

CHAPTER VII

GEORGES SOREL AND SYNDICALISM

“Don't you know that some man with eloquent tongue, without conscience, who did not care for the nation, could put this whole country into a flame? Don't you know that this country from one end to the other believes that something is wrong? What an opportunity it would be for some man without conscience to spring up and say: 'This is the way. Follow me!'—and lead in paths of destruction.”—WOODROW WILSON, *The New Freedom*, Chap. I, p. 28.

I HAVE said that all forms of government have at some time in the experience of the race been tried. That all kinds of reforms, political, social, and industrial, have been tried without success is a commonplace. The condition of peoples of the great States before this war broke out was the best proof of that. In the chief European countries, as in the United States, the speeches of statesmen and the programmes of parties were sufficient to convince the most purblind optimist that in every department of life there were deep dissatisfaction and grave unrest. Yet all parties had their own programmes of reform, and at each election all parties strove to outbid one another for votes. In Germany, where nearly everything was nationalized, there was little or no satisfaction among the general mass of the workers. It certainly is worth while taking into

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consideration what Germany had done in the way of nationalization. Her railways, roads, canals, forests, etc., were under state control. The workers were nationalized under bureaucratic schemes such as military and naval service, old age pensions, insurance for sickness, invalidity, and unemployment; besides there were labour bureaus, and many other departments of a socialistic nature. Yet poverty and pain were rampant in the land. At the last German general election, before the war began, the Social Democratic party asked for freedom of trade, freedom of speech, freedom of press, and freedom of platform; they demanded the abolition of *lèse-majesté*. At that election the Social Democrats, for the first time since the Empire was founded, placed in the forefront of their programme the demand for the abolition of compulsory military service, and increased their voting strength by over 1,250,000 votes, and became the largest party in the Reichstag.

And what had reform done for Britain? A list of the measures discussed in Parliament since the beginning of this century is far, far too long to be set out in a book of this size, but I may say the whole gamut of non-essential reform was run during those fourteen years. From small holdings and allotments to minimum wage for miners, from boards for sweated industries to licensing bills, from insurance for the workers to mental deficiency bills, from education to venereal diseases, from divorce to sanitation, from housing to the franchise, etc., etc., almost world without end. And yet no one was satisfied. Tory, Liberal, Labour, and Socialist, took turns in denouncing the Government for the ill-condition of the people.

But reformers never tire, never weary of legis-

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lation. Homeopathic doses of reform only make their appetites the keener. What cannot be done this year, they think, can be done next, or what is half done may be done completely by the following generation. Hope in the efficacy of government and faith in some statesman not yet born, never fade away. If it were not pathetic it would be a screaming farce. But it is pathetic, for the machinery of the political means is grinding the people to pieces in more ways than one. The political means has continued to do its deadly work of exploiting the masses, strangely enough, by the aid unconsciously given by many of the most earnest and sincere reformers. This sounds like a paradox. But the truth of it must be obvious to any student of German and British legislation. Almost every new act has brought with it more officials, more restriction, until a great powerful class, swiftly becoming hereditary in character, is brought into being to batten upon the needs of the people. And this class in the main (there are, of course, many well known individual exceptions) becomes a bulwark which saves the ruling class from the extremists of all parties. Thus well-meaning reformers, by their efforts which produced legislative measures intended for the benefit of the people, have increased enormously in recent years the numbers of adherents of the state and strengthened every department of the bureaucracy. Here again is an instance of how little the experience of the past is regarded. Greece and Rome in the palmiest days of bureaucracy pale into insignificance before the mighty machines we have constructed.

