

OUTLOOK

SOROKIN'S JOURNEY: FROM EASTERN EUROPE TO EASTERN EUROPE

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Balla, B., Srubar, I. and Albrecht, M. (Hrsg.): *Pitirim A. Sorokin. Leben, Werk und Wirkung. Beiträge zur Osteuropaforschung.* [Pitirim A. Sorokin. Life, Work and Influence.] Hamburg: Kramer, 2002.

The East Central European Working Group that has been organized into a special section of the *German Sociological Association* under the guidance of *Bálint Balla* during the years after the change of the system has been continuously appearing with its publications since 1994. The editors of the publications, namely *Bálint Balla*, Emeritus Professor of the *Technical University of Berlin* and *Anton Sterbling*, Senior Associate of the *Federal University of Military Science of Hamburg*, have been summarizing the presentations and comments of regional conferences dedicated to different topics of particular relevance in the Eastern part of Europe, with the help of occasional co-editors. The social scientists coming from many directions to join the life of the special section have been formed into a mature professional community by the regular opportunity of conferences and continuous working relationship. As it appears from the authors' list of publications the intellectual focus of gravity of the community is Berlin, besides the two big universities of the former Western part, the *TU* and the *Freie Universität* it is the *Humboldt* of East Berlin, also for the purpose of promoting the process of integration. In addition representatives of the centre for cultural sociology of Leipzig, of the universities of Kiel, Hamburg, Bremen, Erlangen, Klagenfurt and Salzburg of the German-speaking area, and social scientists of the broader region coming from Brno and Sofia, Ljubljana and Moscow, from the centres of Southern and Eastern Europe figure among the invited presenters of the conferences. Issues of social theory, related to the collapse of the Soviet system, figure in the focus of their interest. It is in this context that they deal with topics that have emerged in the transitory situation of the East European societies (national and minority problems, migration, assimilation), further on with the oeuvres of the classics of the history of sociology, such as of Max Weber, whose work deserves special attention regarding East European issues; and they are also engaged in getting acquainted with the special areas and orientations of national sociologies pursued

within a national framework (more or less isolated during the decades prior to the 90s). The most recent, sixth publication contains writings presenting and analyzing the career and the history of the influence of *Pitirim A. Sorokin's* oeuvre as discussed at the conference held in Ljubljana in September 2001.

The choice of the topic is particularly happy this time. Mostly because at the time of the increasingly criticized Americanization of East Central European sociology, the discovery of Sorokin's oeuvre turns attention to such an 'American' whose East-European roots, way of thinking, topical interest, researcher's constitution can be brought to natural proximity to the social problematic of the region in the situation of transition. Further on, also because in his case the epithet 'American' can be put in inverted commas and this in itself is remarkable. America accepted Sorokin, but Sorokin did not accept America, more exactly the American patterns of social science after World War II. His integration into America is a problematic one, as in the second part of his career he was excluded (by others? or by himself?) from sociology. His theory focusing on the elemental cohesive factors of altruism, affection, and solidarity could have been made fashionable by Etzioni's communitarism during the past two decades in America. But it did not make it fashionable. Finally, and last but not least Sorokin can be discovered not only by and for the Eastern part of Europe. During the past quarter of a century, disregarding ritual references made to his concept of *mobility*, his oeuvre has been hardly mentioned in manuals of and publications in sociology. *Vera Sparschuh's* paper on the integrality of Sorokin's interpretation of the world is one of the interesting writings of the volume, giving convincing dates of this forgotten state: according to the *Social Science Citation Index* kept up since 1956, so far 347 references can be linked to Sorokin's name and works. Of that number only 27 were made during the past ten years, mostly in publications by Russians, and particularly in relation to the study of transition.

Several contributors have shed light from different angles on the dramatic nature of Sorokin's career at the Ljubljana conference. Focusing on it the more important changes are worth recalling on the basis of writings by *Vera Sparschuh*, *Bálint Balla* and *Justin Stagl*.

