

**diremption and intersection:  
the violence of language in  
bergson and sorel**

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INTRODUCTION: REASSESSING THE LEGACY OF BERGSON'S  
POLITICAL THOUGHT

Henri Bergson had a vast influence on his contemporaries in the realm of political thought<sup>1</sup>. More precisely, Bergson's magnetism was particularly strong among those on the extreme right *and* left. As Deleuze writes, we have generally no idea "how much hatred Bergson managed to stir up in the French university system at the outset and how he became a focus for all sorts of crazy and unconventional people right across the social spectrum".<sup>2</sup> The French Third Republic already had as its guardian angel Descartes, the defender of reason and discourse; Bergson attracted the "rest", who felt the limits of parliamentary democracy as consensus building through debate, and the need to appeal to

direct action, whether through general strikes (Sorel) or fascism (Mussolini). At first glance, the problematic seems to be settled in the extremist schema *from language to violence*. However, as I have demonstrated elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, what truly matters in this topic are the philosophico-political tensions *between certain types of “violence of language”*.

In this paper, I expand and develop this perspective by revisiting the relationship between Bergson and Sorel<sup>4</sup>. To estimate the legacy of Bergson’s political thought as strictly as possible, it is not enough to re-examine the positive assessments of the thinkers who favoured him. As neither Sorel nor Lukács were mere followers of Bergson, we must also pay attention to what their complaints and accusations could mean. Although Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* seems to praise Bergson with open arms, but a closer look will reveal that the arrow of criticism is covertly aimed at him. This is the reason why we need to introduce what we shall call the “Bergsonian Left”. Unlike the Hegelian Left, this notion drives the varied meanings of the English word “Left”, which usually means *Gauche* in French or *Links* in German, but could also mean “left behind”, “abandoned”, “neglected”, or “cast down”. To find what is abandoned today in the potential of Sorel’s political Bergsonism, or to recuperate certain Bergsonian heritage neglected even by Sorel could be one of the goals for the research of “Bergsonian Left”<sup>5</sup>. For this purpose, we will explore at first what Sorel could owe to Bergson (section 1–3), arguing that Sorel received his vision of *language as violence* from Bergson. Then, we will study what Bergson could owe to Sorel (section 4–5), by discussing certain theoretical resonances, including the methodological one between Sorelian diremption and Bergsonian intersection.

## I. BERGSON: ABSTRACTION AND ATTRACTION

### 1. *Language as a central problem in Bergson’s political philosophy*

In *Bergson politique*, Philippe Soulez refers to the introductory essay to *Creative Mind*<sup>6</sup> as one of the three major texts of later Bergson that should be taken up when we examine his political philosophy, the other two being *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* and “My Missions”. One of the strategic points in this introduction having two parts is the section called “philosophy and conversation” (this running title is not reproduced in the English translation), forming the substantive conclusion of Part II.

While this introduction to *Creative Mind* is often said to be Bergson’s intellectual

autobiography<sup>7</sup>—like Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method*—where he talks about his methodology, it is rarely noted that it was finished *after* the First World War<sup>8</sup>. A closer look will reveal that the notion of the “retrograde movement of the true” (CM, 23), the greatest conceptual creation of the first part, is filled with examples of the politics of tomorrow. The position of problems—the second part of the introduction is entitled “Stating of the Problems” (*De la position des problèmes*)—becomes only possible based on a “cutting out” of the original and unforeseeable contours of reality. Such “positing” or “cutting out” gets embarrassing, when the problem involves society<sup>9</sup>. Society, says Bergson, needs the intellect for its own order and security, and thus continually secretes a kind of “philosophy of the state”, a sum of “socially approved” truths.

The section “philosophy and conversation” reveals that Bergson’s conception of language is not only central for his philosophy of intuition, but also for his political thinking. Let us recall a key phrase: “Conversation greatly resembles conservation” (CM, 96). Here, conservation means the fixity of thought. The battle is always waged over the “cutting out”. To form political ideas, “society has cut out reality according to its needs” (CM, 58). Criticising such a “socialisation of the truth” (CM, 103) natural to the human spirit is also a philosophico-political cutting-out *with words*: “But stating the problem is not simply uncovering, it is inventing... In metaphysics, the effort of invention most often consists of raising the problem, of *creating the terms* in which it will be stated” (CM, 58-59). Most criticisms of Bergson, from Adorno to Ricoeur, are of the type that attack him for the unmediated nature of his concept of intuition and the *naïveté* of his view of language, but it is precisely in this respect that their criticisms are misguided<sup>10</sup>. Bergson was very clear when he said that “intuition is reflection” If we read him a bit more carefully, we can see that his focus on the “immediate” arose through the very critique of unreflective mediation. In short, for Bergson, it is mediation that is innocent.

In everything I have written there is assurance to the contrary: my intuition is reflection. But because I called attention to the mobility at the base of things, it has been claimed that... my doctrine was a justification of instability... One could almost say that the philosopher who finds mobility everywhere is the only one who cannot recommend it, since he sees it as inevitable, since he discovers it in what people have agreed to call immobility... And he will understand perhaps better than other people the role of these institutions... No doubt, in the rigid framework of institutions,

sustained by that very rigidity, society evolves. In fact, the duty of the statesman is to follow those variations and to modify the institution while there is still time. (CM, 103-104)

To understand the role of language in Bergson's political thought, we will now take a glimpse at Bergson's theory of language, before revisiting the relationship between Sorel and Bergson.

