# *Syndicalism, Work and Science in Simone Weil's Philosophy of Modernity*




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# Short Abstract

Simone Weil (1909-1943) was a political philosopher and revolutionary-syndicalist militant who put her own body on the line as a factory worker in 1935; mobilised herself in an anarchist militia in northern Spain in 1936 and engaged as a *résistante* in France and then in London in de Gaulle's *Forces Françaises Libres* during the Occupation. Despite the extent of her political, social and militant engagement, and the significant size of her political corpus, accounts of Weil's life and thought tend to emphasise her idiosyncratic distance from the philosophical mainstream and her saintly detachment from the here-and-now. Her mentor, Alain, referred to her as a 'Martian'; Gabriel Marcel called her a 'témoin de l'absolu'. T.S. Eliot went even further, describing her 'as a potential Saint'. Georges Bataille saw her in more fanciful terms, as a 'Don Quichotte […] que l'impossible attirait'. Such accounts, despite their differences, led Raymond Aron to comment in 1983 that Weil had become 'un object de culte'. It is perhaps because these views became so entrenched that Weil scholarship, whether theological or political, has tended to resist seeing her thought as engaged in a deliberate dialogue with philosophical discourses of her own time and about her own time.

By exploring in turn Weil's philosophy work and science, this thesis seeks to redress this balance, showing how from revolutionary syndicalism to anti-Bolshevik communism; from Husserlian phenomenology to Heideggerian ontology; from Gaston Bachelard's historical epistemology to Freudian sublimation; from Walter Benjamin's modern shock experience to Bergson's experience of time as duration, Weil was deeply and deliberately engaged in a shared reflection on the challenges and dangers of the modern world.

# Long Abstract

Simone Weil (1909-1943) was a politically-engaged philosopher whose thought has been obscured 'largely in clouds of incense' to quote one scholar.[1] Of Jewish origin and a deeply secular thinker for much of her life, she experienced a mystical conversion to Catholicism in 1938, five years before her death. Despite an extensive political corpus of writing and a short but intense lifetime of immersive engagement in the revolutionary syndicalist movement, unskilled factory work, agricultural labour, militant conflict in the Spanish Civil War and activities in the French resistance, she continues to be read most often as a religious thinker, preoccupied with transcendent spirituality and estranged, politically as well as philosophically, from the time in which she lived and worked.

This thesis reads Weil's philosophy not only as profoundly *of* her own time, resonating with key contemporaries, but also as *about* her own time, exploring Weil's philosophy of work and her little-read philosophy of science as a critical reflection on the prevalent conditions and assumptions of modernity. The analysis begins by asserting the importance of revolutionary syndicalism in shaping Weil's view of the modern world as well as her reading of Marx. It goes on to explore how Weil's radical decision to undertake factory work for herself opened up new lines of enquiry on embodiment and led her to challenge the dominant abstraction of scientific discourses, first in terms of labour and then more broadly in terms of the scope and legitimacy of scientific knowledge. This brought her philosophy into dialogue with the dominant French tradition of historical epistemology as well as with nascent phenomenology in Germany. The thesis draws to a close by showing that as she drifted further from the philosophical and scientific mainstream towards more mystical perspectives, her thought nevertheless intersected

[1] Heinz Abosch, *Simone Weil: An Introduction* (New York: Pennbridge Books, 1994), p. 107.

with other thinkers that resist classification, challenging the boundaries of rationality and searching for new ways to give life to the sacred in an increasingly sterile secular world. The thesis concludes by showing how Weil's most enduring philosophical concept of 'rootedness' sprung from this desire to understand and restore meaning to the modern world.

T.S. Eliot, who set the tone for Weil's reception among English-speaking readers in his preface to *L'Enracinement* (1943), or *The Need for Roots* (as it was published in English in 1952), emphasised her sacrificial and extreme personality over any intellectual contribution: 'In trying to understand her […] we must simply expose ourselves to the personality of a woman of genius, a kind of genius akin to that of the saints'.[2] Biographers as well as scholars of her thought have commonly emphasised her radical exemplarity and mythologised the conditions of her death, perpetuating as fact the speculation that she died of self-induced starvation in England, refusing to eat more than was available to the poor in Occupied France. For religious scholars, this validated her reputation as a saintly martyr. For some political scholars, in particular those on the left such as Jacques Julliard, it made her engagement with the French resistance appear more extreme.[3] In fact, Weil never stated this as her intention and there is little evidence to support it.[4] Whatever the actual conditions of her death, they have over-shadowed her life and above all her thought.

Scholarship has continued to emphasise principally Weil's idiosyncratic isolation from mainstream philosophy, sustaining her reputation as a saintly, passionate mystic. One of the most recent accounts of her life and thought, Maria Clara Bingemer's *Simone Weil: Mystic of Passion and Compassion* (2015), which includes a foreword by the President of the American Weil Society,

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[2] Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Routledge Classics, [1952] 2002), p. viii.

[3] Jacques Julliard, *Le Choc Simone Weil* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), p. 7.

[4] Records from her correspondence and eyewitness accounts have shown that she had little knowledge of what was available to people in France and that, in fact, she did eat, although certainly not enough to help overcome the tuberculosis which claimed her life. Simone Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), p. 680-681. Those who knew her in London described the idea that she had deliberately committed suicide by self-starvation as 'une absurdité'. Ibid., p. 680.

Tomeu Estelrich, states that 'her life's meaning […] was to remain in complete solitude, in absolute darkness, in profound silence'.[5] Even when discussing Weil's political activism, Estelrich and Bingemer emphasise how Weil 'saw well *beyond* her time', emphasising her exemplary role for future generations while playing down the importance of her intellectual context.[6] Helen E. Cullen's *A Philosophical Anthropology Drawn from Simone Weil's Life and Writings* (2017), asserts that 'Weil transcended the other thinkers of her time […]; she was not an existentialist nor a phenomenologist, but rather a classical thinker'.[7] Leading scholars of Weil have labelled her a Christian Platonist,[8] a religious metaphysicist,[9] or a pure 'mystic'.[10] Weil's engagement with the thinkers and discourses of her own time, especially those *about* her own time, have been at best sketched, most often overlooked, and at worst denied.

The contribution of this thesis lies in reading Weil as an engaged modern thinker, one who grapples, in dialogue with other philosophers and political militants, with the very idea and nature of modernity itself. Initially, I considered structuring this analysis in terms of an over-arching diagnosis: *malheur* (to use Weil's preferred vocabulary, whether it be political, physical or spiritual); and a politico-spiritual solution: roots, put forward in *L'Enracinement*. However, I realised that *malheur* did not capture the political echoes and revolutionary syndicalist strands of her extensive reflection on work as a site of modern oppression, while the notion of rootedness was itself too political and insufficiently epistemological, failing to address adequately the importance she placed on the study and dissemination of science as a vector for modern disconnection and alienation. The more I thought about Weil, the more I saw how central her philosophy of science was, not only to her own thought about modernity as a vertiginous

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[5] Maria Clara Bingemer, *Simone Weil: Mystic of Passion and Compassion* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), p. 116.
[6] (My emphasis) ibid., p. 45.
[7] Helen E. Cullen, *A Philosophical Anthropology Drawn from Simone Weil's Life and Writings* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2017), p. viii.
[8] E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted, *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).
[9] Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1994).
[10] Marie-Madeleine Davy, *The Mysticism of Simone Weil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951.).

experience of abstraction and speed, but also to her engagement with other philosophers exploring the limits of modern scientific knowledge, notably Edmond Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

For this reason, I chose instead a thematic structure around two complementary pillars, work and science. Both underpin the over-arching analysis of modernity as abstracted and explore political, humanitarian and intellectual reforms and solutions to emancipate people, especially workers, from its destructive effects.

The opening part of the thesis, *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Work* (Chapters 1 – 3), highlights for the first time the significant revolutionary syndicalist influence which helped to shape many of Weil's philosophical ideas. Her syndicalism informed her perspective on freedom as the unity of thought and action in labour, which was essential in defining how industrial modernity exerted its oppressive force beyond any mere economic condition of ownership. The thesis examines in particular Weil's syndicalist-inspired experience of factory labour in light of the increasingly rationalised reforms introduced under the banner of the ascendant American approach to industrial re-organisation known as 'Taylorism'. This, applied in capitalist as well as Soviet industry, fragmented the industrial process into discrete tasks executed along a production line. For Weil, this was not only an assault on the necessary embodied experience of labour but also on its psychological experience, which together made labour self-realising in the Hegelian sense and emancipating in the political syndicalist sense. In particular, she examines the experience of industrial time, in a context where intuitive rhythms were overwritten by unrelenting mechanical rhythms. This brings her thought into dialogue with philosophers like Henri Bergson and writers like Paul Valéry, as well as dissident left-wing philosophers working on the embodied experience of modern labour and its temporalities, from Walter Benjamin to Henri Lefebvre.

The comparative dimensions of Weil's political philosophy, at least those which lie beyond comparisons with her immediate political and philosophical circles, are brought out

principally in Chapter Three of *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Work* examining the lived experience of industrial modernity. This choice was informed by the necessity first to ground Weil's thought in a specific biographical and philosophical context, to situate her intellectually in her own time, in syndicalist thought and in the particular traditions and approaches of the anti-Communist left. Anchored in this context, which Weil scholarship has historically regarded as anecdotal rather than philosophically significant, the analysis then broadens to admit more comparative insights with other theorists of the modern condition.

This comparative approach becomes more prominent in the second part of the thesis, *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Science*. Weil linked her philosophy of science to her philosophy of work and her political engagement, arguing that oppressive reforms in industry were enabled by a related abstraction in science. However, as a philosopher of science she had no prior attachment to specific groups or ideas and was motivated only by her belief that the quantification of abstract concepts through algebra was incapable of capturing the complexity of existence in the world. Unlike her political thought, which she actively sought to publish, her extensive philosophy of science is concentrated in her *Cahiers*, in personal papers and letters. It is perhaps in part for this reason that Weil scholarship has largely overlooked her work on science. Only one book has been devoted to the subject, Vance Morgan's *Weaving the World: Simone Weil on Science, Mathematics, and Love* (2005) and it omits any reference to how Weil's reflection on science engaged with broader philosophical discourses. Even if she chose to keep much of this work to herself, her texts about science represent an important site of engagement with the prevailing philosophical approaches of and about her time and yield an abundance of hitherto untapped comparative potential with a number of contemporaries and near contemporaries.

Nevertheless, with this potential comes a challenge. While Weil criticises the abstraction of modern science in ways that resonate deeply and deliberately with philosophers such as Edmond Husserl and Martin Heidegger, she also frequently displays sympathy, even preference, for practices and attitudes that verge on the pseudoscientific. This tension between the

philosophical and scientific mainstream on the one hand and esotericism on the other is not easily resolved, all the more because it cannot be attributed neatly to periods before and after her conversion to mysticism. This tension runs through the heart of *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Science,* dividing it into: the diagnosis of scientific abstraction in Chapter Four and the more mystical, esoteric and sometimes utopian 'science nouvelle' set out as a response to abstracted modern science in Chapter Five.

One of the original contributions of this thesis is not just to present her philosophy of science as a vehicle and or even as a pillar of her critique of modernity, but also to explore how this critique was instrumental in taking her thought beyond the limits of the rational, searching for alternatives in the mystical and the esoteric. In this respect, despite her eccentricity, she was not alone, and her thought engaged with a wide range of radically different thinkers who pushed the boundaries of knowledge beyond accepted scientific categories into the sacred or the pseudoscientific, from Georges Bataille, whom she knew well, to Gaston Bachelard and Sigmund Freud, whom she had read. The concept of energy transformation, a near obsession for Weil, is the most important example outlined in this thesis. Bataille was inspired by the idea of solar energetic excess to define the laws of an alternative political economy in 'La Notion de dépense' (1933) and Freud regarded the transformation of energy from one form to another as vital for sublimation, not just on a personal libidinal level but also on a broader social and political level in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930). In her final *Cahier,* in a rarely cited long passage written at the same time as *L'Enracinement* (1943), Weil used the idea of energy conversion, in particular photosynthesis, to form the spiritual basis for a utopian rural commune, uniting peasants, priests and scientists in work and shared contemplation. This brings the thesis back to the social and political conditions necessary to make work emancipatory, a key element of her syndicalist political thought, and sets the stage for the discussion of *L'Enracinement* in the conclusion.

Against the grain of prevailing Weil scholarship, *L'Enracinement* is presented here not as a 'livre de circonstance', to quote one scholar, nor as an immediate response to the fall of France

in 1940 and the Occupation, but as a solution to Weil's broad diagnosis of modern disconnection and alienation, set out in her philosophies of work and science.[11] Weil developed the idea of rootedness in her final months to try to anchor the abstraction she had diagnosed in the concrete and to assert the importance of traditional community as a counterweight to the emptiness of modern life and the expansionism of totalitarianism and colonialism. Although all the chapters in this thesis draw on *L'Enracinement* to varying degrees, it is at the end of Chapter Five and to a greater extent in the Conclusion that the book is explored as a development of what preceded it and moreover as a solution, as the only solution Weil proposed, to modern crisis.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to provide an exhaustive account of the reform recommendations Weil makes in *L'Enracinement*; others have already done this. Rather I aim to show how Weil arrived at this deeply individual blend of revolutionary syndicalism, mysticism, proto-communitarian ruralism and Gaullism. This respects not only the development of Weil's thought over time, but also arguably its strengths. Theological reflection aside, Weil's thought is most valuable today as an example of political and social criticism, as an account of the lived conditions in which the individual is most oppressed, most fulfilled and most emancipated, all the more since these insights were the product of her own proto-anthropological experimental method to put her own body on the line as a factory worker, as an agricultural labourer and as a war-time militant.

After decades of rather niche interest in Catholic scholarship, Weil's political philosophy and in particular her exploration of modernity, especially industrial modernity, have gained a new relevance as emerging digital technologies associated with the hypermodern 'fourth industrial revolution', including artificial intelligence, blockchain and the so-called internet of things, threaten jobs and profoundly alter the tasks required of workers. Weil's prescient concerns, for

[11] Athanasios Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial* (University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 13.

example, about the destructive psychological and political effects of living in an 'eternal present' have acquired new pertinence in light of ubiquitous digital technologies and concerns about their effects on privacy, liberty and free will. Equally, what may seem like an archaic and conservative political interest in preserving roots in community not only anticipated more recent political philosophies such as communitarianism but can also help current philosophers and policymakers reflect on the challenges of an increasingly globalised society.

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# Introduction

> La vie moderne est *livrée à la démesure*. La démesure envahit tout, action et pensée, vie publique et privée. […] Il n'y a plus de rapport perceptible entre l'action et les effets de l'action, de sorte que même agissant l'homme est *passif*.[12]

Such was Simone Weil's damning judgment of modern life. This account of modernity's effects on the disempowered subject was set out by Weil in her preparatory notes for 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale' (1934).[13] The idea returned with even greater conviction in the finished article, a work of such personal significance that she referred to it as her 'Grand Œuvre'.[14] She presented the modern condition as one of disequilibrium and disproportion, as painful passivity in the face of social and political upheaval:

> Jamais l'individu n'a été aussi complètement livré à une collectivité aveugle, et jamais les hommes n'ont été plus incapables non seulement de soumettre leurs actions à leurs pensées, mais même de penser […]. Nous vivons dans un monde où rien n'est à la mesure de l'homme; il y a une disproportion monstrueuse entre le corps de l'homme, l'esprit de l'homme et les choses qui constituent actuellement les éléments de la vie humaine; tout est déséquilibré.[15]

This view of modernity as disequilibrium, as estrangement from the self and from the world became a key principle for Weil. From the emotional and psychological alienation she experienced first-hand working as a factory labourer in 1935, to the blind spots and false assumptions she identified at the heart of modern science, she made diagnosing and resolving the abstraction and alienation of the modern world a crucial part of her political and philosophical project. Weil set herself the task of providing an account of the concrete experience of modern oppression in

[12] Simone Weil, *Cahiers (1933 - septembre 1941)*, ed. A. Degrâces, et al., vol. VI:1, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 121.
[13] Henceforth 'Réflexions'.
[14] Simone Weil, *Correspondance familiale*, ed. R. Chenavier and A.A. Devaux, vol. VII:1, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), p. 264.
[15] Simone Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques: L'Engagement syndical (1927-1934)*, ed. Géraldi Leroy, vol. II:1, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 94.

order to understand how it might one day be alleviated: 'Nous n'aurons une méthode pour secourer l'oppression que le jour où nous aurons compris les causes de l'oppression aussi clairement que nous concevons l'équilibre d'une pierre.'[16]

This called for an 'inventory' of the modern experience to guide revolutionary politics.[17] As this thesis will show, in pursuit of this goal, Weil chose to focus in particular on the areas of science and work:

> La civilisation actuelle […] contient […] de quoi écraser l'homme; mais elle contient aussi, du moins en germe, de quoi le libérer. Il y a dans notre science, malgré toutes les obscurités qu'amène une sorte de nouvelle scolastique, des éclairs admirables, des parties limpides et lumineuses, des démarches parfaitement méthodiques de l'esprit. Dans notre technique aussi il y a des germes de libération du travail, demandant encore bien plus de conscience et d'ingéniosité que le travail le plus qualifié des usines modernes. […] Quelle tâche plus noble pourrions-nous assumer que celle de préparer méthodiquement un tel avenir en travaillant à faire l'inventaire de la civilisation présente?[18]

Most scholarship on Weil, however, underlines her idiosyncratic isolation from her own time, even from nineteenth-century thought. More often regarded as a Christian Platonist thinker and mystic, her political thought has been obscured 'largely in clouds of incense', to quote one scholar.[19]

The only scholar who has tackled directly, albeit briefly, Weil's engagement with modernity is Bartomeu Estelrich in 'Simone Weil on Modern Disequilibrium' in *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later*, edited by Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone. Although Estelrich acknowledges the resonances between Weil's thought and a number of modern intellectual movements, including phenomenology, existentialism and psychoanalysis, he is at pains

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16 In 'Le matérialisme historique', ibid., p. 327.
17 'Que faire? Faire l'inventaire de la civilisation actuelle, qui nous écrase. […] C'est une tâche au reste impossible à accomplir, […] [mais] ce n'est pas une raison de ne pas l'entreprendre.' Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 116.
18 Simone Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques: L'Expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution (juillet 1934 - juin 1937)*, ed. G. Leroy and A. Roche, vol. II: 2, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 107.
19 Abosch, *Simone Weil: An Introduction*, p. 107.

to emphasise that Weil 'had no part in any of [them]' and 'regarded [her own work] as an heir of the platonic and Christian traditions'.[20]

This thesis will show that, on the contrary, from revolutionary syndicalism to anti-Bolshevik communism; from Husserlian phenomenology to Heideggerian ontology; from Gaston Bachelard's historical epistemology to Freudian sublimation; from Walter Benjamin's modern shock experience to Bergson's experience of time as duration, Weil was deeply and deliberately engaged in a reflection on the challenges and dangers of the modern world. As late as 1942, the year before her death, and four years after her religious conversion to a mystical Catholicism, Weil maintained that the object of her study was not transcendence, but the world around her: 'L'objet de ma recherche n'est pas le surnaturel, mais ce monde'.[21]

This thesis will structure Weil's study of the modern world primarily around her diagnosis of growing abstraction. This was expressed through her philosophy of work, which includes her radical political engagement on the revolutionary syndicalist and anti-Bolshevik left. However, she also identified a broader abstracting force, eroding the foundations of knowledge and the empirical integrity of the categories used to understand phenomena. This led Weil to regard modernity not only in terms of a modern crisis of labour, but also in terms of a crisis in the sciences. Her far-reaching solution to this diagnosis was formulated at the end of her life in her last and most widely read work, *L'Enracinement* (1943).

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[20] Bartomeu Estelrich, 'Simone Weil on Modern Disequilibrium' in Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 3.

[21] Simone Weil, *Cahiers (septembre 1941 - février 1942): La Science et l'impensable*, ed. A. Degrâces, et al., vol. VI:2, Œuvres Complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 245.

*'Il ne s'agit pas ici de philosophie, mais de vie'*

With these words of introduction Weil's first notebook entries were published by the Catholic philosopher Gustave Thibon in 1947, beginning a long tradition in Weil scholarship of associating her colourful biography with her philosophy. [22]

Born in 1909 in Paris to secular Jewish parents, her early life was marked by upheaval. Her father was mobilised as an army doctor in the First World War, taking his young family with him. The family settled again in Paris in 1919, on the Boulevard Saint-Michel in the Latin Quarter, where her parents, with the exception of their war-time exile in New York, remained. She benefited from a privileged education. From 1919 she attended the Lycée Fenelon sporadically due to poor health, obtaining her baccalaureate in 1925. As a promising student, she was sent to *classes préparatoires* at the Lycée Henri IV (1925-1928), where she was taught by the philosopher Alain. She was admitted to the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1928 and gained her *Diplôme d'etudes supérieures* in 1930 and her philosophy *agrégation* in 1931.

Despite Weil's reputation for intelligence, recounted by Simone de Beauvoir in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), she was known for shunning the ivory tower. The 19 year old Beauvoir admired Weil's intense engagement with political and humanitarian causes: 'j'enviais un cœur capable de battre à travers l'univers entier'.[23] However, the acquaintance was cut short over student politics, when one day in 1927, Beauvoir made the proto-existentialist remark that a revolution which brought meaning to existence was more important than a revolution which brought bread to the masses. A disagreement ensued, with Beauvoir left feeling misjudged: 'Je compris qu'elle m'avait cataloguée [comme] une petite bourgeoise spiritualiste'.[24]

Weil was known, above all, as a student for her passionate revolutionary syndicalism, earning her at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the nickname associated with the *communarde* Louise

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[22] Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, [1947] 1988), p. xxv.
[23] Simone de Beauvoir, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (Le Circle du Livre de France, 1958), p. 228.
[24] Ibid.

Michel, 'la vierge rouge'.[25] This was a reputation which followed her to her first teaching jobs in Le Puy and Roanne from 1931 to 1934, where she was branded 'la moscoutaire militante' by a hostile local press.[26] Simone de Beauvoir recalled in *La Force de l'âge* news of Weil's unorthodox life in Le Puy:

> On racontait qu'elle habitait dans une auberge de rouliers et que le premier jour du mois elle déposait sur la table le montant de son traitement: chacun pouvait se servir. Elle avait travaillé sur la voie ferrée avec les ouvriers du rail afin de pouvoir prendre la tête d'une délégation de chômeurs et présenter leurs revendications: elle s'était attiré l'hostilité du maire et des parents d'élèves. […] Son intelligence, son ascétisme, son extrémisme, son courage m'inspiraient de l'admiration.[27]

These years were the height of Weil's engagement with the revolutionary syndicalist movement. Influenced more by Proudhon than Marx, syndicalists rejected political parties and state bureaucracies and called for a re-organisation of society around trade unions. Between 1932 and 1933 Weil published a total of 33 articles in syndicalist periodicals, most notably in *La Révolution prolétarienne*, founded in 1925 by her friend Pierre Monatte to defend the revolutionary principles of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) against reformists.[28]

Weil's attraction to the insights afforded by first-hand experience was already apparent. She spent the summer of 1931 working on a fishing boat and in 1932 she travelled to Germany to report on the state of the proletariat in the face of a rising fascist Nazi threat. She had little sympathy for the Soviet Union and its Bolshevik leadership, which she regarded as authoritarian and exploitative.[29] She nevertheless sheltered left-wing activists whatever their particular allegiances in her large family home on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, including in December 1933, Leon Trotsky. They fought furiously according to Trotsky's wife.[30] Weil accused Trotsky of being brainwashed, falsely believing the Soviet Union to be a workers' state, when workers were in fact

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25 Jacques Cabaud, *L'Expérience vécue de Simone Weil* (Paris: Plon, 1957), p. 34.
26 Cited in Simone Weil, *Œuvres*, ed. Florence de Lussy (Paris: Gallimard 'Quarto', 1999), p. 51.
27 Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard 'Folio', [1960] 2001), pp. 165-166.
28 My own calculation based on information in her *Œuvres complètes.*
29 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 107.
30 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 279.

enslaved to communist bureaucracy and as exploited in the conditions of their work as in any capitalist economy. Trotsky accused her of being a petit-bourgeois anarchist individualist, fuming 'vous êtes tout à fait réactionnaire!'[31] They nevertheless respected each other, even liked each other. At the end of his stay Trotsky teasingly informed his host, 'Vous pourrez dire que c'est chez vous qu'a été fondée la Quatrième Internationale'.[32]

It was through her engagement with the anti-Soviet left that Weil came to be involved, along with Georges Bataille, in the *Cercle communiste démocratique* founded by Boris Souvarine in 1930 to oppose the 'Bolchevisation' of communism and condemn the authoritarianism of Stalin, to whom the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) remained unflinchingly loyal. The *Cercle*'s mouthpiece, *La Critique sociale* (1933-1934), was committed to promoting an open and analytical reflection on Marxism, updating it in light of new threats, particularly from its distortion by anti-democratic and authoritarian forces in the Soviet Union.

The diagnosis of modern powerlessness which opened this thesis was drawn from Weil's most important article of this period, 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', which she intended to publish in *La Critique sociale*. In it, she identified an impasse in the revolutionary movement: as the conditions of modern oppression worsened they weakened rather than strengthened the proletariat.

Weil wanted to experience proletarian oppression from within to understand more clearly how it might be alleviated. From December 1934, she undertook a variety of factory jobs in and around Paris, including at the Renault and Alsthom factories. The experience had a profound effect on her politics and her philosophy, recounted in notes, letters and a number of subsequently drafted articles published posthumously in 1951 as *La Condition ouvrière*. Nothing prepared her for the shock of mind-numbing, crushing labour. She described herself as broken: 'Cette expérience

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., p. 280.

[…] a changé toute ma perspective sur les choses, le sentiment même que j'ai de la vie.'[33] This change in perspective may have helped pave the way for her religious conversion in 1938, since in her later mystical text, she frequently referred to proletarian suffering as an analogue to Christ's suffering on the Cross: 'Les ouvriers possèdent cette proximité de Dieu, d'une saveur incomparable, qui gît au fond de la pauvreté, de l'absence de considération sociale, et des souffrances longues et lentes.'[34]

In the wake of her factory work, her political and proletarian engagement nevertheless continued. She enlisted with the anarcho-syndicalist CNT militia during the Spanish Civil war in the summer of 1936 but returned home after a non-combat related injury. She documented strikes and syndicalist activities in the wake of the Popular Front in northern France in early 1937 and worked as an agricultural labourer in the south of France in 1941.[35] Although she published less frequently in syndicalist periodicals, she continued to write, amassing a quantity of unpublished work on a wide variety of subjects, including 'Expérience de la vie d'usine' (1936), 'Sur les Contradictions du Marxisme' (1937) and 'Sur le régime colonial' (1939). She also penned a number of essays attacking the abstraction of modern physics, published posthumously in *Sur la science* in 1966, as well as other key texts like *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* (1939), which underlined the relevance of Homer's depiction of violence, suffering, and power to modern society.

Around 1938, Weil, who had a long-standing interest in spirituality, experienced a gradual conversion to a Catholic mysticism. However, the objects of her thought did not change. Weil continued to put the experience of oppression and suffering at the heart of her philosophy. As such, the symbolism of the Cross became increasingly important for her: 'Si l'Evangile

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[33] Simone Weil, *La Condition ouvrière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951[posthumous]), p. 19.
[34] 'Réflexions sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l'amour de Dieu', Simone Weil, *Écrits de Marseille (1940-1942): Philosophie, science, religion, questions politiques et sociales*, ed. M. Broc-Lapeyre, et al., vol. IV:1, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p. 261.
[35] Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 404, pp. 565-567.

omettait toute mention de la résurrection du Christ, la foi me serait plus facile. La Croix seule me suffit.'[36]

Her conversion was more mystical than specifically Christian or even religious. Describing the world as a giant metaphor of divine truths, Weil's philosophy opened up to an ever broader range of references from Hinduism and Buddhism; from folklore and myth; from the emerging anthropology of the New World to the lost societies of *Occitanie*, the Cathars, the Gauls and the Aztecs.[37] In *L'Enracinement,* Weil argued against specifically Christian education as exclusively secular education, arguing that both deprived children of the 'treasures' of other cultures.[38] Instead she saw authentically religious teaching and faith as inherently open: 'Une pensée religieuse est authentique quand elle est universelle par son orientation.'[39]. As Palle Yougrau has pointed out in his short intellectual biography of Weil, her conversion represented a radical opening up:

> Though it was specifically Christ's name that she invoked, what is striking is that she responded by seeking immediately to enlarge and universalize her experience, inaugurating a sustained search for what is common to all religions – whereas for most people, a turn towards religion signifies an inclination toward exclusivity, a belief in the superiority of one's own form of worship and its dissonance with all others. For Simone Weil, by contrast, exclusivity - that is *separation* - represented the very antithesis of true religion.[40]

This confirmed Weil's own account in her self-titled 'autobiographie spirituelle', addressed to her friend and confidant Joseph-Marie Perrin in May 1942:

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36 Simone Weil, *Lettre à un religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, [1951] 1974), p. 62.
37 'Le fondement de la mythologie, c'est que l'univers est une métaphore de vérités divines'. Simone Weil, *Cahiers (juillet 1942 - juillet 1943): La connaissance surnaturelle*, ed. M-A. Fourneyron, F. de Lussy, and J. Riaud, vol. VI:4, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 97. See also: 'L'univers entier n'est qu'une grande métaphore', ibid., p. 126.
38 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1083.
39 Ibid.
40 Palle Yougrau, *Simone Weil*, Critical Lives (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), p. 68.

> Quoiqu'il me soit plusieurs fois arrivé de franchir un seuil, je ne me rappelle pas un moment ou j'ai changé de direction. Pour moi le mot de conversion n'a aucun sens.[41]

Weil wrote these lines in Marseille, where she spent almost two years between September 1940 and May 1942 after fleeing Occupied Paris. During these months her fascination with modern science intensified. She linked its value-neutral abstracted approach and its method of constructing artificially closed and totalising methodologies to the rise and expansion of Fascism. With this threat in mind, she engaged in a number of clandestine operations for the French resistance in Marseille, and was briefly imprisoned, before setting off for New York in May 1942, from where she was able to reach London in December. Her hopes of returning to France as a spy were dashed by de Gaulle, but she remained in London, working as a drafter and researcher for the *Forces Françaises libres*. She composed her best-known work, *L'Enracinement,* in London as a blueprint for the reconstruction of France. In April 1943 she collapsed due to tuberculosis and exhaustion and died three months later.

*Making Sense of the Sources: Posthumous Tensions Between the Pious and the Political*

In the immediate aftermath of Weil's death, her intellectual legacy was in the hands of two individuals with whom she had corresponded towards the end of her life, and to whom she had entrusted a number of her notebooks in Marseille. These were the priest Père Perrin and the Catholic philosopher Gustave Thibon, on whose estate she had undertaken three months of agricultural labour in 1941.

This resulted in two books, *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (1947) and *Attente de Dieu* (1950), which remain amongst her best known. However, these were never conceived by Weil as publications. They are posthumous collections of notebook entries, conversations and letters

[41] Cited from an unpublished letter (Lettre VI, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, held 'Dossier *Lettres au Père Perrin*') in Emmanuel Gabellieri, *Être et Don: Simone Weil et la philosophie* (Louvain-la-neuve: Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 2003), p. 540.

assembled by Perrin in the case of *Attente de Dieu*, and by Thibon in the case of *La Pesanteur et la grâce*. Perrin stated explicitly in his introduction to *Attente de Dieu* that the aim of the work was to set out Weil's reasons for refusing baptism, an act he had urged her to submit to:

> De toute son œuvre, ces pages spontanées et brûlantes sont des plus propres à communiquer ce qu'elle appelait ses 'intuitions pré-chrétiennes' et à faire comprendre ses hésitations personnelles devant le baptême sacramentel.[42]

This was a topic of personal and theological importance for Weil but it does not reflect her work as whole. Yet, for nearly a decade after her death these were, alongside *L'Enracinement* (1949) and extracts from her last notebooks published under the title *La Connaissance surnaturelle* (1950), the only books 'by' Weil that were publicly available. It was not until the publication under the impetus of Albert Camus of *La Condition ouvrière* (1951), which was mostly extracts from her diaries and letters of 1935-1936 and to a greater extent *Oppression et Liberté* (1955), a collection of political texts, that her first texts dealing with non religious themes received an audience, as she had wished.[43] Her more than 80 articles published in her own lifetime between 1928 and 1942, mostly in syndicalist publications but also later in *Les Cahiers du Sud*, including the major work 'L'Iliade, ou le poème de la force', were accessible in archives and private collections but were not re-edited until after her death. It is nevertheless a sign of the extent to which Weil's legacy was captured by those interested purely in her religious thought that T.S. Eliot was able to state in 1952 without apparent knowledge or regard for the work she published in her lifetime: 'All of Simone Weil's work is posthumous.'[44]

New posthumous works by Weil appeared rather unsystematically as the century progressed: *Lettre à un religieux* (1951), *La Source grecque* (1953), *Venise sauvée* (1955), *Écrits de*

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[42] Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Editions Fayard, 1966 [posthumous]), p. 6.

[43] *Oppression et Liberté* included her two major articles on proletarian oppression drafted prior to her factory work. These were 'Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne?' (1933) and 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale' (1934). Simone Weil said of the latter in 1940: 'C'est très actuel, également [ainsi que le premier]. Cela vaudrait la peine, je crois, de ne pas être perdu. […] Je regrette bien maintenant de ne l'avoir pas publié.' Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 18.

[44] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. vi.

*Londres et dernières lettres* (1957), *Écrits politiques et historiques* (1960) and *Sur la science* (1966). It was not until Gallimard began to publish her *Œuvres complètes* in 1988, an ongoing 15 volume undertaking edited by André A. Devaux and Florence de Lussy, that it became possible to get a sense of the range and evolution of her thought.[45]

To this day Weil continues to be viewed primarily as a religious thinker.[46] However, this categorisation is being increasingly challenged as her *Œuvres complètes* make available texts and fragments which were previously accessible only through Weil's handwritten manuscripts in the *Fonds Simone Weil* at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France or in obscure and hard-to-access radical periodicals. The texts in her *Œuvres complètes* appear as composed and ordered by Weil without the selective editing by Perrin and Thibon. In *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, for example, fragments were heavily re-ordered by Thibon, sometimes lending a unity or evolution not present in the original chronology of the notebooks. For example, he put the chapter on 'the Cross' symbolically at the very centre of the collection, after chapters relating to the loss of self, such as 'Vide et compensation', 'Détachement', 'Effacement', and before the final more transcendental chapters relating to harmony and resolution ('Metaxu', 'Beauté', and 'L'Harmonie sociale') which conclude the book.[47] This transforms what is often densely argued and detailed prose in the *Cahiers* into pithy spiritual maxims, offering spiritual guidance and promoting personal development. This has led scholars to assert that Weil deliberately wrote in the Christian tradition of aphorism, for which there is no evidence.[48]

Weil's *Cahiers*, and to a much lesser extent the remainder of her complete works, are nevertheless fragmentary, disparate, and diffuse. Only thirty when she fled Paris, she had little

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45 Three volumes remain to be published, including two volumes of her *Correspondence générale* and the first volume of her *Écrits de New York et de Londres*.

46 For example, seemingly unaware of Weil's extensive political texts, Mary Warnock excluded Weil from her collection *Women Philosophers*, as one of a number of thinkers who 'rely more on dogma, revelation or mystical experience than on argument'. Mary Warnock, *Women Philosophers* (London: The Everyman Library, 1996), pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

47 Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 209.

48 See for example Stephen Plant, *Simone Weil: A Brief Introduction* (Orbis Books, 2007), p. 75.

opportunity to put her affairs in order. Her *Écrits politiques et historiques* in three volumes include many finished but often unpublished articles and a number of sketches and fragments.[49] Much of her corpus is made up of detailed notes, particularly the four volumes of her *Cahiers*, but also her two-volume *Écrits de Marseille* and *Écrits de New York et de Londres,* written during her wartime displacement, which cover a wide range of topics, from quantum physics to the Cathars; from the Bible to the Bhagavad-Gita, as well as *L'Enracinement* itself. This text, which absorbed her final efforts in London, is a passionate but wandering and unfinished plea destined for de Gaulle to reform the political, institutional and social organisation of France, once liberated.

*'L'inventaire de la civilisation présente': Work and Science*

This thesis, while respecting the fragmentation and diffuse nature of Weil's texts, will be structured along two broad lines: Simone Weil's philosophy of work, and her philosophy of science. These are the themes around which Weil's reflections on modernity coalesced.

The first chapter, 'Emancipatory Work: Syndicalism and the Primacy of Labour', sets out how Weil's perspective on the role of labour in society was profoundly influenced by the Proudhonian, anarchist tradition of revolutionary syndicalism, which had flourished in the early years of the twentieth century and remained influential through the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT). The extent and duration of Weil's syndicalist influence have often been overlooked by scholarship. Yet, many of Weil's key political contributions, from her earliest to her latest texts, including *L'Enracinement* (1943) remained saturated in syndicalist ideas. For example, unlike a typical Marxist, Weil characterised modern alienation as a qualitative disruption to the dignity and self-realisation of work, rather than an economic condition; she supported decentralisation and opposed political parties in favour of guilds.

[49] Despite the identical title, this collection has only partial overlap with the more limited collection of the same name published in 1960 in Gallimard's *Espoir* collection (founded by Albert Camus).

She broke, however, with the traditional anti-intellectualism of syndicalism, grounding syndicalist politics in philosophical reasoning. In an innovative departure, she drew in particular on Descartes's dualist method of radical doubt, which rejected all collective or accumulated forms of thought, to prove her thesis that only methodical work executed in its entirety by one person (which required a unity between thought and its expression as action) could be considered emancipatory in a political sense. This not only provided a philosophical definition for free work, but also helped define the role of the political philosopher in the age of totalitarianism.

The second chapter in *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Work,* "'Entre deux feux": Communism, Fascism and the Critique of Marx' charts how Weil's Cartesian approach to the role of the revolutionary intellectual shifted from a syndicalist perspective to a more neutral, pessimistic and experience-driven approach in the face of totalitarianism, but which nevertheless retained syndicalist elements. It explores this shift in terms of her contribution to two different political periodicals, the arch-syndicalist *La Révolution prolétarienne* and the more intellectual and anti-Bolshevik *La Critique sociale.*

While Chapter One draws heavily on the former periodical, Chapter Two explores in particular the intellectual milieu and influence of the latter. The anti-Bolshevik, anti-Stalinist contributors to *La Critique sociale,* including Weil, were united in their belief that Soviet Marxism had become a prescriptive, destructive and unbending ideology, promoting a bureaucratic and authoritarian state that perpetuated the same oppressive conditions as capitalist production. Weil was anchored personally and professionally in these circles, but has rarely been read as such. Scholars of Weil and Marxism have typically interpreted her work as a direct exegesis of Marx. Blum and Seidler, for instance, in *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism,* read her as an original critic of Marx seeking to resolve the tension in Marxism between its analyses of the

objective conditions of existence and human subjective experience of those conditions.[50] This provides an excellent understanding of Weil's contribution to the history of Marxist ideas, putting her into dialogue with Marxist revisionists such as György Lukács and Theodor Adorno, but it does not address how Weil's intellectual and political context helped her to arrive at those ideas.

The third and final chapter in *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Work*, 'Simone Weil and Industrial Modernity' explores how Weil's first-hand account of labour challenged an emergent discipline: the 'science of work'. This field combined the approaches of positivism and pragmatism to achieve optimum productivity in a modern and dehumanising vision of the body as a productive machine. The chapter draws in particular on the historian Anson Rabinach's *The Human Motor: Energy Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity,* which examines the adoption of a purely mechanised vocabulary for the body as the defining feature of modernity, apparent on the left in Marxist 'labour power', as well as amongst industrialists widely implementing the efficiency reforms of the American engineer F.W. Taylor. Weil stood out strongly in the syndicalist press against these reforms, which deconstructed work into ever smaller, faster and more repetitive tasks. She regarded this physical and psychological experience of work to be far more alienating than the economic conditions of private or collective ownership which preoccupied her Soviet and Marxist peers. However, unusually for a left-wing thinker, as the thesis will show, Weil made the case against rationalisation by drawing on the vocabulary of the modern science of work, subverting its language from within.

Weil used the principle of energy transformation to anchor a traditional interpretation of work as the basis for human fulfilment. She saw in the idea of labour as conversion of energy an allegorical transubstantiation in which the blood and sweat of the worker pass as energy into the product of labour:

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50 L.A. Blum and V.J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*, Routledge Revivals (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, [1989] 2010), p. xx.

> Un homme qui travaille brûle sa propre chair et la transforme en énergie comme une machine brule du charbon. […] Ainsi on peut dire en un sens que le travailleur manuel transforme sa chair et son sang en objets fabriqués.[51]

This came at a time when these same energetic principles were being used by industrialists to strip work of any spiritual, emotional, social and cultural meaning and justify rationalising reforms.

Of particular concern to her was the way in which rationalised industrial labour suppressed the intuitive, embodied human experience of time as duration, imposing a mechanised, dehumanising temporality: 'Il y a une certaine relation avec le temps qui convient aux choses inertes, et une autre qui convient aux créatures pensantes. On a tort de les confondre.'[52] For Weil this confusion created alienating conditions, which the narrow economic focus of Marxism failed to address.

Drawing on her own experiences in her 'Journal d'usine' (1934-1935), Weil argued that the destructive nature of modern factory work resided in the way it parcelled time into a discontinuous repetitive present. Weil drew on the insights of Bergson, who understood the experience of time not as mechanical intervals but as a flowing experience of duration. However, she differed from many contemporaries in presenting the modern experience of time as not uniquely modern. She drew on sources in classical literature, such as Homer in her *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force,* to show that modernity represented an intensification and generalisation of pre-existing afflictions.

Yet, her thought on modern time did converge in some areas with a number of contemporaries, including Walter Benjamin and Paul Valéry, who both regarded perceived accelerations or distortions of time as inherent to the condition of modernity. Valéry, who Weil admired,[53] presented the acceleration of time as a vertiginous and unnatural loss of reality.[54]

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[51] Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 266.
[52] Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1027.
[53] Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 436.

Walter Benjamin, inspired by Baudelaire's poetic studies of the rapidly changing Haussmanian Paris in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), described modern time in terms of an alienating 'shock experience'.[55]

For Weil, these changes in the industrial workplace were enabled by a related abstraction in science, explored in *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Science*. Science and labour had according to Weil both been stripped of their metaphysical and spiritual dimensions. Communion with their erstwhile object, the world, as an embodied and spiritual experience, had been lost in an endless modern process of abstraction:

> Le jour où il serait impossible de comprendre les notions scientifiques, même les plus abstraites, sans apercevoir clairement, du même coup, leur rapport avec des applications possibles, et également impossible d'appliquer même indirectement ces notions sans les connaître et les comprendre à fond, la science serait devenue concrète et le travail conscient; et alors seulement l'une et l'autre auront leur pleine valeur. Jusque-là science et travail auront toujours quelque chose d'incomplet et d'inhumain.[56]

A reformed science was critical to reversing destructive modern abstraction.

The two chapters of *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Work* are organised thematically around this project. The first (Chapter Four) focuses on Weil's diagnosis of modern science as abstracted from deeper, embodied or transcendental truths about the nature of being. The second (Chapter Five) explores Weil's substantive and structural solutions to restore the lost link between science and the world.

'Diagnoses of Abstraction: Simone Weil's Critique of Modern Science' sets out Weil's analysis of crisis. This was expressed as early as her *Diplôme d'études supérieures,* 'Science et perception dans Descartes' (1930), throughout her *Cahiers* and as late as texts such as 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta' (1941). The chapter is structured by three comparisons: with Gaston Bachelard in France and with Edmond Husserl and Martin Heidegger in Germany.

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[54] Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), p. 1041, p. 1049.
[55] Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, [1921-1939] 2006), p. 192.
[56] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 91.

'Science et perception dans Descartes' engaged with the rich French tradition of historical epistemology. Her chosen supervisor Léon Brunschvicg, was a leader in the field, and like Gaston Bachelard, another of Brunschvicg's students in those years, Weil chose to challenge him. Brunschvicg was a proponent of 'critical idealism'. He believed that the action of the mind determined the material reality of objects and the history of scientific progress revealed the unfolding of truth. Both Weil and Bachelard refused to see modern science in an idealist (and idealised) light and argued against philosophical perspectives that abstracted the reality of objects. They kept Brunschvicg's emphasis on the role of thought as an activity, but both sought to counterbalance it by asserting the contingent independence of the material world.

Bachelard, in his doctoral thesis, published as *La Connaissance approchée* (1927), emphasised the necessary limits of knowledge in the face of a contingent and indivisible reality. He did not see thought as defeated by these limits but rather as forced into a constant activity of approximation and rectification. Bachelard called this the 'philosophy of the inexact'.[57] Weil made a related argument, but adopted a historical approach, charting how Descartes's science, often regarded as an example of idealism, was in fact deeply realist (asserting the independent existence of objects and ideas) and inspired by artisan labour. She went so far as to reformulate the *cogito*, regarding the dynamic embodied activity of the mind within a contingent world (rather than removed from it through radical doubt) as proof of the existence of the mind: *je puis donc je suis*.[58]

This shared interest in science as a subjective reflection of the intuitive activity of the mind led both thinkers to an interest in pre-modern and even pre-scientific modes of enquiry. Bachelard became increasingly interested in the psychoanalysis of the history of science, including how certain individual and collective psyches prevented the abandonment of disproven concepts, blindly integrating them into supposedly purely modern ideas. Chapter Five will return

[57] Gaston Bachelard, *La Connaissance approchée* (Paris: Vrin, [1927] 1981), p. 8.
[58] Simone Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques*, ed. G Kahn and R Kühn, vol. I:1, Œuvres complètes (Gallimard, 1988), p. 89.

to Bachelard, exploring how such lapsed scientific ideas from alchemy and astrology helped Weil to ground science in intuitive and universal concepts. However, before doing so, Chapter Four, sets out Weil's more mature philosophy of science after 'Science et perception dans Descartes'.

Weil argued that modern science was in the grip of a sustained crisis that rendered it unfit to grasp the fullness of reality:

> Les savants, en séparant comme ils font la pensée scientifique de la pensée commune, se règlent sur leurs propres préjugés plutôt que sur la nature de la science. […] C'est à l'origine de la science moderne qu'il nous faut remonter, à la double révolution par laquelle la physique est devenue une application de la mathématique et la géometrie est devenue algèbre.[59]

This idea that abstract algebraic reductionism eclipsed intuitive experience and that narrow scientific calculation missed the deeper nature of being in the world brought Weil's philosophy into dialogue with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.[60]

Like Husserl, Weil diagnosed a destructive abstraction in the way modern science mediated intuitive experience. In *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936), Husserl presented the phenomenological concept of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) as the immediate horizon of all experience as it is available to consciousness. This comparison provides a lens through which to examine Weil's more diffuse analysis of how growing abstraction disrupted the pre-scientific realm of direct and intuitive experience. Both thinkers regarded the invention of algebra during the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution as key in ushering in an age of abstraction, although Husserl identified Galileo as responsible, whereas Weil chose to focus on Descartes.

The comparison with Husserl's phenomenological critique helps to illuminate Weil's argument. However, phenomenology was more concerned with reforming scientific methods than transcending them, as Weil's increasingly mystical perspective sought to do. The limited scholarship on Weil's philosophy of science, principally Vance Morgan's *Weaving the World:*

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[59] Ibid., p. 165.

[60] Weil described Husserl as one of the greatest living philosophers and read and discussed Heidegger with her peers. For Husserl see Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 66. For Heidegger see Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 304.

*Simone Weil on Science, Mathematics and Love* (2005), has focussed on this mystical enquiry without evoking its twentieth-century philosophical context.

Yet Weil remained in tune with her contemporaries. Like Weil, Heidegger was influenced by phenomenology's foundational principle that philosophy should be an account of consciousness and experience from which science had become abstracted. However, Heidegger wanted to go further than Husserl, beyond reforming the scientific method and providing a new understanding of consciousness as a system to probe not just being but the Being of beings. What Heidegger offered in *Being and Time* (1927) was an ontological critique of phenomenology and modern science with which Weil's thought converged in a number of ways.

Firstly, they both reflected on how to draw back the veil of abstraction to access a deeper plane of meaning. Heidegger called this state *Dasein*. Weil focused on the activity, rather than the state, of being in a heightened awareness of multidimensional being. She called this active process *lecture*. Weil herself remarked on the similarity between Heidegger's *Dasein* and her own concept of *lecture*.[61] Secondly, they both critiqued modern science for its incapacity to integrate these ontologies, since the artificially closed and totalising methods of experimental physics do not test what is in the world but what is postulated as there.

Both Weil and Heidegger challenged the self-verifying approach of modern science as Chapter Five, '"Fondement d'une science nouvelle": Analogy, Energy and Intuition', will show. The transition to Chapter Five represents a shift from diagnosis to response. Weil's solutions are structural. Like Heidegger in the 'The Age of the World Picture' (1950), Weil challenged the institutional structure that promoted 'constant activity' (*Betrieb*) at the expense of cautious enquiry.

Weil's methodological reflection on reforming science was largely built around a rehabilitation of analogy as a process of reasoning. Weil followed a number of contemporaries, including Gaston Bachelard and the historical epistemologist Hélène Metzger (1889-1944), in

[61] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 288.

affirming the intuitive legitimacy of reasoning which forges analogical rather than causal relationships between phenomena. For example, the intuitive analogies between the scientific properties of light and the religious notion of grace reflected in the title of the posthumous *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, for Weil revealed deep truths about the mysterious correspondences at work in our world.

Weil complemented these somewhat esoteric perspectives with mystically but also scientifically-inspired substantive solutions to reform the abstraction of modern science. She called for a radical re-think of science around the thermodynamic principle that energy could be transformed and degraded but not destroyed. She argued that extending this insight to new spheres, including morality, desire, alienation and economics could offer compelling explanations for phenomena as diverse as sexual sublimation and suicidal despair. This brought her into dialogue with other thinkers working to establish new scientific discourses related to energy, including Sigmund Freud and followers like Carl Jung, who conceived of sublimation in terms of energy displacement. Quite separately from psychoanalysis, Georges Bataille also put energy expenditure and transformation at the heart of his unconventional works of political economy like *La Notion de dépense* (1933) and *La Part maudite* (1949).

These diagnoses and solutions to the abstract and destructive forces of modernity represent a neglected but vital dimension of Weil's work. They reveal lines of coherence stratified in otherwise disparate texts. This set the stage for *L'Enracinement*, which formalised the diffuse theorisation of disconnection and alienation in all that had preceded it under one unifiying concept: uprootedness. Yet *L'Enracinement* is most frequently read in isolation, as a reaction not to the long history of modern decline, but to the sudden collapse of France under German occupation.

The purpose of this thesis is not to order Weil's œuvre around a new underlying logic, but rather to put her work (back) into dialogue with a vital intellectual context: the critical dissection of modernity as an experience. The idea expressed by Weil in the opening lines of this introduction, that modernity entails conditions that are new, disruptive, unbalanced, even intolerable for humanity, was one of the most pervasive and paradigmatic ideas of the post-Enlightenment age.

This diagnosis of modern estrangement eventually conceptualised as 'déracinement' had a multitude of classic variations in the political economy and emerging sociology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: 'alienation' (Marx), 'disenchantment' (Weber), 'anomie' (Durkheim) and 'quotidienneté' (Lefebvre, who Weil knew personally), to name just a few.

Weil was herself deeply aware of the philosophical and literary debate around modernity:

> Tout le monde répète, avec des termes légèrement différents, que nous souffrons d'un déséquilibre dû à un développement purement matériel de la technique. Le déséquilibre ne peut être réparé que par un développement spirituel dans le même domaine, c'est-à-dire dans le domaine du travail.[62]

It is clear in this passage that for Weil, like Marx, the experience of labour was integral. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx highlighted the frenzy of the 'bourgeois' modern age and how its effects could presage a proletarian revolution:

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.[63]

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62 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1087.

63 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm (London: Verso, [1848] 2012), p. 38-39.

From political economy to philosophy this idea of 'constant revolutionising' within a sterile and directionless modern culture became an intellectual trope.

Friedrich Nietzsche described in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) the advent of modernity as a 'turning point', characterised by contradiction, chaos and excess:

> At these turning points of history, a magnificent, diverse, jungle-like growth and upward striving, a kind of *tropical* tempo in the competition to grow will appear alongside (and often mixed up and tangled together with) an immense destruction and self-destruction. This is due to the wild egoisms that are turned explosively against each other, that wrestle each other 'for sun and light,' and can no longer derive any limitation, restraint, or refuge from morality as it has existed so far.[64]

Weil was deeply antipathetic to Nietzsche and yet she shared this idea that modern man was subject to a destructive disequilibrium.[65] Like Nietzsche she employed an organic vocabulary, applying it to whole societies and eras as well as to individuals in *L'Enracinement* (1943).

Weil initially, like Marx, identified modern alienation as particular to the industrial labourer. However, she diverged from Marxist political economy in that she did not consider wage labour and private ownership to be themselves necessary conditions for alienation. In this respect, she was closer to Durkheim and Weber, whose respective accounts of modern estrangement, *anomie* and *disenchantment*, refer to society as a whole.

For Durkheim society evolved like an organism away from an early undifferentiated model of 'mechanical solidarity', characterised by 'likeness' and a 'collective consciousness', towards a division of labour which favours interdependence and individual difference, characterised by 'organic solidarity'.[66] Where this organic solidarity was inhibited by industrial or economic crises, by monotony or a degradation in understanding of the larger whole, the

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[64] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. R.P. Horstmann and J. Norman, trans. J. Norman, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1886] 2002), p. 159.

[65] 'Nietzsche m'inspire [ . . .] une répulsion invincible et presque physique; et cela même quand il exprime des choses que je pense.' Weil, *Correspondance familiale* VII.1, p. 481.

[66] Émile Durkheim, *De la division du travail social* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, [1893] 1991), p. 410.

division of labour became anomic: 'si la division du travail ne produit pas la solidarité, c'est que les relations des organes ne sont pas réglementées, c'est qu'elles sont dans un état d'*anomie*'.[67] Durkheim extended *anomie* in his 1897 book *Le Suicide*, which Weil had read,[68] to describe the society-wide loss of moral, religious and civic values and the subsequent social disintegration as behaviour is no longer regulated by normative rules.[69]

Weil used these definitions of solidarity and *anomie* in early texts such as 'Fonctions morales de la profession' (1931) as a starting point to understand the role of labour in expressing and shaping morality.[70] In later texts, Weil drew on Durkheim's characterisation of religion as a collective intoxication to support her idea that the depersonalising and oppressive effects of modern collective existence were analogous with traditional representations of the apocalypse.[71] More generally, Weil's eventual conceptualisation of social disintegration in terms of 'uprootedness' and her preference for a 'rooted' community based on mutual obligation bear marks of Durkheim's emphasis on 'solidarity' and individual interdependence.

However, this view of modernity as an erosion of culture, belief and values is equally inseparable from the work of Durkheim's German contemporary, Max Weber. For Weber 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung)* was the process whereby modern societies assert rational understandings of the world at the expense of sacred and magical understandings. There was gain in instrumental scientific terms but also an inevitable loss of meaning and 'sublime' values:

> The fate of our times is characterized by […] the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from

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[67]Ibid., p. 360.

[68] Simone Weil had studied Durkheim closely. See Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 43. She taught Durkheim to her lycée pupils in Roanne. See Simone Weil, *Leçons de philosophie (Roanne 1933-1934)*, ed. Anne Reynaud-Guérithault, Collection: 10/18 (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1959), pp. 215-216.