If the orientation of a social scientist is linked to the elemental impulses of childhood and adolescence, then presumably Sorokin's interest in rural sociology and mobility, his respect for tradition, and the study of altruism, mostly absorbing his intellectual energy during the second part of his career, are rooted in the world of experiences of the closed communities of the area between the Rivers *Vichegda* and *Pechora* of the distant northern regions of the Russian Empire. His father was an itinerant craftsman, his mother was a Komi peasant woman; his uncle was the shaman of the village. The semi-pagan community where he was brought up preserved its own rites and myths while it was (more or less) integrated into the Orthodox Church. As a teenager he moved to the world of cities and joined the social revolutionary wing (Eser) of the anti-tsarist movements which, differing from social democrats, was also open towards the *narodnik* mentality and expected all strata of the society that had reform inclinations. He was arrested during his student years. He wrote his first book in 1913 on the sociological interpretation of vengeance and reprisal under the influence of his experiences in jail. By the late 1910s he was among the leading social scientists

of Saint Petersburg. The first Sociological Association of Russia was formed in 1916 upon his initiative. In the early phase of the revolution he was a supporter of Kerensky and a member of his government. He headed the department of sociology in Petrograd from 1918 onwards. After the Bolshevik changeover he found himself in opposition and had been hiding in the forests of his birthplace for two months. He sent an open letter from there to his voters stating that he withdrew from politics and wished to serve humanity and learning in the rest of his life. Luckily Lenin himself reacted on the letter with patronizing understanding and it saved his life. Three years later he could emigrate.

In Europe it was mostly the Czech social scientists, including T. G. Masaryk who, by that time was head of the state, and E. Beneš, another leading politician, who helped Sorokin in his career. His first major work, the *Sociology of Revolution* (1925) was inspired by his experiences rooted in the recent past; its factual material was also mostly taken from the years of Soviet takeover and dictatorship. At the same time his aim was to expound the topic (scientifically, that is sociologically) with general validity. He interpreted revolution as basically a perversion of human nature and behavior as a consequence of which the structures and functions disintegrate and get mixed up. In the late 20s this approach was not really fashionable: the attraction of major social experiments was just of growing attraction among the circles of the intelligentsia shaping opinion. When the book was published, Sorokin already lived and worked in America, in Wisconsin. There he found himself at home, and regarded the micro-worlds of simple, rural and workers' communities as his own. In the new environment huge energies were let loose in him. He veritably exploded into academic life. Between 1924 and 1929 he published three books: basic works, introducing concepts (such as horizontal mobility, social space) dealt with social mobility, agrarian sociology and with contemporary theories of sociology. In 1931 he reached the peak of his university career when he joined Harvard. It was here that problems started: he could not integrate into the world of the big university with difficulty; the style and way of thinking of the establishment at the eastern coast remained foreign to him.

The year 1937 is a watershed in the history of sociology: but it was not made by Sorokin's next summarizing work, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, enlarged into four volumes and several thousand pages in the next years, but by the *Theory of Social Action*, written by a younger colleague, T. Parsons, working at his department. Sorokin's work was surrounded by freezing and awkward silence. Volumes were published one after another and the icy wrap of silence grew thicker. As if it were suddenly revealed that a bungler entered the academic guild. In fact the overarching cultural and social philosophy of the Russian emigrant had undertaken awkward linkages with crisis philosophies more or less considered a-scientific in sociology to date. He gave up the thesis of linear development (compulsory in sociology), and broke away at several points from the method of procedure, sensitivity of competency and rules introduced in the professional and institutionalized cultivation of study in sociology, and particularly in the American one. By the time the fourth volume was also published, Sorokin spoke with a theatrical vehemence not at all fitting the academic community: in 1941, in his presentation (*The Crisis of our Age*) given at the American Sociological Association, he sharply attacked the mainstream paradigms of

American sociology. His sociologist's career started its downward path from then on. Slowly he was isolated in his own department, while Parson's career began to have an upturn. (Their tense relationship was further damaged by mutual accusations of plagiarism.) His marginalization became final when, obtaining the support of a millionaire, he set up the institution of the *Research Center in Creative Altruism* at Harvard. From then on, avoiding even the word 'sociology', he called the trend of social science research developed (for himself) in the spirit of Christian values *amithology*, which studied the still available traces and conditions of affection, solidarity and brotherly community that might still be restored in modern societies.

Sorokin emigrated in 1955. In the following years, he wrote a long pamphlet on the weaknesses and manias of modern sociology and its associated disciplines as a final farewell (*Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology and Related Science*). This time, speaking of the 'new Columbuses' of 'quantofrenia' and 'testomania' dominating the discipline, he left no doubt of who, among his colleagues should be thought of by the reader. With this writing the relationship between the guild and Sorokin reached such a bottom that proved to be untenable for both parties. In the following years the process of mutual appeasement was launched, mostly with Merton's mediation: Sorokin answered by his readiness for reintegration to the gestures of acknowledgement of the profession. Reintegration ultimately was closed by a spectacular result: the members of ASA elected him president with an overwhelming majority in 1963. Even this late and nice gratification, considered rather hypocritical by many, could not make the fact forgotten that the path along which Sorokin had set out three decades earlier could not be followed in modern sociology as it led nowhere.

