

GEORGES SOREL'S TOCQUEVILLE

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Abstract: Alexis de Tocqueville's intellectual legacy has been characterized in terms of an arc: instant celebrity upon the publication of *Democracy in America* followed by waning influence after his death and belated rediscovery in the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet this article argues that Tocqueville's ideas remained influential in the *fin-de-siècle* writings of the syndicalist Georges Sorel. It explores the curious matter of how a liberal famed for his commitment to a *juste milieu* in French politics could have played a significant role in the thinking of a radical defender of proletarian violence. Beyond the ideological curiosity of their interconnection, it demonstrates that the lessons Sorel derives from Tocqueville effectively transform a conservative argument about the futility of political revolutions into a call for structural upheaval. Sorel's attention to these and other elements of Tocqueville's political theory, we conclude, complicates further the 'strange' nature of the latter's liberalism.

Introduction

At least some part of the prodigious burst of interest in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville over the last several decades stems from the question of Tocqueville's reception and legacy. When, why and by whom was Tocqueville 'rediscovered', and, conversely, why was he 'lost' to French or American readers in the first place?³ Having achieved literary acclaim in France during his lifetime, Tocqueville's works fell into what Cheryl Welch characterizes as 'dusty oblivion' by the century's end.⁴ In the traditional story, these works were eventually rediscovered by post-war liberals such as Raymond

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³ On more general matters of the reception and rediscovery of Tocqueville's ideas in the United States, see especially Robert Nisbet, 'Many Tocquevilles', *American Scholar*, 46 (1) (1997), pp. 59–74; and Filipe Carreira da Silva and Monica Brito Vieira, 'Books that Matter: The Case of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 61 (4) (2020), pp. 703–26. Having carefully documented references to *Democracy in America* throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Matthew Mancini disputes the claim that Tocqueville was ever 'lost' to the Americans. See M. Mancini, *Alexis de Tocqueville and American Intellectuals: From His Time to Ours* (Lanham, 2006). On the trajectory of his ideas in France, see Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French* (Charlottesville, 1998); and Serge Audier, *Tocqueville Retrouvé: Genèse et Enjeux du Renouveau Tocquevillien Français* (Paris, 2004).

⁴ Cheryl Welch, *De Tocqueville* (New York, 2001), p. 223. Softening this claim somewhat, Mélonio argues that Tocqueville was claimed by the right, centre-right and centre-left in the 1870s, though he became 'politically useless' to the French thereafter. Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, pp. 149–88.

Aron and François Furet as they confronted the Marxist orthodoxy of the twentieth-century academy. Prior to his rehabilitation by Aron and Furet, so the narrative goes, Tocqueville had long fallen out of favour with his countrymen, his sympathetic portrayal of American democracy an unwelcome challenge to the cause of French nationalism and his brand of liberalism unpersuasive for the generation of the Third Republic.⁵

Still, if Tocqueville's influence waned among France's liberals and republicans — that is to say, among those with whom one might expect to find some natural intellectual affinity — a very different Tocqueville emerged in the *fin-de-siècle* radicalism of Georges Sorel, especially in the latter's 1908 *Réflexions sur la violence*. Isaiah Berlin's description of the 'anomalous . . . unclassified' Sorel, 'claimed and repudiated by both the Right and by the Left' could just as easily be said of Tocqueville, and in light of the leftist Sorel's turn to Tocqueville, we revisit the standard account of the latter's French reputational rise and fall.⁶ This article offers two central arguments in that direction. First, although the conventional Tocqueville — the champion of civil society, exemplar of liberalism, keen observer of America's democratic social state, and historian of the French Revolution — may indeed have been lost to centrist liberals and republicans in France, we contend that the 'strange' Tocqueville, the critic of bourgeois decadence and European rationalism, remained alive and well in the radicalism of Sorel.⁷ Drawing largely on *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1856), Sorel found in Tocqueville an ally against the 'bourgeois science' of the rationalist post-revolutionary century.⁸ Our second argument, paradoxically, is that Sorel saw the conventional Tocqueville too. His innovation was to make him stranger still — to build a

⁵ For this particular explanation, see Seymour Drescher, 'Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: Tocqueville and the Franco-American Exchange', in *The French American Connection: 200 Years of Cultural and Intellectual Interaction*, ed. Lloyd Kramer (Chapel Hill NC, 1994), pp. 24–33.

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, 'Georges Sorel', in *Essays in Honour of E.H. Carr*, ed. C. Abramsky (London, 1974), pp. 3–35, p. 3. For more recent contributions that trace the historiography of Sorel's reception, right and left and across national contexts, see David Ohana, 'Georges Sorel and the Rise of Political Myth', *History of European Ideas*, 13 (6) (1991), pp. 733–46; and Eric Brandom, 'Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock', *History of Political Thought*, 38 (4) (2017), pp. 733–63.

⁷ On this dimension of Tocqueville's political thought as 'strange', even anti-liberal, see especially the work of Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca, 1987); R. Boesche, 'Tocqueville and *Le Commerce*: A Newspaper Expressing his Unusual Liberalism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44 (2) (1983), pp. 277–92. Another anti-democratic and potentially radical dimension of Tocqueville's 'strange' liberalism was opportunistically highlighted by the far-right nationalist Antoine Rédier, *Comme disait M. de Tocqueville* (Paris, 1925).

⁸ Georges Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, ed. Robert Nisbet, trans. John Stanley and Charlotte Stanley (Berkeley, 1969), p. 96.

radical justification for proletarian violence on the foundation of Tocqueville's *conservative* rendition of the Revolution of 1789.

Sorel's references to Tocqueville have not gone altogether unnoticed by readers of either figure.⁹ Yet aside from passing comments about similarities and sympathies, few scholars have fully examined the extent or substance of those references, or considered what they add to our understanding of the philosophies of each figure.¹⁰ Even those who have been attentive to the connections between the two thinkers, such as Françoise Mélonio, have been more struck by differences than affinities.¹¹ Far more than the 'subterranean influence' identified by J.P. Mayer, the lines of causality between Tocqueville and Sorel are both direct and complex, as we maintain in the arguments that follow.¹²

Although the primary focus of our analysis is on what can be discovered in Tocqueville's work when re-read through the lens of Sorel, the enigmatic, protean Sorel appears in a different light as well. Across decades' worth of entries in the journal *Mil neuf cent*, the leading forum for the study of Sorel's intellectual life and legacy, the majority are dedicated to his concurrent debts to and departures from figures on the political left, including Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Karl Marx. Still, scholars have acknowledged some of his other intellectual influences, too, exploring how Sorel's epistemology was derived from the contributions of figures such as Giambattista Vico, William James and Henri Bergson.¹³ While Sorel's interpreters have identified the syndicalist's 'liberal-conservative' tendencies, for the most part they have not done so

⁹ Julien Freund, 'Une interprétation de Georges Sorel', *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, 14 (36) (1976), pp. 81–94.

¹⁰ Notable exceptions include Georges Goriély, *Le pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel* (Paris, 1962), for whom Tocqueville appears 'the most authentic spiritual ancestor' of Sorel. Goriély regards the two figures as united by a fiercely Norman aristocratic sensibility, love of liberty, and hatred of state power (pp. 18–19, 23–4, 208). See also Marco Gervasoni, 'La liberté, l'État et les associations: Alexis de Tocqueville et Georges Sorel', *Mil neuf cent: Revue d'histoire intellectuelle (Cahiers Georges Sorel)*, 14 (1) (1996), pp. 139–58; and Eric Bandom, 'Georges Sorel, Autonomy and Violence in the Third Republic', unpublished dissertation submitted to Duke University, 2012. See also the short paragraph on Tocqueville's influence in *The Illusions of Progress*, 'Introduction', p. xxxii.

¹¹ Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, p. 181. For a succinct overview of Sorel's simultaneous appropriation of Tocqueville amidst a broader 'distance' or 'frank hostility', if not 'antipathy' between Tocqueville and the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, see Audier, *Tocqueville Retrouvé*, pp. 26–31.

