Review: Sorokin in Review
Reviewed Work(s): A Long Journey: The Autobiography of Pitirim A. Sorokin by Pitirim A. Sorokin
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SOROKIN IN REVIEW*

Early in 1962, a group of renowned sociologists circulated a newsletter to their fellow sociologists, urging the cause of P. A. Sorokin as a write-in nominee for the presidency of the American Sociological Association. Though Sorokin was not the first professor of sociology in this country, he has been a most prolific producer of sociological treatises and monographs. In 1930, he was appointed as the first professor and chairman of the Sociology Department at Harvard. The long overdue honor to Professor Sorokin from his peers, his colleagues, and former associates as well as graduate students was made formal when he became the write-in president of the Association.

In the highly empirical atmosphere of American sociology of recent times, it is not difficult to understand why there are more antagonists than followers of Sorokin’s sociology. During the thirty-five years since Sorokin’s academic career began at Harvard, sociology has changed in notable ways. First, historical sociology gave way to positivistic empirical inquiry. Then, very early in the post-World War II years, Talcott Parsons made a new landmark of sociological theory when he synthesized Sorokin’s functional interpretation of the social system with the action theory of Weber and so set the direction of a major part of sociological writings for the two succeeding decades. In Parsons’ writings the influence of Sorokin quickly turned from agreement on the general evolutionary and comparative perspectives in the interpretation of a social system to a polarity of disagreement on specific concepts and the context within which the course of the emergence of industrialism in the West is interpreted. Partly because the threefold classification of ideational, idealistic, and sensate cultures, apparently crucial in Sorokin’s interpretation of the dynamic nature of the social system, was sterile in empirical research; partly because the economic interpretation of rational action, the division of labor, and the rise of modern industrial capitalism in the West have a pervasive influence, Sorokin’s all-embracing theory of types of culture gave way to Parsonsian “pattern variables.” As a consequence, empirical research in American sociology of the last twenty years has largely ignored Sorokinian theory.

The academic “crisis” of sociology as a discipline during the last three decades which harassed Sorokin may only be paralleled by the world’s social and political “crisis” of which Sorokin is both a keen observer and a critic. To Sorokin the reign of abstract empiricism in sociology is a tragic development, all the more, in that the decadent sensate culture portends the downfall of Western culture. In the study of a social system over substantial periods of time global macro-perspectives require an inordinate amount of sifting and seasoning before such perspectives can be satisfactorily adjudicated by the reali-

ties of a fast-changing world. Nevertheless, at the age of 76, Sorokin was overwhelmingly given the highest honor by his professional colleagues. During the same year, several significant committees of the American Sociological Association, reflecting Sorokin's lifetime interests, were set up. Among these committees are: the Committee for Translating Foreign Literature; and the Committee on War and Conflict.

Sorokin was born in a village of northeastern Russia. Before the Russian Revolution he secured a teaching and research position at the University of St. Petersburg. In 1914 he published a major monograph on crime and punishment. A treatise on sociology was published in 1919. He served as secretary to Alexander Kerensky in 1917, and later was arrested by the Communists and sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted to exile. He came to the University of Minnesota after two years spent in Czechoslovakia. At Minnesota he completed Social Mobility (1927) and in the following year, the publication of Contemporary Sociological Theories made him a pioneer in both fields. These works are still regarded as major systematic studies. In Sorokin's lifetime, his research has covered a wide spectrum: Sociology of Revolution (1925), Rural Sociology (1929 and 1930-32, 4 vols.), Social and Cultural Dynamics (1937-41, in 4 vols.), Time Budgets of Human Behavior (1939), Crisis of Our Age (1941), Man and Society in Calamity (1942), Socio-cultural Causality, Space, Time (1943), Russia and the United States (1944), Society, Culture and Personality (1947), Reconstruction of Humanity (1948), Altruistic Love (1950), Social Philosophies of an Age of Crisis (1950), S.O.S. The Meaning of our Crisis (1951), The Ways and Power of Love (1954), Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology (1956), The American Sex Revolution (1957), Power and Morality (1959), and no less than a hundred scientific papers and articles. Nor has his productivity ceased.