Is it too late to look for the reasons for this lamentable state of affairs? Are we to go on legis-

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lating, legislating, hoping that a day will come when we shall have legislated this system out of existence? Already the syndicalist has answered for us. We wonder how many Americans are familiar with the works of Georges Sorel. France is the motherland of the syndicalist. But France is a Republic, and the notion that it is a democracy seems to be general. How comes it then that Syndicalism can grow in such a soil? It seems strange, but it is only strange to those who believe in labels. The smug politician, who has implicit faith in the machinery of the State to grind out reforms, may lift his hands in horror at the ideas expressed by Sorel. The business man, who is far too busy to study the economics of his business, far too preoccupied with the engrossing detail of buying raw material and selling the manufactured article, would turn from Sorel's writings as swiftly as he would from a plague. Sorel does not like politicians and he has no faith in legislators. He believes in getting reform in quite another way. From what he says of the Parliamentary Socialists we can easily infer what his opinion is of men of the other political parties:

“Nowadays Parliamentary Socialists no longer entertain the idea of insurrection; if they still occasionally speak of it, it is merely to give themselves airs of importance; they teach that the ballot-box has replaced the gun; but the means of acquiring power may have changed without there being any change of mental attitude. Electoral literature seems inspired by the purest demagogic doctrines; Socialism makes its appeal to the discontented without troubling about the place they occupy in the world of production; in a society as complex as ours, and as subject to economic upheavals, there is an enormous number of discontented people in all classes — that is why Socialists are often found in places where one would least expect to meet them. Parliamentary Socialism

speaks as many languages as it has types of clients. It makes its appeal to workmen, to small employers of labour, to peasants; and in spite of Engels, it aims at reaching the farmers; it is at times patriotic; at other times it declares against the Army. It is stopped by no contradiction, experience having shown that it is possible, in the course of an electoral campaign, to group together forces which, according to Marxian conceptions, should normally be antagonistic. Besides, cannot a Member of Parliament be of service to electors of every economic situation?"

His contempt for the preachers of social duty, for State reformers in general, is just as deep:

"When the governing classes, no longer daring to govern, are ashamed of their privileged situation, are eager to make advances to their enemies, and proclaim their horror of all cleavage in society, it becomes much more difficult to maintain in the minds of the proletariat this idea of cleavage which without Socialism cannot fulfil its historical rôle. So much the better, declare the worthy progressives; we may then hope that the future of the world will not be left in the hands of brutes who do not even respect the State, who laugh at the lofty ideas of the middle class, and who have no more admiration for the professional expounders of lofty thought than for priests. Let us therefore do more and more every day for the disinherited, say these gentlemen; let us show ourselves more Christian, more philanthropic, or more democratic (according to the temperament of each); let us unite for the accomplishment of social duty. We shall thus get the better of these dreadful Socialists, who think it possible to destroy the prestige of the Intellectuals now that the Intellectuals have destroyed that of the Church. As a matter of fact, these cunning moral combinations have failed; it is not difficult to see why."

One of the concluding paragraphs of his work, *Reflections on Violence*, states in a few words what he is driving at:

"I believe that I have brought an important contribution to discussions on Socialism; these discussions must hence-

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forth deal exclusively with the conditions which allow the development of specifically proletarian forces, that is to say, with violence enlightened by the idea of the general strike. All the old abstract dissertations on the Socialist régime of the future become useless; we pass to the domain of real history, to the interpretation of facts — to the ethical evaluations of the revolutionary movement. . . . The bond which I pointed out in the beginning of this inquiry between Socialism and proletarian violence appears to us now in all its strength. It is to violence that Socialism owes those high ethical values by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world.”

All this must seem like so much vapour thrown off by an over-heated imagination, for have not our politicians, captains of industry, and philanthropists pooh-poohed it, scoffed at it, and cast it aside as so much rubbish. This will not do. Let me go back to March, 1912, when the House of Commons was busy discussing the great coal strike in Great Britain, and when the House was in the throes of legislating a Minimum Wage Bill to settle that strike. Syndicalism was debated freely by members from all sides of the House. The debate was exceedingly interesting and some quotations from it should be of great value to serious-minded Americans.

Lord Robert Cecil said:

“The Syndicalist teaching, of course we all know, is to seize the property of the owner for the benefit of the workers in the particular industry, and the methods by which that is to be done is, first, the multiplied strike; secondly, the sympathetic strike; and, thirdly, the general strike. That hon. Members will find in every Syndicalist text book on the subject. After the conference in 1910 there was a second conference in Southampton, at which Continental Syndicalists were present in the summer of last year. Immediately succeeding that you had an outbreak of strikes all over the country. Altogether, in June and July there were no less than 102 different strikes.”

