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Review

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## REVIEWS

*Reflections on Violence.* By GEORGES SOREL. Translated with an Introduction and Bibliography by T. R. E. Hulme. Pp. xvi., 299. (London : George Allen and Unwin. Cash price in Great Britain 7s. 6d.)

THIS is not a book that one would naturally expect to find exposed in what M. Sorel would call the "drawing-rooms" of economists—or for the matter of that in any well-regulated drawing-room. Economists may, indeed, be expected to take a more or less detached interest in a book that might be supposed to elucidate the aims and methods of Syndicalism; but though the work before us is acclaimed by its sponsors as "*the classic of Syndicalism*," it could hardly be described as a guide to Syndicalism—except on the view that Syndicalists have builded better than they knew. It is a philosophical interpretation of the Syndicalist movement, and, as we all know, the result of philosophical interpretations is not always recognised by those that are interpreted. M. Sorel does indeed concentrate attention on some of the more distinctive ideas of Syndicalism—the idea, for example, of the class-war, and of direct as opposed to parliamentary action, as also (if more incidentally) on the significance of the approach to Socialism from the side of the producer. But the idea which really attracts our author—and the idea around which he groups all the salient phenomena of Syndicalism—is the significance of proletarian violence, which, while it is the clearest manifestation of the class-war, is itself most clearly manifested in the idea of the general strike. The result is that these "Reflections" have a somewhat wide and indefinite range, being concerned quite generally with the "function" of violence as an (or even the) ethical agent in progress. For to M. Sorel violence is good, both as an end and as a means : violence is at once the condition and the essence of the higher morality or "the sublime in ethics." This sublimation of violence as a kind of moral tonic and renewer

of "lost energies" (of which M. Sorel would find in these years of shock a rather nearer instance at hand) raises questions which would carry us rather far afield into the domains of psychology and ethics, of religion and philosophy : and this is hardly the occasion for such an attractive excursion. It is not, of course, the first time that the cleansing and invigorating powers of war have been contrasted with the corruption and torpor of peace, or that metaphors from warfare have served as the vehicle of moral parables : what is peculiar to M. Sorel is the new or at any rate rather unfamiliar setting which he gives to the idea of violence—the spiritual affinities, for instance, which he finds between proletarian violence and the philosophy both of Proudhon (whom he rather closely resembles) and of Bergson. But M. Sorel is equally notable for the violence he himself does to analogies. It may be said, indeed, of him what he himself says in a particular context of Renan—he seems to have "*identified* too readily" morality and war and "fallen a victim to a figure of speech"—to such an extent indeed that an element of truth becomes distorted into an untruth, into a falsity of extremes. On the other hand, the discerning reader will be able to sift the grain from the chaff (it is emphatically not a book for the young), and may then find that M. Sorel's polemic against "moderation" and "compromise," "arbitration" and "opportunism," has more than a negative value ; that his argument, stripped of the extravagance of its trappings, has a really arresting and illuminating quality ; and that in any case it has the rare and supreme merit of forcing the reader to think—and to think furiously. His book is at once original and thought-provoking.

But we are here concerned with the economic setting (or rather foundation) of the doctrine. To do justice to it, we must discount—rather heavily—the disorderliness, not only of the language (in a parliamentary sense), but of the method. M. Sorel has only one argument for an opponent, and that is a bludgeon. But there is probably a method in what might otherwise be dismissed as mere literary sabotage. The whole argument consists in an inversion (if not perversion) of ordinary values : democracy, for instance, is regarded as nothing more nor better than the happy hunting-ground of jobbers and place-hunters, and it is a part of his case that politicians should be represented as *ex vi termini*, not only so many fools, but so many knaves. It would seem as if he who preaches violence must himself be violent ; and M. Sorel is not singular in his capacity to confound the essence of democracy with the abuse of it. Nor will

the ordinary reader be inclined to have much patience with the nature and method of the argument itself. This way, he will think, madness lies; but if he perseveres he will not only be rewarded with *aperçus* of genuine penetration, but will discover that there is a method in the madness. There are many strands in the author's philosophy of violence, and much of the plausibility of the argument is derived from the fact that the term itself is so imperfectly analysed that it is made to cover a rather motley multitude of spiritual affinities. But regarded as a philosophy of Syndicalism its thesis may be reduced to the proposition that the essential doctrine of Marx can only be fulfilled through the idea of the general strike. The destruction of Capitalism will not come about by itself as by some kind of inner necessity: it can only come about by the class-war carried to the fullest pitch of intensity and self-consciousness. Capital and Labour must raise their offensives to their highest power, and must appear as irreconcilable forces preparing for a final and catastrophic collision. In this lies the significance of proletarian violence: its peculiar value (quite apart from its high ethical quality) consists in the fact that it enlightens the idea of class warfare just as it is in its turn enlightened by the idea of a general strike—this being the form in which it is fully and finally consummated. Hence it is that the idea of a general strike has all the revealing and compelling power of an apocalyptic vision—of a second coming. In the well-known language of the author it is of the nature of a "myth in which Socialism is wholly comprised—i.e., a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society." And the educative value of this particular myth lies in its demonstration of the fact that this world can only be taken by violence, and that the way of "social peace" is paved only with good intentions at the best.

