

FRANZ BORKENAU

# SOREL, PARETO, SPENGLER

## THREE FASCIST PHILOSOPHERS

THE term 'Fascist', which is used above as the common denominator of these three remarkable sociologists, is not simply meant as a term of abuse. I believe that two at least of the three, Sorel and Spengler, have made contributions of value to modern thought. Nor would I contend that what is valuable in them has nothing to do with their rôle as pace-makers for Fascism. The situation is more complex than that. The best in them is very closely connected with the worst.

Georges Sorel, the interpreter of the doctrine of French syndicalism, who died shortly after the last war, has been an immensely productive writer, but outside France he is best known as the author of *Reflexions on violence*. He has also contributed a study on the 'Illusion of progress', which is not on a level with the best he wrote, yet important as giving a wider, more philosophical background to his doctrine of violence. The two titles give clear enough an indication of his philosophy, a clearer one perhaps than his actual writings, which are marred by a *gaucherie* of presentation most unusual for a Frenchman.

Vilfredo Pareto, originally an Italian railway director of liberal background and views, was driven out of Italy owing to his struggle against financial and political corruption. He ended his days as a professor of Economics at Lausanne, bitterly hostile to that liberal régime which had treated him so badly. His only contribution to political doctrine is contained in his *General Sociology*, a work of enormous size and, like Sorel's works, of very muddled composition. There is, however, this excuse that Pareto was nearly an octogenarian when he wrote it. The main doctrine of the 'Sociology' is in keeping with that of Sorel. It is directed against humanitarianism, democracy and liberalism and extols all the attitudes opposed to them. He died in 1923.

Oswald Spengler, who, before his book had made him a rich man, had been a modest teacher of mathematics at Hamburg,

comes into a different category. He died, not an old man, in 1935, thus belonging to a much younger generation. Accordingly he is much less interested in 'absolute values' than either Sorel or even Pareto. There is no need to indicate the well-known main doctrines of *The Decline of the West*. Though Spengler does not believe in absolute values, he is as hostile to the values of the liberal age as his French and Italian counterparts.

Neither of the three was the propagandist of an existing Fascist régime. Sorel just lived to see, not the Fascist but the Bolshevik revolution, and what, I believe, was his last utterance in print is devoted to a 'defence of Lenin'. It is, however, a defence Lenin would hardly have accepted. The most praiseworthy thing in Lenin, in Sorel's eyes, was that Lenin was 'a true Muscovite' who had broken with the Westernizing traditions of Peter the Great, and with the Western traditions of humanity and democracy. The class angle of Lenin's work is hardly mentioned at all. Pareto, after having prophesied, in 1919, an age of dictatorship of the trade unions, just lived to see Mussolini come to power. He applauded his anti-democratic work, but maintained an attitude of reserve, refusing a State appointment offered him. Spengler just lived to see Hitler come into power, and loathed him and his lot with all the hatred his strong soul was capable of. He hated in Nazism those aspects which H. Rauschning has conveyed so vividly to an international public, and he hated them for the same reasons Rauschning hates them. As strong conservatives of the Prussian type both find Nazism much too demagogic, corrupt and unsteady. They have no use for the Dervish-like homage paid to the Fuehrer. Similarly Pareto had summoned Mussolini not to tamper with the liberty of the universities, so that a place of free criticism and research should remain intact.

Even these sketchy remarks should make it clear that a close parallelism exists between the Frenchman, the German and the Italian, all of them typical representatives of an age moving away from the ideals of the nineteenth century, closely similar in their views, expressive of a wide current of opinion in their respective countries. Instead of Sorel, Pareto and Spengler, I might have dealt with Bergson, Michels and Ernst Jeunger; or with Maurras, Mosca and Moeller van den Bruck. I selected these three, not owing to any uniqueness of their views, but owing to the high level on which they conduct their argument; not, however, with

any intention to disparage the importance of others thinking on similar lines, *e.g.* Bergson. These three offer a good starting point for a discussion of the intellectual side of the movement towards Fascism.