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And this after three generations of trade unionism, this after many representatives of the men had entered Parliament. After years of co-partnership and co-operation in many industries, after almost every conceivable legislative palliative, still industrial unrest, grave discontent in the vast body of the wage-earners. In that debate Mr. Lloyd George was put up by the Government to speak for it, and his references to Syndicalism were, to say the least, humorous. He said:

“I do not take the noble lord's view with regard to Syndicalism. I do not think it is so serious as he imagines. I have followed the matter very carefully, because I was for two or three years at the Board of Trade, and it was part of my business, almost weekly, to deal with strikes, and even since I have been at the Exchequer I have been in close touch with most of the big strikes. I do not believe Syndicalism is a real peril. I will tell the House why I have come to that conclusion. I cannot see men of very great weight in the Labour movement who have committed themselves to it. No men of real influence and power have committed themselves to Syndicalism. Syndicalism and Socialism are, of course, two totally different things. They are mutually destructive. As a matter of fact, the Socialist would prefer to deal with the capitalist rather than the Syndicalist, for the simple reason that it is much more easy to deal with the capitalist than with the Syndicalist, because when once you hand over the whole profits of an industry merely to that particular industry, without any regard to the interests of the community, you raise a very formidable obstacle in the way of Socialism which is not in existence now, so that I can understand the Syndicalist as the bitterest enemy of the Socialist. He is bound to be. Let the noble lord take this comfort, that the best policeman for the Syndicalist is the Socialist.”

It would be very difficult to find a better illustration of official ignorance than this affords. Any one who knows Mr. Lloyd George, would never expect

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him to know any more about the works of Georges Sorel than he knows of the works of Henry George. He is a bureaucrat pure and simple. Still his description of Syndicalism did not carry him very far in that debate. A more enlightened explanation came from Mr. George Cave, who said:

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Lloyd George) brushed aside rather lightly the suggestion that this particular strike is on the lines recommended by Syndicalists. What I wish to point out is this. We can know nothing, of course, of the direct origin of the strike. We know nothing yet, but there is one fact apparent to every one who has studied the strike, namely, that in its character and methods it has every indication of following the lines laid down by those who call themselves Syndicalists. What is the method of Syndicalism? I am obliged to use the French word, although I hate it. The method is this. ‘Get into your hands, if you can, the whole of an industry; let it be, if possible, an industry upon which the very life of the nation depends; gather together in one industrial union, or federation of unions, all the branches taking part in that particular industry; get them together under one control, and then when the moment comes, strike and let the whole industry come to an end.’ I take the case of coal, and I am also quoting from pamphlets published a year or even two years ago. ‘In this manner you can get your hands on the throat of the nation, and you can not only destroy the coal industry, but you can stop and hamper a number of other industries. You can deprive the masses of the people of warmth, of the means of livelihood, and even of food. If you follow Syndicalist methods and do as we bid you, the result will be that you will have such a hold on the whole country that you will not only get the extra few shillings a week which you are asking for, but you will have a political power which will enable you to go very much further.’ That is the method followed by the miners in this strike. I do not care whether it is admitted to be an example of Syndicalism or not. I say it is a strike following those Syndicalist methods, and so it is a source of the greatest danger to this country. The Chancellor of the Exchequer says that a

minimum wage is not a Syndicalist proposal. It is not the end of the Syndicalist conspiracy I agree, but it is one of the means recommended by the leaders of that conspiracy in order to gain their ends. I do not confine myself to one pamphlet. I have had the duty of reading quite a number of them. Let me quote one:—'The policy of Syndicalism is continual agitation carried on in favour of increasing the minimum wage and shortening the hours of labour until we have extracted the whole of the employers' profits.' Therefore the minimum wage is part of the Syndicalist policy."

