Introduction

Syndicalism is a deceptive word. It *looks* very similar to such words as marxism or anarchism and is thus often taken as the name of just another school of socialist thought. It is only too easy for the historian of political ideas to assume that he can deal with it in a chapter no different from that devoted to utopian, marxist or fabian socialism. Syndicalism, however, was not the creation of a particular writer, nor even of a group of writers. Despite the 'ism' which lends it so theoretical an air, it was originally the name given to a movement rather than a theory. Although it subsequently acquired a wider ideological significance, and was turned by some theorists into an 'ism' after all, it is not unreasonable to stay with the original use. An operational definition of this sort has the advantage of avoiding theoretical predefinitions which begin by assuming what it is intended to prove, arbitrarily limiting the scope of enquiry by reference to the critic's own conceptual framework. Syndicalism was what those who called themselves syndicalists thought and did.

Syndicalism was originally the name given by its members to the French trade-union movement during its revolutionary phase, roughly the first decade of this century or, more accurately, the name adopted by the revolutionary wing which claimed to be in a majority. Although syndicalist groups later emerged elsewhere, it was in France that the movement had its fullest development and it was from France that most of the ideas came. The English term syndicalism, indeed, was originally a straight translation from the French. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to define it in French terms and to concentrate on the French phenomenon.

The French word *syndicalisme* means no more than trade-unionism. The French described their movement as *syndicalisme révolutionnaire*. When we talk of syndicalism we really mean revolutionary syndicalism. The adjective is more easily dropped in English than in French, there being less likelihood of confusion, but it is partly upon the adjective that the definition depends. It did not simply mean that the unions were committed to revolutionary politics—that has been true at times of communist-dominated unions also. Revolution and unionism were equally important: syndicalism stood for revolutionary action by unions to establish a society based upon unions.

An account of syndicalism should therefore begin with the movement and not with some given doctrine. Syndicalism meant the sum of ideas expressed by the movement and the sum of its activities: it was the outlook shared by members and the form their action took.

Principles emerged at different times, one by one, sometimes with little

reference to each other, often not supported by practice. Syndicalism lacked consistency. Principles were capable of changing almost imperceptibly as the need arose without any fundamental break ever becoming apparent. The analogy that springs to mind is the patchwork quilt—bits added now here, now there, gradually built up, but in accordance with no prearranged plan, forming no clear pattern, one patch often clashing with the next, the whole changing all the time it grows. But at least such principles can be traced. They appeared in the resolutions of trade-union congresses and in the pamphlets of its militant leaders. Syndicalism was also a mode of action and that is much harder to pin down. It is doubly difficult because such action was not necessarily rational in the sense of 'think first, act after'. The syndicalists often stressed the spontaneity of the movement. It may be, therefore, that a coherent theory did not exist at all. In so far as it did, it was implied rather than formulated and thus needs to be reconstructed by the historian of political thought.

It follows that a study of syndicalism falls between two disciplines, history and political theory. Between the two, it is hard to find a middle way. The difficulty of reconciling the analytic and the historical approaches explains the unsatisfactory nature of much that has been written on the subject. A historical study is a tedious and difficult affair. Commentators have sometimes gone to syndicalist writings rather than to the record of syndicalist action. But even that is not easy. Such material is dispersed in congress reports, newspaper articles and occasional pamphlets. As a result, they have more often followed the easier path of using material available in the book form to which they are accustomed. As far as the histories of political thought are concerned, syndicalism was put on the map by its self-appointed apostle, Georges Sorel. This was additionally unfortunate as he was quite unrepresentative of the labour movement. Those who did not fall into the Sorelian trap tended to quote a small group of militant leaders whose ideas were accepted, by and large, but who were not necessarily representative of the rank and file.

The conflict between the theoretical and the historical approach has led to another form of misrepresentation. As G. D. H. Cole put it: "it is after all with ideas that we (i.e. political theorists) are more directly concerned".[1] This has often meant a failure to draw the correct balance between theory and practice. Declarations of principle have often been taken on their face value and used to construct a theory even when they were patently unrepresentative of what the movement probably thought (if it had clear thoughts at all, itself unlikely) and even when they were obviously unrelated to how the movement actually behaved. There is another danger hidden in

[1] G. D. H. Cole, *World of Labour*, 1928, p. 6.

the theoretical approach. The theorist's natural desire to organise his material in logical form, with a beginning, an end and consistent argument between, may easily lead him to impose a self-made order on a subject matter quite unsuited to the purpose. To present syndicalism in this way is to treat it as something static, whereas its ideas were perpetually modified by the stress of events. It is to treat it as something unified, whereas its ideas covered a whole range of divergent shades of opinion. Over-simplification is the result. And the result of that is distortion. It is, of course, quite legitimate for the political theorist to construct a theory of syndicalism. Such a theory is valuable in its own right. It may, for example, interest the student searching for an alternative philosophy of socialism. But this must not be confused with a claim to represent the syndicalism of the French labour movement.