'Fascism', after all, is only an almost meaningless term used in self-description by a movement which preferred not to mention its real aims. The scientific term for that movement is 'totalitarianism', for it is the totalitarian state which has been the real goal of the movement. Now it is remarkable to the highest degree that, whatever prophetic gift our three typical proto-fascists may have displayed in other respects, they are all three of them conspicuous in their failure to foresee the totalitarian state. But 'failure to foresee' is putting it much too mildly. In fact they are all conspicuous by their hatred of the totalitarian idea. What Spengler loathed in Nazism was something closely connected with the process of 'Gleichschaltung'. He believed in the superlative value, the indispensable need for the old German ruling groups, the traditional officers' corps, the Civil Service, the industrial and financial captains with whom, since he had become famous, he was connected by so many ties of friendship. *Years of decision*, his last work, is full of apprehension about the inevitable consequences of the submerging of these keepers of old values by the Nazi flood of uncouth, untrained, neurotic, uncontrolled lower middle-class boys. Adventurers, he would say, are no good in the great moments of history; if huge numbers of them crush everybody who has kept a sense of responsibility, disaster is inevitable. The reservations of Pareto in front of the rise of Fascism are fundamentally of the same kind, and if they were of a milder sort, it was only because Italian Fascism was a much milder affair, and in many respects so much more closely connected with the old ruling classes than Nazism.

The case of Sorel is much more glaring. His doctrine not only does imply opposition to the totalitarian idea, it is even its diametrical opposite. For the main idea of the *Defence of Violence* is this, that a society, in order to have vitality, must be split by the most violent antagonisms. His defence of violence deals, in the first place, with violence as used in the modern class-struggle by the proletariat. His whole argument is directed against Jaurès, against democratic reformism, and it is Marx he invokes as chief witness in his case. Yet Marx would probably have been

as little delighted with Sorel's arguments as Lenin later. For the usual arguments of revolutionary Marxists—that reformism and class co-operation are unable to bring about Socialism, and that proletarian revolution is the necessary outcome of inexorable historical laws—are not even mentioned by Sorel, for the simple reason that he is not interested in Socialism, and does not believe in historical necessity. The worst type of economic organization, according to him, is a society where the State, ruled by a political party, attempts to manage economic life. The efforts of Jaurès tend in this direction—which after all, had Sorel not been so incredibly muddle-headed, he would have seen to mean no more than that Jaurès was a Democratic Socialist—and therefore tend towards a state of things where every individual, through the means of the State, will be plundered by a gang of politicians. Such a development is perfectly possible, and precisely for that reason horribly dangerous. To proclaim such opinions as Marxist is exquisite fun. But more exquisite fun it is to follow Sorel as he concludes, from these premises, that the only protection against that abomination for which he has no name, but which ordinary humans call Socialism is—the class-struggle. That, according to Sorel, is the profound truth which Marx has developed.

But one must be beware from discounting the value of a doctrine, merely because it contains elements of unintended humour. The funny thing about Sorel is merely that for a long time, though not till the end, he continued to regard himself as a Socialist and a Marxist. Shorn of this nonsense—which reveals a weak personality combined with a strong mind, a man able to see things, but afraid of proclaiming openly the novelty of his views—his doctrine has meaning. What he maintains is that in two important directions all State interference threatens social disruption. Economically, it produces a tendency to rely upon political intrigue instead of honest effort for gain, a point also very strongly urged by Pareto; and morally, by establishing the paternal control of the State over contending pressure groups, it takes away all vigour otherwise created by the struggle of these pressure groups. The first is not much more than the economic doctrine of liberalism. The second is not much more than the political doctrine of Machiavelli who, in his *Florentine History*, maintained that the greatness of his native city was, in the first place, due to constant civil war, and, in the second place, to the

poverty of its inhabitants. 'The city became rich, while its citizens were poor.' Our Neo-Machiavelli takes pains to describe the corruption of contemporary France, the cowardice bred in bourgeoisie and proletariat alike by the fear of struggle, the preference for easy compromise, the belief in happiness and progress. What, therefore, is the chief value of the hoped-for intensification of the class-struggle in Sorel's eyes? It is that the bourgeoisie, by the outrages of proletarian violence, will be forced away from its habits of compromise, will give up its bad conscience in the matter of exploitation, will learn to fight back ruthlessly, will become a class again instead of a crowd of fortune-hunters, will develop habits of ruthless vigour and hence, together with the equally vigorous and ruthless proletariat, will save the country.

Sorel is always paradoxical to the point of being scurrilous, and I should not recommend his interpretation of the class-struggle. But it is obvious enough that in this doctrine it is not really the class-struggle that matters in the first place. What Sorel is groping for is obvious to us today. He tries to develop a formula which would express and explain the origins of the moral decay into which, he feels, modern European society, and in particular French society, is rapidly falling. Today we all know how much truth there was in these views, how much there still is in them. It is certainly not true that compromise as such is an evil, as he would like us to believe. But there is compromise and compromise. Compromise as a method of settling, in a well-mannered and reasonable way, matters of secondary importance, is a mark of civilized society. Compromise as something absolutely preferable to fighting, such as we have lived through during the humiliating years between 1918 and 1940, is conducive to complete disintegration of society. Was Sorel wrong in maintaining that the political methods of his era were likely to breed just such a spirit in both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat? Humaneness is a mark of civilization as long as it means not hating people as criminals, whereas in fact they are madmen, not believing in the superlative educational value of a good hiding, and not to imagine that a bit of terrorism is the most obvious first thing to do when confronted with a political problem. But if it extends to the point where inflicting pain (and by implication also suffering pain) is the worst of all evils, and where nothing is regarded as more

