Georges Sorel's Diremption: Hegel, Marxism and Anti-Dialectics

Eric Brandom

To cite this article: Eric Brandom (2016): Georges Sorel's Diremption: Hegel, Marxism and Anti-Dialectics, History of European Ideas, DOI: [10.1080/01916599.2016.1167101](https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2016.1167101)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2016.1167101>

Published online: 31 May 2016.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

View related articles [↗](#)

View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Georges Sorel's Diremption: Hegel, Marxism and Anti-Dialectics

Eric Brandom

Department of History, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, USA

SUMMARY

Georges Sorel's use of the term diremption to describe his method has long been found obscure. This paper shows that the term was associated with Hegel, and that interpreting it in this light can help us make sense of Sorel's method. Sorel, this is to say, in his revision of Marxism and his social theory more generally, was engaging specifically with Hegelian philosophy. In addition to clarifying Sorel's method, this perspective allows us both to place Sorel more clearly in his fin-de-siècle context and to draw connections between his work and more recent *marxisant* theory.

KEYWORDS

Georges Sorel; G.W.F. Hegel; Marxism; dialectics; diremption; French philosophy

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Hegel in France
3. Sorel's Hegel
4. Diremption as negation
5. Diremption as production
6. Conclusion

1. Introduction

Among Jacques Rancière's provocations in his 2011 *Aisthesis* is an elegant definition, or at least description, of both artistic and political modernism across the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries: one long attempt to prove G.W.F. Hegel wrong about the identity of the real and the rational or, put differently, the contemporaneity of world and thought.¹ Rancière is not making a philological claim, but rather a more general point about how best to interpret the objects and moments out of which he has constructed his dissident history of modernism. Everywhere, Rancière is interested in how works of art interrupt given hierarchies or logics in moments of suspension, disruption, deconfiguration. 'Social revolution', Rancière writes, 'is the daughter of aesthetic revolution'. Thus, for instance, the general strike presents 'an exemplary equivalence of strategic action and radical inaction' of the kind that most concerns him.²

Georges Sorel (1847–1922) is not included in *Aisthesis*, although arguably the book's historical centre of gravity is contemporaneous with Sorel's productive life.³ And indeed the phenomenon at the centre of Sorel's most famous work, *Réflexions sur la violence*, is the general strike, which Sorel understands as a myth in a way that is not without parallel to Rancièrean aesthetics. Sorel's

CONTACT Eric Brandom ebrandom@ksu.edu

¹Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Paul Zakir (London: Verso, 2013), 62.

²*Ibid.*, xvi.

³In fact, Rancière has written a little about Sorel, although as far as I can tell he has not done so for many years. See 'De Pelloutier à Hitler: Syndicalisme et collaboration', *Les Révoltes logiques* 4 (1977), 23–61.

reputation—as an antidemocrat, an apostle of the heroic and authentic proletariat, and an enthusiast of violence to such a degree that he was able to pass from the left to the right—militates against his inclusion in Rancière's story. And yet, this paper argues, a fuller understanding of the conceptual 'topography' of Sorel's methods, to borrow Willy Gianinazzi's usage, as well as just the kind of quasi-philological investigation that *Aisthesis* eschews, suggest that Rancière's frame fits Sorel perfectly well.⁴ Sorel's work is anti-Hegelian, and not just in tendency. He explicitly engaged with Hegel, attempting to cleanse Marxism of its residual Hegelianism, and ultimately sought to constitute a social science method that would be anti-Hegelian. He did so ultimately in order to eliminate the hierarchising tendencies he believed socialism had inherited from Hegelian idealism. These terms are not simply transparent, and we will have to investigate what Sorel meant by them. The particular term with which this paper is concerned is one that might well describe Rancière's project: diremption.

After myth and violence, diremption is probably the next word associated with Sorel. He used this word, relatively late in his writing life, to describe his own method. Diremption was not, as has sometimes been said, a neologism of Sorel's.⁵ The central historical claim of this paper is that in using this word, Sorel is signaling a reference to and critical engagement with Hegel, or in fact Hegelianism.⁶ It is an explicit attempt to escape a dialectical approach to social reality. By diremption, Sorel meant a method that would be constitutively disruptive and bound to institutions striving for the greatest possible autonomy within society. This is to be contrasted, for Sorel, with a method, Hegelianism, which is essentially integrative and apologist—idealist and rationalist rather than materialist and historical. To take diremption as a method is certainly, for Sorel, to make a metaphysical choice for pluralism over unity; but the choice is not simply gratuitous. Diremption is opposed to idealist, totalising Hegelian methods partly in its political consequences, and partly because, as Sorel argues, it corresponds better to the practice of scientific and historical work.⁷ Hegel's slogan, 'the rational is real', to which Rancière obliquely refers, has famously been thought ambiguous. We can in a very rapid way explain Sorel's approach with his own formulation, 'whatever is admitted as rational soon acquires the right to be realized', or, in another version of the same sentiment, this time as an ironic description of idealist historiography of the French Revolution: 'things recognized as conforming to reason by philosophers are destined to become real'.⁸

⁴Willy Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne: Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889–1914* (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2006).

⁵The 1950 English translation marked the word out specially as without an equivalent in English, suggesting that Sorel perhaps coined it himself. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on violence* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1950). More recently, Willy Gianinazzi, while not offering any theory about the origin of the word, does complain about 'la mauvaise lisibilité du concept', due to its double function as both a metaphysics and a method. This ambiguity makes a great deal more sense if we take account of the Hegelian origins of the word. Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne* (47, see also 88ff.). See also John J. Cerullo, 'A Literary Sorel: "Diremption" a *Fin de Siècle* Moraliste', *History of Political Thought* 24, no. 1 (2003), 131–49. See Stanley's treatment of the term, which is most extended in the introduction to Georges Sorel and John Stanley, *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁶Few scholars have brought Sorel and Hegel together. One very interesting example is the final chapter of David James, *Art, myth and society in Hegel's aesthetics*, Continuum studies in philosophy (London and New York: Continuum, 2009). More recently, one article which appeared after the present article was under way makes a brief reference to the Hegelian origins of the term: Piotr Laskowski, 'Georges Sorel, l'intempestif', *Mil neuf cent: revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 32 (2014): 161.

⁷Scientific practice provides a powerful justification for Sorel's privileging of the plural over the unified. The experiment is effective *because* it is dirempted from nature as a whole. This is essential to it. One might well object that science nonetheless requires the idea of determinism, however much held in abeyance. Sorel would respond that this is the ideology of science, not its practice. So although the decision for pluralism and non-coherence is of course just as much a metaphysical one as the decision for coherence, Sorel's position is that it not only corresponds better to scientific practice and results and to our practical needs, but also is able to contain fields of coherence. It includes, we might say, determinism. On this issue, see Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne*; and also Jeremy Jennings, 'Sorel's Early Marxism and Science', *Political Studies* 31, no. 2 (1983): 224–38.

