

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Reconstruction of Humanity* by Pitirim A. Sorokin

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CRITICAL REVIEWS

The Reconstruction of Humanity. By PITIRIM A. SOROKIN. Boston: Beacon Press, 1948. 247 pages. \$3.00.

The Reconstruction of Humanity stands in logical sequence to the series of sociological interpretations that Professor Pitirim Sorokin has published since his monumental *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937). Those four volumes, though concerned with a general theory of culture, clearly indicated Professor Sorokin's criticism of our present age: that it was a typically "sensate" culture, founded on an exclusive belief in sensations as a source of meaning and "reality," and that this very fact tended to undermine its existence—since only a supersensate or ideational culture could do justice to all the more significant aspects of human experience.

Sorokin's next boom addressed to the public at large—for he has published various systematic texts in sociology—was largely a condensation of his *Dynamics: The Crisis of our Age*, which came out in 1941. Here, restating in briefer form his general theory of social development, his diagnosis became even sharper, as the disintegration of the West itself became more obvious. At the end he observed: "Our remedy demands a complete change of contemporary mentality, a fundamental transformation of our system of values, and the profoundest modification of our conduct toward other men, cultural values, and the world at large." Drawing his conclusions from similar periods in the past, he reduced the change to a "compact formula: Crisis—ordeals—catharsis—charisma—resurrection." This conclusion was only briefly framed at the end of the book; it called for a more detailed statement, and that the author seeks to provide in his new work, *The Reconstruction of Humanity*.

The thesis of Sorokin's new book is that all detailed plans for improving the present situation through creating a world government or correcting the existing capitalist economy or through this or that program of education are insubstantial or insufficient because they do not envisage any major change in the agent that is to carry them out, namely, in man himself, in his propensities, his purposes, his ideals. Sorokin believes that this major change involves the

deliberate fostering of "creative altruism," a term that seems to be the precise equivalent of what Kropotkin, in his classic treatise, called "Mutual Aid." Unfortunately the pages devoted to the regeneration of the personality, the very core of any effort at achieving altruism, make up only a quarter of the book; and at the very point at which Sorokin has something fresh to say, not already indicated in his previous works, he leaves the reader grasping, not exactly at straws, but at hastily improvised life-rafts and distant life-preservers. We must look forward to still another book to bring Sorokin's positive doctrines to the necessary stage of concreteness and pragmatic application.

The present book has the virtues and defects of Professor Sorokin's earlier works—both in great abundance. Like his nearest rival, Arnold Toynbee, he is a scholar who carries on his shoulders a tremendous burden of scholarly research, but—and here the parallel perhaps still applies—his thought is sometimes confused, rather than clarified, by his very erudition. Though he condemns the habits of our "sensate culture," to use his own term, he frequently succumbs to them, as in his statement on page 118 that there has been a "decrease of the ethics of absolute principles from 100 per cent in the Middle Ages to 57 per cent between 1900 and 1920": a use of pseudo-statistics that should make the rawest Ph.D. blush. In spite of Sorokin's passionate belief in the values of grace and love, his recent works do not show any considerable increase in the proportion of these qualities as his insight has deepened. Though he is properly critical, for example, of Dr. Sigmund Freud's ideological mistakes, he does not acknowledge the real gains in psychological insight which Freud effected, including the fact that Freud, by his original act of reinterpreting the dream and demonstrating its meaningfulness, laid one of the foundation stones of a more ideational culture, which will respect the autonomous functions of the personality. His wholesale disparagement of Freud does not, however, prevent him from availing himself of insights directly derived from Freud's work.

Finally, Sorokin casts doubts upon the value of many of his more profound generalizations by

interlarding his book with many palpably exaggerated or false judgments, such as the statement that "the twentieth century has not produced a single genius in any field of art comparable to the greatest creative geniuses of the preceding centuries or even to the foremost masters of the nineteenth century." In short, in Sorokin's own person, both catharsis and charisma seem to have fallen short of the requirements of the situation he has diagnosed. There is more of unregenerate Saul than of charitable Paul in his judgments; and one would be more confident of his program for "reconstructing" humanity if he himself incarnated, in a greater degree, the qualities he holds necessary for mankind's redemption.

If as a prophet Sorokin's weaknesses are fatal ones, as a sociologist he nevertheless, despite all his painful weaknesses, demonstrates a fuller insight into the nature of society and the disintegration of our own age than do many of his colleagues, who commit fewer sins of semantics and logic and who show less irascible contempt for those who are in disagreement with them. With such exceptions as Malinowski, Radin, and Kroeber in anthropology, Sorokin is one of the few American sociologists who has done something like justice to the higher human functions. His sociological schema gives full place not only to the social processes and to the cultural heritage but to the purposive, goal-seeking elements in the human personality. Unlike Freud, he does not dismiss religion as a childish violation of human reason. At the same time, his insight into the underlying unity of the higher religions keeps him from attributing supreme truth to the Christian religion and true godhood solely to its own savior; in marked contrast to Toynbee, he thus avoids the easy archaism of suggesting reversion to some historic form of Christianity as the one force capable of saving our civilization. So, too, though his insights are associated with his system of sociology, that system is in fact a very comprehensive one; so he differs from another wide-ranging interpreter, F. S. C. Northrop, in being less confined to a wooden set of categories, as arbitrarily defined and separated as Northrop's theoretic and aesthetic components. Much of *The Reconstruction of Humanity*, it is true, consists in a series of verbal injunctions, without either method or appropriate discipline, as ineffective to produce a change as Milton said medicine would be if it followed only the method of the preacher and merely exhorted the patient verbally to get well.

But he who reads Sorokin's work with a fuller charity than Sorokin himself applies to most of his contemporaries will also find a mind well grounded in man's history and culture who has carried through in detail those fundamental insights into the present disintegration of Western civilization which Henry Adams first presented half a century ago. Unlike his emotionally unawakened and therefore intellectually more limited colleagues in sociology, Sorokin has earnestly set himself the task, hopeless to those who are without faith in superconscious processes and axial transformations, of summoning up the forces of life and laying down the basis for a new era founded on love and mutual aid—love enlarged beyond the narrow boundaries of sexuality and mutual aid capable of encompassing the eventual unity of mankind. Sorokin's over-all purpose and his emotional readiness help to transcend and partly nullify his disturbing, and sometimes almost disrupting, weaknesses. Unfortunately, those who have not by themselves come to the same conclusions as Sorokin will probably lack the patience and sympathy to overlook his solecisms and to grapple with his essential contribution.

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Meaning in History. By KARL LÖWITH. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949. 257 pages. \$4.00.

The catastrophes of modern history have created a new interest in the interpretation of history; for contemporary experiences prove that the "settled" convictions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about the meaning of history have less than the "eternal" validity which our culture, in its heyday, ascribed to them. Professor Löwith's profound discussion of the philosophies of history is an important and profound contribution to the reorientation of modern man to the enigma of the drama of history.

The work is essentially an analysis of modern progressive interpretations against the background of Christian interpretations. The author adopts the intriguing method of reading the history of thought backward, beginning with Burckhardt and ending with the biblical view of history. In this review he considers particularly the thought of Burckhardt, Marx, Hegel, Proudhon, Comte, Condorcet and Turgot, Vico,