

Pitirim A. Sorokin

Rediscovering a Master of Sociology

by

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Series in Sociology



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Preface

The Complexity of Pitirim A. Sorokin's Studies and Reasons for "Rediscovering" them

This brief preface is merely a sort of "initiation rite" for the reader as he begins to familiarise himself with the many and varied strands of study that Sorokin tackled throughout his career, both during his time in Russia as well as his years in America. There are brief hints of some aspects that will then be dealt with in-depth in the various chapters of the book. This is also useful for the reader to understand why today, even in the third millennium and more than fifty years after Sorokin's death, it is still important to study this sociologist who was born at the end of the nineteenth century and made the history of the discipline for better or worse (as will be seen on the following pages, see chapter 1). The caveat is that it will be a challenging read since the complexity of this author's thought makes it extremely difficult to provide an adequate and even simplified summary. For this reason, in the different chapters, concepts that have already been dealt with previously are often referred to, or short quotations are repeated to keep a constant thread running throughout the arguments. The task of simplification as well as logical systematisation, has been arduous. Of course, it will be up to the reader to assess whether I have succeeded in achieving the goal. I make my own the words written by Sorokin in one of his accounts of his research activities on the topic of altruism: "*Feci quod potui faciant meliora potentes*" (Sorokin 1963a, 292). Having said that, I can begin this journey into the thought of Pitirim A. Sorokin (1889-1968), who deserves to be rediscovered, especially by the new generations of sociologists to whom he is almost totally unknown.

Understanding how the theories of some so-called "classical" scholars are intertwined with their own biographies but also with human history is not only fascinating but, at the same time, a difficult task – in the case of Pitirim A. Sorokin, this was emblematic (Zyuzev 2019a) considering that he lived the first part of his life in both Tsarist and revolutionary Russia, and then in the United States. This, however, helps to explain the orientations and choices of turning our attention to certain themes and studies rather than others. Re-reading a "classic" of sociology such as Pitirim A. Sorokin is an even more arduous task when considering the vastness of his work and the attention it pays to various and multiple sociocultural phenomena. The intention of this book is not only to try to systematise Sorokin's thought by thematic strands but also to highlight how much and in what way this scholar's forgotten

theories are relevant today (Mangone 2018a), while also having deep roots in the search for an integration between the viewpoints and methodologies of the different human and social disciplines (I speak of Sorokin's integral method, see chapter 3).

These first lines will describe the *scripts*¹ as defined by Goffman (1959) – or rather, Sorokin's meaningful interactions introduced since the volumes of the *Sistema sociologii* (Sorokin 1920) – which led the writer to delve deeper into the studies and works of this sociologist, while also trying to highlight the aspects of hostility shown towards him by the Italian academic environment (of which I am a member) and the American one experienced by Sorokin. To begin this journey, I start with the latter.

When I was a sociology student at the University of Salerno for the Sociology of Knowledge exam, we had to study the book, *I maestri del pensiero sociologico* [Masters of sociological thought] (Coser 1983) – English language edition (Coser 1977) – and the thing that struck me, even then, was the note by the translator of this edition (produced under the supervision of Alberto Izzo) that made it clear: “La seconda edizione americana comprende anche un capitolo su Pitirim Sorokin non incluso nella traduzione italiana [N.d.T.]” [The second American edition also includes a chapter on Pitirim Sorokin not included in the Italian translation] (Coser 1983/1977, 7). As an obviously very naive first-year student, I went beyond that note by continuing my studies. Only when I became a young researcher did I begin to understand why that chapter had not been translated. I came across Sorokin several times, but every time I was about to write something about him, there was always someone who for reasons of intellectual and scientific expediency, persuaded me not to do so. This attitude increased my curiosity about this author. I mention this because every choice is situated in time and space (Sorokin was well aware of this). As far as I am concerned, once I was “mentally freed” from any “opportunistic” intellectual and scientific career constraints, I finally took the opportunity to satisfy that curiosity by starting to do bibliographic research on Sorokin's works from what had been written in Italian. In my research, I am also reminded of that book note I had studied many years