## 2. Bergson's Two Forms of Violence of Language

The starting point of Bergson's view of language is, broadly speaking, based in certain pragmatism which sees the primordial function of language as "industrial, commercial, military, always social" (CM, 94). What makes his view of language unusual is the fact that for him this mundane landscape is sustained *by violence*. Rather than communicating things as they are, language exercises a certain violence of symbolisation, clipping out reality according to its usefulness.

In short, the word with well-defined outlines, the rough and ready word, which stores up the stable, common, and consequently impersonal element in the impressions of mankind, overwhelms [*écrase*, so "squash" or "crush" is better] or at least covers over the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness<sup>11</sup>.

Continuing to operate inwardly, even under the most benign mask of moderate and conservative logic (conversation as conservation), this aspect of symbolic violence is often assumed to be the whole of Bergson's view of language. Yet Bergson did not miss another aspect of language, which is also useful for philosophers to glimpse a more intense dimension of life. In such cases, language is forced to deviate, deflected from its usual function. In some passages, Bergson talks about "remoulding language [reforming then the operation of language] and getting the word to encompass a series of experiences"<sup>12</sup>, "smashing the frames of language" (TFW, 134. However, the translation is missing), or even "to strain the words, to do violence to speech" (TSMR, 242). The violence of language that Bergson is discussing here is not the violence that language wields, but the violence suffered by language, violence wielded by language against language itself<sup>13</sup>.

To understand exactly this second "violence", we can refer to the distinction between the social obligations supporting a closed morality and the personal aspirations bringing an open morality. If the violence wielded by language is on

the side of social pressure as *symbolic abstraction*, then the violence that language suffers is rather something more on the side of the power of seduction stirred up with personal longing by the *metaphorical attraction* of images. For example, the fact that after Bergson, it is no longer possible to regard the word “duration” in the same way as before him, means nothing other than that the second violence of words, the magic of words, has been exercised there. “Let us admire the magical property of speech, I mean the power which a word bestows on a newly created idea – when it extends to that idea after having been applied to a pre-existent object – of modifying that object and thus retroactively influencing the past” (TSMR, 63). This clearly reflects the concept of the “retrograde movement of the true” that we saw earlier<sup>14</sup>.

From this Bergsonian view, the creation of images, metaphors, and analogies that suggest what cannot be expressed in straightforward terms is far from a secondary or subordinate linguistic activity. As is well known, the Greek word μεταφορά, from which “metaphor” is derived, originally refers to spatial movement (transposition and transport). If ordinary language use is already a normalisation (kind of perverted reversal in the sense of forcing inevitably “unjust” translation, because of its brutality), the gesture “philosophically correct” for Bergson is to reverse this reversal<sup>15</sup>.

Comparisons and metaphors will here [in the realm of mind] suggest what cannot be expressed. That will not constitute a detour; it will amount to going straight to the goal. If one were constantly to speak an abstract, so-called “scientific” language, one would be giving of mind only its imitation by matter... Abstract ideas alone would, therefore, in such a case, be inviting us to imagine mind on the model of matter and to think it by transposition, that is, in the exact meaning of the word, by metaphor. Let us not be duped by appearances: there are cases in which it is imagery in language which knowingly expresses the literal meaning and abstract language which unconsciously expresses itself figuratively. (CM, 48-49)

This is where the second reversal of language comes into play. What makes possible this overturning of literality and figurativity, this reversal of going straight and of detouring around, is in fact the perspective of speed, or *dromology* in the words of Paul Virilio<sup>16</sup>. Let us ask: *what is the speed of metaphor?* Apparent literality becomes transparent, and there is no sense of time: It conceals the passing of time and erases it. Metaphor, on the other hand, “eats up” time. By shifting the sense, metaphor *exposes* time<sup>17</sup>. In Bergson’s famous example of

sugar water, duration is the frustratingly long wait for the sugar to dissolve into water and produce sugar water. “Time is what hinders everything from being given at once. It retards, or rather it is retardation” (CM, 110). If the duration as delay is at the core of Bergson’s philosophy, how could its specificity not extend to his view of language? No image can ever fully represent the reality of life, but a concept, that is, an abstract, universal, and simple idea, says Bergson, is even less able to do so. Why has no one ever tried to read the *speed of the image* in the following passage?

No image will replace the intuition of duration, but many different images, taken from quite different orders of things, will be able, through the convergence of their action, to direct the consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to seize on. By choosing images as dissimilar as possible, any one of them will be prevented from usurping the place of the intuition it is instructed to call forth, since it would then be driven out immediately by its rivals. (CM, 195)

Here, Bergson reveals the nature of the power, which metaphor and image show in a negative form, *in the form of violence*, in the sense that they are prevented from usurping the throne that intuition should occupy, and consequently the throne is kept vacant. Yes, the crucial moment occurs “between” images, or more precisely, what is discovered only by being *hindered* by the very plurality of images; Bergsonian philosophy of intuition is paradoxically sustained by the *delay* of images.

