

Glorious Instants, Perpetual Recurrences: Georges Sorel, Vilfredo Pareto, and the Dismissal
of Progress as a Political Category

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Introduction: Dissidents in the Age of Progress

A rather peculiar coincidence of opposites forms the topic of the present chapter. Georges Sorel and Vilfredo Pareto, the two social thinkers of the *Belle Epoque* to be discussed, were acquainted, corresponded, and respected each other from an intellectual point of view¹—not an insignificant detail for two men known for their irascible intractability (Busino 1967, 131n)—but were, nonetheless, on opposite ends of most spectrums and on opposite sides of most issues. Sorel was a committed proponent of working class emancipation, Pareto was a detached observer of social stratification and the dominance of elites; Sorel shared many intellectual affinities with Bergsonian vitalism (Julliard 1985), while Pareto was a staunch positivist; Sorel was a master of conversation and episodic, polemical prose, while Pareto was an eccentric, aristocratic recluse who shrouded his scientific knowledge in hypertrophic systematizing (Aron 1967, Bobbio 1996). Despite the distance that separates their worldviews, an element of commonality is apparent: neither theorist's conception of politics is much concerned with the notion of historical change.

To understand how idiosyncratic this shared position was, it is helpful to place Pareto and Sorel in their context, both intellectual and social. Intellectually, the leading doctrines of the 19th century were dynamic: liberalism, socialism, evolutionism all focused on processes of change in society, on stages, shifts, mutations, progress. All conceived of the present as an essentially new age with respect to the past, all expected the future to be profoundly and importantly different from the present. Even those intellectuals (such as De Maistre or Carlyle, for instance) whose normative preferences led them to decry and oppose the forward march of history were obliged to concur with this basic descriptive characterization (Sternhell 2006). The major social thinkers, from Hegel to Comte, John Stuart Mill to Marx, and Tocqueville to Spencer, perceived fundamental breaks in history, and took it to be the goal of theorizing to analyze the workings of social change. Hence, even the cultural interest in concepts of decline and decadence that spread through Europe at the close of the 19th

¹ For general biographical information on Sorel, see Andreu 1982; Berlin 1980. On Pareto, see Bousquet 1960; Bobbio 1973; Busino 1967.

century, a lineage running *inter alios* from Gobineau to Taine to Nietzsche to Spengler, could appear in this context as nothing but a mirror-image reaction to progressivism, preserving a dynamic view of history while reversing its direction (Forth 1993; Weber 1982; Mazgaj 1982).

If such widely differing voices were in unison with regard to the importance of historical change, the cause can be found in no small part in social life itself. For a citizen of the Victorian or the Bismarkian era, the notion that the present was an age marked by momentous transformations must have appeared as the most self-evident of platitudes. The economic and technological developments of the second industrial revolution, the social and demographic explosions of mass urbanism, transcontinental migration, and disease control, the political and organizational leaps of universal manhood suffrage, national conscript armies, State-supported literacy and the first forms of welfarism all contributed to afford contemporaries the impression that they were witnessing the birth of a new world, the age of the masses².

Confronted with this environment, however, both Georges Sorel and Vilfredo Pareto developed political theories that, in different ways, ignored or minimized the notion of historical change in general, and the significance of modernity in particular, while attacking the belief in progress as an ideological mystification. This chapter will first of all attempt to establish this claim by discussing the relevant aspects of the political thought of Sorel and Pareto, in turn. Subsequently, it will offer a few hypotheses about the driving forces behind the aversion for the theorization of change in these authors as part of a broader cultural dynamic. The chapter will conclude by suggesting some reasons for the relevance of the issue in our contemporary predicament, at the close of the age of ideologies.

Sorel: The Moment of Revolutionary Mobilization

Georges Sorel is generally remembered as the theorist of revolutionary syndicalism, an unmediated politics of direct action and violence on the extreme Left of the socialist movement in pre-war France, aimed at achieving the collapse of the capitalist order by means of the general strike (Sorel 1999, 118). He is further remembered for his anti-intellectualism, and for the reliance of his political thought on the ideational construct of the

² For an overview, see for instance Hinsley 1967; Hobsbawm 1987; Prochasson 1991; Blom 2008; Kalifa 2001; Ozouf 1963.

social myth, a slogan, a rallying cry, a synthetic image that permits collective action without exhibiting any of the conceptually schematic and utopian characteristics of Jacobinism, social reformism, or academic socialism (Kolakowski 1975; Paquot 1982; Portis 1989).

