Mysticism and Mechanization

...the great souls — to a greater extent than philosophers — are those of artists and mystics (at least those of a Christian mysticism that Bergson describes as being completely superabundant activity, action, creation). At the limit, it is the mystic who plays with the whole of creation, who invents an expression of it whose adequacy increases its dynamism. Servant of an open and finite God (such are the characterisics of the élan vital), the mystical soul actively plays the whole of the universe in which there is nothing to see or to contemplate.

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already-underway arrival of the "age of the Machine, the immense mechanosphere, the plane of the cosmicization of forces to be harnessed".

In this age, the molecular moves to the fore, and the creative act that cascades across all the levels of the totality is revealed as the penetration of these forces and flows in order to unleash the production of the new. The figure of the artist-mystic is resurrected in these pages, but wears a new face: that of the "cosmic artisan" capable of taking leave from the earth. This artisan (alternatively referred to as the "artist-artisan") helps realize, through the forces of deterritorialization and decoding, a "cosmic people" and a "cosmic earth" — the people-to-come and the New Earth across which they move.

Thus the plateau on the refrain, which charts (among other things) a movement of territorial formation, stability, and exit across a tripartite schema of Classical, Romantic, and Modern ages, provides a highly abstract prism that allows Bergson's depictions of closed societies and open societies to be read historically. This, admittedly, is the purpose of The Two Sources of Morality and Religion, a work that Ernst Bloch described as "very Marxist".

Others who followed Bergson and his work closely, however, might have found much to disagree with in this overstatement. Such was the case of Georges Sorel, engineer turned political radical, who expressed in an otherwise-sympathetic review of the philosopher's work a "wish that Bergson would abandon the largely infantile applications of his philosophy to the natural sciences and instead apply this to the problems raised by the great social movements."

In Sorel's hands, the vision of the élan vital is not one of a metaphysical system to be perceived as operating at a cosmological level, but the very force that can be found at each moment in the cascading development of industrial forces: "Bergson's creative evolution simply imitates the history of human industry... The true place for Bergson's philosophy is in social studies, especially those concerning the present day."

Sorel's reconfiguration and deployment of Bergson's philosophies in the service of such a pursuit is of immediate interest to elucidating Deleuze's perspective on fabulation, and the role that it plays in the overall architecture of his philosophy. In Sorel's works, particularly the 1908 book Reflections on Violence, Bergsonian thought undergoes a mutation by way of a creative encounter with Marxism and revolutionary syndicalism. This mutation helps provide the backbone of an escape route from what Sorel describes as decadence — that is, a wide-ranging slowdown in the forces of industrial development, economic competition, and class struggle that occurs when the bourgeoisie and and proletariat deviate from the historical paths identified by Marx.

"[I]t has been suggested", writes Jeffrey Mehlman, "that 'entropy' is perhaps the dominant institution of Sorel's thought."

The second law of thermodynamics, as articulated by Rudolf Clausius in the early 1850s, had by the time Sorel was writing exploded over the socio-cultural landscape. The realization that force forever dissipates made shockingly clear that disorder in a given system builds over time and that, at the horizon, a grand extinguishing looms. The euphoria of the earlier industrial era, swept up in the dream of Newtonian balance and universal harmony, dissolved into a fog of cosmic ennui. Fatigue, dissatisfaction, and a generalized weariness with things radiated through society, matched by an intensified focus on maintenance, regulation, and fitness as a means of holding these forces at bay.

Entropy was civilization's grand enemy. To see it rushing over the gates meant that civilization was splitting apart, teetering at the edge of a grand abyss. For Sorel, writing during a time which we can identify as the eclipsing of early, competitive capitalism by monopoly capitalism, the dimming of modernity's flames under the conjoined complacency of reform-minded parliamentary socialists and a bourgeoisie that had become an "ultra-civilized aristocracy" heralded the threat of decay and degradation.

The question of entropy also played a major, if often overlooked, role in Bergson's work, particular where the notion of the élan vital is concerned. In the latter half of the 1800s, the recognition of the doom wrought by entropy triggered oscillations between a world-weary acceptance of the conditions and attempts to forestall it wherever possible. It wouldn't be until the 1940s when negentropy (negative entropy) would come to be known. Erwin Schrödinger, for example, wrote in his 1944 book What is Life? that a living thing "can only be kept aloof from [entropy], i.e. alive, by continually drawing from its environment negative entropy."
...everything happens as if it were doing its utmost to set itself free from these laws. It has not the power to reverse the direction of physical changes, such as the principle of Carnot determines it. It does, however, behave absolutely as a force would behave which, left to itself, would work in the inverse direction. Incapable of stopping the course of material changes downwards, it succeeds in retarding it. The evolution of life really continues ... [as] an initial impulsion: this impulsion... brings life to more and more efficient acts by the fabrication and use of more and more powerful explosives.