⁸Georges Sorel, *La ruine du monde antique: conception matérialiste de l'histoire* (Paris: M. Rivière, [1902] 1925), 136; Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris: M. Rivière, [1919] 1929), 35. In the very first text in which Sorel claimed to be a Marxist, in the full flush of Marx's arguments from political economy, he wrote that 'ce qui est rationnel et démontré doit devenir réel'; Georges Sorel, 'Science et socialisme', *Revue philosophique* 35 (1893): 510. These citations thus span a little over two decades.

This article will first frame the issue of Sorel's reading of Hegel in terms of nineteenth-century French Hegel reception and also of Sorel's approach to German writers in general. Second, the article will place, both in a chronological and a conceptual sense, Sorel's textual references to Hegel. The third section will explore the negative or critical significance of diremption, while a fourth and final section will confront its productive aspect. These two sides, or moments, of diremption emerge each in its own historical context. Diremption as negation appears slowly, first in 1903 as Sorel juggles historical analyses of the Catholic Church and different forms of socialism, finding its full expression only in a methodological postscript to *Reflections on Violence* in 1910. A few years later, on the far side of his experience as maître-à-penser to young monarchists, returning to reflect again on the longer term significance of his own investigations into socialism, Sorel presents diremption as a moment in a process—however ambivalent and fraught—of creation. Together, these two moments are best understood as phases of a longer term response to the challenge of Hegelian social theory. Having understood diremption, we will be better placed to understand Sorelian myth as the creation of a collective subject—that is, as politics. A subsidiary goal here is to argue that scholars interested in French philosophy have much to gain from reading Sorel more carefully. His texts repay careful reading both because they have been constructed more thoughtfully than is immediately obvious, and because substantial neglected portions of European intellectual history are powerfully refracted through them.

2. Hegel in France

The French reception of Hegelian philosophy began in Hegel's own lifetime with Victor Cousin's enthusiastic, if perhaps not rigorous, recapitulation of a philosophy learned from the master himself. There was also an important socialist current of Hegelianism, which included in different ways Saint-Simon, Comte and Proudhon.⁹ After 1848, in the authoritarian context of the Second Empire, a strong Hegelian influence was felt in the historiography of Jules Michelet. Hegel was invoked in the 1850s and 1860s in debates over positivism. Sorel would likely have been aware particularly of how for Ernest Renan and allies of the quasi-empiricism that he represented in philosophy and historiography, Hegel was an enemy, associated with excessively unifying idealist narratives.¹⁰ The Franco-Prussian war in 1870 cast a shadow over discussion of anything German for decades—arguably until it was replaced by the much darker and longer shadows of the twentieth century.¹¹

⁹Cousin, a figure of the intellectual opposition during the Restoration, traveled to Berlin in one of several periods of exile and met with Hegel personally. His 1828 lectures were famously a non-credited recapitulation of Hegelian philosophy of history. Cousin's personal prominence and eventual institutional power made his re-interpretation of German idealism into what became known as eclectic spiritualism enormously influential in nineteenth-century French academic philosophy. For Cousin and his immediate legacy, see Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). For later echoes, see John I. Brooks, *The Eclectic Legacy: Academic Philosophy and the Human Sciences in Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998). See also, on mid-century reception and recapitulation, Éric Puisais, *La naissance de l'hégélianisme français, 1830–1870*, La philosophie en commun (Paris: Harmattan, 2005). For a slightly later period, and with a special emphasis on socialist Hegelianism, see Michael Kelly, 'Hegel in France to 1940: A Bibliographical Essay', *Journal of European Studies* 11 (1981), 29–52. And the response: Bruce Baugh, 'Limiting Reason's Empire: The Early Reception of Hegel in France', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (1993), 259–76. See also Michel Espagne and Matthias Middell, *Von der Elbe bis an die Seine: Kulturtransfer zwischen Sachsen und Frankreich im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, Deutsch-französische Kulturbibliothek (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1993); Michel Espagne, *Le creuset allemand: histoire interculturelle de la Saxe, XVIIIe–XIXe siècles* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000); Michel Espagne, *En deçà du Rhin: L'Allemagne des philosophes français au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 2005).

¹⁰See on Renan and Vacherot: Morgan Gaulin, 'Refonder la philosophie en 1860: Ernest Renan critique de Vacherot', *Nineteenth Century French Studies* 38, no. 1–2 (2009–2010), 52–66. Renan was one of Sorel's great intellectual masters, although it is not always straightforward to say what Sorel learned from him.

¹¹The language used by the French to describe the quasi-Hegelian Prussians after 1870, and the language that, for instance, Hobhouse uses in 1914, are remarkably similar. It had become more difficult, by 1939, to see the Germans, this time the Nazis, as Hegelians. On this, and the citations from Hobhouse, see Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Humanities Press, 1968).

Sorel was born in 1847 and worked a whole career in the French civil service in the provinces.¹² In the early 1890s, he retired and moved to Paris. Virtually his entire adult life was spent within what Claude Digéon long ago called the ‘German crisis of French thought’ triggered by the catastrophe of 1870–1871.¹³ In the wake of the war, engagement with German scholarship was highly politicised and often suspect. Yet Sorel was never an intellectual nationalist. His first two books, both published in 1889—on the Bible and the trial of Socrates—cited German scholars approvingly, in particular Eduard Zeller. Sorel would continue to engage with German writing in the social sciences and philosophy, including Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, but also less classical figures such as the mechanical engineer Franz Reuleaux and the founding figure of psychophysics, Gustav Fechner. It should be stated at the outset that Sorel read all of these texts in translation. Although he had studied German at the *Polytechnique*, he was never comfortable reading it.¹⁴ And, of course, Sorel in the 1890s embraced not just socialism, but Marxism despite an often-repeated claim that Marx’s writings were torturous, ponderous, impenetrable and, worst of all, *Germanic*.¹⁵ If Sorel objected with brutality to some of the leaders of the German Social Democrats (SPD), he maintained a correspondence with Eduard Bernstein, who he regarded as an ally during the revisionist crisis. Even the eruption of war in 1914 did not bring out nationalist or anti-German impulses in Sorel. He believed from early on that the war was a catastrophe and that the ‘plutocratic’ and ‘Jacobin’ Entente would eventually prevail.

By the 1890s, speaking schematically, the belief among French philosophers was that philosophy should either purify its concepts—best accomplished through a return to Kantian criticism—or it should take its cues more directly from the vast strides being made in the physical and brain sciences.¹⁶ The legacy of German idealism was key to these debates, especially for the younger cohort of philosophers around the newly founded *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*.¹⁷ Sorel was deeply engaged with these arguments. Certain prominent neo-Kantians such as Émile Boutroux and rationalist Octave Hamelin did suggest that the Hegelian ‘concrete universal’ might be pressed into the service of French epistemology as a mediator between empiricist and rationalist positions. This was the seed-bed out of which sprang the French tradition of *épistémologie* – historicised epistemology that would issue in, among others, Michel Foucault.¹⁸ Hegelian thinking might have had a place there. However, the explicitly anti-Hegelian positions of all major contenders in French philosophy at this time left little rhetorical room for even partial borrowings of Hegelian concepts.¹⁹ Not until

¹²On this period, long thought to be more or less inaccessible to historians due to destroyed archives, see the pathbreaking Alice Ingold, ‘Penser à l’épreuve des conflits. Georges Sorel ingénieur hydraulique à Perpignan’, *Mil neuf cent. Revue d’histoire intellectuelle* 32 (2014), 11–52.

