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Bergson, Sorel & a Diremptive Arc of Subject Positions

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In his book on Kandinsky, Michel Henry evokes “the life that is embraced in the night of its subjectivity, where there is no light or world.”

Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. Where there’s Gilles Deleuze, there’s Henri Bergson [1859-1941]. Where there’s Frantz Fanon, there’s Georges Sorel [1847-1922]. Deleuze retrieved and revived a new Bergsonism stressing mechanic or rhizomatic becoming. There follows the spectre of Sorel’s theory of diremptive framing of the durée (the durational flow of experience) and cinematic-like envisioning of the successive framings’ actualizing ebb and flows in time.

Bergson’s concept of the durée directly confronts the discipline of the social sciences in a way that Georg Lukács and Richard Rorty in there retrospective theorizing about contingency. Social movement in the sense that Alain Touraine has developed this past half century, does not to quote Keith Ansell-Pearson’s Viroid Life, so much takes place in evolution, as in creating or inventing, that raises the paradox of making the
of evolution as an act of genuine becoming. This is what Bergson meant by creative evolution.

Bergson and Sorel emphasize the durée of an integral experience which involves messy qualities like consciousness, perception and memory. Bergson and Sorel remind us that social science must maintain a contingent sense of evolution that constantly keeps us aware of the time frame (i.e., the web of moments, the durée) in which interaction is framed and experienced.

Bergson wistfully reflected: “To paraphrase would be easy if ready-made ideas were not constantly inserting themselves between the things and us.” Bergsonism shatters the Kantian phenomenological framework. The conditions of experience are no longer external; and they cannot be understood without an appreciation for spirit and intuition.

In Matter and Memory (1896), Bergson argued that the brain does not give birth to representations of any kind. As Touraine would continue sociologically a half century later, our reasoning is directed toward action, differing from reflex functions of the spinal chord only by degree. Our human body exists among an “aggregate” of images with which relate to possibilities of movement in all that we perceive. (Cf. Vilfredo Pareto.)

The material world is not constituted phenomenologically. Rather our perception is ultimately constituted à la Hobbes by the material world. Our brain does not add to perceptions as the “real” of the material world passes into “the virtual.” What the brain does is augment our perceptions with memories. These memories are are stored motor impulses: that is, forces, again à la Hobbes. These forces await instances of relevancy wherein they attach themselves to the external images. Memory of the past is constitutive of perception. Compare Proust. Perception thus involves memory and the duration of the experiencing the forces of images and the forces of memory. The more memories with which to attach to the force of external images, the less our reflexes are unmediated – to use the parlance of Hegel and Lukacs. Memory serves action; not perception/consciousness itself.
For Deleuze [1966], Bergson teaches us to pose riddles and solve them in terms of time rather than space. We are offered the possibility of negating definite meaning even whilst that meaning is being written.

In *Cinema 1* ([1983] Deleuze’s “planes of immanence” denote forces and events: movements that crosses a field, traverses it, stirs it up and prevents its closure. These planes of immanence are the medium through which we creatively evolve: the temporality of what Deleuze calls simply “a life”. In attempting to write immanently/to grasp immanence in words is that the moment it is on the page – or the cursor moves across a white “empty surface”, it is TOO LATE. For Bergson the letter kills the spirit. For Deleuze Bergson provides a way out of the “linguistic turn” in philosophizing.

As a mathematician and physicist, Bergson anticipates Heisenberg’s “Uncertainty Principle” of 1927. But he does so sociologically as well. He understands like Sorel that despite “the illusions of progress” modernity involves a shift from the comforts of certainties and seeming homogeneous ordering to the “dizzying” (the metaphor of poet Paul Valery): that is, the dizzying anxieties and indeterminacy of a pluralism of values and causes. The techniques and instrumental processes of a global time-space compression were already well under way.