The central part of this study tries to bridge the gap between history and analysis. Debates, resolutions, articles and pamphlets are examined in order to extract from them, as far as possible, a number of syndicalist principles. At the same time, an attempt is made to disengage the implications of syndicalist practice. There was much unclarity, some lack of agreement; theory and practice tended to change over time; discrepancies between theory and practice can be seen. If the wood tends to disappear for the trees, it may be because it never had such clear boundaries as certain observers thought to see. There was a wood, certainly, but some of its trees were rather far apart; in some places they merged into other woods. A brief sketch of a syndicalist theory is nevertheless offered. The emphasis throughout, however, is that the underlying unity of the movement—and the key to syndicalism—lay not in theory but in the outlook of the movement, above all in the temper that inspired its action.

Revolutionary syndicalism was used by French workers to describe a particular direction in the labour movement. They used the term to distinguish their wing from other wings which were either reformist or, if revolutionary, politically oriented—i.e. from socialists and marxists. They claimed to be in a majority in the trade union movement between 1902 and 1914. Though this is open to dispute, they undoubtedly controlled the movement's central organisation, the *Confédération Générale du Travail*, during this period. As by their own definition revolutionary syndicalism was neither a preconceived theory nor an integrated doctrine but the movement itself, its principles and its practice, it is reasonable to define syndicalism as the principles and practice of the *C.G.T.* between 1902 and 1914. This definition has conceptual disadvantages but it comes close to the revolutionary syndicalist's own usage and is in line with the point made

earlier that syndicalism should be examined in terms of the outlook and activities of those who used the label.

A working definition of syndicalism, therefore, is the principles and practice of the *C.G.T.* in the years between 1902 and 1914. 'Practice' because syndicalism was a mode of action and it was in that action, rather than books, that its expression was to be found; 'principles' because there was no official philosophy but only a series of ideas and policies pointing in a general direction. In one sense, it would have been more accurate to qualify the definition by saying majority of the *C.G.T.* and, in so far as one examines the ideas expressed by individuals, it is to the leaders of that wing one must look. But many, often conflicting, voices claimed to speak in the name of syndicalism and it is sometimes hard to see which opinion, which policy, was its authoritative expression. In so far as one can be pinned down —and this is only possible within limits—it was that of the Confederation. For this there is support from Léon Jouhaux, many years its secretary and acknowledged leader; the congresses of the *C.G.T.* played a decisive role in determining the activities of the unions; they laid down the goals to be pursued and the means to be employed; they established the principles of the movement.[1]

The choice of years is a somewhat artificial one, as any such division is bound to be. Broadly speaking, there were two fundamental principles which distinguished the trade unionism of this period from earlier and later years: revolutionary action and the autonomy of the labour movement. There was no sudden break in 1902. By then the unions had already rejected socialist party politics and state-sponsored reforms; they had already adopted the doctrine of the general strike. But 1902 saw the unification of the labour movement after a long period overshadowed by organisational questions and thus permitted a considerable increase in direct action. Nineteen fourteen marked a more definite turning point. The outbreak of war saw the end of all revolutionary pretensions. After the war, certain syndicalist ideas were reaffirmed, but as a mere formality; collaboration with the state continued and policy was essentially reformist. The *C.G.T. Unitaire*, created by the communists in 1921, was certainly revolutionary in spirit, but it was subservient to the party. A *C.G.T. Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire* was formed shortly after and survived until the outbreak of the last war, but it was very small and had no further influence on the history of the French labour movement.

The habit of political scientists has been to use syndicalism in a rather different sense. Chapters on syndicalism in histories of political thought are

[1] L. Jouhaux, *Le syndicalisme et la C.G.T.*, 1920, p. 19.

likely to cover the philosophy of Georges Sorel as well as the doctrines of the *C.G.T.* Often no clear distinction is made between them. Sometimes a line of sorts is drawn. Certain writers have used the terms *militants* to describe the labour movement and *théoriciens* to describe the self-styled *nouvelle école* that gathered around Sorel.[1] Given contemporary usage, this had some advantage. The disadvantage is that it creates a misleading impression that the *C.G.T.* and the *nouvelle école* were two branches of the same movement. The relationship between them will be discussed later but the point should be made here that Sorel was at best an interpreter of the movement; he played no active part in its affairs and there were no personal contacts between him and the militants. Though he had many illuminating comments to make about syndicalism, his philosophy was really quite different from that of the workers.