¹ Goffman uses this term to refer to recurring “interaction scripts” that generically define the essentiality of the actors' role in a given situation. Scripts are complex structures of knowledge one possesses about an ordered succession of actions, which define various situations, which have become known through experience. In everyday life, this appears to be the most effective methodology adopted by individuals to manage situations and environmental interpretation through conceptual representations of individual objects as well as social events and relationships.

before and, to my surprise, in retrieving the second American edition of Coser's book (1977), I finally managed to "unravel the mystery" of the non-translation of the chapter on Sorokin. Wanting to be good, the note was a "shoddy justification". Wanting to be malicious, it could be said that it was "outright censorship". I clarify why I say this. In the second American edition, Lewis Coser also adds the chapter dedicated to William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, in addition to the one on Sorokin, but only the chapter devoted to the latter is not translated in the Italian edition; suspicion arises. Why is one chapter yes and the other no? I will try to sketch out an answer, which is based on two sets of reasons: the first is perhaps related to his relationship with Corrado Gini. With the latter, there is an exchange of correspondence preserved at the University of Saskatchewan (University Archives & Special Collections, PA. Sorokin fonds). Gini, as well as all those in Italy who had been considered close to the fascist regime, were relegated to the shadows as if to erase those dark moments, along with all those who had had relations with them. At this point, I would have to say that Sorokin would have suffered the same fate for his relations with Gini; the second is related to Sorokin's being an anti-conformist, with his being non-mainstream – unlike many of his contemporaries such as, for example, Talcott Parsons (see chapter 3) – making him in complete opposition to all the drifts in sociological studies that did not have service to humanity at their centre, and at that historical moment in its development, American sociology was certainly not oriented in this sense. Probably both reasons can be considered plausible, although, knowing the history of Italian sociology, I tend to give greater weight to the second of the reasons expressed.

Delving into Sorokin's thought allowed me to understand how much, today, in our contemporary digital society, the role and functions of the human and social sciences and, first and foremost, of sociology have "gone astray" in the pursuit of the operationalisation of the social and human being. They have lost sight not only of their peculiar objects of study but also of their purpose of service to humanity (repeatedly recalled by Sorokin in his work). For example, the significant success of quantitative methods, testing and the use of big data (today). Sorokin was an "inconvenient" sociologist in this respect because from the beginning of the last century, he denounced the *quantophreny* (Sorokin 1956a) as an end in itself typical of the North American humanities and social sciences. This drift resulted in forgetting that sociocultural phenomena must be studied according to their dynamicity (in space and time) since the constituent elements (personality, society, and culture – "indivisible trinity") are constantly changing and cannot be studied separately (and this is true not only for sociology). The choice of delving into and writing about this scholar was and still is to emphasise how many of his forgotten

theories are actualisable (Mangone 2018a), which for me also means, to some extent, going beyond them but this, however, does not only apply to Sorokin but also to many other scholars considered to be of the “classics” (i.e., Durkheim, Weber, etc.). However, in this period of crisis that we are currently experiencing (exacerbated by the pandemic due to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the crisis in Ukraine), some of his themes are as applicable as ever to current conditions – think of his studies on crises and disasters (Sorokin 1941a, 1948, 2010/1942). Not only that, but all of these studies are also deeply rooted in an ongoing search for an integration of the viewpoints and methodologies of the different human and social disciplines, Sorokin’s so-called integral method (see Chapter 2). To read Sorokin today, to recognise his relevance, means to frame his thought in the historical reality experienced by the scholar. He himself, in his autobiography (Sorokin 1963a), points out that the evolution of his thought had several stages corresponding to his personal and family events (see Chapter 1). On the other hand, the intertwining of these personal aspects and the evolution of his theories can be found in his intellectual biography (Johnston 1995).