His work has been inspired and shaped by several conceptual foundations. The first is that social phenomena have their historical continuity and future direction of development. Thus, almost all the topics treated by Sorokin have dynamic dimensions—for example, one of his primary concerns is with “change” rather than the structure of the social system. Sorokin's works typically draw rich source materials from historiography. Sometimes, his generalizations about recurring historical events have so far broken traditional disciplinary boundaries that he has been called a philosopher of history. Secondly, Sorokin always maintains that social change as well as deviant developments of a society are inherent in the social system and that they are not introduced by outside agents. This organic view of society anticipated the development of the functional school in American sociology. The famous essay on social stratification and its functions by Davis and Moore (American Sociological Review, 1945), for example, offered arguments anticipated by Sorokin some twenty years earlier. Thirdly, Sorokin contends that what are now considered as “social problems” such as war, crime, delinquency, depression, and the rising divorce rates, are not caused by situational factors but are the
necessary consequences of a decadent sensate and materialistic culture. To relate delinquency to poor housing or to slum living is neither scientific, accurate, nor fruitful. Modern international conflict stems from the institutional complex of capitalism, the nationalist movement, and value-conflict rather than from population pressures. Fourthly, Sorokin has been preoccupied by the nature of revolution as characteristic of our time. He has repeatedly warned that the crisis of humanity today is the crisis of Western culture and is characteristic of a decadent sensate culture. In his autobiography, *A Long Journey* (1963), Sorokin recalls the many existential and intellectual factors that account for the main topics of his works. His concern with the *crisis of our age* is both an intellectual and existential experience in his painstaking search for answers to more basic questions. To understand hatred and destruction, their nature, sources, and effects, he sought the answer in the opposite forces of sympathy, mutual aid, and unselfish love. For more than a decade, Sorokin devoted his entire energy to the Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism, and from this dedication issued his *Reconstruction of Humanity* (1948), *The Ways and Power of Love* (1954), *Forms and Techniques of Altruistic and Spiritual Growth* (1954), *Altruistic Love* (1950), and *Explorations in Altruistic Love and Behavior* (1950). Finally, Sorokin’s work seeks to find cross-culture generalization of the causes and effects of social change. His method combines the historical and comparative. Recent studies in sociology and psychology have been, by and large, based on data collected in the United States and western Europe, and have been concerned more with the development of institutions and personality within the context of industrial and capitalist economy. In one sense, Sorokin’s perspective transcends the institutional level and encompasses the sociocultural level in his study of social and personality phenomena.

Publications and achievement reveal the strength of Sorokin’s conceptual foundation. The latter, however, is the very ground on which many of his critics challenge him. The heart of Sorokin’s position; that is, the classification of ideational, idealistic, and sensate cultures—in treating the meaningful integration of values with social and personal conduct is frequently considered a major weakness of his theory. His critics, for instance, cite what they believe to be a tendency to excessively simplified generalization about the uniformity of “response” of individuals in a sociocultural system.

The ideational pattern of cultural orientation is one in which truth is revealed by the grace of God through His prophets or oracles. It is absolutistic, nonutilitarian, and nonpragmatic. Idealistic truth represents a synthesis of sensory and supersensory forms. Sensate truth finds the only true value to be sensory, and cognition is derived only through sense organs. It denies supersensory reality altogether. In *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, where he treated these topics extensively, Sorokin made a case for the existence of a kind of truth rising above and replacing all of these. It is a pattern of cultural orientation based on all three types and he called it the integral truth (*Social and Cultural Dynamics*, IV, 758, 762-763, and passim). “The empirico-
sensory aspect of it is given by the truth of the senses; the rational aspect, by the truth of reason; the super-rational aspect by the truth of faith.” Since a harmonious integration of three types has not been achieved by any civilization in the past, no group, however advanced, has been wholly, that is, integrally creative. The achievement of Greece was in the fine arts and philosophy, that of Rome in the creation of a political system with elaborate codes of military and legal apparatus; the Hebrews were creative in religion, ethics, and literature; medieval society developed Christianity and created organizational methods; the Western world is known for scientific and technological development. Sorokin’s analysis of the “patterns of discovery” and specialized achievement clearly distinguishes him from the works of Danilevsky, Spengler, Toynbee, and F. S. C. Northrop.

Aside from his careful and scientific inquiries into sociocultural processes and their consequences, Sorokin is not merely a scientist, a historian, a philosopher, a psychologist, he is, above all, a critic of society and humanity. Throughout his writings there has been a diffused pattern combining a system of theoretical concepts, supported by an enormous amount of data, with criticism of the inherent weakness of the Western world’s decadent culture. In this combination Sorokin has become increasingly vulnerable both as scientist and critic.

