

INTEGRAL APPROACH OF PITIRIM SOROKIN ON SOCIAL REALITIES – APPLICABILITY TO BIOCOSMOLOGICAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT. *This paper discusses the applicability for the field of biocosmology studies of Pitirim Sorokin's dynamic and integralist approach of sociocultural change. Sorokin developed in the first half of the Twentieth Century an extensive investigation of sociocultural mentalities prevailing in societies and he characterized their respective system of truth and perspective on social realities. He proposed a new approach based on the integration of polarities.*

This paper discusses the validity of the integralist theory developed by Sorokin and proposes new directions for the continuation of the integralist impulse initiated and for its effective re-orientation for the advancement of BioCosmological studies.

KEYWORDS: *Integralism; Dynamic approach; Change; Sociocultural mentality; Biocosmology; Middle-Way.*

Introduction

The triadic nature of the cosmos has always been one of the core elements of the prevailing worldviews in human culture and cosmic mythologies since the end of the last ice age. This is only recently, at the beginning of our actual civilizational period, oriented to the development of human consciousness (individual and collective), that cosmology lost its triadic perspective and representational structure.

Since the establishment of the dominance by the positivist-materialistic doctrine, spread throughout the scientific and philosophic fields of knowledge, physical cosmology established its quasi-total scientific hegemony in cosmology. The Cosmos became progressively seen as a dead entity made of physical elements and at the same time the traditional religious institutions, who had the cultural mission of facilitating the relation (latin: *religare* = to link) between humans and the cosmos, became less and less capable to sustain a valid intelligent explanation of the spiritual nature of the cosmic reality, especially in Occident.

To bring back life in the domain of cosmology, new paths of knowledge need to be investigated in order to rediscover the structure of the foundations of life that animate the realization of human beings and the cosmos. The study of the triadicity's dynamics involved in societal and in civilizational evolutions of humanity represents on that path a potential for contribution to the bio-renewal of cosmology.

Pitirim Sorokin, the initial founder of the Sociology Department at Harvard University, spent few decades developing a triadic perspective² on the social and

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cultural evolutionary dynamics of mentalities immanent to the diversity of societal formations.

The rationale of the dynamics of sociocultural change and the typology developed by Sorokin have been used recently by Konstantin Khroutski, the founder of the *Biocosmological Association* and editor of the academic journal *Biocosmology – Neo-Aristotelism*, to extrapolate a typology of cosmological perspectives and paradigms³. One question raised by the work of Khroutski about Sorokin's theory of cultural evolution is whether the Sorokin typology can be used as a core element for the characterization of the different paradigms and worldviews prevailing in the diverse metaphysical orientations and investigations in the field of cosmological studies?

The goal of the present paper is to present the rationale of Sorokin's theory on social and cultural dynamics and its logical framework for the explanation of a cyclic societal evolution. In order to contextualize these elements of Sorokin doctrine on the dynamics of change I present some of the main structuring factors of the historical period for which Sorokin mobilized all his intellectual attention. In the same sense, it is useful to have a look at the key civilizational preoccupations and scientific motivations that contributed to the development of the social advocacy orientation of Sorokin sociology's program. Finally, I conclude with a series of observations pertaining to the usefulness and adequacy of Sorokin's typology (that serves as the basis of his triadic theory of sociocultural evolution) for the comparison of worldviews related to the field of biocosmology.

1. The sensibility for a context in social implosion

Working at the assessment of a knowledge approach, such as the integralist study of sociocultural dynamics developed by Sorokin, we need to have a look at the context from which this integral approach was conceived. The contextualization of Sorokin integral doctrine will give us the measure of its originality as well as the identification of certain of its limitations.

The historical context where Sorokin's intellectual contribution was embedded⁴ is characterized by a wave of turmoil and two wars in the European socio-political dynamic and at the same time a heavy development of the American industry. The

² The results of this systematic investigation by Sorokin of the sociocultural dynamics of societies and their related mentalities were originally published in four volumes in the end of the 1930s (1937-1941). In 1957 an abridged-edition (Sorokin-1957) of this monumental contribution was published and became a key reference in sociology and cultural studies. Congruent with this extensive analysis of the cultural dynamics of societies Sorokin debated the crisis and civilizational problematic that infused all the first half of the 20th Century (Sorokin-1941 and 1942). But also he devoted a large part of his intellectual energies to the debates related at that time to the renovation of the cultural impulse of humanity following the major civilizational perturbations brought by the World-War II (Sorokin 1948 and 1954).