This is more to the point, and Cave's analysis reveals a certain amount of study of the question. There is however a great deal more to be said for the doctrines of Georges Sorel. The preaching of revolutionary Syndicalism marks the beginning of an entirely new epoch in the relation of labour and capital, and of the proletariat and the State. Let this be clearly understood. It would be futile to dismiss it with the smug smile of the ignorant statesman. Millions of people in Europe are consciously and unconsciously animated by the ideas of Georges Sorel. There is nothing so puerile in modern controversy as ninety-five per cent of the stuff we read about "Bolshevism" in the American papers. In reality "Bolshevism" in action is only a political term for an economic manifestation of revolutionary Syndicalism. It is therefore of paramount importance to both labour and capital, philanthropists and politicians, to understand as quickly as possible the ideas and intentions of one of the deepest thinkers of our time and generation. Let me quote from Sorel's chapter on "The Ethics of the Producers." He says:

"It is quite easy to see that during a considerable period the moderns also did not think that there was anything more to be said about workers than Aristotle had said; they

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must be given orders, corrected with gentleness, like children, and treated as passive instruments, who do not need to think. Revolutionary Syndicalism would be impossible if the world of the workers were under the influence of such a morality of the weak. State Socialism, on the contrary, could accommodate itself to this morality perfectly well, since the latter is based on the idea of a society divided into a class of producers and a class of thinkers applying results of scientific investigation to the work of production. The only difference which could exist between this sham Socialism and Capitalism would consist in the employment of more ingenious methods of procuring discipline in the workshop."

To those who have imagined Socialism is a comprehensive term for a system opposed to what is called Capitalism, the distinction which Sorel draws will no doubt cause surprise. But when we go further into Sorel's analysis we learn the true character and tendency of his ideas. It is when he discusses the all-important question of how "it is possible to conceive the transformation of the men of today into the free producers of tomorrow working in manufactories where there are no masters," that he reveals the individualistic nature of Revolutionary Syndicalism. He tells us:

"In the wars of Liberty each soldier considered himself as an individual having something of importance to do in the battle, instead of looking upon himself as simply one part of the military mechanism committed to the supreme direction of a leader. In the literature of those times one is struck by the frequency with which the free men of the republican armies are contrasted with the automatons of the royal armies; this was no mere figure of rhetoric employed by the French writers; I have convinced myself as a result of a thorough first-hand study of one of the wars at that time, that these terms corresponded perfectly to the actual feelings of the soldiers. . . . This presupposes that no account is taken of the relative values of the different factors

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that go to make up a victory, so that all things are considered from a qualitative and individualistic point of view. One is, in fact, extremely struck by the individualistic characters which are met with in these armies, and by the fact that nothing is to be found in them which at all resembles the obedience spoken of by our contemporary authors. There is some truth then in the statement that the incredible French victories were due to intelligent bayonets."

Strange as it may seem to many who have been led to believe that Lenine and Trotsky have dominated the Russian situation to such an extent that the masses are mere automata moved here and there at will, let me suggest that these two men are the creatures of the vast majority of the Russian people who were ripe for such action as Sorel advocates. Kerensky failed. Why did he fail? Because he was only another kind of politician. He was as blind to the real situation, to the desires of the Russian peasant, as those French socialists are to the notion of Sorel; as blind, I may say, as Lloyd George was to the elements of the coal strike in March, 1912. It is so rare to find any one who will concede that there is at any time an idea animating that mass of people the politician believes he is especially endowed to keep in order, and yet history in this respect seems a series of strictures upon statesmen who stupidly disregarded what was taking place in the minds of the masses. It is undoubtedly true that there have been few, very few, leaders who have anticipated the insurrection of an idea of the mass. Leaders usually appear after the insurrection of the idea has been begun.