Now we will see what role the violence of language plays in *Two Sources*. Not only the politicians of parliamentary democracy, but also “founders and reformers of religions, mystics and saints, obscure heroes of moral life whom we have met on our way and who are in our eyes the equals of the greatest” (TSMR, 42) also use words to address people. The second violence of language too is exercised in moral, religious, and political dimensions: “Why is it, then, that saints have their imitators, and why do the great moral leaders draw the masses after them? They ask nothing, and yet they receive. They have no need to exhort; their mere existence suffices. [the decisive phrase is missing here: *leur existence est un appel*’ translating as ‘their existence is a call’] For such is precisely the nature of this [open] morality” (TSMR, 26). And more importantly, such non-exhorting call, such paradoxical power that images and metaphors have in their vanishing point, does not necessarily come from outside the self: “The word which we shall make our own is the word whose echo we have heard within

ourselves” (TSMR, 27).

This second violence of language seems to be theoretically underpinned by the *idleness* of pure memory as a power of waiting: “To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream. Man alone is capable of such an effort”<sup>18</sup>. To be idle is not to be merely incapable, but to await. “If we refuse to attribute some such waiting to recent, and even to relatively distant, recollections, the normal work of memory becomes unintelligible” (MM, 224)<sup>19</sup>. This point will have to wait for further study in the future.

## II. SOREL: FORCE AND VIOLENCE

### 3. *What Sorel owes to Bergson: “Myth” as Violence of Language*

Like Bergson, Georges Sorel fascinated both the extreme left and the extreme right, anarchists and fascists with his unique thought. Absorbing Bergson’s theory of “free act” (liberty and action) with sympathy, Sorel tries to sketch an anti-deterministic reading of Marxism. According to Sorel, revolution is not the result of an inevitable process of nature, but a spontaneous movement of ideas that impels the workers to unite. Sorel’s originality, therefore, lies not in opposing Bergson and Marx, as the generation of Politzer would soon do, but in attempting a renovative synthesis between their thoughts. Although Bergson expressed his total disagreement with the primacy of class struggle, he always supported Sorel, considering him as one of the philosophers who understood him best.

There is much left to be said about their relationship<sup>20</sup>, but we will focus on two points here. The first is the relation between language, violence, and myth, and the second is certain similarity and difference between Sorel’s *diremption* and Bergson’s intersection (*méthode de recoupement*).

What we would like to demonstrate briefly for the first point is the following: while it is often stated that Sorel, known as the thinker on violence, misread Bergson, however, it is Sorel who actually took Bergson head-on most frequently in this dimension of language. Sorel’s most famous work, *Reflections on Violence*, is in fact developed in the dimension of what we have named Bergson’s violence of language.

Let us start with the supporting evidence. Letters sent by Bergson to Sorel show us that their interest was focused on the issue of language. For example, in the first letter, dated April 25, 1908, Bergson thanked Sorel for his somewhat unusual articles on *Creative Evolution*<sup>21</sup>. After saying that “your views on language in general, and on verbs in particular, were worthy of consideration”, Bergson took up Sorel’s question about his own discursive strategy and justifies his uses of images: “Other than images, there are only concepts, headings that classify various objects under them... If concepts, which are the tools of the intellect at its best, are as much a product of biological evolution as the intellect itself, how can biological evolution be a part of concepts? That is precisely why I cannot do things by inclusion or reduction to concepts. I must do things by suggestion, and suggestion is possible only through images”<sup>22</sup>.

To discuss more in detail the importance of the dimension of language in Sorel, let us attack his central concept of violence. Sorel distinguishes between *force*, which is wielded to maintain established power, and *violence*, which is called to overthrow it and move toward a new social organisation: “We should say, therefore, that the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order”<sup>23</sup>. Sorel argues that this theoretical distinction between bourgeois coercive force and proletarian violence is what makes it possible in real politics to distinguish the true socialism from the bourgeois tendencies latent within socialism.

The “violence” Sorel speaks of, of course, is that of general strike: *a radical totalisation of non-work, a kind of generalised idleness*. As nonsense does not mean the absence of sense but figures an anamorphosis of sense, the non-action here transforms the very sense of action. Although Sorel seems to think that it is too obvious to require explanation, Walter Benjamin expects the objection that “an omission of actions, a non-action, which a strike really is, cannot be described as violence”.<sup>24</sup> As long as state power tolerates individual strikes, they “can be an entirely non-violent, pure means” (CV, 239), but “the moment of violence, however, is necessarily introduced, in the form of extortion, into such an omission” (*ibid.*). “The right to strike constitutes in the view of labour, which is opposed to that of the state, is the right to use force in attaining certain ends. The antithesis between the two conceptions emerges in all its bitterness in the face of a revolutionary general strike... When passive, it is nevertheless to be so described if it constitutes extortion in the sense explained above” (CV, 239-240). Thus, in 1921, Benjamin published his famous “Critique of Violence”. We briefly return to this point at the end of this article.