[69] In *Le Suicide* (1897), Durkheim noted that *anomie* had extended beyond the economy to reach all part of society: 'Depuis un siècle, en effet, le progrès économique a principalement consisté à affranchir les relations industrielles de toute règlementation. […] Voilà d'où vient l'effervescence qui règne dans cette partie de la société [l'économie], mais qui, de là, s'est étendue au reste. C'est que l'état de crise et d'anomie y est constant et, pour ainsi dire, normal.' Emile Durkheim, *Le Suicide* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, [1897] 1983), pp. 283-285.

[70] Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques* I.1, p. 263.

[71] See Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 354, p. 503. See also Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 240, n.243.

> public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of personal human relations.[72]

Weil argued that since the Renaissance (as opposed to the Reformation, as in Weber's view), culture, education and labour had suppressed spiritual and sublime values, favouring specialisation, abstraction and a refusal of spirituality:

> La Renaissance a partout provoqué une coupure entre les gens cultivés et la masse; […] en séparant la culture de la tradition nationale […]. Il en est résulté […] une culture considérablement orientée vers la technique et influencée par elle, très teintée de pragmatisme, extrêmement fragmentée par la spécialisation, tout à fait dénuée à la fois de contact avec cet univers-ci et d'ouverture vers l'autre monde.[73]

Weil's work documented the intellectual, social and cultural costs of this rationalising process down to the smallest everyday detail, such as the songs workers sang.[74]

Weil shared the aspiration with contemporary sociologists such as Henri Lefebvre, to chart the advance of rationalisation as well as popular resistance to it. Lefebvre, who she befriended in Marseille,[75] argued that to understand modern alienation it was necessary to incorporate the experience of everyday life as a dialectical site of control and oppression. This was the basis of his three-volume *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947-1981) followed by the posthumous *Rythmanalyse* (1992) in which everyday life increasingly surrendered its natural rhythms and intuitive orders to the invasion of modern capitalist consumption:

> Le quotidien est à la fois le lieu, le théâtre, et l'enjeu d'un conflit entre les grands rythmes [cosmiques et vitaux] et les processus imposés par l'organisation socio-économique de la production, de la consommation, de la circulation et de l'habitat.[76]

This debate about the effects of modernity on the self and on society was of course not restricted to sociology and political economy. A wide range of writers and intellectuals who were

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[72] Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), p. 155.
[73] Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1053.
[74] Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, p. 232.
[75] Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.
[76] Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier, 'Le Projet rythmanalytique' in *L'Espace perdu et le temps retrouvé*, ed. Rémy Lestienne and Edgar Morin, *Communications* (Paris: Persée, 1985), pp. 191-192.

contemporaries of Weil were wrestling with ideas about the abstraction and the estrangement inflicted by modernity. Walter Benjamin and Paul Valéry, who are key comparisons in Chapter Three, have already been mentioned, but many other thinkers were grappling with the destructive effects of modernity, often blurring the lines between left and right.

Like Valéry, who described himself as 'right among the left and left among the right,'[77] Charles Péguy, the socialist Dreyfusard turned Catholic nationalist, was a theorist of the crisis and decline of civilisation who resisted political categorisation.[78] Péguy's *Notre Jeunesse* (1910) charted the disintegration of a pure, just and truth-loving Dreyfusard Republican 'mysticism' into degenerate political ambition:

> Nous sommes les derniers témoins […]. Nous ne savons pas encore si nos enfants renoueront le fil de la tradition, de la conservation républicaine, [s'ils] retrouveront le sens et l'instinct de la mystique républicaine. […] Aussitôt après nous commence un autre âge, un tout autre monde, le monde de ceux qui ne croient plus à rien. […]; le monde de ceux qui n'ont pas de mystique. […] C'est proprement la stérilité moderne.[79]

For Péguy as for Weil, progress in the future relied on roots in the past, or as he referred to it in 'Brunetière' (1906), to draw on the deepest sources of communal sap:

> Une humanité ultérieure, vraiment digne de ce nom […] ne vient au jour après et sur une humanité antérieure que si elle fait un appel de sève plus profond, que si elle fait appel à un ressourcement plus profond dans les communes sources de sève de la perpétuellement arborescente humanité.[80]

Weil and Péguy's belief in a return to communal, regional and national 'roots', was part of a relatively widely shared but disputed discourse on the decline of civilisation expressed across the political spectrum.

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[77] 'De *droite*, par instinct; de *gauche*, par l'esprit, de *droite* au milieu des gauches, et de *gauche* au milieu des droites'. Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, [1894-1945] 1974), p. 1494.

[78] Weil was familiar with Péguy, who she mentions on a number of occassions, including his misplaced patriotism in *L'Enracinement,* Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1118.

[79] Charles Péguy, *Notre jeunesse* (Paris: Gallimard, [1910] 1957), pp. 14-16.

[80] Charles Péguy, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1988), p. 582.

Weil would almost certainly have known that her chosen vocabulary of "enracinement" and "déracinement" evoked one of the most famous of the anti-Dreyfusard novels: Maurice Barrès's *Les Déracinés* (1897). The novel attacked the modern disintegration of France through a thinly veiled anti-Semitic conservative nationalism. Barres's right-wing organicist narrative of societal crisis blamed (Jewish) cosmopolitanism and the universal Kantian philosophy spread by Parisian elites for the moral uprooting of French youth. The novel follows the lives of seven school children, who turn their backs on their native Lorraine region and follow their charismatic Kantian lycée teacher to Paris, leading to moral disintegration and misery. The teacher, Bouteiller, is characterised as a rootless 'philosophe nomade', and a 'sorcier de jadis':[81]

> Déraciner ces enfants, les détacher du sol et du groupe sociale où tout les relie, pour les placer hors de leurs préjugés dans la raison abstraite, comment cela le gênerait-il, lui qui n'a pas de sol, ni de société, ni, pense-t-il, de préjugé.[82]

For Barrès, morality and identity were shaped by insertion in a native soil and a racial and religious heritage. Despite the convergence in terminology, Weil and Péguy were working within very different Republican and left-wing traditions. They discounted race, emphasising instead the nature of communal identity, whether it be religious, regional, linguistic or cultural, as inherently plural.

The anti-abstractionism of Barrès's novel, like his organic vocabulary, was not restricted to the extreme right. There was a broad movement amongst twentieth-century intellectuals away from theoretical abstraction and towards the concrete values of lived experience. Julien Benda, a friend and intellectual associate of Péguy's, captured this sentiment early on in his influential *La Trahison des clercs* (1927). Benda described the rise of the modern intellectual in France as the advent of abstraction: 'la France est la revanche de l'abstrait sur le concret'.[83] This view resonated with the prevailing belief, shared by Weil ten years later in 'Ne recommençons

[81] Maurice Barrès, *Les Déracines* (Paris: Plon, [1897] 1947), p. 50.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Julien Benda, *La Trahison des clercs* (Paris: Grasset, [1927] 2003), p. 12.

pas la guerre de Troie' (1937), that modernity consisted in a loss of authentic experience and a subordination to empty abstractions or absolutes:

> En tout domaine nous semblons avoir perdu les notions essentielles de l'intelligence, les notions de limite, de mesure, de degré, de proportion, de relation, de rapport, de condition, de liaison nécessaire, de connexion entre moyen et résultat. […] Notre univers politique est exclusivement peuplé de mythes et de monstres; nous n'y connaissons que des absolus.[84]

For Weil's generation these anti-abstractionist discourses remained present.

On the right, Charles Maurras had picked up the mantle of Barrès, leading the royalist and extreme-right movement *Action française.* On the left, Paul Nizan's *Les Chiens de garde* (1932) attacked the dominant abstraction of France's leading idealist philosophers, such as Léon Brunschvicg and Henri Bergson. Nizan's friend Jean-Paul Sartre relished the philosophical attack on abstract idealism: 'C'est du concret total que nous voulions partir, c'est au concret absolu que nous voulions arriver'.[85] Weil seemed to have little interest in nascent existentialism, but she shared this contemporary view in 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie' that growing abstraction had to be addressed through a philosophy of the concrete:

> Nous agissons, nous luttons, nous sacrifions nous-mêmes et autrui en vertu d'abstractions cristallisées, isolées, impossibles à mettre en rapport entre elles ou avec les choses concrètes. Notre époque soi-disant technicienne ne sait que se battre contre les moulins à vent […]. Eclaircir les notions, discréditer les mots congénitalement vides, définir l'usage des autres par des analyses précises, c'est cela, si étrange que cela puisse paraître, un travail qui pourrait préserver des existences humaines.[86]

For Weil, intellectual resistance to modern abstraction, whether in politics, philosophy or science was literally a question of life or death.

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[84] Simone Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques: Vers la guerre (1937-1940)*, ed. S. Fraisse, vol. II:3, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 52.
[85] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique: Théorie des ensembles pratiques*, vol. 1 (1960), p. 23.
[86] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.3, pp. 51-52.

This analysis of Weil's participation in philosophical debates about the modern world questions the implicit and often unsubstantiated assumption that Weil was an 'unorthodox', 'esoteric' and excessively 'original' thinker operating within an entirely archaic frame of reference.[87] The leading authorities on Weil's thought have labeled her a 'Christian Platonist', [88] a 'religious metaphysicist',[89] or a pure 'mystic'.[90]

These labels built on contemporary accounts. Weil was invariably described in terms that emphasised her distance from the mainstream, whether affectionately by Alain as a 'Martian',[91] by Gabriel Marcel as a 'témoin de l'absolu',[92] by Raymond Aron as an 'objet de culte', [93] or by Georges Bataille as a 'Don Quichotte […] que l'impossible attirait'. [94] Contemporaries such as Simone de Beauvoir admired her formidable intelligence, but de Beauvoir was hardly alone in admitting 'je ne pouvais pas l'annexer à mon univers'.[95]

In the 1980s Raymond Aron described the pressure to idolise Weil's genius and sacrifice: 'Toute remarque que n'inspire pas l'admiration, qu'elle mérite à coup sûr, risque de passer pour indécente, iconoclaste'.[96] Accounts of Weil have bordered on the hagiographical. In his preface to the 1952 edition in English of *L'Enracinement*, *The Need for Roots,* T.S. Eliot described Weil as 'a potential saint', possessing 'a kind of genius akin to that of the saints'.[97] As Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucien Stone have noted, biographies often revel in anecdotes of

87 Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 6. Thomas R. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 176. John Hellman, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to her Thought* (Wilfrind Laurier University Press, (1982) 2014), p. 4, p. 17, p. 103.
88 Doering and Springsted, *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil.*
89 Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil.*
90 Davy, *The Mysticism of Simone Weil.*
91 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 49.
92 Gabriel Marcel, 'Simone Weil, témoin de l'absolu', *Cahiers Simone Weil* 4, no. 1 (1981).
93 Raymond Aron, *Mémoires* (Paris: Julliard, 1983), p. 78.
94 Georges Bataille, 'La victoire militaire et la banqueroute de la morale qui maudit (1949)', in *Œuvres complètes: Articles 1944-1949* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 536.
95 de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge*, p. 166.
96 Aron, *Mémoires*, p. 78.
97 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. viii.

childhood genius 'reminiscent of stories of saints' divinely inspired speeches and miracles'.[98] They cite the example of Gabriella Fiori's *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography*.[99] This applies in certain respects also to *La Vie de Simone Weil* (1973), by Weil's close friend Simone Pétrement, still unsurpassed in its detail,[100] but also to biographical studies by Richard Rees, Marie-Madeleine Davy, Jacques Cabaud and the first-hand account of Weil's religious conversion by J.M. Perrin and Gustave Thibon, *Simone Weil telle que nous l'avons connue* (1952).[101]

Psychological accounts of her work are also increasingly prominent. Scholars have speculated on the importance to her philosophy of her alleged anorexia (du Plessix Grey and Duran);[102] her reported phobia of touch and intimacy (Plant and Coles);[103] as well as her supposed self-loathing anti-Semitism (Yougrau and Nevin).[104] These neuroses surely had an impact on her thought, with hunger, sexuality and a desire for self-harm appearing relatively often in her *Cahiers* and some of her articles and fragments. There is no doubt that these shed light on the conditions of her untimely death. However, a purely psychological focus should not promote an insular reading of her philosophy at the expense of a more contextual reading.

A number of scholars of Weil have noted the prevailing absence of contextualisation without offering any remedy. For instance, Moulakis observes in *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-denial* (1998) that:

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98 Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 197.

99 Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Joseph R. Berrigan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 15.

100 The account of Weil's childhood abounds in instances of precocious genius, reported by figures as diverse as the family hairdresser and the surgeon who operated on the three year old Weil for appendicitis, believing her too brilliant to live. See Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 18. See also Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-exiled Jew*, p. 5.

101 Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait*. Marie-Madeleine Davy, *Simone Weil* (Paris: PUF, 1966). J.M. Perrin and Gustave Thibon, *Simone Weil telle que nous l'avons connue* (Paris: Éditions du Vieux Colombier, 1952). Cabaud, *L'Expérience vécue de Simone Weil*.

102 Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York: Viking, 2001); Jane Duran, *Eight Women Philosophers: Theory, Politics, and Feminism* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

103 Plant, *Simone Weil: A Brief Introduction*; Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Boston: Radcliffe, 1987).

104 Yougrau, *Simone Weil*; Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-exiled Jew*.

> The existing literature has so far made no effort to present Weil's political thought both in its philosophical foundations and in relation to its social and intellectual background. Weil is certainly original, and in many respects an oddity, but she is also, to a degree not yet sufficiently acknowledged, the product of her time.[105]

Yet Moulakis himself does not 'sufficiently acknowledge' or contextualise important areas of Weil's life and thought. Revolutionary syndicalism, for example, the only political movement to which Weil actively adhered, is hardly mentioned.

Moulakis seeks to engage with Weil's political thought, not in relation to its time, but in relation to her theology.[106] Like many Weil scholars, Moulakis seeks a theoretical or thematic unity that transcends the diffuse and disparate nature of Weil's philosophy. He proposes a personality-driven explanation of 'self-denial', which sees an unbroken line of intellectual coherence between the factory-based philosopher and the obsessive sacrificial empathy of the mystical *résistante*.

Other less biographically-driven unifying threads have been offered. The dominant interpretation has been that of the French-Hungarian philosopher Miklos Vetö and his American disciple, Eric O. Springsted. They have read Weil through the lens of religious metaphysics, specifically Christian Platonism. Vetö has little interest in Weil's political thought, regarding Weil's late mystically-charged conceptualisation of 'decreation' as 'the only term that adequately expresses her fundamental intuition: that of the self-annihilating vocation of human beings'.[107]

The idea that religious metaphysics offers the key to unlocking the coherence of Weil's philosophy is shared by Springsted, who argues that 'the key to the metaphysical structure of her thought lay in her appropriation of Platonic and Pythagorean mediation.'[108] His core idea is that Weil's philosophy plays with contradiction in order to illuminate deeper metaphysical unity: 'Mediation in this sense, is in its most general foundation a harmonization of incommensurable

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105 Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 18.
106 Ibid., p. 16.
107 Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, p. 11.
108 Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil*, American Academy of Religion Series (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), p. vii.

elements into a unity that does not destroy the integrity or the order of its parts.'[109] In this view, the heterogeneous and even contradictory nature of Weil's thought becomes paradigmatic of her deeper metaphysical purpose. This approach allows Springsted confidently to treat her philosophy as 'cohere[d] into an invisible whole' with Christ as the 'prime mediator'.[110]

Like Vetö, Springsted and Moulakis, Robert Chenavier, a leading French scholar of Weil and editor of her *Œuvres complètes,* has asserted the existence of a unifying logic at work in her philosophy:

> Il y a une cohérence de la pensée philosophique de Simone Weil. […] Les notes, les fragments, les aphorismes apparents, l'interprète doit les relier, non pour achever l'œuvre, mais pour manifester l'exigence de cohérence de sa philosophie.[111]

However, for Chenavier, the early political corpus is not peripheral but foundational in this regard. In his *Simone Weil: Une philosophie du travail*, Chenavier systematises Weil's thought around the principle that work bestows an intuitive truth-giving 'attention'.[112] This makes her early socialist belief in the self-realising capacity of work and her later mystic preoccupation with the spiritual transcendence of suffering, including through labour, deeply coherent. However, Chenavier's commitment to uncovering resonances between her earlier and later work does not extend to establishing resonances with her contemporaries, whether it be those who wrote alongside her in *La Révolution prolétarienne* and *La Critique sociale*, or those who shaped the intellectual discourses of her time, such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

More recent Weil scholarship has produced important exceptions to this, with a number of articles and chapters in edited volumes, if not monographs, taking a comparative and contextualising approach. In particular, Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone's *The Relevance of*

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[109] Ibid., p. 247.
[110] Ibid., p. 7, p. 248.
[111] Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), p. 18, p. 22.
[112] His recent much shorter overview of Weil written for a broader audience as a general introduction to her thought retains this basic idea. See Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil: L'attention au réel* (Paris: Michalon, 2009). 'Attention' is also the chosen unifying principle in another short introduction: Joel Janiaud, *Simone Weil: L'attention et l'action* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 2002).

*the Radical* (2009) marked an effort a century after her birth to re-evaluate her philosophy as relevant to modern thought, notably to feminism and to the theorisation of power and violence since Foucault.[113] Rozelle-Stone has continued to lead efforts to open Weil's thought to new resonances. Her *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy* includes studies of Weil alongside contemporary thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière, but also original comparisons with figures of her time, including the Russian political and religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev.[114] In France the effort to update scholarly thinking on Weil has been led by Frédéric Worms at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, whose *Simone Weil, lectures politiques* (2011) prepared in collaboration with Valérie Gérard, and *Simone Weil, notre contemporaine* (a 2012 edition of the journal *Esprit)*, have contributed studies of Weil alongside contemporaries such as Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus and George Orwell.[115]

The tendency to search for unifying but all too often distorting coherences across Weil's broad and diverse œuvre seems to be weakening. This leaves scope for more outward-looking approaches. This thesis hopes to contribute to this re-evaluation of Weil through a fuller understanding of her intellectual and political engagement with the two themes that defined her critical view of her modern context: work and science.

Weil's philosophy is unconventional, at times structured and clear, at others proceeding in more or less fragmentary form along eccentric, even deliberately irrational lines. Her thought is intuitive and impulsive, changeable and yet deeply resistant to qualification and self-doubt. Raymond Aron reflected on his own failed discussions with her: 'Le commerce intellectuel avec Simone me parut presque impossible. Elle ignorait apparemment le doute et, si ses opinions pouvaient changer, elles étaient toujours aussi catégoriques.'[116] However uncompromising her

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113 Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later.*
114 Rebecca Rozelle-Stone, *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).
115 See Valérie Gérard, ed. *Simone Weil, lectures politiques* (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2011); and Frédéric Worms, *Simone Weil, notre contemporaine*, Esprit (Paris 2012).
116 Aron, *Mémoires*, p. 78-79.

attitude remained in debate with her peers, it lent itself to confrontation with received ideas and opposing ideologies. Weil did not hold back. Her engagement with the big ideas and dominant forces of her time dictated her actions and directed her thought. Albert Camus rightly recognised this as the defining legacy of her philosophy:

> Elle portait fièrement son goût, ou plutôt sa folie, de vérité. Car si c'est là un privilège, il est de ceux qu'on paie à longueur de vie, sans jamais trouver de repos. Et cette folie a permis à Simone Weil, au-delà des préjugés les plus naturels, de comprendre la maladie de son époque et d'en discerner les remèdes.[117]

[117] Albert Camus, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. III (1949-1956), ed. R Gay-Crosier (Paris: Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2008), p. 864-865.

# Part I.

# Simone Weil, Philosopher of Work

> Rimbaud se plaignait que 'nous ne sommes pas au monde', et que 'la vraie vie est absente'. […] S'il en peut être ainsi à notre époque, quelle merveilleuse plénitude de vie ne pourrait-on pas attendre d'une civilisation où le travail serait assez transformé pour exercer pleinement toutes les facultés, pour constituer l'acte humain par excellence.[118]

Written in 1934, the year before she began factory work, this extract illustrates the extent to which Weil still held to an idealisation of manual work typical of the Marxist left. Yet, in this passage, from 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', she goes beyond economic and political perspectives to regard work as the corrective to the existential *malaise* of Arthur Rimbaud.

She would undertake factory work in 1935 to help understand how a reformed culture of work could fill this absence and emancipate the subject in every dimension of life. Yet she would emerge broken, pessimistic and uncertain as to how such a reform could be achieved. Ultimately, it would lead her to an intellectual project to reconceive the foundations of knowledge in science and to reformulate the foundations of society in *L'Enracinement* in 1943.

This was the evolution of a thought that began in a very different tradition: in the work-centred socialism of revolutionary syndicalism in which Weil was an active militant, up to, and to a more limited extent after, her factory work.

This first part of the thesis, divided into three chapters, will explore this evolution, from the profound influence of revolutionary syndicalism, in Chapter One ('Emancipatory Work: Syndicalism and the Primacy of Labour'), to her broader convergence with the French 'alternative'

[118] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 90.

anti-Bolshevik left, somtimes known as France's *deuxième gauche*, in Chapter Two ("'Entre deux feux": Communism, Fascism and the Critique of Marx'). Whereas in Chapter One the syndicalist primacy of work as emancipation is the principal focus, in Chapter Two the engagement is more intellectual than practical, rooted in a common criticism of Marx and rejection of Soviet scientific socialism.

Weil would ultimately become frustrated with political theorising, as the rise of totalitarian ideologies on the left and the right appeared to make the possibility of a proletarian revolution even more remote. Her conviction that socialism, including revolutionary syndicalism, had reached an *impasse*, capable of diagnosing certain elements of modern (particularly industrial) oppression but not how to alleviate them, led her to put her own body and mind on the revolutionary front line by undertaking the most physically and mentally taxing tasks in the modern factory. The philosophical and political insights yielded by this experimental method will be explored in Chapter Three ('Embodiment, Temporality and Industrial Modernity').

The nature of the work which she experienced in the inter-war factory, known as 'rationalised', meaning tasks had been broken down and redistributed to maximise efficiency, shocked her in terms of its physical and psychological destructiveness. Nothing in her theoretical or activist engagement with socialism had prepared her for these experiences. Her observations gave her a concrete basis upon which to define the precise nature of modern alienation as an embodied experience, bringing her thought into dialogue with a number of other theorists of modernity, most notably Walter Benjamin, who also put the experience of the 'shock' of modernity (*Chokerlebnis*) at the heart of his thought.

# Chapter One

## *Emancipatory Work: Syndicalism and the Primacy of Labour*

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> Le syndicalisme, c'est un idéal auquel il faut penser tous les jours, sur lequel il faut toujours avoir les yeux fixés. Etre syndicaliste, c'est une manière de vivre, cela veut dire se conformer dans tout ce qu'on fait à l'idéal syndicaliste.[119]

Weil wrote these lines in November 1936, at the height of the Popular Front, welcoming a new generation of union members into the Confédération Générale de Travail (CGT). Between 1895 and 1914 this revolutionary syndicalist union had been the dominant revolutionary force in France, and, although the leadership was reformist from 1914, a strong revolutionary tradition prevailed among many militants, including Simone Weil.

Nicknamed 'la vierge rouge' by her contemporaries, in a deliberate reference to the *communarde* Louise Michel, she was an active student militant: 'A dix-huit ans, c'est le mouvement syndical seul qui m'attirait'.[120] This attraction continued with varying degrees of intensity throughout the 1930s as student, teacher, factory worker, and republican volunteer in the anarchist POUM unit of the Spanish Civil War.

Weil's commitment to the syndicalist cause shaped her life, her friendships, her political engagement and, most significantly, it shaped her philosophy. This chapter will explore a wide range of syndicalist influences, showing how Weil's thought echoed the movement's terminology, ideas and goals to put forward a syndicalist-inspired philosophy of work, drawing on the legacies of Proudhon, Hegel and Rousseau. In particular, she also used the philosophy of Descartes to provide a philosophical justification for the syndicalist claim that work was emancipatory. Having established the philosophical grounding of Weil's syndicalism, the chapter

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119 'Lettre ouverte à un syndiqué', ibid., p. 394.
120 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 11.

will then look at specifically syndicalist ideas set out in her thought. These include the importance of private property, the positive view of technology, decentralisation and the abolition of political parties, all of which are present from her earliest political engagement to the final pages of *L'Enracinement* (1943).

Yet the influence of syndicalism on Weil has been largely neglected. Weil scholarship has, of course, acknowledged the importance of her political engagement to varying degrees, but the analysis has remained principally biographical and internal to her own thought. For example, studies have explored the progression of her views over time on subjects related to the political (and syndicalist) sphere, such as work (Chenavier's 2001 study *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail*); violence (Doering's 2010 *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*) and justice (Bell's 1998 book *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion*).[121] In all these studies, the context of revolutionary syndicalism is acknowledged but it is not treated as an active ingredient in her thought. For many scholars of Weil, syndicalism is the forum in which she expressed her views, but not the form in which she expressed them.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. The main one is likely to be that specialists on Weil generally come from a philosophical or theological background (usually both), and have little interest in the particular history of the revolutionary syndicalist movement. This is compounded by the fact that this tradition has been successfully eclipsed by more pervasive forms of socialism, in particular scientific Marxism and Soviet Communism (both of which syndicalism mostly resisted and in many instances entirely rejected). There has also been a received wisdom among biographers, influenced by the accounts of Simone Pétrement and Jacques Cabaud, that Weil abandoned revolutionary syndicalism as early as 1934.[122] This is premised on a statement she made in a letter of November 1934 to a student of hers and in a

[121] See Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail*; E. Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); Richard Bell, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 1998).
[122] Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 324. See also Cabaud, *L'Expérience vécue de Simone Weil*, pp. 83-84.

letter to Pétrement, but in other statements she remained committed.[123] The quote of 1936 which opened this chapter is one example. As late as 1943, in *L'Enracinement*, she was re-asserting the importance of a syndicalist commitment: 'Les faibles restes d[u] syndicalisme sont au nombre des étincelles sur lesquelles il est le plus urgent de souffler'.[124] Indeed, as this chapter will show, the substantive changes Weil suggested for post-Liberation France in *L'Enracinement* display a distinctly syndicalist outlook.

Yet, studies of Weil which do look closely at the influence of left-wing thought focus almost entirely on Marxism, such as Blum and Seidler's *A Truer Liberty* (1989), which examines Weil's political thought as a critical and direct reading of Marx. By Weil's own admission, when she read *Das Kapital* as an adolescent she found it 'contradictory' and 'defective', a view which she claimed persisted throughout her life.[125] As late as 1938 she was still calling for the revolutionary movement to orient itself away from Marx and reconnect with largely anti-Marxist socialist traditions, such as Proudhonism, syndicalism and anarchism.[126]

Despite this, Blum and Seidler treat her syndicalism as a biographical but intellectually marginal context. They acknowledge that Weil 'remained in close contact and sympathy with revolutionary syndicalism […], much closer than she was to the Marxism of the Communist Party'.[127] They also acknowledge that this sympathy influenced her ideas on political parties and the primacy of unions, but they do not go further. They simply assert this influence in the early biographical chapters and abandon it altogether as a line of enquiry in the substantive analysis of her Marxism. Blum and Seidler do not present her ideas about Marx as particularly syndicalist in nature.

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123 She wrote to a student in 1934: 'Je suis bien décidée à ne plus prendre part à rien dans le domaine politique et social', Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 324. To Pétrement, she wrote in the same year: 'J'ai décidé de me retirer entièrement de toute espèce de politique, sauf pour la recherche théorique.' Ibid., p. 291.
124 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1057.
125 In 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 134.
126 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 358.
127 Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*, p. 4.

Other assessments of Weil's Marxism by scholars such as Robert Sparling and Thomas Dommange have deepened our understanding of Weil's reading of Marx, but not how this reading was shaped by revolutionary syndicalism. In 'Simone Weil: Le marxisme hors de soi' (2007), Dommange rightly shows how Marx continued to influence Weil longer than is commonly held, arguing that there is no clear distinction between her 'Marxist' and 'mystical' years.[128] Sparling challenges the idea (and Weil's own assertion) that her critique of Marx was based on his political misapplication of a sound materialist philosophy. Sparling claims in 'Theory and Praxis: Simone Weil and Marx on the Dignity of Labor' (2012) that their 'radically different [philosophical] conceptions of labor and its dignity' are the root of their divergence.[129] However, both of these recent contributions fail to mention Weil's syndicalism and anti-Bolshevism as constitutive of her perspective on Marx. This omission is surprising, since for Dommange Weil's syndicalist engagement could help to explain her continued interest in Marx, even more so in the case of Sparling, since a fundamental philosophical underpinning of syndicalism was that work was intrinsically dignified and emancipatory.

Beyond the specific case of Marx's influence, scholarship which claims to explore in depth Weil's political thought also presents syndicalism one-dimensionally as a biographical context, rather than as an active intellectual one. Athenos Moulakis' *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial* (1989), which claims to deliver 'a comprehensive study of her political thought' refers in dismissive tones to syndicalism as 'giv[ing] voice to the naive emotional protest of the masses' and does not offer any substantive analysis of how syndicalism influenced Weil.[130] A more recent study, edited by Valérie Gérard, *Simone Weil, lectures politiques* (2011), reads her political thought in

[128] Thomas Dommange, 'Simone Weil: Le marxisme hors de soi', *Les Études philosophiques* 3, no. 82 (2007), pp. 221-222.
[129] Robert Sparling, 'Theory and Praxis: Simone Weil and Marx on the Dignity of Labor', *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 01 (2012), p. 87.
[130] Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 48.

the light of contemporaries such as Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt, but ignores what is most obviously political in her thought: her engagement with the revolutionary syndicalist left.[131]

Patrice Rolland stands out as the only scholar of Weil who gives serious consideration and a moderate amount of space to the syndicalist influence. He regards her involvement in the movement as linked to another influence: the teaching of Alain. For Rolland, beyond the biographical dimension, it was the anti-authoritarianism and the belief in human dignity which represent the key points of the syndicalist inheritance:

> L'individualisme de Simone Weil sans doute puisé à celui d'Alain rencontre la source libertaire du syndicalisme révolutionnaire. Cette racine commune produit à la fois le sens de la dignité individuelle et ce refus des autorités qui fut peut-être un des principes les plus actifs du syndicalisme révolutionnaire. L'individualisme de Simone Weil et du syndicalisme révolutionnaire jaillit d'abord du sens éminent de la dignité individuelle.[132]

However, Rolland does not go far enough. Weil's syndicalism went beyond an anti-authoritarian individualism and a humanist commitment to dignity, colouring her definition of freedom, her support for decentralisation, her view of technology, political parties and the State, to name just a few. He does not quote from syndicalist primary sources, asserting rather than illustrating what the ideas of syndicalism were and how they influenced Weil.

This chapter will seek to provide this missing context. The aim is not only to argue that this context can help elucidate her philosophy, it is also to make the case that this context is necessary in understanding her view of modern society and work. However, in order to do so it is useful to recall who the revolutionary syndicalists were and what they believed.

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131 See Gérard, *Simone Weil, lectures politiques*.

132 Patrice Rolland, 'Simone Weil et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire', in *Simone Weil, l'expérience de la vie et le travail de la pensée*, ed. Charles Jacquier (Arles: Editions Sulliver 1998), p. 88.

*The French Revolutionary Syndicalism Movement*

The revolutionary syndicalist and anti-Soviet left-wing currents in which Weil was involved were part of what is sometimes referred to as France's 'deuxième gauche' or 'alternative left'.[133] This diffuse anti-Soviet, often anti-Marxist, movement had its origins in the rejection of Jacobin parliamentarism and centralisation and more precisely in the anarchist and libertarian ideas of the First International (1864-1876).[134]

The First International's key theorists were the mutualist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) and the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876). Karl Marx was a divisive figure in the movement, promoting a very unanarchist commitment to party political action, centralised power and state socialism. The internecine struggle between the anarchists and the Marxists resulted in the dissolution of the International in 1876 and a lasting divide between the black flag of anarchism and the red flag of state socialism.[135]

The revolutionary syndicalist movement emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as the fusion of classical anarchism with various strands of proletarian and artisanal French trade unionism to form the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT).[136] After being the dominant force on the revolutionary left until the First World War, the movement was overtaken by

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133 Jeremy Jennings, *Syndicalism in France: A Study of Ideas* (London: MacMillan, 1990), p. 225.

134 Also known as the International Working Men's Association (IWA)

135 The influential First International anarchist James Guillaume, notoriously the victim alongside Bakunin of Marx's strategizing to eliminate the anarchists from the movement at the Hague Conference of 1872, famously said 'Like the cuckoo, Marx came to lay his egg in a nest that was not his'. Marx and his followers went on to form the Second International, a federation of national socialist parties committed to parliamentarism, from which anarchism was forcibly excluded, and out of which subsequent Internationals and Soviet communism emerged. Anarchism re-emerged as a significant force in revolutionary politics via the revolutionary syndicalist movement in France. For a detailed account of the decline of the First International and the emergence of syndicalism as a fusion of trade unionism and anarchism see Wayne Thorpe, *'The Workers Themselves'. Syndicalism and International Labour: the Origins of the International Working Men's Association, 1913-1923* (Amsterdam: Kulwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p. 3.

136 On how the early French movement overcame the tension between the large urban socialist unions and the regional anarchist craft unions associated with the *Bourses de travail* movement see Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies on Labour and Politics in France, 1830-1981* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p. 98.

reformists.[137] The revolutionary branch survived but was divided between the anti-Soviet revolutionary minority in the CGT (to which Weil belonged); the pro-Soviet CGT Unitaire (CGTU) and a third purely anarchist faction. Weil worked hard to re-unite the movement, a fact even the most cursory examination of the title of her political articles will confirm: 'La marche vers l'unité syndicale: une réunion intersyndicale au Puy' (1931); 'Déclaration à la séance du 22 avril 1933 de la conférence dite d'unification; or 'Front unique et unité syndicale' (1933).[138]

Weil's biographical engagement with syndicalism is well documented, in particular by Simone Pétrement and by Patrice Rolland in the studies already mentioned. The focus of this chapter is her intellectual engagement with syndicalism, how it shaped her ideas about the modern world and how it deepens our understanding of her philosophy of work. In this respect, the syndicalist primacy of work, influenced by Proudhon and by Hegel, is an important point of departure.

*The Syndicalist Primacy of Work*

The significance of the periodical title, *L'Atelier*, chosen by the inter-war syndicalist leader Léon Jouhaux (1879-1954), would not have been lost on his contemporaries, including Simone Weil.[139] This synecdochical choice expressed the famous anarchist aspiration of Joseph Proudhon: 'L'atelier remplacera le gouvernement'.

Proudhon's assertion encapsulated the core idea of revolutionary syndicalism, essential to Weil's philosophy: labour is the foundational, life-generating and emancipatory activity of

[137] Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out that this early dominance of syndicalism is often overlooked by contemporary commentators, distracted by the meteoric rise of Marxism and communism from 1917: 'It became hard to recall that in 1905-1914, the Marxist left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of Marxists had been identified with a *de facto* non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical Marxism'. See Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London: Abacus, 1999), p. 72.
[138] See Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, pp. 62-64.; ibid., pp. 203-206.; and ibid., pp. 244-246.
[139] Indeed Berth acknowledged this provenance of *L'Atelier* (1920-1933) in *La Révolution prolétarienne*: Edouard Berth, 'Proudhon et Marx' *La Révolution prolétarienne: Revue mensuelle syndicaliste communiste* 1926, p. 14.

mankind and ought therefore to be the organising principle for civil and political society. Syndicalists were known to repeat this phrase of Proudhon's to saturation point, according to a 1925 commentator in the influential left-leaning cultural periodical *La Grande Revue*.[140] In his comparative 2008 history of syndicalism and communism, Ralph Darlington refers to Proudhon's phrase as 'the basic slogan of the C.G.T'.[141]

The parallel with Weil's work-centred political philosophy during and after her syndicalist engagement is compelling, particularly in so far as work is regarded as self-affirming and emancipatory. However, the purpose here is not to privilege syndicalism as a *more* pervasive influence than any other, but rather to explore how her militant life and her intellectual life might be read as interwoven: philosophical ideas about work (no doubt in part inspired by Alain, and, even more so by Descartes) drew her to syndicalism, and syndicalist thought and action in turn shaped her philosophical ideas about work in a dynamic and self-reinforcing intellectual process.

This builds on the insights of Robert Chenavier in his *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail*.[142] Chenavier argues strongly, as does this thesis, for a reading of Weil's philosophy of work as deeply coherent with other strands of her thought, from the epistemic preoccupation of her earliest work on Descartes in her *Diplôme d'études supérieures*, 'Science et perception dans Descartes' (1930) to the final mystical passages of *L'Enracinement*, written in the weeks before her death.

Chenavier's analysis makes the case for a profound coherence between Weil's philosophy of labour during her syndicalist engagement in the late twenties and the first half of the thirties, and her later 'religious turn':

> La plupart des sujets philosophiques sur lesquels elle écrivait dans les années quarante figuraient au centre de ses préoccupations dès les années vingt : les

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140 "'L'atelier remplacera le gouvernement", s'écriait Proudhon, en une formule qu'ont répétée à satiété les syndicalistes révolutionnaires', G. Guy-Grand, 'La Crise actuelle du parlemantarisme', *La Grande Revue* 119(1925), p. 211.

141 Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 43.

142 Of course, Weil's philosophy of work drew on a wide variety of political, sociological and theological traditions, from Marxism to the labour-oriented parables of the New Testament. The chapter to follow will explore her philosophy of work in the wider context of the history of ideas.

> problèmes de la nécessité, du temps, de l'attention, de la finalité sans fin étaient déjà présents […].[143]

Chenavier acknowledges the influence on Weil of revolutionary syndicalism's anti-intellectualism, citing in particular Georges Sorel (1847-1922), an untypical and controversial syndicalist whose focus on the power of myth to inspire strikes and violent direct action galvanised militants on the extreme left as well as on the proto-Fascist right.

However, Weil seems to have had little interest in Sorel, and Chenavier does not seek to understand her thought within an established syndicalist philosophical tradition.[144] He does not read her output as texts intended for a militant audience that shared common references and common beliefs. Chenavier prefers to see seminal syndicalist-era articles in the journal *La Révolution prolétarienne* as an intellectual Petrie dish carrying the germs of her future mystical and Christian-Platonist philosophy, rather than as pieces of revolutionary syndicalist thought in their own right, engaging with an active militant tradition. Chenavier's approach is invaluable in convincing purely theologically-minded scholars of the force and relevance of her early work, but it does not offer a full account of how Weil's philosophy of work fits within the wider syndicalist tradition she openly adhered to, and how this engagement shaped her theorisation of modern society as uprooted. That will be the purpose of the chapter to follow.

### *'S'alimenter aux sources du proudhonisme'*

The fundamental syndicalist idea which Léon Jouhaux drew from Proudhon and which filled the pages of *L'Atelier* concerned the social and creative value of work:

> Je rêvais de donner force et réalité à cette pensée de Proudhon si saisissante, si puissamment évocatrice de transformation sociale: *l'atelier remplacera le gouvernement*. […] Je sentais que le syndicalisme donne aux travailleurs conscience de la valeur de leur travail dans l'évolution humaine, en même temps qu'il les rend compréhensifs de la puissance de leur cohésion. Dans

[143] Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail*, p. 32.
[144] There is only one mention of Sorel in her collected works, and it is in passing on a discarded manuscript. See Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, pp. 500-501.

> ce double élément résidait selon moi, toute la valeur révolutionnaire du syndicalisme, à la fois élément d'émancipation de l'individu et de transformation du milieu.[145]

Celestin Bouglé (1870-1940), the inter-war editor of Proudhon's *Œuvres complètes*, and Weil's 'Directeur' at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* during her years there (1928-1931),[146] underlined the movement's Proudhonian inspiration: 'Lorsque Jouhaux répète [cette phrase] on voit clairement la philosophie des producteurs, telle que le syndicalisme ouvrier la comprend, s'alimenter aux sources du proudhonisme.'[147]

Syndicalists drew from the diffuse and varied anarchistic, libertarian and utopian forms of socialism that inspired the First International (also known as the International Working Men's Association) the idea that work was not just the necessary, but also the creative and joyful foundation of the human condition. According to Edouard Berth (1875-1939), an early leader of pre-war syndicalism who returned to the movement as a contemporary of Weil's, after losing faith in the Bolsheviks and the French Communist Party, work should be undertaken 'with love, with joy, as artists'.[148] It was from this idea that work alone produced social value, that Proudhon was able to deny the right to property. However, Berth and his fellow syndicalists were less interested in legal arguments than in Proudhon's belief in the creative potential of the working class.[149]

In an article of 1926 in *La Révolution prolétarienne*, a periodical which Weil contributed to and supported financially,[150] Berth cited a passage from Proudhon's *Le Travail*, which sets out these ideas as the ideological core of syndicalism:

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145 Léon Jouhaux and M. A. Renauld, 'Les Mémoires de Léon Jouhaux', *Le Mouvement social*, no. 47 (1964), p. 97.
146 Their relationship was strained, and Weil's political radicalism and provocations led him to label her 'la Vierge Rouge'. Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 183.
147 Celestin Bouglé, *De la sociologie à l'action sociale: pacifisme, féminisme, coopération* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1931), p. 130.
148 Jennings, *Syndicalism in France: A Study of Ideas*, p. 81.
149 Thorpe, *`The Workers Themselves'. Syndicalism and International Labour: the Origins of the International Working Men's Association, 1913-1923*, pp. 15-16.
150 Weil, *Correspondance familiale* VII:1, p. 98.

> *Je demande pourquoi la vie du travailleur ne serait pas une réjouissance perpétuelle, une procession triomphale?* […] C'est une volupté intime, à laquelle le recueillement de la solitude n'est pas moins favorable que les excitations de l'atelier et qui résulte pour l'homme de travail du plein exercice de ses facultés: force du corps, adresse des mains, prestesse de l'esprit, puissance de l'idée, orgueil de l'âme par le sentiment de la difficulté vaincue, de nature asservie, de la science acquise, de l'indépendance assurée.[151]

For syndicalists, this creative, resourceful, intellectual engagement with the world was the foundation for human dignity and freedom. Hubert Lagardelle (1874-1958), one of the architects of the CGT, made this point as early as 1908: 'L'acte de la production […] est la plus haute manifestation de la personne humaine, puisqu'il affirme sa puissance créatrice, […] [et] sa destination naturelle, qui est la libération de l'individu'.[152] Lagardelle would later be seduced by fascism and serve in the Vichy government, but the vast majority of revolutionary syndicalists remained on the extreme or reformist left. Jouhaux, for example, imprisoned by the Nazis, remained at the head of the CGT until 1947. In the extract already cited above, Jouhaux equally saw in the act of labour the essential elements of syndicalism's revolutionary value: the emancipation of the individual and the material transformation of the world.

Weil's early philosophy, which coincided with her militant syndicalist engagement, displays in some respects a relatively unproblematised adherence to socialist and specifically syndicalist ideas about work. For example, the following passage written by Weil in 1928 reinforced the necessity for work to determine social organisation and echoed Lagardelle's idea that work was the source of the 'human person': 'le travail fait apparaître le droit, le respect de la personne humaine, l'égalité; […] Les travailleurs seuls forment une république'.[153]

In fact, Weil's early political writing, which returns time and time again to the theme of labour, exhibited a wide range of syndicalist ideas about work, such as an *ouvriériste* commitment

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151 Edouard Berth, 'Proudhon et Marx', *La Révolution prolétarienne: revue mensuelle syndicaliste communiste* 1926, p. 17.
152 Hubert Lagardelle, *Syndicalisme et socialisme* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1908), p. 47.
153 'Sur l'idée de Ganuchaud et Canguilhem', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 49.

to a society of producers: 'la libre association des producteurs'.[154] She favoured industrial over political action, echoing the rallying cry of revolutionary syndicalism, that the revolution must be the work of the workers themselves (rather than of political parties and intellectuals acting on their behalf): 'Les militants ne peuvent pas remplacer la classe ouvrière. L'émancipation des travailleurs sera l'œuvre des travailleurs eux-mêmes, ou elle ne sera pas'.[155] Weil's early notebooks document a passionate belief in the joy of labour:

> Le signe que le *travail* – dès lors qu'il n'est pas inhumain – est fait pour nous, c'est la joie, joie que l'épuisement même ne diminue pas. […] La joie n'est autre chose que le sentiment de la réalité.[156]

Weil's political articles share with syndicalism an elevated moral vocabulary of the 'dignity' and 'courage' inherent to labour: 'Quant au mouvement ouvrier, toutes les fois qu'il a su échapper à la démagogie, c'est sur la dignité du travail qu'il a fondé les revendications des travailleurs.'[157] This was quite distinct from, and intended to critique, the scientific socialism of Communism, which privileged political action, supported productivist organisational models and understood labour quantitatively as labour-power, rather than qualitatively as an expression of humanity, freedom and joy. Weil noted in the syndicalist periodical *L'Effort* (the mouthpiece of the militant stonemasons of Lyon) in July 1932, that Soviet Communism was in fact closer to high capitalist American *Fordism*,[158] than it was to any truly socialist model based on workers' needs.[159] This was

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154 In 'Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne?' (henceforward 'Perspectives'), ibid., 268. She also adds in 'Perspectives': 'Il y aura socialisme quand la fonction dominante sera le travail productif lui-même.' ibid., p. 273.

155 In 'Perspectives', ibid., p. 279.

156 'Le signe que le *travail* – dès lors qu'il n'est pas inhumain – est fait pour nous, c'est la joie, joie que l'épuisement même ne diminue pas… . […] La joie n'est autre chose que le sentiment de la réalité'. Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, pp. 77-79.

157 Jennings, *Syndicalism in France: A Study of Ideas*: 98. Weil praises revolutionary syndicalism for its project that puts the 'dignity of the producer' at its centre, arguing that it belongs in this respect to the revolutionary tradition of Rousseau, Goethe, Shelley and Tolstoy, as well as Proudhon and Marx (despite the latter's 'contradictions'). Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 93. Even much later, in *L'Enracinement,* this elevated moral vocabulary persisted, in fact it became more prevalent. She noted of her rooted society: [Elle] aurait pour orientation […] la dignité de l'homme dans le travail, ce qui est une valeur spirituelle', Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1074.

158 Fordism: The use in manufacturing industry of the methods pioneered by Henry Ford, typified by large-scale mechanized mass production.

the standard view amongst the revolutionary minority of the CGT and the ideological core of their dispute with the pro-Soviet CGTU (Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire).

*Work and Private Property*

Before turning to Weil's syndicalist conception of freedom, it is worth outlining one final and pervasive Proudhonian syndicalist influence on her thought: the necessity under certain conditions for private property. Weil's thought expresses an anarchist and syndicalist-inspired belief in the oppressive nature of the centralised state,[160] and a consequent opposition to collectivisation: 'Tous ceux qui, soi-disant communistes ou soi-disant socialistes, se bornent à vouloir […] [soumettre] la production industrielle à l'Etat sont des organisateurs de l'oppression, non des révolutionnaires'.[161] Inspired by the Proudhonian school of socialism, syndicalists opposed collectivisation and believed that work imparted rightful ownership of private property. The aspiration to rightful possession of property was considered to have a powerful emotional force and to be necessary for human happiness. This view was still very much present among syndicalists during the inter-war period. Berth, for example, noted in *La Révolution prolétarienne* in 1926:

> *Quand je vire mes sillons, il me semble que je suis roi*: ce sentiment du paysan-philosophe de Proudhon, […] doit être le sentiment de tout travailleur, et où l'idée de la propriété se transfigure dans celle de la production.[162]

In Weil's early *Cahiers* there are distinct echoes of these Proudhonian ideas about work and possession. Neatly mirroring Berth's Proudhonian image of the worker's triumphant proprietary gaze, Weil noted in her first *Cahier,* which dates from 1933-34:

> L'homme crée l'univers autour de lui par le travail. Souviens-toi du regard que tu jetais sur les champs, après une journée de moisson. […] Sentiment de la propriété, parent du sentiment de la réalité.[163]

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159 'Faisons le point', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 107.
160 Ibid., pp. 221-222.
161 Ibid., p. 325.
162 Berth, 'Proudhon et Marx', p. 17.
163 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 87, p. 172.

In fact, Weil's commitment to the idea of private property would be one of syndicalism's most pervasive influences on her thought. Her belief in the beneficial capacity of personal property became so strong that in *L'Enracinement*, she considered it to be a need of the soul, an integral part of a rooted life: 'La propriété privée est un besoin vital de l'âme'.[164]

*'Les métiers, forteresses de liberté': Work as Freedom in the Syndicalist Tradition*

Private property is just one example of a syndicalist commitment which would continue to influence Weil long after her years of active engagement. There are others, which will be examined in the course of this chapter, such as decentralisation, technology and bureaucracy.

However, the primordial syndicalist idea about work with which Weil engaged philosophically with the greatest rigour and originality during this early period (prior to her factory work undertaken from December 1934) was the movement's conception of work as emancipatory. What is striking about Weil's interpretation is that she seeks to ground it philosophically in a Cartesian method, which insists on the individual integrity of one mind thinking alone to plan and determine the product of its actions, which in many instances can be considered its work. Weil's early thought, especially 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale' (henceforward 'Réflexions') sought to provide a Cartesian philosophical foundation for diffuse and previously unsubstantiated ideas about freedom in the syndicalist tradition. In this respect, she made a unique contribution to the theoretical underpinnings of the movement, including how to ensure freedom in the modern industrial age.

Syndicalism regarded the act of work as fundamentally emancipatory, a position from which Weil's definition of freedom as the unity of thought and action in work was not far removed. In the early years of 1902, as the movement was beginning to take shape, Berth defined emancipation as follows:

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[164] Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1048.

> Dans sa profession, l'individu se crée une vie originale, devient un centre autonome d'action, conquiert une liberté positive. Tous les métiers pénétrés d'art et de science, c'est-à dire illuminés par la pensée, deviennent des forteresses de liberté, d'énergie créatrice, d'autonomie féconde.[165]

The extracts from Berth, Jouhaux and Lagardelle, cited above to illustrate the syndicalist belief in the primacy of work, also serve to reinforce this idea that work is emancipatory, so long as difficulty is overcome and skill is deployed. Berth refers to the 'full exercise of the faculties', 'difficulty vanquished' and 'assured independence'. For Lagardelle, where there is 'creative power', emancipation is the working man's 'natural destination'. This syndicalist idea, albeit never theorised more precisely by the deeply anti-intellectualist movement, had a pervasive influence on Weil's thought. At a time when Weil was still actively engaged in the syndicalist movement, she theorised work as emancipation in terms of the union of thought and action:

> La liberté véritable […] se définit […] par un rapport entre la pensée et l'action. […]. Le seul mode de production pleinement libre serait celui où la pensée méthodique se trouverait à l'œuvre tout au cours du travail. [166]

In a similar vein to Berth's Proudhonian idealisation of work, where the 'vanquishing' of difficulty contributes to the emancipatory experience of work, for Weil in 'Réflexions' difficulty is a necessary condition for free work: 'Les difficultés à vaincre devraient être si variées que jamais il ne fût possible d'appliquer des règles toutes faites.'[167] Indeed when Weil set out this vision of free work she specifically denied its originality, arguing that it belonged to the inherited wisdom of the working class: '[c'est] une conception héroïque [de la liberté] qui est celle de la sagesse commune'.[168] In line with this syndicalist tradition, in 'Réflexions' she saw labour in terms of a creative, self-affirming and emancipatory struggle between intellectual resourcefulness and material necessity: 'On ne peut rien concevoir de plus grand pour l'homme […] que sa vie

[165] Edouard Berth, 'Classiques ou modernes', *La Revue socialiste*, December 1902, p. 655.
[166] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 73.
[167] Ibid., p. 81.
[168] Ibid., p. 73.

soit une perpétuelle création de lui-même par lui-même. […] Telle serait la liberté véritable.'[169] However, this is not to say that freedom is a creative escape from brutal necessity, rather it resides in an internalisation of external force:

> L'homme vivant ne peut en aucun cas cesser d'être enserré de toutes parts par une nécessité absolument inflexible; mais comme il pense, il a le choix entre céder aveuglement à l'aiguillon par lequel elle le pousse de l'extérieur, ou bien se conformer à la représentation intérieure qu'il s'en forge; et c'est en quoi consiste l'opposition entre servitude et liberté. […] Un homme serait complètement esclave si tous ses gestes procédaient d'une autre source que sa pensée.[170]

In Weil's later mystical period, she drew to a greater extent on the classical tradition of Stoicism, where freedom is understood in metaphysical terms as a consent to necessity. At this early stage in 1934, necessity intervenes as an obstacle to freedom but is overcome by a process of mental 'forging' (an appropriately labour-centric choice of metaphor), in which necessity is mentally reworked so as to be assimilable to thought through a process of inner representation. Despite the shackles of an unbending necessity, thought, in so far as it can actualise itself in action, remains free.

*The Hegelian Origins of Work as Emancipation*

Weil found this justification for thought as action in Descartes. However, before showing how Weil used the philosophy of Descartes to prove the validity of syndicalism's theorisation of freedom as emancipatory work, it is necessary to emphasise that syndicalism did not develop this understanding of work in an intellectual vacuum. It is also important not to overstate the influence of Marxism, whose teleological conception of emancipation as a future condition of Communism was remote from the concrete, work-driven syndicalist idea. This syndicalist vision was in fact much closer to Marx's early preoccupation in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* with alienated and unalienated labour. In these texts drafted in 1844, Marx diagnosed as

169 Ibid., p. 75.
170 Ibid., p. 73.

alienated work which was enslaved by the wage structure serving the capitalist tyranny of money and private property. In this structure, the right to ownership of one's labour was denied, since the means of production were privately owned, as were the products of one's labour. This relegated work, which should be self-realising, to the basest and most dehumanising conditions, which Marx defined as alienation. However, this similarity reveals not the influence of Marx (the *Manuscripts* were published posthumously as late as 1932), but shared origins in the humanistic socialism of the First International, whose ideas about labour and emancipation drew on a variety of political, philosophical and theological sources.

Radical Protestantism, as early as the English Civil War, had proclaimed work as emancipatory. Gerard Winstanley, the leader and theorist of the proto-socialist Diggers movement, argued in 1652 against traditional understandings of political freedom that 'true freedom lies where a man receives his nourishment and preservation, and that is in the use of the earth'. [171] The nineteenth-century 'gospel of work' emphasised work as a sacred duty, in opposition to the emergent rational models of industrial economics, a discipline which Thomas Carlyle famously called 'the dismal science'.[172] These largely Protestant traditions emphasised the centrality of work in the human condition. Weber would come later to argue that in so doing, these discourses unintentionally laid the groundwork for capitalism to flourish.

But it was the philosophy of Hegel, a Lutheran, and above all his 'Left-Hegelian' followers that adapted these ideas to the philosophical discourses of oppression and liberty that would define modern socialism. Marx, Proudhon and Bakunin, the key architects of the First International, were critical of Hegelian abstraction but nevertheless profoundly influenced by a diffuse interpretive nineteenth-century tradition around Hegel's theorisation of labour in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Marx wrote in his early more humanist text, *The Economic and*

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171 Cited in Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Penguin, 1991), p. 134.

172 Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881): 'The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it. […] All true Work is sacred'. From *Past and Present* (1843) Cited in Keith Thomas, *The Oxford Book of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 113.

*Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, sometimes known as *The Paris Manuscripts,* published in 1932 just as Weil began her period of intense militant engagement, that 'Hegel […] grasps labour as the essence, as the self-confirming essence of man'.[173] Hegel posited in his master-slave dialectic that in contrast to the idle, desiring and sated Lord, it was in the labour of the 'bondsman', through his activity giving shape and form, that thinghood (the objects of labour) became the substance of consciousness.

In other words, the labourer's transformative action on the world is preserved in these objects, and in turn an emancipatory self-consciousness is achieved in the activity of labour:

> This activity giving shape and form, is at the same time the individual existence, the pure self-existence of that consciousness, which now in the work it does is externalised and passes into the condition of permanence. The consciousness that toils and serves accordingly attains by this means the direct apprehension of that independent being as its self.[174]

Marcuse offered a concise and accessible summary of this idea in *Reason and Revolution* (1941):

> Thinking consists in knowing that the objective world is in reality a subjective world, that it is the objectification of the subject. The subject that really thinks comprehends the world as 'his' world'.[175]

Marcuse's work reflects a wider trend, in which Hegelianism re-emerged with vigour in the 1930s. This occurred in light of the discovery of Marx's early humanist reading of Hegel in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. However, above all, due to the profound influence of Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968) through his seminars on Hegel held at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes between 1933 and 1939. Kojève captured the imagination of his age with an original, if somewhat anachronistic, interpretation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. He inverted the chronological chain of influence, reading Hegel in light of the young Marx, rather than vice versa

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173 Karl Marx, *Early Writings [1833-1834]*, ed. Lucio Colletti, trans. G. Benton and B. Livingstone (Penguin Books, 2005), p. viii.
174 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (Abingdon: Routledge, [1807] 2014), p. 186.
175 The vocabulary is that of Hegel, cited in Marcuse's influential account of the humanist Marx, *Reason and Revolution* (1941). Marcuse summarises this idea as follows: 'thinking consists in knowing that the objective world is in reality a subjective world, that it is the objectification of the subject. The subject that really thinks comprehends the world as 'his' world': Cited in Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (London: Routledge, [1941] 2000), p. 26-27.

(the fact that Kojève used the recently published *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* made this all the more compelling to his politicised student audience). What's more, he drew on the most recent German philosophy, reading Hegel's view of death in light of Heidegger's philosophy of being, and proposed an anti-dialectical method for reading Hegel drawn from Husserl, the father of phenomenology.[176]

Weil does not appear on the list of regular and noteworthy attendees, which included Raymond Queneau and Georges Bataille (both contributors, like Weil, to Boris Souvarine's *La Critique sociale*), as well as Roger Caillois, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Raymond Aron, whose wife Suzanne was a good friend of Weil's.[177] It would be futile to speculate on Weil's familiarity with these seminars but, as the case of Sartre highlights, their influence certainly extended far beyond the official list of auditeurs.[178] In any case, the two thinkers responsible for the re-introduction of Hegel in inter-war France: Alexander Koyré (1892-1964), who lectured on Hegel at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes before Kojève, and Jean Wahl (1888-1974), who re-introduced Hegel to inter-war France in his *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (1929), were both acquaintances of Weil.[179]

Hegelian ideas about the form-giving nature of work are clearly apparent in comments she made in her 'Journal d'usine': 'Non seulement que l'homme sache ce qu'il fait - mais si possible qu'il en perçoive l'usage - qu'il perçoive la nature modifiée par lui'.[180] Weil certainly would have been exposed to Hegel's ideas about work through her own close reading of his philosophy as confirmed by her friend, classmate and biographer, Simone Pétrement, and

176 See A. de Laurentis and J. Edwards, *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hegel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 325.
177 Roth includes a full list from the Ecole's *annuaire* and the *Registre des Inscriptions:* Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 225-227. Contemporary accounts tell us that the 'Weil' who appears in the list was Eric Weil.
178 See Alan D. Schrift, 'Is there such a thing as "French Philosophy"? Or why do we read the French so badly?', in *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*, ed. Julien Bourg (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004), p. 28.
179 For Jean Wahl see Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, pp. 264-265, pp. 445-447. For Alexander Koyré see ibid., p. 426, p. 429.
180 Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, p. 45.

possibly through the existentialist readings of her time.[181] Hegelian ideas about work would also have reached her through the intellectual origins of syndicalism in the First International.

The Hegelian influence is apparent in Marx's theorisation of alienated labour in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, but this early work, published in 1932, did not influence syndicalism directly. Rather, this text represents one branch of shared Hegelian influence that also inspired the anarcho-socialism and syndicalism of the First International. Hegel's influence is apparent in the work-centred mutualism of Proudhon, who cited Hegel alongside Adam Smith and the Bible as his three major influences.[182] The anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), close to Proudhon and expelled by Marx from the First International, had also begun as a follower of Hegel, explaining in *Statism and Anarchism* that he had believed in the 1830s and 1840s that 'the eternally sought Absolute had finally been found and understood', via the philosophical system of Hegel.[183] Despite their profound differences, these three leaders of the First International were all involved in wrestling with Hegel's abstracted, idealist philosophy to forge new and concrete socio-political interpretations of labour and history.[184]

Marx also began in a humanistic critique of Hegelian abstraction. However, Marx's 'epistemological break' (*coupure épistémologique*), identified by Althusser, crucially took Marx's thought from the 'ideological' to the 'scientific', breaking with the humanism of Feuerbach and the teleology of Hegelian dialectics in favour of the new science of history set out in *Das Kapital*.[185] Scientific Marxism became central to the Bolshevik project but remained derided by

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181 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 58, p. 122, p. 142, p. 144, p. 216.
182 Robert L. Hoffman, *Revolutionary Justice: The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 90.
183 Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, ed. M. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1873] 1990), p. 130.
184 Proudhon criticised Hegel's monistic, objective representation of reality and he rejected the idea that history was unfolding towards a teleological synthesis of dialectical contradiction. Proudhon preferred to take a more subjective approach to phenomena, underlining the contingency of human agency, and emphasising the importance of morality, duty and obligation as truly existent forces. This resonates with Weil's subjective emphasis on obligation to others as opposed to objective individual rights in *L'Enracinement*. See James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 289.
185 Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, ed. Etienne Balibar (Paris: La Découverte, [1965] 2005), p. 26.

the anti-Communist branch of the syndicalist left, to which Weil belonged. In an unpublished article of 1937, inspired by the victories of the Popular Front, Weil explicitly articulates this syndicalist position, emphasising the purity of the early French syndicalist and anarchist tradition in opposition to 'scientific' debasement by doctrinaire Marxism:

> Il y a à prendre ce qui a été précisément presque oublié par ce qu'on nomme le marxisme: la glorification du travail productif, conçu comme l'activité suprême de l'homme. […] [L]e marxisme a gravement altéré cet esprit de révolte qui, au siècle dernier, brillait d'un éclat si pur dans notre pays. Il y a mêlé à la fois des oripeaux faussement scientifiques, une éloquence messianique, un déchaînement d'appétits qui l'ont défiguré.[186]

Inter-war syndicalism was the last outpost of this qualitative, work-oriented socialist tradition, which emphasised work as the defining, emancipatory human act. However, in order to substantiate this idea philosophically, Weil did not appeal to the traditional socialist philosophical canon, but to the dualist philosophy of Descartes.

*'Ainsi pensait Descartes': A Cartesian Theory of Freedom*

Even before Weil had formulated in precise terms her definition of freedom as the unity of thought and action in 'Réflexions' in 1934, the previous year, in an article rejecting the crude materialism of Lenin, she was explicitly invoking a preference for Cartesian dualist thought:

> Si l'on veut non pas bâtir une théorie, mais se rendre compte de la condition où l'homme se trouve réellement placé, […] on devra reconnaître l'existence et d'un monde qui dépasse la pensée, et d'une pensée qui, loin de refléter passivement le monde, s'exerce sur lui à la fois pour le connaître et pour le transformer. C'est ainsi que pensait Descartes.[187]

She had formed this view as early as 1930, in her *Diplôme d'études supérieures* on Descartes, in which she argued that Descartes's science saw this transformative action of the mind on matter in the experience of manual work. For her and, she argues, for Descartes, whom she described as more Marxist than any disciple of Marx, this made the experience of labour the source of true

[186] 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 141.
[187] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, pp. 305-306.

knowledge.[188]

Interestingly, this claim, which might seem unusual for a left-wing thinker, can be read as a precedent for more recent Marxist scholarship on Descartes. In particular, Antonio Negri's *Political Descartes* sees in the philosopher a relevant model for Marxism for a methodology turned ideology, establishing a meaningful relationship between the transformative agency of the revolutionary mind and the material world.[189]

Weil, in her teaching, as in her own work, was at pains to point out the flaws in a crudely materialist philosophy, which missed this transformative agency of the mind. This was what she hoped to inject through Descartes. However, she did not reject materialist insights altogether. She noted in a class given in Auxerre between 1932 and 1933: 'La philosophie du travail, c'est le *matérialisme*. L'action qui rencontre un obstacle nous donne la *matière*'.[190] She argued that a true materialism allowed for dualist insights:

> Tout est matière, sauf la pensée […] Le matérialisme n'est pas concevable sans la notion d'esprit. […] Il n'y a point penser et travailler; le travail n'est pas moins une pensée que la réflexion.[191]

This idea of work *as* thought, which she found in Cartesian science and passed on to her students, would form the basis for her theory of methodical work as freedom the following year in 'Réflexions'. In these texts Weil used Descartes's ideas to substantiate ideas about freedom adapted from the socialist, and above all from the syndicalist, tradition.

As well as the refutation of crude materialism, Weil's project, Cartesian in inspiration, is to step outside of received wisdom, as Descartes sets out to do in the *Discours de la méthode* and the *Méditations métaphysiques*, and to use independent, methodical thought to pursue truth.[192] This

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188 Ibid., p. 309.
189 See Antonio Negri, *Political Descartes: Reason, Ideology and the Bourgeois Project*, trans. M. Mandarini and A. Toscano (London: Verso, 2006).
190 Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques* I.1, p. 378.
191 Ibid., p. 379.
192 'Pour atteindre la vérité, il faut une fois dans la vie se défaire de toutes les opinions qu'on a reçues, et reconstruire de nouveau tout le système de ses connaissances. […] On ne peut se passer d'une méthode pour se mettre en quête de la vérité des choses'. Réné Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, ed. Laurent Renault (Paris: Flammarion, [1637] 2000), pp.43-44.

inspiration has two important implications: firstly, Cartesian philosophy leads her to a dualist explanation for traditional socialist, and particularly syndicalist conceptions, of work as emancipatory. This definition relies on distinct understandings of thought and action, unified in the idea of methodical work. Secondly, the Cartesian project is structured around the superiority of the individual thinking methodically in isolation, giving access to truth. This was in contrast to collective forms of thought, which, for Descartes, yield only dogmatic opinion. In this vein, in true syndicalist fashion, work is presented not just as the only path to freedom and truth, but also as the only viable alternative to totalitarianism, the political organisation of collective dogmatism in the modern state.

*'Les collectivités ne pensent point': Cartesian Freedom vs. Totalitarianism*

Descartes's intellectualist method rejected all accumulated, collective forms of knowledge and regarded as legitimate only the insights achieved by one mind thinking in isolation.[193] Following this example, Weil's definition of methodical work as freedom presents the collectivity as a potentially insoluble obstacle to emancipation:

> S'il y a au monde quelque chose d'absolument abstrait, d'absolument mystérieux, d'inaccessible aux sens et à la pensée, c'est la collectivité […]. L'individu dépasse la collectivité autant que quelque chose dépasse rien, car la pensée ne se forme que dans un esprit se trouvant seul en face de lui-même; les collectivités ne pensent point.[194]

Because thought is entirely individual, collective human actions appear arbitrary, mysterious and abstracted. The reign of the collective not only interferes with the emancipatory causal relationship between thought and action, it also disturbs man's pursuit of truth:

> Ainsi entre l'homme et cet univers qui lui est assigné par le sort comme

[193] 'Et ainsi je pensai que les sciences des livres, au moins celles dont les raisons ne sont que probables, et qui n'ont aucunes démonstrations, s'étant composées et grossies peu à peu des opinions de plusieurs diverses personnes, ne sont point si approchantes de la vérité que les simples raisonnements que peut faire naturellement un homme de bon sens touchant les choses qui se présentent.', ibid,. pp. 42-43.
[194] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, pp. 83-84.

> l'unique matière de sa pensée et de son action, les rapports d'oppression et de servitude placent d'une manière permanente l'écran impénétrable de l'arbitraire humain. Quoi d'étonnant si au lieu d'idées on ne rencontre guère que des opinions, au lieu d'action, une agitation aveugle?[195]

Descartes saw the proliferation of opinion at the cost of truth as the product of the prevalent scholastic Aristotelian education.[196]

Descartes's solution to the cumulative opacity of collective existence is to sweep away pre-existing 'opinions' and, from the foundational insight of the *cogito*, to rebuild from the perspective of one rational mind, admitting only what that mind 'clearly and distinctly' perceives to be true. This constitutes the first principle of his 'method', sketched in the *Discours de la méthode:*

> Le premier [principe] était […] de ne comprendre rien de plus en mes jugements, que ce qui se présenterait si clairement et si distinctement à mon esprit, que je n'eusse aucune occasion de le mettre en doute.[197]

Although Weil offers no explicit methodology to transcend the abstract opacity of the collectivity, she does seek to find ways in which the emancipatory unity of an individual's thought and action could be applied socially in order to counteract the abstraction of modern collective life.

The ideal, free society sketched in 'Réflexions', which anticipates the project of *L'Enracinement*, would be structured in such a way as to foster the integrity of the mind at work, by making the world rationally available to the worker citizen. Worth quoting at length, this Cartesian-inspired vision of a utopian social condition, which as we will see also drew on

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[195] Ibid., p. 84.

[196] Descartes is sometimes known as the 'Father' of modern philosophy because he broke with prevailing approaches by questioning the dominant tradition of philosophy taught at the time, known as scholasticism. Scholasticism was a late medieval interpretation of Aristotle, particularly reliant on the method of the syllogism. This was a form of reasoning made up of a general premise, a particular premise and a conclusion. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes compared scholastic thinkers to the parasitic ivy which grows on trees: Ceux qui suivent maintenant Aristote […] sont comme le lierre, qui ne tend point à monter plus haut que les arbres qui le soutiennent.' Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, pp. 105-106. A century before Descartes's *tabula rasa,* Rabelais was also virulently critical of the Sorbonne's scholastic philosophers in his second novel *Gargantua* (1534).

[197] Ibid., p. 49.

Rousseau, shows a remarkable overlap with established syndicalist perspectives on societal reorganisation:

> Il faut se représenter une forme de vie matérielle dans laquelle n'interviendraient que des efforts exclusivement dirigés par la pensée claire, ce qui impliquerait que chaque travailleur ait lui-même à contrôler […] l'adaptation de ses efforts avec l'ouvrage à produire, [et] leur coordination avec les efforts de tous les autres membres de la collectivité. La technique devrait être de nature à mettre perpétuellement à l'œuvre la réflexion méthodique. […] Il faut aussi que chaque travailleur se fasse une idée nette de toutes les spécialités […]; les collectivités ne seraient jamais assez étendues pour dépasser la portée d'un esprit humain […]. Il n'y a qu'une seule et même raison pour tous les hommes; ils ne deviennent étrangers et impénétrables les uns aux autres que lorsqu'ils s'en écartent; ainsi une société où toute la vie matérielle aurait pour condition nécessaire suffisante que chacun exerce sa raison pourrait être tout à fait transparente pour chaque esprit.[198]

In this passage, we find a concretisation of Descartes's rational method, in so far as Weil is speculating on what kind of socio-political society could achieve an emancipatory transparency in every domain. For Descartes, this transparency could only be fully available to the philosopher.[199] For Weil this is not sufficient and there is a certain Rousseauvian influence in her aspiration to transparency not just for the philosopher, but as a universal condition.[200]

*Rousseau*

Weil and Rousseau share a hostility to the corrupting abstraction of society. However, Rousseau appeals to an idealised but conjectural point in man's early socialisation prior to the 'invention' of property and the full development of a social, corrupting *amour propre*. Man's 'happiest' and most 'durable' stage in his fall from the state of nature was defined by a unity of thought and

198 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 85-86.
199 'Je pensai [sic] que je ne pouvais mieux que de continuer en [cette occupation de philosophe] même où je me trouvais, c'est-à-dire, que d'employer toute ma vie à cultiver ma raison, et m'avancer, autant que je pourrais, en la connaissance de la vérité, suivant la méthode que je m'étais prescrite.' Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, p. 59.
200 For an interpretation of Rousseau which puts the aspiration to transparency at its heart, cf. Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, [1957] 1998).

action in work:

> En un mot tant qu'ils ne s'appliquèrent qu'à des ouvrages qu'un seul pouvoit faire, et qu'à des arts qui n'avoient pas besoin de concours de plusieurs mains, ils vécurent libres, sains, bons, et heureux autant qu'ils pouvoient l'être par leur Nature […].[201]

However, whereas Rousseau speculates on a conjectural state that is artisanal and irretrievably lost, Weil seeks to establish how such a transparent society might be achieved in the modern, technological age.

Weil largely avoids the questions of political representation which preoccupied Rousseau in *Du Contrat social* and which led him to believe in government of the 'general will' as the only free form of political society. Yet, this influence is implicitly recognised in Weil's vision of a free society. However, in her re-working it is the general will of the *worker* (this vision, cited in part above, is almost exclusively focused on the experience and coordination of work) and not the political *citizen* that determines liberty:

> La coordination devrait s'établir d'une manière assez simple pour que chacun en ait perpétuellement une connaissance précise, en ce qui concerne la coopération des travailleurs aussi bien que les échanges des produits; et comme chaque individu sera en état de contrôler l'ensemble de la vie collective, celle-ci serait toujours conforme à la volonté générale.[202]

In fact, the appeal to Rousseau's thought was relatively typical for those who, like Weil, sought inspiration in the pre-Marxist French socialism of 1848. The writer Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly described these nineteenth-century revolutionaries, despite their profound differences, as 'les bâtards du génie de Jean-Jacques'.[203] Weil certainly sees revolutionary syndicalism as inserted in this tradition, naming Descartes, Rousseau, Goethe, Proudhon and Tolstoy specifically as antecedents to syndicalism in the theorisation and idealisation of free work:

> Après Descartes […], l'idéal d'une vie consacrée à une forme libre de labeur

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[201] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, [1755] 2010), p. 101.
[202] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 85.
[203] Cited in Noland Aaron, 'Proudhon and Rousseau', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28, no. 1 (1967), p. 34.

> physique a commencé en revanche à apparaître […]. Il serait facile de citer d'autres noms illustres, parmi lesquels Rousseau, Shelley et surtout Tolstoi […]. Les syndicalistes révolutionnaires, qui mettent au centre de la question sociale la dignité du producteur considéré comme tel, se rattachent au même courant.[204]

In this way, Weil places a movement ordinarily considered profoundly anti-intellectual within a philosophical and literary heritage.

*Cartesian Theory, Syndicalist Practice: Weil and Classic Syndicalist Ideas*

Weil's implicit philosophical approach may have been unorthodox in the anti-intellectualist syndicalist movement, but it brought her to conclusions remarkably close to those expressed in classic syndicalist texts, dating from the golden age of syndicalism prior to the First World War. For example, *Comment nous ferons la révolution* (1911) by two syndicalist leaders and icons, Emile Pataud (1869-1935) and Emile Pouget (1860-1931). Pataud led the Parisian electricians' strike and regularly plunged the city into darkness between 1907 and 1909. Pouget, the founder of Paris' first employee union in 1879, was also responsible in the same year for introducing sabotage as a justified form of protest within the CGT.

In this syndicalist blueprint for revolution we find political goals close to those of Weil: an emphasis on industrial organisation which prioritises intellectual assimilation and a strong commitment to decentralisation and to the potential of technology to transform the workplace in positive ways. These ideas did not fade with Weil's active militancy. Weil's commitment to these ideas was expressed with the same urgency in *L'Enracinement* as in texts written during the early and mid 1930s.

*Intellectual Assimilation*

The idea that people achieve sovereignty through free, skilled work in a transparent society was a

[204] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 93.

core syndicalist idea. This is clearly expressed in *Comment nous ferons la révolution* (1911), written as a fictional account of an idealised syndicalist revolution:

> A la souveraineté abstraite et fictive dont jouissait le citoyen d'une démocratie, allait se substituer la souveraineté réelle, qu'il exercerait directement, dans toutes les zones où se manifestait son activité.[205]

This real, more concrete sovereignty was above all expressed through work.

Coordination of work which the mind could assimilate, so important in Weil's vision of emancipation, is also respected in Pataud and Pouget's idealised society. The coordination of work must be organic and variable, tailored to the producer and not to the product. According to Pataud and Pouget: 'Il n'y eut pas de formule rigide et sectariste dans les méthodes de réorganisation du travail; il fut tenu compte des tempéraments et des affinités.'[206] Like Weil they believed in skill without overspecialisation. For Pataud and Pouget, the quality to be nurtured in their idealised young worker is an industrious, practical and open intelligence: 'On se préoccuperait […] de faire des hommes industrieux, à l'intelligence ouverte, au savoir judicieux, et capables d'être utiles à eux-mêmes et à leurs semblables'.[207]

*Technology*

This emphasis on applied intelligence was in fact the norm within syndicalism, making the movement well disposed towards technological innovation. This position was distinct from the technological productivism of scientific Marxism as well as from the romanticised Luddism of artisanal groups on the anarchist left. Weil calls for technological innovation that engages methodical thought, and this leads her in *L'Enracinement* to speculation about the emancipatory possibilities of a portable, automatic and polyvalent industrial machine.[208] This chimes with the generally positive view of technological possibilities promoted by syndicalists. Weil's friend and

[205] Emile Pataud and Emile Pouget, *Comment nous ferons la révolution* (Paris: Editions de la Guerre Sociale 1911).
[206] Ibid., p. 153.
[207] Ibid., p. 228.
[208] Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1061.

colleague at *La Révolution prolétarienne,* Robert Louzon (1882–1976), wished to shatter artisanal clichés and to transform the traditional skilled worker into a technical engineer.[209] This was not a-typical of revolutionary syndicalists. Georges Sorel (1847-1922), whose defence of violence and myth inspired syndicalists and anarchists, but also after his death, fascists, argued that only innovation and technology, in the appropriate conditions, offered the possibility for indefinite progress by endless re-skilling and adaptation to innovation.[210]

This is not to say that Weil or the syndicalist movement approved of all technological change. As Chapter Three on the experience of embodiment and temporality in industrial modernity will explore, Weil radically opposed the rationalisation of factories executed under the application of Frederick Taylor's theory of scientific management. This was because by fragmenting the production process into discrete, mechanised and repetitive gestures, such as on a production line, Taylorism disrupted the vital link between individual thought and action. Technology for Weil, as a syndicalist, should enhance the emancipatory capacity of work. How exactly it could do this in the modern factory will be explored in detail in Chapter Three.

*Decentralisation*

These syndicalist ideals relied on a variable and adaptable industrial workplace determined by worker sovereignty and localised decision-making - in other words on a decentralised state structured by federated unions rather than party political democracy. Concretely this entailed a commitment to political and industrial decentralisation: in 1934 Weil described modern industrial 'workhouses' ('bagnes'), the state and centralisation as being responsible for modern enslavement.[211] Decentralisation enabled freedom in so far as it brought about working conditions that were closer to fulfilling the Cartesian emancipatory requirements to which she

[209] Kenneth H. Tucker, *French Revolutionary Syndicalism and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 181.
[210] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1908] 1999).
[211] 'Le Groupement de l''Ordre Nouveau', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 324.

was committed: 'La seule sauvegarde de la liberté serait la décentralisation de la vie économique, le contrôle du fonctionnement des entreprises par les masses, la qualification du travail'.[212]

This was remarkably close in its vision of freedom to the standard syndicalist perspective. In *Comment nous ferons la révolution*, Pataud and Pouget regarded political and industrial decentralisation as paramount to emancipation: 'Donc, sur les ruines de la centralisation, d'où découlaient la compression et l'exploitation des individus, allait s'instaurer une société décentralisée, fédérative, où l'être humain pourrait évoluer en pleine autonomie.' [213] In 'Réflexions', where the Cartesian influence was most explicit, Weil went so far as to suggest that decentralisation constituted the only hope of freedom: 'L'unique possibilité de salut consisterait dans une coopération méthodique de tous […] en vue d'une décentralisation progressive de la vie sociale'.[214] This commitment to decentralisation did not wane but on the contrary was carried over into *L'Enracinement*, long after her active engagement in the syndicalist movement had ceased.

*A Pervasive Influence: The Syndicalist Project of L'Enracinement*

By 1943, when *L'Enracinement* was written, the war effort and Weil's increasingly metaphysical preoccupations had distanced her from syndicalism. Nevertheless, putting to one side momentarily the mystical preoccupations of the text, the concrete political goals of *L'Enracinement* and *Comment nous ferons la révolution* reveal considerable overlap: both are utopian blueprints for a decentralised and essentially syndicalist society. Like *Comment nous ferons la révolution, L'Enracinement* calls for industrial decentralisation, the abolition of political parties, the rule of unions and the development of industrial technology for the benefit of the worker. The process of re-rooting an alienated France was for Weil in *L'Enracinement* a process of

212 Ibid., p. 327.
213 Pataud and Pouget, *Comment nous ferons la révolution*, p. 141.
214 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 105.

decentralising and dismantling the State:

> Le développement de l'État épuise le pays. L'État mange la substance morale du pays, en vit, s'en engraisse […] Si la France a subi l'effet de cette réaction plus que d'autres pays, cela est dû à un déracinement beaucoup plus aigu, correspondant à une centralisation étatique bien plus ancienne et plus intense.[215]

Far from having an antiquated vision, Weil, Pataud and Pouget all argue that a decentralised, union-run state is made uniquely possible in the modern age by technology. Pataud and Pouget emphasised the importance of a national telephone network to ensure distribution of goods,[216] while in *L'Enracinement* Weil argued that the invention of a national electricity grid held the key to successfully decentralised industry.[217]

Equally, the reform recommendations Weil makes for education policy in *L'Enracinement* carry the stamp of established syndicalist ideas. Weil most likely read the syndicalist school teacher A.V. Jacquet's 'Vues sur une école rurale prolétarienne', published in the very same issue of *La Révolution prolétarienne* as her own 'Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne?' in August 1933. In the article, Jacquet complains that *instituteurs,* primary school teachers, have little understanding of rural communities, and import alien bourgeois perspectives into rural and proletarian classrooms:

> Il faut que l'ouvrier ait pleine et puissante intelligence de sa vie à lui, et non pas quelques aperçus sur la vie spirituelle d'un haut dignitaire de l'Etat. […] L'enseignement primaire ne doit pas avoir pour but d'appliquer une première couche de toute la science sur tous les esprits, mais de donner à chacun des connaissances entières dans les limites que le travail fixe à sa vie.[218]

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215 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1101, p. 1108.
216 Pataud and Pouget, *Comment nous ferons la révolution*, p. 170.
217 'Du point de vue technique, la facilité relative du transport de l'énergie sous forme d'électricité permet certainement un large degré de décentralisation.' Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1060.
218 A.V. Jacquet, 'Vues sur une école rurale prolétarienne', *La Révolution prolétarienne: revue bi-mensuelle syndicaliste communiste*, 25 August 1933, p. 325.

Education should thus be varied and adaptable, to reflect the particular conditions of the community in which it is taught. This was in stark contrast to the universalising project of the Third Republic, which aimed to give every child the same republican, secular education.

For Jacquet, education should be linked to the forms of production which surround the children: 'l'école rurale ne peut être qu'une école de travail, étroitement rattachée à la production'.[219] In this reformed society, schools would be extensions of the field, and the fields an extension of the school: 'Nouvelles écoles en plein champs, avec beau jardin, terrains d'expérience, poulailler, clapier, etc. […] voilà ce que nous devons exiger'.[220] Whether teachers are destined for urban or rural communities, they must be thoroughly prepared for that culture of production and work: 'Il faut je crois, de la part des instituteurs et institutrices un très vigoureux effort intellectuel pour rentrer dans la vie ouvrière ou paysanne'.[221]

In *L'Enracinement,* Weil echoes this view, going so far as to suggest that urban and rural primary school teachers should be trained in radically different ways:

> La première condition d'un réenracinement moral de la paysannerie dans le pays, c'est que le métier d'instituteur rural soit quelque chose de distinct, de spécifique, dont la formation soit non seulement partiellement, mais totalement autre que celle d'un instituteur des villes. Il est absurde au plus haut point de fabriquer dans un même moule des instituteurs pour Belleville ou pour un petit village.[222]

Like Jacquet, Weil argued that rural teachers should not simply be from rural backgrounds but should also undergo immersion in a variety of rural tasks and culture, including folklore and peasant literature. In so far as urban teachers were concerned, education should be structured around production:

> Il est désirable que l'apprentissage ne se fasse pas dans les écoles, où il se fait toujours mal, mais soit baigné tout de suite dans la production elle-même. […] Il y a là des efforts d'invention à faire. Il faudrait quelque chose qui combine les avantages de l'école professionnelle, ceux de l'apprentissage

219 Ibid., p. 326.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid., p. 325.
222 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1080.

> en usine, ceux du chantier de compagnons du type actuel, et beaucoup d'autres en plus.[223]

Weil may not have been directly inspired by Jacquet's arguments, but what these parallels reflect is a shared perspective on educational reform, which was specifically syndicalist, avoiding the standardisation of both French Republican and Soviet Russian systems (despite their great differences).

In short, had Weil published 'Le Groupement de l'Ordre Nouveau' (1934), 'Réflexions' (1935) or *L'Enracinement* (1943) in her own lifetime, her peers would surely have recognised their prominent syndicalism. It seems that Weil's early political thought was determined by a circular model: her philosophical interests in work and liberty undoubtedly led her to syndicalism. However, the ideological goals of syndicalism seem also to have informed her thought. 'Réflexions' can fruitfully be read as a Cartesian substantiation of syndicalism and the political project of *L'Enracinement* supports a number of deeply syndicalist reforms, from decentralisation to education.

However, Weil's philosophical engagement with syndicalism did not occur merely on the theoretical level. Her political thought was above all reactive to the very real threat of totalitarian ideology from the left and the right. For Weil, the centralised and productivist Communism of the Bolsheviks represented, along with the violence of Fascism, the most dangerous forms of modern oppression.

The chapter to follow will address in particular Weil's reaction to the rise of this unprecedented threat from the left and right, showing how it ultimately moved her beyond syndicalism to embrace a broader, more diffuse, more intellectual left wing politics. This took the form of a sustained criticism of Marx and the Bolshevik leadership of the Soviet Union and was expressed most fully in her contributions to the periodicals *La Révolution prolétarienne* and *La Critique sociale*. It was on the pages of these journals that Weil set out her vision of the distinctly

[223] Ibid., p. 1066.

modern and related threat of Soviet oppression and Fascist dictatorship, and speculated on how the revolutionary left ought to respond.

# Chapter Two

## *'Entre Deux Feux': Communism, Fascism and the Critique of Marx*

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Simone Weil's emphasis on emancipation, set out in the previous chapter as grounded in an anti-abstractionist Cartesian method for theorising self-directed labour, was both a product of the philosophy of work in which Weil's syndicalism was embedded and a response to the increasingly urgent threat of totalitarianism. The disconnection between thought and action was for Weil not simply a theoretical critique of modern labour but the very real condition of social life in inter-war Europe. She makes this point explicitly in a section of 'Réflexions' titled 'Esquisse de la vie sociale contemporaine':

> Jamais l'individu n'a été aussi complètement livré à une collectivité aveugle, et jamais les hommes n'ont été plus incapables non seulement de soumettre leurs actions à leurs pensées, mais même de penser.[224]

During Weil's political engagement with the *deuxième gauche* prior to her factory work, she expressed her emancipatory message in terms of fervent denunciations of Soviet Communism and Fascism, which as collectivities were antithetical to her individualist model of freedom.[225]

This chapter will set out how she communicated this by participating in established and self-reflexive discourses within syndicalism on the subject of Marx and bureaucracy in periodicals such as *La Révolution prolétarienne*, and also by her association with *La Critique sociale,* the anti-Bolshevik periodical of the dissident Communist, Boris Souvarine. Although her association with

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[224] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 94.

[225] As already set out in previous chapter, France's *deuxième gauche* was an anti-Jacobin nineteenth-century movement rooted in the rejection of State control, centralisation, intellectualisation of the political sphere and parliamentarism. Sometimes described as Anarchist, it has emphasised the importance of civil as opposed to political society, has advocated decentralisation, even regionalism, and has sought organisational models in the association of (mostly) economic groups. Jennings, *Syndicalism in France: A Study of Ideas*, p. 226.

Souvarine in 1933 arguably revealed a weakening of syndicalism's ideological hold on her thought, the continuity of that thought was largely unaffected, in so far as both periodicals understood their role in terms of a critique of scientific Marxism, Bolshevism and Fascism.

The context of these two periodicals, one syndicalist, one dissident anti-Soviet communist, will form the backbone of this chapter, displaying how Weil applied the theoretical insights of Cartesian thought to the political landscape of her day. It will show how she echoes the classical syndicalist line on (Soviet) Marxism, rejecting in particular its destructive promotion of bureaucracy and productivism, while, at other times, striking a more conciliatory tone, calling for a lucid a-political survey of power and its effects in the modern world and for a united front against totalitarianism.

This alternation shows that Weil was not abandoning revolutionary syndicalism in terms of its core ideas, since she would continue to uphold them in certain of her later texts. However, the rise of totalitarianism and the inability of the left, including the revolutionary syndicalist left, to understand and respond to this crisis seems to have opened up new directions and lines of enquiry in her thought. These would include, the decision to become a 'performative philosopher', in the words of the novelist Chris Kaus, and to put herself in the position of the oppressed in an effort to understand from the inside the factors that could account for the revolutionary capability or incapacity of the proletariat.[226] She did this first by travelling and reporting for *La Révolution prolétarienne* amongst the German proletariat in 1932, as this chapter will show, and then more famously by becoming a factory worker herself, as the chapter to follow will explore. It was this experience of industrial labour which helped her to understand how modern working conditions destroyed the subject from within, enabling the rise of totalitarian ideology on both the left and on the right. With her good friend, dissident

[226] Chris Kaus, *Aliens and Anorexia* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000).

communist and editor of *La Critique sociale,* Boris Souvarine, Weil found herself 'entre deux feux, entre deux fascismes'.[227]

*Weil and La Révolution prolétarienne: Syndicalist Autonomy and the Critique of Marx*

Although Weil only began factory work in the last days of 1935, the emphasis on the philosophical and political primacy of the individual was already apparent in her syndicalist-inspired critique of Marx. Jacques Julliard, a historian of French syndicalism, has noted that the defining originality of syndicalism was not the general strike, but its emphasis on autonomy.[228] For David Berry, this is 'the positive core of syndicalism', which did not desire 'the dissolution of the individual in the group, but on the contrary to extract the individual out of the anonymous group'.[229] Whereas Marxist historical materialism downplayed individual agency, syndicalism was born out of an anarchist, Proudhonian, Communard tradition that put autonomy and anti-State federalism at its heart.

Rudolph Rocker, the German anarchist who wrote the first account of revolutionary syndicalism in English, condemned all bureaucratic totalitarianisms in which 'the state is everything and the subject nothing'.[230] He defined the libertarian, federalist project of syndicalism as guided by the following principle: 'The freer, the more independent and enterprising the individual is in a society, the better for the society'.[231] Weil's Cartesian assertion of the superiority of the individual over the collectivity set out in the preceding analysis clearly belongs within this tradition.

*La Révolution prolétarienne*, a revolutionary syndicalist periodical founded in 1925, which

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227 Boris Souvarine, *À contre-courant: Écrits 1925-1939* (Paris: Editions Denoel, 1985), p. 46.
228 Jacques Julliard, *Autonomie ouvrière: Études sur le syndicalisme d'action directe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).
229 David Berry and Constance Bantman, *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism: The Individual, the National and the Transnational* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 191.
230 Rudolph Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto Press, [1938] 1985), p. 12. Anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism are synonymous. Whereas the former is more associated with the Spanish and Italian movement, the latter is the more commonly used term in France and Britain.
231 Ibid., p. 16.

Weil described as the only truly independent 'revue' of its day, also belonged in this tradition. Although contributors valued his ethical core, Marx was often criticised for his neglect of individual autonomy. In March 1929, in an overview of syndicalism in *La Révolution prolétarienne*, Berth highlights the importance of individual agency, which he nonetheless couches in a critique of Marxism: '[Selon] la célèbre proposition de Marx "l'homme fait son histoire, mais dans les conditions déterminées". Il oublia complétement la première partie, pour ne s'attacher qu'à la seconde.'[232] For Berth, the corrective to Marx is to be found in Georges Sorel, who used the idea of myth to restore human autonomy to the idea of a socialist revolution. For Sorel, myths are the expression of a will to act and only myths can engender revolutionary agency: 'Ce ne sont pas des descriptions de choses, mais des expressions de volontés.'[233]

In 'Perspectives', also published in *La Révolution prolétarienne* in August 1933, Weil reformulated this syndicalist view, in which Marx is criticised for overlooking the importance of individual autonomy. Whereas Berth turned to Sorel, we can see in this article the seeds of Weil's turn to Descartes:

> N'oublions pas que nous voulons faire de l'individu et non de la collectivité la suprême valeur. Nous voulons […] donner à l'intelligence son objet propre, en le mettant en contact avec le monde par le moyen de travail. […] La subordination de la société à l'individu, c'est la définition de la démocratie véritable, et c'est aussi celle du socialisme. Mais comment maîtriser cette puissance aveugle […]? Nous cherchions en vain dans la littérature marxiste une réponse à cette question.[234]

However, 'Perspectives', as the plural of the title suggests, does more than simply mirror the conventional syndicalist perspective on revolution (and Marx). Although some scholars have

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[232] Edouard Berth, 'Le Syndicalisme révolutionnaire: du "Capital" aux "Réflexions sur la violence"' *La Révolution prolétarienne: revue bi-mensuelle syndicaliste communiste*, 15 March 1929.
[233] Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence* (Paris: Librairie Pages Libres, 1908), p. xxxv.
[234] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, pp. 277-278.

suggested that the article is a reflection on Trotsky, containing an original critique of Marx, this seems to overlook the revolutionary syndicalist context with which the text was engaged.[235]

The approach taken here is to read 'Perspectives' as serving a self-reflexive purpose within syndicalism. Whereas totalitarian ideologies were growing in Russia, Italy, Spain, and above all in Germany, revolutionary syndicalism was in decline. The revolutionary wing had been split three ways (as already mentioned into the communist CGTU, the anarchist CGTSR, and the formerly revolutionary CGT, which had been under reformist leadership since the 'Union sacrée' of 1914-1919). Weil's passing references to Trotsky (there are three) and longer reflections on Marx are not particularly original, rather they echo established debates within syndicalism and reflect a reading of Marx that did not fundamentally challenge the standard syndicalist discourse.

If 'Perspectives' stands out as original in *La Révolution prolétarienne* it is because syndicalism itself is under review. It will be argued here that it was pessimism about the movement's revolutionary goals and failure to understand the causes of fascism, and not its reflection on Marx, which captures the purpose and coherence of 'Perspectives'.

*'Perspectives' on Marx and Bureaucracy*

Marx's First International anarchist and mutualist rivals, Bakunin and Proudhon, had argued as early as the 1870s that Marx's vision of Communism would create an inflexible, bureaucratic dictatorship.[236] These First International militants rejected political action and bureaucracy because they believed revolution must be the work of the workers themselves. This became the slogan of revolutionary syndicalism and it is certainly no coincidence that the phrase is repeated by Weil in 'Perspectives' without commentary, not just as an assertion of fact but also as an expression of partisanship: 'L'émancipation des travailleurs sera l'œuvre des travailleurs eux-

[235] For 'Perspectives' as a response to Trotksy see Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*, p. 13.
[236] George Woodcock, ed. *The Anarchist Reader* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977), p. 23, p. 38.

mêmes, ou elle ne sera pas'.[237] Rocker echoed this view about bureaucracy abstracting the struggle from the workers themselves when he noted that Marxism, both in its collectivism and its party structure, was predicated on an authoritarian, centralised consolidation of power:

> Centralism, that artificial organisation from above downward which turns over the affairs of everybody in a lump to a small minority, is always attended by barren official routine; and this crushes individual conviction, kills all personal initiative by lifeless discipline and bureaucratic ossification, and permits no independent action.[238]

Indeed, opposition to Marxist centralisation and consequent bureaucratisation is one of the foundation stones of revolutionary syndicalism. From Sorel, the proponent of violent revolutionary insurrection, to Alphonse Merrheim, who ended up on the right wing of the CGT as a reformist, there was a clear consensus against all forms of bureaucratisation.[239] Paul Delesalle, a machinist, journalist and leading syndicalist who helped draft the foundation Charter of Amiens in 1906, was so wary of centralisation that he actually opposed the fusion of the largely vertically-structured proletarian CGT with the regional craft unions of the Fédération des Bourses de Travail.[240] This was a combination which, as Tony Judt has pointed out, was essential in the creation of revolutionary syndicalism as a distinct movement.[241]

Weil's critique of bureaucracy in 'Perspectives' was fairly lenient on Marx in comparison. She included, in the article, without naming the source or author, a quote from *La Guerre civile en France*, a pamphlet written on behalf of the First International. This pamphlet, which lauded private property as a product of free work and the free association of workers, was in fact written not by Proudhon, as the argument might suggest, but by Marx in 1871 as a vigorous defence of the recently fallen Paris Commune.[242] This inclusion implicitly reminded syndicalists and scientific Marxist Communists of their common origins in the First

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237 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 279.
238 Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, p. 90.
239 For Sorel, see Jennings, *Syndicalism in France: A Study of Ideas*, p. 61. For Merrheim, see ibid., p. 173.
240 Ibid., p. 27.
241 Judt, *Marxism and the French Left,* p. 98.
242 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 277.

International. It also strengthened Weil's point that Marx was well aware of the dangers of centralisation and bureaucratisation - he simply made the mistake later of assuming these were products of property and capital. In other words, he did not take into account forms of oppression that were not economic in nature:

> A vrai dire, Marx avait bien aperçu la force d'oppression que constitue la bureaucratie. […]. Mais Marx ne s'est pas demandé s'il ne s'agit pas là d'un ordre de problèmes indépendant des problèmes que pose le jeu de l'économie proprement dite. […] Si l'on voit très bien comment une révolution peut 'exproprier les expropriateurs', on ne voit pas comment un mode de production fondé sur la subordination de ceux qui exécutent à ceux qui coordonnent pourrait ne pas automatiquement produire une structure sociale définie par la dictature d'une caste bureaucratique.[243]

So for Weil, the critique of Marx was perhaps more nuanced than the standard early *ouvriériste* assault on political bureaucracy and centralisation. Marx's intentions were sound, but he was let down by an error in his reasoning. Weil would explore the ramifications of this oversight further in 'Réflexions', a longer article written for *La Critique sociale*, which will be explored in more detail later in the chapter.

This idea that Marx failed to understand oppression beyond an economic condition of misappropriation of the means of production is generally considered to be the backbone of Weil's engagement with Marx.[244] But this is not where the originality or interest of 'Perspectives' really lies - either in terms of its relationship to Marx or to syndicalism. Weil's point about Marx's misunderstanding of oppression was perhaps true but it was in fact already part of inter-war syndicalism's arsenal of arguments against Marx and Bolshevism. Rocker, writing his summary of syndicalist thought during the same period is very clear on this point:

> Economic equality alone is not social liberation. It is just this which Marxism and all the other schools of authoritarian Socialism have never understood. […] 'Socialism' without freedom [is] the worst form of slavery.[245]

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243 Ibid., p. 272.
244 Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*, p. xv-xvii.
245 Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, p. 27-28.

He traced this thought back to Proudhon himself.[246] What's more, the 'enslaved' form of socialism he refers to in 1938 could be National Socialism. This was something, unlike the Soviet Union, that the architects of the First International had not predicted and was the message that 'Perspectives' sought above all to communicate to the backward-looking and ideologically entrenched community of *La Révolution prolétarienne*.

*'Un sacrifice librement consenti': Syndicalism and the Fascist Threat*

'Perspectives', published in *La Révolution prolétarienne,* was addressed to a syndicalist, militant readership. The repetition of established syndicalist perspectives on Marx, centralisation and bureaucracy was not included to preach to the choir. Rather, Weil sought to move the debate on to the present threat of fascism by using accepted arguments that militants could recognise as typically syndicalist. The purpose was to remind a syndicalist movement more used to looking back (to the Commune, to the First International, to the dispute with Marx, to the glory days of the Charter of Amiens in 1906, when political neutrality was codified) that present dangers and not superannuated ideological debates constituted the most urgent threat to proletarian revolution.

For Weil and to a lesser extent for Rocker, the syndicalist goalposts had moved. They did not deny that a certain interpretation of Marxism engendered Communist totalitarianism: Stalin was for this inter-war generation of syndicalists a daily reminder that their predecessors were right in resisting political Marxism and scientific socialism. Yet, as Weil pointed out, fascism was also the product of bureaucracy. Weil, recently returned from Germany, informed her readers in *L'Effort* and *La Révolution prolétarienne* that the young Nazi economists of the periodical *Die Tat* openly considered the USSR the model for their future state and desired a

[246] Ibid., p. 28.

military alliance with the Communist state.[247] The real threat from the bureaucratic machine was not in Russia's past but in the current economic crisis. The Great Depression brought with it the threat that the three bureaucracies of the union, technocratic industry and the state could fuse with disastrous consequences:

> On aurait […] un mélange de dévouement mystique et de bestialité sans frein, une religion d'Etat qui étoufferait toutes les valeurs individuelles, c'est-à-dire toutes les valeurs vraies; […] un système qui anéanti[rait] méthodiquement toute initiative, toute culture, toute pensée.[248]

This echoes the traditional syndicalist emphasis on individual autonomy but in new economic and political contexts. It would seem that 'Perspectives' is trying to move the debate within syndicalism on so as to address the reality of new forms of bureaucratic oppression. Failure to recognise the reality of the present could result in the annihilation of syndicalism, according to Weil: '[ce serait] un sacrifice librement consenti'.[249]

However, Weil's argument about the bureaucratic causes of fascism had little impact on the periodical's position. Two months later, in October 1933, Edouard Berth's article 'Enfin nous avons Hitler!' blamed fascism on the 'lamentable' deficiencies of the capitalist liberal bourgeoisie and traditional, Marxist socialism:

> Le fascisme européen n'est que la triste et honteuse rançon de la déficience lamentable du socialisme européen; la bourgeoisie libérale et le prolétariat socialiste peuvent réciter l'un et l'autre leur *mea culpa*.[250]

This article, along with others like it, called for an entrenchment of traditional, partisan, ideological syndicalism.[251] From this perspective, Weil's article, even if not unprecedented in the

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247 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 267. These fears proved justified, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed in August 1939.
248 Ibid., pp. 274-275.
249 Ibid., p. 274.
250 Edouard Berth, 'Enfin, nous avons Hitler!', *La Révolution prolétarienne: revue bi-mensuelle syndicaliste révolutionnaire*, 25 October 1933, p. 6.
251 Ralph Winter, 'Lutte contre les fascisme et lutte contre le capitalisme', *La Révolution prolétarienne: revue bi-mensuelle syndicaliste révolutionnaire*, 25 September 1933, p. 36.

movement, was resented as counter-revolutionary pessimism.[252] A fellow militant in Weil's own union, the Syndicat national des instituteurs, Roger Hagnauer, denounced her article as eight 'tiresome [*lourdes*] pages': 'Que les intellectuels aventureux, qui n'ont pas le respect de l'organisation […] cessent de méditer sur la faiblesse du prolétariat!'[253]

This contrasted strongly with the aggressively lucid stance of Weil's article, whose self-reflexive rhetorical title and epigraph seemed precisely aimed at undermining this blind optimism: 'Je n'ai que mépris pour le mortel qui se réchauffe avec des espérances creuses'.[254] Weil became increasingly frustrated with syndicalist militants who would not open their eyes to the reality of the present. She wrote in the winter of 1933 to her syndicalist comrade in Saint-Etienne, Urbain Thévenon, that she found the blind ideological optimism of the movement suffocating:

> Dans la mesure où le 'syndicalisme révolutionnaire' est pour vous un dogme, comme le 'parti' pour les communistes […] je cesse décidemment d'être avec vous. […] Je veux […] qu'on apprenne enfin à poser honnêtement les problèmes. J'étouffe dans ce mouvement révolutionnaire aux yeux bandés.[255]

It is possible that Weil's call in 'Perspectives' to radically rethink left-wing ideology was motivated in part by her disappointment with the German revolutionary movement which she had encountered in 1932 on a visit to Germany. In 'Sur la situation en Allemagne', published in May 1933 in *L'Ecole émancipée*, Weil's critical perspective on the Marxist revolutionary movement and its abstracted and 'mythic' ideology was trenchant:

> Espérons que ces camarades comprendront pleinement le péril mortel que court le mouvement révolutionnaire du fait qu'il se trouve entre les mains d'hommes dont les uns aiment mieux régler leurs pensées et leurs actions

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[252] For example, Weil's Belgian syndicalist friend Jacques Mesnil, reflected as early as 1914 on the ideal of the open-minded, anti-dogmatic revolutionary in a pamphlet titled *Esprit révolutionnaire et syndicalisme*: '[Les hommes] doivent y entretenir l'esprit révolutionnaire, c'est-à-dire l'esprit de libre examen, de réflexion personnelle, d'indépendance et de dignité de l'individu.' Jacques Mesnil, 'Esprit révolutionnaire et syndicalisme', (Paris: Les Temps nouveaux, 1914), pp. 6-7.
[253] Roger Hagnauer, 'Pas tant de pessimisme', *La Révolution prolétarienne: revue bi-mensuelle syndicaliste révolutionnaire*, 25 September 1933, p. 359.
[254] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 260.
[255] Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, pp. 225-226.

> d'après des mythes que d'après une vue claire de la réalité. […]. Il est inutile et déshonorant de fermer les yeux.[126]

She added in 'Faisons le point', an unpublished article also written in spring 1933, that a total re-assessment was urgently required within revolutionary syndicalism and socialism more generally: 'La conclusion est que nous devons reprendre par la base tous les problèmes que pose l'action révolutionnaire'.[127]

The backlash in response to 'Perspectives' and its clear failure to achieve what it set out to do may have been instrumental in her decision to write her most important article to date, 'Réflexions', not in a syndicalist journal, but for *La Critique sociale*.[256] The latter, founded by Boris Souvarine in 1931 with the purpose of renewing and updating Marxist thought in light of contemporary challenges, remained very much on the alternative, anti-Soviet left, while rejecting the ideological baggage of established movements, such as anarchists and syndicalists. Souvarine set this out in a 'Perspective de travail', published in the very first issue of the periodical:

> Ce qui dépend de nous, c'est de penser, d'étudier, de nous préparer à mieux servir la classe ouvrière, et, bien entendu, d'extérioriser notre travail. […] Notre rôle est de servir avec désintéressement les exploités et les opprimés, de donner à ceux qui en veulent des raisons, des opinions et des conseils fondés sur les sciences sociales.[257]

*'Une cure de vérité': Simone Weil and La Critique Sociale*

Given this aim, in contrast to Hagnauer's derision, 'Perspectives' was welcomed by *La Critique sociale* in its 'compte rendu' of socialist periodicals. It was welcomed precisely because of its emphasis on intellectual lucidity:

> L'étude de Simone Weil représente un remarquable effort pour sortir des notions toutes faites qui barrent l'horizon des révolutionnaires. Souhaitons

256 In fact, the periodical folded in 1935 and the article was not published in her lifetime. It was first published in 1955. See Simone Weil, *Oppression et Liberté* (Paris: Gallimard: Collection Espoir, 1955 [posthumous]).
257 Cited in Anne Roche, ed. *Boris Souvarine et* La Critique sociale (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 1990), pp. 37-38.

qu'elle serve d'amorce à d'autres travaux orientés dans le même sens.[258]

Through Souvarine, whom she had met at the end of 1932, she was introduced to a heterogeneous group of intellectuals in the *Cercle communiste démocratique,* including Georges Bataille, Raymond Queneau, the Trotskyist Pierre Naville and the Marxist economist Lucien Laurat.[259] The *Cercle*, via its mouthpiece, *La Critique sociale,* expressed critical reflections on Marx and his legacy. Unlike revolutionary syndicalists who often dismissed many aspects of Marxist thought and economics out of hand, Souvarine presented Marx as misunderstood by his and Weil's generation of militant intellectuals. In the very first issue, Souvarine underlined that Marxism was not a static ideology or science but a living and modifiable body of ideas:

> Le marxisme doit par définition se réviser lui-même et subir avec succès la confrontation des faits. […] La vérification du marxisme, donc, à la lumière de l'expérience quotidienne et des acquisitions nouvelles de la culture, est une nécessité irrévocable du progrès des sciences sociales. [260]

Leninism had utterly failed in this task. The Bolshevik 'imposter' was to be exposed by lucid, critical thinking, by what Souvarine called 'une cure de vérité'.[261] With this aim, *La Critique sociale* undoubtedly offered a more propitious context than the *La Révolution prolétarienne* for expressing the particular brand of socialism that Weil conceived in Germany and developed in 'Perspectives'.

This influence is visible in the call to clearly-conceived action in the final passages of 'Perspectives':

> Notre faiblesse peut nous empêcher de vaincre, mais non pas de comprendre la force qui nous écrase. Rien au monde ne peut nous interdire d'être lucides. Il n'y a aucune contradiction entre cette tâche

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258 B. Souvarine et al., 'Revue des revues', *La Critique sociale: revue des idées et des livres*, September 1933, p. 151.
259 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 84.
260 Boris Souvarine, 'Perspective de travail', *La Critique sociale: revue des idées et des livres*, March 1931.
261 In its guiding principles the *Cercle* included the public renunciation of the 'Bolshevik imposter': 'La Désolidarisation publique avec l'imposture bolchevique', cited in Roche, *Boris Souvarine et* La Critique sociale, p. 41. Souvarine called for 'une cure de vérité' in 1926 in 'Où va la révolution russe?'. Cited in ibid., p. 150.

d'éclaircissement théorique et les tâches que pose la lutte effective.[262]

This influence was carried over into 'Réflexions', which she wrote for *La Critique sociale*. In the article, clearly-conceived action is not only the basis for emancipation but is also what ennobles the task of the intellectual: 'quelle tâche plus noble pourrions-nous assumer que celle de préparer méthodiquement un tel avenir en travaillant à faire l'inventaire de la civilisation présente?'[263] *La Critique sociale* was here influencing Weil's ideas and functioning as an outlet while her thought increasingly challenged the anti-intellectualism of syndicalism. However, the proximity between the two periodicals meant she was able to do so without fundamentally deviating from the syndicalist goal of an emancipated, decentralised work-oriented society adapted to the modern industrial era.

*Some Reservations About the Influence of La Critique Sociale*

While *La Critique sociale* clearly influenced the anti-dogmatism of 'Perspectives', as well as the Cartesian emphasis on clarity and transparency in 'Réflexions', it is important to point out that Weil's preference for lucid, descriptive political analysis came about before her acquaintance with Souvarine.

Scholars of Souvarine, such as Jean-François Panné, have emphasised only his influence on her thought. They seem not to consider that the exchange of ideas may have been reciprocal. Jean-Louis Panné has dated this influence as early as 'Impressions d'Allemagne', published in August 1932.[264] However, this is supported neither by the facts, nor by a close reading of their work, which suggests they were brought together by their convergent views and shared a mutually-enriching relationship throughout their intellectual collaboration.