¹² J.P. Mayer, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Biographical Essay in Political Science* (New York, 1940), p. 174.

¹³ Eric Bandom and Tommaso Giordani, *Georges Sorel's Study on Vico* (Leiden, 2020), 'Introduction: Georges Sorel's Study on Vico in French and European Context', pp. 1–48.

regarding Tocqueville's direct influence.¹⁴ This lacuna is especially curious given Sorel's own admission about the degree to which his autodidactic method relied on the insights of others, regardless of ideology: 'I like to take as my subject the discussion of a good book by a good author', he wrote to Daniel Halévy in 1907, 'I can then arrange my thoughts more easily than when I am left to my own unaided efforts'.¹⁵ As he constructed his admittedly 'pessimistic' ethics of violence, Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime* served as one of Sorel's 'good books' of choice.¹⁶

A few brief notes on our method are in order. Our thesis relies upon at least three different levels of analysis. At the most basic level, we identify what many will find to be surprising affinities between the liberal Tocqueville and the syndicalist Sorel. With respect to issues such as the decadence of bourgeois society, the dangers of rationalism, the perverse role of intellectuals in public life, and the futility of political revolutions, the two share a number of fascinating, counterintuitive points of agreement. We find most of these points in Sorel's citations to Tocqueville throughout *Réflexions sur la violence* and *Les illusions du progrès*, both published in 1908, and we have largely restricted our discussion to those two texts and to the period of Sorel's intellectual development that they reflect, though additional references to Sorel's corpus appear throughout the footnotes.¹⁷ This methodological choice to trace Sorel's direct citations to Tocqueville across these two texts, to follow

¹⁴ For an approach to Sorel's thought through liberalism, see Goriély, *Le pluralism dramatique de Georges Sorel*; Richard Humphrey, *Georges Sorel, Prophet Without Honor: A Study in Anti-Intellectualism* (Cambridge MA, 1951); Brandom, 'Georges Sorel, Autonomy and Violence in the Third Republic'; Patrice Rolland, '“Peut-on réformer la démocratie?” Une préface de Sorel à “La réforme intellectuelle et morale”', *Revue Française d'histoire Des Idées Politiques*, 11 (2000), pp. 83–112. On his republican morality, see K. Steven Vincent, 'Citizenship, Patriotism, Tradition, and Anti-politics in the Thought of Georges Sorel', *The European Legacy*, 3 (5) (1998), pp. 7–16. Contrast Irving Louis Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason: The Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (New York, 1961), p. 7, for whom '[o]ne cannot explain Sorel's position by grafting him on to a liberal tradition'.

¹⁵ Georges Sorel, 'Letter to Daniel Halévy', in *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 3–39, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8. See also Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of His Thought* (New York, 1985), p. 181: Sorel's 'vast oeuvre reveals an astonishing breadth and depth of reading, and rarely did any of the works he read fail to leave their mark'. It is worth noting that this approach was precisely the opposite of Tocqueville's, who claimed to have grown 'agitated' and 'disturbed' when trying to engage with the writings of others. 'Tocqueville to Duvergier de Hauranne, 1 September 1856', in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres Complètes* (hereafter *OC*), Tome 17, vol. 3, pp. 314–17, p. 314.

¹⁷ Our study homes in on what has been characterized as Sorel's 'syndicalist phase' after the Dreyfus Affair, when he turned away from parliamentary politics and articulated the myth of the general strike. For a brief intellectual biography of Sorel and the phases of his intellectual life, see K. Steven Vincent, 'Interpreting Georges Sorel:

the breadcrumbs from Tocqueville's portrayal of eighteenth-century France to Sorelian violence, distinguishes our approach from those of other scholars who have highlighted either thematic or dispositional similarities between the two theorists.¹⁸ Moreover, above and beyond noting shared sensibilities, we are concerned with developing the ways in which these neglected points of agreement lead us to interpret each figure differently, highlighting for example the anti-bourgeois and anti-modern dimensions of Tocqueville's thought that have heretofore been regarded as marginal if not contradictory to his centrist liberalism, while also showcasing a side of Sorel's thought that sharpens his disagreements with orthodox Marxism.¹⁹ Finally, our analysis models a straightforward case study in intellectual receptions, that is to say, a consideration of how one thinker's ideas developed in a particular context may be appropriated to different, even contradictory ends by a subsequent thinker under a very different set of historical and political circumstances. In a surprising twist of intellectual history, what Sanford Lakoff and many others have characterized as Tocqueville's 'conservative liberalism' becomes the basis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for Sorel's affirmation of proletarian violence as the vehicle for social rejuvenation.²⁰

Our analysis proceeds in the following way. Over the next four sections of the article, we identify major points upon which Sorel invokes elements of Tocqueville's 'strange' liberalism and, perhaps most unexpectedly, his insights into the conservative nature of institutions. As we document the magnitude of these influences, we return to consider how these shared ideas might lead us to understand each of their political theories differently. Our conclusion revisits the issue of historical reception, or of how and in which ways Tocqueville's thought was selected and transformed in the mind of Sorel.

Defender of Virtue or Apostle of Violence?', *History of European Ideas*, 12 (2) (1990), pp. 239–57.

¹⁸ Goriély, *Le pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel*; Gervasoni, 'La liberté, l'État et les associations'; Patrice Rolland, '“Peut-on réformer la démocratie?”'; Preston King, *Fear of Power: An Analysis of Anti-Statism in Three French Writers* (London, 1967).

¹⁹ This is not to deny those influences, of course. As other scholars have shown, Sorel was among the first and most creative French readers of Marx. See Jennings, *Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of His Thought*, pp. 37–61; Maximilien Rubel, 'Georges Sorel et l'achèvement de l'œuvre de Karl Marx', *Mil neuf cent: Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, 1 (1) (1983), pp. 9–36; Eric Brandom, 'Georges Sorel's Dilemma: Hegel, Marxism and Anti-Dialectics', *History of European Ideas*, 42 (7) (2016), pp. 937–50. Sorel himself writes that his goal was to separate what 'disfigures' Marx from what will 'immortalize' his name. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge, 1999), p. 172.

²⁰ Sanford Lakoff, 'Tocqueville, Burke, and the Origins of Liberal Conservatism', *The Review of Politics*, 60 (3) (1998), pp. 435–64. Also significant in locating Tocqueville in the tradition of 'liberal conservatism' is Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Chicago, 1953), ch. 6.

I Revolution and Tocqueville's 'Principle of Conservation'

Many of Sorel's most familiar arguments from his notorious *Réflexions sur la violence* are predicated on a sense of the profound difficulties of conventional political change. Sorel is famously dismissive of the 'utopianism' of so-called 'parliamentary socialists' such as Jean Jaurès who embrace peaceful, incremental change through democratic processes of give-and-take while professing their 'hatred of violence'.²¹ He regards political institutions themselves as continuous rather than novel insofar as they are highly resistant to endogenous changes. Along these lines, he identifies the bourgeois liberal state, one in which even the avowed socialists are complicit, as thwarting fundamental political transformations by seeking to capture and suppress the spontaneous forces of proletarian syndicalism.²² The only sufficient response to these challenges, according to Sorel, is sweeping extraconstitutional violence. This part of Sorel's theory is well understood and seems to locate him in a radical socialist tradition pioneered by Proudhon and Marx, with some key variations.²³ Yet there is a more fundamental way in which Sorel's radicalism can be understood to emerge from his deep appreciation of Tocqueville's take on the conservative character of the French Revolution. It is because Sorel takes to heart Tocqueville's insights about the ultimate futility of political revolutions that he embraces the necessity of social regeneration through extra-political violence.