Let's go back to Sorel. This difference between false and true socialism is reflected in the difference in their attitude toward language. When Sorel says "Against this noisy, garrulous and lying socialism..., stands revolutionary syndicalism, which endeavours, on the contrary, to leave nothing in a state of indecision" (RV, 112), he is pointing to a situation in which political socialism, in the name of debate, keeps pace with parliamentary democracy and delays revolutionary decisions. So, what kind of violence does Sorelian socialism use? The answer is what Sorel calls the "myth" as "the organization of images":

The general strike is indeed... the myth in which socialism is wholly comprised, i.e., a body of images [*organisation d'images*] capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments... The general strike groups them all in a coordinated picture and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum intensity. We thus obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness – and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously\*.

\*This is the global knowledge of Bergson's philosophy. (RV, 118)

At first glance, it may seem as if Sorel opposes the image and language here. As Sorel accuses, on the one hand, the current state of socialism as "a *doctrine expressed entirely in words* [Sorel highlights]" (RV 24), by proposing, on the other hand, the name of "myth" for the fact that the participants in great social movements always "picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph" (RV, 20).

The question, of course, is not "language or image", but what kind of language is best suited to evoke images that do not dominate people but spur them to action while liberating them and giving them maximum freedom. Against the intelligent and analytical language keeping people in thought as the basis of *force*, stands the intuitive language full of images driving them to action at the heart of *violence*. Indeed, Sorel refers to myth in the sense that he gives it as "identical to the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement" (RV, 29). For those of us who have learned how to distinguish, in Bergson's philosophy, between two kinds of "verbal violence" (abstraction and attraction), it is not difficult to discern the two forces at work in this Sorelian discursive theory of violence. It is, moreover, not surprising in the least that Bergson's name is cited at its core.

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 evoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism 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. \*

\*I believe that it would be possible to develop still further the application of Bergson's ideas to the theory of the general strike. (RV, 113)

Sorel often talks about the "sublime" (25 times in *Reflections*), and Bergson about "enthusiasm" (12 times in *Two Sources*). They both underline the necessity of action, but let us not misunderstand them; Sorel's socialist theory of violence, the myth of the general strike, is not a glorification of physical violence, but a glorification of violence through metaphor and imagery. The next question is to define what kind of violence it is. Even if he declares that "the only force which can produce enthusiasm... is the force resulting from propaganda in favour of the general strike" (RV, 250), Sorel's *violence* is not the ideological agitation that moves people *beyond words* to dogmatic direct action, but violence *in the economy of words* that drives people to creative open action<sup>25</sup>. The reason is obvious: when Sorel speaks of morality, he is thinking of a morality that liberates people to free action. The situation will be the same, even or especially when he speaks of "industrial progress". For Sorel, a progressive producer is a kind of artist: "even though the artist, with his capricious character, often seems to be the very opposite of the modern worker. This analogy is justified by the fact that the artist does not like to reproduce standard models" (RV, 244). If so, the relationship between the general strike of producers and the organisation of images in Sorel is equivalent to the relationship between the open morality of mystics and metaphorical attraction in Bergson.

Sorel's idea of "myth" as "organization of images", implements thus a discursive strategy with "the help of warmly coloured and sharply defined images which absorb the whole of our attention" (RV, 140), somewhat similar to that of spoken language: "words act upon the feelings in a mysterious way and easily establish a bond of sympathy between people" (RV, 6). If this is the case, it is in line with the Bergsonian concept of violence of metaphorical attraction that we glimpsed

earlier. That is why Sorel cannot help but mention Bergson's name when referring to the depth of consciousness. "Bergson has taught us that it is not only religion which occupies the profounder region of our mental life; revolutionary myths have their place there equally with religion" (RV, 30).

Based on the above discussion, we may expect that our first thesis on what Sorel could owe to Bergson has been somewhat satisfied: Sorel received his vision of language as violence from Bergson. Or, at least, Bergson and Sorel seem to share the same horizon of the violence of language.

#### 4. Sorel's Ambivalent Evaluation on Creative Evolution

From here, we move on to the question of whether Bergson owe anything at all to Sorel. However, we must immediately add that our interest lies rather in gaining a deeper understanding of their thoughts through the observation of their theoretical resonances, rather than in determining a strictly historical influence. The question is twofold: one is about the relationship between the biological and the sociological (Section 4), and the other, perhaps theoretically more ambitious, is about methodology (Section 5). However, both relate to the Sorelian concept of *diremption*. Let us start from this point.

