

In The Beginning There Was Violence: Epic Emplotment and the Sorelian Myth

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Abstract

*In his infamous publication, *Reflections on Violence*, French syndicalist Georges Sorel explores the social ills of his contemporary France at the beginning of the twentieth century. Following the rise of enlightened pacifism and diffusion of class tensions, the socialist revolution promised by Marx appeared to drift ever further from Sorel's reach. In *Reflections*, Sorel argues that these challenges may be overcome through the use of the myth to spur the working class into violent action. Despite its centrality to Sorel's work, the myth itself remains nebulous in its construction and provides a challenge to later scholars' attempts to understand Sorel. For this reason, the nature of the myth and its capacity to spur the working class into action is examined in this paper against Hayden White's "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact". In reading Sorel through the lens of White's literary emplotment of historical events, this paper offers a new understanding of the Sorelian myth's method of action as the creation of a future history using culturally-bound literary structures.*

*“At the dawn of every history aimed at ensuring security and making peace with death, it shall be written: ‘In the beginning, there was the word.’ At the dawn of every new temporal order, however, it shall be written: ‘In the beginning, there was violence.’”*⁴¹²

In the years leading up to the publication of *Reflections on Violence* in 1908, Georges Sorel saw his native France in the midst of a crisis.⁴¹³ By the turn of the twentieth century, the world of the Marxist-turned-syndicalist must have appeared farcical compared to the expectations laid down by Marx himself half a century earlier.⁴¹⁴ Socialist politicians had become key players in France’s political sphere, the “bleating herd” of the bourgeoisie had become softened by decadence, and the working class had been placated to the point of pacification.⁴¹⁵ Rather than seeing capitalist France frothing with class warfare and careening towards a proletarian revolution, Sorel watched tensions between the bourgeoisie and proletariat become diffuse, while both were subjected to the self-serving degeneracy of French democracy. Sorel’s historical assessment led him to the conclusion that intuitive use of violence and myth could function as the catalyst to provoke a new world order.

However, in his examination of Georges Sorel and his disciples, author and Sorel translator Jack Roth explains that “the quality of Sorel’s written work is not uniform and much of it scattered among little-known periodicals.”⁴¹⁶ As such, many of Sorel’s constructs remain vague and disorganised, which has proven to be a significant obstacle for scholars studying Sorel. In particular, Sorel’s descriptions of violence and myth straddle the boundaries between elusory and inchoate, their relative formlessness leaving the reader on unstable ground.⁴¹⁷ Yet, this paper argues that reading Sorel against the backdrop of Hayden White’s “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” elucidates the way in which the emplotment of historical events in culturally familiar literary structures aids in the construction of Sorel’s general strike myth and enables the mobilization of the proletariat through the creation of a future history.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹² Giorgio Agamben, “On The Limits of Violence,” *Contemporary Italian Thought* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 109.

⁴¹³ Jack J. Roth, “The Roots of Italian Fascism: Sorel and Sorelismo,” *The Journal of Modern History* 39, no. 1 (1967): 30-1.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31. Loosely defined, syndicalism is closely related to socialism, yet it views the State as an inherently oppressive mechanism that must be abolished via class warfare. In its place, the syndicalist would have small bodies of elected officials made responsible for determining the needs of their immediate communities. These bodies, or syndicates, would then work collaboratively with other syndicates to engage in broader regional planning and labour exchange.

⁴¹⁵ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T.E. Hulme and J. Roth (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1950), 213.

⁴¹⁶ Jack J. Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and Sorelians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), x.

⁴¹⁷ Malcolm Anderson, “Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 1, no. 1 (1989): 92.

⁴¹⁸ Sorel’s understanding of the general strike myth and its relationship to future history will be discussed shortly.

Certainly not the first to view history through the lens of violence and revolution, Sorel fit himself with much contention into a historiography of leftists grappling with the aftermath of Marxism. This tension between the world of Marx and the world as Sorel and many others now saw it underpinned the entirety of Sorel's work and formed the foundation for the questions that his work sought to answer. As such, the impact of Sorel's works is one that is exceptionally unique. In his early writings—an undertaking he would not begin until his retirement from engineering in his forties—Sorel went relatively unnoticed, particularly in his native France.⁴¹⁹ *Reflections on Violence*, on the other hand, became quite popular and was released in several editions and languages. More importantly, however, is the breadth of the audience that responded to this work. Although met with derision by many, *Reflections* found support among fellow syndicalists, but, more perplexingly, also among longstanding adversaries: anarchists and fascists.⁴²⁰ In fact, the support for Sorel's work ran so deeply for some individuals that later scholars have referred to them as his disciples or Sorelians.⁴²¹ The most famous example of these adherents was, without a doubt, Benito Mussolini who would directly credit *Reflections* as aiding the development and rise to power of Italian fascism.⁴²²

