
Review

Reviewed Work(s): SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF TODAY by P. A. Sorokin

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made as to the degree of deviation of youth from Traditional pattern. The last chapter is a summarised qualitative analysis of change firstly, in the context of youth's own deviation from or conformity to tradition and secondly, in regard to the cumulative consequences of these specific changes to the overall process of socio-cultural dynamics of Indian Society.

The upshot of Dr. Shah's study is that mostly the value system and attitude of college youth is neither traditional nor fully deviated from tradition. In majority of cases there is partial deviation. This substantiates the view that a synthesis between tradition and modernity is taking place in the value system of educated youth in India. The study also reveals that education is confined mostly to the upper caste and well-to-do section in India, and hence education instead of being means of status mobility tends to confirm existing pattern of ascribed status.

Yogendra Singh

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF TODAY by P. A. Sorokin, Harper & Row, 1966, pp. 679, price \$10.00.

Sociological Theories of Today by P. A. Sorokin is a severe indictment of contemporary sociology. There is very little that he likes, still less that he admires and a great deal that he actually condemns. Sorokin's fantastic scholarship is evident throughout. Anything like a complete review of the book is out of question—as much due to limitation of space as due to limitations of the reviewer. Only general comments are offered and only a few issues are picked up, enough, one hopes, to lead the reader on to the book itself.

Although Sorokin claims it to be a sequel to his *Contemporary Sociological Theories*, the style and purpose is not unlike his *Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology and Related Sciences*. (And frequent references to *Fads and Foibles* in the book under review confirms it.) The structure of Sorokin's presentation is somewhat like this: after giving a summary account of the school or the author (in which some distortion is inevitable), he offers his criticism—pungent, erudite and devastating, with a generous overlay of, what according to him, are suitable adjectives. The general strategy is two-fold—(i) to show how this or that ancient philosopher discovered this or that truth much earlier and generally in a much better way than the 'puny' sociologists of today; and (ii) to show how contem-

porary sociologists have miserably failed in achieving whatever they have set out to achieve, whether it is measuring a truth or discovering a truth.

Sorokin has the exasperating habit of opening the door of sociological mansion so wide that almost any one can walk in. No credentials are required. Not only does he grant them free admission but not unoften, gives them the pride of place. And older the guest, more honoured his place. His partial truth, stray observations, intuitively perceived insights are highly acclaimed, without even modest examination. Contemporary attempts at scientifically establishing what has been intuitively known is not appreciated by Sorokin and failures are critically noted.

Considerable controversy in the book revolves round origin of ideas—modern sociologists claiming to discover something which Sorokin avers was known for a long time. Now, ideas have a peculiar history of birth and growth in that one father never suffices. An idea grows in precision and power as it finds new fathers. Any idea that is worthwhile has typically not come to full fruition at the hands of a single protagonist. And it is perhaps legitimate, in a qualified sense, for each successive protagonist to claim 'discovery' if he has added something valuable to or removed something valueless from the idea.

Sorokin not only acknowledges intuitively perceived knowledge as valid but, it would appear, he values it more. He seems to contend that human behaviour is not amenable to scientific study. "The reason for the fallibility of all the mechanical tests are at hand. The first of these reasons was mentioned long ago by Montaigne: 'Man is a marvelous, vain, fickle, and unstable subject, and on whom it is very hard to form certain and uniform judgement'. The highly complex, creative, and plastic nature of man is the *main obstacles* to the validity of the psycho-social tests generally, and of mechanical tests particularly." (italics mine, pp. 68-69). When, to this inherent difficulty of the subject-matter (as seen by Sorokin) is added the clumsiness and inaccuracy of objective-experimental methods (as assessed by him*), Sorokin's anger and dissatisfaction becomes intelligible. Against this background, his admission that quantitative methods have suc-

* "The second main reason for the fallibility of the modern tests of personality and groups is the perfectly artificial and superficial character of the bulk of these tests". (p. 69.) There cannot to *two main* reasons for a thing—one may as well then have infinite number of *main* reasons. The issue is: Can human nature ever be measured even if perfect tests were available?

ceeded in certain areas of social life is heartening. “. . . however, a large portion of these quantitative studies represent a sincere effort to obtain real knowledge of the quantitative aspects of social, cultural and psychological realities, especially economic, demographic, and criminological phenomena. This sort of quantitative research should be encouraged.” (p. 101.) Although his rebuke* would seem to be justified, Sorokin forgets that one cannot decide in advance what is quantifiable and what is not. Attempts at quantifying what at a particular moment defies quantification must continually be made and such attempts will register many inevitable failures. Successes in quantification that Sorokin has chosen to applaud were not achieved in a day and they also have records of their failures. Failures are a necessary part of ongoing scientific endeavour.