Crucially, Sorel is impressed by Tocqueville's dismissal of the novelty of the French Revolutionaries. Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime* is predicated on the insight that the Revolution of 1789 was not the dramatic rupture with the past that it seemed to be, but rather a logical perpetuation of the institutions of earlier centuries. For all of their pretensions to have created a modern government *de novo* and despite the Revolutionaries' desire to 'want to abolish everything from the past', the central institutions of the *ancien régime* survived one of the most colossal attempts in human history to remodel society along the lines of pure reason. Tocqueville grants that 'many of the laws and political traditions of the Ancien Régime suddenly disappeared in 1789', but he observes that they then 'reappear[ed] a few years later'.²⁴ For his part,

²¹ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, pp. 92, 103–5, 111–12.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²³ For Sorel's commentary on Proudhon, see Georges Sorel, 'Essai Sur la Philosophie de Proudhon', *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 33–4 (1892), pp. 622–38, 41–68.

²⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, ed. Jon Elster, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, 2011), p. 3. For a similar, contemporaneous affirmation of Tocqueville's insight into the continuity of institutions — indeed one that may have shaped Sorel's own appropriation — see Michel Henry, *L'Idée de*

Sorel correctly identifies the deeply conservative nature of Tocqueville's reading of the events and aftermath of 1789. He lauds 'the researches of Tocqueville', for 'allow[ing] us to study the French Revolution from this' — that is, a less progressive, and as we will discover, for Sorel also a less 'dogmatic' — 'point of view':

[Tocqueville] very much astonished his contemporaries when, a half-century ago, he showed them that the Revolution had been much more conservative than had been supposed till then. He pointed out that most of the characteristic institutions of modern France date from the Old Regime (centralisation, the issue of regulations on every possible pretext, administrative tutelage of the communes, exemption of civil servants from the jurisdiction of the courts).²⁵

Along with the specific historical details Sorel recites about consistency across the French state before and after the Revolution, the broader Tocquevillian 'point of view' that shapes his political theory is the 'principle of conservation'.²⁶ Whether it is a matter of the abiding bureaucracy of the *ancien régime*, constancy across the members of the ruling class themselves, the Napoleonic adoption of the institutions of Revolutionary armies, or even the conditions of industrial production — all clearly demonstrate 'the enormous part played by conservation throughout the greatest revolutions'.²⁷ Following Tocqueville's key insights, Sorel claims that such conservation was borne out in the events of the first half of the nineteenth century, when revolutions (1789 and 1830, and even 1848) failed to generate the 'very great upheavals' necessary to overturn the existing administrative institutions of France.²⁸

With respect to historical details, Sorel again relies heavily on factors Tocqueville regarded as central to the French state as it evolved under and after the *ancien régime*. First, he specifically cites Tocqueville's authority on *l'État: Essai critique sur l'histoire des théories sociales et politiques en France depuis la Révolution* (Paris, 1896), especially pp. 102–4.

²⁵ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Among these 'greatest revolutions', the Roman Empire's conversion to Christianity prompts a similar sociological observation. In Sorel's view, what is striking is not the transformations wrought by Christianity but the number of pagan traditions and institutions that persisted. Like the Jacobins, early Christian priests felt the need to struggle against the national traditions and institutions of Rome. Yet for structural reasons their efforts were often in vain. Sorel, *La Ruine du Monde antique: Conception matérialiste de l'Histoire* (Paris, 1928), pp. 94–106. Compare Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, pp. 82–6.

²⁸ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 155. While Sorel largely restricts his discussions of Tocqueville to *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* and to the *Mélanges* published in 1864, Tocqueville also presented a version of this argument in *Democracy in America's* chapter titled 'Why Great Revolutions Will Become Rare'. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schliefer (Indianapolis, 2012), Vol. II, pp. 1133–52.

how the violence of the French Revolutionaries was simply a continuation of the legalistic deployment of punishment by the monarchy for personal disloyalty redirected against a new set of victims.²⁹ Taking Tocqueville's thesis further, Sorel provocatively asserts that the law of the 22 Prairial, *la loi de la Grande Terreur* that authorized the arrest of 'enemies of liberty', contained 'the whole of the *ancien régime* within it'.³⁰ The particular figures directing the state may in some sense have changed (though as both thinkers agree in discussing the personality of a figure such as A.R.J. Turgot, in many cases these leaders have remained the same *type* of human being)³¹ but the mechanisms and mindsets behind the penal system, what Sorel dismissively calls 'the superstitions of childhood', remain constant between the old and new orders.³²

Second, Tocqueville apprehends the dangerous, centralizing qualities of the French state, which did not begin with the Revolution but were evident upon closer examination even in the eighteenth century. This point later underlies the anti-politics of Sorel's syndicalist writings. Tocqueville characterizes the French vice of centralization as an ancient one; the capacity and rationale for the total state were hardly inventions of the Revolutionaries, manifesting instead in the eighteenth-century doctrine of Physiocracy devised by the 'Economists' François Quesnay and A.R.J. Turgot.³³ So important is this theme for Sorel that virtually the same passages on the problems of Physiocracy and state capacity, some quoted directly and others paraphrased from Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, appear across *Reflections on Violence* and the *Illusions of Progress*. The Physiocrats spoke 'of the state as an impersonal power which by law is subordinate to citizens and in reality is their master', Sorel wrote, citing Tocqueville as his authority.³⁴ Here, Sorel also overlays the Tocquevillean label of 'democratic despotism' back in time onto the Physiocrats, who eschewed the doctrine of separated powers in favour of a state allegedly controlled by 'public reason' but which in reality exercised mastery over its people.³⁵ For Sorel, Tocqueville's description

²⁹ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, pp. 96–7, 101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³¹ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, pp. 33–4, 143–51; Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 81.

³² Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 97.

³³ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, pp. 143–51.

³⁴ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, pp. 57–8; Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 99. While Sorel certainly understood the French state in historical perspective, he also understood it as a former employee. On Sorel's career as a civil engineer, see Alice Ingold, 'Penser à l'épreuve des conflits: Georges Sorel ingénieur hydraulique à Perpignan', *Mil neuf cent: Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, 32 (2014), pp. 11–52.

³⁵ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, pp. 99–100. Tocqueville, too, suggests that 'democratic despotism' existed before the great democratic revolutions: 'democratic despotism,

of the Physiocrats' infatuation with China captures the extent of their envisioned project for France, for they were 'enraptured' by the model of a bureaucratized country run by clerks and valets, where 'men of letters' ascended to the ranks of the aristocracy.³⁶ The remarkable continuity displayed by France's centralized administration that originated in the eighteenth century and endured post-Revolution (most clearly in the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, who placed France once again on a 'monarchical footing' without having to exert much effort to do so) confirms the conservative nature of the French Revolution — and with it, the futility of seeking political change.³⁷

What Sorel identifies through historical details as this Tocquevillean 'principle of historical heredity' proves central to his own political theory.³⁸ In the broadest possible terms, and somewhat ironically, Sorel's recognition of the continuity of revolutions informs his suspicions about the limits of conventional political change and the possible outcomes of strictly political revolution as opposed to syndicalist violence. Because existing institutions perdure even in the face of the most concerted, rationalistic attempts to remake them, as Tocqueville taught Sorel in the case of 1789, social transformation requires a totalizing violence capable of completely upending existing political and economic structures. Curiously, this was a lesson that Marx himself, in Sorel's estimation, had failed to apprehend in its entirety. Because of his failure to envision revolution as anything other than progressive, Marx 'never dreamt of the possibility of a revolution which would take a return to the past, or even social conservation, as its ideal'.³⁹ Nor did Marx or his fellow socialists question the 'dogma' of mankind's progress from one epoch to the next,

of which the Middle Ages had no idea, was already familiar to the Economists [Physiocrats]'. Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, p. 147.