When Weil travelled to Germany in 1932, she had not yet met Souvarine and was

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262 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 281.
263 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 107.
264 Jean-Louis Panné, *Boris Souvarine: Le premier désenchanté du communisme* (Paris: Editions Robert Lafont, 1993), p. 210.

probably unfamiliar with his work.[265] In Germany, it struck her that traditional syndicalist accounts of revolution lacked a psychological and emotional understanding of suffering. The article 'Conditions d'une révolution allemande: "Et maintenant?" par Léon Trotsky', written before her departure, expressed conventional syndicalist views: 'La grande masse des ouvriers allemands reste encore menée par des bureaucrates incapables de se détacher de l'Etat capitaliste'.[266] However, an addendum written after her arrival expressed a markedly different account of Germany's counter-revolutionary stagnation:

> Les ouvriers […] ne se sentent pas assez forts pour une [action révolutionnaire]. […] Ceux qui chôment depuis des années ne sont sans doute plus capables de l'énergie que demande une révolution.[267]

In her 'Impressions d'Allemagne' for *L'Ecole émancipée* and *La Révolution prolétarienne*, her solution was not syndicalist action, but a detached, lucid analysis of the real power distribution across German society in the light of this politics of suffering: 'Nous ne sommes, nous ne pouvons être que des spectateurs dans ce drame. […] Tout d'abord faisons le bilan de la situation, établissons le rapport des forces'.[268]

This approach impressed Souvarine, who gave the piece an enthusiastic review in *La Critique sociale*.[269] It may even have influenced his own work. In September 1932, a month after reading Weil's 'Impressions d'Allemagne', Souvarine reflected, in terms mirroring Weil's, on the

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265 Pétrement, who knew both personally, states that Weil and Souvarine first met at the end of 1932. See Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 218. Such a reading is strengthened by Weil's request as late as October 1933, that her mother buy and send her the first five issues of *La Critique sociale*, suggesting she did not own them already. See Weil, *Correspondance familiale* VII.1, pp. 134-135. This reading is further encouraged by Weil's own later admission to Albertine Thévenon that Souvarine was almost unknown in militant circles: 'Il est seul, méconnu de presque tout le monde'. See Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 218.

266 'Conditions d'une révolution allemande: "Et maintenant?" par Léon Trotsky', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 110.

267 Ibid., p. 115.

268 Ibid., p. 146.

269 'Les plus remarquables "impressions d'Allemagne" qu'on ait lues depuis longtemps dans une publication révolutionnaire, pour l'intelligence et la sensibilité de l'auteur, dont les qualités d'observations et d'intuitions suppléent avantageusement au parti-pris des grands théoriciens qui ont conclu avant d'étudier', Souvarine, 'Revue des revues', *La Critique sociale*, January 1933, p. 55.

'unconscious' state of the proletariat:[270] 'Les signes se multiplient d'une dégénérescence incurable. […] L'avenir imminent ne peut réserver que des défaites à un prolétariat […] inconscient.'[271] In April 1933, Souvarine was making this point even more forcefully:

> Il est permis de se demander à présent si la décadence du capitalisme n'entraîne pas nécessairement une déchéance du prolétariat qui le rende inapte à la 'mission historique' que le marxisme lui assigne.[272]

This represented a shift of emphasis in his argument.

Since in 1931 he had clearly stated in *La Critique sociale*, that, in his view, it was the subordination of the party to the Soviet state and not the weakness of the proletariat itself which had caused the counter-revolutionary status quo in Germany: 'En Allemagne, où se joue le sort de l'Europe, la défaite du faux communisme est acquise avant tout combat. Un parti asservi n'a jamais fait la révolution.'[273] Indeed there is anecdotal evidence related by Jean-Michel Besnier that Weil's undue influence on Souvarine was so pronounced that certain members of the *Cercle* regarded Weil's pessimistic leanings as responsible for Souvarine's disbanding of the group in 1935.[274] This is corroborated by a letter included in Pétrement's biography in which Weil, exasperated by the personality of Georges Bataille, urges the dissolution of the *Cercle,* adding confidently: 'Je sais que Boris est d'accord avec moi sur tout cela, et j'espère aussi d'autres [que lui].'[275] Describing his break with Marxism, she adds, somewhat condescendingly: 'A vrai dire il n'accomplit ce dernier progrès que récemment.'[276]

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[270] 'Une révolution ne peut être menée que par des hommes conscients et responsables'. Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 124.
[271] Boris Souvarine, 'Sombres jours', *La Critique sociale: revue des idées et des livres*, September 1932, pp. 241-242.
[272] Boris Souvarine, 'Anniversaire et actualité', *La Critique sociale: revue des idées et des livres*, April 1933, p. 60.
[273] Boris Souvarine, 'Chaos mondial', *La Critique sociale: revue des idées et des livres*, December 1931, p.147.
[274] Jean-Michel Besnier, *La Politique de l'impossible: L'intellectuel entre révolte et engagement* (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 1988), p. 165.
[275] Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 306.
[276] Cited in Panné, *Boris Souvarine: Le premier désenchanté du communisme*, p. 207.

Although Weil seems, by her own admission, to have pushed Souvarine further from Marx, her own view of Marx was not far from the collective position of the 'revue', in so far as such a position existed. Much scholarship, already mentioned, may see Weil's critique of Marxism as the core of her originality as a thinker, but this is to overlook the anti-Soviet, syndicalist context in which she was writing. Both *La Critique sociale* and syndicalism shared a commitment to certain core elements of Marx and a related critique of Soviet communism as fundamentally estranged from these core elements. How Weil drew on the traditional syndicalist critique of Marx as centralising and preoccupied by abstract economic principles has already been set out.

However, another means by which she drew on existing discourses within the alternative left was by emphasising not just certain flaws within Marx's own *œuvre*, but also by underlining the positives to be found in Marx. What was precious in Marx for the intellectuals of *La Critique sociale*, including Weil, was Marx's method. However, few took this attitude as far as Weil, who declared that Marx's materialist method was a 'virgin' tool, untouched even by Marx himself.[277] However, the periodical's core message, that Marx's value resided in an adaptable, open methodology to be applied to each new socio-economic context, has clear echoes in Weil's work.

This line of argument was intended to shock the scientific Communists, who followed strict laws and patterns set out by Marx in a teleological view of class struggle which defined the development of the Communist state. However, it was relatively characteristic of the alternative left, and particularly of *La Critique sociale*.[278] Lucien Laurat, a dissident Marxist economist who

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[277] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 37.

[278] Both Weil and Souvarine were accused personally by Trotsky of abandoning the left. In 1929, Souvarine wrote to Trotsky: 'vous assignez d'office une place "de l'autre côté de barricade" à ceux qui ne répondent pas comme vous aux questions que vous avez décidé d'ériger en "critères". See Souvarine, *À contre-courant: Écrits 1925-1939*, p. 217. Trotsky predictably replied that Souvarine had abandoned Marx and the socialist cause: '[votre lettre] ne signifie que la désertion de l'organisation marxiste. […] Je suis sûr que demain […] vous passerez de l'autre côté de la barricade. Théoriquement vous y êtes déjà'. See ibid., p. 276. His response to 'Perspectives' in October 1933 was similar: 'Simone WeiI a trouvé une consolation dans une nouvelle mission: défendre sa

worked alongside Weil on *La Critique sociale*, emphasised that true Marxism involved an open, flexible approach to phenomena, one which was incompatible with a fixed, dogmatic knowledge-base and method: 'un marxiste ne peut rester "orthodoxe" qu'au prix de continuelles "hérésies" […], l'héritage de Marx est un capital qu'on ne peut conserver qu'en l'accroissant'.[279] The striking similarity between this view, published in April 1933, and that expressed concurrently by Weil in a preparatory article for 'Perspectives', also written in spring 1933, is so pronounced as to suggest a direct response. Weil even introduced the article by echoing Laurat's reference to Marxist heresy and orthodoxy: 'Ce ne sont ici que quelques idées, peut-être hasardées, certainement hérétiques par rapport à toutes les orthodoxies'.[280] She goes on to echo the precise point made by Laurat:

> Nous vivons sur une doctrine élaborée par un grand homme certes, mais un grand homme mort il y a cinquante ans. Il a créé une méthode; il l'a appliquée aux phénomènes de son temps; il ne pouvait l'appliquer aux phénomènes du nôtre. […] Le marxisme ne peut cependant rester vivant qu'à titre de méthode d'analyse, dont chaque génération se sert pour définir les phénomènes essentiels de sa propre époque.[281]

This short passage reflects the broad consensus among the thinkers of *La Critique sociale.*

Like syndicalists, *La Critique sociale* wanted a return to the ethical core of Marx, regarded by Souvarine as an open, flexible and critical method. In the very first issue of the periodical, Souvarine defined the aims of *La Critique sociale*:

> Le marxisme doit par définition se réviser lui-même et subir avec succès la confrontation des faits. […] La vérification du marxisme, donc, à la lumière de l'expérience quotidienne et des acquisitions nouvelles de la culture, est une nécessité irrévocable du progrès des sciences sociales.[282]

This approach clearly informed Weil's decision to test Marxist hypotheses about alienation by

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personnalité contre la société. […] A elle et à ses semblables, il faudrait de nombreuses années pour se libérer des préjugés petits-bourgeois les plus réactionnaires'. Cited in Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 268.

[279] Lucien Laurat, 'L'Héritage de Karl Marx,' *La Critique sociale: revue des idées et des livres*, April 1933, p. 61.

[280] 'Réflexions concernant la technocratie, le national-socialisme, L'U.R.S.S. et quelques autres points', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 213.

[281] Ibid.

[282] Souvarine, 'Perspective de travail', p. 2.

undertaking factory work during 1935. Indeed, it is no coincidence that it was an approving Souvarine himself who, through his contacts, helped secure Weil a position in a Parisian factory.[283]

*'Le souvenir de mon expérience propre': Putting Marx to the Test*

Both during and after Weil's factory work, she would echo this idea that for Marxist ideas to be valid they must survive the test of everyday experience. When she came to reject Marxism, as Souvarine also would, she emphasised the role that her own first hand-experience had played.[284] This is borne out by notes she took during factory work, published posthumously in *La Condition ouvrière* in 1951:

> J'ai tiré en somme deux leçons de mon expérience. La première, la plus amère et la plus imprévue, c'est que l'oppression, […] engendre non une tendance à la révolte, mais une tendance presque irrésistible à la plus complète soumission. […] La seconde, c'est que l'humanité se divise en deux catégories, les gens qui comptent pour quelque chose et les gens qui comptent pour rien.[285]

This first lesson of her experience attacked the unfounded optimism of Marx. As we will see, this critique was anticipated and encouraged by the work of Souvarine. The second lesson, expressed in the less economic and more humanitarian vocabulary of 'those who count for nothing', encapsulated her critique of the inadequacy of Marx's narrow categories of proletarian and bourgeois. Weil's moral and psychological division of society was clearly opposed to the narrowly economic categories of Marx, and she elaborated on this critique at greater length in a later unfinished text of 1943.[286] Already by 1937, she was rejecting for these reasons

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283 Weil, *Correspondance familiale* VII.1, p. 135, n.132.

284 In 1965, Souvarine would look back on his work of the 1930s and note '[Il me restait un] résidu de scolastique à terminologie marxiste qui encombrait encore mon argumentation', Souvarine, *À contre-courant: Écrits 1925-1939*, p. 190.

285 Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, p. 188.

286 In 'Y-a-t-il une doctrine marxiste' Weil discussed the inadequacies of Marx's understanding of oppression: 'On ne peut pas faire usage de la notion d'oppression sans avoir fait un sérieux effort

the idea that Marx's corpus formed any kind of system, and she used her own experience to substantiate this claim: 'Ce qui me fait exprimer un jugement si catégorique, et si propre à déplaire, c'est le souvenir de mon expérience propre'.[287] How Weil used her own experience of suffering to undermine conventional socialist accounts of oppression and to provide an original alternative account will be explored in the chapter to follow. For present purposes it suffices to note that she regarded, somewhat typically for an intellectual of *La Critique sociale*, that Marxism was a living corpus to be tested (and found wanting) in the light of modern industrial conditions. That being said, her decision to actually undertake factory work for herself remained untypical.

Other groups, some better known than the 'noyau' *La Critique sociale*, such as the Frankfurt School, also rejected Soviet 'scientific' Marxism. Whereas the Frankfurt School expressed the need to 'update' Marxism via the creation of 'critical theory', groups like *La Critique sociale* remained preoccupied by the here and now of inter-war politics and more particularly by an aggressively anti-Bolshevik stance.

Souvarine compared Marxists in the Bolshevik left to medieval 'charlatans' who unthinkingly invoked and deformed Aristotle.[288] He was fond of citing (like Erich Fromm, of the Frankfurt School)[289] that Marx's preferred motto was 'se douter de tout'.[290] This was, according to the selective approach Souvarine took to quoting Marx, part of an explicit rejection by Marx of those who made his method a universal 'passe-partout'. [291] Souvarine pointed out in 'Anniversaire et actualité', published like Laurat's 'Héritage de Marx' in the April 1933 edition of *La Critique sociale*, that to honour Marx was not to idealise his word as final, but to apply his ideas critically: 'Il ne sied pas d'élever des statues à un grand briseur d'idoles'.[292] Weil directly echoed

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pour la définir, car elle n'est pas claire. Marx ne s'en est pas donné la peine. Les mêmes hommes sont opprimés à certains égards, oppresseurs à d'autres'. Weil, *Oppression et Liberté*, p. 175.
[287] 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 134.
[288] Souvarine, 'Anniversaire et actualité', p. 57.
[289] Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), p. 13.
[290] Cited in Roche, *Boris Souvarine et* La Critique sociale, p. 7.
[291] Ibid., p. 20.
[292] Souvarine, 'Anniversaire et actualité', p. 58.

this point as she did Laurat's in the preparatory text for Perspectives, already cited, also written in spring 1933. She argued that instead of being used as a 'living method', Marx was commonly used by her generation of socialists as an ideological battering ram: 'Marx représente pour nous, […] un simple nom, que l'on jette à la tête de l'adversaire pour le pulvériser; presque jamais une méthode'.[293] At this stage, prior to her factory work and subsequent total abandonment of Marx, for Weil, as for the intellectuals of *La Critique sociale*, Marx had value primarily in terms of his method.

However, Weil shared with other contributors of *La Critique sociale*, such as Julius Dickmann, and particularly Souvarine, the view that Marx had betrayed his own scientific method. 'Réflexions', her most extensive and politically-minded critique of Marx was written for *La Critique sociale* and was inspired by the article of Julius Dickmann, 'La Véritable Limite de la production capitaliste'. In his article, which appeared in September 1933 in issue 9 of *La Critique sociale*, Dickmann argued that capitalism and communism share an oppressive productivism, predicated on an erroneous belief in unlimited production. Dickmann presciently argued that production incentivises an ever-greater economy of living labour at the expense of an ever-greater consumption of dead labour in the form of natural resources. Whereas production is unlimited, the material basis required for growth is naturally limited. Furthermore, as the natural resources become more difficult and labour-intensive to extract, the acceleration towards the total collapse of the system becomes even more rapid.[294]

In 'Réflexions', Weil re-iterated this critique of Marx's belief in unlimited production:

> Pourquoi pose-t-il sans démonstration, et comme une vérité évidente, que les forces productives sont susceptibles d'un développement illimité? Toute cette doctrine, sur laquelle repose entièrement la conception marxiste de la révolution, est absolument dépourvue de tout caractère scientifique.[295]

Weil took Dickmann's critique further. For Weil, this belief in unlimited production was part of

[293] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 213.
[294] See Julius Dickmann, 'La Véritable Limite de la production capitaliste', *La Critique sociale: revue des idées et des livres*, September 1933.
[295] Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 35.

a wider, unfounded belief in a mysterious teleology animating matter. Not only did this lead Marx to perpetuate the same abstracted, spiritual account of history which he sought to correct in Hegel's philosophy of Mind/Spirit (*Geist*), it also led him to believe progress resided, not in subjects or minds, but mysteriously in material objects. For Weil, this made Marx's thought the philosophical expression of the capitalist reversal of subject and object which he actually intended to undermine: 'C'est donner une expression philosophique à ce "renversement du rapport entre le sujet et l'objet" dans lequel Marx voyait l'essence même du capitalisme'.[296] Taken together, these inconsistencies between Marx's scientific aspirations and his actual ideological and religiously-minded approach to historical materialism led Weil, with deliberate provocation, to state that Marx had entirely neglected any truly scientific materialist method. She described Marx instead as a 'religious thinker': 'Croire que notre volonté converge avec une volonté mystérieuse qui serait à l'œuvre dans le monde et nous aiderait à vaincre, c'est penser religieusement'.[297] This religious revolutionary sat with difficulty alongside the social scientist, a point she made explicitly in 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme':

> [R]épugnant, […] à laisser subsister en lui deux hommes, le révolutionnaire et le savant, […], il a tenu à faire de sa méthode un instrument pour prédire un avenir conforme à ses vœux.[298]

The idea that Marx had betrayed his own thought for an unjustified ideological optimism was most likely echoing an argument made by Souvarine in April 1933.

In 'Anniversaire et actualité', Souvarine upheld the integrity of Marx's system, but argued that his providential belief in the destiny of the proletariat was unfounded:

> Cette notion purement intuitive de la mission historique du prolétariat peut disparaître sans ébranler […] les pièces essentielles du système de Marx. […] Marx n'a pas eu raison de quitter le terrain de l'investigation scientifique pour avancer sa prévision trop optimiste.[299]

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[296] Ibid., p. 36.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Ibid., p. 135.
[299] Souvarine, 'Anniversaire et actualité', p. 60.

Not only does this precise argument re-appear in 'Réflexions', but the same phrase of Marx is used to illustrate his 'religious' and 'providential' blind faith:

> [Croire que notre volonté converge avec une volonté mystérieuse], c'est croire à la Providence. D'ailleurs le vocabulaire même de Marx en témoigne, puisqu'il contient des expressions quasi mystiques, telles que 'la mission historique du prolétariat'.[300]

However, this intensely critical perspective on Marx himself seems on the surface quite far from the collective position of *La Critique sociale*, with the exception perhaps of Bataille.[301] While Weil may have agreed with Laurat and Souvarine that Marx's materialist method was a flexible tool to be re-adapted for every social, economic and geographical context, they would hardly have agreed with her that this tool had been entirely neglected by Marx himself:

> La méthode matérialiste, cet instrument que nous a légué Marx, est un instrument vierge; aucun marxiste ne s'en est véritablement servi, à commencer par Marx lui-même. […] Il n'est pas étonnant que les mouvements sociaux issus de Marx aient fait faillite.[302]

Weil may have come down particularly heavily on Marx (although she was lenient by the standards of *La Révolution prolétarienne*), but this position probably helped to make her rejection of Bolshevism, and its uncritical distortion of Marx, all the more emphatic. There may also have been an element of rhetorical provocation, in her desire to shake the left out of its theoretical preconceptions about revolution.

In many ways, 'Réflexions', as well as later texts on Marx, such as 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme' (1934) and even 'Y a-t-il une doctrine marxiste?' (1943) offer a synthesis of the

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300 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 36.

301 Bataille's distance from Marx and indeed from the other contributors of the periodical was such that his article, 'La notion de dépense' was uniquely preceded by an editorial disclaimer warning that its content did not reflect the views of the editors. The article explains all political and social phenomena as the conservation or dissipation of energetic excess. Bataille associates bourgeois capitalism with the unnatural conservation of energy, whereas he argues that human nature and civilisation are successfully balanced by excessive and unproductive expenditure (he uses solar energy as his foundational example). Energy expenditure was also a key concept for Weil, and their difference and convergence will be explored in Chapter Five which examines Weil's effort to establish new theoretical foundations for scientific understandings of the modern world.

302 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 37.

various arguments made in *La Critique sociale*. Weil draws on Laurat and Souvarine's focus on Marx's method, which was by no means exclusive to *La Critique sociale*. It also reflected the more methodologically-minded approach to Marxism taken by pro-Bolshevik thinkers such as Georg Lukács.[303] However, whereas Laurat and Lukács were committed (despite differences of opinion concerning the U.S.S.R.) to the integrity of the original Marxist method as 'the road to truth', and sought to reapply it 'only along the lines laid down by its founders' (the expressions belong to Lukács),[304] Souvarine, Dickmann and Weil detect to varying degrees an unfounded optimistic faith in the original project itself.

Souvarine sees a generalised optimism in Marx's vocabulary.[305] For Dickmann, Marx's unscientific optimism is restricted to a blind faith in unlimited production. In Weil, we find both these critiques but couched in a more extreme attitude that attacks the wider 'religious' and 'productivist' presuppositions of Marx's project. She offers this not for its own sake, but by way of explanation for the Bolshevik catastrophe. For Weil, in contrast to Souvarine *et al*, Bolshevism was not completely estranged from the Marxist model it regarded as sacrosanct:

> Cette religion des forces productives au nom de laquelle des générations de chefs d'entreprise ont écrasé les masses travailleuses sans le moindre remords constitue également un facteur d'oppression à l'intérieur du mouvement socialiste; toutes les religions font de l'homme un simple instrument de la Providence, et le socialisme lui aussi met les hommes au service […] du progrès de la production. C'est pourquoi, quel que soit l'outrage infligé à la mémoire de Marx par le culte que lui vouent les oppresseurs de la Russie moderne, il n'est pas entièrement immérité.[306]

This was in sharp contrast to Souvarine, who dated the 'despotisme absolutiste' of Soviet Russia

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303 Luckács in *History and Class Consciousness*: 'Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the "belief" in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a "sacred" book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*.' Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, [1923] 1971), p. 1.
304 Ibid.
305 Souvarine, 'Anniversaire et actualité', p. 60.
306 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 36.

as coming after Lenin.[307] In fact, Souvarine saw the despotism of Bolshevism as a consequence of Lenin's deification in an age of dogmatism and corrupted communism ('communisme dévoyé').[308] Weil, perhaps with her more syndicalist perspective, saw the origins of Soviet Communist authoritarianism as present from the outset in the failures of Marx himself and perpetuated by Lenin. Indeed, it was perhaps with this distance between her and the other contributors to the periodical in mind that she mounted a violent attack on Lenin in the tenth issue. Not only did she denounce him as a precursor to Stalin in her article 'Réflexions sur la guerre' (itself a response to Souvarine's 'Le Socialisme et la guerre' in issue 5),[309] but she also denounced in a separate book review in issue 10 Lenin's simplistic and instrumental interpretation of materialism as evidence of an unfree thinker enslaved to party interest.[310] This was close to the syndicalist position, a tradition she continued to promote across a variety of socialist periodicals, including in 'Sur les contradictions du marxisme', intended for *Essais et combats,* the syndicalist publication of the Fédération nationale des étudiants socialistes:

> Je ne crois pas que le mouvement ouvrier redevienne dans notre pays quelque chose de vivant tant qu'il ne cherchera pas, je ne dis pas des doctrines, mais une source d'inspiration dans ce que Marx et les marxistes ont combattu et bien follement méprisé: dans Proudhon, dans les groupements ouvriers de 1848, dans la tradition syndicale, dans l'esprit anarchiste.[311]

Read in the context of both syndicalism and *La Critique sociale*, Weil's reflections on the value of Marx appear part of a coherent and engaged endeavour. This endeavour was less an exegetical exercise on Marx than a participation in these now lapsed traditions on the alternative left, from anti-Marxist anarcho-syndicalism to the anti-Soviet non-conformist communism of *La Critique sociale*.[312]

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307 Souvarine, *À contre-courant: Écrits 1925-1939*, p. 8.
308 Ibid., p. 129, p. 134.
309 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 295.
310 'Sur le livre de Lénine *Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme*,' ibid., p. 304.
311 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, pp. 135-136.
312 The expression is Souvarine's, cited in Panné, *Boris Souvarine: Le premier désenchanté du communisme,* p. 174.

Weil's thought was woven into the political and philosophical projects of the syndicalist and anti-Soviet left. This influence operated at a theoretical level: it shaped her definition of freedom, her interpretation of Marx and her blueprint for an ideal society. However, it also operated, on the pages of political periodicals, at a more concrete, historical level: it informed her reaction to the rise of totalitarian ideologies, immersed her in self-reflexive debates about the direction of the French left and ultimately led her to experience-driven methodologies.

Whereas Weil's political philosophy of labour can be addressed in light of the traditions set out in this chapter, her proto-anthropological account of the experience of work, undertaken in factories in and around Paris during 1935, largely deviated from established socialist discourses. Drawing on her own physical, psychological and emotional experience of work, she made some of her most original contributions to political thought.

This self-insertion into the condition of modern industrial oppression allowed her to substantiate her point that Marxism was abstracted from the real experience of the proletariat. It also led her to engage with a more diffuse tradition in the history of ideas beyond politics, one which also dealt with the rise of abstraction, the relationship between man and machinery and the sometimes vertiginous experience of time: the critical analysis of the nature and the consequences of modernity as an embodied experience.

# Chapter Three

## *Embodiment, Temporality and Industrial Modernity*

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Revolutionary syndicalism and the broader and more diffuse movement of France's *deuxième gauche* provide Weil's philosophy with an immediate and fruitful context within the history of political thought. However, a wider but no less important context in which to understand Weil's political thought, and above all its focus on industrial work, is within the multidisciplinary discourse on modernity, which has accompanied mass change in the cultural, economic, scientific and political dimensions of society.

Marxist and other left-wing accounts of alienation, as well as right-wing narratives of decline, degeneration and decadence, represent a political diptych within the history of modernity as an idea. However, it was not primarily through her political engagement that Weil engaged with the theme of modernity. Rather, she engaged with the transformations of subjectivity, embodiment and temporality that modernity, and particularly industrial automation, brought about. The focus on work as a site of transformation does not marginalise Weil's philosophy in these debates but rather brings it closer to established discourses. As Jürgen Habermas explains in *Theory and Practice*, the rise of modern philosophy hinges on the changing status of labour and technology:

> The modern thinkers no longer ask, as the Ancients did, about the moral conditions of the good and exemplary life, but about the actual conditions of survival. The assertion of physical life, elementary survival, is directly at issue. This practical necessity requiring technical solutions marks the beginnings of modern social philosophy. In distinction to the ethical necessity of classical politics, it requires no theoretical foundation for the virtues and the laws in an ontology of human nature.[313]

[313] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, [1963] 1974), p. 1006.

This chapter will explore how Weil's philosophy both assimilated the materialism and scientism of modern thought expressed through the metaphor of the worker as machine or motor, and subverted its objectivity by making it the basis of an experience of work which is subjective and self-realising. The worker's experience of time is regarded as central to achieving the self-realising potential of work. Yet modern rationalising reforms, inspired by the emergent 'science of work', incentivised the decomposition of time and focussed solely on the speed of output. This fundamentally altered the temporality of the factory in ways which Weil experienced as destructive and alienating, but which she felt Marx and Marxists largely neglected. This invites a comparison with other theorists of modernity who share a preoccupation with such transformations of subjectivity and temporality in industrial work, most notably Max Weber and Walter Benjamin.

This critical analysis of the modern science of work also paved the way for a broader movement in her thought, which attacked the foundations of modern science as disconnected from lived experience. This will be the focus of the second part of the thesis which follows this chapter.

*'Where does our modern world belong - to exhaustion or to ascent?'*

In his history of social modernity, *The Human Motor*, Anson Rabinach charts how in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the metaphor of the body as motor passed from science into economic, political and cultural perspectives on man and came to be a structuring principle of modernity:

> Through this metaphor, scientists and social reformers could articulate their passionate materialism, embracing nature, industry and human activity in a single, overarching concept - labor power. […] The metaphor of the human motor translated revolutionary scientific discoveries about physical nature

into a new vision of social modernity.[314]

Work was quantified and rationalised as labour power or energy, and its limits were measured in terms of fatigue. Rabinach sees this reflected in Nietzsche's 1888 remark: 'Where does our modern world belong - to exhaustion or to ascent?'[315] From science, to sociology, to culture there was a normative shift towards materialism and the human body became the focus of competing theories and strategies. Despite ideological or disciplinary differences, theorists were united by a common norm: in Rabinach's words, to '[strip] labour of its extraneous social and cultural dimension, and [reveal] only its objectivity'.[316] This is apparent in Marxist 'labour power', but also in the nascent science of work which sought ever-greater efficiency and rationalisation in production. It united liberal reformers eager to limit exploitation while increasing productivity with conservative thinkers who expressed anxiety about modernity in the scientific, quantified vocabulary of modern medicine, for example Maurice Barrès's trilogy *Le Roman de l'énergie nationale* (1897-1902). This was the normative and near ubiquitous understanding of work which Weil was working both within and against.

Scientists of work used this idea of the human motor to reduce work to labour power, to a quantifiable and objective conversion of energy. In Germany, the most prominent scientist of work was Emil Kraeplin (1856-1926), who drew up productivity or performance curves based on environmental variables such as speed, monotony and fatigue. He referred to the analysis of these performance curves as 'Psychophysics'.

This attracted the attention of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), keen to extend this analysis to include socio-economic factors, such as background, literacy, income and religion. He was presumably interested in testing his hypotheses set out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and to apply this science to real-life factory subjects. Although

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[314] Anson Rabinach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 1.
[315] Ibid., p. 19.
[316] Ibid., p. 5.

Weber's 1909 book *Zur Psychophysik der industriellen Arbeit* (*The Psychophysics of Industrial Work*) has received little scholarly attention and has never been translated, it nevertheless reveals the extent to which social science, from its inception, was interested in translating empirical findings in the science of work into a sociology of industrial modernity. Lawrence A. Scaff in his brief mention of the book, quoting Weber, suggests he was interested in measuring the impact of mechanisation 'on the personal qualities, vocational fate and extravocational "style of life" of the workers'.[317] There was no humanitarian purpose, even less a political one, behind this exercise. Weber's study was empirical, scientific and purely value-neutral. Weber was interested in how socio-economic factors interacted *with* mechanisation in productivity curves. Oberschall offers the following translation of a passage from Weber's introduction:

> No matter on what the presence of performance-ability in a specific task rests in an individual - whether it be hereditary factors, upbringing, nutrition, or other characteristics of one's life fate that were of determining influence - always his performance-ability will become manifest in practice in his psychophysical mechanism.[318]

The important point here is that Weber's sociological studies of modernity, and here the specific case of factory work, do not question the scientific assertion that the human body, psychologically and physically, can be studied like a machine.

Weber was closer to the science of work than Marx. Indeed Marx, like Weil, does emphasise the ontological importance of work as 'self-realisation' (to employ the Hegelian term, which influenced Marx), but he draws a clear distinction between work as self-realisation and work as quantifiable labour power produced by the human motor. According to Marx, labour power or labour capacity, the quantifiable product of the worker as human motor, is sold to the factory owner at the cost of the self-realising potential of work. In a key passage of the *Grundrisse*, Marx explains this distinction: 'In exchange for his labour capacity as a fixed, available

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317 Lawrence A. Scaff, *Max Weber in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 47.
318 Anthony Oberschall, *Empirical Social Research in Germany, 1848-1914*, Publications of the International Social Science Council (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1965), p. 116.

magnitude, [the worker] surrenders its *creative power*'.[319] In Marx's account, alienation is therefore a consequence of the economic conditions of ownership and exchange in terms of quantifiable labour effort and not a product of the qualitative experience of work itself, however sympathetic Marx may have been with industrial suffering. It was this theorisation of labour as quantity rather than as quality which formed the basis of Weil's critique of Marx.

*Weil and the Human Motor*

Weil's philosophy was profoundly engaged with these debates, not simply because labour is at the heart of her political thought, but all the more deeply because she adopted and challenged this metaphor of the human motor: 'Penser *toute* la technique moderne (mais jusque dans le détail) sous l'aspect d'échanges d'énergie – ou pour parler plus concrètement, échange de travail'.[320]

As the following examples will illustrate, there can be little doubt that Weil took up the metaphor directly from scientific, sociological and economic discourses. However, she challenged it in so far as she used it in the context of a distinct ontology that placed manual work at the heart of human nature and fulfillment. She took the idea of the human motor, but instead of seeing the output as a quantifiable, abstracted quantity of work, she used the metaphor to promote a traditional vision of work as fulfilling and self-realising.

In her earliest texts she presented a traditional and relatively abstract interpretation of factory work as a transformative encounter between man and his material environment. However, even at this early stage, she nevertheless employed a terminology of matter and energy that anticipated a shift towards the human motor metaphor, which she adopted explicitly around 1939, in fact after her religious conversion. In an early text published in 1932, she idealised mining as a collision between energy and matter: 'à chaque instant l'homme se heurte à une

[319] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 307.
[320] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 107.

matière hostile, qui sans cesse lui impose une fatigue'.[321] This was meant positively. Even after experience of factory work had shattered her preconceptions, she nevertheless persisted in these terms and this view, although she no longer considered it a reality but an ideal. In 'Expérience de la vie d'usine', which she began to draft in 1936 but only completed in 1941,[322] she painted a human motor-inspired vision of the factory, where matter is transformed and conquered by workers:

> Tous les sens participent à un univers où rien ne rappelle la nature, où rien n'est gratuit, où tout est heurt, heurt dur et en même temps conquérant, de l'homme avec la matière. […] Tout concourt à la transmutation de l'homme en ouvrier.[323]

Another reader might see this passage as condemnation of debasing and unnatural working conditions that strip workers of their humanity, but this was not the view of Weil. She added in the line which followed: 'Si c'était cela, la vie d'usine, ce serait trop beau. Mais ce n'est pas cela.'[324] These traditional definitions are characteristic of the syndicalist emphasis on the primacy of work and production as a transformative force, and set out in chapter One.

Even in her private *Cahiers* she explicitly adopted the 'human motor' metaphor. In an entry probably written in 1938,[325] she described the body as a transformative machine: 'Tout travail = *transformation* de mouvements. Le corps humain est une machine à telles transformations, mais tout à fait incompréhensible'.[326] It is interesting to note, relative to Weil's insertion into the broader discourses of her time, that Paul Valéry also uses this metaphor of a

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321 in 'Après la visite d'une mine' (1932), Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 96.
322 According to Florence Lussy, Weil began her draft after reading Jules Romains' account of factory work in *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* at Bourges in October 1935. Weil critiques Romains' account as an unfounded ideal, and draws on her own experience to set the record straight regarding the nature of dehumanising conditions. She nevertheless agrees with Romain that this essentially mechanised and apparently productivist vision of man striving in a mechanised utopia is an ideal, whereas many critics of mechanisation and automation could regard this vision in very different dystopian terms.
323 'Experience de la vie d'usine: Lettre ouverte à Jules Romains', Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 196.
324 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 290.
325 It occurs shortly after notes describing a conversation overheard in December 1937. Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, pp. 82-83.
326 Ibid., p. 91.

'machine à transformations' in 'La Crise de l'esprit' (1919), describing the factory as a living machine:

> Notre Europe, qui commence par un marché méditerranéen, devient ainsi une vaste usine; usine au sens propre, *machine à transformations*, mais encore usine intellectuelle incomparable. Cette usine intellectuelle reçoit de toutes parts toutes les choses de l'esprit; elle les distribue à ses innombrables organes.[327]

Valéry characterised Europe as a dynamic, organic, intellectual machine, but stopped short of seeing individuals as motors.

This makes Weil's utopian vision of work as a mechanistic process all the more striking. As the years passed, the positive connotations of man as a motor became increasingly explicit. In a *Cahiers* entry dating from around 1941-1942, she described manual work as the transformation of living matter (the body) into inorganic matter (the product): 'Travail – C'est décompenser sa propre substance vivante en non organique. C'est bien une mort partielle. C'est bien se faire matière'.[328]

Despite the repeated instances in which Weil's published and unpublished texts return to this principle of the human motor and the material transformation of energy and matter, her engagement with this mechanistic discourse of social modernity has been notably neglected by scholarship, even when her conception of work is being directly addressed.[329] This cannot be on account of the significant weight given to her theological thought at the expense of her political thought, since perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, the materialist language of energetic transformation persists well beyond this conversion. In fact, it actually became *more* pronounced after her conversion around 1938, when the idea of energetic transformation took on new spiritual and sacrificial meanings.

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327 Valéry, *Œuvres*, I, pp. 1005-1006. (My emphasis)
328 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 226.
329 Chenavier's detailed scholarship on Weil's conception of work is invaluable as a study of Weil, yet it focuses on the influence of Marx at the cost of a wider understanding of Weil's context in the history of ideas, particularly with regard to the philosophy and sociology of work and modernity. Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail.*

Even before her conversion, Weil was already tending towards a more mystical and metaphysically charged vision of work as material transfer and bodily sacrifice. For example, in 1937, she drafted a poem, *Prométhée*, exploring the implications of man's break with nature through the discovery of fire, and the subsequent subjugation of the Earth through labour, technology and industry. In the poem, Weil presents Promethean fire in terms of creative destruction: 'Feu créateur, destructeur, flamme artiste!'[330] She is interested principally in the creative destruction of manual work. In particular, she dwells on the symbolism of mining, presenting the miner as penetrating into a gaping, bleeding and man-made wound in the Earth:

> O terre ouverte au soc, saignant sans voile!
> Abîme où frêle une lampe descend!
> Le fer court, mord, arrache, étire et broie,
> Docile et dur. Les bras portent leur proie,
> L'univers lourd qui donne et boit le sang.[331]

The miner's lamp penetrates as another example of Promethean fire, and the sometimes gentle, sometimes violent action of the miner's iron tools in the gaping rock provokes a symbolic mixing of blood between the working man and the laboured Earth. In order to live, man must give his blood, to extract his 'prey': energy made matter. In this economy of necessity, the universe both gives its blood and reclaims the blood of Man. Although Weil's poetry remains largely overlooked by scholarship,[332] she most likely considered 'Prométhée' to represent an important distillation of her thought, since she took the uncharacteristic step of sharing it with Paul Valéry himself.[333]

After her conversion, this idea remained prominent, taking on new sacrificial meanings. The absorption of the metaphor of energetic transformation into a mystical Catholic perspective

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330 'Prométhée' (1937), Simone Weil, *Poèmes, suivis de Venise sauvée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968 [posthumous]), p. 22. It was not unusual to make the association between Prometheus and the advent of a modernity that breaks away from and subjugates nature, for example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, less well known by its full title *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus.*

331 'Prométhée' (1937), ibid., p. 23.

332 Only a handful of poems have been published, and not since 1968, when 'Prométhée' appeared alongside nine others, and her unfinished play, a tragedy, *Venise sauvée.* Ibid. To date, no important piece of scholarship has offered more than a passing reference to her small corpus of poetry.

333 She received a mixed response. He praised her 'force of movement', and 'strength of composition', but criticised her 'didactic' and 'overly instructive' style. (My translation). Ibid., p. 9-10.

is a striking example of continuity across Weil's diverse and esoteric *œuvre*. In an article written in Marseille between 1940 and 1942, titled 'Le Christianisme et la vie des champs', Weil viewed this energetic transfer through a mystical Catholic-infused lens:[334]

> Un homme qui travaille brûle sa propre chair et la transforme en énergie comme une machine brûle du charbon. C'est pourquoi s'il travaille trop ou s'il ne mange pas assez par rapport au travail qu'il fournit, il maigrit; il perd de la chair. Ainsi on peut dire en un sens que le travailleur manuel transforme sa chair et son sang en objets fabriqués.[335]

The parallels with Christian theological notions of transubstantiation are clear.

Weil takes this argument to provocative lengths, from the perspective of the established church. For example, she goes on to argue that the energetic transubstantiation inherent in agricultural labour amounts to a Eucharistic sacrifice, bringing the most 'normal' of peasants to a state of divine perfection comparable with that of a priest:

> Le prêtre a le privilège de faire surgir sur l'autel la chair et le sang du Christ. Mais le paysan a un privilège non moins sublime. Sa chair et son sang, sacrifiés au cours d'interminables heures de travail, passant à travers le blé et le raisin, deviennent eux-mêmes la chair et le sang du Christ. Le travail manuel est bien une servitude dégradante pour l'âme, ou bien un sacrifice. En ce cas, un paysan, en menant une vie normale, avec une femme et des enfants, avec des plaisirs modérés les dimanches et jours de fête, serait aussi bien placé qu'un religieux pour parvenir à la perfection. Car le travail, s'il est exécuté comme un sacrifice, vaut n'importe quel sacrifice.[336]

Across the years, from revolutionary syndicalism to Catholic mysticism, the idea that work is a

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334 'Le Christianisme et la vie des champs' was never published during Weil's lifetime, although it appeared posthumously in 1953 in 'La Vie intellectuelle', a left-wing Catholic journal founded by the Dominican Fathers of Les Éditions du Cerf in the late 1920s.

335 Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 266.

336 Ibid. One notable aspect of this passage, but one which lies beyond the scope of the present argument, is the status accorded to women within this mystical-inspired socialist vision. Weil's wording suggests that a male peasant, since he has 'a wife and children', can operate the divine transubstantiation at work in the Eucharist, rivalling the experience of a priest, who is by definition male. She does not specifically deny that this is available only to male workers, but presumably either felt that this would be a provocation too far and/or distract from her argument. Or she had simply absorbed the bias of her time, and did not think to extend the argument to women. Weil had little interest in feminism, to the extent that she refused to give a lecture on the subject in the late 1920s, claiming 'Moi, je ne suis pas féministe'. See Pétrement, Simone, *La Vie de Simone Weil* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), p. 86.

physical and psychological transformation of necessity, of reality, persists from the early idealisations of miners 'colliding' with the coalface, to the Christian mystic idealisation of self-sacrificial peasant labour.

Although Weil's language of energeticism and thermodynamics is unusual in a theological text, and her claims would have been regarded as unorthodox and perhaps provocative, her emphasis on work within a Christian world view is, of course, far from incongruous. In the Christian tradition labour is God's punishment for the Fall: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground' (Genesis 3:17-19). With its origins in divine punishment, work is the expression of obedience, formalised, for example, in Saint Benedict's fifth century *Rule for Monks*: 'for then are they truly monks when they live by the labour of their hands, like our fathers and the apostles'.[337] From Lutheranism to the Jesuits and to the twentieth-century Catholic worker priest movement, work as toil, as suffering, as the encounter between man and primal necessity, whether regarded as punishment or salvation, is central.

Even before her conversion, in 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale', Weil had absorbed this idea in secular terms from Francis Bacon, whose remark that 'we cannot command nature except by obeying her', was considered by Weil, prior to her conversion to be more useful in the modern age than the Bible: 'Cette formule si simple devrait constituer à elle seule la Bible de notre époque'.[338] The reader of Weil is presented with the idea of work as the defining act of humankind ('l'acte humain par excellence'),[339] which was in many respects not far from the classical, theological conception.[340] Yet, it is precisely because Weil reformulates a philosophically- and theologically-infused expression of work as self-realisation in the face of

337 Cited in Thomas, *The Oxford Book of Work*, p. 99.
338 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 92.
339 Ibid., p. 90.
340 Classical thought and literature abound with references to labour in the face of necessity. Weil was fascinated by Stoicism and on occasion chose 'Cléanthe' (Cleanthes) as a pseudonym, since he was a philosopher by day, and a water-carrier by night. Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, p. 211.

necessity, using the modern metaphor of the 'human motor' and the language of thermodynamics, that her relationship to modernity as a discourse is so problematic.

The key question is: if Weil rejected the normative materialist understanding of work as energy conversion, which underpinned rationalised and scientific perspectives of work, such as Taylorism, why did she persist from her earliest to her latest philosophy in expressing a traditional philosophy of work in the language of positivist and materialist science and social science? This is all the more striking since in these discourses work was denuded of meaning and measured as a transformation of energy. Yet Weil asserted that it is precisely this transformative, materialist function of work that is the source of its philosophical and theological meaning, since it represents a genuine transformative collision of man, matter, energy and necessity. This application of materialist science to theology and work was quite deliberate, as she makes clear in an entry in one of her *Cahiers* written shortly before her death:

> Il faudrait en même temps que ces thèmes de méditation spirituelle donner en corrélation les notions de culture générale sur les transformations de l'énergie dans la croissance des plantes, dans la nourriture, dans le travail […].[341]

Weil seems to suggest that our deeper understanding of matter and nature should lead us to yet deeper philosophies of work enriched with spiritual insights. However, it was not simply the transubstantiation of man as matter in an endless religiously-infused scientifically coherent cycle that structured work as self-realising and redemptive.

Work's convergence with temporal experiences also played a crucial role. In Weil's view the structure of time in the modern rationalised factory constituted the main obstacle to industrial work as a self-realising experience. Reforms which imposed a fragmented, discrete experience of time, demanding that the worker inhabit an eternal present, sealed off from skills accumulated in the past and from expectations and hopes for the future, were regarded by Weil as particularly destructive.

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341 Simone Weil, *Cahiers (février - juin 1942): La porte du transcendant*, ed. A. Degrâces, et al., vol. VI:3, Œuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), pp. 312-313.

The modern discourse of the 'human motor' and 'labour power' blurred the boundaries between the body as object and as subject and this had implications for the conceptualisation of space and time in the workplace. Scientists such as Etienne Jules Marey theorised an economy of spatio-temporal movement that decomposed actions into more and more discrete units. Marey created 'chronophotographs' which mapped the trajectories of industrial movements in space and time (see Appendix A for an example). These resemble a form of early time-lapse photography, where you see the path of a moving object advance as ghostly traces across the surface of the image. Rabinach reminds us that these analytics of space and time were central to scientific and cultural understandings of the body: 'A science of the economy of the body could unlock the secrets of human labor power, emancipate working energy, and transform work'.[342]

For this reason Marey's results, which used photography to break down movement in time and space were enormously influential among scientists of work such as Frank Gilbreth (an associate of F.W. Taylor), but also beyond science in art and philosophy. Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), as well as Max Ernst's *Blind Swimmer* series (1934) were directly inspired by Marey's 'chronophotographs'.[343] Works such as these, which were described by Rabinach as 'the first iconography of energeticism',[344] also influenced Bergson, who saw them as the illustration of an abstracted modern conception of time, describing them as 'decompositions' belying the true nature of time as experience. He favoured visual representations, which saw time as unitary and experience-driven, rather than as fragmented. He uses the famous example from chronophotography of the galloping horse, in which the photograph disproved the commonly-held belief and illusory perception that the horse always has one foot on the ground, even at full gallop:

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342 Rabinach, *The Human Motor,* pp. 87-88.
343 Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 287, p. 314.
344 Rabinach, *The Human Motor*, p. 115.

> Du galop d'un cheval notre œil perçoit surtout une attitude caractéristique, essentielle ou plutôt schématique, une forme qui paraît rayonner sur toute une période et remplir ainsi un temps de galop : c'est cette attitude que la sculpture a fixée sur les frises du Parthénon. Mais la photographie instantanée isole n'importe quel moment; elle les met tous au même rang, et c'est ainsi que le galop d'un cheval s'éparpille pour elle en un nombre aussi grand qu'on voudra d'attitudes successives, au lieu de se ramasser en une attitude unique, qui brillerait en un instant privilégié et éclairerait toute une période.[345]

This distinction between the artifice of clock time, which also governed the factory floor, and a more fluid, experience-driven, intuitive version of time can also be found in Weil's work. Like Bergson, she pointed to a model in ancient Greek art for a more intuitive experience of time, as the analysis to follow on her 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force' will show.

Whether it was scientists breaking down spatio-temporal economies, modernist artists exploring the space-time continuum in representation,[346] or philosophers such as Bergson asserting that the totality and inherent flux of time as experience was unquantifiable, the understanding of time was central to the competing discourses of modernity. Marshal Berman, in his classic study *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, listed the experience of time and space as the first vital experience of modernity:

> There is a mode of vital experience - experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils, that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience 'modernity'.[347]

It is this vital experience of space and time in the modern factory that forms the basis for Weil's critique of the modern experience of automation and invites comparison with other theorists of

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345 H. Bergson, *Œuvres: Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience. Matière et mémoire. Le Rire. L'Évolution créatrice. L'Énergie spirituelle. Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion. La Pensée et la mouvant*, ed. A. Robinet (Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), p. 776.

346 Also noteworthy is Baudelaire's famous lament of spatio-temporal discontinuity between the subjectivity of the poetic narrator and the changing modern city: 'la forme d'une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! Que le cœur d'un mortel'. Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975), p. 85.

347 Marshal Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 15.

modernity, particularly Walter Benjamin, who also analysed the 'shock' of modernity in temporal terms.

*Taylorism and the Decomposition of Industrial Time*

The essential context for understanding Weil (and Benjamin's) account of factory work is the reform of industrial working practices carried out as a result of Frederick Winslow Taylor's recommendations in *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). Commonly known as Taylorism, his ideas were introduced in France by Henri Le Châtelier in 1913, and widely adopted throughout the inter-war period: membership of the Comité national d'organisation française (CNOF), which promoted scientific organisation rose from 140 in 1926 to 1200 in 1932.[348] Taylorism, synonymous with *chronométrage* (time-motion study) in France,[349] sought to translate the insights of scientific discourses set out above into a management strategy that would surrender the organisation of work to engineers specialised in 'time-study' methods.[350] They would calculate ways to increase the speed of work though more efficient movements and impose supervised, timed and quantified production targets ('differential rate piece-work').[351] It was the effect of these reforms on work, particularly in so far as they produced a new experience of time, that forms the basis of Weil's critique of modern industrial work:

> La basse espèce d'attention exigée par le travail taylorisé n'est compatible avec aucune autre, parce qu'elle vide l'âme de tout ce qui n'est pas le souci de la vitesse. Ce genre de travail ne peut pas être transfiguré, il faut le supprimer.[352]

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348 Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization: Factory, Home and Nation From the 1920s to Vichy*, Monographs in French Studies (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), p. 17.
349 Ibid., p. 15.
350 Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911), p. 67, p. 117.
351 This essentially meant that rates per piece could be arbitrarily changed to incentivise speed. Ibid., p. 14, p. 93.
352 'Condition première d'un travail non-servile' (1942), Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, p. 371.

Her experience of working in a Taylorised factory led her to believe that the mind must dominate time in a healthy subject.[353]

However, modern factories were environments that distorted time in ways that affected and afflicted workers: they were caught up in a maelstrom of speed ('vertige de la vitesse'), which was not entropic but rationally quantified into measurable units.[354] In a *Cahiers* entry written shortly after her factory work, she observed in a somewhat Bergsonian spirit that the decomposition of a subject's time into units represented a devastating attack on their subjectivity: 'Morceler le temps. Mal le plus grand qu'on puisse faire à un homme'.[355] Decomposed clock time was presented by Weil as the temporality of machines, unsuited to accommodating the natural variety of human subjectivity:

> Une uniformité qui imite les mouvements des horloges et non pas ceux des constellations, une variété qui exclut toute règle et par suite toute prévision, cela fait un temps inhabitable à l'homme, irrespirable.[356]

This anticipates the way modern historians have come to understand the changing relationship between work and time.

Alain Corbin, in *L'Avènement des loisirs* (*1850-1960*), contrasts porous time ('temps poreux'), which is fluid and open to unpredictability, with the regulated, calculated clock-time of industrial modernity.[357] For him, this initiated a compartmentalisation of time within work and between work and leisure, which had no historical precedent.

Social commentators of the time such as Weil and Walter Benjamin, with whom her work on the experience of time will be compared in the analysis to follow, were well aware of this transformation of subjective experience. This was a widespread preoccupation, even beyond

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353 'Mais il n'est pas moins vrai que notre pensée est faite pour dominer le temps, et que cette vocation doit être préservée intacte en tout être humain.' 'Expérience de la vie d'usine', Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 304.
354 Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, p. 52.
355 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 221.
356 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 304.
357 Alain Corbin, *L'Avènement des loisirs: 1850-1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), p. 10.

intellectual spheres. In popular culture, the effect of modern industrial conditions on the experience of time was a major focus.

An example in which Weil was well versed was the 1936 film by Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times*. This was the year that Weil undertook her factory work, and the film had a profound effect on her: 'voilà enfin quelqu'un qui a exprimé une partie de ce que j'ai ressenti.'[358] Despite her extensive socialist education, teaching and reading, she described *Modern Times* in a 1936 letter to August Detoeuf, the industrialist and founder of Alsthom, as the most accurate account of industrial labour she had ever encountered: 'Vous avez vu *Les Temps modernes,* je suppose? […] Voilà le plus beau et le plus vrai symbole de la situation des ouvriers dans l'usine.'[359] She advised another factory owner to see the film when he was next in Paris, since it expressed better than she could the suffering she had experienced in the rationalised factory: 'Peut-être le film de Charlot y réussirait-il mieux que ce que je puis vous dire.'[360]

Had these men taken up her suggestion, as soon as the opening credits began to roll, they would have been plunged into an exploration of the modern industrial experience of temporal acceleration. The first scene, preceded by clock-themed opening credits, in which the superimposed title words 'Modern Times' take on a more literal sense, shows an assembly line where Chaplin's 'Little Tramp' character is subjected to greater and greater speeds, exceeding his physical and mental limits. Unable to adapt his movements to the pace of the production line, he is eventually and literally consumed by the machine. The Little Tramp in workman's overalls passes head first through a series of giant interlocking cogs, not dissimilar to the workings of a clock, and re-emerges, re-born, in an altered state. His subsequent subversive dance around the factory shows a subject utterly released from the total control of the factory system. He causes havoc, pulling levers, disrupting the steady flow of goods and time, before being stopped by men in white coats and removed to the asylum.

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358 'Lettre à un ingénieur, directeur d'usine', March 1936, Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, p. 201.
359 'Lettres à Auguste Detoeuf', 1936-1937, ibid., p. 250.
360 'Lettre à un ingénieur, directeur d'usine', March 1936, ibid., p. 201.

Weil drew on representations such as these, conceptualising temporality in terms of the living time of subjects and the inert time of objects. In *L'Enracinement,* she boils down these interrelated analyses into a clear rule for the organisation of work. Men and machines inhabit separate temporalities between which there can be no overlap: 'Il y a une certaine relation avec le temps qui convient aux choses inertes, et une autre qui convient aux créatures pensantes. On a tort de les confondre'.[361] Weil clearly implied that Taylor and his disciples had confused these temporal orders. In response to this she elaborated a conception of time related to Bergson's notion of time as 'duration' and to Benjamin's elaboration of tradition-bound long-experience. These share a conception of time estranged from rational, modern and scientific 'clock time' and favour a theorisation of time determined by memory, experience and imagination.

*Weil's Temporality as Self-Projection*

The substitution of living temporality for inert temporality is at the heart of Weil's multifarious accounts of human suffering. Most, but not all of the examples which she gives relate to a modern factory setting. The human mind and not the clock gives structure to living temporality, so its differentiating characteristic is the capacity to project itself forwards and backwards in time. Many theorists of modernity cite this temporal dimension of memory, imagination, invention and anticipation as the defining human characteristic. Valéry in particular noted that man liberated himself from his animal state through his 'songes', which imply precisely this expanded temporal experience of fantasy, anticipation and invention.[362]

For Valéry, the modern crisis of the mind was brought about by an excess of invention, which had created an environment alien to our nature. The mind cannot adapt to speeds faster than perception and to constant change:

> Pendant une crise [de l'esprit], le temps semble changer de nature, la durée n'est plus perçue comme dans l'état ordinaire des choses: au lieu de mesurer

361 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1027.
362 'Crise de l'esprit' (1919), Valéry, *Œuvres*, I, p. 1001.

la permanence, elle mesure la variation.[363]

Man is thus afflicted by modernity in his capacity to experience time and this experience is characterised by a blind, unthinking and destructive acceleration ("intoxication par la hâte' to cite Valéry).[364] Weil offers a related but distinct account. In her view, the need to project backwards and forwards in time as memory, anticipation, or imagination is the central characteristic of human beings, which is inhibited in the modern world.

