Georges Sorel

Biography

Georges Sorel was a 20th century French philosopher. He was born in Cherbourg in 1847 to a middle class family. In 1865, he entered the Ecole Polytechnique, a selective and renowned institution for mathematics and science. Sorel was trained as a civil engineer and spent the majority of his life working for the Department of Public Works. In the 1880s, Sorel began to read the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson. In 1891, Sorel received the Légion d'honneur, a French governmental award given to honorable individuals for distinguished service to France and society. In 1892, Sorel retired from public service and began to fully devote his time to the pursuit of political philosophy. In 1893, he openly declared himself as a revolutionary Marxist and syndicalist. In the 1890s, Sorel supported Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French military officer who was convicted of treason (he was later declared entirely innocent and cleared of all charges). He also was anti-World War I and pro-Lenin, although he agreed much more with Lenin's theories rather than his actual actions. Sorel died in 1922 in France.

Sorel was a supporter of revolutionary syndicalism. He believed that the state should be abolished and workers in trade unions should negotiate and run the economy. Until converting to Marxism, Sorel was a staunch monarchist. Sorel believed that Marx was too utopian and was somewhat incomplete. In order to achieve the ideal Marxist society, Sorel rejects scientific Marxism and embraces spontaneity and creativity because it is less restricting. Sorel emphasized the use of direct action to disrupt and damage capitalism. He believed in the power of myths to motivate the people to act, and saw the general strike as an important myth to inspire the workers to take control of their own cause, rather than following parliamentary socialists to essentially accept the status quo. Even though he realized that a simultaneous strike of all the workers would probably never become a reality, Sorel still believed that the idea of such an event would prove a powerful inspirational tool.

Sorel and Marxism

It is clear that Marx had substantial impact on Sorel and his writings. Specifically, Sorel strived to fill in gaps or "complete" Marxist theory. One example is that Sorel saw pessimism and irrationalism at the center of Marxist philosophy. Thus, Sorel dismissed Karl Marx's views on rationalism. Another point worth considering is that Sorel did not view Marxism as true in a scientific sense, but rather thought that Marx's true involved the promise of a morally as a saving grace for the proletariat.

Sorel's rejected the idea that there would be inevitable change in society as a natural outcome of Marx's beliefs. Rather, Sorel believed that direct action would always be required for change. Furthermore, Sorel's idea of "myth," is also worth considering in relation to Marx. Specifically, it has a particular oddity in that myth should not be judged in relation to a "Truth." Rather, the practical results of a myth are the most important to evaluate. Thus, a political myth should be evaluated based on its ability to motivate citizens to action---- thus, the only possible way to ascend to an ethical life and to achieve deliverance involves the political myth and its effectiveness for mobilizing individuals.

Philosophy: Enemy of the State (State and Bourgeoisie vs Proletariat)
Georges Sorel believes that the proletariat class is the enemy of the state. The state, according to him, offers political help to the bourgeoisie by oppressing the proletariat. Also, proletarian oppression or abuse, he explains, is a way the politicians use to achieve their own aim. Though the oppression of the proletariat class is not direct, the help that the state, through politicians, offers to the bourgeoisie plays a major role in the proletariat oppression. The state is, therefore, endorsing the oppression of the proletariat. Accordingly, the proletariat is the internal enemy of the state. The state, Sorel explains, is an instrument against the masses (the proletariat).

**Philanthropy as a Source of Enmity**

Politicians, who are inevitable consequence of the state, looking to advance their own aims, decide to do so at the expense of the proletariat. These politicians sometimes despise the proletariat general strike not because they seek to advance the interest of everyone but because they want to please their financial supporters. Since these politicians do not have all the resources to maintain their office, they depend on others for resources that they cannot provide themselves. Dependence on others for financial support means that the politicians have to also change their views partially or completely in order to accommodate that of their financial supporters. That is, if these financial supporters are against a certain idea, these politicians have to find a way to support the views of the financial supporters. Sorel explains, “Parliamentary socialists & detest the general strike because all the propaganda surrounding it is too socialist to please philanthropists (Reflections on Violence, 111). These parliamentarians try to find a balance between what they think and what philanthropists think. The existence of the state, which necessarily produces politicians, subsequently produces internal enemies, the proletariat. This is because the state, through politicians, hinders the cause of the proletariat class because the politicians seek to reach their own selfish ends. The proletariat is, therefore, enemy of the state. The existence of the state, thus presupposes an internal enemy, the proletariat.

**State-Bourgeoisie Alliance as Source of Enmity**

While looking to advance ones own political project is enough to make the proletariat enemy of the state, the politicians have found yet another way to further alienate the proletariat. The proletariat does so through the bourgeoisie. Since a general strike by the proletariat adversely affects the bourgeoisie, and the bourgeoisie are financial supporter of the politicians, the politicians endorse the oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the general strike by the proletariat class is not looked upon favorably since the bourgeoisie lose money in the process. Alternatively, the politicians can devise plan themselves to steer events to the advantage of the bourgeoisie and to the detriment of the proletariat. Sorel explains, the profoundly serious work which is being carried on by the proletariat could not be viewed with any approval by the comfort-loving followers of our politicians: the (politicians) desire to reassure the bourgeoisie and promise not to allow the people to give themselves up entirely to their anarchical instincts. [Politicians] explain to the bourgeoisie that they do not by any means dream of suppressing the great State machine, but rather as wise socialists desire two things: to take possession of this machine so that they may improve its operation and make it run to further their friends interests as much as possible – and to assure the stability of government, which will be very advantageous to all business men [the bourgeoisie] (Reflections on Violence, 154-155).

Politicians are apparatuses that breed enemies (the proletariat). The state, instead of advancing the aims of the masses, allies itself with the bourgeoisie against the proletariat because the bourgeoisie helps the state and the politicians financially.

**Trickery as a Source of Enmity**

Sorel yet again explains that politicians seeking to hold on to power do so to the detriment of the proletariat. These politicians do not have any ideological grounds for despising the proletariat. Their hatred towards the proletariat is largely due to them seeking ways to advance politically. Sorel explains that when politicians hatred is powerless, they seek to profit from proletarians success. He explains, “Politicians] hold purely proletarian organizations in horror and discredit them as much as they can; frequently they even deny their efficacy, in the hope of alienating the workers from groups which, they say have no future. But when they perceive that their hatred is powerless, that their abuse does not hinder the working of these detested organizations and that they have become strong, then they seek to turn to their own profit the forces which the proletariat has created (Reflections on Violence, 143-144). These politicians lobby the proletariat to fund their campaigns from the money they have earned from working. Here too, we find that politicians, who are necessary consequence of the state, are essentially creating enemies (the proletariat) in the state because of their own political goals. The proletariat are enemies of the state because the politicians, who are products of the state are not looking to advance the aims of the proletariat. On the contrary, the politicians seek to limit or altogether prevent the proletariat from advancing politically. Lobbying the proletariat for campaign money is tantamount to trickery because when the politicians come to power or maintain their positions, they will side with the bourgeoisie class against the proletariat. Accordingly, the proletariat class is the internal enemy of the state.