

Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology and Related Sciences. By Piritim A. Sorokin.
Pp. viii, 357. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1956. \$10.00.

Professor Sorokin is now at Harvard. Formerly head of the Department of Sociology, he has now, in retirement, founded an Institute 'which aims to study, develop and test principles of altruism and creativity'. He graduated from the University of Petrograd and was an active revolutionary under the Tsarist regime in Russia and a member of the revolutionary Constituent Assembly in 1917. But he publicly renounced politics in 1918, giving his reasons in a letter reproduced in *Pravda* which was the subject of a homily by Lenin entitled 'Valuable Admissions by Piritim Sorokin'.¹ He continued his academic work, holding various posts until 1922, when he again came to Lenin's notice. A copy of a journal *The Economist* was rashly sent with an approving note to Lenin by a young economist who, as Lenin indulgently suggested 'probably had no time to acquaint himself with its contents'.² Alas for Sorokin who was a contributor, the journal turned out on inspection by Lenin to be 'an organ of the modern feudalists, disguised of course, under a cloak of science, democracy and so forth'. Sorokin's contribution in particular, entitled 'The Influence of the War', dealing among other things with the rising divorce rate, incurred Lenin's wrath and he was exiled abroad—as the official account puts it, 'for attempting to smuggle through counter-revolutionary ideas in his lectures and writings'.³ He went eventually to America where he was given a chair in Sociology, first at Minnesota and later at Harvard, and many American sociologists of repute studied under him and doubtless owe him a substantial intellectual debt, positive or negative as the case may be.

His writings swing pendulum-fashion between the sublime and the ridiculous. He has to his credit works in Russian on the sociology of law, on Tolstoy as philosopher, and on 'Social Politics', and standard works in English on social mobility, rural sociology and contemporary sociological theories. He has also undertaken and reported on run-of-the-mill experimental work (e.g. *Time Budgets of Human Behaviour*, 1939, 'one hundred and six experienced persons were asked to write on a special sheet each evening how they were going to spend the next twenty-four hours . . . next day, with the aid of special supervisors, they had to check how they actually spent the

¹ V. I. Lenin. Selected Works, Volume VIII.

² Op. cit. Vol. XI, p. 78.

³ Op. cit. Vol. VIII. Explanatory notes, p. 411.

twenty-four hours' and so on). He is perhaps best known for his four-volume treatise on Social and Cultural Dynamics, which has been followed by numerous excursions into social philosophy, theoretical and applied, culminating in two books published in 1954, *The Ways and Power of Love*, and a symposium, *Forms and Techniques of Altruism and Spiritual Growth*. His erudition is reminiscent, among sociologists, of Pareto, as also the sputtering eruptive quality of his polemical style, with its indignant, arrogant overtones.

This his latest book presents a lengthy attack on 'scientism' in modern sociology and psychology. One needs only a nodding acquaintance with work in these fields to be familiar with the objects of his anger and contempt: 'obtuse jargon and sham scientific slang'; 'amnesia and the discoverer's complex' (i.e. ignorance of, or failure to acknowledge the relevant work of forerunners, and exaggerated claims to pioneer status), 'testomania'; 'quantophrenia' (i.e. the cult of quantification and sham mathematics in the social sciences); 'the grand cult of Social Physics and Mental Mechanics' (i.e. the slavish adoption by social scientists of the aims and methods of the natural sciences—sham experimental methods and sham 'objectivism'). One's first inclination, on this side of the Atlantic (having taken a reassuring glance at the index of names, to find only one reference to a British sociological work—not adverse), is to enjoy the fun of this onslaught by an early and influential enthusiast for quantitative and experimental methods in the social sciences. No words are spared; the indictment is massive and far from sober, matching in its intemperance the enormities against which it is directed, of which a hair-raising selection is used for purposes of illustration.

But when the fun is over and the *Schadenfreude* dissipated, we have to confess to a hollow feeling of dissatisfaction that we seem to have no clearer ideas than before about the real problem at issue.