In the preface dated July 1914 to *Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat* (1919), Sorel refers to the principles of the *diremption* which he proposed in the Appendix to his *Reflections* and recalls its results: "By taking my inspiration from this theory, I have been able to dwell at length on proletarian violence while leaving aside the juridical aspects of the conflicts which lead to violent strikes, the political regime of the country and the institutions that enable the working family to improve its everyday conditions of existence"<sup>26</sup>. Sorel clearly recognises the methodological importance of the *diremption*<sup>27</sup>. The term appeared in 1903 in the declaration that "the *philosophy of diremption* must replace that of unification",<sup>28</sup> but for a coherent definition, we must wait for the essay "*Unity and Multiplicity*", added as an appendix in the second edition of *Violence* in 1910. In the opening paragraph of his article titled "Biological images which foster the idea of unity; their origin", Sorel declares the necessity of showing "how mistaken are those people who believe that they raise an irrefutable argument against the doctrines based on the class struggle, by saying that, according to the evidence of common sense, the notion of society is completely permeated with the idea of unity. (...) The unity of society must be taken into very serious consideration" (RV, 253). Just as Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* makes totality

the enemy and infinity the goal, Sorel, in his social philosophy, makes unity the enemy and multiplicity the goal. What is at stake is a sociobiological account of reality that borrows images and metaphors from biology, but only under the pretence of its authority. Worse still, biologists themselves are completely unaware that they are borrowing images and metaphors from the social world in the first place. “Certain habits of language that are prevalent today have contributed more than all arguments to popularising the prejudices in favour of unity. (...) Such socio-biological analogies present the idea of unity with a singular insistence” (RV, 254).

Now that we have briefly outlined the relationship between the two issues we will be looking at, let us move on to the first issue (the biological and the sociological). On the surface, *Reflections* seems to praise Bergson, but a closer look will find that the arrow of criticism is secretly aimed at Bergson as well. This kind of “criticism” is developed more expressively and extensively in Sorel’s five reviews of *Creative Evolution*. In fact, in his first letter to Sorel, Bergson wrote:

[Your review] presents a system of many unique and original views on the scope of nature and modern science, on the relation of theory to practice, and in short, on the role of philosophy... The most important of these [objections] is the following question: the principles I have derived are applicable to social facts, but not to biological facts, because they seek their information in inner observation and in the consciousness of freedom. Indeed, it may be easier and more certain to apply them in sociology (even though I have never attempted it). However, that’s all I’ll give you, and as for biological philosophy, I think it’s necessary either to go down the path I indicate, or to give up any explanation. (C, 193-194)

Let me explain why I qualified earlier this review as “somewhat unusual”. On the whole, Sorel’s assessment of biology amounts to a historical misdiagnosis quite excessive: “Evolutionism seems to me to be fabricated with data from economic history; it is even questionable whether any biological theory can be constituted in any other way than by imitating life by means of social constructions... Biology is nothing but a false sociology” (RCE1, 269). However, it would be premature to assume that Bergson’s characterisation of Sorel’s critique as “unique and original” is due to mere courtesy. The fact that Bergson himself admitted, albeit concedingly, a certain applicability of the principles presented in *Creative Evolution* “easier and more certain” in sociology, becomes

more interesting, when we take into consideration what he later fully developed in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* and of *Creative Mind*. The same may be said of Bergson's philosophy of technology, all the more for Sorel's remark: "Mr. Bergson bases his theory of the intellect on a consideration of labour, which will come as a shock to those who know what role Marx gives to technology in history" (RCE2, 478)<sup>29</sup>. Anyway, Sorel relentlessly repeats that Bergson's biological philosophy is merely an analogy from social philosophy. The following affirmation almost makes us want to say that he even predicted *Two Sources*<sup>30</sup>. This is the final passage that concludes the five-part series review:

In concluding this study, I express the wish that M. Bergson, abandoning the not very fruitful applications of his philosophy to the natural sciences, will apply it to the problems which it allows to illuminate with such a brilliant light, that is to say, to those which are raised by the great social movements which require a great freedom. I believe that he has already recognised that his principles would be appropriate to facilitate the understanding of religious revolutions, which fit so well into this category, but which are not the only ones to appeal to deep convictions in order to break an order sanctioned by the centuries. (RCE5, 294)

##### 5. *What Bergson could owe to Sorel: Diremption and Intersection*

To look at the second comparative point, let us recall rapidly Bergson's method of intersection and his theory of the "lines of facts" to consider whether there was anything of methodology that Bergson could receive from Sorel<sup>31</sup>. This theory was first expressed in a lecture "Life and Consciousness" delivered at the University of Birmingham on May 29, 1911 (the French title is inverse: *La conscience et la vie*): "Each [of lines of fact], taken apart, will lead us only to a conclusion which is simply probable; but taking them all together, they will, by their convergence, bring before us such an accumulation of probabilities that we shall feel on the road to certitude" (ME, 7). Bergson took up this theory again in *Two Sources*, calling it the method of intersection [*méthode de recouplement*], but the order in which certainty arises from the accumulation of probabilities remains the same.

We have alluded elsewhere to those "lines of fact" each one indicating but the direction of truth, because it does not go far enough: truth itself, however, will be reached if two of them can be prolonged to the point where they intersect... In our opinion this method of intersection is the

only one that can bring about a decisive advance in metaphysics. (TSMR, 237)<sup>32</sup>

To see its closeness and divergence with Bergson's method of intersection, we will now turn to Sorel's *diremption*. According to him, in contrast to physiology which cannot consider the function of an organism without connecting it to the whole organism,

Social philosophy, in order to study the most significant phenomena of history, is obliged to proceed to a *diremption*, to examine certain parts without taking into account all of the ties which connect them to the whole, to determine in some manner the character of their activity by pushing them towards independence. (RV, 263)

To draw briefly three characteristics of Sorelian *diremption*, let us take an example: Primitive Christianity. Sorel admits that the language of the Christian authors was entirely disproportionate to the actual importance of the persecutions; there were very few martyrs before the middle of the third century. The statistics of persecutions play no great part in this question. "It was through these rather rare but very heroic events that the ideology was constructed" (RV, 180). In this situation, being separated from the rest, a certain system of images would stir up emotions and drive people to action. The driving force behind what Sorel calls "myths", such as the Syndicalist general strike, Marx's catastrophic revolution, the French Revolution, etc., springs from this symbolism, system of images exerting its forces in certain specific, limited, determined contexts.