Bergson shifts us from a model of cognition to a model of action; where are embodied subjectivity and intersubjectivity is an understanding of our situated agency options. Creative memory involves stillness and movement. Perception is nothing more than an occasion for remembering. Or forgetting:: see here Marc Auge: *Oblivion*, 2004; and *Non-Places*, 2009 in the-

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effort to work a passage out of the limits of poststructuralist cultural theory. Perception serves action. “To get stuck” in inaction or nonaction is to have stopped thinking in time.

Deleuze [1966/1988] regarded Bergsonism as radically opposed to Edmund Husserl’s “phenomenology of internal time consciousness” on the grounds that its linearity misconstrues duration as spatial. Like Walter Benjamin would write in *The Arcades Project* some thirty years after Bergson’s boundary-shattering *Creative Evolution*. The by now fifty year achievements of Touraine’s *sociologie de l’action*
complements the new institutionalisms (historical, rational choice, and sociological) by keeping us aware that the swelling of historical movement and change is a displacement, as much as it is path-dependent. This is the displacement of one threshold for another. History, Walter Benjamin advised us, is never wrapped into a specific moment of a fixed conjuncture. Rather it flows in a passage that swells beyond the limits of its epoch, of its period in historical narrative. It confronts a gap and makes up for it by constituting a canal for the displacement of the swelling (schwelle), a superimposition of a threshold.

Bergson understands that the non-spatial temporal is greater importance for comprehending active becomingess – or in Touraine’s sociology of action “institutionalizing emergence” and what Cornelius Castoriadis more poetically refers to as the magma of the creative “imaginary instituting of society.” This is also referred to by Hans Joas as “The Genesis of Values.” (We will dwell on the imaginaire and myths in Sorel later on.) As the Annales historian Marc Bloch noted: “History is the plasma in which phenomena are immersed and the locus of their intelligibility.

Bergsonism presents us with the ontological notion of historical creativity, i.e., path-creating as well as overdetermined path-dependency. And in so doing offers the study of public policy deliberation a path, passage a canal for escaping dominant perceptions of history as representational, causal-linear or quasi-teleological. The eminent historian of The Mediterranean Fernand Braudel, picking up from Bergson and the English political theorist Edmund Burke, has noted that times moves at different speeds and in different registers. And [with no tipping of the hat to Harry Lime] understanding individuals and events as “intelligible at the price of revealing their fundamental unimportance,”

Deleuze’s Bergsonism understands phenomena as “shocks of difference” whose intensity dissipates when they are secondarily homogenized into the flow of time. To understand time in terms of an instantaneous “living present” is not time as flowing, but the present moment wanting to break out and away from itself. Any present moment argues Deleuze, is already crystallized (“reified” for Lukacs/”practico-inert for Sartre) “within the past even as it emerges.

Proceeding in this channel, in this register, history is understood as a network of contingencies from which a structural framework emerges (what Anthony Giddens labels “structuration”). A
network that can be genealogically traced as a foundation of human practice. This is the practical reasoning of the lived durée. This is a fluid foundationalism with human history as practical reasoning. History is understood relationally rather than relativistically.

Indeterminancy and incommensurability are reduced to a lower register. William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s pluralistic and agonistic lifeworld of constantly contesting “forms of life” can be inferred. And since these practices have been made, they can be unmade. As long as we know how it was that they were made: i.e, how they were institutionalized.

Recourse to history is meaningful to the extent that history serves to show that which is has not always been. What practical reasoning perceives as necessity in the form of a social structure of rationality can be shown to have a history: a history of mentalités/ imaginaires.

Bergson’s durée is linked to intersubjectivity philosophically; and Sorel’s mutualité politically. Implied is a concept of self: as identity/ collective identity that is located at the juncture of durée of non-discrete/ non-quantifiable intensities and the quantifiable extensities which our internal experience is associated with and represents.

Contrary to Kant, Bergson denies (1) the positing of a transcendental subject of noumenal freedom amidst phenomenal determination; and (2) the positing of a freedom as thought in a spatialized regime of time. Further, Bergson dismissed the Kantian emphasis on intellect of cognitive interests. (A Kantian pragmatism explored by Jürgen Habermas in Knowledge and Human Interests). The intellect/cognition according to Bergson was not designed to plumb the depths of our inner life (i.e., intensities) The most the cognitive can do is to “theoretically apprehend and analyze’ the experience of durée using the terms of ordinary language: terms Bergson claimed were incapable of expressing pure change itself, novelty, creativity.