Yet, somewhere between outright rejection and blind adherence to the presumed intentions of Georges Sorel lay the remainder of scholars who took an interest in Sorel's postulations. Among these was critical theorist Walter Benjamin who built from Sorel's ideas extensively in his own evaluation of the intersection between violence, class, and law in German society.⁴²³ Published in 1921, "Toward the Critique of Violence" would prove to be a deeply poignant reflection introduced into Germany's tumultuous Weimar era. In 1958, historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt published *The Human Condition* in which she examined changing perceptions regarding the intersections of labour, work, and action. Through this, Arendt weaves the intersections of violence, whereby violence and force, as with Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*, are distinctly separated.⁴²⁴ The works of Sorel and Benjamin converge in philosopher Giorgio Agamben's essay "On the Limits of Violence"—an analysis of language and violence—which Agamben personally mailed to Arendt in 1970 alongside a letter that credited her works as a driving force in the construction of the essay. Two years later, Arendt would publish her essay "On Violence" as part of the anthology *Crises of the Republic*, which would further refine her understanding of the relationship between violence, power, and government with an emphasis on essence and instrument.⁴²⁵

⁴¹⁹ Roth, "The Roots of Italian Fascism," 30, 32.

⁴²⁰ Anderson, "Georges Sorel," 71.

⁴²¹ Anderson, "Georges Sorel," 76.

⁴²² For a more in-depth examination of this process, see Roth, "The Roots of Italian Fascism."

⁴²³ Walter Benjamin, "Toward a Critique of Violence," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 236-252.

⁴²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁴²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

Meanwhile, scholar Jack Roth would dedicate several decades of his life to an exhaustive examination of the key tenets of Sorel's apocalyptic ideology, the followers these ideas enraptured, and the impact these had on Western society. These would finally be published as *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians* in 1980. However, more than a century after its publication, there would still prove to be more to say about the work of Georges Sorel. While scholars such as Malcolm Anderson and Eric Brandom continue previous efforts to pin down Sorel's intentions, others, such as Giorgio Agamben and Thomas Martin, use elements of Sorel's works to guide their own.⁴²⁶ As such, this paper endeavours to position itself within this continuing legacy.

Touched on in the introduction, Sorel's worldview was rooted in Marx's conception of class conflict whereby the uncontrolled growth of the capitalist society would precipitate an alienated proletariat. Once sufficiently brutalized at the hands of the capitalist society, Marx predicted that the proletariat would become aware of their suffering, overthrow the bourgeoisie, and apprehend the industrialized world to establish a classless society rooted in a socialist mode of production.⁴²⁷ At the time of Marx's writing, the increasing disparity between classes at the hands of unfettered capitalist expansion certainly lent itself to Marx's historical future theory. Yet, by the turn of the century, the capitalist France of Sorel had undergone a series of cultural shifts to differentiate it significantly from the world of Marx. These shifts, which Sorel attributes to the waylaying of the socialist revolution, can be whittled down to three primary concerns. The first was the use of duty, "founded on sentiments of resignation, goodness, and of sacrifices" toward peace and social cohesion, to encourage pacifism amongst the working class.⁴²⁸ This emphasis on pacifism directly ties into Sorel's second observation, identified as "middle-class cowardice, which consists in always surrendering before the threat of violence" and, when allowed to solidify, will ensure "that the middle class is condemned to death, and that its disappearance is only a matter of time."⁴²⁹ The third issue, most vehemently condemned by Sorel, is the introduction of socialists into the French political sphere as parliamentary politicians rather than external antagonists.⁴³⁰ Having been subsumed into French parliamentary

⁴²⁶ Anderson's approach includes a broader overview of Sorel's work as well as the impact of these works contextualized by Sorel's own life. Brandom's focus is predominantly through the lens of French liberalism and conducted in the aftermath of the resurgence in interest in Sorel following the 1980s such as the work by Anderson. Agamben builds from the work of Sorel and Benjamin, yet introduces the relationship between violence and death, which goes wholly unmentioned in *Reflections on Violence*. Thomas Martin, spends considerable time examining Sorel's relationship with rationality, yet the latter section of the paper posits suggestions as to where Sorel's ideas may lead future readers. See Agamben, "On the Limits of Violence"; Anderson, "Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*"; Brandom, "Violence and Resistance," 91-2; Thomas Martin, "Violent Myths: The Post-Western Irrationalism of Georges Sorel," *Democracy & Nature* 4, no.2-3 (1998): 50-69.