³ The analysis done by Khroutski on the usefulness of Sorokin typology of sociocultural mentalities can be found in his papers of 2011 and 2014.

⁴ The itinerary of Sorokin has been well documented by Johnston (1995) and Nichols (2012); certainly interesting are the self-reflections from Sorokin autobiography (Sorokin-1963a).

preceding Century was the period that saw the culmination of philosophical thinking and at the end its erosion toward pragmatism, utilitarianism and the emancipation of positivism as the dominant epistemological doctrine.

This period of the first half of the 20th Century saw the emergence of the institutionalization of a professional practice of social sciences. Sorokin was the founding director of the department of sociology at Harvard University in the 1930s. At that time the core doctrines for the study of societies and civilizations were in emergence. One of the convictions of Sorokin was that the new social scientists were responsible to propose valid interpretation of the sense and the dynamic of the evolution of societies as well as to identify sustainable ways for improvement. This explains the positioning of Sorokin as an engaged scholar for the advancement of humanity and civilization. Sorokin, probably in concordance with his Russian temperament and disposition to serve first of all the collectivity, undertook the position of the “social prophet⁵” that takes on his shoulders the guidance of society toward its destiny. In this sense, Sorokin was “Fichteian”⁶ in his professional attitude for the imperative contribution of the new social sciences and especially for sociology to be dedicated to critical and public purposes (Jeffries, 2005), so to be an emancipatory contribution.

Sorokin was aware of the necessity of assuring valid epistemological foundations for the new social sciences in development. This is why he devoted a lot of energy arguing with his peers about problematic priorities that should be targeted by the research community but also about the validity of research methodologies and approaches adopted. His contribution in the development of an integralist doctrine for the analysis of the dynamic of sociocultural evolution of societies was aimed at providing to social sciences a comprehensive theory and perspective to access the truth of societies.

He was caught by an intensive sense of urgency and responsibility in front of what he called *The Crisis of our Age* (Sorokin, 1946). As he said in the last words of his ultimate injunction to his scientific colleagues (Sorokin, 1963b: 322):

The present critical point of human history imperatively demands this deeper and more **adequate integralist knowledge of man and man’s sociocultural universe**, not only for the sake of a more adequate comprehension of these most “mysterious” phenomena, but especially because **the mortally dangerous crisis of mankind must be**

⁵ This key-role of the social prophet was well characterized by Solovyov in his famous narration of the monk *Pansophius* on the future of the world (Solovyov, Vladimir. 1899/1990. *War, Progress and the End of History. Three Conversations*. Aurora, CO: Lindisfarne Press. Johnston (1999:32) also signals this role of the social-prophet in Sorokin professional attitude, in the resemblance of August Comte who was surnamed the “Prophet of Paris”.

⁶ Johann Gottlieb Fichte in his series of Jena Lectures of 1794 pleaded for the future generations of scholars *to be teacher and guide of mankind* (Fichte. 2011. *The Vocation of the Scholar*. Charleston: Nabu Press).

terminated⁷ and the way made clear for humanity's entrance into a new, creative, and harmonious era of history.

The state of crisis envisioned by Sorokin was of two orders:

a) First, he was aware of a crisis of civilization where sociocultural mentalities of dominant societies were heading too far in their materialist orientation and in doing so generating destructive patterns. This hypothesis brought him on a path for the investigation of the societal dynamic of sociocultural mentalities and to the development of his triadic historical cycle of sociocultural evolution.

b) Second, he was convinced that Western societies and their knowledge systems of science, philosophy and religion were founded on false assumption in regard of the nature of the reality. There was also a crisis in their systems of truth and that a new approach should be introduced to restore a valid apprehension of all aspect of the realities, which is the integralist perspective (Sorokin 1946, pp. 80–132). Because social sciences were kept prisoner of the scientist ideology coming from the natural sciences he proposed a redefinition of the categories of space, time, causality in order to provide an autonomy⁸ and a specific epistemology to the field of studies devoted to societies (Sorokin 1963, pp. 226–237).