Instead Bergson presents us with the élan vital as la durée agissante: This is a force that “moves life forward on the path of time, carrying the principle of duration from subjective consciousness to life itself”: to creative evolution. Bergson is unlike the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau Ponty tracing the intentionality of consciousness staked out by Edmund Husserl. He is more like George Sorel, in that they both argue that the foundation is not the primacy of perception. The foundation is the primacy of memory.

For Bergson the scientist and Sorel the engineer, we are alienated from the élan of becomingness because language fails to translate inner experience. For them, it is language (both langue as grammar as well as langage as institutionalized practice) that makes us believe in the unchangableness of our sensations and even in the very nature of the sensation felt.
In Deleuze’s Bergsonian film theorizing, there is a focus on frame and shot closure of space, out-of-frame visualizations, perceptions of perceptions, the movement of the film’s path, frames burning in frames (as pioneered by Jean-Luc Godard in *Wind from the East* (1970), the subverting of the chronological passage of time, the deciphering of “image regimes.”

In *Cinema 1* [1986] Deleuze follows Bergson’s tripartite correspondence of images: (1) perception images involving long shots of overview; (2) close-up shots showing “affection” and conveying feeling; and (3) medium shots presenting action images with a sense of the experience of the *durée*. He showshow each entails the next. He describes (1) how the image of continuity of movement is not a succession of separate elements; (2) how we experience different conceptions of both movement and *durée*; and (3) the fluidity/liquidity of flow in camera movements and cinematic images: “flow” as in the free movement of molecules. Alain Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad* [1961] is particularly studied for its absence of any semblance of succession in time.

At the end of *Cinema 1*, Deleuze broaches the crisis of the movement image and the notion of the time image to supplement it, and possibly even supplant it. It allows him to bring in Bergson’s grasp of the non-spatialized sense of time; time that is not clock time, but intensity of the *durée*, and the dynamism of the interpenetration of the memories of the past and the horizons of the future. The time image also conceptualizes the immanence of time: that is, the becomingness of time.

We are left with significant queries. How does time destabilize actors’ ability to master space? How do we bring our creative potential to cope with the sagging and decaying embodied material that we are in space? How can the temporal visual overcome the spatial material? How does time subvert established, reified/”crystallized” social structures? How is the present of the dynamic interpenetration of the past and the future?

In *Cinema 2* [1989], Deleuze goes beyond *movement images* and *mental images* (e.g., Hitchcock and Lumet). There he describes *time images*, temporality itself, the immanence of time, and how we expand our capacity for ethically inhabiting time. For Deleuze like Bergson and Sorel there is no freezing of time, taking a “slice of time” or relying on snapshots. Time is understood as the experience of *durée* where we call up fragmented memories and luminal fantasies. The time image is (1) an image infused with time: both the past and the future; (2) an image that is unrecognizable to the spectator often generating a feeling in the spectator of “the shock of the new;” and (3) an image that stirs us out of a narrative that otherwise might be anticipated by habit of genre expectation.
Forcing us into TIME and opening up the possibility that the future could be different than what is conventionally or habitually expected, the time image represents the immanent creative potential for difference which moves through and beyond different levels (“planes” to be traversed). As Sorel argues, we are shocked out of “coasting” behavior and forced into “recoiling” into our memories and sense of the future.

Unlike Hannah Arendt’s homo activa, Sorel and Bergson continue with the model of humankind as homo faber: (1) man the tool-maker; (2) man the creator of material technology; and (3) man the creator of values, man the foundation for emergent social movements with immanent creative potential. For Sorel, homo faber is the productive hunter and stalwart warrior of the classical heroic antiquity. And anticipating Karl Polanyi’s The Great Tranformation at mid-century, it is the laissez-faire mentalité of the capitalist state that kills off civic spirit, public mutualité, and second-nature traditions and habitus of social self-management he recognized as syndicalism.