¹³Claude Digéon, *La crise allemande de la pensée française, 1870–1914* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1959).

¹⁴Tommaso Giordani, *The Uncertainties of Action: Agency, Capitalism, and Class in the Thought of Georges Sorel* (PhD diss. European University Institute, 2015), 42.

¹⁵Such was the description that Gabriel Tarde gave in a dismissive book review that triggered Sorel’s public declaration, in a letter to the editor, of his own Marxism, cited above. Gabriel Tarde, ‘J. Bourdeau. Le socialisme allemand et le nihilisme russe’, *Revue philosophique* 35 (1893), 78–84.

¹⁶Much of this account is drawn from Baugh, which is in some sense a response to Kelly, ‘Hegel in France to 1940’, cited above. Baugh, whose focus really remains the twentieth-century Hegel debates around people like Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and Levinas, argues that these positions were already implied by the critiques leveled at Hegel, and the uses to which he was tentatively put, in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Baugh, ‘Limiting Reason’s Empire’.

¹⁷Xavier Léon, one of the founders of the journal and the individual most actively involved in it—eschewing an academic career in order to devote himself exclusively to promoting professional institutions for philosophy in France—was a Fichte specialist. See Stéphan Soulié, *Les philosophes en République: L’aventure intellectuelle de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale et de la Société française de Philosophie (1891–1914)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009). Brandom ‘Liberalism and Rationalism at the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1902–1903’ *French Historical Studies* 39, no. 4 (2016) Forthcoming.

¹⁸Joel Revill, *Taking France to the school of the sciences: Leon Brunschvicg, Gaston Bachelard, and the French epistemological tradition* (PhD. diss Duke University, 2006).

¹⁹Baugh argues that this position was already over-crowded. Hegel was squeezed out of the field of French philosophy. Between the neo-criticist Léon Brunschvicg—a figure of substantial institutional power in professional philosophy by the first years of the century—and Henri Bergson—who wielded much less institutional but certainly more cultural influence—there was simply no room for Hegel. A third figure here is Durkheim, who was similarly, if ambiguously, hostile to Hegelian abstraction in sociology. Pierre Birnbaum, ‘La conception durkheimienne de l’Etat: L’apolitisme des fonctionnaires’, *Revue française de sociologie* 17, no. 2 (1976), 247–58. Left entirely to the side in this discussion has been the reception of Hegelian aesthetics by generations of French artists. Most famously, Stéphane Mallarmé and Louis Aragon. This reception begins in the 1850s with the publication by Charles

the 1920s and 1930s would a new generation of French philosophers turn to Hegel, and then not least in order to better understand Marx.

In sum, in Sorel's earlier productive years, Hegel was widely held to be the chief ideologue of Prussian militarism. His real-is-rational slogan meant in practical terms an amoral worship of the powers that be, and in philosophical ones a self-absorbed but also imperial rationalism, or panlogism, that was not only opaque but also inadequate to the complexity of the world.²⁰ The contrast would have been with Kant's rigorous ethics and careful delimitation of reason's space of operation. This did not discourage Sorel from engaging with German thought. Our interest in Sorel here begins with his emergence as arguably the most sophisticated and certainly the most creative French Marxist of the *fin de siècle*.

3. Sorel's Hegel

In the 1890s, Sorel came to think about the relation of Marx to Hegel well armed not only with the tools of non-Marxist sociology, but also with the tradition of French philosophy of science. Sorel's reading of Hegel, like that of Marx, was sustained but necessarily highly mediated by the availability of texts and prevailing preconceived ideas. For instance: an Italian Hegelian, Augusto Vera, was responsible for the vast majority of the translations of Hegel into French.²¹ One important mediating text is Plekhanov's essay on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Hegel's death.²² There, the Russian Marxist presented a Hegel who above all demonstrated that an honest and rigorous idealism could not explain the world. Hegel, Plekhanov argued, frequently resorted at difficult moments to materialist explanation—meaning, by this, economic explanation for historical change.²³ References to Hegel are scattered throughout Sorel's writings. The 1896 essay on the Neapolitan philosopher of history Giambattista Vico makes continual reference to Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion*. Citations suggest that at least by late 1898, Sorel had read substantially in Hegel's *Encyclopedia*. Sorel's reading, from whatever distance, was incisive and sustained.

The great arguments over the epistemological status of Marxism naturally pushed Sorel to enquire into the meaning of the dialectic, and this meant forming an opinion about Hegel. This was a methodological question of some weight. Antonio Labriola's sustained defense of dialectical method, and Sorel's ridicule of it, was no small part of the reason for the rift between him and Sorel.²⁴ For Sorel,

Bénard of a commentary on the *Aesthetics*. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Charles Bénard, *Hegel. Esthétique* (Paris: G. Baillière, 1875).

²⁰Michael Kelly cites Beaussire and Ravaissin, both supposedly commemorating the centenary: 'Between then they did not so much commemorate Hegel as commit him to oblivion, for they represent almost the last comments to be made on the philosopher within the French university for fifteen years'. Kelly, 'Hegel in France to 1940'. 37. Kelly also emphasizes the arguments around Hegel and positivism in the later 1850s—significant as this is, contextualising Sorel here would be too radically speculative.

²¹By the end of the 1870s, he had put into French the entirety of the *Encyclopedia*, as well as the complete version of the lectures on Religion.

²²Roberto Dainotto has remarked on the rhetoric of mourning that typifies—not just the title—of the text through which Antonio Labriola initiated philosophical discussion of Marx in Italy: 'In memoria del Manifesto comunista'. The observation can perhaps be extended. In this, which would later be seen as the heroic age of the construction of working-class political parties in Western Europe, much theoretical writing already took place in the mode of mourning for a lost past. Roberto Dainotto, 'Historical Materialism as New Humanism: Antonio Labriola's "In Memoria del Manifesto dei Comunisti" (1895)', *Annali d'Italianistica* 26 (2008), 265–82.

²³Georges Plekanow, 'Le philosophie de Hegel', *L'Ère nouvelle* (1894), 138–44; 258–80. It was just this economic interpretation of materialism that Sorel would soon reject. *L'Ère nouvelle* lasted for only 18 issues, and almost immediately became difficult to obtain. Sorel, however, evidently kept his copies of the journal, because he cites from Plekhanov's essay still in 1909 Arturo Labriola, Édouard Berth, and Georges Sorel, *Karl Marx l'économiste, le socialiste* (Paris: M. Rivière, 1923). Note: the Labriola in question here is Arturo, a pugnacious younger revolutionary syndicalist, not Antonio, the older academic philosopher and defender of Marxist orthodoxy. On the broader issue of French socialist Hegelianism, see Kelly, 'Hegel in France to 1940', 38ff., 50.