Building the Social Myth
It must be noted that fiction, when it has the power to move us, resembles an incipient hallucination: it can thwart our judgment and reason, which are strictly intellectual faculties. Now what would nature have done, if she wanted to guard against certain dangers of intellectual activity without compromising the future of intelligence? ... if intelligence was to be kept at the outset from sliding down a slope which was dangerous to the individual and society, it could only be by the statement of apparent facts, by ghosts of facts; failing real experience, a counterfeit of experience had to be conjured up. A fiction, if it is vivid and insistent,
may indeed masquerade as perception and in that way prevent or modify action.

Ordinary language could not produce these results in any very certain manner;
appeal must be made to collections of images which, taken together and through intuition alone, before any considered analyses are made, are capable of invoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war taken by social against modern society... This method has all the advantages that integral knowledge has over analysis, according to the doctrine of Bergson; and perhaps it might be possible to cite many other examples which would demonstrate equally well the worth of the famous professor’s doctrines.

Reversal

The pessimist regards social conditions as forming a system bound together by an iron law which cannot be evaded, as something in the form of one block, and which can only disappear through a catastrophe that involves the whole. If this theory is admitted, it then becomes absurd to attribute the evils from which society suffers to a few wicked men.
Sorel used the history of Christianity to draw this out. The primitive Christian, for example, found themselves born into a life of bondage, a slave to the earth of which Satan is the prince. In order to survive in this world, the individual gives themselves over to the belief in the future eschatological conflict between God and these forces of darkness: the myth of war and the realization of the New Jerusalem transforms one into something capable of truly existing. The Calvinists took this even further with the added weight of the doctrines of predestination. In the sixteenth century they were able to power an immense revolutionary machine, a “real catastrophic revolution” that fundamentally transformed everything, shaking apart the power structures of Catholicism and undermining its long-held stability.

If Catholicism could be broken apart by the Calvinist revolutionary force, it was because it had lost its connection to the fire of the mythic through the disappearance of the “Church militant”. Calvinism, likewise, suffered a similar fate in the wake of the Renaissance, which for Sorel has ushered in a wave of humanistic thought that brought with it an unbridled optimism. Here, at this point, society begin to run afoul, the groundwork laid for a “ridiculous social pacifism” that drowned out vital, nourishing anger. The iron cage began receding into the background. Soon the bourgeoisie, much like the parliamentary socialists with whom they linked arms, would cease to be like Nietzsche’s ‘warrior types’, and come to prefer the large, cumbersome industrial cartels and rationalized industry to the competitive battlefield of the market.

This society, divorced from myth and swallowed by optimism, was (to use Bergson’s parlance) a closed society. Yet it is clear how Sorel reverses Bergson’s schema: for the earlier philosopher, the mythic society was the closed society, held under the sway of a ‘static religion’. In Sorel’s work, decadence was marked by stasis, and it is no stretch to treat the decadent society as the theoretical descendant of the closed society — except that the relationship to myth is fundamentally different. For Bergson, the open society follows the faculty of intuition in a proto-negentropic escape from the closed society’s mythic basis. For Sorel, a precise contrast: the negentropic opening follows through the reinvigoration of the myth of deliverance.

The Revolutionary Myth

It’s important not to mistake Sorel’s myth for more basic forms of propaganda. Perhaps an apt way to pull them apart is to compare each to Mark Fisher’s distinction between sorcery and magic. For Fisher, magic, like propaganda, proceeds by operating within a given system, moving in line with its despotic programming in order to ‘organize’ and ‘install’ words and languages with the goal of capturing potentially divergent movement (and to ward off more powerful, threatening ones). Sorcery, by contrast, operates at a much higher — or perhaps, more properly, lower — level. It marks an opening to the Outside, the zone where the Outside pours into the interior. Instead of organizing words into programs, sorcery entails “words melting into Things, and building sensitive side-communication Meshworks that spread”. It is thus out of reach of human control, generative, and radically open.