While Bergson would not regard Sorel as a disciple, he recognized that Sorel like William James understood his theories of vitalism, intuition, the fluid character of reality and temporality perfectly.

Yet Sorel unlike the other two was political radical and a moralist: seeking neither progressive reform nor retrieval of Roman republican antiquity. He foreshadow the 1920s and 1930s fascination with the hero: e.g., T. E. Lawrence, Andre Malraux, Gabriel D’Annunzio, Antoine Saint-Exupery, and the fictionalized mythic character of Lafcadio by Andre Gide. Sorel denounced all forms of positivism, especially Durkheim’s functionalist sociology as “la petite science”; and counterposed an ethics of engaged activism against (1) bourgeois acceptance of the mediocre, moral slackness in commerce; (2) the professions, and youth; and (3) the dissembling stagnation of parliamentarism.

Like Blaise Pascal, Sorel does not attack Reason per se, but disclaims a Cartesian linearity and instrumentality that refuses to account for the fugitive presence or blocked absence of the heroic spirit of sublimity: and (2) projects instead a rationalization that uses pseudo-mathematical reasoning for answering moral questions; and avoiding mystery, miracle, and the sublime. For Sorel, mystery is not synonymous with mysticism. Mystery is the absence Max Weber describes as missing in “the disenchantment” of modernity. It is intersubjectivity Weber understands we feel “affectively” at moments of grace. It is a mutual élan vital approaching of the planes of immanence that we are blocked from viewing and actualizing.

Sorel presents a methodology similar to Weber’s “ideal types” but at more than one moment, more than a particular discrete instance. In “The Decomposition of Marxism” [1910], Sorel sets out to build his
Direptive method: juxtaposing a number of mutually incompatible statements so as to dialectically illuminate aspects of reality that might otherwise have passed unnoticed, in contemporary parlance.

Sorel was advocating the social analyst to immerse himself in the agonistics of incompatible subject positions. Sorel’s direptive approach emphasized the pictures/images upon which humans act: where no image and its stimulating or constraining effect would be studied discretely in isolation, but not holistically. Rather this direptive approach scans a constellation of instances that is open to montage-like presentation. Reality would be reflected at more than one moment, one instance. In this direptive process, Sorel attempted to show how customary genres return to haunt us, not just as memory, but also as the possibility of uncanny activation. Unlike myths and ideologies, direptions (a term also employed by Sorel’s friend Pareto) were correctible, experimental in function to be used in trial-and-error analysis.

However, Sorel would turn his direptive method on Bergson’s concept of “integral experience.” A concept Sorel as holistic and essentialistic, re-admitting metaphysics through the backdoor. Unlike Bergson, Sorel denied a unified, integral and hierarchical holism. In its stead, more like the pragmatists and poststructuralists, Sorel posited a fragmented, chaotic, and pluralistic world. Unlike Marx in the 19th century or Popper in the 20th century, Sorel cannot understand an entire epoch (i.e., period of historical time) holistically as a totality. Rather than a monolithic Social Subject of Right, i.e., proletariat, negating the negation:

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Sorel posed a pluralistic Social Subject of Rights (cf. McClure) amidst historical tendencies that could be examined and comprehended only by piecemeal studies of what William James and Charles Peirce referred to as a “pluralistic universe.” Like the pragmatists he emphasized experimental “trial and error.” He resisted any totalizing mechanistic thinking where problems (inputs) could be poured into and from which solutions would come out (outputs, within-puts). And anticipating Alain Touraine’s method of SOCIAL INTERVENTION which eschews value-free detachment by the social observer and non-intervention.

For Sorel whose social theory anticipates Touraine’s, movement and temporality are everything. He emphasized (1) the changing ordering of the willed rather than the automacity and permanence of the geometric; (2) the underlying and unfolding immanence of the practical reasoning and predicate logic of emergent social movements capable of “plunging ahead”; but (3) an allowance for what Pareto would refer to as non-logical (habitual “coasting”) and illogical (irrational eruptions and moments of collective madness).