The preoccupations that motivated Sorokin in the development of an integral perspective for social sciences' research were multiform. He believed that the character of any culture is determined by its mentality so he wanted to understand the evolutionary dynamic and the orientation of these sociocultural mentalities. This was done through his monumental research project that generates his typologies of sociocultural mentalities and his triadic-cycle of sociocultural re-alignment between two polar orientations: a sensate mentality and an ideational (Sorokin, 1957)⁹. He also believed that it was crucial to renew the humanity's awareness of its finalities, *the destiny of Man* as would have said Fichte, through the re-alignment of the systems of truth prevailing in all domains of human knowledge toward an integral cognition that would synthesize all aspects of the reality. An integralist epistemology that reconciles sensate science and knowledge with intuitive knowledge that comes from the ideational side of the realities. In his view he believed that this new integralist system of truth could bring wisdom to societies and can generate a unifying principle for humanity through a shared and equilibrate perspective on social realities.

Previous presentations of Sorokin's typology of sociocultural mentalities and the dynamics of cyclical historical change were done in this journal by Khroutski (2011 and 2014) and excellent synthesis were done by Johnston (1995 and 1999), Jeffries (2005), and Russell (2006). We want to concentrate our attention on a series of key aspects of Sorokin's integralist perspective in order to discuss the validity of its cognitive foundations and its potential capacity to be transferred in the field of

⁷ Emphasis are from us.

⁸ In his metaphysical diagnostic of the needed epistemological changes he talk about a *Declaration of Independence*.

⁹ The complete and integral version of this impressive research output was published in four tomes between 1937 and 1941.

biocosmology for an integral apprehension of the full reality of the cosmos. The issue at stake is important in term of epistemological validity because, if transferred as analogical cognitive artifact, the parameter of the perspective would induce constraints to the field of biocosmological studies.

2. Sorokin's integralist theory

The persistent confrontational attitude and sense of mission maintained by Sorokin toward the research community in social sciences resulted for him of being labeled as a "heretic". He was not rejected by the community because his enormous dedication to the advancement of social research imposed respect to his intentions and recognition for his sustained contributions to the common good of this field of scientific endeavor. The collective judgment of "heretic contribution" was mostly due to his preoccupation to balance the monolithic orientation of the scientific efforts in this field toward a positivist and instrumental-utilitarian approach of social phenomena by re-introducing the investigation of the subjective inner experience lived by individual, groups, collectivities and societies.

Sorokin developed his integralist theory of social knowledge with the goal of transforming the sensate-based approach of human knowledge with a more equilibrate perspective that would include the ideational pole of human cognition and experience. He believed that human cognition is made of the intertwining of the sensate objective-dualist experience of the world that surrounds us with at the same time the inner experience of an inspirational flow of ideas and feelings that comes from the ideational aspect of the reality.

We prefer to name it *inspirational* instead of *intuitive* because we are convinced that Sorokin confused the inspirational processes with the real intuitional cognitive experience. Sorokin reduced the domain of the inner human cognitive experience to the one of the soul, which is congruent with the collective Occidental belief that prevails since the judgment pronounced by the 8th Ecumenical Council of Constantinople of 869¹⁰. In that occasion where the threefolding of human nature was the object of canonical debates it was established that human beings were made of a physical body endowed with intellectual capabilities and of a sentient soul with relational and heart-based faith inspirational cognition. In doing so, the traditional threefolding of human being was rejected and its ontological essence made of his spirit, his higher-self, was negated and vaguely merged with a confusing subjective notion of the human soul. From then, human understanding of the triadic nature of human nature and cognition was lost¹¹, except for the Orient that kept the traditional threefold definition of human cognitive capabilities.

¹⁰ Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the movement for Spiritual Science explained extensively this crucial cultural moment that influenced the development of the Western civilization and the domains of the modern human sciences. This cultural reductionism is comparable to the later one introduced by Kant when he established the doctrine of transcendental nature of phenomena for human mind. See his history of philosophy *The Riddles of Philosophy* (1914: 445-449).

¹¹ We should say that it went "underground" and that it was maintained heretic through the intellectual domination from the Catholic Church in Occident and after the short period of the

This question is of importance for the adequate assessment of Sorokin frame of reference because he based his integralist theory of cognition and truth about reality on a threefold structure of the human nature that is finally dual. Sorokin's three systems of truth structure his integralist theory of cognition. The integral system of truth is aimed at providing a valid framework for the integration of all aspects of the truth of the reality. It was design for the purpose of the understanding of sociocultural realities but, as proposed by Khroutski (2014), it may also be considered useful for any object of human cognition, including the cosmos as a whole. Let us look at his integralist framework of human cognition and truth of reality.

