

THE DISUNITY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

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“What is the ‘Marxist sense’ of the unity of theory and practice?” Professor Stanley asks in his generous review of my *Commitment and Change*.¹ I admire the skeptical spirit in which this question is raised, and confess that I have no ready answer. Some of the principal candidates, however, would appear to be the following: (1) a view that the tasks once ascribed to theory must be taken up by practice (*i.e.*, *change* not *interpretation* will liberate us); (2) a view that the conclusions of theory coincide with the practical demands of a movement (*i.e.*, its particular needs and interests match and embody the universal requirements of philosophy); (3) a view that theory ought to reach practical conclusions (*i.e.*, it is idle if it fails to connect with the real situations and problems of its day); (4) a view that theory does embody “practical”² interests, implicitly taking a stand on political matters by virtue of the assumptions which it makes and the categories which it adopts, whether it seeks to do so or not; (5) a view that practice proves or disproves the truth of theoretical speculation (“Man must prove the truth ... of his thinking in practice”); (6) a view that practical effectiveness *constitutes* the truth of theory; (7) a view that theory and practice ought to interact, each continually enriching the other; (8) a view that the same people ought to theorize and practice (*i.e.*, no division of manual and intellectual labour). None of these senses of the phrase is logically related to any other, *i.e.*, one can accept or reject any one without being committed to the acceptance or rejection of any of the rest, though some may be hard to square with others. Not surprisingly, then, the question of Sorel’s relation to Marx (and Marxism) on this topic is one of great complexity.

There may be something to be said for beginning with the quite elementary manner in which Sorel introduces the topic in his earliest writings, drawing not at all upon Marx (or Hegel) but upon the ancient question of the philosopher’s relation to the city. In *Le Procès de Socrate* (1889) Sorel makes the following rather heavy-handed remark:

The future was bleak, and it was clear that long wars were to be expected. The city was poor, and had to appeal to the heroic feelings of all those peasants, coal-merchants and garlic-growers who knew only one thing about philosophy: that their fathers had beaten the Persians, and had won supremacy at sea.³

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What is philosophy to the coal-merchants and garlic-growers? Nothing at all, Sorel says, and Socrates (to judge from Plato's *Crito*) would surely have agreed. The city's unity is constituted not by the True and the Good but by images and memories of a gratifying kind: "our fathers beat the Persians." Seventeen years later, the following passage appears in Sorel's most notorious book, *Réflexions sur la violence*:

We might be lead to ask, in fact, whether our official socialists, with their passion for discipline and their boundless faith in the genius of leaders, are not the most authentic heirs of the royal armies, while the anarchists and the advocates of a general strike are not those who today represent the spirit of the revolutionary warriors who so thoroughly thrashed the fine armies of the coalition, against all the rules of war.⁴

Now why should a theorist of revolutionary syndicalism, who believed in the strictest class division and thus in the invalidity of *civisme*, have introduced such an appeal to the heroes of Fleurus (who, after all, gave their lives for a cause which Sorel despised)? Because "what our fathers did," in beating the Persians or the Austrians in so exemplary a fashion, enters fundamentally into the scheme of things that we admire, and we can be induced only with great difficulty, if at all, to engage in something for which our memories have not prepared us. What can be *done*, then, is limited by the array of images which can be diffused sufficiently to win consent to a project.

Here we may have an explanation for that asymmetry of theory and practice which, in my view, runs throughout Sorel's thinking, and, arguably, supplies its principal dynamic. Once again, *Le Procès de Socrate* is helpful:

Only very rarely do the men of science engage in active politics. Remarkably enough, they are all the more cautious the more bold and radical they are in their doctrines. Generally speaking, the men who resort to violence are rather weak in theory.⁵

And once again, there is a passage in *Réflexions sur la violence* which interestingly recalls this earlier remark. Sorel says of the syndicalist militants:

These men may be wrong about any number of political, economic or moral questions; but their testimony is decisive, sovereign, and beyond correction when it is a

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matter of discovering the pictures [*représentations*] which most powerfully move them and their comrades, which are able, in the highest degree, to fuse with their conception of socialism, and thanks to which their reason, their hopes, and their perception of particular facts seem to form a single indivisible unity.⁶

Sorel's new approval of the men of violence, then, does not in the least diminish his old conviction that they are "weak in theory." Their views are unreliable guides to truth in "political, economic and moral" questions. Yet the "men of science," who separate fact from hope and thus might answer those questions better, are nevertheless incompetent in the realm of action, for their knowledge gives them no clue as to what is effective as, so to speak, *opinion*. The passage from *Réflexions* amplifies this argument in a most relevant way; in practical thinking, as Sorel says, reason, hope and perception are fused in a self-sustaining unity which is therefore closed to criticism or doubt. This is, of course, the "indivisibility" and "irrefutability" of myth, a doctrine for which Sorel is so famous; and like Plato's even more famous myth in the *Republic*, it springs from the proposition that what is true will not secure consent by virtue, simply, of being true.