Another distinction appears to be necessary, and that within the ranks of the militants. Revolutionary syndicalism owed much to a small group of men, notably Griffuelhes, Pouget, Yvetot and Delesalle. These four were the most articulate members of the revolutionary-syndicalist wing of the *C.G.T.*—they wrote most of its pamphlets. Between them they occupied the leading positions in the *C.G.T.* and one was the editor of its newspaper. In many ways they were the real force behind it. There is an obvious temptation to identify syndicalism with what they wrote. This identification is also misleading, though not as misleading as the identification with Sorel. Their doctrines were often more radical than those officially adopted by the *C.G.T.*, their tone more revolutionary, their ideas more anarchistic. Their ideas were also more sophisticated, within limits more systematised, than those of the majority. It is possible to argue, indeed, that they too were in a sense interpreters of the movement, always a step ahead of the rank and file. It would have been tempting to call Griffuelhes, Pouget, Yvetot and Delesalle the theorists of the movement and the rest the militants. As it is, it has been necessary to use the term 'militant leaders' or 'militant theorists' for the former, 'rank and file' for the latter.

Of course, such a distinction is possible only within limits. The militant theorists were after all the leaders of the Confederation and, as such, largely responsible for its activities as well as its resolutions and manifestos. The extent of their responsibility is, in fact, an important point that will have to be examined. There is no doubt that their ideas were more advanced than those of the rank and file. True, they claimed only to be crystallising ideas already at work within the movement, telling the workers what their

[1] Cf. Pirou, 'A propos du syndicalisme révolutionnaire: théoriciens et militants' in *Revue Politique et Parlementaire*, October 1911; and R. Goetz-Girey, *La pensée française syndicaliste: militants et théoriciens*, 1948.

instincts already told them, or would tell them were they aware of the true nature of the class war. But they also drew on other, more theoretical, traditions, on the doctrines of Blanqui and of anarchism. Evidence of a more direct nature than their own is thus necessary to understand the principles and practice of the labour movement.

A straightforward analysis of the principles and practice of syndicalism cannot do full justice to the movement, even if it takes account of all its complexities. It is the attempt of an outsider to give a rational account of something that was never intended to be translated into such words. The syndicalists were neither philosophers nor politicians but workers; they were less concerned with ideas than with the actual, everyday struggle to improve their lives. Syndicalism has often been called a philosophy of action. Sometimes this simply meant that the syndicalists were concerned with a strategy of action rather than the solution of abstract problems and that they were guided by their own experience, the lessons of life, rather than ivory-tower speculation. Sometimes, however, it meant something more: the syndicalists did not think about action but acted more or less spontaneously. In that sense, there was no consciously held syndicalist theory at all; their action *was* their philosophy. This is a little too sophisticated. More plausibly: syndicalism was a mode of action and the temper underlying that mode; syndicalist ideas formed an intuitive mind-picture not a verbal construct.

Schumpeter commented that writers who assume that everything can be described rationally inevitably emasculate syndicalism. That, for him, was the feature of syndicalism which distinguished it from all other forms of socialism.[1] Two points are involved. If the syndicalism of the workers was a composite mind-picture, it can only be grasped as a whole. Described rationally, the ideas of the movement become unrelated abstractions, their true meaning is lost. Sorel was fond of quoting Bergson in this context: to analyse is to destroy. If the picture was intuitive, it can only be grasped intuitively. The same is true if syndicalism was a particular temper: it has to be experienced to be fully understood. It is necessary to feel oneself into the movement.

To appreciate syndicalism, therefore, it is important to have a picture of the movement before one's eyes, not merely a series of facts and figures or a series of principles. Such a picture comes only with long study and the sense of familiarity created by the gradual accumulation of a host of details, minor in themselves. To recreate the spirit of syndicalism within the covers of a book, to paint the full picture, requires other gifts than those of the

[1] J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy*, 1943, p. 339.

historian or political scientist. The problem is acute in syndicalism, though by no means special to it. It was Goethe who said: "Wird der Poet nur geboren, der Philosoph wirds nicht minder; alle Wahrheit, zuletzt, wird nur gebildet, geschaut."

A first essential is doubtless sympathy. One can take this further. According to Proudhon: "Pour juger au fond d'un système, il faut en quelque façon y croire, parce que l'on ne conçoit bien que ce que l'on étudie avec passion."[1] If, as Schumpeter claimed, there was no rationale for syndicalism, one is certainly thrown back on the somewhat paradoxical doctrine of *credo ut intellegam!*—I believe in order to understand! According to Schumpeter, of course, this is not possible for the political scientist: "Unlike marxism or fabianism, syndicalism cannot be espoused by anyone afflicted by any trace of economic or sociological training."[2] Proudhon and Schumpeter, taken together, would bar any understanding of syndicalism at all. Fortunately, both exaggerated. Sympathy may remain critical.