The reader will wonder at this point why the thought of a scholar who lived through historical periods so distant in time and characteristics from our own contemporaneity (think of the revolutions that in the western world have totally disappeared, replaced by revolts with a consequent transformation of their meaning) can and must be reconsidered and brought up to date. I will try to give some outlines that will then be developed in depth in the pages of the various chapters that make up this book. What makes Sorokin unique are two aspects that distinguish him from other equally important scholars.

The first is the magnitude and complexity of the historical events in which he was involved and in which he participated directly or as a significant witness. Born at the end of the nineteenth century, he lived until the age of eleven among the Komi people, spending these years following his father (a travelling artisan) and receiving his first education within this community. When he was orphaned, he attended an Orthodox boarding school and, eventually, the University of Petersburg, where he studied various disciplines, including sociology, which was to become his first discipline. During these years, Sorokin’s studies oscillate between populist idealism and positivist and determinist behaviourism. His major references are Pavlov, Kovalevsky, Petrajitsky, de Roberty and Bechtereff. Among those who decisively influenced him were undoubtedly Kovalevsky and de Roberty. While in Russia, he actively participated in the anti-Tzarist revolution and, once this failed, continued his political activities against the Bolsheviks. These activities led him to getting arrested several times (three times under the Tsarist regime and three times under the Communist regime) and even sentenced to death in 1918. The

sentence was not carried out only thanks to Lenin's personal intervention. He resumed his academic activities by founding the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Petersburg, also becoming its first professor and dean. In 1922, however, he suffered his final arrest for his political activities and, banned by the government, left Russia for good the following year. He arrived in the United States in the autumn of 1923, and here began a second life. After a few years, he founded the first department of Sociology at Harvard, of which he also became the director, and continued his teaching, study and research activities at Harvard University (amidst ups and downs that will be made clearer in the following pages) until 1955, the year of his retirement, without ever losing his capacity for commitment to humanity (think of his actions in favour of peace – see chapter 7).

In light of these few lines, the answer to why Sorokin needs to be recast is simple. Sorokin is credited with giving birth to dynamic sociology (the analysis of changes in society starting from sociocultural phenomena) based on a total conception of man and society, a dynamism that has multiplied and accelerated in the contemporary digital society. For this latter reason, today, more than ever, it is necessary to reconsider the centrality of man, and it is on this assumption that all of Sorokin's studies have developed. He placed mankind in its entirety at the centre, made up of individual personalities interacting with each other and embedded in their own social and cultural context of reference, because only mankind can act to emerge from the crisis that now appears irreversible – see, for example, the conflict in Ukraine and the hundreds of dead migrants in the Mediterranean Sea that do not seem to have found a solution. This led Sorokin to be the forerunner of a “positive sociology” or “humanistic sociology” (Nichols 2012; Yogan 2015); that between the end of the last century and the beginning of the third millennium, many people hoped for (Berger 1963; Lee 1973, 1978; Goodwin 2003) and that could make a better world possible, as Sorokin already hoped for a century ago. The latter, in fact, based his studies on simple questions (the same ones that will be taken up by humanistic sociology) and that perhaps the social sciences and sociologists, in particular, have forgotten: what can improve the living conditions of individuals (no one excluded) and how can this be achieved? Humanistic sociology did nothing more than take up Sorokin (even without any direct reference) as he shifted the sociological dialectic to values to design and improve social systems for individuals and not consider the latter as instruments of social systems that do not meet or even understand their needs.