For the purposes of the present discussion, however, this standard picture must be amended, or rather deepened, in two main directions. On the one hand, it is important to underline the relative lack of importance for Sorel's revolutionary theory of any evaluation of the chances for success in the struggle, and the absence of any palingenetic quality of the proposed post-revolutionary State. The life of the producers would in fact continue in much the same fashion in material terms and with regard to the organization of labor, according to Sorel, once the dominance of the parasitic classes has been shaken off.³ Therefore, paradoxically the material grievances of the workers are not the fulcrum of motivation for revolutionary action. What really counts about class struggle and the general strike, rather, is the calling forth, in the charged atmosphere of mass mobilization, of the spirit of altruism, self-sacrifice, tenacity, and heroism that already resides in the working class, constitutes its social character, and grounds its claim to pre-eminence (Vernon 1978, 33). These traits are the foundation of ethical life for Sorel (as stated explicitly in the letter to Benedetto Croce of 6 May 1907, quoted in Hughes 1958, 170), and their social deployment is the goal and only worthwhile characteristic of politics as direct action.

The second revision of the received image of his thought has to do with the wider historical applicability of this dynamic: the mechanism leading to productive social tension by means of the social myth is in no way limited to revolutionary syndicalism—the general strike is simply its most recent instantiation. The past offers many analogous cases, from the early Christian communities to the first German followers of Martin Luther to the soldiers in the French revolutionary armies of 1792 (Sorel 1999, 13 and 240-242). The same dynamic reappears any time a marginalized group possessing strong internal cohesion and altruistic mores happens upon the mobilizing images capable of igniting collective action.

This particular view of politics as a cycle of conflict and crisis is both condensed in the moment of the clash of worldviews and indefinitely iterated in historical examples from all ages—irregular, unpredictable, but recurrent. Such an understanding of the essence of politics finds further expression in Sorel's attack on the notion of progress as a typically bourgeois ideology, to which the working class, as the bearer of a new spirit for the future

³ It is not difficult to discern the influence of Proudhon on this matter (Vernon 1978, 15-21).

organization of society, opposes a messianic pessimism (Sorel 1908). I will refrain for present purposes from engaging with the thorny interpretative problem of moral progress in Sorel's thought, which merits more detailed reconstruction. Nonetheless, if Sorel could interpret any lessening of the passion for social opposition as a sign of decadence, the historical process as a whole could then be understood by him only as an irregular, random recurrence of cycles of social tension, from which any notion of Marxian teleology (despite the lip-service that Sorel for a time paid to the idea) had been essentially expunged (Horowitz 1961; Humphrey 1951; Meisel 1950; Roth 1980).

In short, it is in the glorious instants of collective action that Sorel's politics lives: not only, then, are the specificities of modern society of no particular strategic relevance to a politics of direct action, but the fundamental normative value of duration as a mark of success (and the attendant structuring of revolutionary politics as a competition for the founding of a stable political order) is radically called into question.

Pareto: The Immutability of Social Hierarchy

Vilfredo Pareto is generally associated with the Italian school of sociology and with the *Realpolitik* critique of democracy that goes by the name of the theory of elites. In order to understand the implications of the architectural structure of Pareto's view of society, it is useful to recall his intellectual trajectory, and in particular to note the homologies that exist with his seminal contributions to the field of economics.⁴ Accordingly, social science consists for Pareto in the analysis of invariance and general equilibrium conditions: actual empirical states can either manifest themselves as convergent and stable, or as divergent and unstable, but all crises prefigure the appearance of a new static equilibrium, indeed can only be conceived in terms of it. Therefore, the dynamic aspect of the system is limited to the description of a cycle, all shocks being ultimately subsumed by the recomposition of the *status quo*.