Indeed, as Bergson’s understanding of the myth entailed, it isn’t the product of any one person or institution; it is something that organizes itself through time in the intersection of the individual intellect and the wider congealing of habits into social memory. From there it’s only a small leap to Sorel’s Marxist theoretical ground, where social institutions, norms, belief structures, etc., are secondary formations relative to the primary generative processes. In his discussions concerning both ‘primitive Christianity’ and ancient Greece this becomes particularly clear, with the doctrine of original sin and the epic battles of the gods deriving their contexts from material conditions unique to each social order.

This dynamic is in play with Sorel’s chief topic: the myth of the general strike advanced by the revolutionary syndicalist movement of his time. Where did the myth come from? Not from any singular source. It congealed from Proudhon and Bakunin’s anarchic vision of grand industrial federations, and from the communist anticipation of the great revolution looming up on the horizon — and behind each, the tumult of history. The preconditional ferment of this revolutionary consciousness encompassed the eradication of the romantic.
only means by which the European nations, stupefied by humanitarianism, can recover their former energy. This violence compels capitalism to restrict its attention solely to its material role and tends to restore it to its warlike qualities it formerly possessed. A growing and solidly organized working class can force the capitalist class to remain ardent in the historical struggle; if a united and revolutionary proletariat confronts a rich bourgeoisie ready for conquest, capitalist society will reach its historical perfection.

...the idea of the general strike, constantly rejuvenated by the sentiments
provoked by proletarian violence, produces an entirely epic state of mind and, at the same time, bends all the energies of the mind towards the conditions that allow the realization of a freely functioning and prodigiously progressive workshop; we have thus recognized that there is a strong relationship between the sentiments aroused by the general strike and those which are necessary to bring about a continued progress in production. We have then the right to maintain that the modern world possesses the essential motivating power which can ensure the existence of the morality of producers.

4. Ibid., 197-198.


7. Ibid., 132-133.


13. Ibid. (emphasis in original)


15. Ibid., 195.


17. Ibid., 17.

18. Ibid., 109.

19. Ibid., 130.

20. Ibid., 130-131.

21. Bergson's student Jacques Chevalier later recounted his mentor's thoughts on Sorel: "He's a curious man, this old engineer, whose thought had such an effect on Lenin and Mussolini. What he has tried to find in my work is the idea of the generative myth. But he had his own ideas in mind more than my own." Fujita, "Anarchy and Analogy", note 12, 124.


For Sorel, the Nietzschean 'master type' was based upon "ancient heroes and the man who sets out to conquer the Far West" (Ibid., 232). The European bourgeoisie, having slowly reclined into civilized comforts, had fallen short of this idealized state — but for Sorel, it could still be found in the industrious spirit exhibited by capitalists in the United States: "I believe that if Nietzsche had not been so dominated by his memories of being a professor of philology, he would have perceived that the master type still exists under our own eyes, and that it is this type which, at the present time, creates the extraordinary greatness of the United States." Interestingly, Deleuze and Guattari also draw attention to the exceptional, schizophrenizing nature of American capitalism in both volumes of Capitalism and Schizophrenia, and even note in that "everything important that has happened or is happening takes the route of the American rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 19.). The relationship between the "American rhizome" and the figure of the people-to-come will be taken up again in a future section of this essay series.

I owe this insight to Cockydooody. Check out his Totalitarian Collectivist blog right now.


Here, magic is the associated with the reformist gambit of Keynesian economics, and sorcery with the entrepreneur and the rhythmic pulse of creative destruction as identified by Joseph Schumpeter and his work on wave dynamics in capitalism. It goes without saying something like creative destruction is precisely what Sorel is hoping to win out over highly reformed, stagnant capitalism.

Sorel, Reflections on Violence, 77.

Sorel here appears as an early progenitor of the "Insect Communism" advanced by the likes of Eliphas Apis, among others. See Eliphas Apis, The Insect Communist Manifesto (Terra Nova: Sov-Hive 325 Publishing, 2025). Directly presaging the concerns of Apis, Sorel himself describes 'perfection in manufacturing' as a factory or workshop capable of being "considered as a machine whose parts are men." The industrial education of the workers here produces a "completely mindless life" based on automatic behaviors in relation to the rhythms of production. Thus the "skill the workers acquire can, in the long run, be compared reasonably to the instinct of an insect." See Georges Sorel, The
Illusions of Progress (Berkley: University of California Press, 1969), 195-196. It is also worth noting that Sorel is invoking Bergson's somnambulist theory of instinct. For an overview of this controversial theory (and the influence of it on Deleuze's early work), see Christian Kerslake, "Insects and Incest: From Bergson and Jung to Deleuze", *Multitudes*, No. 25 (2006), http://www.multitudes.net/Insects-and-Incest-From-Bergson/.