²⁴Labriola included, as an appendix to the French translation of his *Discorrendo*—written as a series of long letters to Sorel—several pages from Engels' *Anti-Dühring* on the dialectic. Sorel (trained in theoretical mathematics) was unimpressed by Engels' demonstration of the negation of the negation (—a* — a = a). In a review of Labriola's book, Sorel deplored that Labriola, 'accepte, sans chercher à la concilier avec sa doctrine, ce qu'on a appelé la *dialectique* d'Engels et il a joint à son livre un passage où Engels expose cette bizarre théorie ... J'avais fortement engagé M. L. à supprimer cet appendice'. Georges Sorel, 'Labriola—Socialisme

the dialectic was always a means of resolving apparent paradox.²⁵ In a letter to Benedetto Croce from December 1897, he complained that despite the ease with which it is invoked, ‘what above all seems to me obscure is the *dialectical method*’. Sorel asks, ‘would it not be better to suppress this expression, *the dialectic*, and everything connected to the *negation of the negation*? It would be a great progress, given that, for our contemporaries, this whole Hegelian apparatus has no meaning’.²⁶ We can say that the dialectic appeared to Sorel as just one more way of finding always the same thing, of getting always the same, pre-established answer, no matter the question posed. Sorel did not change his mind about this, returning to the theme again in 1909. There, Sorel allows that Marx himself wanted, in the famous phrase, to put Hegel’s ‘dialectical machine’ on its feet, although only for expository purposes.²⁷ Yet, Sorel concludes, Marx never really escaped the toxic phrase-mongering of the young Hegelian 1840s. All the more so today: ‘I really am afraid that the Marxist’s dialectic has sometimes lost touch with the firm ground of experience’.²⁸

However, Sorel saw that Marx had inherited more than remnants of idealism from Hegel. In an article on the future of Marxism from 1899, Sorel cites a passage from *Capital* on the inevitability of proletarianisation, which he says occupies roughly the same place in Marxism as the fourth Gospel does in Christianity. In a footnote to this passage: ‘no one has yet observed ... that Marx’s theory of the proletariat is entirely borrowed from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Spirit*. The revolution has as its object the passage to *general self-consciousness* and thus to bring about the reign of *reason* on earth’.²⁹ Sorel promises that he will look into this question at length later on. In a text first delivered as a lecture and probably written soon after the one just mentioned, he returned to Marx’s Hegelianism, saying that Marx ‘remembered what Hegel wrote about the opposition of master and servant, and about the process through which reason appears at the moment when this opposition disappears. The disciple ... perhaps ... even exaggerated the influence that reason was to have in the society of the future’.³⁰ It is a measure of Sorel’s capacity as a reader that he makes this connection—generally associated with Alexandre Kojève’s lectures in the 1930s—between Marx and the Master–Slave dialectic. Yet he

et philosophie’, *Revue philosophique* 48 (1899): 109. See also Sorel’s remarks on what he believes to be Engels’ misunderstanding in the *Anti-Dühring* of the slogan from Spinoza, ‘*definitio est negatio*’. Sorel, ‘Lettere di Georges Sorel a B. Croce’, *La critica*, 25 (1927): 108. Letter from 1 April 1898.

²⁵ For instance, the letter from 14 January 1896 to Croce, speaking about Campanella, Hegel and paradox. ‘à son époque personne ne songeait qu’on pût corriger un vice autrement qu’en supprimant la cause; il nous semble, aujourd’hui, que la correction doit provenir du complet développement, épanouir au grand soleil du réel, de toute la cause. Avant Hegel, personne ne pouvait soupçonner un pareil paradoxe’. Sorel, ‘Lettere’ 41.

²⁶ ‘mais ce qui me semble surtout obscur c’est la *méthode dialectique* ... Ne conviendrait-il pas de supprimer cette expression *la dialectique*, et tout ce qui se rapporte à la *négation de la négation*? Ce serait un grand progrès, parce que, pour nos contemporains, tout cet appareil hégélien n’offre aucun sens’. Sorel, ‘Lettere’, 52. Croce offers a footnote to this passage, suggesting that Sorel is echoing William James’ ‘On Some Hegelisms’, published in 1882. It is extremely unlikely that Sorel knew this text. One possible connection here, which in fact was not made, is with Giovanni Gentile’s explosive essays around the Theses on Feuerbach. Gentile there discusses Sorel with approval. Sorel had certainly received a copy of this text, but it seems to have made little or no impression on him, and it is possible he did not read it. Giovanni Gentile, *Opere complete di Giovanni Gentile* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1955), 64ff.

²⁷ Labriola, Berth, and Sorel, *Karl Marx l’économiste*, xxviii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xxx.

²⁹ ‘Nessuno ha ancora osservato, mi pare, che la teoria del proletariato di Marx è tolta ad prestito dalla *Filosofia dello spirito* di Hegel (§§ 434, 435). La rivoluzione ha per iscopo di passare alla *coscienza del sé generale*, e allora avverrà il regno della *ragione* sulla terra. Io mi propongo di scolgere questo concetto in uno studio sull’origine hegeliana del marxismo’. Georges Sorel, ‘Dove va il marxismo?’, *Rivista critica del socialismo* 1, no. 1 (1899): 13.

³⁰ ‘se souvenait de ce que Hegel a écrit sur l’opposition du maître et du serviteur, et sur le processus par lequel apparaît la raison, au moment où cette opposition s’efface. Le disciple n’a pas reproduit purement et complètement la pensée de son prédécesseur; mais il s’en est inspiré et peut-être même a-t-il exagéré l’influence que la raison devrait avoir dans la société future’. Georges Sorel, ‘L’éthique du socialisme’, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 7 (1899): 282. See also, from the same few months, and also published in RMM, the footnote on Hegel: ‘le lecteur voudra bien se reporter aux §§ 436–440 de la Philosophie de l’esprit de Hegel pour comprendre l’origine de cette théorie, de même qu’il faut se reporter aux §§ 431–435 pour bien comprendre la théorie du prolétariat. Je me réserve de revenir amplement plus tard sur ces bases hégéliennes du marxisme’. Sorel, ‘Y a-t-il de l’utopie dans le marxisme?’, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 7 (1899): 171. Andler, in his treatment of Hegel, mentions the Master–Slave relation, although he does not explicitly connect it to the Bourgeois–Proletariat relation. Charles Andler, *Les Origines du socialisme d’État en Allemagne* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1897), 28.

does so from within the frame of a mainstream French critique of Hegel's panlogism, and of the excessively unifying nature of Hegelian reason, above all when applied to history.³¹

This Hegelian leftover in Marxism was thus not to be applauded, but rather explained and excised. Sorel, not unjustly, always regarded sloganeering about the reign of reason as indicating a desire to bring about the supremacy of those believed to embody reason—bourgeois intellectuals. This, as he argued again and again in different ways over his career, was one mechanism in the intimate connection between rationalism and Statism.³² Just as those devoted to abstract inquiry tend to support the state or something that aspires to be a new state, so too do states have an essential tendency to try to impose, in a necessarily destructive way, clear and rigorous categories onto a social world that is not in and of itself clear and distinct, which contains much overlap and ambiguity. Sorel here sounds notes not too dissimilar to certain more radically anti-statist liberals, but also familiar from contemporary anarchist theorising.