³⁶ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 59; Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 100. Crediting Tocqueville for the China analogy elsewhere, compare Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris, 1929), pp. 85–6 and Sorel, *L'avenir socialiste des syndicats* (Paris, 1901), p. 10 n.1. Identical references to Tocqueville appear in the 1898 version of 'L'avenir socialiste des syndicats', originally published in *L'Humanité Nouvelle*, 2 (1898), pp. 300 n.4 and 438 n.2. This marks one of Sorel's earliest mentions of Tocqueville and hints that his familiarity comes, at least in part, through the writings of Ferdinand Brunetière, himself a prolific discussant of Tocqueville in the 1890s and early 1900s. See, for example, F. Brunetière, *Éducation et Instruction* (Paris, 1895), pp. 31–2 (the work cited by Sorel) and especially, F. Brunetière, *La Moralité de la Doctrine Évolutive* (Paris, 1896), p. 64, where he notes of his defence of the French Revolution: 'I wouldn't go about it today as I did ten or twelve years ago, but would place special emphasis on the reasons Tocqueville indicated in his *Ancien Régime*, and which Edgar Quinet developed after him in his book *Révolution*. I would further insist on this point: most of today's fashionable reproaches of the Revolution reach through it to the very same old regime we complain of it having destroyed.'

³⁷ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 81.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

from the economic heights of efficient capitalism to the next historical stage of a socialist future.⁴⁰ For Sorel, Tocqueville provides the perspective that is missing from Marx's theory of revolutions: the portrayal of revolution as conservation, even as reaction. This perspective, Sorel writes, 'will enable us to conjecture what will be the result of revolution in times of *decadence*' rather than uninterrupted material progress, a term Sorel uses to portray the early twentieth century, and one that is also heavily inflected by Tocqueville's perspective on the past.⁴¹

II

Illusions of Progress versus Ages of Decadence

One of the most enduring aspects of Tocqueville's account of the French Revolution is the paradox of how such an event could have taken place not in a nation like Germany where the labouring classes suffered from truly abject conditions, but instead in France where the yoke of feudalism was relatively light, at a time when material conditions seemed to be improving. As France grew more prosperous, Tocqueville explains, its people became 'more unsettled and anxious. Public discontent grew more bitter . . . the nation was clearly headed for revolution'.⁴² Tocqueville attributes the paradoxical pairing of prosperity and discontent to public perceptions. 'Every abuse that is eliminated seems only to reveal the others that remain, and makes their sting that much more powerful', he contends.⁴³ This basic insight into what has come to be known as the 'Tocqueville Paradox', or the 'revolution of rising expectations', has had a profound and lasting legacy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as documented by Jon Elster.⁴⁴

Interestingly, the belated discovery of Tocqueville's sociology of revolution was refigured, at least to some extent, by Sorel, who amplifies the sense in which popular unrest tends to be born of optimism. 'According to the experts of social reform', Sorel writes, the commercially and agriculturally prosperous period of the late eighteenth century 'ought to have been excellent for consolidating the government'. Yet 'disappointment' and 'restlessness' grew alongside revenues.⁴⁵ For Sorel, this phenomenon of rising expectations

⁴⁰ Even as he notes Marx's shortsightedness on 'conservation', Sorel nonetheless finds value in the 'terrifying' progressive nature of revolution as conceived of by Marx, which gives to socialism 'its high educational value'. Progress may indeed be an illusion, but it can also be a constitutive feature of myth. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴² Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, p. 156.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴⁴ Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist* (New York, 2009), pp. 162–79. For the classic political science expression of this thesis, see J.C. Davies, 'Toward a Theory of Revolution', *American Sociological Review*, 27 (1962), pp. 5–19.

⁴⁵ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 113.

that 'astonished Tocqueville' can be further explained by reexamining material conditions. As he lightly chastised Tocqueville for failing to contemplate the relationship between material life and thought, Sorel specifies that the 'revolutionary spirit gains ground whenever the belief in *economic necessity* is weakened'.⁴⁶ Once the problem of meeting mankind's most basic needs is no longer *the* problem, as in France by the 1780s, human beings will invariably set their sights higher in pursuit of comfort and material gain, and thus conduct 'bold experiments' in social reform 'as well as in technology'.⁴⁷ Only once they see the possibility for profit, not for mere subsistence, will the 'sundry priests and prophets' of revolution become energized in their ferocious struggle against all received traditions.⁴⁸

With this point, Sorel also restates one of Tocqueville's accompanying observations that has been less explored in the literature. Conditions of relative progress versus decline not only explain the causes and timing of revolutionary movements, but the nature of them as well. With Tocqueville, Sorel is dubious of the crude way of thinking (displayed most often by philosophers, Sorel believes) whereby revolutions occur at the point of maximum oppression or exploitation. The France of 1780, the France that erupted in revolution, was marked by material 'prosperity' and a belief in mankind's 'unlimited perfectibility', the two figures agree.⁴⁹ Yet this shared perspective would also seem to reinforce at least part of Marx's progressive theory of socialist revolution, or the thesis that capitalism 'will be struck to the heart' precisely when the bourgeoisie are at their most powerful and the economy at its most efficient — the very theory that Sorel himself calls into question.⁵⁰

But against orthodox Marxism on this point, Sorel is careful to differentiate the France of 1908 from that of 1780, and to distinguish times of 'progress' when economic conditions prompt rising expectations from moments of 'decadence' or stasis.⁵¹ While concurring with Marx that economic 'crises' may play a precipitating role in bringing a new social order into being, Sorel nonetheless distinguishes those periodic crises to which capitalism is wont by virtue of risk-taking and overproduction from genuine periods of economic malaise, which do not carry the same regenerative potential. Sorel grants that 'the conception of economic progress prevailed' so 'absolutely' at the time of Marx's writing that it obscured the very possibility that capitalism could grow decadent or motionless — or, put another way, that capitalism itself could tend towards conservation.⁵² In times of general advancement, as in the late

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Sorel, *La Ruine du Monde antique*, pp. 94–6, 272–8.

⁴⁹ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 113.

⁵⁰ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 79.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 126–7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 136–7, 127, 159.

eighteenth century, the workers grow hopeful in their own power, as they come to believe that their struggles against the capitalist system will be successful.⁵³ By way of contrast, a static society makes it impossible for the workers to envision a better future on the horizon, let alone to fight for a better world as their common end.

Sorel accuses the parliamentary socialists of attempting to bring about a decadent society, or of working to ‘arrest the movement of capitalism’ with positive laws to temper competition and limit the acquisition of wealth, all in the interest of augmenting the power of those who already possess it.⁵⁴ This was an economic state of affairs that, in Sorel’s eyes, Marx could never have imagined, when inactivity is wished for and progress spurned — even by the bourgeoisie. Who, after all, would aim to halt capitalist growth? Yet a closer examination of the *consequences* of economic decadence explains its political utility. Not only are *syndicalist* general strikes — the engines of genuine social metamorphosis — unlikely to occur under such stultifying conditions, but periods of decadence, ages that border on decline, are ultimately most conducive to *political* (bourgeois) general strikes of the kind Sorel dismisses as ineffectual but that his socialist predecessors and contemporaries favoured for opportunistic reasons. Unlike Sorel’s general strikes that unleash the spontaneous forces of the proletariat in a totalizing struggle against the existing system, traditional political strikes render the lower classes susceptible to being manipulated by politicians⁵⁵ — hence the motivation for ‘sham socialists’, those who hold the reins of power, to prefer decadence to improvement.⁵⁶ Whereas prospering social classes are bold and their actions reformative, enervated classes are like sheep, desirous of submitting themselves to the putative protections of a masterful state.