1) Symbolic: this is precisely the first characteristic of *diremption* as "symbolic knowledge": "Rather than representing things, this method produces symbols in which phenomena participate" (IMTP, 228). What Sorel calls *symbolism* "fills them with life, exalts the psychological qualities that constitute the true cause of the importance given to memorable actions by thoughtful people" (IMTP, 229); although, what he calls *rationalism* "annuls these qualities in constructing reality within the bounds of skeletal abstractions" (*ibid.*), and thus "countermines our symbols" (IMTP, 235). Therefore, there will have been a war of interpretation around symbols. The "symbol", which is in the position of the closed in Bergson, is in the position of the open in Sorel.

2) Abstractive: By "navigat[ing] in imaginary space, in pursuit of absolute

man” (RV, 260), Sorel’s diremption counter-attacks against the jest made by Joseph de Maistre in 1796 on the subject of the work of French constituent assemblies: “I have seen Frenchman, Italians, Russians, etc.; but as for *man* I declare that I have never in my life met him.” The abstraction of the “*ahistoric* man” envisioned by Rousseau for the construction of an ideal city-state based on the social contract remains rather essential for the formation of the “idea of absolute duty,” which makes possible that “man can detach himself from the ties that bind him to historical conditions” (RV, 262). Thus drawn, the principles of *ahistoric* men are “more or less thrust on the road of the absolute. The abstract man is not, therefore, as Joseph de Maistre thought, a useless person for philosophy; he constitutes an artifice of our understanding” (RV, 263). If Bergson’s famous words mean to bring the human mind to reverse the direction of its customary way of operating, then he is not too far from Sorel: “But philosophy should be an effort to go beyond the human state” (CM, 228). The “soundness” of what Sorel calls “sound interpretation of the symbols” (IMTP, 231) is a graceful resignation to the limitations of this abstraction.

3) Ascetic: The third characteristic seems to be easier to understand, if we recall the following: the method of intersection in *Two Sources* is introduced to ensure the philosophical value of mysticism. In certain “catastrophic” atmosphere (RV, 182, 273) Sorel’s diremption focuses not only on the limited and fragmented in terms of situation and domain, but also on the “isolated individuals” (RV, 257), such as “beggars, certain itinerant artists and especially singers, and bandits”, or the “genius”, as ‘Greek hero, who had occupied such a prominent place in the national traditions” (RV, 256-257). The description of “ascetics” who “were called to have a history of very different importance from that of the other isolated individuals” cannot help but remind us of Bergson’s *Two Sources*: “Western Christianity profoundly transformed asceticism in its monasteries; it brought forth this multitude of mystical persons who, instead of fleeing from the world, were devoured by the desire to spread their reforming activities all around them and to whom the *religious experience* gave superhuman strength” (RV, 257-258).

## IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

As a perspicacious historian of political thought, Isaiah Berlin saw, of course, that Sorel “in due course, offered sustenance to ‘extra-parliamentary’ oppositions both of the right and of the left” (Berlin, 417). However, while drawn to Sorel’s strange attractiveness, Berlin seems to fail to get to the heart of his

theoretical possibility. He admits it himself: “Sorel remains unclear” (407). Why so? Because, for Berlin, “among purveyors of words”, Sorel was “productive only of words” (418). Such an insensitivity may be responsible, in our view, for his indifferent inclusion of heterogeneous political currents under the name of “irrationalism”, from “the wave of radical unrest [Berlin mentions ‘Fanon and the Black Panthers, and some dissenting Marxist groups’]” (414) to “Fascism and National Socialism” (412). If Berlin had read *Two Sources*, he would have smelled the danger of Fascist-like propaganda in the frenzied language of the Bergsonian mystics. Dreaming the political alternative could indeed be vehement, but for Sorel and Bergson, this vehemency takes the form of an artistic idling, never of any holocaust full of deep hatred and resentment. We believe, in this precise regard, having found in Sorel’s discursive acuity, the reason why he considered the general strike, *non-action* (in the sense of nonsense), as exemplary of violence, and, parallel to this, why Bergson privileged the mystic, active but not actual, *untimely*, as exemplary figure of open morality in urgent international politics.

Considered often as the century of violence, the twentieth century, with all its intricate relationships between enlightenment and myth, politics, and religion, will therefore have been also the century of the violence of language. Among other masterpieces such as Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, or Hannah Arendt’s *Vita Activa*, better known by its English title *The Human Condition*, the closest to the problem sphere of Bergson and Sorel is undoubtedly Walter Benjamin’s article mentioned earlier “Critique of Violence”. While Bergson distinguishes between two types of violence in language (*symbolic abstraction* and *metaphoric attraction*), and Sorel stressed the distinction between *force* and *violence*, Benjamin emphasised on the distinction between *mythic violence* and *divine violence* (CV, 249-250). Just as the *symbol*, being in the position of the closed in Bergson, was in the position of the open in Sorel, so the *myth*, in the position of the open in Sorel, is in the position of the closed in Benjamin.