Now in the militant's mind as Sorel describes it there is indeed a unity of *thought* and practice, his "representations" of the world being tied essentially to his "hopes" of changing it. If we are tempted to call such thought "theory," that is, I think, only because it often draws, in varying degrees, upon elaborate theoretical constructs such as, in this case, those of Marx. But all this amounts to is the uncontentious point that the vocabulary and conceptual apparatus of theory may sometimes enter the realm of practical thought (which is a far cry indeed from claiming that they can themselves constitute what Sorel, like Cardinal Newman, called "principles of action");⁷ and there is a good reason for preserving the distinction of words. Precisely because there is a unity of *thought* and action, there is, in Sorel's view, a disunity of *theory* and practice; for "thought" thus understood is constitutive of the social world, forming the means by which groups identify and differentiate themselves, while theory is required to be explanatory of the complex and evolving relations of the social world thus constituted. As we have seen, Sorel distinguishes between the success of a belief in constituting social life and its success in explaining it, and there might in fact be logical difficulties in claiming that a belief did both (for if it *was* the object of enquiry, could it also explain that object?).

A pragmatist might resolve, or, more correctly perhaps, dispense with such difficulties by redefining explanatory success as practical success, so that the truth of a belief became identical with its effectiveness in inducing desired

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effects. But whatever the merits of such a proposal, it does not appear to have been Sorel's. He emphatically separates out three kinds of questions: (1) the truth of a belief as a claim about the world, (2) the current opinion about its truth,⁸ and (3) the historical consequences of this opinion's being held. With regard to (1) and (2), he insists that the question of truth must be *set aside* by the historian or sociologist of opinion (and *not*, therefore, identified with opinion) — "for example, in the history of the order founded by St. Francis of Assisi, what does the exact and scientific nature of his stigmata matter? What interests the philosopher is the idea that contemporaries held about it."⁹ With regard to (2) and (3), the whole of Sorel's treatment of history is shot through with his assumption that the course of events departs sharply from the images of change formed beforehand by the actor, and in *Réflexions sur la violence* he systematically undertakes to display the projected consequences of the myth of the general strike (and of other strategies) by means of criteria (elsewhere termed "rules of prudence")¹⁰ which are wholly independent of the content of the myth itself.

Nor do I think Russell's suggestion¹¹ that what Marx imagined as a unity of theory and practice qualifies as pragmatist should pass without some comment. Broadly following Kolakowski's fine essay on this topic,¹² one might briefly describe Marx's position as follows: since the reality in which we live is made by men, collectively and historically, there is the most intimate relation between what we believe and what is, for what we believe enters into the constitution of what is (and, of course, *vice versa*). Yet what is collectively and historically generated by men serves as a test of what individual men, or groups of men believe. The institutions and practices which we confront are not independent of the beliefs which we hold, and in that respect the conformity of a belief with factual reality is no genuinely independent test of the ontological truth of that belief (*e.g.*, the laws of political economy, despite their success, are in the last resort only conventional); yet the world thus constructed serves as an independent check upon the beliefs which particular men or groups of men may form. To ask, then, whether what is real is or is not given is to ask a very misleading question; for it is given with respect to our attitudes to it or our desire to change it, but not with respect to a fictitious "Man," for we do not inhabit an Aristotelian "nature" but a constructed world, albeit one that we have not (as yet) constructed with full consciousness of what we are doing. What significantly distinguishes such a view from (what I take to be) James's pragmatism is that while it may admit practice as a *test* of truth it permits the *criterion* of truth to remain distinct from practical effectiveness, as the world of social relations, though ultimately constructed indeed by men, nevertheless has objective features, limits or tendencies to which our beliefs may be said to correspond or not.¹³

If James sought to collapse the (theoretical) criterion of explanatory truth

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into the (practical) criterion of effectiveness, Marx imagined, rather, a unifying of the two, a situation, that is, in which theory and practice, both retaining their essential properties as distinguishable modes or categories of experience, nevertheless eventually meet in a revolutionary proletariat equipped with the practical means of effecting change and theoretical knowledge of the processes and ends of history. And it was here, I have suggested, that Sorel would not follow Marx (without however for that reason adopting a Jamesian solution); for he did not believe that the socialist revolutionaries understood what they were doing any more fully than the bourgeois revolutionaries had done,¹⁴ and he thus retained theoretical reflection as a category not only distinct from practice but also separate from it.