Of course, Sorokin was right in his diagnostic of the limitations and inadequacy of the *sensate system of truth*¹² that predominates in all sciences and that it was detrimental to the advancement of civilization and human development. It was less evident in the first half of the 20th Century when the positivist doctrine of science and epistemology propagated by the "Vienna Circle" but now, more and more radical critics are raised about the lack of evidence that may support such a doctrine. On the other side of the spectrum Sorokin was right in judging the limitations of the ideational subjective inspirational¹³ faith-based system of truth.

He proposed an approach of knowledge that would be the intermediate position between both poles, a synthesis of the physical aspect of the sociocultural reality with its ideational and faith-based aspect. He believed that the knowledge *standpoint* (Sorokin 1963b, pp. 309) of the intermediate cognitive position will assure a valid truth on all aspect of realities by generating a synthesis of the two complementary sides of social reality.

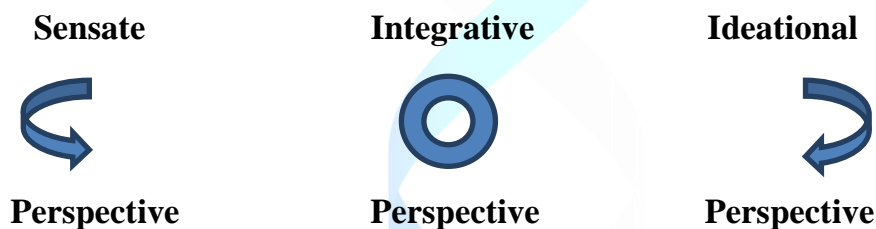


Figure 1: Sorokin's Triad of Knowledge Perspectives

Florentine Renaissance it was overwhelmed by the enormous "materialist pull" brought in human civilization by the rational-utilitarian era of intellectualism, material and technological development of societies' scientific systems, and the globalization of the positivist doctrine of truth for human cognition.

¹² Russell (2006) provides an excellent synthesis of Sorokin challenge of the sensate and materialist doctrine of science.

¹³ Again, it is evident for someone that is able to make a clear distinction between the mystical, aesthetical, reflexive inspirational cognition and the true intuitive experience of the spiritual plane of the cosmic reality. The mixed list of what Sorokin (1963b: 310) called *ancient mystic* reveals his lack of clear understanding of the specific nature of the spiritual plane of the integral reality. The subjective inspirational cognition (called intuition in Sorokin terminology) is still a sensate knowledge using the physical human body and its reflexive thinking based on its brain. Sorokin knew the Sri Aurobindo explanations related to the *supramental experience* but seems to have misunderstood the radical differences that are intrinsic to the path of knowledge that is "followed" by the knower to access to the supra-mental, the cosmic spiritual plane where duality no more exist.

The doctrine of integralism proposed by Sorokin was seen as an idealistic cognitive position for the knower and the one that can give him an integrated perspective on the full spectrum of the reality in concordance with his natural knowledge potentialities. Integralism would constitute the best available epistemology to access the truth in a valid way. He was right with his theoretical conclusion related to the dynamic of embedded immanent finalities (and determinism) and limited causality of sociocultural mentalities and also their related systems of truth. They influence the evolution's dynamic of societies and their capacity for change as well as their propensity to maintain effective values that sustain their development.

Given the major gaps and limitations of Sorokin's definition of the spectrum of the total reality of our cosmos, what should be an integral perspective?

3. The integral perspective as the way to the middle of the cosmos

To expand and to bring a wholistic-integral cosmic perspective of knowledge to the impulse initiated by Sorokin for the development of a valid system of truth we will use the frame of reference presented by Rudolf Steiner (1914a:13-24)¹⁴ in his modeling of the full spectrum of worldviews to be used to reach an integrated knowledge of the cosmos.

A system of truth¹⁵ is made of cognitive orientations, the directions the conscious of the knower is observing and/or experiencing. Husserl in his phenomenology clearly explained that the consciousness is firstly a process of intentionality directed to the reality. The *cogito* of the pure self is an act of pure intentionality and relation¹⁶. This means that the knowing entity will experience different point of view depending on the orientation of his awareness.

