

“Georges Sorel and the Reactionary Politics of Intuition in Fin de Siècle France”  
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Georges Sorel was a syndicalist, a civil engineer, sometimes a royalist, a nationalist, and an anti-Semite. Mussolini happily declared, "What I am I owe to Georges Sorel." He energized a powerful current of pre-war French political thought considered neither Left nor Right, structured as it was by a more fundamental suspicion of democracy in any iteration. But perhaps most troubling for contemporary political theory, Sorel was also one of the first thinkers to politicize Henri Bergson's philosophy of intuition and translate it into an attack on capitalism and democracy, an approach that would appeal to later fascist thinkers.

This essay reconstructs Sorel's pessimistic diagnosis of democracy's problems. Doing so brings into view how he conscripted Bergson's philosophy into formulating an antidote for the stagnating, dying French republic: "sublime" political violence. For Sorel, democracy and its preferred mode of instrumental, cognitive reasoning cannot make our free will known to us in the way immediate intuition can during the activity of violence. Violence therefore promises escape from a modern world by rescuing the free will from being deadened by instrumentalism and parliamentarism. Reconstructing Sorel's argument calls into question the political innocence of "intuition" as a critical category for our present, revealing how it can motivate reactionary forms of anti-capitalism instead. It also clarifies what is troubling in the turn towards aestheticized or experiential politics generally: By describing anything from parliamentarism to language itself as "deadening," the cry to "return to immediate intuition" participates in a dangerous fantasy of unmediated access to freedom from which stem commitments to violence in the name of irreducible, vital life.