The need for self-projection in time is frequently expressed in Weil's thought and is an idea that persists throughout her work, even when there is no question of a contrast to modern automation. Its inhibition appears as a universal form of oppression which has become ubiquitous in the modern factory. Her article 'La situation en Allemagne (1)', which described her observation of German workers in the summer of 1932, explained that the revolutionary potential of the economic crisis was undermined by the effect that hardship had on the workers' capacity to project themselves backwards and forwards in time:

> Les jeunes, pour qui la crise est l'état normal, le seul [état] qu'ils aient connu, ne peuvent même pas y échapper dans leurs rêves. Ils sont privés de tout dans le présent et ils n'ont pas d'avenir. C'est en cela que réside le caractère décisif de la situation, et non pas dans la misère elle-même.[365]

This was an idea that drew on an argument made by Emile Durkheim in his 1897 study of the sociology of despair, *Le Suicide*. Durkheim argued that the modern acceleration and subsequent deregulation of industry and commerce had destabilised the normative values that dictated social and personal life, leaving many people terminally unsatisfied with the present, a condition he called *anomie*. Although the experience of time was presented by Durkheim as a symptom rather than a cause of *anomie*, he nevertheless depicted, like Weil, the modern subject as trapped in an isolated and unbearable present:

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363 'Propos sur l'intelligence' (1925), ibid., p. 1041.
364 Ibid., p. 1049.
365 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 1049.

> Mais l'homme qui a toujours tout attendu de l'avenir, qui a vécu les yeux fixés sur le futur, n'a rien dans son passé qui le réconforte contre les amertumes du présent; car le passé n'a été pour lui qu'une série d'étapes impatiemment traversées. Ce qui lui permettait de s'aveugler sur lui-même, c'est qu'il comptait toujours trouver plus loin le bonheur qu'il n'avait pas encore rencontré jusque-là. Mais voici qu'il est arrêté dans sa marche; dès lors, il n'a plus rien ni derrière lui ni devant lui sur quoi il puisse reposer son regard. La fatigue, du reste, suffit, à elle seule, pour produire le désenchantement, car il est difficile de ne pas sentir, à la longue, l'inutilité d'une poursuite sans terme.[366]

Although Weil does not mention Emile Durkheim by name in this context, she knew his work well, both as a student of his thought,[367] and as a teacher of modern sociological thought at Le Puy and in Roanne.[368]

Weil took this idea further than Durkheim, who saw it as symptomatic of a generalised experience. Four years later, reflecting on the nature of oppression in the modern factory, Weil applied this idea of human projection backwards and forwards in time not just to life in general, but even within short periods of time:

> Si la pensée veut éviter cette monotonie [du travail aux pièces], imaginer du changement, donc un ordre soudain, elle ne peut pas voyager du moment présent à un moment à venir sans passer par une humiliation. Ainsi la pensée se rétracte. […] L'avenir de celui qui travaille dans une usine est vide à cause de l'impossibilité de prévoir, et plus mort que du passé à cause de l'identité des instants qui se succèdent comme les tic-tac d'une horloge. […] Il faut que l'avenir s'ouvre devant l'ouvrier par une certaine possibilité de prévision, afin qu'il ait le sentiment d'avancer dans le temps, d'aller à chaque effort vers un certain achèvement. [369]

However, this thought-annihilating experience of time was not exclusive to factory work nor to industrial unemployment.

In her essay of 1940-1941, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', which analysed Homer's *Iliad* as a study of violence, suffering and injustice, Weil argued that an identical experience of

366 Durkheim, *Le Suicide*, pp. 285-286.
367 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 43.
368 Weil, *Leçons de philosophie*, pp. 215-216.
369 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 293, p. 304.

time afflicted the epic warrior. What prevented the soldier's mind projecting backwards and forwards in time was the certainty of violent death:

> Pour les autres, la mort est une limite imposée d'avance à l'avenir; pour eux, elle est l'avenir même, l'avenir que leur assigne leur profession. Que des hommes aient pour avenir la mort, cela est contre nature. […]. Chaque matin l'âme se mutile de toute aspiration parce que la pensée ne peut pas voyager dans le temps sans passer par la mort. […] Les malheurs intolérables […] durent parce qu'ils ôtent les ressources nécessaires pour en sortir.[370]

The warrior occupies an extended temporal order which is unbearable for human nature. This state of suffering lasts even longer than it should because it strips the soldier of the psychological resources he needs to escape the war.

This crushing effect mirrors the psychological paralysis of the young German 'chômeur', whose inability to project into the past or future had become a counter-revolutionary force. This passage was probably also informed by the modern workers' experience of orders as humiliation. The factory worker and the warrior share the impossibility of projecting into the future without traversing ('passer par', the expression is repeated) a self-annihilating prospect: humiliation or death.

Modernity, for Weil, was not an entirely new way of experiencing time, as it was in Berman's definition, and as it was for Duchamp and for Baudelaire. In Weil's analysis temporal disruptions characteristic of modernity did have precedents but not on the same scale as those to be found in the modern factory. In the Taylorised workplace, automation and piece-work brought about an intensification and broader dissemination of certain timeless forms of suffering, such as the inability to project forwards and backwards within time.

In *L'Enracinement,* which sought to counteract the alienating experience of rootlessness which had become increasingly acute in modern times, it fell to the community to assist the individual in projecting him or herself into the past and future: 'Un être humain a une racine par

370 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 543.

sa participation réelle, active et naturelle à l'existence d'une collectivité qui conserve vivants certains trésors du passé et certains pressentiments d'avenir'.[371] In contrast to Valéry's theorisation of modernity as temporally disruptive, for Weil the distortion of our experience of time was not the product of a cultural shift towards vertiginous speed and chaos. Rather, it was a product of specific rationalised industrial working practices, which inhibit our human need for temporal projection by mimicking the effects of certain eternal forms of suffering. In this sense Taylorised work is bracketed alongside other specific forms of suffering that afflict individuals in their conception of time, for example the Homeric soldier's certainty of an imminent death.

This would suggest that Weil did not in fact elaborate a distinctly modern conception of time, which Berman suggested was the vital experience of modernity. She did nevertheless put temporality at the heart of her understanding of modernity. Whereas in Ancient Greece, the warrior class represented a tiny fraction of the population, in modern France, the proletariat represent ever-increasing proportions of the population. Furthermore, the inability to project temporally within a factory was not a metaphysical condition representing man's inability to assimilate the reality of his own certain death as it was for the warrior, but rather it was an incapacity to assimilate the contradictory temporal experiences of rhythm and entropy, which in the factory were experiences of monotony and chance: 'La pensée doit constamment être prête à la fois à suivre le cours monotone de gestes indéfiniment répétés et à trouver en elle-même des ressources pour remédier à l'imprévu'.[372] The reconciliation of the two is literally unthinkable: 'Obligation contradictoire, impossible, épuisante'.[373] This situation is all the more unbearable because the nature of the monotonous work itself was not adapted to the speed of human thought but to an accelerated speed of mechanised production.

> Il faut répéter mouvement après mouvement à une cadence qui, étant plus rapide que la pensée, interdit de laisser cours non seulement à la réflexion, mais même à la rêverie. […] Cette situation fait que la pensée se

371 Ibid., p. 1052.
372 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 294.
373 Ibid.

> recroqueville, se rétracte, comme la chair se rétracte devant un bistouri. On ne *peut pas* être 'conscient'.[374]

The particularity of modern factory work would seem therefore to be grounded in the form and extent of its oppression. The ability of the modern worker to project in time was not inhibited by an exceptional circumstance, for example, the horror of sudden death, as was the case for the Homeric soldiers, who represented a tiny minority undertaking an extreme and a-typical task. Rather the modern worker was unable to project him- or herself in time because of an external, generalised, inhuman temporal order that suppressed thought, while also requiring psychological resilience against an experience of time that combined total monotony with arbitrary unpredictability.

Few philosophers and critics of modernity place such close emphasis on the psychological experience of time within the mechanised, industrial workplace. Amongst them, the most striking in its similarity and fruitful in its comparative potential is the thought of Walter Benjamin. Like Weil, he puts 'inhabitable' temporal orders, theorised in terms of modern 'shock experiences' at the centre of his theorisation of industrial modernity.

*Benjamin's Theory of Erfahrung and Erlebnis*

Weil and Benjamin were exact contemporaries, both dissident Marxist Jewish thinkers who moved in the same radical French political circles.[375] They share a preoccupation with the theorisation of alienation, and particularly the role of time in shaping modern subjectivity. In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, written in 1939, Benjamin made it clear that his essay was not just a study of the poet but also an examination of man and the industrial machine in the modern age.

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374 'Lettre à Albertine Thévenon' (1935), Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, p. 28.

375 They shared some of the same acquaintances, including Georges Bataille, Jean Paulhan and Jean Wahl, all of whom Weil knew personally and all of whom were involved, along with Walter Benjamin, in Georges Bataille's *Collège de sociologie*. This was a discussion group who met between 1937 and 1939, broadly to explore notions of the sacred in contemporary thought. For Bataille, see Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, pp. 306-308. For Paulhan (ibid., p. 442.), and Wahl, (ibid., p. 435.). For Benjamin's involvement in the Collège de sociologie, see Theodor W. Adorno, 'Walter Benjamin et le collège de sociologie', *Critique* 788 - 789, no. 1 ([1940] 2013).

He inserted his text in this tradition by quoting from Marx's *Das Kapital*:

> It is a common characteristic of all capitalist production that the worker does not make use of the working conditions. The working conditions make use of the worker; but it takes machinery to give this reversal a technologically concrete form.[376]

Benjamin, like Weil, accepted Marx's core point, but again like Weil, what he chose to examine was what Marx had neglected, in short the psychological and individual experience of 'shock' (*Chokerlebnis*) that the worker and the Baudelairian poetic narrator experience: 'The shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to the isolated "experiences" of the worker at his machine.'[377] In Benjamin's article, it is the disconnection from conventional understandings of time that characterise the 'shock' of unskilled labour. The repetitive nature of work, which does not draw on any prior knowledge represents a disconnection from the past and from tradition that Benjamin calls 'isolated experience' (*Erlebnis*). This is contrasted with tradition-bound 'long experience' (*Erfahrung*), which builds on the experience of being embedded in tradition. According to Benjamin, when we form associations with an inanimate object and store these associations in our *mémoire involontaire*, this is the object's 'aura'. This process characterises the 'long experience' of *Erfahrung*.

The latter echoed the emphasis Weil placed on free projection within time, which encompasses the deployment of skills learnt in the past, and the anticipation of work to come. For Weil, this constituted a healthy relationship to time. To apply Benjamin's terminology to Weil, one could say that the modern factory did violence to the worker when it plunged his or her mind into an 'isolated experience' of the present:

> Les manœuvres sur machines n'atteignent la cadence exigée que si les gestes d'une seconde se succèdent d'une manière ininterrompue et presque comme le tic-tac d'une horloge, sans rien qui marque jamais que quelque chose est fini et qu'autre chose commence.[378]

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376 Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life,* p. 191.
377 Ibid., p. 192.
378 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 296.

Work in factories organised around this conception of time imposed, according to Weil, psychological distress, but also physical suffering, in which embodiment is simultaneously denied and taxed. Weil continued:

> Ce tic-tac dont on ne peut supporter d'écouter longtemps la morne monotonie, eux doivent presque le reproduire avec leur corps. Cet enchaînement ininterrompu tend à plonger dans une espèce de sommeil, mais il faut le supporter sans dormir.[379]

This passage could also invite analysis in terms of Bergson's theorisation of time: in the factory the spatial, scientific conception of time is imposed on the subject, whose inner nature is 'duration' (*durée*). Bergon's notion of 'duration' as opposed to scientifically constructed 'time' (*temps*) offers an illuminating interpretive tool to both Weil's view of the organic link between the subject's present, past and future and Benjamin's theorisation of *Erfahrung*.

For Benjamin, handicraft and skilled labour drew on tradition-bound knowledge-based *Erfahrung*. This echoed the preservation of accumulated memories, which for Bergson, are inserted in the present in order to permit perception and inform action. In Weilian terms, Benjamin's conception of tradition-bound work was predicated on a capacity for projection within time. This was in contrast to unskilled labour, which is 'sealed off from experience':[380]

> The hand movement of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding gesture for the very reason that it repeats that gesture exactly. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a *coup* in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it.[381]

Even though it is formulated differently, the characterisation of machine work as a combination of monotony and chance offers an interesting parallel to Weil's thought.

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379 Ibid.

380 Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life,* p. 192.

381 Ibid., p. 193. Benjamin compares the worker to the gambler in a game of chance, who in a very different way lives from one minute to the next. It is interesting to note that gambling was of huge significance for later nineteenth century authors like Baudelaire, who Benjamin was writing about, but also Balzac. The latter, in particular, linked it to the loss of traditional social authority in *La Peau de chagrin* (1831).

In Weil's account of time, machine work is characterised by repeated moments of isolated experience, reminiscent of *Erlebnis*:

> La pensée humaine domine le temps et parcourt sans cesse rapidement le passé et l'avenir en franchissant n'importe quel intervalle; mais celui qui travaille [en usine] est soumis au temps à la manière de la matière inerte qui franchit un instant après l'autre. C'est par là surtout que le travail fait violence à la nature humaine.[382]

This violence in the view of both Weil and Benjamin has the effect of emptying the worker of his subjectivity - his or her experience is that of an endless *Erlebnis*. This is not simply restricted to the moment of work, but consumes the subject's existence. In the case of Weil, this total emptying was referred to as slavery in *La Condition ouvrière* ('esclaves de l'industrie moderne') but was later reformulated in *L'Enracinement* as 'déracinement'. For Benjamin it was expressed as the 'disintegration of the aura in the immediate shock experience'.[383] Despite these differences of terminology, and despite the fact that these accounts were arrived at, it would seem, without reference to each other, nevertheless in both cases the alienation of the worker was expressed in terms of a relationship to time and this constituted a particular critique of Marxism and modernity, and a rejection of scientific rationalism, that Weil and Benjamin shared.

However, they were not entirely alone in this respect. Weil's war-time friend and fellow exile in Marseille in 1940-1942, the Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre, also explored modern oppression in terms of rhythmic disruptions experienced in the minutiae of daily experience. In his three-volume *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947-1981), Lefebvre presented the modern disruption of 'linear' repetitions, often found in industrial work and consumption, as opposed to 'cyclical' natural cycles, which characterise traditional, often rural, societies:

> Le quotidien dans sa trivialité se compose de répétitions : gestes dans le travail et hors du travail, mouvements mécaniques (ceux des mains et du corps, et aussi ceux des pièces et des dispositifs, rotation ou allers-retours), heures, jours, semaines, mois, années; répétitions linéaires et répétitions

[382] Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1218.
[383] Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 210.

cycliques, temps de la nature et temps de la rationalité.[384]

Like Weil, Lefebvre emphasised aspects of daily life that resisted colonisation by the dehumanising rhythms of modern industry, such as traditional festivals.[385] He also attempted like Benjamin and Weil to understand the body-centric process in which modern capitalist modes of production challenged natural rhythms. In his final and posthumously-published work, *Rythmanalyse* (1992), which Lefebvre considered as the fourth volume of *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, he set out in more detail how modernity imposed temporal disruption and deformity:

> Le corps consiste en un paquet de rythmes […] dans une interaction perpétuelle, en équilibre sans doute 'métastable' […] sauf cas de trouble. […] Mais les alentours du corps, le social aussi bien que le cosmique, sont également des paquets de rythmes. […] L'homme (l'espèce): son être physique et physiologique est bien la mesure du monde. […] Ce qui ne veut pas dire que la production se borne à reproduire les choses et les objets donnés naturellement. Le créé ne rentre pas dans cette échelle, soit qu'il la dépasse, soit qu'il la transfigure.[386]

This echoed the related point made by Weil almost sixty years earlier, that modern conditions of work executed within unnatural and unbearable temporalities, created a monstrous disproportion between the labourer and the conditions and products of his or her labour:

> Nous vivons dans un monde où rien n'est à la mesure de l'homme; il y a une disproportion monstrueuse entre le corps de l'homme, l'esprit de l'homme et les choses qui constituent actuellement les éléments de la vie humaine; tout est déséquilibré.[387]

Through these comparisons, modernity emerges as an illuminating context in which to understand Weil's thought, both in its own right and as an example of a broader discourse.

The focus of Weil's engagement with modernity can be fruitfully understood in terms of her adoption and adaptation of the metaphor of the human motor, which emerged in the

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384 Henri Lefebvre, *La Vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 40.
385 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, vol. 1 (Paris: L'Arche, [1947] 1958), pp. 202-207. In *L'Enracinement,* Weil presented rural festivals as events threatened by the forces of modern uprootedness, which needed to be consecrated and protected in a reformed society. See Weil, *Œuvres*, pp. 1077-1078.
386 Lefebvre and Régulier, 'Le Projet rythmanalytique', pp. 196-199.
387 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 94.

nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a positivist, mechanistic and value-neutral tool for analysing the biological functions and energy potential of the human subject and which became central to theorisations of modernity across disciplines. Weil's philosophy transforms and subverts this idea, since in its very objectivity she sees the human motor as a metaphor for man's encounter with blind necessity. The worker's matter (his or her flesh) is transformed into energy, which transforms the earth's organic matter into food and its inorganic matter into energy and products. Weil is re-conceptualising the philosophically and culturally denuded metaphor of the human motor as the expression of a spiritual and self-realising process that places manual work at the heart of human nature and fulfillment. It is in this context that Taylor's reform of working practices (also based on the model of the human motor) emerges as destructive and alienating. The decomposition of work into temporal units is incompatible with the self-realising nature of work, which depends on a freedom to 'inhabit' time in ways that escape rational quantification. This latter focus puts Weil's thought in dialogue with other theorists of modernity, such as Walter Benjamin, who also conceptualised modernity as an assault on man's temporal experience of the world.

Weil rejects the modern science of work for its abstraction, quantification and rationalisation of time and for its failure to understand man as an embodied and thinking subject. Far from being isolated from her larger philosophical project, this was part of a broader critical reflection on modern science as abstracted from lived, intuitive experience, which will be the subject of the next section, 'Simone Weil: Philosopher of Science'. Weil's critical reflection took the form of a philosophical diagnosis, as the chapter to follow will explore, in which the epistemological foundations of modern science were questioned. Weil's approach put her thought in dialogue with other contemporary philosophers, including Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. However, Weil also went beyond a diagnosis to examine specific reforms to counteract scientific abstraction, setting out structural and substantive solutions to reconnect the core principles of science, particularly energy, with a more holistic and intuitive vision of life,

including ethics, desire and social organisation. This will be the focus of Chapter Five, the second and final chapter in 'Simone Weil: Philosopher of Science'.

# Part II.

# Simone Weil, Philosopher of Science

> Descartes avait cru autrefois avoir fondé une science sans mystère, c'est-à-dire une science où il y aurait assez d'unité et de simplicité dans la méthode pour que les parties les plus compliquées soient seulement plus longues et non pas plus difficiles à comprendre que les parties les plus simples. […] Le même Descartes avait formé le projet d'une École des Arts et Métiers où chaque artisan apprendrait à se rendre pleinement compte des fondements théoriques de son propre métier; il se montrait ainsi plus socialiste, sur le terrain de la culture, que n'ont été tous les disciples de Marx. Quant aux intellectuels du mouvement ouvrier, ils n'ont pas songé à s'attaquer à une tâche aussi indispensable; tâche écrasante il est vrai, qui implique une révision critique de la science toute entière […]; mais tâche clairement posée par la notion même du socialisme […]. Un pas fait dans cette voie serait plus utile peut-être à l'humanité et au prolétariat que bien des victoires partielles dans le domaine de l'action pratique.[388]

With these words, written in 1933, Weil made explicit the continuity between her political thought and her extensive corpus on science. The modern forces of abstraction, which regarded workers not as thinking beings but as moving parts, anchored their legitimacy in the objectivity and neutrality of science. Debunking this science as flawed, subjective and myopic was thus integral to her broader political project to understand and alleviate modern oppression.

In particular, Weil feared that science's growing abstraction from lived experience and intuition represented a threat to civilisation. She was determined to diagnose the causes and effects of this abstraction and set in place solutions and alternatives, which vary from pragmatic reforms to eccentric re-organisations of society. Her many essays on the subject are scattered

[388] 'Sur le livre de Lénine *Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme*', *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.1, p. 309.

throughout her *Œuvres complètes*, including her *Cahiers*. The most important are collected in the posthumous *Sur la science* (1966).

*Simone Weil, Philosopher of Science* will be divided into two chapters. It will begin with Chapter Four: 'Diagnoses of Abstraction: The Critique of Modern Science', before turning to her solutions in Chapter Five: '"Fondement d'une science nouvelle": Analogy, Energy and Intuition'.

# Chapter Four

*Diagnoses of Abstraction: The Critique of Modern Science*

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In 1937, the year before the German chemist Otto van Hahn discovered the nuclear fission of heavy elements, paving the way for the atomic bomb, Weil expressed her concerns about the threat posed by scientific and moral crises in the age of totalitarianism:

> Pour bien des raisons, je crois […] que la science entre dans une période de crise plus grave qu'au Ve siècle, et comme alors, accompagnée d'une crise de la morale et de l'agenouillement devant les valeurs purement politiques, c'est-à-dire devant la force. Le phénomène nouveau de l'État totalitaire rend cette crise infiniment redoutable, et risque d'en faire une agonie.[389]

Weil would not live to see Hiroshima but she saw the danger of the growing disconnect between modern science, particularly theoretical physics, and the concrete world of lived experience.

This diagnosis of modern science as abstracted was present in Weil's work, from her first piece of mature philosophy, *Science et perception dans Descartes*, which was her *Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures*, completed in 1930, to some of her final texts and fragments, such as 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta' and 'L'Avenir de la science', both written in Marseille in 1941. Although many of Weil's articles and reflections on science were unpublished in her own lifetime, it does not follow that they should be read in isolation from the philosophical debates about science, which characterised the period.

Yet, that is exactly what has happened. Both theologically-focussed and politically-minded scholars have largely ignored this corpus of work, which lies beyond their interest in

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[389] 'Fragment d'une lettre à un étudiant', Simone Weil, *Sur la Science* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966 [posthumous]), p. 120. The fifth-century crisis referenced by Weil is most likely the challenge brought by Sophism, which expressed a fallacy through a rhetorical logic, intended to mislead. She was more clear in a letter to her brother of around 1940: 'Qui sait si la démonstration sur le pair égal à l'impair n'a pas été le modèle des démonstrations prouvant une thèse et son contraire (base de la sophistique), qui ont pullulé au Ve siècle et ont démoralisé Athènes?' ibid., p. 231.

Weil as either a sacrificial mystic or a revolutionary militant and thinker. The only monograph on Weil's philosophy of science is Vance Morgan's *Weaving the World: Simone Weil on Science, Mathematics, and Love* (2005). An excellent piece of exegesis, its purpose is to identify an internal coherence linking Weil's multifarious reflections on science, forging links with other aspects of her thought, ultimately in order to show her moving from the outset towards a 'geometry of the cross'.[390]

This chapter favours a more outward-looking and comparative approach, which situates Weil's evaluation of modern science in relation to other anti-abstractionist discourses of the early- to mid- twentieth century. This chapter is divided into three comparisons, which also mark important evolutions in Weil's thought.

The analysis will begin with a reading of Weil's early work, *Science et perception dans Descartes*. Weil knowingly inserted her thesis into the French historical epistemological tradition, by selecting France's leading epistemologist, Léon Brunschvicg, as its supervisor and examiner. This chapter will then compare Weil's early philosophy of science not with Brunschvicg, but principally with the philosophy of another one of his students, Gaston Bachelard.

Like Weil, Bachelard began his career with epistemology, seeking to ground the validity of scientific knowledge in a reconciliation of idealism and realism.[391] The two philosophers did so in related but distinct ways. Weil's text is a defence of realism, which takes a historical approach, explaining how misreadings of Descartes have fuelled abstractionist and idealist perspectives within and on science. She complemented this with her own Cartesian meditation in the second part of the text, arguing that it is the action-oriented thought present in the activity of labour which constitutes the basis for scientific truth. Bachelard also made the active agency of

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390 Morgan Vance, *Weaving the World: Simone Weil on Science, Mathematics, and Love* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 155.

391 Idealism describes any system of thought in which the objects of knowledge are regarded as dependent on the mind. Realism claims that any concept, including abstract principles or universals, must have some objective existence beyond the mind of the perceiving subject. The world and everything in it is considered to exist independently.

thought the pillar of his own reconciliation of idealism and realism, although he eschewed a historical approach, preferring to posit a purely epistemological argument about the twin processes of approximation (associated with realism) and rectification (associated with idealism). Both thinkers wanted to escape from a philosophical prism that abstracts from objects, regarding them as entirely dependent on the mind for existence, in favour of an approach which examines the activity of the mind in shaping the contingent and externally existent material world.

Like Bachelard, who became increasingly interested in the psychoanalysis of scientific enquiry, Weil moved away from epistemology towards approaches which took a more critical line on science itself. She did not subscribe to any defined school of philosophy. However, her interest in escaping the abstract calculation of modern science in favour of more intuitive and unmediated interpretations of lived experience leads naturally to a comparison with phenomenology. This chapter pursues the evolution of Weil's critique of modern science by putting it in dialogue with two very different but related thinkers, both of whom she had read: Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

Husserl, who is widely regarded as the father of phenomenology, studied how the 'natural attitude' of science failed to take into account how objects constitute themselves in consciousness. On this basis, he put forward in his 1936 book *The Crisis of The European Sciences*, the notion of the *Lebenswelt* (Lifeworld). *Lebenswelt* was what science had missed: the direct, intuited and shared horizon of all our experiences in their unmediated forms. Through a comparison with Husserl, the chapter will show how this notion can contextualise and deepen Weil's less systematised but no less present philosophical emphasis on a prescientific realm of direct and intuitive experience. Interestingly, both Weil and Husserl identified a key turning point in the history of science as largely responsible for its growing abstraction: the invention of algebra during the Scientific Revolution of the early modern period.

Any thought which seeks to reverse the subordination of lived experience to scientific calculation naturally brings in Martin Heidegger, who provides the chapter's third and final

comparison. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger carried out a fundamental ontological critique of phenomenology, seeking to move the debate on from phenomenological ideas about reforming scientific methods and systematising the intentionality of consciousness, in which perception is always directed towards an object. Heidegger favoured what he called an ontological approach, which put the examination of the Being of beings at its heart. This resonated with Weil's thought in a number of ways.

Weil shared with Heidegger, as with Husserl, this critique of modern science. However, like Heidegger she sought to unveil different planes of meaning and truth, which the intentionality of scientific and phenomenological analysis missed. The chapter will explore the convergences between Weil and Heidegger's responses to this ontological challenge. Significantly, both elaborated states of being undistorted by intentionality, already immersed in the totality of being and receptive to meaning, without the intellectual abstraction of a subject-object relationship. Weil likened this to a kind of passive, perfectly receptive reading (*lecture*) of phenomena, whereas Heidegger put the emphasis on the immersive character of this state, which he called *Dasein* (literally, 'to be there'). The notions are quite distinct, and are applied in different ways. However in their broadest brushstrokes, they display a number of parallels, which Weil herself observed in her *Cahiers*.[392]

These three comparisons with Bachelard, Husserl and Heidegger not only provide a contextualisation of Weil's texts on science, they also deepen our understanding of a key pillar in her critique of modernity. This will show how she enriched her ideas with the epistemological, phenomenological and existential distinctions and reservations of her time, to elaborate her own critique and philosophy of science, which, as this chapter will show, put the experience of the worker at its heart.

[392] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 288.

*Epistemological Beginnings: Science et perception dans Descartes*

Despite Weil's militant syndicalist engagement during her student days, her first major piece of mature philosophy, undertaken while she was at the Ecole Normale Supérieure from 1928 to 1931 was not political, but rather was part of an act of self-insertion into the continental tradition of the philosophy of science. 'Science et perception dans Descartes' (1930) was Weil's *Diplôme d'études supérieures*, undertaken as her graduating dissertation. The relevance of relating this work to the French epistemological tradition is underscored by the fact that Weil chose Léon Brunschvicg, France's leading epistemologist, as her *Diplôme*'s supervisor, and regularly attended his classes, according to Weil's friend and biographer, Simone Pétrement.[393]

Brunschvicg was France's foremost exponent of idealism.[394] He did not believe that any object could exist outside of our knowledge of it. Heavily influenced by Descartes, he constructed a system of philosophy he called 'critical idealism'. He defined it as a means of increasing our consciousness of consciousness itself and pushing the shifting boundaries of knowledge further through a radical and spontaneous self-reflexive analysis:[395]

> L'idéalisme affirme l'être et le définit par la pensée. Au lieu de comprendre la pensée par rapport à une détermination déjà donnée de l'être, il cherche dans la pensée le caractère constitutif de l'être. Ainsi la pensée ne peut-elle plus être une copie passive des choses, une représentation muette comme un tableau sur une muraille; elle se pose elle-même comme une activité. La pensée est une faculté indéfinie d'unification, elle est une spontanéité radicale.[396]

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393 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 95.

394 Brunschvicg took up the Chair at the Collège de France's Academie des sciences politiques et morales vacated by the the Kantian idealist philosopher Jules Lachelier in 1919, of whom he was an admiring follower.

395 'De toute découverte qui étend la portée du savoir humain, [la philosophie] fait un moyen pour pousser plus loin l'analyse reflexive de notre connaissance, pour nous donner davantage conscience de notre conscience.' Cited in Maurice Gex, 'L'idéalisme critique de Léon Brunschvicg,' *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, no. 20 (1970), p. 152.

396 Cited in ibid., p. 148.

Given the importance accorded to the dynamic activity of thought itself, rather than its static content, Brunschvicg's epistemology favoured a historical approach, capturing the 'curve' and 'direction' of 'total knowledge'.[397]

Weil would have experienced this tradition as an almost daily reality at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, where she moved in the same circles as Jean Cavaillès and Georges Canguilhem (also a student of Alain's) and at the Sorbonne, where historians and philosophers of science such as Abel Rey,[398] Brunschvicg and Gaston Bachelard were prominent figures.

However, the initial focus of this analysis on Weil's *Diplôme* is not chosen in order to argue that Weil deliberately positioned herself as a philosopher of science in this emergent French tradition. Nor is it chosen to argue that this tradition provides an interpretive key for Weil's later and more esoteric texts on science to be found in her *Cahiers* and other later works collected in the posthumous publication *Sur la Science*, although, as this study will show, the trace of this influence did remain. Rather, this context reveals Weil as a young and engaged thinker, eager to work on the frontline of philosophical enquiry and to contribute to current debates. Whereas this might be regarded as a given for most philosophers, the particularity of Weil's legacy as an esoteric mystical writer, and the eclipse of revolutionary syndicalism by more successful strands of Soviet and scientific socialism, have meant that her work has rarely been contextualised by scholarship.

Even those scholars who have engaged with the *Diplôme* have largely neglected its philosophical context. Vance Morgan's analysis of the *Diplôme*, which is a faithful and rigorous account, is intended to construct and elucidate a philosophy of science internal to Weil's thought, particularly in light of her later religious thought, and does not seek to establish an epistemological

[397] Léon Brunschvicg, *L'Expérience humaine et la causalité physique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, [1922] 1949), p. 552.
[398] Weil was very familiar with the work of Abel Rey, according to Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 122.

context.[399] Peter Winch examines Weil's idea of thought as an active principle in the *Diplôme* in terms of its implications for an understanding of the self in her work as a whole and contextualises her thought in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, almost exclusively by drawing parallels with the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein.[400] Robert Chenavier takes a different approach, addressing the *Diplôme* exclusively in terms of a wider analysis of Weil's philosophy of work, and the epistemological contribution of the *Diplôme* to the philosophy of science is not examined.[401]

And yet at no point in Weil's career was she as actively engaged in the academic milieu of university research as during the drafting of her *Diplôme*. The point of engagement which she chose was the historically-oriented epistemology of Léon Brunschvicg and his student, Gaston Bachelard.

*The French Epistemological Context: A Comparison with Gaston Bachelard*

Although Bachelard was twenty-five years older than Weil, they studied under Brunschvicg at roughly the same time and in the same place: the Sorbonne.[402] Bachelard completed his doctoral thesis, *Essai sur la connaissance approchée,* in 1927. Simone Weil's *Diplôme*, 'Science et perception dans Descartes' was drafted shortly after, from 1929 to 1930.

Like Weil, Bachelard was committed to resolving false intellectual distinctions within epistemology between idealism and realism. He sought to find a middle way, which he described as 'applied rationalism', acknowledging (like Brunschvicg) the active role of the mind in creating concepts, but (unlike Brunschvicg) recognising the specificity of these concepts compared to the

399 Vance, *Weaving the World: Simone Weil on Science, Mathematics, and Love*, p. 35.
400 Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 12-17.
401 Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail.*
402 Bachelard was born in 1884 to a poor family and earned his academic qualifications while working long hours as a postal worker and then as a secondary school teacher. The fact that they were both thinkers with a long experience of low-wage labour, Bachelard by necessity and Weil by choice, may have influenced their shared interest in work and labour as a medium for testing the validity and scope of knowledge.

generality of sense impressions.[403] The key element in this approach is the dual process of rectification and approximation at work in the acquisition of scientific knowledge, in which irrational, indivisible and contingent problems are overcome, only to throw up new irrational and indivisible problems in a never-ending epistemological process. Bachelard referred to this as the philosophy of inaccuracy: *la philosophie de l'inexact*.[404]

This philosophy united the realist acceptance of approximation and guesswork, in which thinkers or scientists can justifiably experiment by stumbling and groping in the dark for answers, since objects have an independent existence in the world, with an idealist process of rectification, in which concepts are refined and corrected in light of a theoretical ideal: 'L'approximation acceptant l'objet s'exprimerait alors dans le langage réaliste, la rectification travaillant en vue d'un idéal relèverait plutôt d'un langage idéaliste.'[405] For Bachelard, the co-existence of the two is what drives scientific discovery.

This dual process operates at the shifting frontier of knowledge. This is the moving boundary between the rational (what has been rationally proven) and the irrational (what remains to be rationally proven through a process of approximation and rectification). This requires the active participation of the philosopher or scientist. This is why Bachelard conceived thought as forceful and dynamic action, rather than a form of passive and sceptical observation:

> La [connaissance approchée] c'est la véritable réalité épistémologique, puisque, c'est la pensée dans son acte, dans son dynamisme profond. On n'expliquera pas la pensée en faisant un inventaire de ses acquisitions, une force la parcourt dont il faut rendre compte.[406]

The role of thought as an active process continued to underpin Bachelard's epistemology, even as his focus shifted away from epistemology and towards psychoanalysis. In *La Formation de l'esprit*

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[403] See Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 88.
[404] Bachelard, *La Connaissance approchée*, p. 8.
[405] Ibid., p. 295.
[406] Ibid., p. 300.

*scientifique* (1938), Bachelard explores the psychological conditions necessary to promote the active, enquiring mind and in doing so ensure the progress of science:

> Et quoi qu'on dise, dans la vie scientifique, les problèmes ne se posent pas d'eux-mêmes. C'est précisément ce sens du problème qui donne la marque du véritable esprit scientifique. Pour un esprit scientifique toute connaissance est une réponse à une question. S'il n'y a pas eu de question il ne peut y avoir connaissance scientifique. Rien ne va de soi. Rien n'est donné. Tout est construit.[407]

Bachelard's emphasis on thought as forceful, probing activity would have appealed to his mentor Brunschvicg, although as Jean-Claude Pariente has noted, *La Connaissance approchée* was too realist in approach to attract his unqualified approval.[408]

Simone Weil's *Diplôme* was certainly too realist for Brunschvicg's taste, as well as lacking the historical analysis he regarded as paramount. This, according to Simone Pétrement, accounts for the very poor mark he awarded it, earning him the wrath of the philosopher Alain, who

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[407] Gaston Bachelard, *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique* (Paris: Vrin, [1938] 2004), p. 16. Bachelard refers to any psychological pattern that inhibits scientific progress as an *obstacle épistémologique*. Epistemologists can draw on psychoanalysis to help define and promote the psychology needed to advance in experimental science. He upholds Heisenberg as a positive example, who in his quantum theory sets out two contradictory theories (waves and particles), and upholds both, using each to refine the other. See Chapter Four of Gaston Bachelard, *Le Nouvel Esprit scientifique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, [1934] 2013). Although Weil approached contradiction more in terms of spiritual transcendence than scientific method, she also believed that openness to contradiction was a crucial epistemic and spiritual criterion. She noted in her *Cahiers* of 1941-1942*:* 'La vérité se produit au contact de deux propositions dont aucune n'est vrai; leur rapport est vrai', Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 90. She continues in an entry of the same period: 'Les contradictions auxquelles l'esprit se heurte, seules réalités, critérium du réel. […] La contradiction est l'épreuve de la nécessité. *Application à tous les domaines*', ibid., p. 454. Interestingly, here Weil frames the acceptance of contradiction as an obedience to necessity, an idea which she liked to express through a quote by Francis Bacon, notably as an epigraph to 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale': 'L'homme commande à la nature en lui obéissant.' Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 92. In a neat but coincidentally parallel turn of phrase, Bachelard, saw this psychological openness to seemingly irrational contradiction not in terms of *obedience* but in terms of *resistance*. For his ideal scientist, embracing contradiction is resistance, not obedience: 'Nous comprenons la Nature en lui résistant.' Bachelard, *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, p. 23.

[408] Pariente notes: 'On ne s'étonnera pas de voir qu'il [Brunschvicg] s'est montré sensible aux hésitations de l'*Essai sur la connaissance approchée* entre l'idéalisme et le réalisme. Même s'il admet en fin de compte que Bachelard se retrouve du bon côté, il n'a pas tort de relever les traces de réalisme que comporte l'*Essai*.' Jean-Claude Pariente, 'Rationalisme et ontologie chez Gaston Bachelard,' in *L'Épistémologie française: 1830-1970,* ed. M. Bitbol and J. Gayon (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), p. 255.

publicly upbraided him for his failure of judgment.[409] However, the *Diplôme* did speak to Brunschvicg's and Bachelard's approach in a number of ways. Firstly, like Bachelard, Weil was seeking an epistemological reconciliation between an idealist and a realist standpoint. This was an early example of her critique of modern science as abstracted from reality. Secondly, like Bachelard and to a limited extent Brunschvicg, Weil emphasised the role of thought as dynamic and forceful action to arrive at justified knowledge in the face of infinite complexity, contingency and irrationality. However, she does so with a distinctly syndicalist and Marxist flavour, since she argues that it is manual workers and not scientists who are best placed to uncover and harness the resulting insights. Thirdly, and finally, Weil and Bachelard both share an interest in the intuitive and imaginative sources of knowledge, although these interests were developed largely after the epistemological texts under discussion, in works such as Bachelard's *La Psychanalyse du feu* (1938), and *L'Eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (1941), and Weil's *Écrits de Marseille* (1940-1942) and her *Cahiers*.

However, returning to the early text, 'Science et perception dans Descartes', Weil, like Bachelard, frustrated Brunschvicg by arguing in favour of a science that would be capable of uniting realism and idealism. Whereas Bachelard sought to lay the foundations for a more holistic and accurate method to 'do' science, Weil proceeded first by showing how modern science had become abstracted from experience. In her view, this was the result of an overly-idealist and selective reading of Descartes's thought:

> Cent autres textes de Descartes feraient voir que nul n'a poussé si loin le réalisme. C'est le monde tel qu'il est en soi qu'il veut connaitre. […] Qu'après cela il ait choisi de définir le monde [dans ses *Méditations métaphysiques*] par l'étendue, c'est-à-dire par une idée, c'est ce dont on s'est de tout temps étonné. Mais que cet idéalisme et ce réalisme, tous deux extrêmes, soient pour lui non seulement conciliables, mais corrélatifs, c'est ce qu'il fait, sinon comprendre, du moins explicitement savoir dans [ses oeuvres].[410]

[409] Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 116.
[410] Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques* I.1, p. 178.

In the *Diplôme,* Weil sets out a number of examples from Descartes's philosophical and scientific texts to demonstrate the strong realist current in his thought. Given Descartes's influence on idealists such as Brunschvicg, she considered this exercise as essential in order to establish an epistemology that adequately incorporates realist perspectives. This would help to assert in epistemological terms the reality of matter beyond the mind, which is the cornerstone of realism.

The idealist interpretation of Descartes had grave consequences for Weil. She wrote to Alain that this misreading, or at least selective reading of one of the founding figures of the Enlightenment was at the root of a crisis in modern science: 'Il me semble que tout ce qui s'est passé depuis trois siècles pourrait, si on voulait, se résumer en ceci, que l'aventure de Descartes a mal tourné'.[411] Contrary to established understandings, for Weil, Descartes was a deeply realist thinker. She probably intended to provoke the likes of Brunschvicg and other high-minded establishment figures when she argued in her *Diplôme* that Descartes's realism made some elements of his work most accessible to manual labourers:

> La science cartésienne est bien autrement chargée de matière qu'on ne croit d'ordinaire. […] Elle est si liée à l'imagination, si jointe au corps humain, si proche des plus communs travaux, que c'est par l'étude des métiers les plus faciles et les plus simples qu'il convient de s'y initier; surtout ceux où il règne le plus d'ordre, comme celui des tisserands, des brodeuses ou des dentellières.[412]

However, political or social provocation aside, the deeper point being made here is foundational for Weil's early epistemology.

She was arguing that knowing is indistinguishable from activity in the material world. Thinking, as soon as it has an object, is a form of action that cannot be artificially separated from the world beyond the mind. Weil argued in her *Diplôme* that Descartes himself was at pains to point this out:

> Les grandes corrélations, qui forment le nœud de la doctrine, apparaissent; il n'y a plus de contradiction entre liberté et nécessité, entre idéalisme et réalisme. Pour cette dernière opposition, il suffit, pour n'être plus arrêté par

411 Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 111.
412 Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques* I.1, pp. 179-180.

> elle, de remarquer que tout l'esprit est en acte dans l'application de la pensée à un objet. C'est pourquoi Descartes ose dire, en contradiction directe avec la manière dont la philosophie couramment enseignée définit la déduction, que 'c'est le propre de notre esprit, de former les propositions générales de la connaissance des particulières'.[413]

She summed up Descartes's position as follows: 'Se servant de l'imagination, l'esprit géomètre ne manie pas des idées vides, il saisit quelque chose'.[414]

Here we find an epistemological realism and an emphasis on knowledge as rooted in activity that engages with themes present in Bachelard's work. However, Weil also went further, not only did she use dynamic, active thought as the basis for a critique of modern science as abstracted, but she also reformulated one of the foundation stones of Western philosophy, the *cogito*, according to this ideal. She rejected the rationalistic dualism of the *cogito*, preferring an epistemological model predicated on agency and activity: 'Je *puis*, donc je suis. […] Exister, penser, connaître, ne sont que des aspects d'une seule réalité: *pouvoir*.'[415] For Weil, and she argued for Descartes, only work (*travail*), as the indivisible unity of thought and action, could provide certain knowledge that the world exists.[416]

Weil is here much more concerned than Bachelard with re-evaluating Descartes's contribution. Bachelard did not address Descartes in *La Connaissance approchée*, and in his first major work of epistemology after his thesis, *Le Nouvel Esprit scientifique* (1934), he went so far as to propose a 'non-Cartesian' epistemology. He rejected the Cartesian notion that human reason is an eternal given, and instead viewed it as historically contingent and evolving, both shaping and being shaped by a world that is already there through a process of approximation and rectification.

This resonates with Weil's view on the active role of thought in both shaping and being shaped by the world. For Weil, 'pouvoir' does not denote simple mastery of the material world as

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413 Ibid., p. 220.
414 Ibid., p. 179.
415 Ibid., p. 189. (My emphasis)
416 Ibid., p. 218.

Peter Winch has rightly pointed out, but contingency.[417] Thought as activity is not exercised in a knowable universe, but one defined by uncertainty, by 'hasard', to employ the word preferred by Weil for events which appear inexplicable:

> Le hasard est vêtu, déguisé de bleu, de gris, de lumière, de dur et de mou, de froid et de chaud, de droit et de courbe, de triangles, de cercles, de nombres; le hasard, c'est-à-dire n'importe quoi. Je n'ai jamais conscience de rien, sinon des vêtements du hasard; et cette pensée même, en tant que j'en ai conscience, est hasard. Il n'y a rien de plus.[418]

There is no way into understanding this contingent, inexplicable world by thought alone, it has to be allied with action:

> Cette science n'est pas *vulgarisable*. Pourquoi? Justement à cause de la part du *hasard*, de *l'imprévu,* qui fait qu'elle n'est pas *une*. Pas moyen d'ouvrir quelques vastes avenues qu'on puisse parcourir du regard sans y entrer - il faut entrer dedans. Dans la spéculation aussi, même la plus pure: *'Am Anfang die Tat'*.[419]

This approach seizes the contingent world first via an action or deed (Goethe's *'die Tat'*). Like Bachelard, Weil argues that abstract logical thinking in view of an ideal and devoid of experience in the uncertain world is circular and cannot uncover knowledge that is new:

> Comment, en effet, aller autrement qu'au hasard à la recherche de vérités non encore soupçonnées? Je connaissais pourtant une méthode sûre pour employer les connaissances que je possédais à prouver la légitimité d'une affirmation; c'est ce qu'on nomme la logique. Mais je remarquais que cette méthode ne constituait qu'une simple analyse, absolument sûre parce qu'absolument infructueuse; elle pouvait me servir à tirer de l'ensemble de mes connaissances la connaissance dont je pouvais avoir besoin mais je la reconnaissais impuissante à me faire rien acquérir. Quant aux moyens de connaître quelque chose de nouveau, […] le premier n'est autre que les hasards de l'expérience.[420]

To learn something new, you have to immerse yourself in the 'unexpectedness (*hasards*) of experience', you have to approximate, before you rectify, in the terms of Bachelard.

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417 Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*, p. 10.
418 Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques* I.1, p. 188.
419 The quote is from Goethe's *Faust*: 'In the beginning was the deed'. Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 94.
420 Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques* I.1, p. 196.

Weil argues that this approach advances the boundaries of knowledge, to come ever closer to the infinite complexity of the world. Yet without ever hoping to master it, there will always be a frontier of the unknown and the seemingly irrational: 'L'action humaine se rapproche ainsi de plus en plus de la complexité indéfinie du monde, sans jamais l'atteindre.'[421] Bachelard shares this vision of the world as infinite complexity and understands the experience-driven effort involved in overcoming infinite complexity, perceived as irrationality, as the key to the progress of scientific knowledge: 'La science fait face à l'irrationalité fondamentale du donné. Cette irrationalité sollicite sans cesse la science, elle la pousse à des efforts toujours renouvelés'.[422] In this sense, science is endlessly being reborn in new trajectories: 'La science est une énigme qui renaît, une solution amène un problème'.[423] However, while Bachelard focuses exclusively on the scientist, Weil gives her epistemological analysis a distinctly syndicalist twist.

She argues that this unity of thought and activity by which we access knowledge has always been present through the act of labouring:

> C'est par le travail que la raison saisit le monde même, et s'empare de l'imagination folle. C'est ce qui ne se pourrait pas si je connaissais le monde par le pur entendement.[424]

Weil uses this epistemological claim about the primacy of action to defend a political claim about the primacy of work.

> En fin de compte, la seule sagesse consiste à savoir qu'il y a un monde, c'est-à-dire une matière que le travail seul peut changer, et que, l'esprit excepté, il n'y a rien d'autre. […] En un éclair, l'esprit qui s'arrache à ce qu'il sent se retranche en soi-même et agit; le pilote qui dans la tempête dirige le timon, le paysan qui balance sa faux, se sait soi-même et sait le monde de la manière qu'exprime la parole: 'Je pense, donc je suis' avec son cortège d'idées.[425]

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421 Ibid., p. 213.
422 Bachelard, *La Connaissance approchée*, p. 160.
423 Ibid., p. 155.
424 Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques* I.1, p. 209.
425 Ibid., p. 217.

This leads Weil to a provocative statement about the epistemological superiority of workers, even over scientists: 'Les travailleurs savent tout: mais hors du travail ils ne savent pas qu'ils ont possédé toute la sagesse.'[426]

Here, as Robert Chenavier and Florence de Lussy have pointed out, the influences of syndicalism and her mentor Alain are undoubtedly present.[427] Yet, as the comparison with Bachelard's philosophy of dynamic thought and approximation reveals, the *Diplôme* cannot be understood purely in these terms. 'Science et perception dans Descartes' functions as a piece of epistemology in its own right and can be read in light of emerging debates within twentieth-century French philosophy of science.

Weil and Bachelard took these insights in very different directions, not least in their analysis of Taylorised industry. For Weil, who fused epistemology with left-wing politics, modern factory work was an epistemologically regressive force, which severed the action of work from its origins in thought. However, Bachelard saw the Taylorised factory in neutral terms as an enclosed rational system in contrast to the irrational horizon of the unknown in pure science: 'L'industrie, au contraire [de la science], cherche à s'inscrire dans la matière un rationnel clairement reconnu puisqu'il est voulu. D'un côté on cherche le rationnel, de l'autre on l'impose.'[428] This means that while modern industry is efficient at producing identical objects, it inherently lacks innovation: 'La matière elle-même est pour ainsi dire débarrassée de son caractère irrationnel, car il n'est plus nécessaire d'avancer sa connaissance au delà des limites qu'assigne le but poursuivi'.[429] The status of the industrial worker as a thinking being is not viewed as problematic by Bachelard, since the labourer is operating within a closed system isolated from the irrational or the unknown: 'Une technologie se développe dans le règne des fins'.[430]

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426 Ibid.
427 Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail*: 23-24.; Florence de Lussy, 'La Marque d'Alain', in Weil, *Œuvres*, pp. 95-101.
428 Bachelard, *La Connaissance approchée*, p. 160.
429 Ibid., p. 161.
430 Ibid., p. 160.

For Weil, Taylorism certainly represented an enclosed system in which the subject and the object are eclipsed by the rationality of the process. For her this brought dangerous consequences, epistemologically, but also politically and morally. For Weil, Taylorism, insofar as she had experienced it, fragmented and compartmentalised human agency, representing an epistemologically-oriented attack on the worker's basic freedom to determine the product of his or her actions: 'L'important (pour la liberté) ce n'est pas que le travail soit méthodique, c'est qu'il soit *méthodiquement accompli*.'[431] She adds in terms that echoed Bachelard's view of industrial technology: 'Travail moderne: substitution du moyen à la fin'.[432] It has already been explored in the first chapter of this thesis how these changes to working conditions challenged her syndicalist-inspired definition of liberty, which rested on the unity of thought and action through labour.

However, this passage, which is drawn from Weil's early *Cahiers* (1933-1934), written approximately three years after the *Diplôme,* also reveals how her rejection of industrial automation evolved from an early epistemological focus, which fused scientific knowledge with the effort of work. While her syndicalism gave her epistemology a purpose beyond the purview of the principal currents of French epistemology in the 1920s and 1930s, there was nevertheless as this analysis has shown, a distinct and direct engagement with these currents.

This comparison with Bachelard emphasises the extent to which Weil's understanding of thought as work in action also functions beyond its syndicalist sympathies as a distinct piece of epistemology in its own right and can be fruitfully read in light of debates within twentieth-century French philosophy of science. The French historically-oriented philosophy of science is therefore a useful context in which to understand the origins and early evolutions of Weil's thought.

However, her epistemological and political interest in labour, which would lead her to undertake factory work for herself, would be transformed by the suffering and alienation she

431 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 100.
432 Ibid., p. 94.

found in modern labour and push her to new and different perspectives on science, which better reflected her lived experience. It is interesting to note that Bachelard also moved away from epistemology to focus on more imaginative and intuitive sources of scientific knowledge, for example through poetic and psychoanalytical perspectives, which will be explored in the chapter to follow, including in relation to the similar evolution of Weil's thought.

Before doing so, this chapter will examine how her experience of factory work led her away from epistemology towards alternative philosophical currents which were more explicitly critical of modern science, such as phenomenology.

*The 'Crisis' of Modern Science: Weil and Husserl*

When Husserl's phenomenology began to gain ground in France in the 1930s, it is unlikely that it would have resonated with Weil as particularly relevant to her own philosophical projects - especially since phenomenology was rarely appropriated as a foundational project in its own right, and was more often used as a method for theorising concrete experience within existentialism.[433] Nevertheless, Weil admired Husserl, describing him as the greatest living German philosopher, and there is a shared vision of abstraction at the heart of both Weil's critique of modern science and Husserl's 1936 *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (henceforth *Krisis*).[434] Appreciating these convergences as well as profound differences are useful for Weil scholarship, since the conceptual rigour and precision of phenomenology as a 'transcendental' science *of* science can illuminate and delineate distinctions and particularities within Weil's critique, which is a more blurred and fragmented amalgam of epistemological, metaphysical and sociological perspectives.[435] In general terms, Husserl's *Krisis* elucidates Weil's thought in terms of

433 Gary Gutting, *Continental Philosophy of Science*, Blackwell readings in Continental philosophy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 9.
434 Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 58.
435 At the time of writing only one academic study makes a sustained comparison between Weil and Husserl. The comparison examines common themes in their treatment of geometry, with the purpose of applying their thought to debates in contemporary architectural theory. In 'En défense de

understanding precisely from what forms of thought or experience science has become abstracted, and more particularly it draws attention to the role of algebraic structures in Weil's diagnosis of modern crisis.

In the *Krisis*, Husserl understands science in terms of an abstraction from the pregiven, prescientific realm of universal experience known as the Lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*):

> Science is a human spiritual accomplishment which presupposes as its point of departure, both historically and for each new student, the intuitive surrounding world of life, pre-given as existing for all in common.[436]

It is a-temporal, pre-given, inescapable, pure existence. It is the world experienced both in terms of its constraints and its plenitude. It corresponds to original, intuitive experience. This experience cannot be suspended under any conditions, it is a given, a totality outside of which no-one, including the scientist, can make claims:

> For the physicist it is the world in which he sees his measuring instruments, hears time-beats, estimates visible magnitudes, etc. — the world in which, furthermore, he knows himself to be included with all his activity and all his theoretical ideas.[437]

Modern science is inadequate because it excludes the qualitative 'plenum' of the Lifeworld in favour of quantifiable spatio-temporal forms:

> The natural science of the modern period, establishing itself as physics, has its roots in the consistent abstraction through which it *wants* to see, in the

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la géométrie: Edmund Husserl et Simone Weil', Villela-Petit shows how Weil and Husserl's 'defence' of geometry has found a new and prescient relevance in the widespread shift among architects away from geometric forms. She sets out their theorisation of abstracting algebra as a case against contemporary computer-driven designs, and calls for reconciliation between architecture and geometry, as theorised by its 'defenders', Weil and Husserl. See Maria Villela-Petit, 'En défense de la géométrie: Edmund Husserl et Simone Weil', in *Géométrie, mesure du monde: Philosophie, architecture, urbain*, ed. T. Paquot and C. Younès (Paris: Edition La Decouverte, 2005). Lissa McCullough has also examined Weil's philosophical use of the body in structuring thought and ordering the world, arguing she preceded Maurice Merleau-Ponty in this regard, although it is important to add that Weil never systematised her diffuse and often undeveloped arguments on the subject. For the comparison see Lissa McCullough, 'Simone Weil's Phenomenology of the Body', *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2015).

436 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, [1936] 1970), p. 121.