Sorokin's sociological studies are, therefore, all characterised by dynamism, but as will be seen in the various chapters of the book, many of them represented the cornerstones of certain strands of studies (i.e., just to name a few: those on social mobility, those on rural sociology, and those on altruism –

see chapters 4 and 8). For Sorokin, society and its sociocultural phenomena are not static. On the contrary, they are constructed and reconstructed by a continuous process of definition. This process leads to the opportunity to identify shared values and attitudes that underpin structure and actions, what has been defined as “cultural mentality” (Sorokin 1957). In this case, culture contains within itself the tools (language, symbols, signs, etc.) that give meaning because they are shared within a context that must then validate the action. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the cultural system is one of the three necessary elements together with society and personality (Sorokin 1948) for the analysis of sociocultural phenomena (see Chapter 5). Sorokin, however, does not provide a precise definition of what “human culture” is. He believes that it is not necessary to give a restrictive definition but rather a broad and generic one. This forced Kluckhohn and Kroeber (1952), in their study of the classification of definitions of culture, to place it either in the “normative definitions” (definitions that place emphasis on rules and values but also on behaviour) or in the category of “genetic definitions” (the emphasis, in this case, is on the idea that culture is a product of life and, therefore, ideas and symbols are emphasised). Obviously, for Sorokin, not everything is a “cultural phenomenon”. This becomes clear when considering the fact that for Sorokin, the social sciences deal with superorganic phenomena, i.e. those phenomena that are only of human beings and located in the world created by them. In this way, individuals, individually or in groups, perform the main function of agents and instruments of meanings, values and norms, i.e. producers of meaningful interactions.

As previously stated, what is connected to the sociocultural dimension is not static; it is dynamic. The first aspect of dynamism is the way in which these systems of meanings, norms and values are created, reproduced and incorporated by individuals and groups. Human beings, in their daily life experience, are producers of meanings, norms and values because they have meaningful interactions. Here, however, we recall the cyclical movements of systems (Ideational, Sensate, and Idealistic) identified by Sorokin that are produced by transformations in the mental bases of individuals and are characterised by particular values and forms of knowledge (see Chapter 5). Cultural mentality concerns the experience linked to the thinking of individuals and the processes of symbolic mediation that enable the attribution of meaning. The theory of cyclical movements of mental systems – as it is called – is produced by the transformations of the mental bases of humans and groups. It is clear that an examination of the characteristics of the types of cultural mentalities is a different matter from an examination of the way in which these mentalities and their characteristics are distributed across cultural realities, with the attitude of individuals and groups to these

mentalities being a different matter. There is no single cultural system or a single form of it, nor is there a single approach to analysis. The different definitions of culture produced over the decades have not brought clarity to the concept since it has a high degree of relativity due to its inextricable link with social and individual aspects. Sorokin's entire reflection is based on the inextricable linkage of these elements, which stringently links all cultural aspects (meanings, norms and values) to aspects of personality and the social. This passage outlines the reciprocity between the vital world and the social system. It represents the central moment in which attention is paid not only to the individual as the recipient of decisions but also to the individual as a "subject" and active participant in any decision-making process. This marks the shift from an approach that tends to reduce the social system to its instrumental aspects alone to one that pays attention to the overall meaningful interactions between individuals and all the other relevant variables that together constitute society.

Sorokin's focus never deviates, therefore, from the two foundations that characterise his entire theoretical framework: a) the indivisible sociocultural trinity: society, culture and personality (Sorokin 1962/1947). From the interactions of these three aspects and three further components (human beings, meanings and vehicles) arises the complexity of sociocultural phenomena and processes of *meaningful human interaction*; b) the idea of sociology as a science engaged in the study of meaningful interactions between the elements of sociocultural phenomena, and capable of pointing the way forward for the improvement of the living conditions of individuals. Hence his criticism of a certain *negativistic way* of working of the social sciences capable of bringing out only negative or pathological phenomena without ever highlighting the positive and healthy phenomena that also exist within all societies.