Perhaps this sketchy presentation can also indicate how conspicuous the joint effect and inter-linkage of the two components of the *oeuvre*, namely the drama of *life* and the sharp turns of the *work* in Sorokin's case was. The major value of the publication is that it markedly presents and sheds light from several angles on the duality of personally *experienced* and the world *written* with the help of concepts, mutually corroborating each other. The subtitle of the book: *Leben, Werk und Wirkung* (instead of *Lebenswerk* washing away stresses) emphatically refers to that interrelationship.

It should be stated that *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, for its bulk filling half a shelf if for nothing else, is impossible to read. It had this quality already at the time of publication. Even at a first sight it recalls the major sociological theories of the 19th century, claiming to create a theory for the world. It recalls those monumental works created with a dilettante's passion outside university and academic circles, and here the epithet is not at all used in a pejorative sense, by private scholars among whom we may honor the founding fathers of sociology like A. Comte or H. Spencer. In their own age (particularly if they did not live to grand old age) their works were read, next mostly references have been and are being made to them. What could expect Sorokin's opus magnum of this size and claim in the 40s of the last century in America? At the beginning of the professionalization of sociology in the present sense, following American pattern? What could the theory of the person persecuted by the Soviet Union, expect in America in alliance with the Soviet Union, which, though not expressly expounding but warned about the crisis (or at least the inevitability of the

decline) and spoke about the hopelessness of a materialist-'sensate' culture oriented towards consumption and as such was just moving towards its own victory? And what message can it have today, after six decades?

According to the presentations of the Ljubljana conference more attention should be paid to Sorokin's oeuvre, and particularly to his main work. Even if it is difficult to read continuously, the bulky volumes of *Social and Cultural Dynamics* are worth picking up from the shelf. They have a message addressed to our days. The writings in the publication under survey revitalize the oeuvre and point out the effects of Sorokin's thinking inspiring system theory approaches, its relationships to the post-modern, the topicality of his rural sociology and concept of mobility that can be utilized in the study of post-socialist transition, and the concepts of his approach to art that may be definitely assumed as anachronistic yet deserving attention. Meanwhile the basis of the oeuvre, profoundly alien to sociology, is often mentioned: namely Sorokin's stand, often not averse even to a prophetic tone, for the ethics of *creative altruism* and at the same time for it being the guarantee of the survival of modern (Western) civilization.

The publication contains four chapters: the first one contains his life and the comprehensive interpretations of the oeuvre, the second one, without claiming totality, deals with Sorokin creating something new in the fields of the theory of sociology and some special branches of social science, the third one focuses on the philosopher of culture, and the fourth one on the topicality of the oeuvre.

In the first chapter *Vera Sparschuh* (Berlin) calls attention to Sorokin's interpretation of the world claiming totality, namely she analyses his *integrality*, its significance for a concept, rather present in German-speaking areas formerly, and not so much in the recent decades, that is *worldview* (*Weltanschauung*), mingling and focusing on social experience and theoretical orientations, intuitive and theoretical elements. A tripartite approach is a traditionally favored one of social theories (no matter whether they are of idealist, spiritual, materialist, or linear, perhaps cyclical nature). *Bálint Balla* classifies the tripartite approaches, the *triads* basically under the category of *structural and processing orders*. His paper that may be regarded as an interesting experiment, analyses Sorokin's life and work in contiguous triads. In *Justin Stagl's* (Salzburg) interpretation Sorokin was the first, characteristically overseas representative of *anti-sociologists*. The concept itself is a German one, and it is truly meaningful only in Germany. Helmut Schelsky defined his own position by it (*Die Arbeit tun die anderen*) in the debates around his person in the mid-70s. Abandoning or changing for another career is not a rare case among sociologists (as well). The anti-sociologist is rather rare: he would stay on. Only he has to face the fact that somehow everybody comes counter his direction. He is an apostate, who has found himself opposed to the professional community as a whole.