Sorokin is most satisfied with the progress of macro-sociological studies of civilizations and high culture, to which branch of study he himself has made distinguished contributions. “The last few decades have produced . . . a rich harvest of impressive macrosociologies of great cultural and social systems. These theories, despite their shortcomings, are perhaps the greatest achievements of recent sociology and related sciences.” (p. 177). He devotes great deal of space to several authors in the field and some readers may have the feeling that proportionately far too many pages have been written on the subject.

Sociologists† will feel most interested in Sorokin’s review of recent theories of social system. “Recent theories of social systems have been less fruitful than those of cultural systems. Hardly any of the new theories gives us anything significantly new or any important improvement on the theories of the preceding periods. In comparison with their predecessors many new theories appear more primitive and shallow than adequate and precise.” (p. 392). And, on why it is so, Sorokin himself provides the answer, “One of the main reasons for the shortcomings of recent theories of social systems is the fact that almost all of those theories substantially ignore—deliberately or through ignorance—the invaluable scientific knowledge accumulated

* “Those quantitative studies that use quantitative methods incompetently, or apply them to phenomena that do not lend themselves, *as yet*, to quantification, or regard them as a sort of infallible magic that knows all and measures all should, on the other hand, be discouraged. Unfortunately, this sort of quantitative study occupies a large place in modern quantitative sociology.” (italics mine, p. 101.)

† Despite the narrow title, the book is very comprehensive in its scope, including subjects like psychology and anthropology. Hence specific mention of sociologists for this section.

and incorporated in these law codes and in the theoretical science of law.” (p. 394—note the word ‘main’ in the first sentence.) Undeniably legal system is of help in understanding a society but Sorokin is guilty of extravagant exaggeration when he says, “... the fully developed law codes precisely define practically all the important forms of social actions and relationships of each member of a given group of interacting individuals and prescribe a detailed ‘blue-print’ for all socially significant behaviour. Only actions and relationships that are socially unimportant are not included and not defined in the law codes.” (p. 393.) Legal systems do not completely map out the full range of even the normative system of a society, leave alone social behaviour of its members. (On range, variety, complexity and patterned evasion of norm, see *American Society* by Robin M. Williams.) One has only to realise how many people are unaware of how many laws in society and still go through life which clearly would be impossible if Sorokin’s contention be true. Legal systems are of marginal help when it comes to understanding social behaviour. What, for example, does one learn about behaviour when informed that (i) New York State permits divorce only on the ground of adultery, (ii) that sale and use of contraceptives are legally prohibited in Connecticut, (iii) that there was prohibition in the United States and there is prohibition in parts of India today, (iv) that every one is equal before law? Instances can be multiplied to show that the relationship between laws of a land and behaviour of its people is a problematic question, to be settled by empirical investigation in each case, and not taken for granted, as Sorokin, in unexpected naivete, does. And, so, his criticism of theories is at least misplaced, if not overdone.

Sorokin is understandably and expectedly harsh on T. Parsons, R. K. Merton, Marion Levy, G. Homans, etc., the group of contemporary sociologists who are among the most influential today and who are responsible, in his view, for the sorry state of affairs. Although in his last sentence of foot-note no. 41 on page 408, Sorokin says, “It is regretful that this part of Parson’s theorizing [meaning, the unproductive, ponderous and unclear part] has been imitated more than the correct part, which is the valuable part,” he fails to bring out this ‘valuable part’ in Parsons’ work in his not-too-brief criticism.* Ambiguity prevails in his critical assessment of others, and not unoften,

