

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher  
Publisher  
[melcher@thepoliticalforum.com](mailto:melcher@thepoliticalforum.com)

Stephen R. Soukup  
Senior Editor  
[soukup@thepoliticalforum.com](mailto:soukup@thepoliticalforum.com)

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### A LIBERAL PRIMER

Mark L. Melcher  
Stephen R. Soukup

I wrote several pieces during the Clinton years arguing that whatever Bill was, he wasn't a liberal. I won't labor that point this week, except to say that the gist of the argument was that a real liberal wouldn't fly home to execute a mentally retarded convict, support welfare reform, bomb third-world countries willy-nilly, advocate free-trade, make common cause with some of the nation's largest, international corporations, and make "paying down the debt" a central feature of his economic program. If one were choosing terms to describe Bill, I think "political huckster" and "kleptocrat" would come closer than "liberal."

Anyway, now that he's gone, I think it is likely that the Democrat party will return to something more closely approaching old-style American liberalism. It will never arrive there. The modern corporate state, with its synergistic ties to business and its tendency to make even the poor prosperous, is incompatible with traditional American liberalism. Nevertheless, the left is certain to be more influential in the post-Bill Democratic Party. For one thing, Republicans have the political center fairly well covered. More importantly, the energy of the party comes almost exclusively from various left-wing, extremist groups.

So this week, I thought, since the left may be making a comeback in the Democratic Party, it might be appropriate to take a look at the fundamental character of this slightly-over-200-year-old ideology. In an attempt to make this exercise both entertaining and interesting, I have chosen to stay away from contemporary American thought on the subject, which can be both boring and shallow, and present the views of Georges Sorel, a turn-of-the-century French radical.

Sorel is known today primarily for his terrifically entertaining and insightful book, *Reflexions Sur La Violence*, although he wrote extensively about politics and society. *Reflexions* was first published in 1908. The English translation, by T.E. Hulme, has long been out of print and copies are hard to come by. **[Editors Note:** I was wrong about on this. You can get a new paperback copy on amazon.com. To quote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince, "I thought that I was

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The Political Forum

8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842  
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email [melcher@thepoliticalforum.com](mailto:melcher@thepoliticalforum.com),  
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rich with a flower that was unique in all the world; and all I had was a common rose.”] My third edition copy was published by B.W. Huebsch in New York in 1912.

Sorel is difficult to characterize. The *Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia* describes him as a “social philosopher.” I have a 1976 paperback containing excerpts from Sorel’s many works, entitled *From Georges Sorel*, published by the Oxford University Press, which describes him as “one of the foremost thinkers of this century to write extensively on the great importance of the moral dimension of social movements.”

For purposes of this article, let’s just say he was a devoted leftist radical and a strong critic of what he called the “Parliamentary Socialists,” who ruled France during his day under the direction of Jean Jaures, one of the principal founders of the French Socialist Party. Sorel’s complaint against Jaures and his lot was not, I might add, a Hayekian charge against socialism. It was that these Parliamentary Socialists had abandoned the Marxist blueprint for a proletarian-led revolution that would put an end to conventional government altogether, and had instead become the government, as oppressive and hypocritical as any that Marx despised.

In a 1907 letter to a friend, Daniel Halevy, Sorel compared the Parliamentary Socialists to the Germans who conquered the Roman Empire, and then “ashamed of being barbarians,” “put themselves to school with the rhetoricians of the Latin decadence.” He often used the term “worthy progressive” to describe them, which he defined as “naive, philanthropically disposed people who believe that they have discovered the solution to the problem of social reform – whose attitude, however, is often complicated by a good deal of hypocrisy, they being frequently rapacious when their own personal interests are at stake.”

Sorel was an advocate of what he called the “general strike,” by which he meant that the proletariat would quit working *en masse*, thus beginning the Marxist revolution. He scorned what he called the “political general strike,” a sarcastic term for the slow morphing of revolutionary Marxism into status quo governing by bourgeois “socialists.”

Anyway, let’s “go to the text,” as the saying goes. And, while reading Sorel’s words, reflect on how little the leftist herd has changed, despite the distance of one ocean and 100 years. When reading these words, reflect on the dynamic duo of Gephardt and Daschle; Jesse Jackson, Ted Kennedy, and the whole lot of America’s left-wing politicians, who purport to represent “the poor,” but whose often-odious, personal actions bespeak more of a plantation mentality and a Nietzschean “will to power” agenda. Consider too, Miss Hillary, the former radical supporter of the Black Panthers, who now covets her powerful, establishment seat in the U.S. Senate and peddles her “moderate” stands on the issues.