⁴²⁷ Granted, this is a very reductionist interpretation of Marxism, but a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴²⁸ Sorel, *Reflections*, 82-3, 104.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴³⁰ Roth, "The Roots of Violence," 31; Sorel, *Reflections*, 101.

politics, socialist politicians relinquished the potential to overcome the capitalist state and, instead, function within it to further diffuse the class tensions between the middle and working classes.⁴³¹

To understand this shift in dynamics, this author suggests one need only view these three groups—the middle class, the proletariat, and politicians—as the tectonic plates that make up capitalist French society. As with tectonic plates, these groups exist in tension with one another and, in order to avoid a catastrophic earthquake, tension needs to be gradually released. This gradual release is embodied by the three key social changes noted by Sorel. For many, these changes were recognized as positive cultural shifts away from the barbarity and conflict of an unenlightened society.⁴³² However, for Sorel and other syndicalists who emphasized revolutionary change over parliamentary cooperation, the gradual release of tension through the placation of workers, growing timidity of the middle class, and parliamentary compliance of socialists, prevented the friction necessary to precipitate violent revolution, destabilize the capitalist regime, and usher in the free and classless society proposed by Marx.⁴³³ While it is important to note that Sorel was strictly a non-believer in the use of history as a predictive tool and did not ascribe to the teleological unfolding of history proposed by Marx and Hegel, it was central to his understanding of capitalist society that, should a revolution occur, it would do so through the escalation of tensions between the middle class and the proletariat. Furthermore, for this to occur, both classes would need to revert to the characteristics embodied by these classes in previous decades. Specifically, the middle class would be required to slough off the growing decadence that shackled them to a timid and passive existence and return to a state of tenacious and imperialist inclinations.⁴³⁴ In response, the proletariat would no longer find the middle class liable to acquiesce to their demands for improved accommodations and, through the degradation of proletariat living conditions, the gap between classes would gradually widen and become reinforced by class tensions. As this gap is reestablished and tension can no longer be gradually released, the tectonic plates would buckle into an eruption of proletarian violence to bring about the socialist revolution.⁴³⁵

Critical to this process, in the eyes of Sorel and arguably Marx himself, is the role of violence initiated by the proletariat. Violence is conceptualized by Sorel in two ways: Force and Violence.⁴³⁶ Force is defined as the planned and organized use of violence, rooted in “savagery” and “superstition” by the state apparatus for the sake of maintaining its own authority.⁴³⁷ Violence, in contrast, is the collective violence of the

⁴³¹ Sorel, *Reflections*, 96.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 70, 81, 103, 139.

⁴³³ Sorel, *Reflections*, 142.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 103, 113.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 194. Moving forward, these terms will be capitalized to distinguish between Sorel’s constructs of Violence and Force and the general use of the word “violence”.

⁴³⁷ Sorel, *Reflections*, 135.

revolutionary proletariat as “the *clear and brutal expression of the class war*” in the form of the general strike.⁴³⁸ As such, Violence consists of “purely and simply acts of war” and are “carried on without hatred and without the spirit of revenge”.⁴³⁹ Most importantly, however, is the understanding that, although Violence is, in its essence, an act of war, it is distinct from judicial proceedings and the militarism that functions as an extension of the state itself.⁴⁴⁰ In Sorel’s analysis, Violence is predominantly conceptualized as an instrument wielded by a collective for the purposes of affirming or destabilizing power structures such that isolated acts of violence by individuals do not appear to be encompassed as a part of Violence or Force. Rather, these acts of violence are only alluded to in Sorel’s broader discussion of the public perception of violence in his contemporary France and its relationship to criminality and social duty, as discussed earlier. According to Sorel’s assessment, the shift in public perception of criminality fell directly in line with the economic development of France as a capitalist nation which was reflected in public response to financial crimes in contrast to violent crimes.⁴⁴¹ As financial crimes such as fraud and theft had become more socially acceptable as part of the daily life of exploitative capitalist society, violent crimes, in contrast, were viewed as increasingly barbaric. This rift is further exacerbated by the increasing prominence of “middle-class philosophers” who espouse the notion that “violence is a relic of barbarism which is bound to disappear under the influence of the progress of enlightenment.”⁴⁴²

The pacification of French culture is diagnosed by Sorel, in part, as the result of the infection of rationalism into the social sciences. As just mentioned, the dominant cultural relationship to violence was one that viewed violence as the by-product of a barbaric and uneducated society. As such, with proper education and social conditioning, human behaviour can be explained and predicted such that it aligns with reason. Sorel, in contrast, falls into alignment with those who have “abandoned all hopes of discovering a complete science of nature” and maintain that the human condition is one that is rooted in the irrational; human behaviour is better controlled by intuition rather than reason.⁴⁴³ Thus, to overcome social adherence toward passivity and incite a population toward that which is considered irrational (Violence), one must utilize that which is rooted in the intuitive and irrational. This, Sorel argues, can be accomplished through the use of historical myth.⁴⁴⁴

Sorel’s understanding of the myth remains to be one of the most nebulous constructions central to his work. As with Violence and Force, Sorel offers a broad characterization of the myth, particularly as the general strike myth, and the pivotal

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 132-133.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 214-7.