Sorokin's analysis of sociocultural changes as a consequence of crisis (Sorokin 1941a, 1948) and disasters (Sorokin 2010/1942) also fits into this theoretical framework – see Chapter 6. These studies appear to be as topical as ever at the time this book comes out due to the catastrophic effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on both our health and the socio-economic system and the crisis in Ukraine following Russia's intervention. In the analysis he carries out, while the Second World War is underway in Europe, he identifies as a way out of the crisis the change in the cultural mentality and attitudes of individuals in the direction of the norms prescribed by the Sermon on the Mount (from this point on he will often be considered a prophet rather than a sociologist). This is because such a change would have entailed the development of a new model of economic and political structures. Sorokin attempts to outline the ways through which individuals can emerge from the

post-war crisis, and the only tool he identifies is altruism (Sorokin 1954a) which becomes an instrument of peace and survival. Sorokin is also considered one of the precursors of *peace research* (Eckhardt 1983), although this is known to few (see Chapter 7). According to our Russian-American sociologist (more Russian than American; I make this clear in more than one chapter, but particularly in Chapter 1), man's impotence in being "creatively altruistic" is the fact that studies of the positive phenomena of society (solidarity, cooperation, altruism, etc.) have been neglected by the social sciences over the last four centuries. In light of this, for Sorokin, one of the first urgencies to be resolved was to correct the misconception of man and the sociocultural universe on the part of the social sciences and primarily sociology. Research plans were to be promoted that would study the "energies of the human being", which he did in the *Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism* in 1949-1959 (see Chapter 8).

During his years of activity, Sorokin never stopped reflecting on the role of the social sciences in interpreting these transformations due to the constant changes in society. He was not wrong to do so, considering that even today, while a new way of thinking is developing which involves the organisational structures of the world's major institutions, the social sciences still seem to have difficulties in interpreting these transformations (probably due to positions of excessive self-referentiality of the disciplines), but it is precisely in this constantly changing context that the social sciences can assume a primary role as sciences capable of understanding society in its entirety. This, however, obliges researchers to redefine paradigms, methodologies and methods so that knowledge takes the form of an integrated network experience. This form of knowledge results from comparisons and conflicts that materialise in a certain space and time in an integrated system of knowledge – something that Sorokin himself suggested many years ago with his integral method (see Chapter 2). This has remained unheeded.

For the sake of its internal coherence and reasoning, the book has been divided into three parts, each descending from the most general to the most specific aspects; this same logic is also adopted within the individual parts. The First Part (*Life Experiences and Ideas*) consists of three chapters that together represent not only the highlights of Sorokin's biography but also those of his academic and intellectual career. Chapter 1 constitutes what musicians call a "prelude" since it includes an extensive biography. As mentioned at the beginning, it is not possible to study an author without knowing the background of his life and experiences that contributed to the construction of his thought, with the main elements that characterise Sorokin's sociology, which is a "positive sociology", and what role this discipline should play, also being discussed. The biographical note is divided

into two major moments: Russian experiences – which dramatically marked him – corresponding to the period from his birth to 1922 (a period that also coincides with the two moments of the Russian revolution, years 1905-1906 and from 1917 onwards), and the American experiences from 1923 to his death (mainly concerning his professional life).

Chapter 2, on the other hand, pays attention to Sorokin's integral method. The latter proposes his solution to the problem of constructing and maintaining meaningful correlations between sociological thought and autonomy from other sciences without, however, denying a necessary disciplinary integration and interdependence. The need for a sociology of knowledge makes it possible to highlight how systems of ideas are nothing more than the construction of reality, a multidimensional and multiform reality. Sorokin's integralism makes it possible to highlight how many of the concepts and elements presented in the past are still relevant or topical for understanding the influences of forms of knowledge on the construction of reality, but at the same time, the development of societies and, the very relationship between individuals, knowledge and society. It is, therefore, desirable that an integral theory of knowledge develops and becomes reflexive knowledge capable of promoting the construction of connections in the living environments of and between subjects. Not by denying the autonomy of the individual disciplines of the social sciences (sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc.), but by abandoning the excess of self-referentiality that makes all knowledge absolve itself within its own frames of reference and paradigms.