important than to preserve life, it is the last stage before the end. A society is vital precisely to the extent it believes there are many things more important than the preservation of life. The supplanting of physical violence by peaceful means of action is a mark of civilization. But if this goes so far as to breed an attitude where direct aggression is viewed with horror, while the worst forms of indirect cruelty are easily condoned, and where intrigue generally supplants more direct forms of action, it is the beginning of the end.

Here is the root of Sorel's problem—and it is not an imaginary problem at all. It is also Pareto's problem. The difference between them is a difference of method. Sorel handles his problem, in the first place, as a problem of political morality. He makes injunctions, develops a programme, not of political and economic transformation, but of moral recovery to be brought about by a new fierceness of the class-struggle. Pareto sees the problem, but no longer takes sides distinctly. Though all his instincts are on the side of fierceness (of what, in his queer enough terminology, he calls 'Residue II') he nevertheless admits that there are certain things, economic prosperity being among them, which are spread by cleverness, adaptability and peaceful methods. Hence he interprets historical development as a cycle, where fierceness and shrewdness, conservatism and desire of change, alternate. Periods of shrewd adaptability create wealth, but they contain an element of disintegration which inevitably leads to their end. Periods of conservatism and force are better able to maintain wealth, but fall behind in creating it. They end through the gradual rise to leadership of the opposite, the shrewd, non-violent type; though it is not so clear why, in Pareto's view, this is always bound to happen. There are obvious points of contact between this doctrine and Spencer's doctrine of the military and the industrial type of society. Only Spencer, with all his soul, prefers the latter, and naïvely identifying his preferences with the law of history, regards it as the one which is bound to survive; whereas Pareto prefers the former, concluding that after repeated interludes, it is always bound to return.

Pareto's *Sociology* was published one year after Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Both are the result of research conducted over the decade preceding the last war, and they must therefore be regarded as strictly contemporaneous, not having influenced one

another. Sorel and Pareto were friends, but there is no sign that Spengler even so much as knew about Sorel. Nevertheless, Spengler's views can be presented as a direct continuation of Sorel's and Pareto's. For what, according to Spengler, characterizes the early period of the great civilizations, is exactly what Pareto described and what Sorel aimed at bringing back: A society unquestioningly steeped in profound beliefs, constituting severe and strict rules of conduct. In other words early civilizations are religious, late civilizations, by contradistinction, are sceptical, utilitarian, materialistic, and finally disintegrate through the rupture of the bonds of morals and beliefs which keep society together. Spengler is superior to Pareto through his avoidance of the pseudo-biological contortions of Pareto's argument, and also—which is much more important—through his success in relating the two social types described by Spencer and Pareto to definite historical periods. With Spencer it looks as if an industrial society, once established, were bound always to be stronger than a military one. In terms of Pareto's doctrine, it is impossible to say when the one and the other can and will arise. Spengler fits them into a precise time-schedule: Early civilizations are religious, late ones sceptical.

It is not difficult to sum all this up and to find a formula for the dominating trend in it. The nineteenth century, the era of liberalism and of the growth of Democracy is, at the same time, the period when big business becomes paramount, when finance becomes a decisive political power, when wars become rare, when the working-classes gradually rise to a better standard of living, when religion decays, and when the mark of civilization is seen in the disappearance of all fierce beliefs, all violent forms of action. It is inevitable that certain groups should view these developments with disgust, groups, that is, who are deeply steeped in the old ways. They are not, mostly, the groups at the top, for it is relatively easy for those to adapt themselves to the new conditions. There is no great problem in a Grandee becoming a financial grandee. The fiercest reactions are called forth among the old, traditional, middle middle-classes, who no longer understand the world. It is not material whether these middle middle-classes are bearers of titles; rather one would say that the lower aristocracy, of which Pareto is a typical member, shares the disgust at the new mode of life with the provincial bourgeois