4. Diremption as negation

Sorel used the word 'diremption' first in 1903, in consideration of the Church, modernity and liberalism. According to Sorel, many philosophers 'postulate that the mind [l'esprit] requires unity; but this is completely inaccurate'.³³ Contradictory logics manifestly exist in every historical formation. The work of genuine historians like Renan, according to Sorel, made this clear. Historiography that seeks to reduce everything to a single causal order simply does not *work* as historiography—it becomes something else. Sorel writes that

man cannot create unity in his thought unless he allows himself to give up part of reality. In order to construct a new metaphysics that corresponds to our needs, it must be admitted that in coming into contact with the world, our mind divides itself into distinct ideologies, which deal with areas that become more separate as we gain a broader knowledge [connaissance] of the real. Humanity has always acted as though it understood this metaphysics and the evidence of history legitimizes the enterprise of those who seek to create this *philosophy of diremption* to replace that of *unification*.³⁴

We will best understand 'diremption' when we understand it to be designed specifically to counteract what Sorel here calls the philosophy of 'unification' and which, I argue, is Hegelianism.

The word was certainly not an invention of Sorel's. According to Littré, diremption is a correct, if obscure, French word 'meaning, in terms of law, dissolution', and particularly applied to marriage.³⁵ Littré points to a use of the word by none other than Proudhon, commenting on the Church's policy towards divorce: In principle divorce is not admissible, 'but, by a casuistic fiction' if certain conditions apply a given marriage can be said never to have existed, and this would be a diremption.³⁶ Sorel gave no indication in 1903 that he was thinking of Proudhon, but certainly having studied Proudhon deeply it is possible he made this association. Indeed, in a 1913 letter to Berth in which Sorel expanded on the significance of the term as method, he also insisted that it had always been, although unspoken, Proudhon's own method.³⁷

³¹Sorel returned to these criticisms of the dialectic in his 1909 preface to Labriola, Berth, and Sorel, *Karl Marx l'économiste*.

³²Probably the most extended treatment of this question is in Georges Sorel and Yves Guichet, *Les illusions du progrès: suivi de, L'avenir socialiste des syndicats*, (Lausanne: Age d'homme, 2007).

³³Georges Sorel, 'Léon XIII', *Études socialistes* 1, no. 5 (1903): 265.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 265. Emphasis here and elsewhere in original.

³⁵Littré says that the word was borrowed from English. The Oxford English Dictionary gives three meanings. The first two correspond to the two senses of the word given by Littré, and are attested in the seventeenth century (Hobbes, for instance, provides, 'they cannot be parted except the Air or other matter can enter and fill the space made by their diremption'). The third sense is a special botanical one, referring to the separation of leaves, which also existed in French at least by the nineteenth century. Oxford English Dictionary, 'diremption, n'. (Oxford University Press).

³⁶Specifically: 'La clandestinité, l'impuissance, le crime emportant mort civile, l'erreur sur la personne, etc., sont pour elle autant de cas de diremption de mariage'. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Les confessions d'un révolutionnaire: Pour servir à l'histoire de la révolution de février* (Paris: La Voix du peuple, 1849), 20.

³⁷Georges Sorel, 'Lettre à Ed. Berth', *Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon*, no. 5–6 (1913), 263–65. Many thanks to Michel Prat for bringing this particular reference to my attention.

By the later nineteenth century, the term in French was strongly associated with Hegel and German idealism more generally, and remains so today.³⁸ For instance, a Catholic encyclopedia from the 1840s used the word in its article on metaphysics: Schelling ‘explains neither the *why* nor the *how* of this primitive diremption that he supposes within absolute unity, the result of which is the manifestation of the absolute in the double form of subject and object. [...] This is the task that Hegel undertook’.³⁹ The word appears frequently in Auguste Ott’s 1844 *Hegel et la philosophie allemande*. Etienne Vacherot uses it in 1869 in the context of a Hegelian account of Christianity, as a gloss or equivalent for judgment.⁴⁰ In general, in translations, diremption was used to replace *Entzweiung*. In the usage of the time, diremption, then, is the moment of the dialectic in which judgment destroys the unity of a notion, which must then be healed, or surpassed, by the *Aufhebung* into concept.⁴¹

Diremption, then, as Sorel uses it, signals an attack on the panlogism of Hegelian dialectics, opposition to the kind of unification—totalisation—that Hegel was taken to represent. Sorel, in selecting this Hegelian word, is refusing specifically the *Aufhebung*, the dialectical resolution or, he says, unification. Abstract reason does destroy the apparent unity of its objects—and although this reason does have a concrete foundation in institutions, no unity necessarily follows from this. As Sorel maintained earlier in the same Church–State context, it is a mere prejudice, without scientific justification, to assume that the world has a rational unity in and of itself that could guarantee the rational unity of human thought. Diremption, understood as an interruption or revision of the dialectic, brings this principle up to the level of at once method and metaphysics.⁴²

We can give some negative content to this attempt at an interruption of Hegel’s dialectic through a brief comparison to how Benedetto Croce thought about Hegel. For Croce, in Hegel’s

dialectical treatment of the ordinary conception of reality...all the dualities...all the rents and wounds with which reality shows itself to be lacerated by the abstract intellect, are filled, closed, and healed. A complete unity (*gediegene Einheit*) is realised: the coherence of the organic whole is re-established; blood and life again circulate within it.⁴³

For Croce, Hegel gives us not an anatomy, but a physiology of reality. This dialectical healing of the discontinuity of nature is what Sorel refuses. Diremption is, exactly, the creation of a gap in reality through the workings of abstract intellect. Any pretense to a total vision of reality—that of the Catholic Church, for instance, or of certain Marxists, and certainly that of any insufficiently self-conscious scientists—is really a selective reading of a fundamentally non-coherent reality and should, at least by philosophers, be recognised as such.

In 1910, Sorel added a chapter called ‘Unity and Multiplicity’ to a new edition of *Reflections on Violence*. He there mounts a criticism of ‘sociobiological’ accounts of reality, which have sought the prestige of biology by borrowing its images or metaphors (often without apparently realising that

³⁸Diremption is still sometimes used in English translations of Hegel and Hegelian philosophy, not always consistently. In the Nisbet *Philosophy of Right*, it replaces ‘Zerreißung’ (§357). It appears in the *Historisches Wörterbuch Philosophie* in a discussion of Marx’s ‘Zur Judenfrage’, and the English translation of this text (Cambridge) also uses the word, but in the place of both *Trennung* and *Spaltung*. This passage appears on 356–7 of the MEW, and on 40–1 of Berth’s translation for *Études socialistes*. Berth gives divorce and scission, rather than diremption. Marx does use this and phonetically similar terms, but as far as I have been able to tell, not in texts that were published during Sorel’s lifetime. Hegel himself also used the term in several places—for instance, the *Enzyklopädie* §367. Vera’s translation of this passage (to which he assigns §368) does not. The bulk of Hegel’s uses of the term, as far as I have been able to tell, in fact arrives in the sections on natural philosophy of organisms, particularly their reproduction.