⁴⁴² Sorel, *Reflections*, 93.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 169.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 170.

role the myth will play alongside Violence and Force in his conception of the proletarian revolution. Nevertheless, in regard to the concrete manifestation of these constructs, Sorel leaves his readers wanting. What Sorel does reveal, however, is that the myth encloses “all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party, or of a class, inclinations which recur to the mind with the insistence of instincts in all the circumstances of life; and which give an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action by which, more easily than by any other method, men can reform their desires, passions, and mental activity.”⁴⁴⁵ Furthermore, the myth itself cannot be offered to the designated mass, but must emerge from within it as “a body of images which” compels by intuition rather than analysis.⁴⁴⁶ Given this context, it is understandable that Sorel himself cannot provide insight as to the specific details of the myth itself, yet he does offer critical insight as to its essence. While he argues that the specific details and the plausibility of these details are unimportant, it is vital that the myth cultivate a direct association between the general strike and cultural memory of France’s recent martial past.⁴⁴⁷ In doing so, the myth will “[appeal] to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness” such that the myth will leave a “deep and lasting impression” and ensure that “instead of thinking of battles, they now think of strikes; instead of setting up as their ideal a battle against the armies of Europe, they now set up the general strike in which the capitalist regime will be annihilated.”⁴⁴⁸ To recap, Sorel asserts that the myth must be one of intense images derived from the proletariat themselves and fashioned from recent military history such that the general strike and the Violence endemic to that strike are visualized by the proletariat as akin to the martial violence out of which, Sorel argues, France’s own cultural, political, and national identity has been both fashioned and enforced.⁴⁴⁹

Moving forward with this conception of the myth, two additional facets of Sorel’s thinking become critical. The first is the process by which history becomes future history. In Sorel’s assertion that the myth will offer the proletariat a vision of the future rooted in their collective cultural memory, he acknowledges that, due to the impossibility of using history as a predictive tool, there reaches a point where it does not matter that the present and future historical events of the myth are fictitious. Rather, as long as they evoke the wider sentiment of the proletariat and the events appear as though they are manifest to unravel in this way, the myth is sufficient for mobilization.⁴⁵⁰ The second, which directly responds to the first, is Sorel’s praise of the

⁴⁴⁵ Sorel, *Reflections*, 142.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 143, 145. In this context, “cultural memory” refers to Jan Assmann’s definition of cultural memory whereby significant events are fixed outside of time by cultural formation and institutional communication such as texts, monuments, and observances. Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” trans. John Czaplicka, *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 129.

⁴⁴⁸ Sorel, *Reflections*, 91, 140, 145.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁵⁰ Sorel, *Reflections*, 140, 142, 144.

military epic. According to Sorel, this literary form “gave an epical colour to all the events of internal politics” such that the elements of France’s banal political world were elevated to the realm of the fantastical.⁴⁵¹ Riots became illustrious battles, politicians became giants, and most importantly, the process was enveloped “in a dramatic mythology” which rendered all criticism impossible.⁴⁵² When read in tandem, these elements suggest that the myth must have the capacity to convincingly bridge past, present, and future through the use of emotionally-charged cultural memory in such a way that its adherents can have no doubt of the way in which the mythologized history is capable of unfolding as is the case in the familiar military epics of contemporary France. It is in this reading of Sorel that a direct parallel can be drawn to the work of Hayden White.