Political dynamics of this sort are — not coincidentally — consistent with Tocqueville’s vision of ‘soft’ or ‘administrative’ despotism as described in *Democracy*, a connection underscored by Sorel amid his reflections on the proper social conditions under which to project the noble ‘myth’ of the general strike. In times of decadence, such as those that prevailed in the early twentieth century, the ‘comfort-loving’ members of the middle classes are duped by socialist politicians into supporting a centralized administrative state that provides stability and peace. Alongside a number of references to Tocqueville, Sorel notes that ‘political philosophers set themselves the task of establishing *menageries of happy men*’, as opposed to active or emboldened ones.⁵⁷ It is this very dynamic, in Tocqueville’s view, that explains why revolutions ‘no longer produce any very great upheavals’, since they have

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 171.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁷ Sorel, *L’avenir socialiste des syndicats*, p. 10 n.1. Original emphasis.

been redirected to the benefit of the state and not to the revolutionaries themselves.⁵⁸ Sorel, too, insists that structural change can never be effected politically, as the state apparatus will find a multitude of ways of capturing and rechanneling revolt and resistance. If Marx placed too much faith in a *progressive* understanding of great revolutions, parliamentary socialism suffers from the defect of accepting piecemeal changes in lieu of fundamental transformations, corrupting proletarian leaders with the temptations of middle-class affluence and eschewing violence in the name of political compromise and coalition-building — and subjecting civilizations to periods of decadence all the while. Much like the Physiocrats of Tocqueville's account, the socialist financiers of the Third Republic 'understand that the preservation of a highly centralized, very authoritarian, and very democratic State puts immense resources at their disposal'. Moreover, Physiocrats and socialists alike arrived at this conclusion 'instinctively', without ever having read Tocqueville.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Sorel seemed to rely upon Tocqueville's insight in this regard. It was Sorel's reading of Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* that led him to perceive this instinct within the political socialists of his day, and thus to see both the activity of democratic politics and the institutions of the French state as inherently reactionary.⁶⁰

III

Appraising Bourgeois Society

Sorel's diagnosis of the pathologies of decadence not only implicates the Marxists and the political socialists of his day, but also brings to light his palpable and more general dissatisfaction with the *moeurs* of modern bourgeois society. His antipathy towards the middle classes draws upon many of the same complaints we find in Tocqueville's corpus about the moral and spiritual enervation of the bourgeoisie, their excessive concern with material well-being, even their abdication of political responsibility.

For all of Tocqueville's praise of America in the 1835 *Democracy*, there are already hints of his worries about the perverse consequences of middle-class affluence. The advent of democracy brings with it a 'middling standard' that undoubtedly raises some albeit at the expense of debasing or 'dragging down' others. The 'will and the power' to cultivate great works of the mind is extinguished by a strictly utilitarian attitude towards knowledge and the

⁵⁸ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 161.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁶⁰ As Sorel notes of the 'conservative' upshot of Tocqueville's democratic analysis: 'Tocqueville has often been accused of having spread this conception of the fatal triumph of democracy. In *Democracy in America* he counseled conservative men of State not to try to struggle against Providence, which intends this result. Our current bourgeoisie acclaim as the saviors of order those politicians who work to *slowly* destroy the old social organization.' Sorel, *Matériaux*, p. 17 n.1. Original emphasis.

practical demands of pursuing a trade.⁶¹ We face a trade-off between ‘the greatest strength or glory for the nation’, ‘heroic virtues’ and ‘splendid deeds’, on the one hand, and material ‘well-being’, ‘tranquil habits’ and generalized prosperity, on the other.⁶² Among the worst effects of the infamous ‘tyranny of the majority’ is a ‘courtier spirit’ that exists in a world lacking ‘men of great character’, those who possess the ‘virile candor and manly independence of thought’ of earlier ages.⁶³

By the second volume of *Democracy* in 1840, Tocqueville’s occasional misgivings about the middle classes have become full-fledged indictments. The natural dynamics of democracy lead to an individualistic retreat into the private or domestic sphere and an abdication of one’s public engagement — categories of public and private whose gendered components have been amply identified.⁶⁴ While conceding that democratic life might indeed give rise to a ‘restless’ energy even in the midst of abundant prosperity, any such dynamism is directed towards petty ambitions of personal advancement and status differentiation rather than great political undertakings, characteristics embodied in the middle classes. Moreover, democratic concerns with security and material well-being will lead to the rise of ‘soft despotism’, whereby citizens not only relinquish their vocation to self-government but also any sense of personal responsibility in exchange for the ministrations of an all-encompassing tutelary state. As Sorel notes in the same Tocquevillean vein, predicting what the next stage of democracy will bring,

Down with rights! That is to say, there will no longer be anything in the world besides administrative relationships, and the whole life of citizens will be subordinated to considerations of convenience and expediency, or even the search for certain general goods of which the government pretends to be the sole power capable of judging.⁶⁵

Tocqueville’s complaints about the debilities of bourgeois existence arguably become a central theme of his later works and political career under France’s July Monarchy (1830–48), when he emerges as a peculiar critic of the liberal government led by a bourgeois political class that, he comments critically, gave the entire regime an ‘oligarchic physiognomy’.⁶⁶ Criticisms of bourgeois materialism, privatism, even of Sorel’s preferred term ‘decadence’ pervade Tocqueville’s speeches and writings from the period, and lie at the

⁶¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I, pp. 244–5.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 258–9.

⁶⁴ Laura Janara, *Democracy Growing Up: Authority, Autonomy, and Passion in Tocqueville’s Democracy in America* (Albany, 2012); See also *Feminist Interpretations of Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Jill Locke and Eileen Hunt Botting (University Park PA, 2010).

⁶⁵ Georges Sorel, *De l’Église et De l’État: Fragments* (Paris, 1901), p. 7.

⁶⁶ Tocqueville, ‘Notes de Tocqueville, 1847’, in *OC*, 3.1, p. 726.

heart of his defences of French imperialism.⁶⁷ France must overcome its domestic, bourgeois-induced malaise by exerting its international power; *grandeur* and conquest abroad are prescriptions to remedy internal decline.⁶⁸ His most explicit complaints about the political fecklessness of the middle classes and their apotheosis in the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe appear in his *Recollections*. The *Recollections* paints an especially vivid portrayal of the bourgeoisie as feminized, succumbing to a domestication and obsession with material concerns that robs them of both their political and sexual energies.⁶⁹ Nor was Tocqueville himself impervious to the bourgeois spirit of the democratic age, which he wrote rendered him similarly 'lazy and despondent'.⁷⁰

Tocqueville is hardly alone in expressing this view. These and other complaints about the impotence and emasculating effects of the bourgeois way of life are a veritable trope in nineteenth-century French culture and literature. This vision of the bourgeoisie as lacking energy is showcased in the novels of Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola, and countless other works of philosophy and literature.⁷¹ So it may come as no surprise that as a product of late nineteenth-century France and student of socialism, Sorel should embrace these same derogatory views of bourgeois society, going so far as to describe middle-class

⁶⁷ Writing in 1843, Tocqueville lamented that 'decadence' had 'superseded the liberal cause that triumphed in 1789'. Tocqueville, 'Lettres Sur La Situation Intérieure de La France', *OC*, 3.1, p. 95.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Michael Hereth, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Threats to Freedom in a Democracy* (Durham NC, 1986), pp. 122–65; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2006); Richard Boyd, 'Imperial Fathers and Favorite Sons: J.S. Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Nineteenth-Century Visions of Empire', in *Feminist Interpretations of Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Locke and Botting, pp. 225–52; Ewa Atanassow, 'Colonization and Democracy: Tocqueville Reconsidered', *American Political Science Review*, 111 (2017), pp. 83–96. Likewise, as Gianna Englert has demonstrated, there is a domestic analogue to this concern with bourgeois decadence in Tocqueville's eventual embrace of suffrage reform. Gianna Englert, 'Tocqueville's Politics of Grandeur', *Political Theory*, 50 (3) (2022), pp. 477–503.

⁶⁹ For a more extensive discussion of this gendered trope in Tocqueville, see Dana Villa, 'Tocqueville and the Feminization of the Bourgeoisie', in *Feminist Interpretations of Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Locke and Botting, pp. 71–98; L.E. Shiner, *The Secret Mirror: Literary Form and History in Tocqueville's Recollections* (Cornell, 1988).

⁷⁰ 'Tocqueville to Marie, 9 August 1842', in *OC*, 14, pp. 463–4.