'notables', whose prejudices Sorel painfully reveals in the midst of his most revolutionary utterances. The reaction of these groups is originally merely conservative. It is a statement valid without exception that all thinkers even remotely connected with Fascism and its precursors have been prompted by conservative instincts, that Conservatism is their starting-point. But it is a great mistake to mix up a man's background, and his ingrained instincts, with the actual rôle he plays in society. The story of Fascism is the story of Conservatives driven into revolution—and a fierce and sweeping sort of revolution—unknowingly, and much against their instincts. This is clearest in the case of Sorel, to whom there were two things sacred: The notion of property as given in Roman Law (absolute, unrestricted personal property), and the most Puritanical interpretation of monogamous sex morals. (He went so far as to maintain that chastity had won the war of 1870 for Germany; one might wonder whether it was also chastity which won so many wars for France during the revolutionary and Napoleonic period.) Sorel joins (temporarily) the Labour movement, because he expects it to restore the bourgeois values. But in order to do so, it must be splendidly violent, ruthless and crude, hence utterly anti-bourgeois. A fine muddle!

Yet the muddle is in the things, much more than in their interpretations. As I have said, the dangers which these old, decent, traditionalist middle middle-classes apprehend, are not imaginary dangers. They are real enough. The rôle of Cassandra, towards the end of the nineteenth century, and down to our present day, was always necessary. Only Cassandra herself found out that it is sometimes little use being Cassandra. In order to restore the old standards, you must first have people believing in them unquestioningly. But if there were people awake to the complexity of modern life, and at the same time deeply steeped in the old standards, there would never have been the series of ignominious collapses of civilization through which we all have lived. And do these champions of the old standards believe in them? It is more than doubtful. Here we approach still a little further the roots of Fascism.

Sorel, always the most muddle-headed, the most Utopian, but also the most profound of our proto-fascists, had his very strict moral ideas. He also believed that these moral severities were more acceptable to the proletariat than to the bourgeoisie—and Pareto



thought the same. Yet there is a doctrine in Sorel's writings which shows that he did not really believe what he thought he believed. It is the famous doctrine of the 'social myth'. There exists a strict parallelism between this doctrine and Sorel's conception of Socialism.

We saw that Socialism, for Sorel, meant the prevention of any undue interference of the State in private business. Now the means by which Sorel wants to introduce this strange sort of Socialism is the general strike, the decisive weapon, the Napoleonic battle of the class-struggle, in the view of all syndicalists. Now Sorel's view of this conception which he himself did so much to propagate, is contained in the following unintentionally cynical statement. 'Experience proves that certain conceptions of an uncertain future can be of great service without any considerable inconvenience; this is the case with the myths which embody the strongest tendencies of a people, a party or a class, tendencies which obtrude themselves with the force of an instinct all the time. We know that these social myths do not by any means prevent a man to take advantage of the experience of life and do not in the least interfere with the fulfilment of his ordinary tasks.' In other words: The wise interpreter of syndicalism knows that the idea of the general strike is rubbish. But his fold must believe in this idea of the great Napoleonic battle of the class-struggle with an instinctiveness impermeable to argument. Otherwise they will be inclined to utilitarian compromises, and the healthy effects of ruthlessness will not be forthcoming.

Now look at this almost incredible paradox. Here is a man who, in matters of a moral code of property and of family life, has ingrained ideas quite sufficiently impermeable to argument to provide him with a fighting creed. This creed is also the creed of his own class, the provincial middle middle-classes. But he feels only too clearly that in their hands this creed has lost the strength which gives inspiration. So he turns away from his own very real and forceful prejudices, in order to enhance the abstract value of the prejudices of a section of the proletariat, prejudices in which he does not by any means believe. Here is the dividing line between reactionary Conservatism and Fascism. Here, I believe, is the essence of the Fascist soul. The old Conservative classes, the lower aristocracy which, in France, was embodied in the traditions of the Vendée, and the provincial bourgeoisie so

important in French affairs since the seventeenth century, *had* prejudices. Proof of it, that they did not regard them as prejudices, but as truth and decency itself. The Conservatives of the beginning of the twentieth century, however, were living in an atmosphere of disintegration of long-established rules of conduct. They no longer had any prejudices whose social validity they would be confident to assert. Instead, they were driven to develop a profound enough, yet self-contradictory doctrine of the value of prejudice, hardness and mythical thought in the abstract. When a myth is known to be a myth, yet still upheld, it becomes an outright lie. The definition of a myth is that its believers do not regard it as a myth, but as supernatural reality. There is no valid truth, these Neo-Conservatives might say, not at any rate any truth for which it would be worth while to lay down one's life and sacrifice other lives. But without such truths life, individual and social, is bound to disintegrate. So let's act the other way round. Let's start being ruthless and prejudiced to excess. The faith which used to inspire ruthless and prejudice will then be given unto us.