Our next work will explore probably the relationship between Bergson’s themes (the violence of language and the idleness of pure memory) and Benjamin’s, such as 1) the theory of Passage, the motif of the *flâneur*, 2) the theory of *translation* (the glorification of certain unpolished literality as opposed to smooth, legible translation), and 3) the theory of aesthetics (the “politicization of art by communism” as opposed to the “aestheticism of politics promoted by fascism”). But this is another story.

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## NOTES

1. For the general context in which Bergson was able to exert his global influence, see François Azouvi, *La gloire de Bergson: Essai sur le magistère philosophique*. Paris: Gallimard, 2007. As for studies relating to the political and social aspects of Bergson's philosophy, the following two books are basic reading: Guy LaFrance, *La philosophie sociale de Bergson: Sources et interprétation*. Ottawa: Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1974; Philippe Soulez, *Bergson politique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France [abbreviated hereafter as PUF], 1989. Among many studies in recent years, Alexandre Lefebvre's works deserve attention, including *Human Rights as a Way of Life: On Bergson's Political Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). See also the following thorough historical research providing a broad and stable perspective, including the important topic of "Negritude and Bergson": Kevin Duong, "The Left and Henri Bergson", *French Politics*, volume 18, p. 359–379 (2020).
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*. Trans. Martin Joughin, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 6.
3. Hisashi Fujita, "Anarchy and Analogy: The Violence of Language in Bergson and Sorel". *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*. Eds. Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012, 126-143.
4. As an authority of the Anglo-Saxon study of political thought, Isaiah Berlin's account can be regarded as the "standard" Sorel interpretation: "But there was also the decisive influence of the philosophy of Henri Bergson...*Not theoretical knowledge but action, and only action*, gives understanding of reality... Reality must be grasped *intuitively, by means of images*, as artists conceive it, *not with concepts or arguments or Cartesian reasoning*. This is the soil which gave birth to Sorel's celebrated doctrine of the social myth which alone gives life to social movements" (Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Princeton University Press, 2013, 399-400, we highlight). But the words with which this distinguished scholar concludes his essay on Sorel seem to us to be a symptom that he is missing something crucial: "The first to *formulate this in clear language* was Sorel. *His words* still have power to upset" (Berlin, 419, we highlight).
5. In our broader scope, the "Left" Bergsonians in this sense could include certain German thinkers such as Adorno, Arendt, Benjamin, Horkheimer, etc. generally considered as anti-Bergsonians. Is there nothing at the core of their thought that is formed by a kind of  $\varpi$   $\varpi$   $\mu$  with Bergsonian thought? This could be effectively one of the essential questions in measuring the range of Bergson's political philosophy.
6. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind* [abbreviated as CM]. Trans. M. L. Andison. New York: Philosophical Library, 1946.
7. See for example Soulez, 225; Philippe Soulez and Frédéric Worms, *Bergson: Biographie*. Paris: Flammarion, 1997, 252; or the French *édition critique of Creative Mind: La pensée et le mouvant* [abbreviated as PM]. Paris: PUF, 2013, 301.
8. Rare exception: Soulez, 225. According to him, the first and second parts of this introduction

are structured “as if Bergson was moving from the ‘I’ as philosopher, to the ‘I’ as intellectual facing society” (*ibid.*). French *édition critique* makes an interesting remark: “this is one of the most impatient texts written by Bergson” (PM, 332, n. 55). François speculates on the “meaning” of this “stylistic decision” (346, n. 158), as an attempt to respond to the criticism repeated tirelessly in an outrageous way, but in our view, the imminence of the post-war situation seems to be also an unignorable factor.

9. In the list of subheadings presented at the beginning of the second part of the Introduction, Soulez (Soulez, 230) did not miss a tiny one: “*La philosophie de la cité*,” translated into English as “The philosophy of the body politic” (CM, 33; cf. 93).

10. Cf. Hisashi Fujita, “Ricœur and Bergson: The Shadow of the Philosophy of Life” (in Japanese). *Ricœur Reader*. Eds. Toru Kashima, Shigeo Kawaguchi, Katsuhiko Koemon. Tokyo: Hosei University Press, 2016, 228-243.

11. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* [abbreviated as TFW]. Trans. F. L. Pogson. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910, 132.

12. Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* [abbreviated as TSMR]. Trans. R. Ashley Audra and C. Brereton. New York: Henry Holt, 1935, 252.

13. See Foucault’s perspicacious remark in his recently published lecture, which is perfectly in line with my point (Michel Foucault, *Language, Madness, and Desire: On Literature*. Trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

14. French edition of *Two Sources* makes a suggestive remark: “It should be noted that Bergson introduces this notion [of *magic*] in an analysis of *language* concerning the notion of *justice*” (Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. Eds. Ghislain Waterlot and Frédéric Keck. Paris: PUF, 2013, 402, n. 172).