⁷¹ On Tocqueville and the late nineteenth-century theme of decadence, see Richard Boyd, 'Tocqueville and the Napoleonic Legend', in *Tocqueville and the Frontiers of Democracy*, ed. E. Atanassow and R. Boyd (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 264–87. On the trope of bourgeois feminization and decadence more broadly, see Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York, 1993); Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, ca. 1848–1918* (Cambridge, 1989).

decadence as a prevailing feature of his age — one to which, as we have discovered, even the political socialists have subscribed.⁷²

Yet it is worth noting how starkly this vision of bourgeois apathy and civilizational decadence shared by Sorel and Tocqueville departs from the socialist views espoused by Marx and Engels with which Sorel is otherwise so closely associated.⁷³ For Marx himself, generally speaking, the bourgeoisie is supposed to be the vector of capitalism's destruction — and thus of historical progress — by virtue of its dynamism, creative energy, and insatiable desire for constantly revolutionizing the means of production.⁷⁴ In Sorel's view, this assumption leads Marx to theorize the transition from 'capitalism in its full vitality' to socialism and to assume, as we have seen, that revolutions will spur progress, not invite political reaction.⁷⁵ This more orthodox Marxian view, however, stands in stark opposition to the subsequent disenchantment with the passivity, torpor, cowardice, domestication and aversion to violence with which Sorel, like Tocqueville before him, associates the middle classes.

Sorel's departure from the Marxian characterization of bourgeois innovation makes his conclusions about class dynamics all the more striking — and more Tocquevillean. According to Sorel, the true vitality of capitalist industry comes not from the boardrooms and parlours of the bourgeoisie, the sites of modernity's decadence, but from the shop-floors.⁷⁶ The spirit of invention and industry that Marx associated with bourgeois capitalism — the same spirit which would spell its undoing — emerges entirely from below in Sorel's image of society. Workers are akin to artists or rank-and-file soldiers who quietly perfect their trade not in pursuit of glory or remuneration but out of morality, a '*secret virtue*' of free workers eagerly toiling in collaboration towards a 'continued progress in production'.⁷⁷ By way of contrast, the cowardice, complacency and aversion to conflict exhibited by the bourgeois classes could not be farther from the heroism of warfare with which capitalism's propagandists wish to associate it. Not just in politics but also even in their style of management, the bourgeois classes are defined by passivity.

⁷² Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 80. Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. xlii.

⁷³ Vincent traces Sorel's condemnation of decadent society to France's leftist republicans, a tradition that includes figures as varied as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Proudhon. Without denying the potential influence of republicanism on Sorel, we instead link the theme of decadence to his disdain for bourgeois morality, which he shared with Tocqueville and which emerges most clearly in those passages in which he cites Tocqueville directly. Vincent, 'Interpreting Georges Sorel', pp. 251–3.

⁷⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York, 1978), pp. 475–7. Villa, 'Tocqueville and the Feminization of the Bourgeoisie', pp. 73–6, appreciates this distinction between Marx and Tocqueville's divergent visions of the bourgeoisie.

⁷⁵ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 79.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

Against such passivity, only the 'general strike', undertaken by free producers, can give rise to the 'enthusiasm' necessary for social transformation.⁷⁸ Only the proletariat, in fact, can 'restore to the bourgeoisie something of its energy' by re-establishing the basis of class struggle.⁷⁹

In fairness, according to Sorel, such bourgeois malaise was not always the status quo historically. As he explains, the middle classes with which Marx was familiar in mid-century England — when Tocqueville denounced the listless bourgeoisie of France — were then 'animated by their conquering, insatiable, and pitiless spirit, which had characterized at the beginning of modern times the creators of new industries and the adventurers launched on the discovery of unknown lands'.⁸⁰ At least in capitalism's infancy, 'the capitalist type and the warrior type' closely resembled one another; this was the source of the image of the great industrialists as 'captains of industry'. Even in his own time, Sorel allows, the 'indomitable energy' and 'audacity' that once were manifest in Europe can still found be found in the great *American* capitalists. The workers, after all, must undertake the mission to 'restore' whatever energy the middle class once possessed, suggesting the loss of such vitality rather than its permanent absence.⁸¹

Nonetheless, by way of contrast, Sorel confronts in the France of his own day a 'middle class which has become almost as stupid as the nobility of the eighteenth century'. This class was responsible not for the acts of creative destruction attributed to it by Marx, but for the 'ultimate in vulgarization' — of education, of science and of knowledge.⁸² The triumphant bourgeoisie of Sorel's account 'systematized certain methods that existed before it came into prominence, but has invented nothing', serving as tinkerers rather than innovators.⁸³ So feeble are the bourgeoisie of Sorel's age that they too find themselves seduced by the doctrines of a degraded, parliamentary socialism. 'Stupefied' and guilted by the socialists' calls for 'humanitarianism', they are prepared to compromise to meliorate the conditions of the workers rather than

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 89.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 85.

⁸² Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 26.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 27. As Sorel notes elsewhere, one bellwether of societal decadence is the 'perversion of capitalism', when the bourgeoisie ceases to act and understand himself as a producer and instead seeks to live as a rentier or usurer, akin to the sumptuous life of a 'Polynesian savage, who regards man above all else as a consumer, working only accidentally'. Georges Sorel, *Introduction à l'Économie moderne* (Paris, 1911), pp. 124–5. Original emphasis.

to fight, and they are perversely more dedicated to the tutelary improvement of the proletariat than to their own true vocation of capitalist conquest.⁸⁴

Beyond these apparent similarities in their accounts of bourgeois decline, Sorel's genealogy of bourgeois decadence owes much to Tocqueville's account of the *ancien régime*, and even to the insights of the latter's less-famous father, cited numerous times by Sorel as Count de Tocqueville.⁸⁵ As the younger Tocqueville explained in his history of the eighteenth century, France's landed aristocracy once enjoyed the same liberties as the English aristocracy. It was once a class predicated on energetic rule and manly independence.⁸⁶ Yet unlike the English lords who clung stubbornly to their traditional political responsibilities, even at great personal cost of time and taxation, the French aristocracy surrendered these prerogatives. Following Tocqueville, Sorel notes an affinity between the eighteenth-century French aristocrats' overwhelming 'love of tranquility' and the ease with which the upper classes of 'today . . . sacrifice everything to their tranquility' in the interest of 'assuring themselves a few days' rest'.⁸⁷ But more than this, Sorel retraces the ascendance of the bourgeoisie by way of Tocqueville's earlier explanation for the decline of the nobility.⁸⁸ Hoping to rid itself of the obstructive counterweight of the privileged classes, the monarchy established a hierarchy of able functionaries that coalesced into a sovereign, wealthy class all its own, equally powerful and ultimately as obstructive as the nobility it was marshalled to displace. But weakened and beholden to 'long-standing, outdated' social circumstances and conventions, the monarchy feared disturbing the disruptive administrative structure it had created, leaving the prestige and concomitant power of the growing functionary class unchecked.⁸⁹ In the writings of the two Tocquevilles, father and son, Sorel finds an explanation for the continued dominance of this functionary class beyond the eighteenth century, which coalesced into the 'nucleus of the bourgeois oligarchy'.⁹⁰

That same middling class soon surrendered whatever power it had amassed. Echoing Tocqueville's description of the aristocracy's wilful political abdication, which he cites directly, Sorel makes precisely the same indictment of the

⁸⁴ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, pp. 86–92. See also Sorel on the popularizing of education for the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, pp. 27–8.

⁸⁵ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 34 n.37.

⁸⁶ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, p. 81. See also Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. and trans. J.P. Mayer (New York, 1988).

⁸⁷ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 36.

⁸⁸ Sorel attributes the insights of his other authorities, A.A. Cournot most notably, to Tocqueville's written reflections on the French monarchy.