It is not that the analysis given by these thinkers were so completely wrong. What could be more pertinent than to emphasize the rôle of power, the value of traditions, the need of a self-sacrificing mentality, the danger of the disintegration of existing standards of conduct without putting other equally valid standards into their stead? But the people who advocate it all ought first to believe in it themselves, and they don't. That is what is most Fascist in Fascist thinking. That is what makes Fascism something so profoundly different from the fanaticism of the religious wars.

For it is one thing to be ruthless in the pursuit of a goal (that was what the Inquisition did, and Calvin when he burnt Servetus, and that was what happened in Spain a few years ago) and quite a different thing to pursue a goal because it stimulates ruthlessness in the abstract—and that is what the blackshirts did first, and the S.S. after their model. The distinction is not one of logic. Its niceties may be difficult to formulate—but in real life the man with a real faith draws the boundary-line without much difficulty. The Fascist is constitutionally unable to draw that boundary line—he must therefore be traditionalist in the abstract, hence he returns to entirely meaningless traditions such as old Rome in

Italy, Wotan in Germany; he must be ruthless in the abstract, hence persecutes even his potential friends against his most immediate interests, etc., etc.

At the same time he is unable to give a reasonable formula for what he is actually achieving. I have pointed above to the almost incredible fact that none of the precursors of Fascism so much as envisaged either its economic form—thorough planning—or its political form, the totalitarian state. Yet I believe that a valid case can be made out for the first, and though I emphatically reject the second, I yet believe that a sensible case can be made out in its favour. Yet not by Fascist! To them, their very achievements are only stepping-stones to mad outbursts. In order to say 'Look here, these are our aims and our achievements', one must believe in the definite value of something. Otherwise, even aims and achievements can only be incidents of a destructive propaganda campaign.

The senselessness of life—this is the great subject matter of Fascist doctrine. I have pointed to this conclusion in respect of Sorel's doctrine. It is equally applicable to that of Pareto. Pareto's basic concept of social psychology is the 'residue'. Residues, in Pareto's system, are permanent combinations of ideas prompting permanent types of behaviour. But all impulses are residues. For residues are by definition 'nonlogical', while there are also logical actions, hence actions not determined by residues. Those logical actions are all aiming at the intelligent pursuit of self-interest. All other actions are determined by 'residues'. 'Taboo' is the prototype of residues. It is, in Pareto's definition, an aversion of a given group to a given type of activity, open to no further explanation. It is 'simply a non-logical nucleus uniting certain acts with determined effects'. In other words, all non-utilitarian action is absolutely meaningless, completely inexplicable, and, we must conclude, differs from sheer madness only in so far it is not specific to an individual, but common to a group. The senselessness of life could not be more emphatically insisted upon. And this is the basis of a far-reaching sociological doctrine!

Spengler, on this point, does not differ from either Sorel or Pareto. There is nothing particularly negativistic and destructive in the doctrine of culture-cycles, and given such a doctrine it needs an ample measure of naïveté to believe that we are now in the ascending phase of our civilization. What is, however, typically

and specifically Fascist in Spengler's theory is his almost furious insistence that, in the teeth of overwhelming evidence, there is no connection between one civilization and any other one, that there is no history of mankind as a whole. The great civilizations, he literally says, are 'gloriously meaningless'. Here the circle is closed. Fascism started with the shame-faced whisper that, after all, all ideals are dead and that, in order to keep human affairs going, an artificial stimulus of ruthlessness must be infused into them, by however insincere means. It ends with the assertion that the complete meaningless of life is the basis of sound philosophy.

But let us not be self-righteous. He that is without blame may cast the first stone. The absence of values able to prompt determined action is not limited to Fascist circles. The war has fortunately brought out the fact that, in some countries, negative values at least exist in sufficient strength, that people are still ready to die to ward off certain extreme evils. But the feeling of pointlessness of positive effort has not yet gone. I believe that it is deeply ingrained. It is the root-fact of Fascism. No easy solution, no facile watchword, will undo it. It is not only the root-fact of Fascism, it is also the root-problem of mankind at the present moment.

Yet one thing seems certain enough. In the context of the Fascist philosophy of meaninglessness even those elements of Fascism which otherwise would have meaning can only be incidents in a sanguinary tragi-comedy of self-destruction. There may be something to be learnt from our enemies. But our enemies cannot learn it. Only anti-Fascists can bring out the positive elements of our age.

STEPHEN SPENDER

## MODERN POETS AND REVIEWERS

MR. ALEX COMFORT'S admirably intelligent letter in the May number of *Horizon* serves as a link between my article on 'Poetry in 1941' and the present Postscript. This letter clarifies the attitude of poets under thirty to poetry and the limited extent to