What this *status quo* amounts to is well known: the fundamental fact of politics, according to Pareto, is social heterogeneity—a few rule, everyone else obeys. And as it is scarcely possible for the few to oppress the many by force alone, the great edifice of the *Traité* is devoted to the study of ideological obfuscation (La Ferla 1954, 44). In this sense, Paretian

⁴ The best introduction to the argumentative structure of the *Traité de sociologie générale*, Pareto's main sociological work, is Bousquet 1925.

sociology decisively parts ways with economics (*homo oeconomicus* is no longer the object of study: Busino 1967, 130), and, ultimately, with the *Raison d'État/Realpolitik* tradition, as well, especially in terms of its pragmatic intent and its ambiguous relation with the notion of publicity. The main building blocks of the analysis are the positing of original *residues* (i.e. psychological ideal-types), the elaborate taxonomy of *derivations* (i.e. ideological formations), and the linkage between changes in the composition of residues within the ruling class and elite circulation. Pareto's discursive strategy, which depends on extensive discussion of historical examples, and relies heavily on the Ancient world for this purpose, is certainly motivated by his inductive method (since controlled experiments are typically unavailable to the social sciences, the need arises for as much raw historical data as possible), but is also an implicit claim about the epistemological unity of social facts across time, and a refusal of historicization (Busino 1967, 132).

From this point of view, it is clear that progress, and, for that matter, decadence,⁵ has no true scientific significance within the bounds of Paretian theory: the trans-historical truths about society concern heterogeneity and ideological discourse, and a cult of progress (or a demonization of decadence) are precisely nothing more than derivations—instances of politically tainted and thus intellectually bankrupt reasoning (Pareto 1964, sections 301-4).

While the theory thus commits itself to conceive of history as an endless replaying of the same script (a view that naturally affords no special status to the present, or modern society as such), it also renders change essentially parametric: inasmuch as the circulation of elites depends on unobservable variations in residues, it cannot meaningfully be predicted (even if warning signs can be perceived in the variations of ideological discourse). By a different route, Pareto seems to be rejoining Sorel's conclusions on this count as well: not only is history a series of equivalent iterations, but these also recur irregularly, and are therefore fundamentally unpredictable.

Very different conclusions ensue, however, with regard to personal engagement in real-life political struggles. Pareto maintains that a necessary condition of intellectually defensible investigation in social matters is a radical separation between theory and praxis: a view from nowhere, or a retreat to Galapagos (Finer 1968), from which to contemplate the perpetual recurrences of different configurations in political inequality and social stratification. This ascetic position is linked to the status of rationality and the opposition between knowledge

⁵ *Contra*, see Valade 1990.

and action, a position that is brought to the fore in Pareto's extensive critique of the language of politics and in his scientific attachment to definition and neologism.⁶

The Opacity of Mass Society and the Crisis in the Understanding of Collective Agency

If the brief interpretative reconstructions attempted above appear persuasive, it would seem that Sorel and Pareto's views of politics, by focusing either on the unique moment of mobilization or on the long-term recurrence of hierarchical arrangements, seriously discount the notion of historical change. In the specific context, this stance amounts to a denial of, or at least a significant challenge to, the view that the rise of the masses and the "Social Question" were world-historical events, irreversible transformations of the configuration of society—a view held by most European social thinkers, at least from the time of Tocqueville's meditations on the first wave of democratization. Sorel and Pareto were not traditionalists, or untimely in a Nietzschean sense:⁷ they were both conflict theorists who directed their analyses to the heart of the new industrial mass society, with its technical and disciplinarian conception of time.⁸ However, their perspective transcended the struggles of the *fin de siècle*: they believed in the trans-historical nature of conflict; they recognized historical multiplicity, but they did not locate their theory of politics at the level of historical change. Thus, they differed even from an earlier alternative to the linear, progressive notion of time, namely, the cyclical view of history held by thinkers such as Polybius or Machiavelli. What we find in Pareto and Sorel, rather, is something much more radical: a de-valuation of the historical process *per se*. This negation of teleology in Pareto's case prefigures the impartial stance claimed by the modern social sciences. It is hardly possible, however, to miss the formal similarity between the conclusions to be drawn from his stance and from Sorel's, which stems from a completely different source, an essentially aesthetic revaluation of the (ephemeral) moment as the only possible locus of revolutionary enthusiasm. Consequently, we may deduce by implication their shared belief that what, if anything, is distinctive about modernity has nothing to do with politics.

⁶ La Ferla 1954, 9-14; Busino 1967, 39. Gramsci's rebuttal of Pareto's many tirades on the imprecision of current political vocabulary can be considered emblematic of the passing of an era, and the dawn of the "linguistic turn" in political analysis (Gramsci 1975, Notebook 11, section 24).

⁷ *Pace* Sheldon Wolin (cf. Vernon 1973 and Vernon 1981).

⁸ Frederic Jameson (personal communication, February 2012) has pointed out that much of the reflection on different regimes of time in high modernism, both in the realm of philosophy (Bergson) and in that of literature (Proust, Mann), was driven by the perception of the effects of a still *incomplete* process of modernization, most visible in the opposition between the rhythms of town and country.