⁸⁹ On the relative weakness of the ruling power in the eighteenth century, Sorel cites the Count de Tocqueville at Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 37. On the outdated actions of the monarch, he cites Alexis de Tocqueville at *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

middle classes in the nineteenth century. Just as Tocqueville's French aristocracy squandered their traditional right to self-government in the name of escaping taxation and the symbolic emoluments of Court, Sorel complains that the middle classes have likewise exhausted their liberal political vocation.⁹¹ Sorel thus turns to the proletariat to create altogether original institutions 'which owe nothing to middle-class thought' and calls on them to acquire 'habits of liberty with which the middle classes nowadays are no longer acquainted'.⁹² In both cases, for Tocqueville's eighteenth-century aristocrats and Sorel's later bourgeoisie, the class in question relinquished its political status out of an overwhelming concern for its economic well-being. Such classes are at best politically apathetic. At worst, they are unwitting defenders of existing institutions from which they benefit materially but which also stand in the way of more fundamental renewal. It is worth noting that Tocqueville himself sees the same pattern repeated in the bourgeois July Monarchy, whose ministers disguised their personal motivations for material gain as political ideals. Their actions revealed that the middle-class, plutocratic spirit had become the ruling spirit, 'active, shameless . . . moderate in everything, except in its taste for material well-being, and mediocre'.⁹³

For both Sorel and Tocqueville, such general lack of energy, exhibited both by the aristocracy and the middle class, is accompanied by a cowardly aversion to violence. In the case of Tocqueville, it is significant that aristocratic honours once associated with military service, valour and public service eventually become purely social designations that loosely reflect one's degree of favour or servility at Court.⁹⁴ Amplifying the novelist Stendhal's deft dissection of the effete *politesse* of the salon aristocracy, Tocqueville realizes that this class had long since lost anything but a mere symbolic connection to military service and martial courage.⁹⁵ So, too, for the middle classes. Despite often having been portrayed by others as the Third Estate that was so decisive in upending the *ancien régime*, the bourgeoisie appear in Sorel's work as passive clients of entrenched power rather than energetic disruptors of the status quo. Sorel found this tendency as early as the eighteenth century's incipient bourgeoisie, that 'democratic oligarchy' of middle-class administrators, whose ideology was directly tied up with the administrative and judicial functions for which it was brought into being. In a series of reflections reminiscent of Tocqueville's speeches against Louis-Philippe and the government after

⁹¹ Sorel agrees with Tocqueville that the aristocracy had in fact so abandoned itself that it 'no longer had an ideology of its own', favouring borrowed ideologies and personal amusements instead. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁹² Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 88.

⁹³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848 and Its Aftermath*, ed. Olivier Zunz, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville, 2016), pp. 4–5.

⁹⁴ See Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, Book II, ch. 9.

⁹⁵ Richard Boyd, 'Politesse and Public Opinion in Stendhal's *Red and Black*', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 4 (4) (2005), pp. 367–92.

1830, Sorel writes to challenge the image of a liberal social middle that rose ostensibly to challenge the centralized state, lamenting that ‘we do not find many liberal tendencies’ in the middle classes, ‘rather, we see a strengthening, regulating, and extending of the power of the state, which the oligarchy more and more regarded as its property’.⁹⁶ By the end of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, Sorel perceives those same tendencies towards regulation amplified in the agenda of the parliamentary socialists, the unwitting agents of a bourgeois society who would never seek to overturn the very state through which they hoped to control the levers of power.⁹⁷ If they invite comparison with the Napoleonic officials ‘who worked to strengthen the State bequeathed by the ancien régime’, then revolutionary syndicalism ‘corresponds well to the Napoleonic *armies* whose soldiers accomplished so many acts of valor’.⁹⁸ For Sorel, the new, intrepid syndicalism supplants an enervated socialism.

IV Intellectuals and Utopia

Just as Sorel derides the languid bourgeoisie of France’s parlours along with the feckless political socialists of its assembly, he likewise condemns the pseudo-scientific intellectual class for propagating utopian ‘illusions’ without ever spurring men to action. While Tocqueville does not go so far as Sorel’s declared ‘revolt against reason’, or his Bergsonian embrace of emotional inspiration in its place, both Tocqueville and Sorel share a deep suspicion of the pernicious influence of intellectuals in public life. Whether in the eighteenth century or the twentieth, the main problem with utopian intellectuals is the false confidence they place in the sovereignty of reason. For Tocqueville the conservative and Sorel the radical alike, inveterate intellectuals assume that they can imagine *ex ante* a novel world of rational institutions and social arrangements. Their misplaced self-confidence poses a particular problem when it becomes politicized, or when intellectuals attempt to refashion the social world according to a pre-planned rationalist design.

The brunt of Sorel’s invective may have been directed against utopian intellectuals of the Third Republic, but consistent with his opinion on the continuities between the old and new France, the issue for him is traceable first and foremost to an eighteenth-century, Physiocratic phenomenon. His

⁹⁶ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 44.

⁹⁷ Tocqueville and Sorel both looked to America as an object lesson in this regard, albeit with different conclusions. Sorel regards the attractions of industry and money-making in America as a preferable alternative to democracy in France, where the wealth of the state and the poverty of society encourages the unscrupulous to dedicate their ambition to capturing the ‘very easy prey’ of the state. See ‘La démocratie’, in *Georges Sorel: Présentation et textes choisis*, ed. Larry Portis (Paris, 1982), pp. 239–45.

⁹⁸ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 281. Emphasis added.

antipathy towards Turgot and the Physiocrats is anchored in Tocqueville's criticisms of their behaviour during the *ancien régime*. Confident in 'enlightened power', the Physiocrats proposed to counter despotism by expanding education and governing according to uniform rules.⁹⁹ Yet, following Tocqueville's assessment, Sorel is clear to specify that these expressions of so-called 'progress' amounted to mere 'illusions' propagated by the so-called enlightened few. Seduced by such illusions, the Third Estate heeded the warnings of the eighteenth-century men of letters as if consulting 'oracles'.¹⁰⁰ Sorel reproduces Tocqueville's own words to uncover the political reality behind their prophetic image of a rational state populated by well-educated subjects. 'With the help of this little piece of literary nonsense', of the Physiocrats' promise of public education, 'they meant to remove all political guarantees', substituting enlightenment for liberty while nonetheless assuring the French people of both.¹⁰¹

Both thinkers likewise object to the intellectual currents of 'positivism' that would seek to apply what Sorel refers to dismissively as the 'little science' to complex social and political arrangements.¹⁰² According to Sorel, the utopians wrongly apply the scientific method to predict the behaviours of social and political institutions. But his critique of this species of vulgar positivism is not just the familiar lament shared by Tocqueville and conservatives such as Edmund Burke — claims that human reason is too feeble to comprehend social complexity. Sorel would not disagree, though his critique goes deeper still, and hinges once again on his appropriation of Tocqueville's principle of conservation. Social change can never be anticipated or directed in advance, and sweeping transformations of the sort that Marx and the socialists envision spring from not merely anti-rational but *irrational* sources. Such changes emerge spontaneously from 'the depth of the soul' in a manner that is 'intuitive' — unanticipated and incomprehensible by reason, even to the revolutionary participants themselves.¹⁰³

This has direct implications for the political education of the revolutionary classes. Insofar as the proletariat can remain untutored and uncorrupted by formal ideologies of utopianism, they will not make the mistake of conforming their actions to a plan that will inevitably err from its *a priori* intended consequences. Instead, they will *act* and *produce* instinctively and spontaneously,

⁹⁹ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, pp. 58–9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58. For the original, see Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, pp. 144–5. Sorel dismisses the illusions of 'liberal men of state', who offer the children of the masses an education intended to 'prepare them to become ardent voters for progressive parties'. Instead, in Sorel's view, this ridiculous education does nothing to elevate their condition and only tends to make them 'detest the very labor they must engage in to earn a living'. Sorel, *Matériaux*, p. 138.