It is difficult for anyone to evaluate the mass of Sorokin’s publications over the past thirty-five years. A few paragraphs, however, can be devoted to his central thesis on the structure of the meaningful orientation of the supercultural system and his negative attitudes toward microsociological research in general.

On the first point, three related theoretical issues may be raised concerning the decline of supersensory truth in the Western world. The first concerns a more basic conceptual problem of the relationships between the value orientation and the psychological processes of cognition, or the relationships between a more stable structure of the sociocultural system and the personality system. Sorokin suggests that the relationship may be isomorphic; that is, for one type of sociocultural orientation, there is a corresponding psychological type, the varying degree of integration notwithstanding. Furthermore, he suggests that a new system of meanings takes form first as a mere mental conception. “It must first somehow be objectified through vehicles and then socialized through becoming known to other human beings. If the conception of an ideological system may be compared to the conception of an organism, its objectification may be likened to the birth of an organism” (Society, Culture, and Personality, p. 555). But mental conception must be channeled through interaction with other individuals and, if it is functionally integrated into the larger social system, it will merge with other congenial minor systems. Sorokin’s failure to take into consideration the reciprocal influence of the institutional norms and the individual’s mental conceptions in the process of change may account for his overcommitment to organicism and for his conception of the great supersystems. To attribute the rising rate of suicide to the excessive sensate and materialistic orientation may be justifiable from the macroanalytical viewpoint, but it rarely
explains the internal variations of suicide within one population group and their psychological causes. For example, Henry and Short (Suicide and Homicide, 1954) reported that while suicide increases in depression and decreases in prosperity, crimes of violence against persons increase in prosperity and decrease during depression. Furthermore, although suicide of all categories increases during depression, the degree of increase is greatest among the high status categories. As we examine the suicide and homicide rates by moving down the status scale, suicide as a response to business depression decreases and homicide as a response to business prosperity increases. These studies of differential response to a larger cultural and social system by members of different social groupings suggest that social phenomena must be differentiated not only by the nature of responses, but also by the very origin of socioinstitutional causations.

The second theoretical issue, concerning the decline of supersensory truth, the decline of selfless devotion and altruistic love or the change from religiosity to a decline of religiousness, deserves more attention. Sorokin's contention is that religiosity is associated with an individual's transcendental orientation only in the sense of otherworldliness. This is to say that, so far as religious interests are concerned, a religious person will tend to renounce all of the "practical" affairs which involve institutionalized obligations. He will, therefore, tend to be oriented to the reduction of mundane desires. Weber's distinction of "other-worldly" and "inner-worldly" orientations in religiosity suggested that "religious experience" issuing from the pattern of differentiation and integration between religious organization and other parts of the supersystem may vary. Where religiosity is high, the choice of one alternative leads to religious rejection of the world in the name of religious values, and the choice of another leads to an orientation that enjoins mastery over the world in the same name of religious values. This argument suggests another theoretical point: the institutionalization of religious values, whereby they become part of the larger sociocultural system itself, has been neglected in Sorokin's own thinking.

When, perhaps only when, the religious nature of inner-world orientation became paramount in the Western world, then human organization itself had to be taken into consideration as values and meanings in the study of social phenomena. Weber not only talked about profit-making, he also talked about methodical work, withdrawal of status respect, objective and universalistic criteria in evaluating achievement, the structural component of modern society, and the institutional apparatus for attaining instrumental goals; all have their origin in the orientation to work as response to a calling. What was first an element of religiousness or moral awakening on the part of an individual was later institutionalized and became a part of the social system. On the other hand, the social system requires a special type of personality integration exemplified by status independence, affectional neutrality, and asceticism, for a more "efficient" adjustment to the system itself. How religious values and orientations are differentiated from the institutionalized belief systems of a society was,
perhaps, not clearly brought out in Sorokin's works. For example, it
will be recalled that ascetic Protestantism, with a complex syndrome
of respect for cleanliness and independence, was considered to be
associated with the cult for privacy in the Western world. The empha-
sis on privacy was transmuted into the need for sensitivity to, and
respect for, the rights of others. It is perhaps not so much a question
of the decline of spontaneous love as love must be expressed through
the appropriate institutional framework. The respect for indepen-
dence and privacy, and the ultimate expression of economic indi-
vidualism, extends to familial relationships and there has developed
"... a certain refinement and spiritual and ethical penetration of
marital relationships, with a blossoming of matrimonial chivalry"
264). This development may well be reflected in the overexaggerated
importance of affection in the contemporary personality; especially,
perhaps, in the universalistic presence of strong affectivity in the
nuclear family.