³⁹‘Métaphysique’, in *Encyclopédie catholique: répertoire universel et raisonné des sciences, des lettres, des arts et des métiers, formant une bibliothèque universelle*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Glaire (Paris: Parent-Desbarres, 1848), 473.

⁴⁰Auguste Ott, *Hegel et la philosophie allemande; ou, Exposé et examen critique des principaux systèmes de la philosophie allemande depuis Kant, et spécialement de celui de Hegel* (Paris: Joubert, 1844); Étienne Vacherot, *La Religion* (Paris: Chamerot et Lauwereyns, 1869), 17.

⁴¹See the ‘Hegel’ entry in Franck’s *Dictionnaire*; J. Wilm, ‘Hegel’, in *Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques*, ed. A.D. Franck (Paris: Hachette, 1847), 32; and Charles Bénard, ‘L’esthétique allemande contemporaine: l’esthétique du laid’, *Revue philosophique* 4 (1877): 247.

⁴²This is parallel with Hegel’s dialectic, these ambiguities of which Frederic Jameson has recently stressed. See the first chapter of Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009).

⁴³Benedetto Croce and Douglas Ainslie, *What Is Living and What Is dead of the Philosophy of Hegel* (London: Macmillan, 1915), 51–2. This text appears first in 1906—after Sorel first endorses diremption—and Sorel reports having read it then.

biologists themselves borrowed first from the social world). Sorel maintained that there existed fundamental differences between physiology and social philosophy. Most importantly, physiology cannot investigate a given organ without relating its function to the whole of the living being. In contrast ‘social philosophy’, Sorel wrote,

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 the ties which connect them to the whole, to determine, in some manner, the character of their activity by pushing them towards independence. When it [social philosophy] has thus arrived at the most perfect understanding it can no longer attempt to reconstitute the broken unity.⁴⁴

Here, as elsewhere, *diremption* is a method required to understand an institution that has successfully claimed some autonomy. Here, that is again the Church. In certain periods, the Church surprises everyone by demanding again absolute independence, experiencing an institutional renaissance. These periods reveal ‘what constitutes the *essential nature* of the Church; and thus the method of *diremption* is found to be fully justified’.⁴⁵ But the approach is not simply analytically useful. It responds to the nature of social reality, which Sorel believed to be irreducibly plural.

Sorel’s adoption of *diremption* signaled a clear refusal of any Marxist sociology that took relations of production as in-the-last-instance determinants. It also cuts against the tendencies of most subsequent Marxist analysis in the sense that it rejects even the heuristic use of the appeal to totality.⁴⁶ If *Reflections* was a profoundly voluntarist attempt to impose or shore up class categories that Sorel saw to be eroded by the developments of modern democratic politics, the *diremptive* method rejects any unifying logic of capital at work in the world. We must then ask, in what sense is Sorel still a Marxist? It is significant that Sorel articulated *diremption* most fully in 1910. He had by this point broken with the CGT and, in April of 1910, published a piece in the far-right *Action française* (AF) newspaper. This moment has drawn sustained attention from those trying to pin down Sorel’s significance for the ideological battles of the twentieth century. Sorel’s alliance with the right should not be minimised. Affiliation with the AF did not last long, but Sorel founded a journal, *L’Indépendance*, together with a cohort of younger intellectuals who had passed through the AF’s tutelage. This journal lasted until early 1913. In these years, although Sorel wrote copiously for newspapers, especially Italian ones, about political life, he did not produce significant social theory. He turned, rather, to more ‘pure’ philosophy, publishing several important essays in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, the seat of university philosophy in France. Sorel was still very much concerned with Marx and Marxism, but his politics had indeed shifted to one of refusal. His attachment to the right is best understood as support for those who seemed to most effectively reject the seductions (very much Sorel’s word) of parliamentary government. In this sense, Sorel’s later philosophy is—like Western Marxism, at least according to Perry Anderson’s contentious definition—a product of reflection on defeat, loss and the absence of a generative proletarian movement with which to think.

5. *Diremption as production*

And yet *diremption* also had a productive side. There was, perhaps, nothing that Sorel regarded with more suspicion than the attempts of intellectuals to be socially ‘productive’ through their writings. We must therefore approach Sorel’s own gestures in this direction with great care. In 1914, Sorel composed a preface for a collection of earlier texts, to which he gave the title *Matériaux d’une théorie du prolétariat*. The goal of the volume was to put before the world the results of Sorel’s free inquiry into social reality in the hopes that the material would be useful. He made no pretense that any

⁴⁴Georges Sorel and Jeremy Jennings, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 263.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 268 (translation modified).

⁴⁶The standard work here remains Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Sorel makes a number of supporting appearances in this book. Jay takes Sorel’s investment in totality to be a sort of Bergsonian projective holism. That is, for Jay’s Sorel, Marxism becomes an integral, all-determining ethical standpoint for those involved in it.

unified theory could emerge from the materials united in this volume. Indeed, if such a theory did emerge, it would demonstrate a failure to truly engage with social reality. The preface itself is an attempt to recuperate something of this 'free spirit' by pursuing 'the healthy interpretation of symbols', above all that of Marxism.⁴⁷ In the course of this project, Sorel returned to and re-elaborated the concept of *diremption*. Here, it is not only a refusal of the Hegelian, statist, rationalism that persisted in Marx's thought, but also a moment in constructing what, elsewhere in his work, Sorel called 'generative' social science description.⁴⁸

What does Sorel mean by a 'healthy' understanding of symbols? Sorel rejected the idea that any single logical framework can encompass the world as we encounter it. The result of attempts to impose such a logical framework is rationalist monism. Against rationalist monism, Sorel insists on pluralism, both political and explanatory. This is especially relevant for the necessarily political social sciences. Sorel simply does not believe that, in the given state of society, it will be possible to provide a useful symbolic reduction of the social situation. That is, in the context of Sorel's career, the general strike is no longer a valid myth. But this is not presented as a fact, only an impression.⁴⁹ This is not, as has been so often asserted of Sorel's work, an irrationalism. Rather, Sorel argues, when reason is concerned with the 'civic matters [choses de la Cité]', it has two criteria. First, it should be able to make use of 'our constructive faculties' in order to develop, in the wake of *diremption*, a 'symbolic understanding [connaissance]' of the essentially non-rational products of history. A paradigm of this symbolic understanding, relevant to Sorel's professional life, is the reduction of an engineering problem like building a bridge to a set of formulae; we might also think of a mathematical model of an economy. Second, this symbolic knowledge should be able 'to direct us as wisely as possible through our everyday difficulties'.⁵⁰ If one succeeds in creating a useful abstraction of this kind, then one will have arrived at a philosophy of history. Rationalists, writes Sorel, have often understood by this term speculation 'on the morphological evolutions of institutions, ideas, or moeurs', but for Sorel it suggests 'the control that a philosopher is able to exercise over the living realities of history'.⁵¹ The Book of Daniel is one exceptionally powerful such work. But so, too, do the anticlerical institutions of the Third Republic deploy a philosophy of history as they engage, often with great success, the villages of France.⁵²

This is what Sorel had earlier called 'generative historiography'. And here he suggests that we can understand a number of important ideological constructs as *diremptions*, always undertaken with a view to some sort of project. So, for instance, 'the man of which the Declaration of Rights speaks is evidently a symbolic being, obtained through a *diremption*'.⁵³ This figure was then rolled into a political project, and became, we might say today, naturalised. Its origins in a *diremption* were forgotten. A similar process has taken place with the *Homo economicus* of classical economics as well as, and with different intent, Marx's concept of the proletariat.⁵⁴ The self-consciousness of the *diremptive* method is supposed to ensure that we remain pluralist, and do not take the unity we have created through *diremption*, however helpful it may be in practice, to be the real world: 'It is absurd to want to obtain clarity from a *diremption* and to then forget what *diremption* is when making use of its results'.⁵⁵ This absurdity is the state into which official Marxism, Sorel believed, had fallen.