Professor Stanley suggests a most illuminating parallel between Sorel's view of natural science and his approach to social science, a fuller examination of which would, I willingly admit, allow a more adequate picture of the relation between theory and practice than I have offered. But perhaps there are some contrasts to be made too. Something like a unity of theory and practice holds, arguably, in physics as Sorel views it, for he regards theoretical constructs as simply coextensive with the relations brought into being by human work. As a socialist theoretician, however, Sorel in effect refuses to admit such coextensiveness, by distinguishing sharply between the manner in which beliefs are held by those who act and the standpoint of the theorist in relation to them; for the theorist of the myth "*knows it to be myth*,"¹⁵ whereas the actors (or at any rate most of the actors) cannot view it in this way, or else it would lose its force and thus also lose its mythic status. To put it differently, Sorel does not treat the myth as a scientific hypothesis but as a *fact* about which we may form hypotheses as to its relation to other facts, and in that respect he retains a clear distinction between practical conviction and scientific prediction. Rather than displaying any thesis about the continuity of the natural and social sciences, Sorel's argument significantly anticipates the views of later theorists who have pointed to the disanalogy between the two. There are, as Peter Winch (notably) has argued, *two* sets of "rules" with which the sociologist must come to terms, those of the social actors whose thought and behaviour he is explaining, and those of sociological theory itself, a situation which has no parallel in physics:¹⁶ and just such a thesis is fundamental to *Réflexions sur la violence*, where Sorel takes issue at such length with socialist theoreticians who are unable, it seems, to grasp that those about whom they theorize have thoughts of their own, and cannot be captured by the tidy constructs of the socio-scientific mind. These constructs, he insists, must take as given a realm of practical thought,¹⁷ for social life has an experienced reality of its own which the theorist cannot simply override in giving order to the data which confront him; the data are already ordered by thought.

Professor Stanley's suggestion that the problem which Sorel thus confronted

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parallels the "uncertainty principle" in physics is quite brilliant, and points towards a most valuable area of enquiry. It does occur to me to wonder, though, whether this parallel can do justice to the fact that the uncertainty principle is *internal* to physical theory,¹⁸ while the questions which plagued Sorel concern the relation between theory and something external to it. This consideration, more tentatively, might conceivably cast some doubt of a general kind upon the thesis that science provides a very strict model for the unity of theory and practice:¹⁹ for the uniting of the two clearly presupposes their initial separability, and where is this line of demarcation in physics? The testing of a theory by experimentation or other means is not a uniting of theory with anything else, but a requirement internal to theory. And anyway, is the supposed analogy between scientific experimentation and political practice even plausible? An experiment requires that the most demanding conditions should be sought for the testing of a hypothesis, while a political actor (revolutionary or otherwise) who followed this rule would be irresponsible to the point of sheer lunacy.

I have tried to keep this response brief and have left untouched many of the intriguing questions that Professor Stanley raises. Nor have I said how much I appreciate the enormous care which Professor Stanley has taken in reading my book; but an adequate expression of my gratitude would make altogether unreasonable demands upon this journal's space.

Notes

1. John L. Stanley, "Sorel and the Social Uncertainty Principle," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (1979), 87.
2. I shall not return to this point, as it seems to me to confuse the question of theory and practice with the distinct question of objectivity. Clearly, a theory can be non-objective without being *practical*.
3. *Le Procès de Socrate*, Paris, 1889, pp. 238-9. One may be reminded of the editors' remarks about the "indifference of the surrounding population" in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1977), v.
4. *Réflexions sur la violence*, 7th edition, Paris, 1930, p. 376.
5. *Le Procès de Socrate*, p. 204; cf. Marcuse's "Ethics and Revolution" in Edward Kent, ed., *Revolution and the Rule of Law*, Englewood Cliffs, 1977, p. 49.
6. *Réflexions sur la violence*, p. 181.
7. "Preface for Merlino," translated in my *Commitment and Change*, Toronto, 1978, 85. Cf. J.H. Newman, "Secular Knowledge not a Principle of Action," in *Newman: Prose and Poetry*, G. Tillotson, ed., Cambridge (Mass.), 1957, pp. 100-3. For Sorel's respect for Newman, see *Réflexions sur la violence*, pp. 10-11, 45. In some ways Newman would provide a better point of reference than Marx in interpreting Sorel's view of practice, but that is another story.

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8. *Le Procès de Socrate*, p. 120.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
 10. "Preface for Pelloutier," translated in *Commitment and Change*, p. 94.
 11. "Sorel and the Social Uncertainty Principle," p. 92.
 12. Leszek Kolakowski, "Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth," in *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, New York, 1968, pp. 38-66.
 13. As indeed any notion of "true" or "false" consciousness would seem to require. I am uncertain about the relation between the theme of "false consciousness" in Stanley's essay and the pragmatism which he also stresses: Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, review of Richard J. Bernstein's *Praxis and Action*, *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 25, 1972, p. 741.
 14. See the essay translated in *Commitment and Change*, "On the Barbarism of Revolution," especially p. 115.
 15. *Réflexions sur la violence*, p. 220. This passage is, however, far from clear, and may be read in a sense as being as favourable to Stanley's interpretation as to mine. I do maintain, though, that my reading of it is more consistent with what Sorel does in *Réflexions*.
 16. Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, London, 1958, p. 87.
 17. That Sorel was indeed often critical of what people thought ("Sorel and the Social Uncertainty Principle," p. 86) does not in my view make him a theorist of false consciousness, for one can criticize as a *moraliste*, as I believe he did, without invoking the criterion of truth, as I believe he explicitly declined to do.
 18. Cf. Mary Hesse, "Models Versus Paradigms in the Natural Sciences," in Lyndhurst Collins, ed., *The Use of Models in the Social Sciences*, Boulder (Colorado), 1976, p. 13.
 19. See for example Edward Andrew, "A Note on the Unity of Theory and Practice in Marx and Nietzsche," *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, 1975, pp. 305-16.
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