Historical events, White argues, are value-neutral.⁴⁵³ They hold no inherent value nor inherent meaning on their own. Indeed, for a historical event to be ascribed meaning, it occurs through human intervention in an attempt to somehow make sense of that which has occurred. In particular, White argues that “histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles...”⁴⁵⁴ Through this process, historical events, chronicles, or facts (however one may choose to refer to segments of the past) are gathered by a historian and then constructed in such a way as to generate a sequence of events that appears to be governed by logic to derive a particular conclusion. White argues that this process is accomplished by “the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures” in much the same way as a story, fictional or otherwise, is constructed.⁴⁵⁵ White continues on to explain that, the specific meaning ascribed to these events by the historian, guides the way in which the events are emplotted and the literary motif—tragic, comic, romantic, ironic, etc.—relied upon by the historian to guide his reader’s interpretation.⁴⁵⁶ Furthermore, as these events are value-neutral, they can be constructed using multiple motifs depending on the motivations of the historian.⁴⁵⁷ As these literary tropes are culturally derived and integral to one’s literary heritage, historians can use these constructions to “familiarize the unfamiliar” and introduce a logic that may not exist otherwise.⁴⁵⁸ Thus, the reader of a particular history will not be guided by the events themselves, but rather, how they are emplotted in a familiar literary trope; the reader’s expectation of how this trope unfolds helps them to make sense of what has happened and what is yet to come.⁴⁵⁹ Thus, a reader following

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 84.

⁴⁵⁴ White, “The Historical Text,” 83.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 85-86.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 86.

this structure can understand “*why* a particular story has ‘turned out’” and it is in this capacity for meaning-making that the line between history and myth becomes blurred.⁴⁶⁰ Indeed, when one sees “the ‘point’ of a story...we have identified the theme...which makes of it a ‘parable or illustrative fable.’”⁴⁶¹

As with White’s conceptions of history, in the strike-generating myth of Sorel’s proletariat, the way in which historical events are organized into a familiar story becomes the critical element from which meaning is derived. This becomes abundantly clear with respect to the familiarity of the military epic in French culture contemporary to Sorel. As Sorel touched on in *Reflections*, military epics such as the tales of Napoleonic battles frame military violence as the result of “a people famished for liberty...[who] had maintained against a coalition of all the power of oppression and error”, were guaranteed victory against an adversary, and became the foundation for the elements of French culture held in esteem.⁴⁶² Thus, when recent historical events are emplotted in a similar fashion against a Marxist backdrop that emphasizes the trials of the proletariat against the ails of a capitalist society, two things occur. The first is that the culturally embedded and widely recognized emplotment-style of the military epic functions to familiarize the unfamiliar, despite the myth extending beyond the past and into the future. The cultural memory of the suffering proletariat, emplotted in the style of the military epic, transforms the uprising and the Violence endemic to it into something recognizable despite being largely fictional (as is the nature of future history). Second, the use of this literary trope endorses the success of the general strike in overthrowing the regime as a guarantee, as were the victories spoken of in the military epics of France’s past. Furthermore, the (seemingly) inevitable socialist revolution and resulting cultural shift then bears a resemblance to the way in which French culture and values had previously been established. Once this process has become familiar and inevitable, it has transitioned from irrational to rational; it would no longer be a violation of rational, civil society to pursue the Violence of the general strike.⁴⁶³ In fact, it would be irrational not to.

Despite Sorel’s protestations that the significance of the myth transcended language itself, he would later liken it to poetry in its capacity to evoke powerful images of the future using the images of the past.⁴⁶⁴ Giorgio Agamben furthers this idea by suggesting that “poetry introduces a form of persuasion that does not rely on truth, but rather on the peculiar emotional effects of rhythm and music, acting both violently and

⁴⁶⁰ White, “The Historical Text,” 83.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Sorel, *Reflections*, 115, 136.

⁴⁶³ From what is understood of Thomas Martin’s claim, the mythical becomes irrational, which is in line with natural human inclination. Thus, the historical future written into the myth becomes attainable. This paper reaches the same conclusion, yet in a different direction. Instead, the familiar logic of the epic form of emplotment presents the historical future of the myth as rational. Thus, humans whose cultural values centre on the ideal of rationality, find themselves aligned with the myth. Martin, “Violent Myths”, 54.

⁴⁶⁴ Sorel, *Reflections*, 140.

bodily...”⁴⁶⁵ Through the comparison to Hayden White’s theory of emplotment, this parallel is drawn yet again whereby it is not the language or historical facts themselves that imbue the myth with its power, but rather how the masses choose to structure the myth using culturally derived literary forms. Understandably, “any attempt to discuss how far it can be taken literally as future history is devoid of sense. *It is the myth in its entirety which is alone important*: its parts are only of interest in so far as they bring out the main idea.”⁴⁶⁶ Thus, Sorel’s unwillingness to postulate on the specifics of the myth nor aid in its construction as a syndicalist and supporter of the socialist revolution arose not out of ambiguity, but out of necessity. For, if the working class were to rise up and crush the decadence of late-capitalist society, the word so cherished by the peaceful must be exorcised by the rhythm and images of the proletarian myth.

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⁴⁶⁵ Agamben, “On The Limits of Violence,” 105.

⁴⁶⁶ Sorel, *Reflections*, 144.

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