Chapter 3 (*Parsons and Sorokin at Harvard: the social construction of a conflict*) reconstructs the dynamics of the conflict between Talcott Parsons and Pitirim A. Sorokin (two masters of twentieth-century sociological thought). The conflict that, for most, began with the circulation of Sorokin's cyclostyled paper entitled "Similarities and Dissimilarities Between Two Sociological Systems" (1951a) but which, in actual fact, found its genesis with Sorokin's arrival at Harvard just over twenty years earlier. It is precisely from this stage that this sort of intellectual journey into the relationship between these two scholars begins, one that not only characterised their individual academic careers but also influenced the thinking and orientations of American sociology in those years as well as western sociology in general.

In the Second Part (*Social and Cultural Dynamics*), the focus is on the sociology of change that characterised almost all of Sorokin's scientific production. Chapter 4 deals with some of Sorokin's perhaps lesser-known areas of study, in which aspects of social mobility, rural sociology and that social dynamic he called the sex revolution, which qualified American society

as one characterised by “sex addiction” in the second half of the last century, are addressed.

In Chapter 5, however, the focus shifts to that part of Sorokin’s thought that is probably best known, namely the cyclical theory of integrated cultural systems. These derive from the cultural mentalities (Ideational, Sensate and Idealistic) that have succeeded one another throughout history (cyclical movement theory). This chapter not only outlines the characteristics of these three systems but also the components of the “indivisible trinity” (personality, culture, and society). Chapter 6 closes this second part by proposing a reading of this Russian-American scholar’s thought related to the theme of the reconstruction of humanity, and this is done through the analysis of three of his works that have been strongly criticised in American academic circles *The Crisis of Our Age* (1941a), *Man and Society in Calamity* (2010/1942), and *The Reconstruction of Humanity* (1948). Beyond these critiques, many topical aspects of contemporary society concerning social changes and crises can be found in these works. Sorokin, in these works, not only analyses the reasons for crises but also proposes paths through which humanity can be reconstructed and the guiding role of sociology in undertaking these paths. Humanity as a whole, for the Russian-American sociologist, remains the only true creator of good living conditions for the individual himself.

The last part (*Social Resolution of Global Conflicts*), consisting of only two chapters, connects to the remedy Sorokin identifies to get out of crises (altruism). Chapter 7 combines some of his early studies (i.e., *Sociology of Revolution*) with his pacifist commitment to the final part of his research activities. Known more as the sociologist of revolution and war, he can also be recognised as one of the pioneers of peace studies. In order to understand why Sorokin can be regarded as a pioneer of peace studies, however, we have to go back to the very last years he spent in Russia (and thus to his first studies). In this chapter, an attempt has been to try and trace a path from studies on the revolution and war (as the main causes for the loss of peace), through crisis studies to the pioneering ideas for the search for stability (peace) that serves as a necessary transition to finally arrive at the positive forces of humanity such as altruism. It is precisely altruism that is the topic of Chapter 8, the culmination of all Sorokin’s complex work in affirming a priority role for sociology, but also for the other human and social sciences, as well as the researcher and scholar in these disciplines as a promoter of change with beneficial effects for humanity. Satisfying the need for love and altruism can no longer be postponed as the assertion of a hyper-individualistic attitude produced conflicts between individuals and groups whose negative effects reverberated on themselves. The controversy in American academia that arose because these ideas were considered “prophetic

and catastrophic visions” most likely arose from ignorance of both the earlier works and the works in which Sorokin condensed the treatment of altruistic creative love (Sorokin 1948, 1950a, 1950b, 1954a, 1954b) and the activities carried out at the Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism (Sorokin 1955a, 1963a, 1995). If the genesis of altruistic creative love can be traced in some earlier works (Sorokin 1941a, 2010/1942, 1948) in an unripe manner, the full maturity of the concept will come with all the activities carried out by the Center.

This book presents itself as an attempt to condense Sorokin’s complex thought to also try to propose not only a sort of “rehabilitation” of this scholar who has perhaps been forgotten for too many years but also a reactivation of certain strands of study that today, as in Sorokin’s contemporary society, pose problems that need to be solved.

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