The first part of this study is devoted to the historical background of syndicalism. An attempt is made to trace the various forces which shaped the French labour movement and helped to form its temper, underpinning the interpretation of syndicalism as a way of thought and a mode of action. It may also help the reader to understand its character. Several strands have been picked out: political culture, economic development, the law relating to trade unions, the record of the socialist parties and the influence of certain political thinkers. The choice and arrangement of facts may appear a little arbitrary. No claim is made that this is history for its own sake. Only what seemed relevant has been discussed. The procedure is bound once more to be in some way analytic; the several strands may appear a little disjointed. To synthesise what the intellect has divided, to apprehend the multiplicity of interpenetrating causes—that, as Bergson said, is the task of intuition. Syndicalism differed from marxism or anarchism in that it never existed in isolation. It was not the product of disinterested speculation. Institutions preceded ideas and ideas reflected the character of institutions. Syndicalism was unionism, even if unionism of a special sort. The debates of the labour movement were not concerned with laws of history or blueprints of utopia but with the problems facing it. This, too, was reflected in its ideas. The final chapter of this section is therefore devoted to the history of the labour movement itself.

[1] P. J. Proudhon, *Avertissement aux propriétaires.*
[2] J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy*, 1943, p. 339.

Introduction

Syndicalism was not simply a phase in the history of the French trade unions. Syndicalist theory was not an isolated chapter in the history of political thought. The movement and its ideas together formed part of a wider current of movements and ideas. Parallel to it ran movements of right-wing revolt, first nationalist, then fascist. Both were a reaction to the same apparent failure of democracy; they had a common object of attack: the parliamentary system. Both could be seen as the expression of a similar temperament—romantic, activist, anti-intellectual—which linked them in another object of attack: bourgeois values and bourgeois life. Some attention must be paid to Sorel, the thinker, and Mussolini, the practitioner. Both stood at the crossroads where the extreme right met the extreme left; both explored the two paths. At the same time, the account of syndicalism is extended beyond the principles and practice of the labour movement as such and special attention is paid to the more sophisticated doctrines of its militant leaders. Their ideas show many points of contact with a wider movement of thought, generally described as romantic or anti-intellectual and associated with Nietzsche, Bergson and William James. The revolt against democracy on the one hand, the revolt against Reason on the other—the two were themselves interwoven. History, philosophy and temperament all conspired to relate syndicalism to this broad current of revolt. The purpose of the final section in this study is to place syndicalism against a wider background and to illustrate its deeper significance.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

National character and revolutionary tradition

Earlier writers often suggested that syndicalism was something especially French, born of, or reflecting, the peculiar character of the French people. Of all the influences that went to form the labour movement in France, national character is certainly the most general and may for that reason serve as a starting point. But it is well to remember John Stuart Mill's warning: of all the vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effects of social and moral influences upon the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of human conduct to inherent natural differences. Racial theories are now rightly discredited. National character can be defined instead as learned behaviour, shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society. This may include the Latin temperament which some claim to have observed in syndicalism itself. It is certainly possible to find passages in books about the French in general which seem to fit the syndicalists in particular. These books tend now to be out of fashion; their evidence is not very scientific. National character may be a dubious influence but it is, perhaps, the most entertaining and that alone may justify the following pages.

THE LATIN TEMPER. One Frenchman, in a book addressed to the English reader in 1925, said of his countrymen: "We are capable of impulsive, sudden and explosive action. We are easily set on fire by an idea, a cause; we abandon ourselves utterly to a spirit of exaltation that carries us away and prevents us from seeing the obstacles in our path, and as happens with enthusiasm not supported by reflection, these ardours cannot long be sustained at the same pitch. Thus we lay ourselves open to the reproach of instability."[1] Sombart had ascribed syndicalism to the Latin temperament in an almost identical passage six years earlier: "The only people who could possibly act on such a system of teaching are Frenchmen and Italians. They are generally men who do things impulsively and on the spur of the moment, men who are seized by a sudden passionate enthusiasm which moves their inmost being and forces them to act at once, and who possess a vast fund of emotion, showing itself quickly and suddenly; but they have little application, perseverance, calm or steadiness."[2]

One might conclude that the French worker, seeking an outlet for his

[1] A. Feuillerat, *French Life and Ideals*, 1925, p. 25.
[2] W. Sombart, *Socialism and The Social Movement*, 1919, p. 110.