* Whatever Sorokin may say of Parsons’ work in his book, Parsons’ intellectual influence is far in excess of Sorokin’s, a question that merits serious answer. Neither Mills’ percentage distribution (whom Sorokin quotes) nor Sorokin’s own criticism provides the answer. For a balanced criticism of Parsons’ writings, see *Social Theories of T. Parson* edited by Max Black,

what has been vigorously criticised earlier is picked up for praise later. On Robert K. Merton:—*Criticism*: “What shall we say of these paradigms and codifications? About the same that we said of Parsons’ paradigms and schemes. If an investigator wishes to be guided by Merton’s paradigm, he must be an omniscient sociologist excellently versed in all branches, methods and problems of general and special sociologies.” (p. 451.) “It [the paradigm] does not give any specific method (or even a technique) of functional analysis, nor does it sum up the main results of such an analysis of the important problems of sociology Both [Parsons’ and Merton’s] are heuristically sterile, empirically useless, and logically cumbersome table of contents.” (pp. 451-2.) “Finally, a multitude of Merton’s proposition, especially in his theory of reference groups (chapters 8 and 9) represent a codification of trivialities dressed up as scientific generalizations. . . . This sort of triviality goes on and on throughout chapters 8 and 9, which deal with the centuries-old problems of social groups, called by Merton “reference groups”. *Praise*: “Merton’s theory of reference groups represents a thoughtful but fragmentary and incidental codification or recapitulation of several—more systematic—theories of social groups.” (pp. 452-3.) “Although his contributions in the field of social systems or “reference group” have been important, they have been limited.” (p. 456). (And this after a thorough criticism of *The American Soldier* from which reference group theory is derived.) In his foot-note no. 21 on page 455, Sorokin says, “The main contributions of Merton to sociology consist not so much in his theory of functionalism and of reference groups as in his thoughtful studies in the sociology of knowledge and science, psycho-social anomie, bureaucracy, radio and film propaganda, manifest and latent functions, and other empirical investigations with specific social theories involved.” And, one would like to ask Sorokin, what is manifest and latent function if not functional analysis? On George C. Homans:—*Criticism*: “That Homans’ knowledge of many fields he discusses so cavalierly is limited is evident in his reiterated claims to have discovered “small groups”, “informal organisations”, and new insights into the “institutional” and “sub-institutional” forms of behaviour and norms, and to have achieved a “new synthesis” of sociological theory. It is also evident from the sources he refers to in his work.” (p. 538). ‘By their fruits ye shall know them’ What sort of cognitive fruits have Homans’ studies given to us? *Most* of his substantive propositions and generalizations can be classified into three *defective* classes: partially wrong and inadequate; platitudinous and tautological; indeterminate and vague.” (p. 539, italics mine.) *Praise*: “Homans’ studies have their own—and not insignificant merits.” (p. 551) “ . . . , his combined use of the data, theories, and methods of animal and human

psychology, economics, and sociology for understanding important psycho-social realities deserves a warm commendation: It gives to all investigators of human behaviour and social systems an example worthy of imitation." (p. 552. This "warm commendation" comes after accusing Homans of limited knowledge.) "Homans must also be commended for verifying his deductive propositions by relevant empirical facts." (p. 551) And this after roundly criticizing Homans for blindly accepting others' data as true. "Anyone who knows anything about such anthropological and sociological investigations knows well that many of them are fantastic and incorrect and that only an insignificant portion of them are free from gross errors and misinterpretations. One can but envy Homans' trust in the infallibility of the five field studies on which his work relies ... His theories are based upon hearsay-stuff taken from other investigators." (p. 537). And hearsay stuff becomes empirical fact! The only sociologist who escapes altogether unscathed in the volume is P. A. Sorokin.

The healing touch in the last section is not at all successful. After tearing every one's work to pieces, his optimism will sound, to use an often-employed word in the volume, sham. If Sorokin has been able to carry his reader through the book, his last section will leave him thoroughly unconvinced.

How does one feel when a leading member of the profession writes the kind of book under review here? The faint-hearted among us will feel too dejected to easily recuperate and the stout-hearted may not care for many of his criticisms. Sorokin has occupied a very exalted place in intellectual life; at Harvard, he attracted many brilliant students some of whom are distinguished names in sociology today—Robert Merton, Kinsley Davis, Wilbert Moore, Marion Levy, Robert Bales, Robert Bierstedt and a host of others. Why is it that Sorokin has exercised so little influence on the course of American sociology when many of his own students have been leaders in this phase of development? This is not a tiny question that concerns only Sorokin but belongs to the field of sociology of knowledge. Perhaps Sorokin will some day address himself to this task and will give us another monumental volume.

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