437 Ibid.

> Lifeworld, only corporeity. […] Through such an abstraction, carried out with universal consistency, the world is reduced to abstract-universal nature, the subject matter of pure natural science. It is here alone that geometrical idealization, first of all, and then all further mathematizing theorization, has found its possible meaning.[438]

It is in this elaboration of the Lifeworld and modern science's departure from it that a comparison with Weil becomes interesting. This is because Weil is not nearly so clear as Husserl about what has been abstracted and from where. In her thought we have no conceptual understanding of reality in its fullest and total Lifeworld manifestation. Instead there are presentations of both historical moments of unabstracted plenitude: the Ancient Greeks; but also a-temporal states, such as the human condition of labour (albeit threatened by the abstracting forces of modernity), as well as references to the primacy of a mysterious intuitive capacity found in the experience of affliction ('l'intuition étant immédiate ne peut être précédée que d'une "nuit obscure", contrairement à la pensée discursive').[439]

Weil's understanding of labour approached in certain respects Husserl's Lifeworld: it is conceptualised in terms of access to a fuller reality, experienced as necessity:

> Le travail physique constitue un contact spécifique avec la beauté du monde, et même dans les meilleurs moments, un contact d'une plénitude telle que nul équivalent ne peut s'en trouver ailleurs. L'artiste, le savant, le penseur, le contemplatif doivent admirer réellement l'univers, percer cette pellicule d'irréalité qui voile et en fait pour presque tous les hommes, à presque tous les moments de leur vie, un rêve ou un décor de théâtre.[440]

Clearly, however, there are profound differences with the Lifeworld, the most prominent being that in Husserl's construct there is no differential access to the Lifeworld, we all effortlessly experience it in every moment of our lives, whether we are labourers, artists or thinkers. In that sense it is a-political, whereas Weil's account is clearly influenced by socialism in according

438 Ibid., p. 227.
439 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 124.
440 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 738.

(unexploited) workers a privileged contact with a transcendent reality from which everyone else is excluded. Weil continued:

> Ils le doivent mais le plus souvent ne le peuvent pas. Celui qui a les membres rompus par l'effort d'une journée de travail, c'est à dire d'une journée où il a été soumis à la matière, porte dans sa chair comme une épine la réalité de l'univers.[441]

This may sound like a classic socialist view, and in particular a Marxist view. However, on closer inspection it is hardly a neat fit. Weil's analysis does not apply only to the capitalist mode of production. It does not present this alienation as an economic condition imposed by the bourgeoisie who own the means of production and seek to extract surplus value. Marx may have said that exploitative work 'mortifies the body and ruins the mind', but this did not afford knowledge beyond the realisation by the worker that he or she is alienated from his or her labour on the factory floor, with little reflection on their broader existence.[442] Weil, on the other hand, was claiming that beneath a veil of unreality, experienced at all times, there lay a deeper material reality, which is experienced through the plenitude of contact. In fact, this passage, dating from 1942, shortly before her death, and at the height of her mystical period, arguably has more in common with a self-sacrificial Christian perspective, where suffering brings the victim closer to God.

Nevertheless, whatever the nature of this fusion of Marxist and Christian influences, the fundamental point of this passage is an epistemological claim about our access to reality in its true depth. Moreover, this depth does share characteristics with the plenitude of the Lifeworld. In fact, in the closing pages of *L'Enracinement*, written around the same time as the previous passage, Weil explicitly discussed her understanding of necessity as deeper reality in the context of the modern philosophy of perception, returning again to the idea that the reality of the universe penetrates our flesh. It would be remarkable if, in 1943, she were excluding phenomenology. It is more likely

441 Ibid.
442 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), p. 72.

that she had Husserl, 'le grand philosophe allemand contemporain', specifically in mind, and perhaps Heidegger whom she had also read in depth.[443]

> Dans la philosophie moderne sont apparues un peu partout, sous différentes formes, des analyses susceptibles de préparer une théorie complète de la perception sensible. La vérité fondamentale que révélerait une telle théorie, c'est que la réalité des objets perçus par les sens ne réside pas dans les impressions sensibles, mais uniquement dans les nécessités dont les impressions constituent les signes.
>
> Cet univers sensible où nous sommes n'a pas d'autre réalité que la nécessité […]. Cet univers autour de nous est de la pensée matériellement présente à notre chair.[444]

The suggestion that the worker has an epistemological superiority, not in his mastery of matter as in the *Diplôme*, but in his subservience and obedience to necessity, is in itself an interesting reversal.

The relative clarity, universality and conceptual rigour of the Lifeworld theory can help demystify Weil's more metaphysical and imagistic approach: firstly for both thinkers our perceptions give us access to a Lifeworld whose plenitude exceeds our ability to conceptualise it mathematically or scientifically, and in both accounts this plenitude is universally accessible, with the exception that this access is conditional in Weil's account on a certain experience of work. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Weil's account of deep reality as the 'plenitude' of necessity can only be experienced in ways that disrupt and challenge the subject qua subject. For Husserl, science simply cannot express the qualitative fullness of reality, but he focuses on how science is rooted in consciousness, which is always surrounded by the 'sedimented' horizon of the Lifeworld. For Weil, the focus was not conscious experience but the experience of work: reality in its fullness is invasive, injurious, inseparable from expression in our corporeal being. We access a qualitatively different reality only in so far as we allow this imposition, in so far as we obey necessity's burden. This was not simply a metaphysical or religious experience for Weil, it is also

443 For Husserl see Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 66. For Heidegger see Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 304.
444 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1212.

related to our understanding and appreciation of science. It is in this respect that Greek geometry and classical algebra play an important role in Weil's thought. This is another area in which there is both diagnostic convergence between Weil and Husserl and extreme epistemological divergence.

*'Dieu est un perpétuel géomètre, mais non pas un algébriste'*

Despite their different conceptions of pre-scientific given realities, Husserl and Weil both argued that the failure of modern science to account truthfully for intuited experience was the result of a reliance on quantitative abstraction. Both philosophers agreed that the critical turning point was the arithmetisation of geometry and the invention of algebraic structures. Furthermore, they both emphasised the role of geometry in idealizing the proportions and shapes of intuitive, real experience. In Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry,* included as an appendix to the *Krisis*, he called for an 'inner history' of geometrical knowledge, which eschews historico-cultural reconstruction in order to reveal a deeper culture of truth beyond the empirical, which Derrida has referred to as 'absolutely normative': 'La culture de vérité dont l'idéalité est absolument normative. […] celle-ci est devenue possible par une irruption de l'infini, comme révolution à l'intérieur de la culture empirique.'[445]

Weil saw this revolution in geometry's famous myth of origin: 'Plus belle encore fut la première intuition de Thalès, quand il aperçut dans le soleil l'auteur d'une infinité de proportions qui s'inscrivent sur le sol et qui changent avec les ombres.'[446] This myth, which remains inherently a-historical, serves to identify the transcendent nature of geometry expressed as the infinite necessity that structures all material existence and experience, apprehended intellectually through proportionality:

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445 Edmund Husserl, *L'Origine de la géométrie*, ed. Jacques Derrida (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, [1936] 1962), pp. 47-48.
446 Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 144.

> C'est une seule et même chose qui relativement à Dieu est Sagesse éternelle, relativement à l'univers est parfaite obéissance, relativement à notre amour beauté, relativement à notre intelligence équilibre de relations nécessaires, relativement à notre chair force brutale.[447]

Such a totalising experience did not need transcendental phenomenology to provide an account of lived experience, since the 'plenum' of necessity expresses itself as necessity in the unity of spiritual, metaphysical, aesthetic, intellectually intuited and corporeal experience. Yet Husserl's project, which understood modern science from Galileo as the arithmetisation of geometry, resulting in the quantified and abstracted emptiness of algebra, does bring him closer to Weil's project than perhaps any other of her contemporaries.

*The Origin of Geometry* is concerned with 'returning to the primal wellsprings (*Quellen*) from which our current conceptualizations and practices were originally drawn'.[448] However, in the main text of the *Krisis*, Husserl's examination of geometry and algebra aimed more to understand their part in a teleology of modern abstraction than their origins in the Lifeworld. For Husserl modern abstraction came about because Galileo arithmetised nature from ancient geometrical knowledge. This was already a double abstraction, since the origins of geometry lay in the prescientific 'empirically intuited world of bodies' and not in the idealisations through which they came to be formalised: [449]

> Even ancient geometry was, in its way […], removed from the sources of truly immediate intuition and originally intuitive thinking, sources from which the so-called geometrical intuition, i.e., that which operates with idealities, has at first derived its meaning.[450]

However, for Weil it is precisely in the geometrical idealisation of concrete intuited bodies that geometry expresses the necessity that structures our deepest reality. Weil noted in one of the last entries in her *Cahiers*: 'L'univers est providentiellement constitué de telle manière que la

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[447] In *L'Enracinement*, Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1212.
[448] *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. H.L. Dreyfus and M.A. Wrathall (Blackwell, 2009), p. 549.
[449] Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, p. 49.
[450] Ibid.

connaissance du concret soit suspendue à la connaissance de l'abstrait.'[451] Geometry is therefore a pure abstraction which permits reality to be apprehended qualitatively, via the proportions and necessary relations between numbers and forms:

> Chaque rapport enveloppe des quantités qui croissent d'une manière illimitée sans cesser d'être fidèles à une relation parfaitement définie, comme un angle, à partir d'un point, embrasse un espace qui s'étend indéfiniment au-delà des plus lointaines étoiles. […] C'est ainsi qu'au lieu du rapport entre le désir et les conditions de l'accomplissement, la science grecque a pour objet le rapport entre l'ordre et les conditions de l'ordre. Il s'agit d'un ordre sensible à l'homme, et par suite l'homme n'est pas absent de ce rapport; pourtant cet ordre se rapporte à l'univers mieux que ne font le désir, le projet, l'effort.[452]

The fusion of scientific and metaphysical truths in Greek geometry led Weil to call proportionality the soul of scientific knowledge: 'l'âme de toute connaissance scientifique'.[453] These different understandings of geometry's essential truth reside in different conceptions of reality as necessity and as the Lifeworld. However, despite these differences, both philosophers agree that the 'mathematisation of nature' carried out by the leaders of the Scientific Revolution, notably Galileo (for Husserl) and Descartes (for Weil) led directly to the abstraction which characterised the science of their day. This was understood by both Weil and Husserl to reside in the eclipse of geometry by algebra. Husserl noted of 'algebraic structures':

> This arithmetisation of geometry leads almost automatically, in a certain way, to the emptying of its meaning. The actually spatiotemporal idealities, as they are presented firsthand *[originär]* in geometrical thinking under the common rubric of 'pure intuitions,' are transformed, so to speak, into pure numerical configurations, into algebraic structures. In algebraic calculation, one lets the geometric signification recede into the background as a matter of course, indeed drops it altogether; one calculates, remembering only at the end that the numbers signify magnitudes. […] One invents, one may make great discoveries - but they have acquired, unnoticed, a displaced, 'symbolic' meaning.[454]

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451 Weil, *Cahiers (juillet 1942 - juillet 1943) La connaissance surnaturelle*, VI:4, p. 402.
452 Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 143.
453 Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, p. 23.
454 Ibid., p. 44-45.

Algebraic thinking is 'carried out *in infinitum* in its own essential totality, [it is] a science of the forms of meaning of the 'something-in-general' which can be constructed in pure thought and in empty, formal generality.'[455]

What is not accounted for is the qualitative character of the Lifeworld, the true totality, which is unquantifiable. However, the abstracting and totalising aspirations of the Scientific Revolution, which led directly to the 'crisis' of modern science concealed its inadequacies, with destructive results: 'It is [therefore] understandable that some were misled into taking these formulae and their formula-meaning for the true being of nature itself.'[456]

Weil's diagnosis shares broad convergences with this analysis. Although she had a particular admiration for the proportionality of Greek philosophy and science, she argued that all forms of science which had preceded modern algebraic science were closer to the transcendent truths present in experience and contemplation:

> Les formes différentes qu'a prises selon les pays et les époques la connaissance du monde ont chacune pour objet, pour modèle et pour principe le rapport entre une aspiration de la pensée humaine et les conditions effectives de sa réalisation. […] La science grecque, elle, considère les mêmes conditions que la science classique, mais elle a égard à une aspiration tout autre, l'aspiration à contempler dans les apparences sensibles une image du bien. […] Mais la science contemporaine, que faut-il en penser ? Quel rapport lui sert de principe et en mesure la valeur ? […] [L]e rapport qui est au principe de cette science est simplement le rapport entre des formules algébriques vides de signification et la technique. […] L'algèbre pure est devenue le langage de la physique, un langage qui a ceci de particulier, qu'il ne signifie rien.[457]

Simone Weil's criticism is less systematic, but it does incorporate some of Husserl's critique. This is apparent as early as her 'Science et perception dans Descartes', when she identified the algebraic

[455] Ibid., p. 45.
[456] Ibid., p. 44.
[457] Weil, *Sur la Science*, pp. 146-150.

age initiated by a misapplication of Descartes as having succeeded one dominated by the plenitude of experience to be found in geometry:[458]

> La science s'est purifiée de ce qu'elle avait d'intuitif […]. Au lieu d'être reine de la science, la mathématique n'est plus qu'un langage; à force de dominer, elle est réduite à un rôle servile.[459]

Over ten years later, despite the epistemological shifts in her thought already discussed, and especially the adoption of necessity as the central intuitive experience, her position on algebra remained the same: 'Pour moi, je pense bien que Dieu, selon la parole pythagoricienne, est un géomètre perpétuel - mais non pas un algébriste'.[460] This is because, whereas geometry serves as an idealisation of our deepest metaphysical and spiritual reality, while remaining by definition manifest in concrete intuited experience, algebra is a quantification process, which not only separates the sign from the signified,[461] but can also function regardless of the nature of the signified. It can therefore 'work' in different realities, without telling us anything meaningful about the world:

> Dès lors que signifient les formules algébriques? Sur le modèle de quoi reconstruit-on l'univers? Sur le modèle des formules algébriques? Mais elles ne constituent pas un modèle, elles épousent n'importe quelle réalité […]. [La] Science [est] à présent *non orientée*.[462]

Weil, like Husserl, argued that the arithmetisation of nature during the Scientific Revolution introduced a new and totalising abstracted understanding of the world which eclipsed its true nature. She recorded in a notebook around 1940: 'Science du XVIIe, XVIIIe, début XIXe (science classique). Reconstruire le monde *sur le modèle* de l'action par laquelle je déplace un crayon.

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458 'l'origine de la science moderne […] [se trouve dans] la double révolution par laquelle la physique est devenue une application de la mathématique et la géométrie est devenue algèbre, autrement dit [dans] Descartes'.Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques* I.1, p. 165.
459 Ibid., p. 164.
460 Weil is referencing Plato's famous statement that 'God ever geometrizes'. Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 212.
461 'Chercher tous les obstacles pour l'imagination. Séparation du signe et du signifié (algèbre)' Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 117.
462Ibid., p. 231.

Dans un tel monde, l'homme ne vivait pas.'[463] This cannot offer real understanding of the world, since a quantified understanding of the world cannot be scientifically valid: 'l'algèbre [est] […] un maniement de rapports de pure convention, non pas une connaissance du monde; le monde ne fournit jamais de telle donnée'.[464] The difference between Weil and Husserl's critique of algebra relates not to its content broadly understood, but rather to its application.

Husserl's *Krisis* is epistemological in scope: his analysis is restricted to exploring the 'decapitation' of philosophy by the empty algebraic abstractions of positivism.[465] Weil's project was more sociological in its purpose. She applied the insights of this epistemological critique to the quantification of social phenomena whose transformative effect on economics and industry she condemned:

> ARGENT MACHINISME ALGEBRE: les trois monstres de la civilisation actuelle. […] Mettre la qualité au-dessus de la quantité *aussi* dans le domaine de la science. Le rapport de la science à ses applications est *fortuit* – il n'est pensé par personne; il ne peut donc être que *fortuit*. […] Le mathématicien vit dans un univers à part dont les objets sont des signes. Le rapport de signe à signifié périt; le jeu des échanges entre signes se développe par lui-même et pour lui-même. Et encore *ce phénomène se redouble*. Car la complication croissante exige des signes de signes. […] C'est en cela que consiste 'le robot'... L'esprit, succombant sous le poids de la quantité, *n'a plus d'autre criterium que l'efficacité*. […] Là où l'esprit (l'homme...) cesse d'être principe, il cesse aussi d'être.[466]

In this passage, Weil united her epistemological critique with a societal and political one that recalls not only Marx's critique of the 'icy water of egotistical calculation' inherent to capitalist economics,[467] but also elements of Weberian modernity as a quantifying, rationalising process. In fact, Weil goes so far as to perceive the decline of peasant culture in terms of a complete adoption of an abstract and counter-intuitive algebra:

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463 Ibid., pp. 154-155.
464 Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 122.
465'Positivism, in a manner of speaking, decapitates philosophy.' Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, p. 9.
466 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 100.
467 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 37.

> La vie des paysans a cessé de ressembler à Hésiode depuis un demi-siècle. Destruction de la science telle que la concevaient les Grecs, vers le même moment. L'argent et l'algèbre ont triomphé simultanément.[468]

Money and algebra are both related forces of abstraction in Weil's view: 'Algèbre, argent niveleurs, l'un intellectuellement, l'autre affectivement'.[469] Husserl's *Krisis* can help elucidate the epistemological dimensions in Weil's theorisation of geometry and algebra and its role in her critique of modern science.

Weil's critique of algebra as a vehicle of empty meanings disconnected from the reality of their existence as necessity (or in the Lifeworld) echoed Husserl's idea that arithmetised geometry as algebra is an example of 'long-understood acquisition, […] sedimented in [its] embodiments'.[470] The letters of algebraic calculation are severed from their origin in the reality of the Lifeworld and passed on unquestioned between every modern scientist. However, as has been set out, the difference with Weil's thought is not only in its metaphysical and spiritual orientation towards the Good (Bien), but also in the idea that algebra is part of a wider 'leveling' ('niveleurs') tendency that extends to reduce all aspects of modernity to just one plane, or to one horizon, to use phenomenological vocabulary. This is deeply antithetical to Weil's Platonist influence, which, in Plato's divided line metaphor (Part VII, Book VI), structures a metaphysical conception of knowledge in terms of a hierarchy between Knowledge (*epistēmē*) and the corresponding 'Intelligible realm' (*to noēton*) and Opinion (*doxa*) with its corresponding 'visible realm' (*to horāton*):[471]

> Liaisons entre les sciences et *le premier principe* - ἀνυπόθετος [inconditionné, anhypothétique]. Sens des sciences dans Platon? Toujours un trou entre le premier principe et les sciences. Car: la diversité. Elle n'est pas contenue dans le premier principe. Elle est donnée *organisée* […]. C'est cette organisation qui est le monde. Principe de la science occidentale: pas de hiérarchie.[472]

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468 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 186.
469 Ibid., p. 185. Same idea expressed in Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 149.
470 Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, pp. 26-27.
471 Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 236.
472 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 155.

Weil's thought is influenced both by Plato and by the concept of the three *gunas* of Hinduism, the tripartite energy structure of creation, preservation and destruction. On this basis, Weil sought to establish multiple hierarchies both in relation to the world ('Les conditions d'existence du bien permettent de concevoir une hiérarchie dans la nature'),[473] and the self ('Si on ne respecte pas la *hiérarchie verticale* en soi, on est hypocrite, même en voulant être sincère';[474] 'Notre époque détruit la hiérarchie intérieure'.)[475] Any critique that laments the reduction of knowledge, and especially modern scientific knowledge and the self to one plane of being, recalls Heidegger.

*The 'Ontological' Critique of Science: Convergences with Heidegger*

Heidegger was influenced by phenomenology's fundamental idea that philosophy should be an account of consciousness and experience, from which modern science had become abstracted. *Being and Time* is even dedicated personally to Husserl. However, Heidegger criticised Husserl's phenomenology for its intentionality, which failed to understand, as did modern science, the nature of being in the world. As phenomenology's slogan 'to the things themselves' suggests, the Husserlian phenomenologist was locked into an analysis which did not see consciousness independently from any object, but always in relation to some experience or state. Neither science nor phenomenology stopped to examine the deeper nature of being. Particularly in so far as science is concerned, Heidegger referred to this abstraction as ontic.[476] This means operating on a flat plane of facticity, as opposed to a deeper, often concealed, ontological plane of phenomenal existence, i.e. being.

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473 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 86.
474 Ibid., p. 144.
475 Ibid., p. 186.
476 Heidegger described 'ontical inquiry [a]s concerned primarily with entities and the facts about them'. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell's, [1927] 2001), p. 30.

Heidegger's remedy for this is ontological. *Being and Time* is an ontological critique of phenomenology and the ontic sciences:

> The question of Being aims therefore at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine beings as beings of such and such a type but also for the possibility of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundations. *Basically, all ontology, no matter how rich and firmly compacted a system of categories it has at its disposal, remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task*.[477] [The emphasis is Heidegger's].

Heidegger's critique of Husserl's project 'aims to see phenomenological experience not as a scientific method, but as a fundamental possibility of human life'.[478] This involves moving from the 'ontic' truth of science, which knows beings as 'occurrent' entities, towards the ontological truth of Being. The ontic sciences are not without merit in Heidegger's view. They do tell us about the physical laws that govern matter, but they tell us what we set out to test, and as such they are sealed off from the world as it really is:

> Modern physics is not experimental physics because it applies apparatus to the questioning of nature. Rather the reverse is true. Because physics, indeed already as pure theory, sets nature up to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance, it therefore orders its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way.[479]

Because they are set up in this way, the ontic sciences will only proceed if clear quantified data is returned. Because experience does not usually provide such data, science increasingly takes refuge in theory. As John McCumber has pointed out, citing Heidegger, 'Physics has pursued measurement so far beyond the bounds of experience that "its realm of representation remains inscrutable and incapable of being visualized."'[480]

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[477] Ibid., p. 31.
[478] *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, ed. Bret W. Davis (Durham: Acumen, 2010), p. 36.
[479] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Garland, 1977), p. 21.
[480] J. McCumber, *Time and Philosophy: A History of Continental Thought* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), p. 194.

Weil made this point in a number of her essays, noting that from the time of Greeks to the pre-quantum mechanic age of classical science, all phenomena could be explained in terms of representation: 'La science classique n'est qu'un effort pour concevoir toutes les choses dans la nature comme des systèmes de leviers, ainsi qu'Archimède avait fait pour l'eau.'[481]

A science such as quantum physics which has no visual schema, even a hypothetical one which could be visualised in accordance with common sense, is problematic in terms of its truth: 'une explication scientifique qui n'est aucunement représentable est vide de signification.'[482] Weil is not arguing here in 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta' that classical science, which is the science of the Scientific Revolution until the discovery of quantum theory (or 'quanta' as it was known at the time), was more accurate than modern science. She recognised this as beyond her expertise. However, she is suggesting that classical science had a representation of truth, which was not only intuitive and accessible, but which also helped scientists to guide and verify their research:

> Les savants de la période classique avaient une représentation de la vérité scientifique certes fort défectueuse, mais ils en avaient une; et ceux d'aujourd'hui n'ont dans l'esprit aucune chose, fût-elle vague, lointaine, arbitraire, impossible, vers laquelle ils puissent se tourner la nommant vérité. À plus forte raison n'ont-ils pas l'image d'un chemin qui y conduirait et auquel ils compareraient, pour la contrôler, chaque démarche de leur pensée.[483]

This lack of representation of truth in science inhibits its progress, because experimentation becomes an enclosed and isolated exercise, isolated from a larger worldview that could be used to verify and correct it.

This echoed the point made by Heidegger that modern physics orders its experiments only to confirm a conclusion already predetermined by theory in advance of the experiment. As a

481 Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 137.
482 Ibid., p. 189.
483 Ibid., p. 206.

result, all that is revealed is what the experiment was set up to reveal. For Weil, what this neglected was the world itself, at the cost of infinite error:

> Un physicien néglige toute la différence entre une chose qui se produit sous ses yeux et un système parfaitement clos, parfaitement défini qu'il conçoit dans son esprit […]; et cette différence, c'est le monde même, le monde qui se presse autour de chaque morceau de matière, s'infiltre à l'intérieur, met une variété infinie entre deux points si rapprochés soient-ils; le monde qui empêche absolument qu'il y ait aucun système clos. On néglige le monde, parce qu'il le faut, et, ne pouvant appliquer la mathématique aux choses à un prix moindre, on l'applique au prix d'une erreur infinie.[484]

For Weil it was the world in all its contingency and chaos which science artificially neglected. She and Heidegger shared a critique of science founded on its inability intuitively to represent the phenomenon or object under scrutiny and its failure to escape artificially closed systems of enquiry. However, Heidegger's more fundamental critique relates to science's estrangement from Being.

The closest Heidegger gets to a definition of Being is to assert that it is the being of entities: 'That which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood, […] the Being of entities "is" not itself an entity.'[485] Being is the being (*Sein*) of some entity or being (*Seindes*).[486] Where the entity has a mode of Being that asks questions about Being, i.e. where the enquiry is fundamentally ontological, Heidegger calls this *Dasein*: 'This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term "*Dasein*".[487] In other words, *Dasein* is the being for whom Being is important.

The notion of *Dasein*, with which Weil was familiar and described as a 'truth' in existentialism, does not contemplate the Being of beings from outside of being itself.[488] This would be an ontic perspective, such as that found in modern science, which subordinates the

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484 Ibid., p. 161.
485 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 25-26.
486 Ibid., p. 29.
487 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh (NY: State University of New York Press, [1927] 1996), p. 10.
488 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 294.

world to calculation and abstraction and does not engage with the Being of entities. Unlike the ontic sciences, *Dasein* corresponds to a being always already immersed in being. *Dasein* is constituted by 'Being-in-the-world',[489] that is *Dasein*'s 'basic state'.[490]

In an approach which carries an echo of Weil's example of science as a (card or dice) game that eliminates all intrusions of the everyday world into the game and compensates for any 'accidents' with new cards or repaired dice, Heidegger emphasises the ontological primacy of the 'everydayness' of the world. Being-in-the-world as a state of *Dasein* can bring an ontologically richer understanding of the world into view, not as a closed ontic system but as open everydayness:

> A glance at previous ontology shows that if one fails to see Being-in-the-world as a state of *Dasein*, the phenomenon of worldhood likewise gets passed over. […] Our method has already been assigned. The theme of our analytic is to be Being-in-the-world, and accordingly the very world itself; and these are to be considered within the horizon of average everydayness - the kind of Being which is closest to *Dasein*. We must make a study of everyday Being-in-the-world; with the phenomenal support which this gives us, something like the world must come into view.[491]

This will be much more than the totality of the entities in the world:

> Houses, trees, people, mountains, stars. We can depict the way such entities 'look', and we can give an account of occurrences in them and with them. This, however, is obviously a pre-phenomenological 'business'. […] It is ontical.[492]

To attain ontological truth on top of ontic truth the scientist must begin by engaging *Dasein*, to understand how beings are revealed in their presence, how they occur in their everydayness. He calls this process *alētheuein* (unconcealment). Here we see the profound influence of the metaphorical and structured conception of knowledge within hierarchies, which also influenced Weil. In Plato's Cave metaphor, the simile of the sun quite literally reveals the truth of physical

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489 Heidegger describes Being-in-the-world as 'the basic constitution of *Dasein*'. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 168.
490 Ibid., p. 169.
491 Ibid., pp. 93-94.
492 Ibid., 91.

things, and the corresponding Intelligence (*noēsis*) in the divided line metaphor deals only with Forms (things as they really are) in an upward movement towards a first principle, which Weil cites in Plato's Greek as ἀνυπόθετος (absolute).[493] Weil criticised the ontic limitations of science as a failure in terms of representations. From a truly Platonic perspective she understood the truth of science to be found in science as imagery. This imagery must resonate with the self and it must do so on several planes:

> Lumière - ombre, bien - mal. Images, dans le monde, de la corrélation des contraires. Si on se représente des particules, la lumière et l'ombre ne sont plus des contraires. […] Et cela aussi est une image; image d'un plan - et même de deux - d'où l'opposition des contraires disparaît. L'univers vu par la science fait partie de l'imagerie du monde, du système d'images.[494]

This account of science suggests, as did Heidegger, that science should aspire to a process of unconcealment. Weil stated this explicitly in an article on quantum mechanics, 'Réflexions à propos des quanta', in which she suggested the contradictory results achieved in quantum science and expressed through algebra fail epistemologically, because they do not embrace multiple planes of truth:

> Il en résulte une forte apparence de profondeur; car les profondes méditations philosophiques ou mystiques comportent elles aussi des contradictions, des étrangetés et une difficulté insurmontable dans l'expression verbale. […] Si une pensée profonde est inexprimable, c'est parce qu'elle embrasse à la fois plusieurs rapports verticalement superposés et que le langage commun reflète mal les différences de niveau; mais l'algèbre y est moins propre encore, elle met tout sur le même plan.[495]

This leads Weil to a notion central to her philosophy of science: 'lecture'. This is the process by which the subject, whether or not he or she is engaged in scientific study, must 'read' the multi-dimensionality of the world. This reading can never be outside the state of our being in the world,

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[493] Heidegger was a close reader of Plato - one of his earliest works *Plato's Sophist* is a line by line analysis of Plato. However, he repeatedly found the different kinds of 'unconcealing' in Plato to be confused and he preferred the 'complete clarity' of Aristotle. Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Plato and Heidegger: A Question of Dialogue* (University Park: PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), p. 10.

[494] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, pp. 66-67.

[495] Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 195.

we are always already immersed in our temporal and qualitative experience of the world, which is 'ours':

> Etude du monde. Toujours analogies avec l'homme. Comment autrement? N'est-ce pas notre monde? Quelle puérilité de croire qu'on réussit à éliminer le temps et les qualités. L'homme ne revient-il pas, dans le critérium de la simplicité des formes algébriques? […] *Lire dans le monde les nécessités auxquelles l'homme est soumis*. On le peut; l'homme n'est-il pas l'âme du monde? […] La science doit être une participation au monde et non un voile.[496]

This *Cahiers* entry of 1941 expressed a distinctly Heideggerian perspective on science. The study of the world is only possible from within, from a perspective that dissolves the subject-object relationship in favour of an approach that sees the world as part of our being. We are reflected in the world. Its phenomena are analogies of our existence, like an extension of ourselves which we inhabit as a soul inhabits a body. Algebra cannot hope to express the abstract truth it aspires to, because the world cannot be abstracted from the souls which inhabit it. If one were to apply a Heideggerian vocabulary to this passage, it would reflect that the 'being-in-the-world' of *Dasein* here dissolves the subject-object perspective of the ontic and science becomes an ontological participation in the world. True science is an unconcealment, or here in Weil's terminology an unveiling.

For Weil, this process is achieved by analogical 'lecture', which offers a solution to the partial sightedness of what Heidegger would call ontic understanding. This convergence must have struck, and perhaps influenced Weil herself, as she noted in the sixth of her *Cahiers*: 'Parenté entre ma notion de *lecture* et le "*Dasein*" des existentialistes'.[497]

Weil's *lecture* was an idealised interpretative relationship to texts but also to events, where the 'reader' opened him- or herself to the world, but without the distorting lens of selfhood or ideology: 'ne jugez pas, i.e., ne lisez pas'.[498] As Marie Cabaud Meaney has pointed out, 'focussing all one's attention on something one does not understand, to wait like servants

496 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 356.
497 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 288.
498 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 292.

for their master in the Gospel, in a position of *attente*, is Weil's ideal in the intellectual as well as in the moral realm'.[499] Scholars, such as Meaney and Chenavier, have compellingly demonstrated the relevance of Weil's exegesis of *attention* and *lecture* across her thought, from religious texts to literary analysis.[500] However, these notions have never been looked at in the context of Weil's interest in the philosophy of science, and in particular in the critique of abstracted modern scientific enquiry to be found amongst phenomenologists such as Husserl and existentialists such as Heidegger, even though Weil herself drew parallels between these approaches and her own.

The concept of 'lecture' was for Weil part of a wider endeavour to put analogical ways of thinking, which had prevailed prior to the Scientific Revolution, back at the heart of scientific thinking. The chapter to follow, '"Fondement d'une science nouvelle": Analogy, Energy and Intuition', will explore how Weil used ideas like 'lecture' to define the parameters of a new science. This led her to many of the ideas for a reformed and rooted society, which she set out in *L'Enracinement*.

[499] Marie Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretation of Ancient Greek Texts* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 103.
[500] See Ibid. As well as Chenavier, *Simone Weil: L'attention au réel.*

# Chapter Five

## *'Fondement d'une Science Nouvelle': Analogy, Energy and Intuition*

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The previous chapter opened with Weil's diagnosis of a profound crisis in science. According to Weil, through its narrow and abstracted perspectives, modern science estranged people from truth, beauty and being. This process, as Weil remarked, echoed the rise of sophistry, which idolised the fallacy of rhetoric over the harmony of geometry in the fifth century BC. However, Weil did not believe that the situation was hopeless:

> Si notre époque est celle d'une crise de la science comparable à celle du Ve siècle, il en résulte un devoir évident: refaire un effort de pensée analogue à celui d'Eudoxe.[501]

Weil's solutions for the foundation of a new science were threefold.[502]

Firstly, her solutions were *methodological*. In this respect, her interest in the analogical method was key. It was an interest shared by a number of the historically-oriented French epistemologists working in the Sorbonne, in particular in Abel Rey (1873-1940) and Gaston Bachelard's 'Institut d'histoire des sciences et techniques'. As this chapter will explore, Weil's approach to analogy was particularly in tune with the work of the historical epistemologist, Hélène Metzger (1889 - 1944), whose career was tragically cut short at Auschwitz.

Secondly, her solutions were *substantive*. She found in the idea of energy transformation, adapted from thermodynamics, a principle that could unlock deeper truths about the nature of the self and the external world. These ideas help to shed light on the nature of modern alienation as conceptualised by Weil. They also bring her into dialogue with other thinkers who, in different ways, sought to reform scientific perspectives in the subjective realm, from Georges Bataille's theory of energetic excess in *La Part maudite* to Sigmund Freud's theory of sublimation.

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501 Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 120.
502 The expression 'fondement d'une science nouvelle' is the title of an unpublished fragment in ibid., p. 275.

Thirdly, and finally, her solutions were *structural* and *social*. Towards the end of her life, around the time she drafted *L'Enracinement,* Weil sketched a vision for a utopian rural community, in which labour and social organisation worked together to promote a holistic fusion of scientific knowledge, lived experience and divine contemplation.

Together, these disparate and sometimes eccentric reflections form a response to the scientific crisis at the heart of modernity and constitute a coherent intellectual if not always politically practical project. Moreover, despite their esotericism, when read in the broader context of other thinkers that were working against the prevalent scientific model, they were in a number of respects characteristic of the period.

*'Ma solution si j'avais pu: l'analogie'*

The first key pillar of Weil's foundation of a new science was the concept of analogy. Weil regarded analogy and analogous ways of thinking as vital in breaking free from the abstraction which prevailed in modern science. She was committed to reconciling scientific discourses with more intuitive ways of thinking and communicating. As Weil emphasised in 'La Science et nous', this was not a question of abandoning science and scientific methods, but of changing the way scientific and technical progress was expressed:

> Toute étude scientifique des phénomènes de la nature, si abstraite soit-elle, est menée de manière à aboutir, en fin de compte, à une collection de recettes techniques, au lieu que les sages, les grands artistes, les saints, ne disposent jamais de recettes, non seulement à l'usage d'autrui, mais même à leur propre usage, quoiqu'ils aient chacun une méthode pour donner l'existence au bien auquel ils aspirent. Les résultats des efforts accomplis pour penser l'univers, le corps humain, [et] la condition humaine […] ne peuvent peut-être pas s'exprimer dans un autre langage que celui des mythes, de la poésie, des images.[503]

By the language of myth and poetry and the use of imagery, Weil principally meant a freer use of metaphor and analogy to make thinkers more creative, to make public awareness of science more

[503] Ibid., p. 135.

intuitive and accessible and to anchor abstract science, especially algebra, in the concrete world. She noted in her *Cahiers* some methodological indications to guide her own writing:

> Liste des *combinaisons*
> *équivalences - transformations - correspondances - analogies*
> Conciliation de l'intuition immédiate et du raisonnement = *lire* une chose dans une autre. […]
> Méthode universelle de 'lecture'?[504]

This passage serves as an example as well as an instruction to her readers. This list of combinations, in the context of a call precisely for further lists of combinations, whether transformations, correspondences or equivalences, aims itself to demonstrate the capacity for analogous thinking to unlock meaning and elevate understanding above what is immediately at hand.

Weil gave a fuller explanation of her view of analogy in a letter written in 1935 to one of her mentors, the philosopher Alain (1868-1951). She argued that analogy is more adapted than algebra to the structure of the human mind, because analogical thought reasons both in terms of the concrete particular and the universal:

> Seule l'analogie fournit la possibilité de penser d'une manière à la fois absolument pure et absolument concrète. On ne pense que des choses particulières; on ne raisonne que sur l'universel.[505]

Modern science attempts unsuccessfully to resolve this tension between the particular and the general:

> La science moderne a perdu son âme en voulant résoudre cette contradiction par l'artifice qui consiste à ne plus raisonner que sur des signes conventionnels, qui sont des objets particuliers en tant que marques noires sur du papier blanc, et sont universels par leur définition.[506]

In the place of modern algebraic science, Weil proposed putting analogy at the heart of scientific study:

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504 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 80.
505 Weil, *Sur la Science*, pp. 111-112.
506 Ibid., p. 112.

> L'autre solution [que l'algèbre] serait l'analogie. J'entrevois ainsi une nouvelle manière de concevoir la mathématique, […] comme consistant purement et simplement en des combinaisons de signes; mais sa valeur théorique et sa valeur pratique, qui ne seraient plus distinctes, résiderait dans des analogies, qu'il faudrait arriver à concevoir clairement et distinctement, entre ces combinaisons et les problèmes concrets auxquels on les applique dans le cours de la lutte livrée par l'homme à l'univers. Les signes seraient alors rabattus à leur rang de simples instruments.[507]

What Weil favoured was the transformation of mathematical signs from empty abstractions to substantive analogies. These would correspond to both the reality of lived experience and the subjectivity of human creative impulses:

> La véritable destination [des signes] apparaît, à savoir: servir non l'entendement, mais l'imagination; et le travail scientifique apparaîtrait comme étant en somme un travail d'artiste, consistant à assouplir l'imagination.[508]

However, when Weil called for a place for the imaginative realm, this did not constitute a rejection of scientific experimentation, nor was she advocating an approach that dismissed empirical findings in favour of more creative pseudo-scientific branches of knowledge.

She used the example of light to illustrate what a scientific adoption of analogy could entail:

> J'ai rêvé parfois d'un manuel de physique […] où l'interprétation des phénomènes naturels serait exclusivement présentée sous l'aspect d'analogies successives […]. Ainsi, pour la lumière, on commencerait par la liste de tous les cas où la lumière se comporte comme quelque chose d'analogue à un mouvement, pour passer ensuite à l'analogie avec un mouvement rectiligne, à l'analogie avec les ondes.[509]

This process would continue *ad infinitum*, yielding a scientific corpus which acknowledged and integrated previously held views, which left a space for intuitive imagery, and which aroused the imagination and appealed to the senses.

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507 Ibid.
508 Ibid.
509 Ibid., p. 114.

This approach led Weil to an interest in what Bachelard would refer to as 'lapsed' sciences - those retrospectively judged to be unfounded empirically and rationally, such as astrology and alchemy. However, these often carried value for Weil, because they put analogy at their heart:

> L'univers entier n'est qu'une grande métaphore. L'astrologie, etc., constituent des reflets dégradés de cette connaissance de l'univers comme métaphore, peut-être des tentatives […] d'en trouver des preuves matérielles. De même l'alchimie.[510]

As well as rescuing lapsed sciences from a myopic modern narrative on progress, Weil also believed that a renewed respect for analogy could inspire better understanding of areas traditionally regarded then, though not necessarily now, as non-scientific, such as the emotions:

> Il y aurait à construire à côté de cette physique [scientifique], et par analogie avec elle, mais sur un plan bien distinct, l'étude des phénomènes qui ne sont qu'objets de contemplation.[511]

With this goal in mind, Weil used analogy to illuminate intuitive parallels between physical phenomena, and objects like aesthetic beauty or morality. She did this by linking analogies of human emotional experience (e.g. baseness) with scientific concepts (e.g. gravity):

> Analogie fondamentale entre le monde et la pensée et le rapport du haut et du bas dépendant de la pesanteur. […] Tout ce qui suggère une montée suggère une augmentation de valeur. […] La vue des oiseaux, émouvante, mais pourquoi? […] Analogie du monde et des valeurs par l'intermédiaire de la pesanteur; elle rend la hiérarchie des valeurs sensible. Si la hiérarchie des valeurs n'était pas sensible par analogie, nous ne la penserions pas. […] Le monde est nécessairement tel que nous puissions penser tout ce qu'il y a de plus pur par analogie.[512]

The power of analogy for her lay not just in its capacity to bridge the gap between the particular and the universal, and the rational and the intuitive, but also to express the inexpressible:

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510 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 126.
511 Weil, *Sur la Science*, p. 113.
512 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, pp. 352-354.

> Analogie inexprimable entre choses exprimables. Analogie entre analogies inexprimables, et ainsi de suite. Analogie entre toutes les analogies possibles. À tout infini correspond une unité. Correspondance inexprimable entre l'analogie et l'unité - dialectique platonicienne.[513]

In putting analogy at the heart of her thought, Weil was, naturally, influenced by Plato. Allegory and analogy were the cornerstones of Plato's philosophy. His allegories of the Sun, the Cave, the Divided Line, and the Chariot are only the most famous of his analogies.[514] In the *Timaeus* (c. 360 BC) Plato remarked that 'of all bonds, the most beautiful is analogy […] Man and God, Earth and Heaven, all realities imitate one another. All by the self-same relation, are linked together.'[515] Weil had read Plato since childhood,[516] and had studied his philosophy in depth under Alain at the Lycée Henri IV from 1925 to 1926.[517] Plato remained a powerful influence to the last, and she is regarded by two of the foremost scholars of her theological thought as a 'Christian Platonist'.[518]

However, the primacy of 'analogie' goes beyond a Platonist influence, to resonate with approaches that were much more contemporary to her.

*A Return to Intuition: Analogy in French Epistemology*

The focus of her work on the role of analogy in science also resonates with a number of French philosophers and historians of science, working largely from a historical perspective. In different ways and with different philosophical agendas, they shared her interest in the importance of intuitive approaches to science. These thinkers, who formed a small, but influential intellectual community, broadly fell into three inter-related groups.

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513 Ibid., p. 348.
514 For the Cave, the Divided Line and the Sun analogies see Plato, *The Republic*, pp. 233-248. For the Chariot analogy of the soul see Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, 12 ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 69-71. The analogy of the Cave and the Sun represent our condition in the world in an allegorical cave as removed from the Good (represented by the Sun). The allegory of the divided line distinguishes the visible from the Ideal realm, while the Chariot, in the *Phaedrus*, presents the soul as a charioteer, drawn by two horses, one good and one bad.
515 Cited in James F. Anderson, 'Analogy in Plato,' *The Review of Metaphysics* 4, no. 1 (1950), p. 111.
516 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 33.
517 Ibid., p. 56-58.
518 E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (eds.), *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2004).

These were Henri Berr's 'Centre international de synthèse' (founded in 1925 and moved shortly after to the Ecole Normale Supérieure); Abel Rey's 'Institut d'histoire des sciences et techniques' (founded in 1932); and thirdly a diffuse group of thinkers all based at the Sorbonne: Léon Brunschvicg, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and subsequently Gaston Bachelard. These groups were Paris-based, porous and overlapping. For example Bachelard took up Abel Rey's Chair at the Sorbonne in 1940, as well as the Directorship of the 'Institut d'histoire des sciences et techniques', which he in turn passed to Georges Canguilhem in 1955. Although these thinkers were all broadly interested in charting the origins of modern science in prescientific forms of thinking, they did not represent a cohesive school of thought.[519]

Abel Rey's Institute was devoted to a fusion of history and philosophy that would approach the philosophical study of the mind through a 'total history' of science. The watchword of the Institute was 'the philosopher is the historian of contemporary scientific thought'.[520] This history spanned scientific and cultural production and the world-views, or 'mentalities', which conceived and executed them, from antiquity to the present day. The idea was that by charting constants, contingencies and revolutions in this history of enquiry and invention, deeper truths about the nature of the mind and the possibility for knowledge in the world would be revealed. Berr's 'Centre International de Synthèse' worked closely with Rey's Institue, and broadly shared its approach, although the former was more implicated in extending these ideas to the social sciences through its co-director, Lucien Febvre, who would go on to found the *Annales* school of history. The 'Centre International de Synthèse' had a 'Section d'histoire des sciences' run by Hélène Metzger and where Alendre Koyré regularly presented his work.

Lastly, the Sorbonne also hosted a number of philosophers addressing these issues. One with whom Weil was familiar was Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.[521] Based at the Sorbonne, Lévy-Bruhl

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519 For a detailed account of these institutions and thinkers see Cristina Chimisso, *Writing The History of the Mind: Philosophy and Science in France, 1900 to 1960s* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008).
520 Cited in ibid., p. 95.
521 Weil, *Leçons de philosophie*, pp. 215-216.

worked in anthropology on the fringes of these groups, contributing an influential theory of 'primitive mentality' that traced the continuity of pre-logical and mystical mentalities into modern life and modern science. Brunschvicg drew on Levy-Bruhl's ideas about 'mentality' to define an influential historical epistemology, which used history as a 'laboratory' for the philosopher to study the mind *a posteriori*.[522] Other leading thinkers such as Gaston Bachelard, who was the doctoral student of Brunschvicg and Rey; and Alexandre Koyré, based at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, who Weil knew, were also key figures, although they worked largely in opposition to the idea of a 'total history'.[523] For Koyré, this was because he rejected any hypothesis resembling a secular vision of modernity as progress. He was more interested in understanding certain microcosmic turning points, like the Scientific Revolution, than he was in the long sweep of scientific history. For Bachelard, this was because the key lay not in the study of history, but in the psychoanalytical predispositions for intuitive modes of thinking that have influenced progress and ruptures in the evolution of science.

Like Weil, Bachelard moved on from purely epistemological perspectives to develop an interest in the intuitive sources and expressions of knowledge. He carried his very different but related analysis forward in a series of books on the elements (*La Psychanalyse du feu* [1938]; *L'Eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* [1941]; *L'Air et les Songes: Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* [1943] and *La Terre et les Rêveries du repos* [1946]). Bachelard was interested in how and why imaginative and analogical ideas about scientifically-explicable phenomena persist, even in the face of objective data, including in the minds of scientists.

> Les conditions anciennes de la rêverie ne sont pas éliminées par la formation scientifique contemporaine. […] Nous consacrerons une partie de nos efforts à montrer que la rêverie reprend sans cesse les thèmes primitifs, travaille sans cesse comme une âme primitive, en dépit des succès de la pensée élaborée, contre l'instruction même des expériences scientifiques. […] Ce qui nous semble intéressant c'est […] l'alchimiste sous l'ingénieur.[524]

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522 Chimisso, *Writing The History of the Mind*, p. 73.
523 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil,* p. 628.
524 Gaston Bachelard, *La Psychanalyse du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, [1949] 1986), pp. 13-14.

Bachelard, like Weil, sought to chart the origins of rational conceptualisations in intuitive *a prioris*:

> On ne peut étudier que ce qu'on a d'abord rêvé: la science se forme plutôt sur une rêverie que sur une expérience et il faut bien des expériences pour effacer les brumes du songe.[525]

Bachelard and Weil would certainly agree that these subjective perspectives tell us much about human nature. However, Bachelard's goal was ultimately to chart these intuitive origins, using psychoanalysis to explore our attraction to certain ideas and our resistance to others, in order to overcome them. Weil interest lay in integrating these subjective perspectives into the language and culture of science, believing them to reveal fundamental truths about the world. This was not a common view within the prevalent philosophical and historical perspectives on science just outlined. However one exception was the lecturer and librarian of the 'Institut d'histoire des sciences et techniques', Hélène Metzger, who like Weil, argued that science must be a fusion of intuitive (including analogical) and rational practices.

*Analogy as Historical Epistemology: A Comparison with Hélène Metzger*

Metzger was a philosopher and historian of chemistry, the author of nine books, and closely involved with Rey's Institute. Until her premature and tragic death in Auschwitz, she managed the library, gave classes and was responsible for bringing new thinkers to the group like Alexandre Koyré.[526] She also provided an important link to Levy-Bruhl, who was her uncle. In particular she influenced Bachelard, as well as the American philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, who cites her as an inspiration for his influential theory in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).[527] Like

525 Ibid., p. 50.
526 Chimisso, *Writing The History of the Mind*, p. 7.
527 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, ed. I. Hacking (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 2012), p. xi.

Bachelard, although writing a decade later, Kuhn argued that science advanced not in terms of linear progression, but in abrupt 'paradigm shifts'.[528]

Reading Weil alongside Metzger reveals a shared resistance to positivist and teleological accounts of scientific concepts and a shared commitment to acknowledging the necessary integration of intuitive, imaginative capacities into scientific knowledge. This comparison can help to bring out more clearly how Weil's understanding of 'analogy' is elucidated by historical epistemology. It can also underscore that, even in the case of esoteric subjects, such as the role of analogy, Weil remained engaged in the intellectual discourses and debates of her time, even if she did not always do so directly or deliberately.

Like Weil, Metzger put analogy at the core of her thought. In *Les Concepts scientifiques* (1926), she identified active analogy ('analogie agissante') as the driving force behind our understanding of the world:[529] 'Enonçons-le tout d'abord tel qu'il s'est présenté spontanément à l'esprit humain, […] le voici dans toute sa force et toute son impression: "les semblables agissent sur les semblables"'.[530]

Metzger shared with Weil a specific interest in Renaissance science, medicine and alchemy. This science relied on analogies between celestial (macrocosmic) and terrestrial (microcosmic) forms. This capacity for analogy was regarded by Metzger as intuitive and innate. She saw analogy as an *a priori* principle of the human mind, which had not evolved or been eliminated from scientific enquiry: 'l'esprit humain est toujours et partout semblable à lui-même dans ses caractères fondamentaux'.[531] In understanding the structures of the mind as inherently stable and continuous, Metzger believed that all scientific theories, ancient and modern, are animated by a desire to act on the world by ordering according to analogical resemblance:

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528 This term has been become a cliché since but was quite unusual when Kuhn first employed it. Ibid., p. xxiii.
529 Hélène Metzger, *Les concepts scientifiques* (Paris: Alcan, 1926), p. 42.
530 Ibid., p. 35.
531 Hélène Metzger, *La Méthode philosophique en histoire des sciences. Textes 1914-1939*, ed. G. Freudenthal (Paris: Fayard, 1987), p. 60.

> Comprises ainsi les doctrines scientifiques des paracelsistes perdent leur caractère mystérieux qui les rend si difficiles à pénétrer pour nos esprits modernes; elles découlent, si l'on ose s'exprimer ainsi, d'une des tendances primordiales de notre esprit. La ressemblance qui permet de classer ensemble plusieurs choses différentes ne resterait jamais à l'état 'simple'; elle veut être simultanément 'ordre' et 'action'.[532]

This tendency to think in terms of resemblance made all scientific knowledge accessible and coherent, whether 'lapsed' or current.

Metzger interpreted an *a priori* mentality such as analogy in terms of 'expansive' and 'reflective' (*réfléchie*) thought. The expansive thought corresponds to imaginative, intuitive, religious and metaphorical tendencies, whereas reflective thought is rational, critical and scientific in the modern sense of the term.

Yet unlike Lévy-Bruhl, who saw modern mentalities as superior to primitive mentalities, Metzger, like Weil, argues that all scientific concepts are a fusion of imaginative 'expansive' thought and critical 'reflective' thought. In Renaissance sciences like alchemy we find active analogy dominated and defined by 'expansive' thought. In modern 'reflective' science we find active analogy expressed in the theory of vaccines, or repressed ('refoulée') in other theories.[533]

This idea that intuitive forms of thinking remained repressed in modern science influenced Bachelard. However, Bachelard ultimately argued that psychoanalysis could help account for and overcome them.

> La pédagogie de l'esprit scientifique gagnerait à expliciter ainsi les séductions qui faussent les inductions. […] Dans tous ces exemples [du feu, de l'eau, de l'air, de la terre, du sel, du vin ou du sang], on trouverait, sous les théories plus ou moins facilement acceptées par les savants ou les philosophes, des convictions souvent bien ingénues. […] II faut que chacun s'apprenne à échapper à la raideur des habitudes d'esprit formées au contact des expériences familières. II faut que chacun détruise plus soigneusement encore que ses phobies, ses 'philies', ses complaisances pour les intuitions premières.[534]

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[532] Metzger, *Les concepts scientifiques*, p. 40.
[533] Cited in Golinski, J.V., 'Hélène Metzger et l'interprétation de la chimie du XVIIe', in G. Freudenthal, *Etudes Sur/Studies on Helene Metzger* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), p. 88.
[534] Bachelard, *La Psychanalyse du feu*, p. 17-18.

For Metzger, like Weil, the intuitive dimensions of scientific thought were integral and could not be dismissed. Metzger saw no discontinuity between lapsed imaginative sciences which put analogy at their heart and modern science, it was merely a question of the balance between expansive and reflective thought: 'Ce que M. Lévy-Bruhl a appelé *prélogique* en étudiant la mentalité […] n'est en somme que la pensée expansive allant de l'avant'.[535]

Reflective thought had not emerged in contrast to expansive analogical thought, but rather because of it. Metzger used the example of Newton, who tradition has it elaborated gravity from an analogy between a falling apple and the stars: '[la pomme eût pu] activer une tendance fondamentale de notre esprit qui cherche à unifier par un lien physique et mental les choses apparemment fort différentes'.[536] In this view, even the most 'reflective' theories have their origins in the creative and spiritual mentality of expansive thought.

This resonates with Weil's view that modern sciences like chemistry and astronomy grew out of alchemy and astrology, and in a number of respects are degradations of the analogical purity of those lapsed sciences:

> N'est-il pas reconnu d'ailleurs que l'astronomie sort de l'astrologie, la chimie de l'alchimie? Mais on interprète cette filiation comme un progrès, alors qu'il y a dégradation de l'attention. L'astrologie et l'alchimie transcendantes sont la contemplation de vérités transcendantes dans des symboles fournis pas les astres et les combinaisons des substances.[537]

Unlike Bachelard, Weil sought to reassert the relevance of intuitive thought, rather than to overcome it, once and for all.

For Weil and for Metzger it was important to acknowledge the intuitive origins of science. The two thinkers accepted that science had evolved and opened up new channels of understanding, but analogical dimensions present in ancient forms of knowledge remained, they

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535 Cited in Metzger, *La Méthode philosophique en histoire des sciences*, p. 69.
536 Freudenthal, *Etudes Sur/Studies on Helene Metzger*, p. 165.
537 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.3, p. 213. In 'La Science et Nous' Weil adds that alchemy can be considered more enlightened than modern chemistry because the virtue of the alchemist is an active ingredient in the process. Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV:1, p. 149.

argued, powerful and legitimate in their ability to express transcendental intuitive truths available only through metaphors and analogies.

Understood in the context of these debates, Weil's insistence on analogy and the primacy of intuitive and imaginative forms of thought seems less idiosyncratic and less marginal. However, Weil, unlike these historically-oriented philosophers of science, was not tracing scientific history to uncover the origins of rational concepts and better understand the *a prioris* of the human mind. Rather, she was working towards a history of science that respected and redeemed lapsed theories, while in the same movement critiquing modern science as abstracted from deeper truths about the universe and being. In its place she pursued a mystical totalising aesthetic that uses analogies characteristic of Platonism and Renaissance science to demonstrate the interconnectedness between the intuitive realm of beauty, virtue and creativity and the material realm of scientific forces and concepts.