Now this individualistic viewpoint is one we dare no longer ignore. Revolutionary, as the notion may be to many, we must now recognize the fact that the

ideas of the mass create the leaders and that our old notion that agitators give ideas to the mass can be accepted only in a very superficial way. It has been said over and over again that the masses always suspect their labour leaders, and on reflection this is true, no matter how loudly a leader's speech may be cheered, no matter how great a majority of votes may be given to him at the poll. If there is any doubt of this, look into the political history of labour parties in Britain and France for ten years before the war began. What was one of the most noticeable phenomena in all strikes? Was it not this: a great element of an anarchistic nature always at work, rejecting the advice of leaders, breaking not only contracts but rules of the unions? How many times have the leaders had to confess that their efforts were unavailing? Of course, the leaders have generally to put the best face on to meet this state of affairs, and often have to submit with that grace, which the politician knows so well, when he leads from behind. This attitude of the labour leader is, however, no longer tolerated, so I gather from what is taking place in Britain. The *New York Times* of January 29, published in its cable, on the strikes taking place in Great Britain, the following:

“Alexander Thompson, editor of the Socialist Labour newspaper *Clarion*, in reviewing present industrial unrest for *The Mail*, writes: ‘The new Labour Minister, Sir Robert Stevenson Horne, whose sincere sympathy with labour's desire for improved conditions of life has very favourably impressed leaders of the trade unions, confesses his utter helplessness in dealing with the grave problems assailing him on his entrance to office.’ None of the present strikes has been authorized by the executives of the unions involved and all are contrary to official advice. Therefore, it is obviously impossible for Sir Robert to interfere. It is his policy,

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as Labour Minister, to support trade union executives, as any other action would only weaken their authority and strengthen the hands of those who have disobeyed instructions."

Does this mean government is impotent to deal in the old way with men? Does it mean anarchy? I wonder what Lloyd George will say on Syndicalism when the House meets to discuss the next strike! When will politicians look facts squarely in the face and realize the full gravity of the situation? When will they learn from Sorel that the old methods are useless, and abandon them? The unions have lost the fight. A union is now a husk, for the Shop Stewards' movement¹ has burst open the shell of unionism and cast it aside. Sorel understands this when he says:

"The same spirit is found in the working-class groups who are eager for the general strike; these groups, in fact, picture the Revolution as an immense uprising which yet may be called individualistic; each working with the greatest possible zeal, each acting on his own account, and not trou-

¹ The shop steward movement in Britain is only one manifestation of profound dissatisfaction on the part of the workers with the old trade union machine. Whereas trade unions moved more and more to centralization, the shop stewards movement is one which takes on all the tendencies of decentralization. It is representative of the shop and its workers. It is individualistic in inception though the aim be unified control of industry, the local shop nevertheless to remain the power basis of direction. Within the movement there are to be found advocates of what is called "an official extension of the trade unions," but on the other hand one finds in the shop stewards movement a large body "as bitterly at war with constitutional trade unionism as with the employers." The trade union manifesto, issued February 13th, 1919, on unauthorized strikes, reveals a most serious state of affairs in British industry. It calls for a strengthening of the hands of responsible leaders in the trade union movement and an agreement to abide by the decision of the majority. Unless that course is taken a very serious blow will have been struck at the fundamental principle of trade unionism—namely, collective bargaining. Under any circumstances, it adds, unauthorized strikes cannot and must not be tolerated.

bling himself much to subordinate his conduct to a great and scientifically combined plan. This character of the proletarian general strike has often been pointed out, and it has the effect of frightening the greedy politicians, who understand perfectly well that a Revolution conducted in this way would do away with all their chances of seizing the Government. . . . The upholders of the general strike are accused of anarchical tendencies; and as a matter of fact, it has been observed during the last few years that anarchists have entered the syndicates in great numbers, and have done a great deal to develop tendencies favourable to the general strike. This movement becomes understandable when we bear the preceding explanations in mind; because the general strike, just like the wars of Liberty, is a most striking manifestation of individualistic force in the revolted masses. It seems to me, moreover, that the official Socialists would do well not to insist too much on this point; they would thus avoid some reflections which are not altogether to their advantage. We might, in fact, be led to ask if our official Socialists, with their passion for discipline, and their infinite confidence in the genius of their leaders, are not the authentic inheritors of the traditions of the royal armies, while the anarchists and the upholders of the general strike represent at the present time the spirit of the revolutionary warriors who, against all the rules of the art of war, so thoroughly thrashed the fine arms of the coalitions."