If we ask M. Sorel what kind of society the workers will put in the place of the State and of Capitalism, or how violence is as fitted to create as to destroy, he replies: "from this point of view 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 ethical valuations of the revolutionary movement: and it is to violence Socialism owes those high ethical values, by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world." M. Sorel has, in fact, a new beatitude—blessed are the violent for they shall inherit the earth—and his criticism of contemporary Socialism is in effect that it is not violent enough.

It would really seem in the end that M. Sorel's whole philosophy (or religion) of violence lies in a confusion or mixture of values. He is continually passing from a popular to an unpopular and even esoteric use of the conception; and it is only in this way that he can regard violence as having in itself a creative value. It is to M. Sorel a real energy of the soul, "a striving after perfection," an assertion of individuality; and so we find him insisting on "the great resemblances between the sentiments aroused by the idea of the general strike and those which are necessary to bring about a continued progress in methods of production." He attributes to violence, in fact, the *rôle* of what Keats calls "making souls"; it constitutes indeed "the soul of the revolutionary proletariat," but it is a soul which is also fitted by revolutionary Syndicalism—the greatest educative force that society has at its disposal—to carry out an "industrial revolution."

"There is only one force that can produce to-day 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. The preceding explanations have shown that the idea of the general strike (constantly rejuvenated by the feelings roused by proletarian violence) produces an entirely epic state of mind, and at the same time bends all the energies of the mind to that condition necessary to the realisation of a workshop carried on by free men, eagerly seeking the betterment of industry. . . . We have, then, the right to maintain that the modern world possesses that prime mover which is necessary to the creation of the ethics of the producers."

This is perhaps the most significant passage in which M. Sorel attempts to establish a new economic harmony (out of discord): it has the merit if it also has the defect of the older ones. We may well ask why and how "violence" (which is also called "brutality") has this effect. And the answer must be because it is not merely violence. The truth is that M. Sorel makes little or no attempt to analyse the nature of violence or of "war." That there is a truth in his doctrine—and a truth of more than negative value—is undoubted; but the argument is vitiated by the confusion of a part of the truth (even if it may be the part that is in most danger of neglect) with a whole truth. His "Reflections" have the defect, if they also have the merit, of one-sided emphasis: as a protest against facile optimism and the false prophets who cry peace where there is no peace, they go far to justify the pessimistic conception "on which the whole of the study rests." M. Sorel's book is a challenge of an unusually uncompromising kind to much in our modern thoughts and practice that seems to have become divorced from realities. On the

other hand, one abstraction cannot be corrected merely by the substitution of another. It is a synthesis of the extremes that we miss in these Reflections on Violence ; but this need not affect our appreciation of the extreme which M. Sorel has given us—and in such full and exuberant measure.

SIDNEY BALL

*International Finance.* By HARTLEY WITHERS. (Smith, Elder and Co. 1915. Pp. viii+181. 3s. 6d. net.)

MR. HARTLEY WITHERS fills now, for the advantage of the general public, the rôle immortalised by Bagehot. With a similar rare aptitude for telling phrase and arresting epigram, these two writers have known how to express a close acquaintance with the practice, and acute appreciation of the theory, of the "money-market" in perspicuous speech. Technicalities become attractive and intelligible when handled by such masters ; and so easy and convincing seems their agreeable explanation that readers end with some surprise that in their first approach towards this subject they should have been dismayed by difficulty or checked by doubt. And yet "what the City really does" and "why it is the centre of the world's Money Market" do not cease to form a marvellous and intricate narrative ; and, in spite of Mr. Withers' frank apology for traversing in his last book "a good deal of ground covered in earlier efforts to throw light on the machinery of money and the Stock Exchange," we feel that repetition, in this case, does not forfeit the charm of freshness, and that much of what he says here once again, with such lucidity and force, can hardly be over-emphasised.

The few chapters of this short book offer a tempting opportunity for laudatory comment ; and we are not disposed to criticise the author for his cheering optimism on the future prospects of his country in the sphere of international finance, or to deprecate the buoyant adroitness with which he removes black paint from the received description of financiers. He is not indeed blind to the chance now opened to the United States by the predicament of belligerent European countries for financing enterprise, especially in South America, which was previously dependent, chiefly upon England, for its capital. Nor does he fail to acknowledge those evil possibilities of international finance to which a special chapter is devoted. But, nevertheless, he maintains emphatically that finance is "a very much cleaner affair than either law or politics" ; he argues that financiers are as a rule human, not inhuman, persons, averse to wars, from which they are less likely to derive