The phenomenon that she used to demonstrate this approach was the thermodynamic principle of energy transformation. Like George Bataille, whom this chapter will address shortly, Weil elaborated an unconventional and original totalising hermeneutic framework for science in which the concept of energy played a central role. However, whereas for Bataille, the purpose was anti-scientific, for Weil, the goal was to found a new, mystical and virtuous science for modern times. At no point did Weil indicate that she wanted to replace the empirical sciences with her own brand of esoteric mysticism, which is perhaps why she did not undertake to formalise these primarily draft notebook texts into a coherent and published project. Yet these passages on science do provide valuable insight into her own view of the modern world, and where and how it was failing to meet intellectual, emotional and ethical needs and obligations.

*New Foundations for Science: The Physics and Metaphysics of Energy Transformation*

For Weil, analogy extended the origins and capacity for scientific knowledge to the imaginative and intuitive sphere, but it remained creative rather than directly scientific as a concept. However,

the truly holistic dimension of Weil's metaphysical philosophy of science, which incorporated physical, metaphysical, emotional and social phenomena in one concept was energy, and more specifically the scientific principle or law of energy conversion.

Her *Cahiers* and her mostly unpublished texts on science constitute a fragmented and diffuse but nevertheless consistent attempt to put an energetic principle at the heart of all actions, experiences and phenomena:

> Dionysos, dieu chlorophyllien. La chlorophylle est l'intermédiaire entre l'énergie solaire et nous. […] [Elle] nous permet de manger et de boire l'énergie solaire. Quand nous buvons le vin, nous buvons l'énergie solaire elle-même. […] Non seulement notre faim [et soif], mais tous nos besoins. Nous nous bâtissons des maisons, au défi de la pesanteur, avec l'énergie sous forme de bois. L'énergie solaire descend dans les plantes et les animaux comme vie, mais devient mort avant de satisfaire nos besoins. La Croix est un arbre mort. […] L'idée de la *guna sattva*, force ascendante et lumière, montre que les hindous de l'antiquité avaient une notion très précise de la fonction chlorophyllienne de la lumière. L'homme ne peut produire aucune énergie.[538]

Her project draws jointly on the hierarchical approach of Greek thought and mythology; on the materialism of classical (Enlightenment) science; on the symbolism of Christianity; on the energetic focus of Hinduism and Buddhism and on the notion of entropy at the heart of nineteenth-century thermodynamics. Entropy refers to the energy dissipated, primarily in the form of heat, as it is converted from one form to another, including during mechanical work.

She gives the fullest overview of her theory towards the end of *L'Enracinement*:

> Tout phénomène est une modification dans la distribution de l'énergie, et par suite est déterminé par les lois de l'énergie. Mais il y a plusieurs espèces d'énergie, et elles sont disposées dans un ordre hiérarchique. La force mécanique, pesanteur, ou gravitation au sens de Newton, qui nous fait continuellement sentir sa contrainte, n'est pas l'espèce la plus élevée. La lumière impalpable et sans poids est une énergie qui fait monter malgré la pesanteur les arbres, et les tiges des blés. Nous la mangeons dans le blé et les fruits, et sa présence en nous nous donne la force de nous tenir debout et de travailler.[539]

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538 Weil, *Cahiers* VI:3, pp. 253-254.
539 Weil, *Œuvres*, pp. 1212-1213.

Chapter Three of this thesis explored Weil's vision of the energy cycle in which agricultural production and food consumption functioned as a self-realising communion at the heart of labour. Her *Cahiers* are filled with examples of energy transfers and degradations, of which the following is just one chosen for its relative brevity:

> Mort et décomposition - passage de la vie à matière. Nourriture - passage de matière à la vie. […] Pour qu'un grain de blé devienne matière inerte, il suffit qu'il tombe à terre et pourrisse. Pour qu'il devienne chair humaine, il faut qu'il soit mangé par un homme.[540]

The contrast between gravitational and solar energy can help contextualise the contrasting analogy behind the title *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, or *Gravity and Grace*, chosen by the Catholic philosopher Gustave Thibon as his title for the posthumous selection of Weil's notebooks published shortly after her death. Weil intended energy conversion to apply not just to the physical world but also as a science of the mind, the emotions and the soul. It is in this particular extension of its application that Weil's conception is interesting and original. She added in the final pages of *L'Enracinement*:

> [Pour] faire de l'étude de l'âme une science, […] il faudrait y introduire la notion de limite, et poser en principe que dans la partie terrestre de l'âme tout est fini, limité, susceptible d'épuisement. Enfin il faudrait y introduire la notion d'énergie, en posant que les phénomènes psychiques, comme les phénomènes physiques, sont des modifications dans la répartition et la qualité de l'énergie et sont déterminés par les lois de l'énergétique.[541]

Her account of energy did not reject the findings or approaches of science. Like Heidegger, for whom the ontic was a valid but partial-sighted perspective that had forgotten or repressed the meaning of being, for Weil, science functioned beyond immediate material findings as the

[540] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, pp. 132-133. There are many other examples of such reflections in her *Cahiers*, for example ibid., p. 205. and ibid., p. 222.
[541] Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1213.

reflection of a symbolic mirror of mystical truth: 'la science entière […], sans que nous songions à le remarquer, est un miroir symbolique des vérités surnaturelles.'[542]

In Weil's *Cahiers,* the thermodynamic and gravitational science of energy complements the elaboration of energy in another mirror of symbolic truth, the sacred texts of Hinduism, the *Veda* and the *Upanishads,* which are ubiquitous references from the third *Cahier* to the last. Weil was particularly insistent on the parallel between the three *gunas* (the qualities of *sattva*: creation, purity; *rajas*: preservation, movement; and *tamas*: destruction, darkness) of Hindu *prakrti* (prime energy of which all matter is composed) and the energetics and gravitational focus of modern science:[543]

> Pesanteur en trois dimensions. Trois *guna* - montée - descente - expansion horizontale. On pourrait y faire correspondre, dans l'étude de la matière, la vie, l'entropie, la conservation de l'énergie (l'entropie), (l'inertie). […] DEUX PRINCIPES DE LA SCIENCE ET DEUX SEULEMENT: EQUILIBRES ET GUNA.[544]

Modern scientific theories belonged for Weil within a spiritual and epistemological totalising model, which echoed Plato's analogies of the Intelligence/Intelligible realm and the Opinion/Visible realm (in the Divided Line allegory), as well as the 'real' Sun and the 'artificial' Fire (in the Cave allegory): 'Le feu dans la caverne de Platon, c'est […] l'énergie au sens ou la physique moderne emploie ce mot'.[545] In this understanding the dancing shadows of observable phenomena in physics represent a partial and illusory manifestation of the reality of the fire and the sun outside. To move up the energy hierarchy to contemplate the energy of social, psychological, emotional and spiritual life is to aspire to greater truth. The science of the soul offers new concrete perspectives on the self with the caveat that for the mystical Weil the truth

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542 Ibid.
543 *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 138.
544 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 67, p. 112.
545 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 388.

would always be out of reach: 'Comprendre est toujours un mouvement ascendant; c'est pourquoi la compréhension doit toujours être concrète. (On est jamais sorti de la caverne, on en sort).'[546]

*The Second Law of Thermodynamics: Applications to the Human Condition*

Weil's new energetics of the soul had no aspiration to replace or even to replicate the methodologies of science. Although her approach applied scientific insight to psychological and social life, it contrasted significantly with her near contemporary, Durkheim's, project, which proceeded methodologically as a science of the social and rejected the legitimacy of understanding behaviour metaphysically. Durkheim was clear on this point in the 'Preface' to *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1937):

> Notre règle n'implique donc aucune conception métaphysique, aucune spéculation sur le fond des êtres. Ce qu'elle réclame, c'est que le sociologue se mette dans l'état d'esprit où sont physiciens, chimistes, physiologistes, quand ils s'engagent dans une région, encore inexplorée, de leur domaine scientifique.[547]

Weil, on the other hand adopted an inverse approach: she took the conceptual idea of energy transfer, compensation and degradation from thermodynamics, dispensing entirely with any scientific method and empirical rigour. In this respect, her approach is much closer to that of anti-scientific thinkers such as Georges Bataille, who also took the idea of energetic excess, applying it to philosophical, social and emotional realms, and severing it from its empirical and objective applications.

Weil was above all concerned with the first and second laws of thermodynamics: the first law establishes that the sum total of energy in a closed system is constant and therefore concerns the conservation of energy, proving that energy can be transformed, but not created or destroyed. The second law is related to the unilateral direction of natural processes, i.e. their irreversibility; for example, the processes through which materials rust or burn. The dissipation of energy is

546 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 106; Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 388.
547 Emile Durkheim, *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, 10 ed. (Paris: PUF, 1999), p. xiv.

expressed as entropy. Weil used the term entropy as coined by Clausius to measure the decrease in energy available for work (e.g. because it is lost as heat and noise through friction).[548] Weil took this scientific principle of irreversible energy degradation and applied it to the human condition:

> Entropie. Passage irréversible du bien au mal. Conformité avec la pensée traditionnelle. […] Métaphore de la pesanteur: c'est à cause de l'entropie. Chute, transformation irréversible. Qui s'est abaissé sera élevé. Cela ressemble aux 'compensations' au sens de la thermodynamique'.[549]

It is clear from her texts that Weil hoped to make an original and genuine contribution to knowledge by exploring a mysterious unifying principle governing the human condition and the material world in the form of energy transfer. This was clearly expressed in a passage from her third *Cahier*, heavily marked up by Weil using marks in the margin:

> Le mécanisme par lequel une situation trop dure abaisse est que l'énergie fournie par les sentiments élevés est – généralement – limitée; si la situation exige qu'on aille plus loin que cette limite, il faut avoir recours à des sentiments bas (peur, convoitise, goût du record, des honneurs extérieurs), plus riches en énergie. […] *Infinie fécondité de la notion d'énergie appliquée à la vie humaine: source inexplorée.* Le sentiment. Rapport entre le monde et la pensée: il vient du monde, immédiatement, avec les sensations, comme elles, mais varie en fonction des déplacements de l'énergie de l'être humain. Que cette énergie devienne un moyen d'exploration du monde – un bâton d'aveugle.[550]

According to this view, energy provides a tool, which makes visible the links between the world and human thought and emotion. It acts as a key to unlock previously unavailable and mysterious phenomena to which individuals blindly submit themselves.

Weil was particularly interested in 'supplementary' energy. She defined this as the excess energy absorbed by the individual over and above the baseline level of energy needed to survive, which Weil called 'vegetative energy':

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[548] She is not using it as a synonym of disorder, as the term is applied in statistical theory or in information theory.
[549] Weil, *Cahiers* VI:2, p. 267.
[550] ibid., p. 309. (Italicisation is mine, it serves to emphasise the passage marked out by Weil in the manuscript with two pen strokes.)

> Une partie de notre énergie est au niveau du temps […]. C'est l'énergie supplémentaire, celle qui nourrit le désir, celle qui alimente la volonté. L'énergie végétative qui fait fonctionner les mécanismes chimico-biologiques indispensables à la vie est au-dessous du temps.[551]

Weil identified many conversions of this supplementary energy. She was fascinated by how it could be drawn on psychologically and emotionally by the subject to determine the course of their actions: 'Application à la psychologie de la notion de compensation, AU SENS DE LA DEUXIEME LOI DE LA THERMODYNAMIQUE'.[552] This passage is marked in the manuscript by a lambda (Λ) in the margins which, in Weil's *Cahiers*, designates a law. This addition emphasises the extent to which she believed she was engaged in a 'scientific' examination of human personality.

As esoteric as this theoretical focus on energetic excess and compensation may sound to a modern audience, Weil was not alone in this preoccupation. Her contemporary and acquaintance, Georges Bataille, for example, was working in different but related ways to theorise how the idea of energy excess transformed individual and social life, and substantiated critical views of modernity. In very different ways, Freud was also working to define the parameters of a new science of the soul and mind, including the transformation or 'sublimation' of energy, as the analysis following the discussion of Bataille will explore.

*From Excess Energy to Unproductive Expenditure: Simone Weil and Georges Bataille*

Weil's philosophical applications of energetic excess to a certain extent echoe and anticipate the concerns of Georges Bataille's theory of unproductive expenditure, set out in 'La Nation de dépense' (1933) and *La Part maudite*, written between 1946 and 1949. Weil and Bataille were both deeply individual and unclassifiable thinkers, and in fact knew each other well through Boris Souvarine's *Cercle communiste démocratique*.[553] They both tended to work against the grain of

[551] Weil, *Cahiers*, VI.4, p. 254.
[552] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 233. The capitalisation is Weil's.
[553] Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 306.

established philosophical schools but their shared interest in excess, compensation and expenditure was broadly in tune with a number of prevalent anthropological, scientific and philosophical discourses.

The anthropologist Marcel Mauss had famously argued in his 'Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques' (1923-1924) that primitive societies did not work to derive profit as personal wealth in conventional terms, but as excess in order to be 'spent' on lavish and exuberant public acts of destruction. Known in Native American cultures as *potlach*, these symbolic dissipations of excess wealth ultimately maintained hierarchy by strengthening social ties and stabilising social order.[554] This was an economy of the gift, an economy that did not aspire towards utility and personal and social *enrichissement* but towards the symbolic. This stood in stark contrast to the logic of the modern capitalist economy.

Mauss's intellectual legacy was profound and diverse, as Gerald Moore's *Politics of the Gift* (2011) has shown. Two very different strands of his influence stand out as particularly relevant to Weil's philosophy. The first, to a lesser extent, was the structuralist anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss, who sought to situate the Maussian gift within 'an unconscious process of structurally guaranteed symbolic exchange' through a 'progressive mathematisation' of the social sciences.[555] The second radically different strand is an anti-modern, anti-scientific, aneconomic embracing of excess. Principally put forward by Georges Bataille, this vision does see the exuberance of life-giving energy as excessive and in need of compensation and dissipation, but for Bataille this release could not take place within the narrow quantifiable and abstracted economies of modern societies. It belonged instead to the subjective realm of experience and, in particular, to desire.

Weil's engagement with the first strand was limited. She in fact knew Levi-Strauss, both in Paris, and in New York.[556] She admired his work with Franz Boas to investigate the common

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554 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, [1925] 2002), p. 42.
555 See Gerald Moore, *The Politics of the Gift* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 25.
556 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 164.

meanings and origins between the myths and folklore of otherwise divergent societies. However, like Bataille, she believed that structural concepts like energy excess represented precisely what could not be contained by traditional abstract scientific and mathematical discourses. Her brother, the mathematician André Weil, could hardly agree, and had she lived to see his algebraic annex to Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté,* she would likely have felt that, structural insights on kinship aside, a deeper point about the nature of the inner experiences of love, loss, suffering, revenge, hope and desire had been missed.[557]

It is precisely this point that brings her thought into dialogue with Bataille. Bataille, inspired by the ideas of Mauss, shared with Weil a deep theoretical interest in the idea of supplementary energy and how individuals and society compensate for this excess. Bataille addressed this question in two related works: 'La Notion de dépense', an unconventional work of political economy which appeared in *La Critique sociale* in 1933, and *La Part maudite* (1949), which reworked and expanded many of the ideas present in the first essay, applying them beyond political economy in a more totalising approach.

We can be almost certain that Weil was familiar with 'La Notion de dépense', which appeared in the seventh number of Boris Souvarine's *La Critique sociale,* in January 1933. This is not simply because she was closely involved with the journal and ensured she received every copy,[558] but also because her own *Journal d'usine* makes detailed references to an article by the Austrian socialist Julius Dickmann in the very same number of *La Critique sociale*.[559]

'La Notion de dépense' built on the foundational insights of Mauss. However, unlike Mauss, Bataille was not interested in the imposition of an obligation for reciprocity. On the contrary he emphasises in the idea of a gift, a 'dépense', that goes beyond contractual obligation and quantification, to reveal an intrinsic, exuberant human tendency towards excess:

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557 Claude Levi-Strauss, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Presses Universitaires de France, [1949] 1969).
558 See Weil, *Correspondance familiale* VII.1, p. 135.
559 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 229, p. 597.

> Les hommes assurent leur subsistance ou évitent la souffrance, non parce que ces fonctions engagent par elles mêmes un résultat suffisant, mais pour accéder à la fonction insubordonnée de la dépense libre.[560]

This loss or spending is present whenever society escapes the narrow confines of utility that dictate a rational economy premised on utility:

> L'activité humaine n'est pas entièrement réductible à des processus de production et de conservation et [une partie de] la consommation […] est représentée par les dépenses dites improductives: le luxe, les deuils, les guerres, les cultes, les constructions de monuments somptuaires, les jeux, les spectacles, les arts, l'activité sexuelle perverse (c'est-à-dire détournée de la finalité génitale) […] ces formes improductives constituent un ensemble caractérisé par le fait que, dans chaque cas, l'accent est placé sur la perte qui doit être la plus grande possible pour que l'activité prenne son véritable sens.[561]

For Bataille, modern, particularly bourgeois society had lost touch with the desire, and beyond that the need, to express unquantifiable excess:

> L'atrophie générale des anciens processus somptuaires caractérise l'époque moderne. […] L'humanité consciente […] se reconnaît le droit d'acquérir, de conserver ou de consommer rationnellement mais elle exclut en principe la dépense improductive. […] La haine de la dépense est la raison d'être et la justification de la bourgeoisie.[562]

In 'La Notion de dépense', Bataille largely restricted himself to political economy, even if his examination of unproductive expenditure included many examples from beyond the polis, such as sexuality, human sacrifice and luxury jewellery. However, he did not stop there.

In his later reworking of the idea of unproductive excess, *La Part maudite,* which he described as a 'universal history,'[563] Bataille described a 'Copernican transformation' at work through the example of the overflow of energy from the sun.[564] He represented solar energy as a life-generating principle that gives without receiving, turning received notions upside down:

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560 Georges Bataille, 'La Notion de dépense', *La Critique sociale*, January 1933, p. 15.
561 Ibid., p. 8.
562 Ibid., pp. 8-15.
563 Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite*, Collection Critique (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, [1949] 1967), p.13.
564 Ibid., p. 76.

> Passer des perspectives de l'économie *restreinte* à celles de l'économie *générale* réalise en vérité un changement copernicien: la mise à l'envers de la pensée - et de la morale […] La source et l'essence de notre richesse sont données dans le rayonnement du soleil, qui dispense l'énergie – la richesse – sans contrepartie. Le soleil donne sans jamais recevoir.[565]

Bataille pointed out that energy is used initially in living systems to grow that system, and he argued like Weil that this was well known before thermodynamics, citing the example of agriculture.[566]

However, Bataille's *homo economicus* had lost sight of this energetic economy, and had narrowed his or her view to the restricted economy of productive operations, characteristic of artificially isolated systems:

> La science économique se contente de généraliser la situation isolée, elle borne son objet aux opérations faites en vue d'une fin limitée, celle de l'homme économique; elle ne prend pas en considération un jeu de l'énergie qu'aucune fin particulière ne limite: le jeu de *la matière vivante en générale,* l'énergie est toujours en excès. […] [L'énergie] ne peut s'accumuler sans limitation dans les forces productives; à la fin, comme un fleuve dans la mer, elle doit nous échapper et se perdre pour nous.[567]

True excess, which is possible only once growth is complete, must dissipate to ensure the survival of the system.

Like Weil, who principally applied the insights of supplementary energy to the human condition, for Bataille it was humankind who defined and shaped the world through the unproductive dissipation of excess:

> L'homme est de tous les êtres vivants le plus apte à consumer intensément, luxueusement, l'excédent d'énergie que la pression de la vie propose à des embrasements conformes à l'origine solaire de son mouvement'.[568]

According to this view, life, especially human life, is volatile and dangerous, always poised on the edge of explosion:

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565 Ibid., pp. 76-79.
566 Ibid., p. 79. For Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 313.
567 Bataille, *La Part maudite*, pp. 72-73.
568 Ibid., p. 91.

> La limite de la croissance atteinte, la vie, sans être en chaudière close, entre du moins au ébullition: sans exploser, son extrême exubérance s'écoule en un mouvement toujours à la limite de l'explosion.[569]

Dissipation and compensation are constantly at work, diffusing the subject on the edge of annihilation.

This is reminiscent of Weil's use of energetic excess and dissipation, which like Bataille she applied to both societies and to individuals:

> Equilibre et permanence. Changement, rupture d'équilibre. Sans fin, comme dans le cas du pendule. Dans la matière, la société, les pensées (les sentiments). Le changement serait destruction s'il n'était pas astreint à des limites. Les limites impliquent des phénomènes de compensation. L'étude du devenir est l'étude de cette compensation. […] Ex. conservation de l'énergie […] - augmentation de l'énergie cinétique et diminution de l'énergie potentielle.[570]

For Weil, supplementary or 'voluntary' energy (as she sometimes referred to it) had to be transformed and spent to stabilise the individual, a surplus of supplementary energy brought destruction, whereas its expenditure, even unproductive expenditure, brought the individual closer to the sacred:

> [L'énergie supplémentaire] doit être dépensée totalement avant que l'âme puisse faire un seul pas dans la direction de l'éternité. L'essentiel, c'est qu'il dépense et ne gagne pas. […] Il faut que l'énergie volontaire soit dépensée de manière à ne pas être récupérée, de manière à être épuisée.[571]

Bataille would certainly agree on the core point, if not necessarily on what direction constituted eternity. As he reflected in *La Part maudite*, storing up unspent energy did not just create an explosive situation within collective systems, including communities, but also within individuals, endlessly frustrated by modern society in their need to dissipate energy through unproductive means:

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569 Ibid., p. 81.
570 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, pp. 358-359.
571 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 255.

> En effet l'ébullition que j'envisage, qui anime le globe, est aussi mon ébullition. Ainsi cet objet de ma recherche ne peut-il être distingué du […] sujet à son point d'ébullition.[572]

There is a shared conception here that subjects exist at the meeting point of energetic disequilibria. How excesses are dissipated through energy expenditure, conversion and compensation is determinant for society and for individuals. However, Weil could not agree with Bataille that this should result in a totally free and profligate dissipation, including through a Sadean embracing of the profane and the perverse.

Bataille called for this reversal of conventional morality as a political, revolutionary gesture, because what was sacred for Bataille is what arises from this excess but is excluded by modern 'civilised' society, where only consumption that is productive is admitted. He refers principally to eating (including scatology and other bodily processes), death, art, menstruation, sexuality and perversion:

> L'histoire de la vie sur la terre est principalement l'effet d'une folle exubérance: l'évènement dominant est le développement du luxe […]. Les trois luxes de la nature: la manducation, la mort et la reproduction sexuée.[573]

This is what is repressed by modern, bourgeois society, perceived as the 'accursed share'. Moore summarises this as follows:

> The [*part Maudite* is the] disutilitarian and unhygienic profanity thought simultaneously unpalatable and unnecessary to human economic concerns. […] Reversing the modern (Durkheimian) construal of the sacred as that which is free from the profane, Bataille affirms profanity - shit, death and menstruation, the orgiastic and intemperate, the unscientific - as that which is sacred, belonging to the exuberant general economy of 'the gift of life'.[574]

This Copernican reversal of the sacred and the profane in modern life was intended to free subjects from the repressive grip of the restricted economy, and unleash the energetic excess of

[572] Bataille, *La Part maudite*, p. 58.
[573] Ibid., p. 85.
[574] Moore, *The Politics of the Gift*, p. 58.

luxury in every dimension of life. This was not just an emancipation but an act of self-protection, since if this energy is not dissipated it remains explosive:

> Si nous n'avons pas la force de détruire nous-mêmes l'énergie en surcroit, elle ne peut être utilisée; et, comme un animal intact qu'on ne peut dresser, c'est elle qui nous détruit, c'est nous-mêmes qui faisons les frais de l'explosion inévitable.[575]

Modern subjects, particularly the industrial poor who lack the time and means to spend unproductively, are presented by Bataille as involved in a Nietzschean struggle for non-economic and exuberant expenditure in the face of stultifying modern pressures to conform and consume in order to produce, bringing potentially self-annihilating consequences.

Weil also applied this energetic process in politicised ways, but she was more interested in the moral implications of unspent excess energy as self-destruction:

> Mécanique humaine. Quiconque souffre cherche à communiquer sa souffrance – soit en maltraitant, soit en provoquant la pitié afin de la diminuer, et la diminue vraiment ainsi. Celui qui est tout en bas, que personne ne plaint, qui n'a le pouvoir de maltraiter personne […], sa souffrance reste en lui et l'empoisonne. Cela est impérieux comme la pesanteur.[576]

Whereas Bataille favoured the liberation of excess energy in irrational unproductive expenditure, Weil saw the difficult but attainable goal of breaking this imperious cycle as the key to a higher moral order, with evident Christian undertones: 'La vertu consiste à garder en soi le mal qu'on souffre, à ne pas s'en délivrer en le répandant au-dehors par les actes ou l'imagination.'[577]

For Weil, the energy economy helped to explain the moral importance of restraint and self-control. For Bataille, it illustrated the importance of dissolution, in energetic as in moral terms. This contrast goes to the heart of the irreconcilable difference that Weil herself identified, when contemporaries drew parallels between her thought and Bataille's:

> La révolution est pour lui [Bataille] le triomphe de l'irrationnel, pour moi du rationnel; pour lui, une catastrophe, pour moi une action méthodique […];

[575] Bataille, *La Part maudite*, p. 73.
[576] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, pp. 119-120.
[577] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 249.

> pour lui la libération des instincts... pour moi une moralité supérieure. Quoi de commun?[578]

Weil scholarship has principally sought to echo and substantiate this denial. In the only significant comparison of their thought, Marianne Esposito, who is principally interested in Weil's religious thought, emphasised their fundamental divergence around the existence of God:

> Ce qui les unit est aussi ce qui les sépare. Si, chez Georges Bataille, la passion communautaire requiert une perte – une dépense –, chez Simone Weil la même passion suit un mouvement contraire. Plus précisément, un mouvement qui exige cette perte, non pas pour glisser dans l'illimité, mais pour expérimenter la limite, pour adhérer pleinement à la loi de nécessité.[579]

Bataille himself, on the other hand, was not so resistant to the comparison. Writing after her death in an article of 1949, he identified in Weil a fellow theorist of subjective experience, who worked towards an escape from the modern economy of utility and aspired to impassioned excess: 'C'est elle qui indique clairement que le bien recherché l'est par la passion: ce bien n'est pas l'intérêt bien compris des êtres humains, ni la commodité ni l'avantage de tous.'[580] Bataille regarded Weil herself as a contradictory creature of excess. He painted her as seductive yet asexual, authoritative yet gentle, admirable yet dangerous, courageous but quixotic, wilful but light, rough but brilliant:

> Elle séduisait par une autorité très douce […], c'était certainement un être admirable, asexué, avec quelque chose de néfaste. […] Elle était sans doute très bonne, mais à coup sûr un don Quichotte qui plaisait […] par un courage extrême que l'impossible attirait. […] Je le dis sans vouloir la diminuer, il y avait en elle une *merveilleuse* volonté d'inanité: c'est peut-être le ressort d'une âpreté géniale.[581]

Bataille was sufficiently fascinated by Weil and her thought to render her as the fictional Louise Lazare in his novel *Le Bleu du ciel* (written in 1935 during their acquaintance, but published much later in 1957). It is all the more interesting in the context of Bataille's theory of excess and his

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578 Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 306.
579 Marianne Esposito, 'Une passion en commun. Extase et politique chez Georges Bataille et Simone Weil', *Lignes* 17, no. 2 (2005), p. 185.
580 Bataille, 'La victoire militaire et la banqueroute de la morale qui maudit', p. 536.
581 Ibid., p. 537.

profanation of the sacred through manducatory, scatological and sexual excess to note that Louise Lazare is a creature of contradiction, both sacred and profane.

Lazare is virginal yet dirty, (a 'vierge sale'), she is a naive figure of hope and a harbinger of ill omen ('l'oiseau de malheur').[582] She is both a selfless giver and deeply self-destructive: 'Son avidité de sacrifice, contribuaient à donner l'impression d'un contrat qu'elle aurait accordé à la mort'.[583] She appears as a sacrificial figure, both in the conventional sense and in the Bataillean sense of an embodied, passionate, excessive figure beyond the reach of traditional and bourgeois economies.

It was certainly true that Weil was attracted to sacrificial modes of being, although in an individual rather than a communal sense. She approached the subject of suffering and sacrifice also in terms of energy. She was interested in the supplementary energy of the self, and what use is made of it by the individual, which is why it is also referred to as 'énergie volontaire' in her *Cahiers*.[584] Although she visibly shared the contemporary scientific, anthropological and philosophical interest in energy conversion, her theorisation of the subject was also deeply personal.

*Supplementary and Vegetative Energy: A Framework for the Self, Sexuality and Suffering*

Weil developed an energetic science of the soul in two related broad movements: the first deals with excess 'supplementary' energy and charts patterns and entropic laws of transfer which operate within the human mind and soul to dissipate energy. She looked diagnostically at how behaviour could be understood in terms of compensation and particularly the role imagination plays in this process. She also used energy differences to substantiate moral distinctions between 'elevated' and 'base' motives. Weil was particularly interested in sexuality as a negative

582 Georges Bataille, 'Le Bleu du ciel', in *Œuvres complètes: Œuvres littéraires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 402, p. 399.
583 Ibid., pp. 411-412.
584 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 255.

transformation of supplementary energy. This brings her into dialogue with Freud and psychoanalysis, since psychoanalysis was another line of enquiry seeking to correct perceived 'bad' science with a new form of science that captured the life of the spirit.

The second broad movement of Weil's energetic science of the soul is a specific reflection on the condition of affliction ('malheur') understood in terms either of a degradation of 'vegetative' energy by the soul, usually reserved for biological processes, and/or of an excess that cannot be compensated for by action directed at others. This state of extreme suffering may be Weil's most famous contribution to theology, yet it has often been decontextualised by scholarship from its rightful place in the *Cahiers* as part of a reflection on energy degradation and transfer within the human body and soul.

Beginning with the first movement relating to supplementary energy, Weil elaborated a theory of energy compensation, in which the soul must expand like a gas to fill the emptiness created by an action:

> Comme du gaz, l'âme tend à occuper la totalité de l'espace qui lui est accordé. Un gaz qui se rétracterait et laisserait du vide, ce serait contraire à la loi de l'entropie.[585]

This principle was used by Weil to explain imagination and sin as compensatory processes ('combleurs de vide'):[586]

> L'imagination, fournisseuse ou voleuse d'énergie. D'énergie réelle. On a toujours le besoin de recevoir sous une forme ou sous une autre l'équivalent de ce qu'on dépense. […] Il faut une récompense équivalente. Inévitable comme la pesanteur. […] Le vide (non accepté) produit de la haine, de l'aigreur, de l'amertume, de la rancune. Le mal qu'on désire à ce qu'on hait, et qu'on imagine, rétablit l'équilibre. L'imagination (non contrôlée) est productrice d'équilibre, réparatrice des déséquilibres et des vides.[587]

This compensatory process causes actions that are antisocial, sinful and illusory. It also provides an explanation for how spiritual and social evil could be distinguished from reality so as not to

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585 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 152

586 'Dans n'importe quelle situation, si on arrête l'imagination combleuse, il y a vide.' Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 152.

587 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 285.

taint the world as inherently malicious. The real was in Weil's Greek Platonist metaphysics analogous to the Good.

In this context, Weil's energetics of the soul must also engage itself with how to approach the Good, given the strict necessity of the compensatory and thermodynamic properties of human personality and action. This presented a challenge because the laws of thermodynamics stipulate that energy degrades irreversibly, heat cannot pass from a colder to a hotter material:

> L'énergétique pose que l'énergie se dégrade et ne monte jamais; qu'elle se gaspille et ne s'accroît jamais; que rien ne monte sans qu'autre chose ne soit davantage descendu; et cela s'applique même à la vie végétale et animale.[588]

This seems to present a pessimistic scientific foundation for a descent into ever increasing evil and unreality amongst mankind: '*L'énergie libérée par la disparition d'objets qui constituaient des mobiles tend toujours à aller plus bas.*'[589]

The solution for Weil lay in an understanding of the energetics of the soul whereby self-knowledge and focused contemplation ('attention') could help individuals to move up the energy hierarchy towards the Good:

> Un même effort est plus facilement accompli avec un mobile bas qu'avec un mobile élevé. Par quel mécanisme? C'est que les mobiles bas n'exigent aucune attention, et que par suite la fatigue ne les empêche pas d'être présents à l'esprit. Au contraire la fatigue, en paralysant l'attention, fait disparaître les mobiles élevés. […] Posséder en soi de l'énergie libre susceptible d'épouser le vrai rapport des choses.[590]

This ascendant way of living, which echoes a Platonic aspiration to the Intelligible realm, is therefore energy intensive and requires a life of contemplation and self-knowledge, in which sufficient energy is devoted to elevated causes and use is made of techniques to aspire to a deeper metaphysical truth. This 'attention' which contemplates necessity is a technique from Eastern religion that Weil transposed onto a mystical, stoic-Christian conception of science:

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588 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.3, p. 122.
589 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 247. (Weil's emphasis)
590 Ibid., pp. 249-250.

> L'obéissance est la vertu suprême. Aimer la nécessité. La nécessité et le *dharma* [cosmic law of harmony in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism] ne font qu'un. Le *dharma*, c'est la nécessité aimée. […] Parallélisme entre Arjuna [a protagonist of the *Bhagavad-Gita*] et le Christ.[591]

'Analogy' as a form of 'attention' has a particular role in achieving a transformative energetic movement up the energy hierarchy towards the supreme good and deepest reality. This represents a discontinuous almost supernatural capacity in so far as it overcomes the irreversible principle at the heart of necessity:

> Les sentiments bas (envie, ressentiment...) sont de l'énergie dégradée. Transferts d'énergie ascendants. Les uns par association (du désir d'avoir une bonne note à celui de faire une bonne version), les autres par analogie (exemples ?). Seuls ceux par analogie peuvent faire beaucoup monter, peut-être, car ils font seuls monter par-dessus une discontinuité.[592]

However, the tragedy of running out of supplementary energy in the pursuit of the good and 'defiling' oneself is ever present: "Tragédie de ceux qui, s'étant pourtant portés, par amour du bien, dans une voie où il y a à souffrir, arrivent au bout d'un temps donné à leur limite et s'avilissent.'[593] Energy is finite and unpredictable: 'On ne peut pas […] savoir à un moment donné si un jour, une heure, plus tard, la limite ne sera pas atteinte et l'énergie épuisée. Ne jamais oublier cela.'[594]

So, for Weil necessity dictated that we are always trapped in an 'infernal' energy cycle in which the path of least resistance is a degradation: 'On libère en soi de l'énergie par une violence qui en dégrade davantage. Compensation au sens de la thermodynamique; cercle infernal dont on ne peut être délivré que d'en haut'.[595] Yet, Weil argued that in moments of pure attention akin to sanctity this could be countered, requiring huge reserves of energy and purity. This did not mean that Weil's science of the soul was entirely incompatible with the science of matter – she also believed that such discontinuous leaps were possible in the material world in the form of supernatural events. She noted that purported miraculous phenomena such as yogis levitating or

[591] Ibid., p. 87.
[592] Ibid., p. 247.
[593] Ibid., p. 197.
[594] Ibid., p. 198.
[595] Ibid., p. 249.

Christ's resuscitation of Lazarus could be explained according to the laws that determine physical phenomena: 'Cette action s'est accomplie par l'effet d'un mécanisme parfaitement intelligible à qui saurait en démontrer les rouages'.[596]

It is precisely in the context of this intervention of the 'surnaturel' within the science of the soul and matter that Weil became interested in sexuality as supplementary energy. She jotted in her notebook: 'Energie supplémentaire (extra-vitale) et voyageuse, clef de la vie humaine. On peut, si on veut, la nommer sexuelle'.[597] Weil was interested in the ubiquity of sexual energy, and in the capacity to use this energy in an ascendant movement. Freud's great insight for Weil was that sexuality as libido is a sexual energy that can have a multitude of objects:

> Le désir, c'est essentiellement l'énergie supplémentaire qui se porte sur les objets et les fait aimer. Les perversités montrent que n'importe quel objet […] peut être objet de désir. (C'est ce qu'il y a de vrai dans Freud). […] Ainsi quantité des vieilles demoiselles qui n'ont jamais fait l'amour ont dépensé le désir qui était en elles sur des perroquets, des chiens, des neveux ou des parquets cirés. […] Elles n'ont pas été chastes. Il n'y a pas de chasteté sans détachement.[598]

The idea that sexual energy could be rechanneled to new uses was fairly commonplace. For example, Georges Bataille made a similar point in *La Part maudite,* using the example of domesticated cattle:

> Le moment vient où la croissance ralentie ne consomme plus la totalité d'un excédent accru: il parvient dès lors à la maturité sexuelle. […] Si l'on châtre le mâle, son volume individuel augmente de nouveau pour un temps et l'on tire de lui des sommes de travail considérables.[599]

However, Bataille had no interest in rechanneling excess energy expressed through sexuality and libido, quite the contrary. Bataille called for exuberant energy expenditure through unreproductive sexuality, seeing in it a denial of the modern political, industrial and moral economy of productive

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596 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, p. 439. For yogi levitation: 'Cela n'a rien de miraculeux': Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p.86.
597 Weil, *Cahiers* VI:1, p. 321.
598 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.3, pp. 106-107.
599 Bataille, *La Part maudite*; p. 78.

expenditure. Weil, however, was calling for the re-conversion of sexual energy for the purposes of a transcendent mystical contemplation.

*Supplementary Energy: 'C'est ce qu'il y a de vrai dans Freud'*

These views all drew on Freud's theory of 'sublimation', outlined in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Sublimation for Freud was the transformation of sexual energy into other more socially acceptable activities:

> [Another] result of an abnormal constitutional disposition is made possible by the process of sublimation. This enables excessively strong excitations arising from particular sources of sexuality to find an outlet and use in other fields, so that a not inconsiderable increase in psychical efficiency results from a disposition which in itself is perilous.[600]

Freud in particular identified intellectual and artistic activities as the beneficiaries of this re-channelled libido:

> [Sublimation is] one of the origins of artistic activity; and, according to the completeness or incompleteness of the sublimation, a characterological analysis of a highly gifted individual, and in particular of one with an artistic disposition, may reveal a mixture, in every proportion, of efficiency, perversion and neurosis.[601]

Providing an example in *Leonardo da Vinci: A Study in Psychosexuality* (1916), Freud set out how the artist's illegitimate birth and the subsequent absence of his father and excessive pampering by his mother dictated 'his extraordinary capacity for sublimating the primitive instincts'.[602] Leonardo's 'sexual repression […] caused him to sublimate his libido into the urge to know, and established his sexual inactivity for the whole of his later life'.[603]

In a subsequent study, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud provided more details on how this sublimation might occur, linking it to energy displacement between the *id,* responsible for

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600 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Perseus Books, [1905] 2000), p. 104.
601 Ibid.
602 Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 480.
603 Ibid.

the instinctual drives like sexuality and aggression, and the *ego* responsible for the psychological parts of our personality evident in conscious decision-making:

> There exists in the mind – whether in the ego or in the id – a displaceable energy, which is itself neutral, but is able to join forces […] with an erotic […] impulse. This neutral displaceable energy […] proceeds from the narcissistic reservoir of libido, i.e. it is desexualised Eros.[604]

It is this free-flowing displaceable and neutral energy that lends plasticity to the sexual impulses of the *id*, re-channelling them into intellectual or creative faculties found in the *ego*:

> If this displaceable energy is desexualised libido, it might also be described as sublimated energy. […] If the intellectual processes in the wider sense are to be classed among these displacements, then the energy for the work of thought itself must be supplied from sublimated erotic sources.[605]

Freud went on in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) to describe this process of sublimating instinct into utility as fundamental for the development of civilisation, bringing with it great progress across almost every discipline, but bringing also discontent as a product of this repression.

Weil took up this idea of sublimation, although she did not use the term herself. However, Weil diverged from Freud's clinician's perspective in viewing these extreme instances of repression and sublimation as positive. Freud recognised sublimation as a necessity for social, 'civilised' life, and welcomed the great advances in art, culture and science which it brought. However, on an individual case-by-case basis, he sought to correct it, where it tipped into perversion or neurosis.

In her *Cahiers,* Weil saw sublimation as a detachment from sexuality and a transmutation of its energy into other areas:

> L'énergie contenue dans la semence est une nourriture pour les organes sexuels et leur exercice, mais aussi bien pour d'autres organes et leur exercice. Si d'autres organes mangent cette énergie, la sexualité meurt de faim. On peut transporter la sexualité sur des objets quelconques: collection,

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[604] Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Rivière (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), pp. 61-63.
[605] Ibid., p. 64.

> or, pourvoir, parti, chat, canari, Dieu (ce n'est pas alors le vrai Dieu). Ou on peut tuer la sexualité et opérer une transmutation de l'énergie qui était affectée. Cette opération est le détachement. *Tout attachement est de même nature que la sexualité. En cela Freud a raison (mais seulement en cela).*[606]

Weil thus put Freudian sublimation and the transmutation of sexual energy, either as attachment or as detachment, at the heart of her mystical theology.

Since she acknowledged that all attachment is sexual in origin, she regarded the transformation of supplementary energy into sexual love as vital, even in the contemplative mystical experience. She clearly aspired to total detachment through the sublimation of sexuality, but she did not seem to regard all attachment as corrupted. She argued it was wrong to reproach mystics for loving God sexually, and given her celibacy, she may well have had herself in mind, when she noted in a *Cahiers* entry of 1942:

> Reprocher à des mystiques d'aimer Dieu avec la faculté d'amour sexuel, c'est comme si on reprochait à un peintre de faire des tableaux avec des couleurs qui sont composées de substances matérielles. Nous n'avons pas autre chose de quoi aimer.[607]

This is not to say that the energy did not undergo some kind of elevation or conversion. She drew a distinction between mystical experience which is a genuine contemplation of God, and false mysticism that sublimates sexual energy into an imaginary object. For her this was an unholy and incomplete sublimation, amounting to a form of 'debauchery':

> Il y a une différence essentielle entre le mystique qui tourne violemment vers Dieu la faculté d'amour et de désir dont l'énergie sexuelle constitue le fondement physiologique, et la fausse imitation de mystique, qui, laissant à cette faculté son orientation naturelle et lui donnant un objet imaginaire, imprime à cet objet, comme étiquette, le nom de Dieu. La discrimination entre ces deux opérations, dont la seconde est encore au-dessous de la débauche, est difficile, mais elle est possible.[608]

It is interesting to note Weil's description of the channelling of sexual love towards God as a 'violent turn', since in Freud's theory it is both sexuality and violent aggression that are

606 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 336. (Emphasis is mine)
607 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.3, p. 170.
608 Ibid., pp. 170-171.

sublimated. In fact, Freud seems to suggest that sexual impulses are more easily sublimated than violent ones: 'The erotic instincts appear to be altogether more plastic, more readily diverted and displaced than the destructive instincts.'[609]

For Weil, this sublimation of violent sexual love towards God, when genuine, was not in the least debauched. On this point she reproached Freud for a contradiction at the heart of his thought, which she believed both challenged and reinforced the prejudice that sexuality is inherently vile:

> Le freudisme serait absolument vrai si la pensée n'y était pas orientée d'une telle manière qu'il est absolument faux […]. Le freudisme tout entier est imprégné du préjugé même qu'il se donne pour mission de combattre, à savoir tout ce qui est sexuel est vil.[610]

Weil was committed to rehabilitating sexuality and desire as material reflections of a mysterious and intangible spiritual value:

> Les choses spirituelles ont seules une valeur, mais les choses charnelles ont seules une existence constatable. Par suite la valeur des premières n'est constatable que comme éclairement projeté sur les secondes.[611]

However, this sublimation should not invite the individual to express the sacred in an excess of sexuality and desire (as Bataille might suggest), but in abstinence, because desire can only destroy the object it seeks.[612]

This is also an idea which she perhaps derived, at least in part, from Freud. He also posited in *The Ego and the Id* that as individuals move between the phases of psychosexual development (oral phase, anal phase, phallic phase, latency phase and genital phase), love can all too easily be transformed into hate, and a desire to destroy the object of love:

> We perceive that for purposes of discharge the instinct of destruction is habitually enlisted in the service of Eros. […] We might conjecture that the essence of a regression of libido, *e.g.* from the genital to the sadistic-anal level, would lie in a defusion [sic] of instincts, just as, conversely, the

609 Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 63.
610 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.3, p. 170.
611 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 191.
612 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.3, p. 106.

> advance from an earlier to the definitive genital phase would be conditioned by an accession of erotic components.[613]

What was important for Weil was the state of desire as an analogy for love which remained immaterial. For Weil, the energy should not be diffused in sexual acts, but harnessed to achieve an elevation towards a more transcendent experience: 'Nos désirs sont charnels, sont matière; c'est pourquoi ils sont limités. La direction est illimitée, mais le mouvement aura une fin'.[614] It is unclear whether the end here for Weil was divine transportation, or whether she was acknowledging this effort to be worthy but futile.

Weil was not consistent on this point. On some occasions already cited she seems to advocate the necessity of unconsummated, but distinctly sexual love, to achieve a complete mystical experience. On other occasions she seems to call for a deliberate refusal of all expressions of sexual love:

> Sexualité. Il y a un mécanisme dans notre corps qui, quand il se déclenche, nous fait voir du bien dans les choses d'ici-bas. Il faut le laisser rouiller jusqu'à ce qu'il soit détruit.[615]

However, she seemed, ultimately, writing shortly before her death in 1943, to be pessimistic about the possibility of resisting desire, including presumably sexual desire, or sublimating it into divine contemplation:

> Quoique je sache que les choses d'ici-bas ne méritent pas mon désir, pourtant j'y trouve mon désir attaché, et je n'ai pas d'énergie pour l'en arracher. Les efforts de volonté sont illusoires.[616]

Just as science offers man a symbolic mirror of nature, sexual love as supplementary energy offers a symbolic mirror of desire which is to be transformed in the aspiration to the

613 Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 57.
614 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.3, p. 141.
615 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 219.
616 Ibid.

impersonal, supreme Good: 'La beauté charnelle a été rendue désirable afin qu'on n'y touche pas. Requalification d'énergie.'[617]

For Weil, this requalification of energy points to a meaningful analogy between sexuality and alchemy:

> Analogie entre l'or et la sève végétale. Les alchimistes regardaient la production de l'or comme une sorte de mariage spirituel. Passage de je ne sais quel ouvrage d'alchimie sur la nudité de l'époux et de l'épouse, quand, les préliminaires, fiançailles, et noces, étant terminés, ils en viennent à l'union nuptiale. […] Je crois que la science doit être entièrement faite de telles images. […] La pierre philosophale permettant de remonter l'entropie à rebrousse-poil, a dû - en admettant qu'elle ait existé - contenir de l'énergie requalificatrice. C'est pourquoi il est si souvent question de la puissance de la génération chez les alchimistes.[618]

Although Weil does not seem to have been familiar with the work of the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung, they shared a preoccupation with the collective unconscious (or 'imaginaire universel' in Weil's terminology), as well as a related theorisation of the links between alchemy and sublimation.[619]

Both Weil and Jung sought to break down distinctions between the religious and the scientific, the mystical and the psychoanalytic. In 1939, Jung wrote:

> The conflict between science and religion is in reality a misunderstanding of both. Scientific materialism […] has given another name to the supreme principle of reality and has assumed that this created a new thing and destroyed an old thing. Whether you call the principle of existence 'God,' 'matter,' 'energy,' or anything else you like, you have created nothing; you have merely changed a symbol.[620]

Jung's fascination for symbols, metaphors and analogies led him like Weil to an interest in alchemy. In *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944) Jung described alchemy as a reflection of the psychoanalytic process of individuation, whereby the self develops out of a collective

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617 Weil, *Cahiers* VI:3, p. 444.
618 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 348.
619 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, pp. 48-49.
620 Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, 20 vols., vol. 11, Collected Works (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1958] 1975), p. 477.

unconscious. Alchemy provided a powerful symbol of the transcendent and mystical nature of the self:

> Alchemy seems like a continuation of Christian mysticism carried on in the subterranean darkness of the unconscious. But this unconscious continuation never reached the surface, where the conscious mind could have dealt with it. [The alchemist] would then have had to recognise not only himself as the equivalent of Christ, but Christ as a symbol of the self.[621]

Sublimation was the core of this process of mystical individuation, the nature of which Freud had failed to grasp:

> Sublimation is part of the royal art where the true gold is made. Of this Freud knows nothing, worse still, he barricades all the paths that could lead to true sublimation. This is just about the opposite of what Freud understands by sublimation. It is not a voluntary and forcible channelling of instinct into a spurious field of application, but an alchemical transformation for which fire and *prima materia* are needed. Sublimation is a great mystery. Freud has appropriated this concept and usurped it for the sphere of the will and the bourgeois, rationalistic ethos.[622]

Jung and Weil were engaged in very different enterprises, within different disciplines. His was clinical, hers was personal; his was psychoanalytic, hers refuses categorisation; he sought the self through individuation, she sought to transcend it through detachment. However, what this comparison does show is that even at her most esoteric, Weil was part of a broader turn in the mid-twentieth century away from scientific discourses (like Husserl, like Heidegger, and even like Freud) and towards more mystical understandings of the world (like Bachelard, like Metzger, like Jung and one could add like Wittgenstein, although he lies beyond the scope of this thesis and his parallels with Weil have already been thoroughly documented by Peter Winch in *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*).[623]

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621 Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, 20 vols., vol. 12, Collected Works (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1944] 1980). 355.
622 Carl Gustav Jung, *Letters of C. G. Jung*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015). 171.
623 See Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*.

Sexuality and the emotional life presented many possible outlets for the transformation or requalification of supplementary energy. However, what happens when all supplementary energy has been exhausted? Weil's answer was that a different order of energy begins to be converted. The subject begins to live on 'vegetative' energy:

> L'énergie végétative qui fait fonctionner les mécanismes chimico-biologiques indispensables à la vie est au-dessous du temps. Quand l'autre énergie est épuisée et que celle-là doit être dépensée pour autre chose que pour les fonctions biologiques auxquelles elle est destinée, alors un quart d'heure est comme une durée perpétuelle. C'est alors que le cri: 'Assez!' envahit l'âme, et que l'âme est divisée en deux si tout en elle ne s'associe pas à ce cri. C'est quand la sève même s'écoule et que l'homme encore vivant devient du bois mort.[624]

This occurs in instances of extreme suffering, like the crucifixion of Christ, but also in the worst and most dehumanising labour conditions. This is an unbearable form of living death that Weil referred to as 'malheur'.

'Malheur' is defined in the *Cahiers* as the exhaustion of supplementary energy, forcing the victim to draw on the vegetative energy of their organs. The conditions in which this occurs are presented as an unconscious spiritual choice: 'A ce moment où l'énergie volontaire est épuisée, où l'énergie végétative est à nu, l'âme choisit entre l'enfer ou le paradis. Et elle ne sait pas qu'elle choisit'.[625] For Weil, this is an involuntary choice between the void ('Il n'y a pas d'autre enfer que le néant')[626] and a divine purging that encounters the impersonality of the supreme good. The part of your soul that cries 'Assez!' belongs to a hellish void, the part of your soul that refuses this cry achieves a divine and impersonal detachment: 'la partie de l'âme qui a refusé de crier "Assez!" travers[e] la longueur indéfinie du temps et a passé de l'autre côté du temps, dans l'éternité'.[627] Christ on the Cross offers an example of this, however Weil criticises Christians who desire

[624] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 254.
[625] Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 256.
[626] Ibid., p. 221.
[627] Ibid., p. 254.

martyrdom: 'Les martyres n'ont pas été réduits par le malheur à l'énergie végétative. Le Christ y a été réduit, sans perdre la lumière de la grâce'.[628] 'Malheur' was therefore an essential element of sacrifice, which at its most extreme resulted in a sacramental death:

> Quand les circonstances mettent l'énergie végétative à nu et commencent à la consommer, il faut que cette énergie même s'arrache aux fonctions biologiques qu'elle alimente et se consacre à Dieu. C'est la mort spirituelle qui est aussi une opération corporelle. L'homme se donne à manger aux créatures de Dieu.[629]

This was not exclusively Christian. Weil was particularly interested in Hinduism, and saw the same processes at work: 'L'arbre du monde, le figuier éternel dont il faut couper les racines avec la hache du détachement (Gītā). C'est l'énergie végétative'.[630] Weil was fascinated by the intuitive Eastern understanding of energy cycles: 'Il n'y a dans le monde que nourriture et mangeur; *soma* [an Indian ritual drink of immortality] et *agni* [the Vedic deity, personification of the fire of sacrifice].'[631]

The conceptualisation of 'malheur' in the *Cahiers* was built on a bedrock of energetic significations which are overlooked by scholars focussing on it as a purely spiritual method,[632] or as the condition of extreme alienation to be found in modern factory labour.[633] This is in part due to the neglect of Weil as a philosopher of science and critic of modern science. It is also due to the fact that Weil herself focused much more on the energy dynamic of 'malheur' in her personal *Cahiers* than in her subsequently more well known essay 'L'amour de Dieu et le malheur' (1942).

However, since the latter was in fact written as a letter to her spiritual confidant, Père Perrin, she perhaps felt it was neither appropriate nor propitious to set out her personal theory of spiritual energetics in full, especially given that it incorporated the crucifixion. However, it is clear

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628 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 394.
629 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 257.
630 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 420.
631 Ibid., p. 109.
632 An exception is Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*. Vetö does mention the terminology of 'vegetative' and 'supplementary' energy, although he does not situate it in the wider context of Weil's energetic theories.
633 Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail.*

that as far as Weil's private and unguarded thought was concerned, the energy cycle represented one of the most important pillars of her mystical thought.

Before concluding it should be noted that at no point did Weil advocate that the scientific community re-orient themselves towards a study of mystical energetics. However, she did clearly believe that the structure in which science was being carried out was in need of reform, which could include a greater openness to mystical phenomena. This chapter will close with an examination of how Weil argued this might be achieved, through a utopian vision for a radically reformed scientific community.

*The Scientific Village to the Parabolic Commune: Structural Reforms for a New Science*

Weil's project to elaborate a distinctly new science for the modern age incorporated science both as a body of knowledge and as an institutionalised practice. She was at her most critical when denouncing the incentive structure and goals of modern science in 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta' (1941-1942), one of the few articles Weil published towards the end of her life.

She denounced the isolated 'village' structure of modern science. To understand more fully Weil's critique of science as institutionalised research it is interesting to read this article alongside a rarely cited, and only recently published, passage from *Cahier 17*, in which she outlined a secular monastic order dedicated to communicating scientific knowledge within the communities of a decentralised state.[634] Written between October and November 1942, shortly before leaving New York, the passage is roughly contemporaneous to the publication of 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta' in the *Cahiers du Sud* in December 1942.

Reading these texts together offers a clearer perspective on Weil's structural and institutional criticisms of science and views on how it might be reformed to accommodate a more

[634] The communities discussed by Weil are both rural and small-scale industrial, implying this vision is in line with the decentralised model she puts forward in *L'Enracinement.*

metaphysical approach. This new structure would have to embrace a vision of necessity as a deep but veiled reality (which in Weil's thought is akin to a fusion of phenomenology's Lifeworld with Plato's Intelligible world of Forms), it would have to permit the ontological truth of being beyond the ontic surface of quantification (as the comparison with Heidegger helped to elucidate) and it would have to incorporate Weil's new, holistic science of energy.