15. Cf. Mark Sinclair, “Bergson’s Philosophy of Art.” *Interpreting Bergson: Critical Essays*. Eds. Alexandre Lefebvre and Nils F. Schott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 87-103.

16. Cf. Paul Virilio, *Vitesse et politique: Essai de dromologie*. Paris: Galilée, 1977.

17. Cf. Dominique Maingueneau, « *Le possible et le réel : quel genre de texte ?* », in Cossutta (éd.), *Lire Bergson : « Le possible et le réel »*, PUF, 1998, p. 41: “It would be very interesting to discuss the digressivity of Bergson’s texts, especially with reference to Pierre Bayard’s excellent work on Proust’s digressivity. Bayard shows the relationship between this discursive figure of derailment and the theory of the subject as mobility.”

18. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* [abbreviated as MM]. Trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911, 94.

19. Cf. Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy* [abbreviated as ME]. Trans. H. Wildon Carr. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920, 161-162.

20. Tommaso Giordani, “On Sorel and Bergson. The impact of Bergsonian ideas on Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*.” *Lo Sguardo - Rivista di Filosofia*, n. 26, 2018 (I), 163-181.

21. Published in *Le Mouvement socialiste* some months after *Creative Evolution* (published in May

1907), this series of reviews appeared in five successive journal issues, 191 (15 October 1907: 257-282), 193 (15 December 1907: 478-494), 194 (15 January 1908: 34-52), 196 (15 March 1908: 184-194), and 197 (15 April 1908: 276-294) [abbreviated as RCE1-5].

22. Henri Bergson, *Correspondances* [abbreviated as C]. Ed. André Robinet. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002, 195. See also the second letter dated May 18, 1908 shows an exchange on Sorel's art of writing (C, 202). Through three other letters from Bergson to Sorel, we can see Bergson follow constantly Sorel's various works. When we look back on their subsequent interactions about language, even the fact that their first encounter was made at "*Propositions concernant l'emploi de certains termes philosophiques*" chaired by André Lalande seems a bit too much of a coincidence.

23. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* [abbreviated as RV]. Trans. Jeremy Jennings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 165-166.

24. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" [abbreviated as CV]. *Selected Writings: Volume 1 (1913-1926)*. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, 239.

25. Why we prefer the expression of *economy* to that of *politics* for example? Because Sorel's ideas of "general strike" or of "morality of the producers" take a radical evolutionary form of the logic of capital that ultimately allows for positive economic development, in contrast to the usual general strike, which tends to be anti-capitalist (RV, 250). In other words, Sorelian challenge is to overcome, to go beyond, the ordinary *political* opposition between socialism and capitalism.

26. Georges Sorel, "Introduction to *Materials for a Theory of the Proletariat*" [July 1914], in *From Georges Sorel. Essays in Socialism and Philosophy* [abbreviated as IMTP]. Ed. John L. Stanley. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, 228.

27. As for the concept of diremption, see Tadao Uemura, "Sorel's diremption", in *Gramsci: Thought in the Prison* (Seidosha, 2005), p. 191-218 (cf. his postface to the Japanese translation of *Materials* (Miraisha, 2014), "Sorel and Marxism", p. 184-237). In this excellent paper, Brandom shows that the term diremption was used throughout the 19th century as a translation of *Entzweiung*, a moment of Hegelian dialectics, and that Sorel's extraction of this moment alone had a clear anti-dialectical intention (Eric Brandom, "Georges Sorel's Diremption: Hegel, Marxism and Anti-Dialectics". *History of European Ideas*, 42:7 (2016), 8).

28. Georges Sorel, "Léon XIII." *Études socialistes*, 1: 5 (September-October 1903), 265.

29. Cf. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Trans. A. Mitchell. London: Macmillan, 1911, 91. See also RCE1, 274-276. Cf. Hisashi Fujita, "Bergson's Hand: Toward a History of (Non)-Organic Vitalism". *SubStance*, Issue 114 "Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* 100 Years Later", 36.3 (nov. 2007), 115-130.

30. Cf. Caterina Zanfi, "La morale dell'aspirazione e il mito di Sorel" in *Bergson, la tecnica, la guerra: Une rilettura delle Due fonti*. Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2009, 95-97: "Beginning in the 1910s, as he deepened his study of the theory of morality and society, he tended to blur his disagreement with Sorel about the practical and moral value of intuition. (...) Bergson's attention

had probably been drawn to the way in which Sorel had enriched the intuition with a practical and social function, which is not far from what happens in the transition from *Creative Evolution* to *Two Sources*.”

31. Camille Riquier in his admirable *Archéologie de Bergson* (Paris: PUF, 2009, 170), has suggested that this method of intersection may have been inspired by Newman’s work titled *A Grammar of Assent* (1870). However, a simple reading seems to indicate the opposite (John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1870, 239). In any case, it is worth noting that Sorel in one note of the introduction to *Reflections on Violence*, referred to this very work by Newman in relation to Bergson (RV 28, n. 37).

32. Cf. Jacques Chevalier, *Entretiens avec Bergson*. Paris: Plon, 1957, 273.