¹⁰² Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 134.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 28.

rather than according to reason or dogma. Moreover, their revolution — while undoubtedly making use of violence — will escape the wickedness and ‘spirit of vengeance’ that pervaded the French Revolution and the Terror.¹⁰⁴ It will resemble a war, carried out between combatants without hatred and without ‘the spirit of revenge’ that first impelled the Revolutionaries and later the Jacobins.¹⁰⁵

One significant difference between Sorel’s criticism and Tocqueville’s earlier analysis upon which it relies is that Sorel takes care to disaggregate the various intellectual currents of the eighteenth century to pinpoint the origins of utopian thinking. Unlike Tocqueville, who faults philosophers generically for their intoxication with abstract ideas and their dilettantish lack of practical political experience, Sorel draws a clear distinction between the Encyclopedists — Condorcet, Diderot and the *philosophes* — and the Physiocrats. ‘The Encyclopedists’, he emphasizes, ‘detested the Physiocrats’;¹⁰⁶ and in his view, this was for good reason. For as Tocqueville correctly noted, the Physiocrats deployed a ‘Napoleonic language’ to depict the state as a plebiscitarian instrument of domination. On their account, the state is directed by and subordinate to the will of the people from whom it derives its legitimacy, and yet in reality it is the device by which the Physiocrats seek to impose their ideals upon all of society. So confident were the Physiocrats in the power of reason that they attributed the Revolution to it. ‘They so well expressed the most widely held and widely considered opinions of the administrative class’, Sorel concludes after having just cited Tocqueville’s *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, ‘that they must often have believed that the reforms achieved by the Revolution resulted from their reasoned proofs’.¹⁰⁷

When Sorel quotes Tocqueville on this perverse quality of a wider ‘democratic despotism’, he means a despotism whose power is effectively disguised and augmented under the pretense of its alleged popularity.¹⁰⁸ Intellectuals disguise their own love of power behind the mirage of their modelled, utopian dreams for social regeneration, which as in the case of the Physiocrats, necessarily requires keeping the state intact so that they themselves can deploy its power to satisfy their own ends. Indeed, one of Sorel’s principal goals in writing *Reflections on Violence* is to ensure that intellectuals, those accustomed to ‘thinking for the proletariat’, stay out of future revolutions to leave space for creative action.¹⁰⁹ For Sorel, the rationalists’ ideals are opposed to pure,

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–8.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁰⁶ Sorel, *Illusions of Progress*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁹ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 129.

regenerative myths; the former will remain mere 'intellectual products', while the latter lead men towards the violent destruction of the status quo.¹¹⁰

Conclusion: Seeing Tocqueville Through Sorel

Sorel's Tocqueville, as this article has argued, is a fellow sceptic of rationalism and pessimistic theorist of revolutions, a lone voice warning of French decadence well before the former diagnosed the malaise of the early twentieth century and denounced his fellow socialists for their complicity in its perpetuation. Remarkably, Sorel suggests that *this* Tocqueville, odd as he may seem in the landscape of European liberalism, came into view only after the 'great changes' of 1870, with the dissolution of the Second Empire and the founding of the Third Republic. It was this founding moment that enabled Sorel to appreciate his predecessor's portrayal of the Revolution of 1789 and guided him to draw certain conclusions about revolutionary action more generally. 1870 was a breaking point of sorts; the end of the Second Empire finally 'dispelled' the venerable belief that the Revolution of 1789 marked a 'war of liberty' undertaken by the people against 'all the powers of oppression and error'.¹¹¹ It exposed the Revolution for what Tocqueville recognized it as all along: political reaction, not social transformation, regardless of the motivations professed by its key actors.¹¹² Seen in Sorel's particular context, in the transition from Napoleonic rule to the Third Republic, the idea of violence can take on a new normative cast. No longer bound to the longstanding legacy of the Jacobin Terror, to 'police operations, proscriptions, and the sittings of servile courts of law', it may serve as the mechanism for society's rebirth, the only true weapon against oppression and error.¹¹³

Yet Sorel's Tocqueville is even stranger than either Roger Boesche's 'strange' liberal or Sheldon Wolin's displaced aristocrat, who never found himself at home in a post-revolutionary age caught between the two worlds of aristocracy and democracy.¹¹⁴ For in mustering Tocqueville's principle of conservation to bolster an apology for radicalism, Sorel deftly appropriated some features of Tocqueville's thought while consciously, it seems, disregarding

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90. As a point of contrast to Sorel's claim about Tocqueville's insights under shifting political contexts, Mélonio locates 1870 as the time when Tocqueville's works began to fade 'toward oblivion'. Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, pp. 149–58.

¹¹² Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 92.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Boesche, *Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*; Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, 2003). On Tocqueville as the thoroughgoing product of his aristocratic milieu, see Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* (Princeton, 2013).

others. One example can be gleaned from Sorel's take on the lessons of Physiocracy. Amid those critical appraisals of Physiocracy which Sorel quotes, Tocqueville also draws a straight line from the pre-revolutionary Physiocrats to the mid nineteenth-century socialists. 'When I peruse the books of the [Physiocrats]', Tocqueville comments, 'I have the feeling that I have lived with these people and talked with them only a moment ago.' He emphasizes these remarkable and unfavourable commonalities in order to implicate both the Physiocrats of the *ancien régime* and the socialists of his present day: centralization and socialism, Tocqueville insisted, grew 'from the same soil'.¹¹⁵ For his part, Sorel engages in a selective intellectual reception of Tocqueville's thesis. At the same time that he appropriates Tocqueville's analysis of socialism to indict one strand of socialism — a socialism politicized and pacified — he also ignores the latter's scathing accusations against socialism as a monolithic 'materialist' political ideology, bound up with the same bourgeois taste for 'well-being' that both figures openly detest.¹¹⁶

Above all, the Tocqueville unseen — or perhaps consciously concealed — by Sorel was an avowed enemy of class-based violence and, very much unlike the French radical, an advocate for the centrality of the political. Alongside his condemnations of the 'materialist' philosophy of socialism, Tocqueville decried the Revolution of 1848 as a 'class combat' rather than a genuine 'political struggle'.¹¹⁷ Sorel, of course, arrived at precisely the opposite conclusion about class-based disorder, as he sought a form of spontaneous social violence that would reposition the bourgeoisie against the proletariat while reawakening the dormant martial virtues of each class. Although Tocqueville analysed the French Revolution as evidence of the futility of political change, he remained a champion of the political, going so far as to tie the 'political' to the 'sacred' in his pointed denunciations of the socialists' agenda post-1848.¹¹⁸

Still, we ought not to overlook the ease with which the radical Sorel built upon the insights of the liberal Tocqueville. Even if, as we have suggested, Sorel elevates select *parts* of Tocqueville's political theory over others, mobilizing Tocqueville as a peculiar ally for the cause of proletarian action, this does not mean that he necessarily discounts the *whole*. Although *Democracy in America* is most often embraced by the American intellectual and political Right, Tocqueville found himself at the centre-left of parliamentary politics when he returned to France after his travels in the New World, finding few allies among even the liberal parliamentary oppositions and taking a hardline

¹¹⁵ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, p. 148.

¹¹⁶ Tocqueville, *Recollections*, p. 56.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 97 and 56.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97. On Tocqueville's affirmation of 'the political' over and against the deterministic 'social' or 'economic' interpretations of society, see especially Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought, Volume 1* (New York, 1965).

stance against what he perceived as the reactionary qualities of the so-called liberal government. The core tenets of Tocqueville's political theory beyond the pages of *Democracy* — his disappointment with bourgeois France, distaste for materialism, embrace of social reform, and philosophical aversions to decadence — lend themselves quite naturally to a left-leaning intellectual reception.¹¹⁹ Both figures, as we noted in the Introduction, are misfits of their respective *milieux* — philosophical chameleons, without an obvious party or intellectual home-base. As Sorel succeeds in incorporating the conservative principle of historical 'heredity' into a fringe argument for violence from below, he concurrently brings to light the less-familiar aspects of Tocqueville's *oeuvre* that fit awkwardly within his reputation as a 'liberal conservative'. Even as Sorel's politics — that is to say, his anti-politics — seems a far cry from the political philosophy of the Tocqueville we have come to know, Sorel captured some of the enigmas of his predecessor's peculiar liberalism.

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¹¹⁹ For a survey of Tocqueville's reformist impulses congenial to the left, especially in the United States, see Robert T. Gannett, Jr., 'Tocqueville and the Political Left in America: Heeding a Call for Decisive Action', in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, ed. Richard Boyd (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 157–77. On broader reformist strands in Tocqueville's thought, see Seymour Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization* (Pittsburgh, 1963); Michael Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform* (New York, 2003); Gianna Englert, '“The Idea of Rights”: Tocqueville on the Social Question', *The Review of Politics*, 79 (4) (2017), pp. 649–74.