The question then arises: what is the determinant, the driving impetus, the pre-analytical appeal of this conception of time? The issue is complex, and allows for no straightforward solutions. The direction I propose to follow in order to offer a hypothesis leads towards the shared generational perception of a failure of politics as a dialogic or deliberative experience. Otherwise stated: an irreducible disconnect between public discourse and political decisions and actions characterizes the entry into the political age of the masses. The issues of what counts as a persuasive argument in the political realm, how consent is to be acquired, maintained, and even measured, and what the springs of collective agency are, all confronted the turn-of-the-century generation in fundamentally novel guises. The problem of the conditions under which one can talk about politics in modernity became central.

One analytically available answer to these dilemmas of modernity was an epistemology of suspicion, allied to a rhetoric of unmasking and denunciation, such as is to be found in Marx, in Nietzsche, and to a certain extent in Freud. I believe that both Sorel and Pareto can be shown to operate within this paradigm; in the historical circumstances of the *fin de siècle*, however, this amounted to a more general loss of faith in the possibility for a rational, justifiable organization of society, and thus of applying political doctrines in the world. This crisis of rational agency at the level of large aggregates in turn implied a crisis of principled political engagement: the interplay between the two can be observed for instance in the period's intellectual fascination with the irrationality of crowd behavior (Nye 1973; Nye 1975; Barrows 1981). Consequently, the problem of the social role of the intellectual was also posed for both in an essentially unsolvable form.⁹

While political voluntarism was under attack in the closing years of the 19th century, comparable problems had surfaced with regards to social theories based on non-agentic, structural determinants of social change. The paradigmatic real-world case was the issue of revolution and its timing. Observers on both sides of the socialist-bourgeois cleavage were mystified by the apparent decoupling of economic developments and working-class organization. On the one side, the empirical falsification of Marx's general immiseration thesis did not seem to have any effect on the growth of explicitly Marxist socialist parties. On the other, the growing strength of working class mobilization seemed unable to reverse the receding of the revolutionary horizon. The peculiar political opacity of mass society seemed to lie precisely in this limbo, where the reasons for the subsistence of the *status quo*

⁹ Of the vast secondary literature on this topic, see especially Charle 1990.

had been refuted, yet revolutionary change did not erupt. Different ambits of society seemed to be moving in a wholly uncoordinated manner: quantitative development in material conditions found no translation in qualitative change in the field of politics.

The views, then, of Sorel and Pareto can be read as two symptomatic attempts to account for phenomena of revolution and order in an intellectual context in which previous theories of social action had been discredited, yet the concrete political situation imposed the issue as one of immediate practical concern. Their respective normative preferences concerning revolution account for the polarity of the viewpoints adopted. Nonetheless, the solidarity between their dismissals of progress as a key political category can be connected with a broader crisis in the reflexive understanding of modern European societies, which took the form of a reaction against Victorian rationalisms. Inasmuch as political action could not be understood (either on its own discursive merits or in terms of deeper structural forces) except as prevarication or blind mythical enthusiasm, progress was not, and could not be, a meaningful interpretive or normative category.

This theoretical stalemate can best be understood when compared with the value orientation and specific personality requirements that Max Weber attributed to political and intellectual pursuits, the stoicism of vocation when confronted with a similarly disenchanting view of history and the potential meaninglessness of human fate. The Weberian problem of the ultimate ends of politics escapes the bounds of this position, which at the same time has abandoned any commitment to a liberal or Marxian humanism, and thus any teleology of deliverance or emancipation.

Conclusions for contemporary Victorians

In a political environment such as has obtained in most Western countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall, an environment pervaded by temptations to declare itself the end of history, and indeed to look for its civilizational antecedents in late Victorian globalization, it may prove fruitful to revisit the circumstances that caused the demise of the previous liberal end of history. If we take seriously the historical interpretation of the first half of the 20th century as a protracted European civil war, the theories of Pareto and Sorel will figure as non-marginal elements in the narrative of its cultural and intellectual origins. Most importantly, perhaps, focusing on their thought, and on their peculiar refusal to theorize change can alert us to the fundamental differences between the liberal-democratic polities

they were discussing and our own. Without this preliminary move of estrangement, I would claim, the antinomies of our present institutions and political practices will remain largely unintelligible.

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