Whole pages could be filled with the bare outlines of the contradictory, comical, and quack arguments which form the substance of the harangues of our great men; nothing embarrasses them, and they know how to combine, in pompous, impetuous, and nebulous speeches, the most absolute irreconcilability with the most supple opportunism.

Parliamentary Socialists can only obtain great influence if they can manage, by the use of a very confused language, to impose themselves on very diverse groups; for example,

they must have working-men constituents simple enough to allow themselves to be duped by high-sounding phrases about future collectivism; they are compelled to represent themselves as profound philosophers to stupid middle-class people who wish to appear to be well informed about social questions; it is very necessary also for them to be able to exploit rich people who think that they are earning the gratitude of humanity by taking shares in the enterprises of Socialist politicians.

[P]oliticians have nothing to fear from the Utopias which present a deceptive mirage of the future to the people, and turn [in the words of Clemenceau] “men towards immediate realizations of terrestrial felicity, which any one who looks at these matters scientifically knows can only be very partially realised, and even then only after long efforts on the part of several generations.” The more readily the electors believe in the magical forces of the State, the more will they be disposed to vote for the candidate who promises marvels; in the electoral struggle each candidate tries to outbid the others; in order that the Socialist candidates may put the Radicals to rout, the electors must be credulous enough to believe every promise of future bliss; our Socialist politicians take very good care therefore, not to combat these comfortable Utopias in any very effective way.

Enfeebled classes habitually put their trust in people who promise them the protection of the State, without ever trying to understand how this protection could possibly harmonise their discordant interests; they readily enter into every coalition formed for the purpose of forcing concessions from the Government; they greatly admire charlatans who speak with a glib tongue . . . The political general strike [as opposed to the real “general strike”] presupposes that very diverse social groups shall possess the same faith in the magical force of the State; this faith is never lacking in social groups which are on the downgrade, and its existence enables windbags to represent themselves as able to do everything. The political general strike would be greatly helped by the stupidity of philanthropists, and this stupidity is always a result of the degeneration of the rich classes. Its chances of success would be enhanced by the fact that it would have to deal with cowardly and discouraged capitalists.

[W]ise Socialists desire two things: (1) to take possession of this [great State] machine so that they may improve its works, and make them run to further their friends’ interests as much as possible, and (2) to assure the stability of the Government which will be very advantageous for all business men . . . Socialist financiers . . . understand instinctively that the preservation of a highly centralised, very authoritative and very democratic State puts immense resources at their disposal, and protects them from proletarian revolution. The transformations which their friends, the Parliamentary Socialists, may carry out will always be of a very limited scope, and it will always be possible, thanks to the State, to correct any imprudences they may commit.

Therefore, the authors of all enquiries into modern socialism are forced to acknowledge that the latter implies the division of society into two groups: the first of these is a select body, organised as a political party, which has adopted the mission of thinking for the thoughtless masses, and which imagines that, because it allows the latter to enjoy the results of its superior enlightenment, it has done something admirable. The second is . . . the whole body of the producers. The select body of politicians has no other profession

than that of using its wits, and they find that it is strictly in accordance with the principles of immanent justice (of which they are sole owners) that the proletariat should work to feed them and furnish them with the means for an existence that only distantly resembles an ascetic's.

The masses believe that they are suffering from the iniquitous consequences of a past which was full of violence, ignorance, and wickedness; they are confident that the genius of their leaders will render them less unhappy; they believe that democracy, if it were only free, would replace a malevolent hierarchy by a benevolent hierarchy. The leaders who foster this sweet illusion in their men, see the situation from quite another point of view; the present social organization revolts them just in so far as it creates obstacles to their ambition; they are less shocked by the existence of the classes than by their own inability to attain to the positions already acquired by older men; when they have penetrated far enough into the sanctuaries of the State, into drawing-rooms and places of amusement, they cease, as a rule, to be revolutionary and speak learnedly of "evolution."