Professor Sorokin does not really make out a case—he fulminates indiscriminately—against the fads and foibles which arise from the compulsive striving of social scientists for scientific status. But in so far as he can be said to follow an argument, it is that the heart of the matter is the failure of social scientists to understand that which they are trying to imitate. Their efforts reveal a conception of principles and procedures in the natural sciences which is at best ill-informed and antiquated, and at worst downright false. If social scientists only knew how the notions of physical determinism and causality have been overtaken in the natural sciences by developments in quantum mechanics and atomic theory, they would be less anxious to flaunt their supposedly 'scientifically objective' approach to the social reality in which they are, in fact, inextricably involved; and they would find release from the thralldom of fruitless analysis of meaningless 'congeries' of 'socio-cultural facts' and from arid insistence on the importance of quantification and the achievement of results with predictive value.

The view that social scientists are misled by misunderstanding the natural scientific method has been formulated and developed much more profoundly by Professor Popper in his essays on Historicism and elsewhere.

But whereas Popper seeks to show that, with a proper conception, any distinction of method between the natural and social sciences is both unnecessary and productive of serious error—taking his stand on the slogan 'unity of scientific method'—Professor Sorokin sponsors something he calls 'the meaningful-causal method' for the social sciences. The peculiarity of this method consists in the use of logic and intuition (and especially, as it turns out, of intuition) as aids to the detection of 'socio-cultural systems' of which the constituent interrelationships, the object of sociological investigation, are 'meaningfully-causally determined', or in other words, functionally interdependent.

Professor Sorokin's distinctive idiom does not make for clarity. The notion of 'social system', and the meaningful element in social causality which distinguishes it from statistical relationships of association or correlation are sociological commonplaces; the notion of sequences of cause and effect is largely replaced by that of functional dependence; and the use of 'logic and intuition' to construct sociological models is certainly not a novelty. But even if the notion of 'meaningful causality' were both peculiar to the social sciences (which it is not) and a methodological innovation (which, again, it is not); and even if the role of intuition is far greater than is commonly appreciated both in the natural and in the social sciences (about which Professor Sorokin and the distinguished natural scientists he quotes may well be right), it does not seem to follow that we can do away with the need to apply standard scientific treatment to problems in the social sciences. Whatever our problems and however selected, they must be broken down into empirically testable propositions and we must constantly seek to refine and develop our techniques of testing, including experiment with and quantification of unpromising data. No-one has shown that modern concepts of relativity and chance in the study of the physical universe involve the abandonment of objective techniques of experiment and quantification.

It is true that there are confidence-tricksters (as well as fools) among the empiricists in the social sciences. But the cardinal sin of the honest men among them is not that they are empiricists, or even that they are working with a false theory of cognition and outmoded notions of determinism and causality, but that they have got the bit between their teeth and are neglecting the part that theory should play in helping them to choose their problems and make their findings cumulative. This is no new development. More than half a century ago, Max Weber quoted approvingly F. Th. Vischer's distinction between 'subject-matter specialists' and 'interpretative specialists' and his comment that 'the fact-greedy gullet of the former can be filled only with legal documents, statistical work-sheets and questionnaires, but he is insensitive to the refinement of a new idea. The gourmandise of the latter dulls his taste for facts by ever new intellectual subtleties'.¹ At that time the social sciences suffered from a surfeit of theory rather than of fact, but the problem of the divorce between theory and empirical enquiry was in principle the same as now.

The divorce between theory and empirical enquiry is a sign of scientific immaturity. In its contemporary form it also reflects the circumstances of the recent development of the social sciences—in particular, their marriage with policy in industry and government which is largely responsible for an undisciplined spread of interest over a wide field, and a tendency to investigate a multitude of more or less unrelated problems rather than to select those likely to make the maximum theoretical contribution.

Professor Sorokin himself has always represented a laudable, if sometimes ill-assorted and unbalanced alliance of theory and observation. Readers must turn to his other works to judge for themselves whether his current emphasis on the cognitive value of intuition improves his theoretical contribution and results in more fruitful observation.