As a first step to achieving these aims, Weil considered it necessary for science to enter a period of stasis and reflection. Yet the incentive structure of science effectively prevented this: 'On n'acquiert ni avancement, ni réputation, ni prix Nobel en s'arrêtant. Il faudrait à un savant brillamment doué, pour s'arrêter volontairement, une sorte de sainteté ou d'héroïsme'.[635] This blind momentum of science was driven by its institutionalisation, which Weil compared to an insular village:

> Les savants sont des gens qu'on paie pour fabriquer de la science; on attend d'eux qu'ils en fabriquent. […] L'avancement, les chaires, […] la réputation, la célébrité, les titres, tout cela compte pour beaucoup. […] Aujourd'hui la facilité des communications à travers le monde en temps de paix et une spécialisation poussée à l'extrême ont pour effet que les savants de chaque spécialité, qui constituent les uns pour les autres l'unique public, forment l'équivalent d'un village.[636]

Weil elaborated on the limitations of this village structure more fully in 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta'. The residents of the village are specialists with extremely narrow perspectives: 'leur spécialité mise à part, [beaucoup de savants] sont bornés et peu cultivés'.[637] The villagers do not only define the boundaries of science, but they plan, execute and interpret results in an isolated and unverifiable structure:

> L'état de la science, à un moment donné […] c'est l'opinion moyenne dans le village des savants. Cette opinion, il est vrai, s'appuie sur des expériences; mais il s'agit toujours d'expériences […] préparées, recommencées, rectifiées par les seuls habitants du village, et surtout interprétées par eux seuls.[638]

635 Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 207.
636 Weil, *Œuvres*, pp. 1188-1189.
637 Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 204.
638 Ibid.

This analysis of modern science recalls Weber's account of institutionalised rationalisation, bureaucratisation and specialisation in the universities of a disenchanted world in 'Science as a Vocation'. However, Weil's scientist-villagers of 1941 have none of the passion, commitment and integrity that Weber still saw in those with a genuine vocation for scientific research in 1917.[639] Weil condemned not just the blind institutional forces of the rationalised university sector, but also the blind ambition of the scientists themselves, who preferred professional advancement and fame to truth and contemplation. Like Weil, Heidegger commented on the qualitative change in the objectives of scientific research, which he denounced as 'constant activity' (*Betrieb*) in 'The Age of the World Picture' (1950). Both philosophers focused on the methodology of modern science as a self-enclosed and self-verifying space:

> The modern research-experiment is, however, not merely an observation that is more precise in degree and scope. It is, rather, an essentially different kind of methodology for the verification of law within the framework and in the service of an exact projection of nature. […] In these processes the methodology of a science is circumscribed by its own results. More and more, methodology adapts itself to the possibilities of procedure it itself opens up.[640]

The mathematisation of nature presented by modern science as physical laws engendered a pursuit of science within theoretically defined rather than pragmatically conceived institutionalised experimental 'research'. Heidegger continued in 'The Age of the World Picture':

> The more exclusively a science becomes focused on the complete carrying out and mastery of its process of working, the more these activities are - without illusion - shifted into research institutes and professional schools for research, then the more irresistibly do the sciences achieve the completion of their modern essence. […] Method establishes itself at any given time in constant activity. Projection and rigor, method and constant activity, each demanding the other, make up the essence of modern science, make it into research.[641]

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639 'Without this passion, […] you have *no* calling for science and you should do something else. For nothing is worthy of man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion'. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), p. 135.
640 Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *Off The Beaten Track*, eds. K. Young and J. Haynes, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univerity Press, 2002), p. 63.
641 Ibid., 165.

In both Weil and Heidegger's account, science as research proceeded with a self-fulfilling momentum oriented not towards truth or ontology but towards an endless deepening of objective knowledge. Heidegger explained:

> We first arrive at science as research when the being of beings is sought in […] objectness. This objectification of beings is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing aimed at bringing each being before it in such a way that the man who calculates can be sure - and that means certain - of the being.[642]

In a related analysis, although one which is less conceptual and more critical, Weil, like Heidegger, understood the research of the scientific village to be the accumulation of mathematically-projected objective knowledge. In their different ways they both sought to uncover ontological reality beneath the ontic:

> Les savants, dans l'effort qu'ils fournissent jour après jour tout le long de vie, ne peuvent pas être poussés par le désir de posséder de la vérité. Car ce qu'ils acquièrent, ce sont simplement des connaissances, et les connaissances ne sont pas par elles-mêmes un objet de désir. […] La vérité […] n'est pas un objet. […] La vérité est l'éclat de la réalité.[643]

Weil goes on to set out how she would reform science and scientific teaching more fully in *L'Enracinement*, which will be examined as a specific response to modern abstraction and disconnection in the conclusion to follow. However, before doing so, it is appropriate to present Weil's sketch in *Cahier 17*, drafted at the same time as *L'Enracinement*, of a secular order of enlightened generalists, who would work embedded in every community. This was Weil's alternative to the scientific 'village'. She set out in her notebooks the *raison d'être* for this secular order:

> Il faudrait en même temps que ces thèmes de méditation spirituelle donner en corrélation les notions de culture générale sur les transformations de l'énergie dans la croissance des plantes, dans la nourriture, dans le travail. Rapporter à cela un ensemble de connaissances élémentaires et essentielles

642 Ibid., p. 66.
643 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1186.

> d'astronomie, de mécanique, de physique, de chimie, de biologie, et rapporter le tout à la série des paraboles.[644]

This did not simply refer to parabolic truths in the New Testament, but also to the truths contained in mythology and folklore: 'Les mythologies, le folklore, enferment quantité de paraboles semblables à celles de l'Evangile qu'il suffit de dégager'.[645]

Weil's vision of embedded, concrete, holistic truth would see an entire community involved in the study of scientific, spiritual and metaphysical truths, complemented and deepened by their self-realising experience of work. She called this utopian structure a study circle: 'un cercle d'étude'.[646] Science would be a collective endeavour and a symbolic reflection of the worker's condition. The circles would be organised by a secular order, who would live simply as farm hands ('valets de ferme') but who would be people of extraordinary ability: 'Il leur faudrait une culture générale très étendue'.[647] They would organise the circle and above all carry out specialised masses, drawing on both spiritual parables (Christian as well as other world religions) and truths from myth and folklore. The pantheistic mystical ceremonies would address directly the labour or rite of passage that each individual was seasonally engaged in (Weil lists harvesting, sowing, pruning vines, raising livestock but also marriage and childhood).[648]

This project, which has distinct parallels with the kibbutz movement and other alternative, farm-based utopian communes, was, according to Joseph-Marie Perrin in *Mon dialogue avec Simone Weil*, elaborated in Marseille and Weil envisioned herself as a member of the secular order, who would organise the 'cercle d'étude'.[649] The aim was to transform life itself into a deeply symbolic and truthful experience: 'Il faut […] que toute une vie humaine soit seulement une parabole.'[650] The plan was certainly utopian and seems impractical, even oppressive in its control

644 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, pp. 312-313.
645 Ibid., p. 315.
646 Ibid., p. 313.
647 Ibid.
648 Ibid., pp. 313-314.
649 Joseph-Marie Perrin, *Mon dialogue avec Simone Weil* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1984), p. 109.
650 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 315.

of people's intellectual, cultural and professional lives. However, recalling that one of the fundamental aspects of this group would be scientific knowledge (of astronomy, mechanics, physics, chemistry and biology) it reveals quite how important a role scientific knowledge played in Weil's understanding of an ideal existence oriented towards truth as reality.[651] This project, despite its eccentricity, was not a 'back to woods' rejection of modernity. On the contrary, the 'cercle d'étude' plan is formed around the foundational insight that modern science can and must guide a reformed society towards truthful contemplation.

That this plan for a rural commune was most likely impossible to implement does not undermine its relevance to her broader project. The important point is that for Weil her plan reflects the symbolic and mystical power of analogy and intuition, setting out how a pantheistic reformed science could be the 'mirror of symbolic truth':

> La Sagesse éternelle emprisonne cet univers dans un réseau, dans un filet de déterminations. […] C'est la vérité qui éclate avec d'incomparables accents d'allégresse dans les parties belles et pures de l'Ancien Testament, en Grèce chez les Pythagoriciens et tous les sages, en Chine chez Lao-Tseu, dans les écritures sacrées hindoues, dans les fragments égyptiens. Elle est peut-être cachée dans d'innombrables mythes et contes. Elle apparaîtra devant nous, sous nos yeux, dans notre propre science, si un jour, […] Dieu nous dessille les yeux.[652]

Although Weil largely worked independently of others, her philosophy of science can be read as part of a sweeping diagnosis of modern *malaise*. In this respect she was in tune with her time.

From Weil's early focus on epistemology to her later focus on esoteric sciences such as alchemy, she engaged with an existing French historical tradition of epistemology, including Hélène Metzger and Gaston Bachelard, who both worked to highlight the relevance and insight of various lapsed sciences. Her rejection of scientific objectivity as estranged from the truth of experience and the nature of being puts her thought in dialogue with Husserl and Heidegger respectively. Weil's interest in energetic excess as providing a totalising science of the soul and

651 Ibid., p. 313.
652 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1207.

sexuality shows her working in ways relevant to contemporaries such as Georges Bataille and it shows her integrating and re-working the insights of influential thinkers like Freud, with whom she is rarely associated.

Above all, Weil was interested in the often veiled access to a transcendent and holistic truth which can be found in different manifestations across cultures, religions, traditions and texts. She called any society turned towards these truths 'rooted'. In *L'Enracinement* she laid the foundations for this society within her own social, economic and political context.

# Conclusion

> Je crois qu'il y a une seule raison légitime de faire un livre: c'est quand on le porte en soi et qu'il veut sortir. On écrit comme on accouche. S'il n'est pas ainsi, mieux vaut s'abstenir. Mais s'il en est ainsi, on n'a pas à se demander à quoi bon. Il faut écrire.[653]

Weil wrote these lines to Boris Souvarine in September 1942, less than a year before she died and as she began to compose her final work and only stand-alone book, *L'Enracinement, prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain* (henceforth *L'Enracinement*). Written quickly, as she battled exhaustion, illness and the fast-moving political and military environment of De Gaulle's Free French offices, *L'Enracinement* is a passionate, unfinished plea to make community, belonging and mutual obligation the political, social and ethical foundations of post-Liberation France. The book is often read as a stand-alone text, but this conclusion will show how *L'Enracinement* in fact developed and consolidated the criticisms of modern society and industry put forward by Weil throughout her intellectual career. By May 1943, the draft was well-advanced and she wrote jokingly to her parents: 'J'ai fait […] un "grand œuvre", ou plutôt je suis en train, car ce n'est pas fini'.[654] She continued to fine-tune the text until her death from complications related to tuberculosis in Ashford Sanatorium in Kent on 24 August 1943.

The book's title hinted, surely deliberately, at the right-wing nationalism of Maurice Barrès's bestselling novel *Les Déracinés* (1897). However, *L'Enracinement* reversed the direction of Barrès's title, emphasising not a state of being uprooted, but an active process of putting down roots. This came at a time when the political heirs of Barrès and the *antidreyfusard* Action Française had gained power and influence through Marshal Philippe Pétain's collaborationist Vichy Government. Furthermore, the rarely used subtitle of *L'Enracinement*: *Prélude à une*

653 Simone Weil, *Lettres à Boris Souvarine*, vol. XV, Cahiers Simone Weil (Paris: L'Association pour l'étude de la pensée de Simone Weil, 1992), p. 120.
654 Weil, *Correspondance familiale* VII.1, p. 280.

*déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain*, situated the book in the revolutionary tradition of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* of 1789. From its title alone, it was clear that *L'Enracinement* set out to provide political direction to France in ways that blended ideas from across the political spectrum, including by proposing a universal ethical framework based not on the abstract rights of individuals, the traditional preserve of the left, but on the obligations owed between individuals and communities, more frequently associated with conservative nationalism.

*L'Enracinement* was published posthumously under the aegis of Albert Camus in 1949. Camus discovered Weil's writing only after her death, but her thought had a profound effect on him. As Frédéric Worms has pointed out, Weil and Camus's philosophy both share an interest in the lived experience of transcendent absolutes explored from within the particularity of human existence. These were not just theoretical absolutes, but action-oriented. Worms points to their shared engagement, both 'concrete' and 'critical', to resist the experiences of despair and violence but also beyond that to assume the responsibility of the writer in combatting the discourses that distance us from these estranging or uprooting experiences.[655] Writing to Père Perrin only a few months after her call to arms, 'il faut écrire', Weil articulated this combat as the rendering explicit of universals, preventing them from being hidden in modern abstraction:

> Nous vivons une époque sans précédent, et dans la situation présente l'universalité, qui pouvait autrefois être implicite, doit être maintenant pleinement explicite. Elle doit imprégner le langage et toute la manière d'être. Aujourd'hui ce n'est rien encore que d'être un saint, il faut la sainteté que le moment présent exige, une sainteté nouvelle, elle aussi sans précédent. […] Le monde a besoin de saints qui aient du génie comme une ville où il y a la peste a besoin de médecins. Là où il y a besoin, il y a obligation.[656]

Weil's terms anticipated Camus's multi-faceted allegory of political and moral pestilence in *La Peste* (1947). The novel's protagonist, Dr Rieux, responds to obligation with action. Rieux's

655 Frédéric Worms, 'Simone Weil, Albert Camus, le siècle et nous', *Esprit* Août/septembre, no. 8 (2012), p. 12.
656 Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, pp. 81-82.

actions assuage suffering, overcome despair, resist violence and promote human dignity, even in the face of death, evoking a particularly modern secular sainthood.

Such was the proximity, intellectual and personal, that Camus felt to Simone Weil's thought, that, asked on the eve of his Nobel Prize in 1957 what living authors he admired the most, he replied: 'Simone Weil, – car il y a des morts qui sont plus proches de nous que bien des vivants.'[657] He certainly regarded *L'Enracinement,* which he published in his own Gallimard 'Espoir' collection, as vital for the immediate reconstruction of post-war Europe: 'Il me paraît impossible en tout cas d'imaginer pour l'Europe une renaissance qui ne tienne pas compte des exigences que Simone Weil a définies dans *L'Enracinement.*'[658]

In this book*,* Weil united her diffuse diagnosis of abstraction, disconnection and alienation, expressed but not systematised in works such as 'Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne?' (1933); 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale' (1934); 'Expérience de la vie d'usine' (1941) and 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force' (1941), under one overarching concept: *déracinement* or uprootedness. This provided a structuring metaphor, or analogy, around which her ideas about modern crisis could find expression. Far from being an entirely new departure, this book united in one text the many symptoms of modern crisis she had elaborated over her career and it intensified her search for solutions.

The particular conditions in which Weil drafted *L'Enracinement,* as she reflected in the offices of the Free French on the prospects for post-Liberation France, have led many scholars

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[657] Florence de Lussy, *Simone Weil: Sagesse et grâce violente* (Paris: Bayard, 2009), p. 43.

[658] Albert Camus, *Œuvres complètes* III, p. 864. The convergences between Camus and Weil have been documented by Frédéric Worms in an article already cited above. John Randolph LeBlanc's 2004 study of Camus and Weil sets out their work as 'a prelude to the formulation of a self-consciously creative form of citizenship, critically respectful of established forms of political discourse and being, but willing to supplement or replace out-dated forms with more appropriate ones.' While LeBlanc's use of Weil and Camus to refute postmodernist views of reality as discontinuous is somewhat anachronistic, he rightly looks further than their related critiques of totalitarianism, where other comparisons have stopped. LeBlanc allies Weil's philosophy of labour with Camus' aesthetic of revolt to define a political philosophy that promotes active and creative citizenship in the face of physical and metaphysical limits. However, more a specialist of Camus than Weil, his study omits the prescriptive dimensions of Weil's political philosophy, central to *L'Enracinement,* as well as the syndicalist elements of her philosophy of labour. John Randolph LeBlanc, *Ethics and Creativity in the Political Thought of Simone Weil and Albert Camus* (Lewiston: NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

to read *L'Enracinement* as a '*livre de circonstance'*, to quote one leading scholar.[659] For this reason and because it is her best-known work, it is often read in isolation from the work that preceded it. However, many of its ideas and solutions were long-standing ones that invite a reading of *L'Enracinement* as the consolidation of what came before. One finds in *L'Enracinement* the development of ideas prominent in her philosophies of work and science, in particular ideas that were critical of modern political, social and industrial conditions. They include her proposal to make the healthy experience of time and productive concentration the key concern in the organisation of work; her belief that technology should be engineered to promote the psychological emancipation of its user, as well as the efficiency and quality of its product; her emphasis on making science more accessible and inspiring through the use of analogy, particularly concerning energy transformation; her promotion of distinct urban and rural educational approaches as well as decentralised industrial production, both of which would contribute to the flowering of the individual, as well as regional and communal life.

However, the book's tone is urgent and uncompromising and at times veers into positions that are disturbing. In particular its sustained and repetitive attacks on modern science reveal a hardening and even caricaturing of her previously-held views on the subject. Examples include her questioning of Einstein's ideas as 'unfounded';[660] her provocative declaration that modern scientists were perhaps more responsible for Hitler's crimes than Hitler himself;[661] and most of all 'the vindictive parallels she draws between Nazis, [classical] Rome and Israel', which rightly offended Susan Sontag and the vast majority of readers of *L'Enracinement.*[662] Sontag, nevertheless, like Emmanuel Levinas, felt moved to defend Weil's legacy, while pointing out her

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659 Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 13.
660 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1176.
661 Ibid., p. 1177. The extremism of her position in *L'Enracinement* may in fact have served to discredit her work on science more generally, contributing to the neglect of her extensive philosophy of science by Weil scholarship discussed in Chapters Four and Five.
662 Susan Sontag, 'Review: Simone Weil's Selected Essays,' *The New York Review of Books*, 3 February 1963. Weil saw in the history of the Roman Empire, Israel of the biblical period and in Nazi Germany brutal, exterminating and self-idolatrous societies, who had uprooted others through conquer and slavery. See Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1055.

destructive and uninformed interpretation of Jewish history and theology.[663] *L'Enracinement* certainly contains elements that are 'tendentious […] and infuriatingly certain',[664] but as Sontag equally points out, there is a difference between embracing meaningful truth in philosophical or literary texts and embracing 'views':

> Such writers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Genet - and Simone Weil - have their authority with us precisely because of their air of unhealthiness. Their unhealthiness is their soundness, and is what carries conviction. […] I cannot believe that more than a handful of the tens of thousands of readers she [Weil] has won since the posthumous publication of her books and essays really share her ideas. […] We read writers of such scathing originality for their personal authority, for the example of their seriousness, for their manifest willingness to sacrifice themselves for their truths, and - only piecemeal - for their 'views'.[665]

Patrice Rolland's 'Approche politique de *L'Enracinement'* (1983) and more recently Jacques Julliard's *Le Choc Simone Weil* (2014) provide unflinching and detailed accounts of the views

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663 See Susan Sontag, 'Simone Weil,' in *Against Interpretation, and other Essays*, *Modern Classics* (London: Penguin, [1963] 2013). Levinas felt compelled to address her selective, subjective reading of the Old Testament: 'On a reproché à Simone Weil d'avoir ignoré le judaïsme. Et, ma foi, elle l'a ignoré royalement. […] Elle impose une lecture de la Bible telle que le Bien y soit toujours d'origine étrangère au judaïsme et le Mal spécifiquement juif.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006), pp. 178-179. There is consensus among scholars that 'Weil's anti-Semitism [was] not a form of racism', with much speculation as to why Weil's was so violently opposed to her own origins. See Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, p. 44. In *Simone Weil, Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew,* Thomas Nevin explores 'self-mutilation', contextualising her philosophy within Jewish theology while dissecting how she came to wilfully misunderstand it: 'What irony that her own ethics, in much of her life and the best of her writings, should be so very Jewish. In tearing Christianity from its true [Jewish] roots, she was herself deracinated. It is as though in this bemusingly wilful endeavour she was practising a form of self-mutilation for entry into some mystery cult of her own fashioning'. See Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-exiled Jew*, p. 256. George Steiner saw in her hostility to her ancestral faith and ethnicity 'the traits of a classical Jewish self-loathing carried to fever pitch. […] Worst of all, to repeat, is her refusal to envisage, in the very midst of her eloquent pathos in respect of suffering and injustice, the horrors, the anathema being enacted on her own people'. George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p. 250. Perhaps most compellingly, Robert Coles drew on Freudian analysis, in particular Anna Freud, to explore how her relationship with her family and her rejection of sexuality might have contributed to a conflictual desire for self-harm and love. For Coles, 'her Jewishness became a Cross'. Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage*, p. 62.

664 Sontag, 'Review: Simone Weil's Selected Essays'.

665 Sontag, 'Simone Weil,' 249-250. Even the conservative, Anglo-Catholic, T.S. Eliot, often accused himself of anti-Semitism, has said of Weil: 'Our first experience of Simone Weil should not be expressible in terms of approval or dissent. I cannot conceive of anybody's agreeing with all of her views, or of not disagreeing violently with some of them. […] Certainly she could be unfair and intemperate; certainly she committed some astonishing aberrations and exaggerations.' Cited in his preface to Weil, *The Need for Roots*, pp. vii-viii.

expressed in *L'Enracinement*.[666] However, what they and other examples of Weil scholarship do not do is to show how this notion of roots sought to resolve the political, industrial and social crisis in modernity that had preoccupied many of her own texts and those of her time.

*The Need for Roots*

The book, in fact, does not begin with roots but more broadly with needs and not just physical needs but the more transcendent 'needs of the soul':

> Les besoins de l'âme […] sont, comme les besoins physiques, des nécessités de la vie d'ici-bas. C'est-à-dire que s'ils ne sont pas satisfaits, l'homme tombe peu à peu dans un état plus ou moins analogue à la mort, plus ou moins proche d'une vie purement végétative.[667]

Readers familiar with Weil's reflections in her *Cahiers* on energetic transformation discussed in Chapter Five can here recognise the importance of community as fertile ground for the transmission of 'vegetative energy':

> On doit le respect à un champ de blé, non pas pour lui-même, mais parce que c'est de la nourriture pour les hommes. D'une manière analogue, on doit du respect à une collectivité, quelle qu'elle soit – patrie, famille, ou toute autre –, non pas pour elle-même, mais comme nourriture d'un certain nombre d'âmes humaines.[668]

These needs of the soul provoke not rights, which are individual, but obligations towards others, which are communal. The need for roots (which served as the book's title in English) was best met by community:

> La nourriture qu'une collectivité fournit à l'âme de ceux qui en sont membres n'a pas d'équivalent dans l'univers entier. Puis, de par sa durée, la collectivité pénètre déjà dans l'avenir. Elle contient de la nourriture, non seulement pour les âmes des vivants, mais aussi pour celles d'êtres non encore nés […]. Enfin, de par la même durée, la collectivité a ses racines dans le passé. Elle constitue l'unique organe de conservation pour les trésors spirituels amassés

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[666] See Patrice Rolland, 'Approche politique de *L'Enracinement*,' *Cahiers Simone Weil* 6, no. 4 (1983); Julliard, *Le Choc Simone Weil*.
[667] Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1029.
[668] Ibid., p. 1030.

> par les morts, l'unique organe de transmission par l'intermédiaire duquel les morts puissent parler aux vivants.[669]

Rootedness was for Weil an active 'participation' in a community, which was not deliberate or conscious, but natural and intuitive. The key characteristic of this participation, which resisted the eternal present of modernity, was transmission between past and future. Rootedness was not a simple insertion in a geographical territory. It had no association with ethnicity or nationalism, but rather was an active belonging in time and tradition:

> Un être humain a une racine par sa participation réelle, active et naturelle à l'existence d'une collectivité qui conserve vivants certains trésors de passé et certains pressentiments d'avenir. Participation naturelle, c'est-à-dire amenée automatiquement par le lieu, la naissance, la profession, l'entourage. Chaque être humain a besoin d'avoir de multiples racines. Il a besoin de recevoir la presque totalité de sa vie morale, intellectuelle, spirituelle, par l'intermédiaire des milieux dont il fait naturellement partie.[670]

This developed in more generalised and societal forms her ideas about the alienating experience of time in modern industrial labour as explored in Chapter Three. In particular it took up again the notion that the worker was most destructively oppressed in his or her need to project forwards or backwards in time, drawing on past knowledge and using it to determine the future as a free agent. However *L'Enracinement* took these ideas further, transforming the private need to project backwards and forwards within time, into a collective need to participate in the transmission of culture, whether it be native culture ('naissance' or 'lieu' was not to be confused with race), or culture related to employment and social life ('profession', 'entourage').

*Déracinement* was the prevention or disruption of this participatory root. Weil was clear that *déracinement*, like the industrial experience of fragmented time explored in Chapter Three, was not a uniquely modern experience. She asserted that uprootedness was as ancient as military conquest itself: 'Il y a déracinement toutes les fois qu'il y a conquête militaire'.[671] However, in the

669 Ibid.
670 Ibid., p. 1052.
671 Ibid.

past, military conquest entailed settlement and assimilation, which checked its capacity as an uprooting force:

> Le déracinement est au minimum quand les conquérants sont des migrateurs qui s'installent dans le pays conquis, se mélangent à la population et prennent racine eux-mêmes. Tel fut le cas des Hellènes en Grèce, des Celtes en Gaule, des Maures en Espagne. Mais quand le conquérant reste étranger au territoire dont il est devenu possesseur, le déracinement est une maladie presque mortelle pour les populations soumises.[672]

As such, modern colonialism was the most potent form of uprooting. To make this understood Weil deliberately equated the German invasion of Europe with European colonialism, the slave trade and cultural genocide:

> [Le déracinement] atteint le degré le plus aigu quand il y a déportations massives, comme dans l'Europe occupée par l'Allemagne ou dans la boucle du Niger, ou quand il y a suppression brutale de toutes les traditions locales, comme dans les possessions françaises d'Océanie.[673]

Jean-Pierre Biondi and Gilles Morin in their study of anti-colonialism in France, *Les Anticolonialistes (1881-1962)*, have noted the very small number of voices raised against colonialism in France before the Second World War, including on the Left, citing Simone Weil and Messali Hadj as 'lone protests in a sea of indifference'.[674]

If France was engaged in the violent uprooting of its empire, it was for Weil because France itself was uprooted: 'Qui est déraciné déracine. Qui est enraciné ne déracine pas'.[675] She saw the collapse of France in 1940 as illustrative of the advanced state of its uprootedness:

> L'effondrement subit de la France, qui a surpris tout le monde partout, a simplement montré à quel point le pays était déraciné. Un arbre dont les racines sont presque entièrement rongées tombe au premier choc. Si la France a présenté un spectacle plus pénible qu'aucun autre pays d'Europe, c'est que la civilisation moderne avec ses poisons y était installée plus avant qu'ailleurs, à l'exception de l'Allemagne.[676]

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672 Ibid.
673 Ibid., pp. 1052-1053.
674 Cited in J. P. Little, ed. *Simone Weil on Colonialism: An Ethic of the Other* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 10.
675 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1055.
676 Ibid., p. 1056.

The poisons which uprooted modern French civilisation, driving it to pursue and enlarge its Empire, were money and a particular view of education: 'Il y a deux poisons qui propagent cette maladie [du déracinement]. L'un est l'argent. […] Le second […] est l'instruction telle qu'elle est conçue aujourd'hui.'[677] The first was associated with industrial work, the second with intellectual culture, including science.

*'L'idolâtrie de l'argent nous sépare d'une civilisation susceptible de valoir quelque chose'*

Money, according to Weil, destroyed roots by subordinating all values to the desire to amass wealth: 'L'argent détruit les racines partout ou il pénètre, en remplaçant tous les mobiles par le désir de gagner'.[678] This was to an extent a reformulation of early Marxist ideas presented in *The Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts* (1844) and *On the Jewish Question* (1843):

> Money degrades all the gods of man and converts them into commodities. Money is the general and self-constituted value of all things. […] Money is the being of Man's work and existence alienated from himself, and this alien being rules him, and he prays to it.[679]

However, *The Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts* were not published until 1932 and moreover such ideas were already well established in sociological thought independently of Marx by the early twentieth century.

The German sociologist of modern urban life, Georg Simmel, in particular regarded the quantifying perspective imposed by money as central to the alienating experience of modern urban life. In an argument that resonated with Weil's view of abstracting modern science, Simmel presented money in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) as a quantitative reduction of the world:

> The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the ideal of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula. It has been the money economy which

677 Ibid., p. 1053.
678 Ibid.
679 Marx, *Early Writings*; p. 239.

> has thus filled the daily life of so many people with weighing, calculating, enumerating and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms.[680]

This was in fact closer than Marx to Weil's position in *L'Enracinement*, since like Simmel she was not referring specifically to the proletariat but to an uprooting calculation that is society-wide: '[L'argent] emporte sans peine sur les autres mobiles parce qu'il demande un effort tellement moins grand. Rien est si simple et si clair qu'un chiffre.'[681] This reductivism had long underpinned Weil's rejection of algebraic formulas. In her very first *Cahier* dating from 1931, Weil had noted:

> Parmi les caractéristiques de décadence du monde moderne, ne pas oublier l'impossibilité de penser concrètement le rapport entre l'effort et le résultat de l'effort. […] Ce rapport, qui ne gît dans aucune pensée, gît dans une chose: l'argent. […] ARGENT, MACHINISME, ALGEBRE: les trois monstres de la civilisation actuelle. Analogie complète.[682]

Even if Weil's analysis of the uprooting ascendance of money applied to the whole of society, her reference to 'machinisme' implied that she regarded it as particularly acute amongst the urban proletariat, a view she continued to hold in *L'Enracinement*: 'C'est dans cette condition sociale que la maladie du déracinement est la plus aiguë'.[683]

The recommendations put forward in *L'Enracinement* to emancipate modern labour from money drew extensively on the theoretical work that preceded it. Chapters One and Two set out how Weil used the philosophy of Descartes in 'Perspectives. Allons-nous vers le révolution prolétarienne?' (1933) and 'Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale' (1934) to substantiate a syndicalist theory of freedom as the unity of thought and action in work. This underpinned her analysis in *L'Enracinement,* although in this more pragmatic text she did not explicitly restate this Cartesian theory of freedom, despite making intellectually demanding and autonomous work a necessary condition of emancipation:

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680 Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, [1903] 2002), p. 13.
681 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1053.
682 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.1, 99.
683 Ibid.

> Il faut changer le régime de l'attention au cours des heures de travail, […] la nature de l'obéissance, la quantité trop faible d'initiative, d'habilité et de réflexion demandée aux ouvriers, l'impossibilité où ils sont de prendre part par la pensée et le sentiment à l'ensemble du travail et de l'entreprise.[684]

The fruits of her reflection on the experience of time in the modern urban factory setting were also critical to the recommendations she makes in *L'Enracinement.*

Chapter Three of this thesis placed her modern urban philosophy of time, drawn from her *Cahiers,* her *Journal d'usine* and from articles including 'L'Expérience de la vie d'usine' (1941 [1936]), 'La Situation en Allemagne' (1933) and 'L'Iliade, ou le poème de la force' (1940-1941) in the context of other theorists of time and modernity, most notably Walter Benjamin. Although *L'Enracinement* was drafted eight years after her factory work, the role of time in ensuring rootedness in labour remained central and she associated the reform of the prevalent wage structure with a more intuitive, 'habitable' temporality in the rooted factory:

> Si la plus grande partie des ouvriers étaient […] responsables de leur production et de leur machine […] le paiement aux pièces n'aurait plus d'inconvénient […]. Il n'impliquerait plus l'obsession de la vitesse à tout prix. […] Un ouvrier ou un groupe d'ouvriers pourrait avoir un certain nombre de commandes à effectuer dans un délai donné, et disposer d'un libre choix dans l'aménagement du travail. Ce serait autre chose que de savoir qu'on doit répéter indéfiniment le même geste, imposé par un ordre, jusqu'à la seconde précise où un nouveau commandement viendra imposer un nouveau geste pour une durée qu'on ignore. Il y a une certaine relation avec le temps qui convient aux choses inertes, et une autre qui convient aux créatures pensantes. On a tort de les confondre.[685]

Thus when Weil evoked money as the first source of uprootedness, she demonstrated that this had implications far beyond economic disenfranchisement, touching also on the experience of work as a lived experience, principally of time.

Weil's first solution to emancipate the worker from this oppression lay not in reconstituting an idealised past, nor in socialist demands to expropriate the bourgeoisie and

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[684] Ibid., p. 1059.
[685] Ibid., p. 1063.

nationalise industry, which she argued would not change conditions.[686] She even somewhat paternalistically argued against taking the demands of workers at face value:

> On ne peut pas chercher dans les revendications des ouvriers le remède à leur malheur. […] Les revendications expriment toutes ou presque la souffrance du déracinement. S'ils veulent le contrôle de l'embauche et la nationalisation, c'est qu'ils sont obsédés par la peur du déracinement total, du chômage. S'ils veulent abolir la propriété privée, c'est qu'ils en ont assez d'être admis sur le lieu du travail comme des immigrés qu'on laisse entrer par grâce.[687]

Instead she proposed transforming the conditions of work through new technologies: 'Un changement dans le rapport des classes doit demeurer une pure illusion s'il n'est pas accompagné d'une transformation de la technique cristallisée dans des machines nouvelles.'[688]

She proposed criteria with which modern industrial machines should comply. Firstly, the machines must not cause physical or psychological injury or exhaustion. Secondly, the machines must be adaptable to different processes in order to comply with shifting demand and avoid harmful monotony. Thirdly, these machines should require a degree of skill, essentially eliminating production lines: 'un très grand développement de la machine automatique, réglable, à usages multiples […] supprime[rait] l'état de manœuvre sur machine.'[689]

To achieve this Weil suggested that trade unions should be involved in commissioning technical research. She proposed that engineering schools include perspectives on the experience of using machines as well as increasing their efficiency. This is now widespread in industry as 'user experience' research and design. In *L'Enracinement* she proposed that these machines be housed throughout France in a decentralised network of small factories, permitting the flourishing of regional culture and identity and the inclusion of family and social life within work.[690] She also placed emphasis on the need for workers to be educated on the utility, destination and cultural significance of production:

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686 Ibid., pp. 1060-1061.
687 Ibid., pp. 1058-1059.
688 Ibid., p. 1061.
689 Ibid.
690 Ibid., p. 1063.

> Du point de vue technique, la facilité relative du transport de l'énergie sous forme d'électricité permet certainement un large degré de décentralisation. […]. Une grande entreprise serait constituée par un atelier de montage relié à un grand nombre de petits ateliers […] à travers la campagne. […] Le travail n'y serait que d'une demi-journée, le reste devant être consacré aux liens de camaraderie; […] à des conférences techniques pour faire saisir à chaque ouvrier la fonction exacte des pièces qu'il produit […] et à des conférences géographiques pour leur apprendre où vont les produits qu'ils aident à fabriquer, quels êtres humains en font usage, dans quelle espèce de milieu, de vie quotidienne, d'atmosphère humaine ces produits tiennent une place, et quelle place.[691]

This may seem like a utopian vision of industrial progress wedded to an idealisation of rural life, all the more so as our own hyper-modern globalised industry has made the fragmentation of production the norm, offshoring and sub-contracting menial and exploitative conditions to distant emerging economies. However, Weil would have been unlikely to regard her argument as utopian. She had been closely involved in worker education and she had herself witnessed a leap forward in workers' rights during the Popular Front.[692] Moreover, she saw the necessary reconstruction of post-war France as an opportunity to build new institutions from the ground up: 'Ce problème de la construction d'une condition ouvrière réellement nouvelle […] doit être décidée dès maintenant. Car aussitôt la guerre finie, on construira, au sens littéral du mot.'[693]

These ideas were also consistent with *L'Enracinement* being, at least partially, a syndicalist manifesto within a tradition of programmatic texts. As this thesis has shown, this is a political context within which Weil's work is seldom read, *L'Enracinement* even less so, coming at the end of her life when she is widely regarded to have abandoned syndicalism. Nevertheless, both the tone of the text, and the substantive recommendations it made regarding decentralisation, education, the importance of private property and the abolition of political parties in favour of unions expressed a number of syndicalist ideas. Chapter One, 'Emancipatory Work: Syndicalism and the Primacy of Labour' already set out the significant parallels between *L'Enracinement* and

691 Ibid., p. 1060, p. 1071.
692 She welcomed the significant gains and the joy afforded by improved conditions six times in *L'Enracinement*. Ibid., p. 1056, p. 1059, p. 1063, p. 1121, p. 1149, p. 1165.
693 Ibid., p. 1071.

Emile Pataud and Emile Pouget's *Comment nous ferons la révolution* (1911) and A.V. Jacquet's 'Vues sur une école rurale prolétarienne' published in *La Révolution prolétarienne* in 1933. *L'Enracinement* displayed a distinctly syndicalist *ouvriérisme*, which asserted the superiority of worker culture and the primacy of their direct experience of the world over the abstracted perspectives of the bourgeoisie:

> Tout ce qui appartient à la science classique […] consistant à transporter dans la nature les relations qui dominent le travail humain […] appartient aux travailleurs […] bien plus naturellement qu'aux lycéens. À plus forte raison en est-il ainsi de la partie de la culture rangée sous la rubrique des 'Lettres'. Car l'objet en est toujours la condition humaine, et c'est le peuple qui a l'expérience la plus réelle, la plus directe de la condition humaine. Dans l'ensemble, sauf exceptions, les œuvres de deuxième ordre et au-dessous conviennent mieux à l'élite, et les œuvres de tout premier ordre conviennent mieux au peuple.[694]

Weil argued in *L'Enracinement* that workers were best placed to understand Greek tragedy, since they had the most unmediated experience of suffering: 'Un ouvrier, qui a l'angoisse du chômage enfoncée jusque dans la moelle des os, comprendrait l'état de Philoctète quand on lui enlève son arc, […] il comprendrait aussi qu'Électre a faim.'[695]

In this view, labour and culture (whether classical, literary or philosophical) were both expressions of a rooted human condition which was increasingly rare: 'Le désir d'apprendre pour apprendre, le désir de vérité est devenu très rare. Le prestige de la culture est devenu presque exclusivement social.'[696] The exclusion of workers from an elitist high culture was an expression of its distance from truth. Making culture more inclusive was a political necessity for Weil, both to bring culture closer to the human condition and to give the proletariat and rural workers a sense of active particpation in social and cultural transmission, regarded as a condition of rootedness:

> En résumé, la suppression de la condition prolétarienne, qui est définie avant tout par le déracinement, se ramène à la tâche de constituer une production

694 Ibid., pp. 1068-1069.
695 Ibid., p. 1069.
696 Ibid., p. 1054.

> industrielle et une culture de l'esprit où les ouvriers soient et se sentent chez eux.[697]

The society advocated by Weil required a re-organisation of industrial production, but also a radical opening up of culture. If she wanted people to put down roots, it was not to restrict them to a local culture but rather to promote access to culture in the broadest sense: 'Un arbre ne se meut que vers le haut. Symbole de l'état de contemplation pure'.[698]

*'Se sentir chez soi dans le monde de la pensée'*

As shown here in *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Work*, articles such as 'Réflexions' and 'Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne?' highlighted the destructive, alienating effects of specialisation in modern, rationalised, specifically Taylorised work and industry. This critique of specialisation was increasingly extended to science as her life and thought progressed, as set out in the second part of this thesis, *Simone Weil, Philosopher of Science*. In 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta' and other texts gathered in *Sur la science*, Weil presented the scientific community as an insular and specialised 'village', passing theories from one scientist to another in a closed and self-verifying cycle.[699] In *L'Enracinement*, Weil held to this view.[700]

However, she also broadened her anti-abstracting and anti-specialising platform to encompass all forms of culture:

> Parmi toutes les formes actuelles de la maladie du déracinement, le déracinement de la culture n'est pas le moins alarmant. La première conséquence de cette maladie est généralement, dans tous les domaines, que les relations étant coupées chaque chose est regardée comme un but en soi.[701]

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697 Ibid., p. 1071.
698 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 255.
699 She presented the 'scientific village' as a self-verifying space, 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta', Weil, *Écrits de Marseille* IV.1, p. 204.
700 'Les théories poussent comme au hasard […]. Une telle science peut être une forme de l'élan vital, mais non pas une forme de la recherche de la vérité.' Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1190.
701 Ibid., p. 1068.

According to Weil, the transmission of culture had become the preserve of educated administrators, who saw knowledge as an end in itself, disconnected from its place within lived experience: 'La culture est un instrument manié par des professeurs pour fabriquer des professeurs qui à leur tour fabriqueront des professeurs.'[702]

The uprooting of culture stemmed from a historical process of specialisation at its heart: which had separated it from lived experience:

> La Renaissance a partout provoqué une coupure entre les gens cultivés et la masse. […]. Il en est résulté une culture qui s'est développée dans un milieu très restreint, séparé du monde, dans une atmosphère confinée, une culture considérablement orientée vers la technique et influencée par elle, très teintée de pragmatisme, extrêmement fragmentée par la spécialisation, tout à fait dénuée à la fois de contact avec cet univers-ci et d'ouverture vers l'autre monde.[703]

This was uprooting for industrial workers and rural communities alike, both of which depended for their well-being on a knowledge that their contribution was valuable and participatory: 'La formation […] implique aussi une instruction, une participation à une culture intellectuelle. Il faut qu'ils se sentent chez eux dans le monde de la pensée.'[704] Yet, far from being at home in the world of ideas, Weil presented the way culture was taught in the first half of the twentieth century as an abstracted and mendacious commodity forcibly imposed on the working classes:

> Ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui instruire les masses, c'est prendre cette culture moderne, élaborée dans un milieu tellement fermé, tellement taré, tellement indifférent à la vérité, en ôter tout ce qu'elle peut encore contenir d'or pur […] et enfourner le résidu tel quel dans la mémoire des malheureux qui désirent apprendre, comme on donne la becquée à des oiseaux.[705]

The example she chose to illustrate this point is a familiar one for those acquainted with her earlier work.

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[702] Ibid.
[703] Ibid., p. 1053.
[704] Ibid.
[705] Ibid., p. 1054.

In the texts later collected in *Sur la science*, Weil, like Edmund Husserl, had identified the introduction of algebra during the Scientific Revolution at the expense of the previously dominant geometric approach as a turning point in the rise of an abstracted, sterile and instrumentalising modern science. In *L'Enracinement*, she expanded this, attributing to the emergence of algebra not just damaging epistemological implications but also profoundly political and social implications:

> La plupart [des gens] ignoreront toujours que presque toutes nos actions, simples ou savamment combinées, sont des applications de notions géométriques, que l'univers où nous vivons est un tissu de relations géométriques, et que la nécessité géométrique est celle même à laquelle nous sommes soumis en fait, comme créatures enfermées dans l'espace et le temps. On présente la nécessité géométrique de telle manière qu'elle paraît arbitraire. Quoi de plus absurde qu'une nécessité arbitraire?[706]

For Weil, the communication of culture and learning around the lived experience of necessity, of which the unbending but harmonious laws of geometry were the purest example, was essential in giving people a sense of rooted participation in the world. However, this required adapting education to the experiences of those receiving it.

> La science doit être présentée aux paysans et aux ouvriers de manières très différentes. Pour les ouvriers, il est naturel que tout soit dominé par la mécanique. Pour les paysans, tout devrait avoir pour centre le merveilleux circuit par lequel l'énergie solaire, descendue dans les plantes, fixée par la chlorophylle, concentrée dans les graines et les fruits, entre dans l'homme qui mange ou boit, passe dans ses muscles et se dépense pour l'aménagement de la terre. Tout ce qui se rapporte à la science peut être disposé autour de ce circuit, car la notion d'énergie est au centre de tout. La pensée de ce circuit, si elle pénétrait dans l'esprit des paysans, envelopperait le travail de poésie.[707]

In the absence of this rooting transmission, the situation of workers, whether in the country or in towns, resembled that of an oppressed colonial people. Their culture and activity were not only ignored by the dominant intellectual class, but actively denied:

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[706] Ibid., p. 1066.

[707] Ibid., p. 1068.

> Ce soleil dont on parle en classe n'a pour [le travailleur] aucun rapport avec celui qu'il voit. On l'arrache à l'univers qui l'entoure, comme on arrache les petits Polynésiens à leur passé en les forçant à répéter: 'Nos ancêtres les Gaulois avaient les cheveux blonds.'[708]

This was consistent with Weil's view that colonialism was a consequence of domestic uprootedness, since uprooted peoples felt compelled to assuage their alienation by uprooting other cultures. However, it is also clear from these passages that what Weil was implicitly calling for in *L'Enracinement* was a reform to education that drew on her previous critique of modern science as a closed and abstracted algebraic system and promoted her own reconception of science around energetic transformation as set out in Chapter Five, '"Fondement d'une science nouvelle": Analogy, Energy and Intuition'.

This is the context in which *L'Enracinement* united Weil's critique of modern science with established syndicalist-inspired reforms to education, such as those put forward by A. V. Jacquet, writing alongside Weil in *La Révolution prolétarienne* 10 years earlier in 1933. *L'Enracinement* held to her views on educational reform explored in Chapter One, and argued that to tackle uprootedness, education had to be founded on an anti-abstracted and experience-driven method, proceeding through demonstrations drawn from lived experience, whether it was teaching folklore and photosynthesis to rural workers,[709] or mechanics and physics to the proletariat:[710]

> Il faut s'être placé au centre d'une vérité, l'avoir possédée dans sa nudité, derrière la forme particulière sous laquelle elle se trouve par hasard exposée. […] Il n'y a pas à choisir entre la démonstration et l'expérience. On démontre avec du bois ou du fer aussi facilement qu'avec de la craie. […] Tout ce qui appartient à la science classique […] procède principalement d'une méthode analogique, consistant à transporter dans la nature les relations qui dominent le travail humain. Par conséquent, cela appartient aux travailleurs, si on sait le leur présenter, bien plus naturellement qu'aux lycéens.[711]

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708 Ibid., p. 1080.
709 Ibid.
710 Ibid., p.1069.
711 Ibid.

Invested with this knowledge, workers could find in their efforts an expression of the transcendent beauty of necessity, which Weil liked to express in her early work as in *L'Enracinement* as penetrating their bodies.[712] Education and science were vital in creating the conditions for this, along with the Church and, still for Weil in 1943, the unions:

> Ce qu'il faudrait, c'est que ce monde et l'autre, dans leur double beauté, soient présents et associés à l'acte du travail […]. Cette association peut s'opérer par une manière de présenter les pensées qui les mette en rapport direct avec les gestes et les opérations particulières de chaque travail, par une assimilation assez profonde pour qu'elles pénètrent dans la substance même de l'être […]. Bien entendu, l'école n'y suffirait pas. Il faudrait que tous les milieux où subsiste quelque chose qui ressemble à de la pensée y participent – les Églises, les syndicats, les milieux littéraires et scientifiques.[713]

In *L'Enracinement*, Weil's mission and vocation was to put workers at the centre of culture and the polity: 'Notre époque a pour mission propre, pour vocation, la constitution d'une civilisation fondée sur la spiritualité du travail.'[714] Weil was filling in the lines of a society she had been sketching out for many years. In 'Réflexions' in 1934 she had said: 'La civilisation la plus pleinement humaine serait celle qui aurait le travail manuel pour centre, celle où le travail manuel constituerait la suprême valeur.'[715]

In *L'Enracinement* Weil united her distinct assessment of rooted and emancipated work, her analysis of modern science as abstracting and exclusive, her desire for a holistic science that contemplated divine and universal truths, and her syndicalist commitment to a society structured and inspired by work:

> Si d'une part toute la vie spirituelle de l'âme, d'autre part toutes les connaissances scientifiques concernant l'univers matériel, sont orientées vers l'acte du travail, le travail tient sa juste place dans la pensée d'un homme. Au lieu d'être une espèce de prison, il est un contact avec ce monde et l'autre.[716]

712 See 'Expérience de la vie d'usine', (mostly drafted in 1936 but completed in 1941), Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 292. For *L'Enracinement* see Weil, *Œuvre*s, p. 1040.
713 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1085.
714 Ibid.
715 Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* II.2, p. 89-90.
716 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1084.

This contact was for Weil the bulwark against modern abstraction. She sought true embodied contact in her unconventional immersive method, in her factory work, in her syndicalism and in her political engagement in Spain and in England and transmitted the fruits of this contact through her philosophies of reformed work and science. These were the sites of estrangement between humanity and the world, which, in a rooted society, would be elevated into sites of engagement:

> La vérité est l'éclat de la réalité. […] Désirer la vérité, c'est désirer un contact direct avec de la réalité. […] Si dans les sciences de la nature et la mathématique l'interprétation symbolique reprenait la place qu'elle avait jadis, l'unité de l'ordre établi dans cet univers apparaîtrait dans sa souveraine clarté. L'ordre du monde, c'est la beauté du monde. Seul diffère le régime de l'attention, selon qu'on essaie de concevoir les relations nécessaires qui le composent ou d'en contempler l'éclat. Le retour à la vérité ferait apparaître entre autres choses la vérité du travail physique. […] Il est facile de définir la place que doit occuper le travail physique dans une vie sociale bien ordonnée. Il doit en être le centre spirituel.[717]

With these words Weil closed *L'Enracinement* on a simultaneously mystical and syndicalist note. A society structured by work, executed in the conditions she had devoted her life to setting out, would emancipate citizens politically and existentially, realising in the unity of their thought and action the transformation of their material conditions in the image of the world's unrelenting necessity. The transformation of energy, the pivotal reality and supporting analogy of her philosophy of science, was the most important expression of this: 'L'univers ne se donne à l'homme dans la nourriture et la chaleur que si l'homme se donne à l'univers dans le travail.'[718]

Science should make a study of such truths through *lecture*, by cultivating 'attention', the contemplative, receptive openness she regarded as vital to transcending the surface layer of physical phenomena (what Heidegger called the 'ontic') to access deeper truths and symbols about the nature and order of being. Mathematics, and specifically geometry, were the principal bearers of these truths, which recorded the finite material world of physical necessity and

[717] Ibid., p. 1186, p. 1214, p. 1218.
[718] Ibid., p. 1218.

expressed it on a transcendent and impersonal plane of meaning as the harmony and perfection of the world: 'la mathématique éternelle, ce langage à deux fins, est l'étoffe dont est tissé l'ordre du monde.'[719] These resonances were also to be found in folklore, art, mythology and religion: 'Images dans le monde des vérités concernant la condition humaine'.[720] Weil called for a culture and science that made these truths apparent: 'Le souci du symbole a complètement disparu de notre science. […] De la pensée moderne à la sagesse antique le chemin serait court et direct, si l'on voulait le prendre.'[721]

This thesis has suggested how Weil went down this path, although in her treatment it appears neither short nor particularly direct. More work is needed to explore how Weil tackled the critique of modernity beyond the themes of work and science, which remained nevertheless her principal focus. In particular, folklore and mythology, which fill the pages of her *Cahiers*, constitute a critique of and a response to this modern alienation. Far from being an esoteric and personal exercise, Weil's interest in folklore was part of a renewal of academic interest in folk tradition, led by Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss, both of whom she had sought out during her brief stay in New York.[722] Weil's writing on comparative folklore and mythology, including Greco-Roman mythology, was part of a contemporary trend to analyse the present in the light of these ancient forms. Georges Dumézil's studies from the 1930s onwards explored a common imagination and tripartite socio-political structure to be found in all Indo-European peoples, borne out by myth and folklore.[723] This was essential to understanding modern institutions of oppression. Weil was certainly familiar with the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose studies of the 'primitive mind' throughout the 1920s and 1930s presented mythology and folklore as the development of common truths detached from objects of immediate experience, enabling the

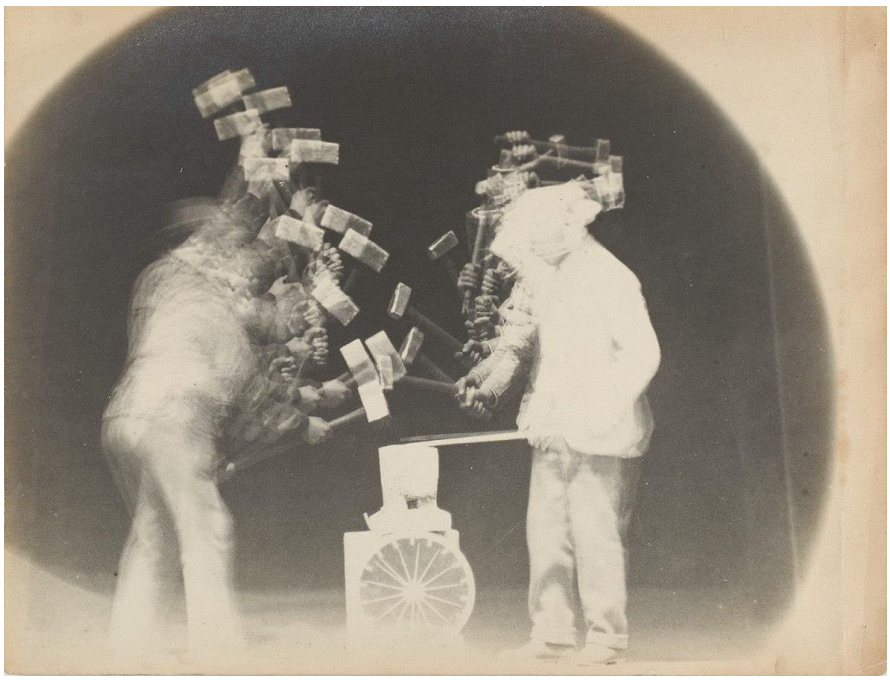
719 Ibid., p. 1212.
720 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.2, p. 66 and p. 343.
721 Weil, *Œuvres*, p. 1212.
722 Weil, *Cahiers* VI.4, p. 426.
723 Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et Epopée: L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Paris Gallimard, 1968).

emergence of mystical and religious contemplation and even philosophy.[724] Weil, however, does not seem to have been aware of the philosopher Rachel Bespaloff, an existentialist scholar of Kierkegaard and an early French reader of Heidegger, whose 1943 *De L'Iliade*, explored the epic poem's existential 'instants' in which transcendent truths on the nature of freedom and ethics illuminated the war-torn present.[725] Such were the parallels between Bespaloff's and Weil's treatment of myth in 'L'Iliade, ou le poème de la force', that upon being sent Weil's text in December 1941, a surprised Bespaloff remarked: 'il y a des pages entières de mes notes qui auraient l'air d'être un plagiat'.[726] This is just one striking instance of the parallels and shared pre-occupations far beyond work and science which exist between Weil and her contemporaries across many aspects of her thought.

These are promising orientations for Weil scholarship to resist viewing her as a purely individual thinker, estranged philosophically from her own time, and instead elaborate more fully her legacy as a philosopher in, and of, her own time.

[724] Weil presented the ideas of Lévy-Bruhl to her students. See Weil, *Leçons de philosophie*, pp. 215-216. See also Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La Mentalité primitive* (Paris: Flammarion, [1922] 2010).
[725] Rachel Bespaloff, *De L'Iliade* (Paris: Editions Allia, [1943] 2004), p. 61, p. 70.
[726] Rachel Bespaloff, *Lettres à Jean Wahl 1937 - 1947*, ed. Monique Jutrin (Paris: Editions Claire Paulhan, 2003), p. 204.

# Appendix A



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Etienne-Jules Marey and Charles Fremont, *Chronophotograh,* Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel and Rogers Fund, 1987, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chronophotograph_MET_DP156448.jpg

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