taken to pieces, and certain parts of it have been shaped in such a way that they can (with a few alterations by way of adjustment) be fitted into approaching legislation. Whilst contemporary myths lead men to prepare themselves for a combat which will destroy the existing state of things, the effect of Utopias has always been to direct men's minds towards reforms which can be brought about by patching up the existing system; it is not surprising, then, that so many makers of Utopias were able to develop into able statesmen when they had acquired a greater experience of political life. A myth cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement; and it is, in consequence, unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical descriptions. A Utopia, on the contrary, can be discussed like any other social constitution; the spontaneous movements it presupposes can be compared with the movements actually observed in the course of history, and we can in this way evaluate its verisimilitude; it is possible to refute Utopias by showing that the economic system on which they have been made to rest is incompatible with the necessary conditions of modern production. . . .



People who are living in this world of "myths," are secure from all refutation; this has led many to assert that Socialism is a kind of religion. For a long time people have been struck by the fact that religious convictions are unaffected by criticism, and from that they have concluded that everything which claims to be beyond science must be a religion. It has been observed also that Christianity tends at the present day to be less a system of dogmas than a Christian life, *i.e.*, a moral reform penetrating to the roots of one's being; consequently, a new analogy has been discovered between religion and the revolutionary Socialism which aims at the apprenticeship, preparation, and even reconstruction of the individual,—a gigantic task. But Bergson has taught us that it is not only religion which occupies the profounder region of our mental life; revolutionary myths have their place there equally with religion. . . .

### The Myth of the General Strike

According to Marx, capitalism, by reason of the innate laws of its own nature, is hurrying along a path which will lead the world of to-day, with the inevitability of the evolution of organic life, to the doors of the world of tomorrow. This movement comprises a long period of capitalistic construction, and it ends by a rapid destruction, which is the work of the proletariat. Capitalism creates the heritage which Socialism will receive, the men who will suppress the present régime, and the means of bringing about this destruction, at the same time that it preserves the results obtained in production. Capitalism begets new ways of working; it throws the working class into revolutionary organisations by the pressure it exercises on wages; it restricts its own political basis by competition, which is constantly eliminating industrial leaders. Thus, after having solved the great problem of the organisation of labour, to effect which Utopians have brought forward so many naïve or stupid hypotheses, capitalism provokes the birth of the cause which will overthrow it, and thus renders useless everything that Utopians have written to induce enlightened people to make reforms; and it gradually ruins the traditional order, against which the critics of the idealists had proved themselves to be so deplorably incompetent. It might therefore be said that capitalism plays a part analogous to that attributed by Hartmann to The Unconscious in nature, since it prepares the coming of social reforms which it did not intend to produce. Without any coordinated plan, without any directive ideas, without any ideal of a future world, it is the cause of an inevitable evolution; it draws from the present all that the present can give towards historical development; it performs in an almost mechanical manner all that is necessary, in order that a new era may appear, and that this new era may break every link with the idealism of the present times, while preserving the acquisitions of the capitalistic economic system.

Socialists should therefore abandon the attempt (initiated by the Utopians) to find a means of inducing the enlightened middle class to prepare the *transition to a more perfect system of legislation*; their sole function is that of explaining to the proletariat the greatness of the revolutionary part they are called upon to play. . . .

These results could not be produced in any very certain manner by the use of ordinary language; use must be made of a body of images which, *by intuition alone*, and before any considered analyses are made, is capable of evoking as an undivided whole the mass of sentiments which corresponds to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society. The Syndicalists solve this problem perfectly, by concentrating the whole of Socialism in the drama of the general strike; there is thus no longer any place for the reconciliation of contraries in the equivocations of the professors; everything is clearly mapped out, so that only one interpretation of Socialism is possible. This method has all the advantages which "integral" knowledge has over analysis, according to the doctrine of Bergson: and perhaps it would not be possible to cite another example which would so perfectly demonstrate the value of the famous professor's doctrines.

The possibility of the actual realisation of the general strike has been much discussed; it has been stated that the Socialist war could not be decided in one single battle. To the people who think themselves cautious, practical, and scientific the difficulty of setting great masses of the proletariat in motion at the same moment seems prodigious; they have analysed the difficulties of detail which such an enormous struggle would present. It is the opinion of the Socialist-sociologists, as also of the politicians, that the general strike is a popular dream, characteristic of the beginnings of a working-class movement; we have had quoted against us the authority of Sidney Webb, who has decreed that the general strike is an illusion of youth, of which the English workers—whom the monopolists of sociology have so often presented to us as the depositaries of the true conception of the working-class movement—soon rid themselves. . . .

And yet without leaving the present, without reasoning about this future, which seems for ever condemned to escape our reason, we should be unable to act at all. Experience shows that the *framing of a future, in some indeterminate time*, may, when it is done in a certain way, be very effective, and have very few inconveniences; this happens when the anticipations of the future take the form of those myths, which enclose with them 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 by which, more easily than by any other method, men can reform their desires, passions, and mental activity. We know, moreover, that these social



myths in no way prevent a man profiting by the observations which he makes in the course of his life, and form no obstacle to the pursuit of his normal occupations.

The truth of this may be shown by numerous examples.

The first Christians expected the return of Christ and the total ruin of the pagan world, with the inauguration of the kingdom of the saints, at the end of the first generation. The catastrophe did not come to pass, but Christian thought profited so greatly from the apocalyptic myth that certain contemporary scholars maintain that the whole preaching of Christ referred solely to this one point. The hopes which Luther and Calvin had formed of the religious exaltation of Europe were by no means realised; these fathers of the Reformation very soon seemed men of a past era; for present-day Protestants they belong rather to the Middle Ages than to modern times, and the problems which troubled them most occupy very little place in contemporary Protestantism. Must we for that reason deny the immense result which came from their dreams of Christian renovation? It must be admitted that the real developments of the Revolution did not in any way resemble the enchanting pictures which created the enthusiasm of its first adepts; but without those pictures would the Revolution have been victorious? Many Utopias were mixed up with the Revolutionary myth, because it had been formed by a society passionately fond of imaginative literature, full of confidence in the "science," and very little acquainted with the economic history of the past. The Utopias came to nothing; but it may be asked whether the Revolution was not a much more profound transformation than those dreamed of by the people who in the eighteenth century had invented social Utopias. In our own times Mazzini pursued what the wiseacres of his time called a mad chimera; but it can no longer be denied that, without Mazzini, Italy would never have become a great power, and that he did more for Italian unity than Cavour and all the politicians of his school.

A knowledge of what the myths contain in the way of details which will actually form part of the history of the future is then of small importance; they are not astrological almanacs; it is even possible that nothing which they contain will ever come to pass,—as was the case with the catastrophe expected by the first Christians. In our own daily life, are we not familiar with the fact that what actually happens is very different from our preconceived notion of it? And that does not prevent us from continuing to make resolutions. Psychologists say that there is heterogeneity between the ends in view and the ends actually realised: the slightest experience of life reveals this law to us, which Spencer transferred into nature, to extract therefrom his theory of the multiplication of effects.

The myth must be judged as a means of acting on the present; any

attempt to discuss how far it can be taken literally as future history is devoid of sense. *It is the myth in its entirety which is alone important:* its parts are only of interest in so far as they bring out the main ideas. . . .

The conception of the general strike, engendered by the practice of violent strikes, admits the conception of an irrevocable overthrow. There is something terrifying in this which will appear more and more terrifying as violence takes a greater place in the mind of the proletariat. But, in undertaking a serious, formidable, and sublime work, Socialists raise themselves above our frivolous society and make themselves worthy of pointing out new roads\* to the world.