Politicians . . . argue about social conflicts in exactly the same manner as diplomats argue about international affairs; all the actual fighting apparatus interests them very little; they see in the combatants nothing but instruments. The proletariat is their army, which they love in the same way that a colonial administrator loves the troops which enable him to bring large numbers of negroes under his authority; they apply themselves to the task of training the proletariat, because they are in a hurry to win quickly the great battle which will deliver the State into their hands; they keep up the ardour of their men, as the ardour of troops of mercenaries has always been kept up, by promises of pillage, by appeals to hatred, and also by the small favours which their occupancy of a few political places enables them to distribute already. But the proletariat for them is food for cannon, and nothing else, as Marx said in 1873. The reinforcement of power of the State is at the basis of all their conceptions; in the organisations which they at present control, the politicians are already preparing the framework of a strong, centralised and disciplined authority, which will not be hampered by the criticism of an opposition, which will be able to enforce silence, and which will give currency to its lies.

Religions constitute a very troublesome problem for the intellectualists [read: Parliamentary Socialists], for they can neither regard them as being without historical importance nor can they explain them.

To most people the class war is the principle of Socialist tactics. That means that the Socialist party founds its electoral successes on the clashing of interests which exist in an acute state between certain groups, and that, if need be, it would undertake to make this hostility still more acute; their candidates ask the poorest and most numerous class to look upon themselves as forming a corporation, and they offer to become the advocates of this corporation; they promise to use their influence as representatives to improve the lot of the disinherited . . . Socialism makes its appeal to the discontented without troubling about the place they occupy in the world of production; in a society as complex as ours, and as subject to economic upheavals, there is an enormous number of discontented people in all classes, – that is why Socialists are often found in places

where one would least expect to meet them. Parliamentary Socialism speaks as many languages as it has types of clients. It makes its appeal to workmen, to small employers of labour, to peasants; and in spite of Engels, it aims at reaching the farmers; it is at times patriotic; at other times it declares against the Army. It is stopped by no contradiction, experience having shown that it is possible, in the course of an electoral campaign, to group together forces, which, according to Marxian conceptions, should normally be antagonistic . . . In the end the term ‘proletariat’ became synonymous with oppressed; and there are oppressed in all classes.

He [Jaures] saw that this upper middle class was terribly ignorant, gapingly stupid, politically absolutely impotent; he recognised that with people who understand nothing of the principles of capitalist economics it is easy to contrive a policy of compromise on the basis of an extremely broad Socialism; he calculated the proportions in which it is necessary to mix together flattery of the superior intelligence of the imbeciles whose seduction was aimed at, appeals to the disinterested sentiments of speculators who pride themselves on having invented the ideal, and threats of revolution in order to obtain the leadership of people void of ideas.

I could go on, of course. Sorel is a mother lode of wonderful observations about bourgeois socialists that are as true today as they were in turn-of-the-century France. But I will close with some of Sorel’s thoughts on the horror with which the Parliamentary Socialists viewed the concept of the general strike because, while the idea was simpatico with their publicly-professed left-wing anti-establishment views, it threatened their actual position as part of that very same establishment.

This passage comes to my mind whenever the radical left wing “anti-globalization” crowd gathers to protest a World Bank/IMF meeting, such as the one that started it all in Seattle in November 1999.

This motley crew is avowedly left-wing. And it is also undeniably the political offspring of the whole tiresome lot of 1960s radicals, which included Bill and Hillary, who, in their own youth, sloganeered endless about “overthrowing the corrupt establishment.” Yet, most of the groups that make up this “movement” are arguably more despised and feared by their progenitors than they are by conservatives, who, for the most part, either view them as amusing, or applaud them, as my good friend Steve Moore of the “Club for Growth” and I always do whenever they show up to attack the some gathering of the “economic masters of world.”

When the force of the State was in the hands of their [the socialists’] adversaries, they acknowledged, naturally enough, that it was being employed to violate justice, and they then proved that one might with a good conscience “step out of the region of legality in order to enter that of justice” (to borrow a phrase of the Bonapartists); when they could not overthrow the government, they tried at least to intimidate it. But when they attacked the people who for the time being controlled the force of the State, they did not at all desire to suppress that force, for they wished to utilise it some day for their own profit; all the revolutionary disturbances of the nineteenth century have ended in reinforcing the power of the State . . . That is why our parliamentary socialists, who spring from the middle classes and who know nothing outside the ideology of the State,

are so bewildered when they are confronted with working-class violence. [Seattle?]  
They cannot apply to it the commonplaces which generally serve them when they speak about force, and they look with terror on movements which may result in the ruin of the institutions by which they live.

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