In the second chapter *Günter Endruweit* (Kiel) analyses the process of narrowing by Sorokin's example that characterized the import of theory oriented from Europe to America in the past century. He takes two of Sorokin's work on the history of theory, the *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (1928) and the *Sociological Theories of Today* (1966) that can be regarded as the continuation of the former one, as a basis of his analysis. Nearly four decades were spent between the two volumes. In the first one 96 such social scientists figure who did not write in English, or are not at all, or only

partially accessible in English, and who were mentioned by Sorokin at least three times. In the book of 1966 only 30 authors are found on the basis of the same criteria. The weakening of American interest towards and readiness to absorb literature (and problematic) in foreign languages was more spectacular. Endruweit follows this process of alienation on the basis of almost forty, more or less commonly known manuals of the history of sociology, first published in the United States of America by *Sumner* and *Cooley*, living in the attraction of European patterns, topics, and authors, understanding several languages from the early years of the 1900s down to monographs of the recent decades that have become conspicuously rigid towards cultural differences. In this context Sorokin as a mediator of theories, stands out with his sensitivity towards multiculturalism. The focal figures of the emerging canon of the history of sociology (Tönnies, Durkheim, M. Weber, etc.) emphatically appeared in his writings as well, but in addition to the scholars of the developed industrial societies who created paradigm and were conform to paradigm, his attention also extended over others too, primarily over Russians, who were not customary to consider. (“*Rossica sunt, non leguntur*” – stated Sorokin with resigned irony in a footnote of his history of sociology written in 1928.) Did this far-reaching posture of an intellectual, preserving a great deal from the anachronistic passions of the ‘educated amateur’ have also some role in Sorokin’s marginalization? Endruweit does not put this question this way. As a summary of his statistical analysis he does put questions at the end of his paper that could be rightly asked by the representatives of world languages: “...what do we know about the highly current sociology if it is not accessible by our German and mixed English languages? Presumably we are also not saved from the increasing limitation of our ability of scientific importation.” (p. 78.) In the same chapter *Anton Sterbling* (Hamburg) deals with mobility as interpreted by Sorokin, *Friedrich Fürstenberg* (Bonn) considers the concept of socio-cultural fluctuation as of key importance in *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. *Ilja Srubar* (Erlangen) calls attention to the perspective of the sociology of knowledge of theory when analyzing Sorokin’s interpretation of socio-cultural dynamics.

In the first paper of the third chapter *Martin Albrecht* (Berlin) considers (and finds mostly problematic) the musical material expounded with the help of the triad of the *ideational*, *idealistic* and *sensual*, presented in the cyclical model of culture given in *Social and Cultural Dynamics* from the angle of the music historian. Several of the authors of the publication, and particularly *Ilja Srubar* in the second chapter, touch upon the contact points of Sorokin’s cultural sociology and the cultural pessimism of cyclical philosophies of history, with crisis literature forecasting the decline of occidental civilization. Sorokin even dedicated a separate volume to this topic (*Social Philosophies of an Age of Crisis*, 1950), and to the work of *Danilevsky*, *Toynbee*, *Spengler*, *Bergyayev*. Even if he had disputes with this sphere of thinkers (popular between the 20s and 40s), he had always accepted their influence and asserted them in his sociology of culture. And this attraction, that may have appeared strange in his own academic guild, further corroborated his status of ‘anti-sociologist’. These philosophies of society and civilization, these theories of culture and philosophies of history are mostly classified under the category of pseudo- or a-scientific phantasmagorias by the profession of sociology. *Simone Hohmaier* (Berlin) compares

Sorokin's triad of *society – personality – culture* to Spengler's model of historical development that was also broken up into three, putting also the question of how far the conceptual system of the two theorists could offer a conceptual framework to analyses by the theory and history of music. In his paper analyzing Danilevsky's influence *Wolfgang Geier* (Berlin) mostly deals with the question at what points Sorokin thought the concept of the Slavophil cultural crisis of the last century, turning against the European orientation of the *zapadniks* mistaken and exaggerating.

In the chapter focusing on the topicality of the oeuvre *Endre Kiss* (Budapest) analyses the structural components of Sorokin's theory of civilization within the framework of the theories of globalization and the critique of *Huntington's* concept of civilization. *Stephan Beetz* (Berlin) attempts to interpret the transformation of the East German rural regions after the change of the system on the basis of Sorokin's concept related to social differentiation into rural and urban.

Susanne Pickel (Greifswald) studied Sorokin's presence on the Internet on the basis of 46 countries. In his writing *Igor Bahovec* (Ljubljana), closing the publication, was trying to find an answer to whether the more or less buried oeuvre can and could have messages that would help interpretations, claiming theoretical value of the society in the world at the turn of the millennium (facing the challenge of the post-modern condition by many). Besides Bahovec's writing the publication as a whole convinces me that Sorokin's bulky volumes have a future: it is worth reading them (again? for the first time?).