Sorel wanted to account for the origins of the idealist elements of Marxism, but also to trace them exactly. Like many later readers of Marx, Sorel's interpretation relied on the existence of contradictory impulses within the oeuvre. Sorel by 1914 believed that Marx had consciously adopted Hegelian language only as a rhetorical device, a literary pose. But, as Sorel argued often happened to social

⁴⁷Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, 14.

⁴⁸See Georges Sorel, *Le système historique de Renan* (Paris: G. Jacques, 1906).

⁴⁹Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, 2.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 6–7.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 13.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 20.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

science, the mode of expression soon overshadowed the material being expressed. The SPD, bearer of Marxist orthodoxy, as it engaged increasingly successfully in democratic politics, demonstrated clearly that it had left the substance of Marx behind to retain only the empty formulae. Perhaps, Sorel suggested, even Marx himself had in the end been duped by the seductions of idealist historiography.⁵⁶ Marx, an extremely acute observer, saw a pluralist world. His writings describe a social reality shot through with contradictions, change and instability. Yet because Marx also inherited from Hegel ‘monist prejudices’, he believed that all this had to be reduced to a coherent unity in order to be subordinate to human reason.⁵⁷ ‘Marx saw quite well that this passage from heterogeneity to homogeneity’ did not fit within the framework of antagonistic forces that he saw in history. Thus there is a leap (catastrophic revolution) in which ideological forces (Marxism, consciousness) escape from materialism.⁵⁸ The social content of this leap, though, always remained obscure.

Sorel tries to remove this obscurity by a long and curious digression, fitted into the longer discussion of Marx and Marxism, on Plato’s *Republic*. The argument is that Marxists, especially Engels, have fallen into the typical utopian mode also employed by Plato. In the Utopia there are no real human beings, only infinitely reproduced types. It is a psychologically satisfying fantasy, nothing more.⁵⁹ But so too, Sorel claims, did Marx himself model the proletariat in his writings—a diremption—after Plato’s communistic ruling class. Then, calling Plato ‘one of the most skilled writers of Greek prose’, Sorel argues that by basing the prosperity of the *Republic* on a series of obviously mysterious preconditions, Plato was telling his readers that in fact the *Republic* was not to be read as a legislative agenda for some potentially real society, but simply as an elegant way of presenting a number of theses about education, virtue and so on.⁶⁰ Sorel is telling us how he believes we should be reading Marx. That is, according to Sorel, Marx’s diremptive creation of the proletariat, as signaled by the implausibility of the revolutionary leap from heterogeneity into homogeneity, should not ultimately be understood as a work of social science, but as a way of presenting arguments and claims about how one ought to live. Marx, like Plato, used textual or rhetorical strategies to solicit the ethical engagement of the reader.

Much of Sorel’s text had been given over to a pitiless critique of Marxism’s confusions. Yet in the final paragraph, Sorel turned rather sharply to reproduce a long quotation from an interview Benedetto Croce had given a few years earlier. Sorel allowed Croce to say what Marxism had accomplished, what it had contributed to civilisation: it brought about changes in labour law to materially improve the lives of the working class; in the intellectual realm socialism had been a powerful counter to positivism and encouraged objective study of economic matters. More broadly, Croce claimed, by standing up against reaction everywhere, it had worked to prevent a European war. Sorel concluded that anyone who had ‘taken a part in such a noble work’ could be assured of ‘a life usefully employed’.⁶¹ Thus, there is demonstrably great moral value in Marx’s writings—they have had these effects in the world—in part because they do not present a closed or coherent whole.

In the Hegelian dialectic, at least as Sorel understood it, an apparent unity was torn apart in the moment of diremption, and then reconstituted by the philosopher into a new synthesis. In this way, the contradictions of the world could be explained and resolved for the student by the master. By

⁵⁶Ibid., 21–2.

⁵⁷Ibid., 39.

⁵⁸Ibid., 41.

⁵⁹Ibid., 50–1.

⁶⁰Ibid., 49.

⁶¹Ibid., 52. Sorel quoted the interview from a volume in which Croce had collected his recent occasional pieces. This particular interview had the title ‘Socialism is dead’, and dealt broadly with Croce’s understanding of his own trajectory through Marxism. It had been a living faith for Croce in the 1890s, but it had failed him—as he believed it must fail all intelligent observers (the perspective of rank-and-file socialists or syndicalists was not his concern). Sorel was perhaps especially interested in this text. Croce there suggested that perhaps it was even Sorel’s acute analysis of revolutionary syndicalism in the *Reflections* that, by so effectively explicating this myth, killed it. Croce’s idealism and elitism are, in fact, very far removed from Sorel, but became extremely influential for later interpreters of Sorel. Benedetto Croce, *Cultura e vita morale: intermezzi polemici*, (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1993), 152, 147–56.

adopting the method of diremption, Sorel accepted that it is the task of the theorist to grasp and even accentuate the incommensurable logics at work in the social world. But Sorel did not believe that it was the task of the writer to resolve these contradictions. The gaps, incompleteness, and fragmentation of Sorel's texts demand that the reader take the next step. The productive moment, the *Aufhebung*, is not in the text itself, but in the reader. We do not find a closed system in Sorel's books, as Sorel believed that one did in Hegel. Rather, we find a demand, a solicitation for the activity of the reader. As Sorel had written in the 1908 letter to Daniel Halévy that serves as an introduction to the *Reflections*, 'it is my ambition to be able occasionally to awaken a personal vocation', to awaken the 'meta-physical fire which lies hidden beneath the ashes' in every person.⁶² The *Aufhebung*, Sorel suggests to us, is this awakening, the passage from reason to will.

The preface to *Matériaux* was composed in July 1914, but the publication of the book was interrupted by the war that, Croce believed, socialists had held off for so long. When the volume finally did appear, just as the war ended, Sorel added a postscriptum to the preface marking in a sense that what he had written earlier was now obsolete: 'one must be blind not to see that the Russian revolution is the dawn of a new era'.⁶³ The machinery of diremption must still perform its critical work, but the new revolutionary movement in Russia meant that the dangerous generative activity which might accompany diremption was no longer so necessary. A new symbolic order—'a new era'—was imposed on the world not by writers, philosophers or social scientists, but by the practice of Revolution.