Taking Bergson, Sorel, Touraine and Deleuze together—beyond their respective differences—we have the elements of a direptive approach to the emergence of practical reason and institutionalizing practice in public policy deliberation of social movements rather than of the normative pragmatics of members of an elite political class. Michael Urban in his recent Cultures of Power in Post-Communist Russia: An Analysis of Elite Political Discourse [2010] depicts an elite political class as a norm-binding network without a center: an ensemble or constellation of presentist legitimating norms. What he cannot account for is an
institutionalizing collective imaginary. This involves the imagination of new policy arrangements, transformations of policy regimes, image regimes, normative regimes with a reflexive understanding of better positioning as subjects in a reconstructed constellation or arc of the discourse such imagination projects as a social movement.

A regime is an ensemble of constitutive discourse providing the imaginary framework through which we interpret the symbolic order into which we are drawn, if not thrown. A regime is the carrier of institutionalizing practices and governance rationales [Rose:1996; Kjaer:2004]. It is an internal ensemble of discourse generating legitimation claims open to interrogation/interpellation.

The constellation of symbols/images positioned within a legitimating argument is internal to the argument itself or the collective rage expressed with affect and threat of violence. The internalist trajectory is itself a contingent byproduct of accumulating social conflict: regulated to some extent or not. The trajectory and its arc—characterize the endogenous constellation of subject positions within normative argument or collective rage.

Touraine and Castoriadis have pointed to the differing and contradictory role expectations at work in any congealed/crystallized regime configuration. And these differences and contradictions do not simply originate in the operative norms themselves. They are not logics of appropriateness [Gunther, 1988] and attendant “application discourse.’ Rather these are discursive traces of alternative institutionalizing practices are always at work. And these traces, Touraine noted [1977:362, 311] overflow the frame in which they appear” and “mobilize demands which cannot be entirely satisfied” within the arc of subject positions within frames of practical reasoning and learning.

This metaphor of an “arc” or a “constellation” relates to the “internalist” character of the argumentation regarding the legitimation claims raised in deliberative democracy beyond the elite gatekeepers/ policy makers. We refer to an endogenous “arc’ or “constellation of symbols and discourse which as Andrew Sayer[200:34] reminds us “exists as it is regardless of whether I study it and whatever I think of it.” The transversing of the field or plane dynamic Deleuze alludes to is something that acting subjects internally (endogenously) participate in and constitute as they go along.

Judith Butler [1990,1993] points out to us that a constellation is constituted as we interrogate it. The symbols and images are reconstructable as unfolding intersubjectivity and normativity. This is not just a bounded rationality / ideology l of recombinatory elements, but a n imaginative projecting of new values [Joas: 1993, 2000a, 2000b]. This is an imaginative
projecting and reconstructing that enables us to engage in creative collage/ montage and in synthesizing of novelty from our memories and our anticipatory imaginings. This institutionalizing imaginaire opens up an arc of intersubjectively imagined new social positioning; as well as a future which is different, that is, a future regime of heteronomous Adifference and heterarchy rather than homogenizing hierarchical ordering.

Discourse theory refers to this positioning as SUBJECT POSITIONS: interpretive schema related to structurated positions outside, and inter-related as an endogenous constellation of legitimations from which we draw upon in narratives and visualizations from a storage trunk / repertoire of symbollic/ image resources comprehended visually and with affect. But not as static discrete snapshots, but panning shots of a crystallized or emergent regime in motion. A disruptive approach to an arc of subject positions scans a constellations of unfolding flow of instances as one that is open to montage.

The future is neither fully fathomable nor determinable; neither reflexive endogenous mutually interpreted nor overwhelmingly exogenously over-determined. What we grasp, we do from immersion in the lived durée of the flux and flow of constantly contesting images; a lived durée we engage without detachment in search of the creation of novel different values. We grasp traces, semblances, shades and shadows within the intermittent flows and rhythms, framings and jumpcuts. We recognize, recollect, and dream as we pause to call up both memory and hope and recoil in deciding upon whether to plunge ahead.

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