What does this mean? There seems to be only one parallel that I can think of. Here we have an industrial gospel, or an industrial religion, let us say — Sorel would agree — that is to be as leaderless as the religion of Jesus was to be priestless. All the time-honoured notions of Liberalism and Socialism are thrown upon the scrap heap; all the hair-splitting politicians are swept aside.¹ The exploiters of ideas of the mass will not be required, for this

¹ "The multitude even though they know nothing of the political science and hold no magistracy, still can form a good practical judgment upon government in general and even a better one than those in office who can not see their own defects and errors."—Aristotle.

idea is so simple that it requires no elucidation by statesmen. As I have said, millions are at present actuated by that idea.

I shall now present some of Sorel's views of the conditions of the worker and industry under the new system:

"I want now to point out some analogies which show how revolutionary Syndicalism is the greatest educative force that contemporary society has at its disposal for the preparation of the system of production, which the workmen will adopt, in a society organized in accordance with the new conceptions. The free producer in a progressive and inventive workshop must never evaluate his own efforts by any external standing; he ought to consider the models given him as inferior, and desire to surpass everything that has been done before. Constant improvement in quality and quantity will be thus assured to production; the idea of continual progress will be realized in a workshop of this kind. . . . Modern industry is characterized by an ever-growing care for exactitude; as tools get more scientific it is expected that the product shall have fewer hidden faults, and that in use its quality shall be as good as its appearance. If Germany has not yet taken the place in the economic world which the mineral riches of its soil, the energy of its manufacturers and the science of its technicians ought to give it, it is because its manufacturers for a long time thought it clever to flood the markets with trash; although the quality of German manufactures has much improved during the last few years, it is not yet held in any very great esteem. . . . Economic progress goes far beyond the individual life, and profits future generations more than those who create it; but does it give glory? Is there an economic epic capable of stimulating the enthusiasm of the workers? . . . Morality is not doomed to perish because the motive forces behind it will change; it is not destined to become a mere collection of precepts as long as it can still vivify itself by an alliance with an enthusiasm capable of conquering all the obstacles, prejudices, and the need of immediate enjoyment, which oppose its progress. But it is certain that this sovereign force will not be found along the paths which

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contemporary philosophers, the experts of social science, and the inventors of far-reaching reforms would make us go. There is only one force which can produce today that enthusiasm without whose co-operation no morality is possible, and that is the force resulting from the propaganda in favour of a general strike."

Revolutionary Syndicalism is a means to an end; the end is Socialism. The syndicalist intends to dispense with the politician. At a meeting in South Wales about the time of the great coal strike, an old miner, in moving a vote of thanks to a lecturer who had spoken on Syndicalism, said, "Well, it seems to me it's worth trying. I waited forty years for members of Parliament to do something. I thought labour members might make a change. They had a chance. But Parliament seems to spoil them. So I says, Let's try this chap's way." Now, at that time there were several well-known labour leaders, not in Parliament, who were spreading syndicalistic doctrine in the lodges, and they were undermining the position of the parliamentary group and favouring direct action. But see what has happened in recent years: the fiercest South Wales revolutionary syndicalist is now as tame a member of Parliament as any member in the miners' group. In France changes of this kind are more notorious. This is where the great danger lies, for whereas only one or two here and there have a chance of becoming a member of a legislature, the thousands remain outside to learn the lesson anew of what parliamentary associations do to their leaders. Still, though their hopes are sometimes dashed down by what they call a turn-coat, they do not lose faith in the gospel of direct action, for their numbers increase mightily every year.

A shrewd observer of British politics, commenting upon the proportionately small number of votes recorded at the last general election, said it was one of the most sinister signs of the times, for it seemed to him that the small vote was in the nature of a rebuke, and meant a great increase in the number of the adherents of Syndicalism.