6. Conclusion

Rancière's 1981 *La nuit des prolétaires* presents a remarkable and almost unmanageable collection of nineteenth-century 'workers' voices to the reader.⁶⁴ As Jason Frank has recently reiterated, the formal difficulties of this text spring from a concern to avoid presenting the author as master.⁶⁵ Readers are left to encounter and synthesise on their own. In this way, Rancière and Sorel are alike. Both refuse the knowing Hegelian absolute master. The *Aufhebung* is not performed in the text, but perhaps suggested to the reader. Emancipation is to be practiced, not expounded. Contradictions are not resolved, but proliferate. Both Rancière and Sorel are exceptional figures, and are in many ways at odds with one another. Yet taking Sorel's anti-Hegelianism seriously as a multidimensional characteristic of his work allows us to trace connections, or repetitions, between his *fin-de-siècle* revisions of Marxism and the work of a whole generation of French philosophers who themselves emerged from the political experiences of the late 1960s with a profound ambivalence towards Marxism, especially in its more totalising, Hegelian forms.⁶⁶

We have seen that Sorel worked within a French tradition of Hegel interpretation that found Hegel politically useless, but did look to him for solutions to epistemological problems. Sorel encountered Hegel first as an idealist holdover in Marx. He found that he had to reject the Hegelian leftovers in Marx during the Revisionist crisis. Hegel, he then believed, had led Marx to place too much faith in the ultimate rationality of history. As Sorel read Vico in the later 1890s, he looked increasingly back to Hegel—perhaps to help fill in the gaps that seemed to be left by Marx's focus on the economy. The *Bernsteinstreit* convinced Sorel at once of the empirical weakness of class analysis and also of the inability of the Marxist parties to escape their own formula.

It was in reflecting on the capacity of the Church to remain autonomous over the centuries, to resist subsumption into the social and political structures within which it operated, that Sorel arrived

⁶²Sorel and Jennings, *Reflections on violence*, 7.

⁶³Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, 53. Sorel also, rather perceptively, asks whether the defeat of Germany has not meant the ruin of the bourgeois liberals rather than the aristocratic Junkers.

⁶⁴Jacques Rancière, */Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France/* (London: Verso, 2012)

⁶⁵Jason Frank, 'Logical Revolts: Jacques Rancière and Political Subjectivization', *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (2015): 255–6.

⁶⁶This is one way to describe what Laskowski is doing, although he proceeds really from Deleuze to Sorel and then back to other contemporary figures. Laskowski, 'Georges Sorel, l'Intempestif'.

at the concept of *diremption*. And the term remained associated at several points with the problem of the Church in society. If there is a way to make rigorous use of the nation as a context determining the differences between Sorel's thinking as French and some German and Italian interlocutors, this is a good place to start. The political field Sorel encountered in France presented him with a variety of totalities, two in particular that were actively threatening: the Jacobin Republican state, and the claims of the Catholic Church. In the nineteenth century, and even the early twentieth, in Germany political totality was a distant and beautiful dream, not an active danger. Here is a fundamental difference in orientation between Sorel—who sought only and always to escape totality—and both German and Italian interlocutors, who may be said to have looked for solutions to political and social problems in imagined, virtual totalities. Croce, Gentile, and Gramsci, in very different ways, sought to construct the Italian nation within which politics could be pursued.

It was with *diremption*, understood as an explicit modification of dialectical method, that Sorel recovered the fundamental Marxist category of the proletariat from the Bernsteinian critique of its empirical validity. He did so first by disaggregating it from the totalising framework of capitalism that had given it meaning for Marx, and in a second phase reconstituting it as a constructive political principle. *Diremption* does not deny rationality or reason, but it does localise and delimit the unity of reason. It is a subjectivism contained and made rational by a consciousness of its own material conditions and the limits they set. *Diremption* denies the capacity of reason—the Hegelian philosopher—to encompass reality as a whole. This gives it an implicit political force. For Sorel, Hegel was always the thinker of the State. Hegelian thought tends to support statism, Sorel believed, and those in power gravitate towards Hegelianism. This means a logic of abstraction capable of assimilating anything to preconceived categories, as well as a teleology able to justify any kind of action. That this opinion was strongly influenced by the reading of Hegel current in nineteenth-century France does not lessen its importance for understanding Sorel. *Diremption* interrupts this process of abstraction and self-justification, and is therefore the philosophy appropriate to enemies of the State. We can see here that the State came to define, if negatively, even the concepts and institutions that were supposed to supplant it.

This paper has skirted a difficult problem, which is Sorel's way of understanding the formation of collective subjects capable of political action in the modern world. Having investigated a bit the Hegelian roots of Sorel's *diremption*, we are finally positioned to understand Sorelian myth. Totality, for Sorel, will be assumed by the individual as an ethical act. Since there is no telos, no absolute to guarantee at any level the dialectical resolution of distinction, we do not have a Hegelian *Aufhebung*. We have rather *myth*, which is not a description of the world, but the expression of a will to act. It is discursive, but at the most material level—emotive and empty of conceptual content. It is enough, however, to resolve the gap between individual and collective, although only in a temporary and tenuous way. The myth is the idea, or ideal, around which a collectivity generates itself as institution. But the life-world of the institution cannot yet really exist when the individual acts on the myth to create it—here the ethical gap is a temporal one—and here is revolution. Certainly Sorel thought this to be deeply opposed to Hegel's rationalism. If we follow Herbert Marcuse, indeed it is. Yet I think that if we prefer, for instance, Gillian Rose's Hegel, whose thought is always negatively related to reality in the mode of the speculative, always engaged in a dramatic and experiential critique of what is, Sorel may come to seem more Hegelian.⁶⁷

It is one thing to clarify intentional meaning, and another to understand the resistance or lack of resistance to alternate readings put up by a given body of work. Sorel's *Reflections*, indeed his best-known texts taken altogether, constitute a revolutionary theory that is organised around reflexive refusal of the state and the obscure formulation of myth moving between individual and collective subjectivity. The record Sorel left behind in his books and in his political affiliations was taken to mean that a myth, without an obvious rational connection to empirical reality—*dirempted*—might be the sign of a will strong enough to impose itself on history. This was a conflation of Sorel's

⁶⁷Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*; Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981).

methodological caution in social thought with a claim about the world itself. A conflation, it must be said, that Sorel sometimes himself invited and certainly that his own diremptive method did not allow him sufficiently to resist.

With the term diremption, as I have argued here, Sorel adopted an involuted version of the Hegelian dialectic, at once a method and a metaphysics. If Sorel rejected Croce's notion of a dialectical healing of the rents in the fabric of reality, he nonetheless followed Croce in conceiving of these rents or gaps as distinctions, rather than contradictions. If we have no unity, we can really have no contradiction, and the living pulse, the musical rhythm of dialectical conflict and resolution, becomes an undifferentiated, atonal roar of grinding gears and failing components. Neither social reality nor good social science is musical. We do not find music in the world. We put it there.

Acknowledgements

Audiences at meetings of the American Comparative Literature Association and German Studies Association heard earlier versions of arguments in this paper. I would like to thank James McFarland for his comments at the latter and Jerilyn Sambrooke for animating the former. My special thanks are due also to Michel Prat, Tommaso Giordani, and Richard Weiner.