The need for spontaneous expression of affection is the result of
inner-world religious orientation, instigated by the ascetic nature of
Protestanm. The expression of the need for affection may take a
number of forms; but, by and large, all large scale organized chari-
ties had their beginnings in countries under Protestant auspices.
Elizabeth Fry, an English Quaker, established a nursing school in
London in 1840 to work among the poor. Florence Nightingale was
inspired by the priggish atmosphere engendered by the intense reli-
gious feelings of post-Napoleonic times. The Red Cross movement
received its impetus from two citizens of Geneva, the birthplace of
Calvinism. Various laws against cruelty to animals and to children
had their origin in England. William Booth, the founder of the
Salvation Army, was a Methodist. In equating the decline of other-
worldly religiosity with the decline of altruistic love, Sorokin over-
looked the institutional structure of the Western world.

Henceforth, the second point under discussion is the theoretic
foundation of Sorokin's methods of inquiry. The current battle of
macro- versus microsociological investigations is still on. Sorokin's
commitment to a broader view of the historical forces which shape
the contemporary social system has two important aspects: the em-
phasis on the continuity of sociocultural systems; and the irreversible
trends of social change which can be extrapolated into the future.
While it is indisputable that the historical element plays an important
role in what happens today and in what we are now, how valid are
the inferences that can be drawn from past to present and to future
conditions? Identical historical elements, even if they are enumerated
accurately and identified carefully, may have different results depen-
dent on how such elements are combined. Without a careful analysis
of the kinds of detailed relationships among various components of
the social system, a valid generalization based on a bold stroke of the
pen can hardly be satisfactory. Sorokin's own study of social mobility
may here serve as a point of discussion. He reports, for example, in-
creasing economic inequality during certain periods and a leveling of
such differences at other times. Variations of economic inequality within one society, according to Sorokin, are an indication of some unknown forces which act as checks. He maintains that the tendency of a society to increase economic inequality and the countervailing forces are "natural." He does this by giving a series of historical illustrations (Social and Cultural Mobility, pp. 46-47). He fails to be precise, however, on what the factors are: which are positive and which are negative, and how do they work in the social system. Furthermore, it is doubtful that such factors, whether positive or negative, in causing the natural increase of economic inequality work the same way in a preindustrial society as they do in a highly industrialized economy. In the latter case, for example, the automated economy sets free production forces which are unknown in a less developed economy and which may tend to bridge the gap between strata with respect to the style of living and other sociomedical differentials.

At any rate, the moral of all this is not so much that Sorokin is wrong about the stratification processes when he overlooks the necessity to go beyond a general theory or fails to see the advantages of having "middle range" theory or even a "bottom range" theory about social phenomena. Most sociologists today consider that even the effort to write grand theory in sociology is premature without the necessary stages of description, delineation of concepts, and establishment of a small number of propositions that are valid in several diverse contexts. Thus, to most sociologists Sorokin's "imperialistic" view of sociology is shocking, for Sorokin claims all aspects of all social phenomena as the proper realm of sociology. In current sociology there are many efforts to establish theories of middle range, or "partial theories," like the partial theories of optics and thermodynamics in physics: Merton's theory of relative deprivation, Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, Homans' theory of elementary social behavior, and Murdock's theory of kinship structures. To encourage the careful investigation of small scope, micro-social phenomena and the cumulation of a large array of lower range partial theories does not necessarily mean that an inclusive theory about the science of society is impossible. If inclusiveness is considered a matter of degree, as Zetterberg stated (On Theory and Verification in Sociology, 1963), efforts to encompass two or more partial theories and integrate them into a grand theory would be desirable. Sorokin's inclusive theory, then, should be complemented by current sociological efforts to integrate a large number of propositions and by endeavors designed to advance and strengthen sociology by closer cooperation between micro- and macroinvestigators.

—William T. Liu

YVES SIMON ON NATURAL LAW*

The late Yves Simon works carefully and with assurance in his