The cognitive map designed by Steiner¹⁷ presents the twelve worldviews that an integral knowledge approach of the world must integrate in order to bring a wholistic understanding:

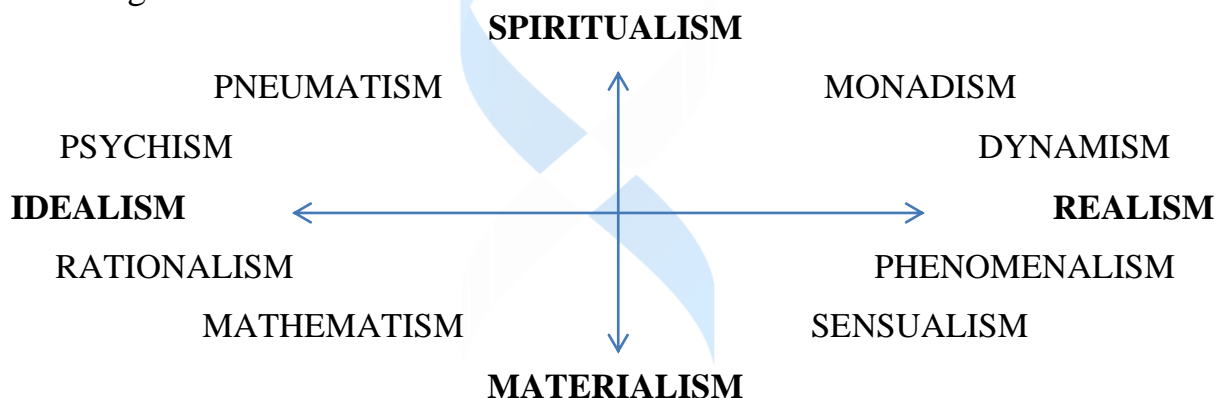


Figure 2: Steiner's Model of Cognitive Worldviews

¹⁴ Complementary for the historical explanation of the evolution of this spectrum of worldviews Steiner (1891, 1914b and 1920)

¹⁵ Truth understood as the level of agreement of a known object with the reality.

¹⁶ Husserl probably became aware of this relational characteristic of any act of knowledge from Brentano, his teacher.

¹⁷ See Steiner (1914a) for a description of each component of the model.

This model draws the map of the four directions or approaches that structure the perception of the reality dependent on the cognitive orientation of the knower. These four cardinal directions have intermediate perspectives so that each of these twelve perspectives for the orientation of the consciousness of the knower will present a knowledge aspect of the world. Steiner affirms that an integral knowledge of the reality can only result from the integration of all these twelve perspectives or worldviews.

If we go deeper in our understanding of the characteristics of a valid cosmological system of truth we must look at the “positioning”¹⁸ of the knower. This means that the knower as a knowing entity can “occupy” a position as an observer/experiencer on a continuum that goes from the dualist perspective of the external appearances of the world to the other pole of the spectrum of the reality, that is the pure spirit. This supposes that the knower will access truth following a path of knowledge that goes on that continuum. The integral perspective on the world will be reached right in the middle where he is in balance between the two poles of the reality. At this point he is in a position to integrate all aspects of the full spectrum of the reality and the dualist perspective on the world becomes dissolved and an integral experience of the whole cosmos is lived by the knower. This real monistic view on the world is well known as the *Middle Way*¹⁹ and the cognitive path that reach this true integralist knowledge position is certainly the approach that give access to the highest level of truth on the cosmic reality.

Conclusion

The hope of Sorokin for the emergence of an integralistic era in the development of civilization was certainly a sign that he was aligned with the destiny of humanity. Given the state of knowledge and the systemic emergence of professional sciences in the first part of the 20th Century, and also given the brutal materialistic orientation of the dominant societies that were competing globally for natural resources and requiring internally functional populations to serve to the national effort for increasing the material standards of living in society, it is understandable that his proposal and advocacy for a new system of truth was to be received with politeness but not becoming adopted as the mainstream of social sciences²⁰. The integralist

¹⁸ Necessarily the notion of *positioning* (or “posturing of the knowing-self”) is an approximation because somewhere in the middle of the spectrum space and time cease to exist.

¹⁹ The supra-sensible path of knowledge experienced by Steiner and others like the followers of the doctrine of spiritual practice developed by Nagarjuna (see Kalupahana-1999).

²⁰ Some authors mentioned that he was rejected. I would say that lived what the quasi-totality of significant contributors experience in the general field of human sciences: they come and pass because of the high level of the fragmentation pulse of these domains of research and of the “adhocratic” organization of their scientific communities. Hegel the great philosopher, first rector of Berlin University was finally rejected but his ideas still have a significant influence. In the field of sociology, the functionalist alternative to Sorokin integrative sociology, headed by his colleague Talcott Parson, is no more the dominant sociological theory given the fact that social-democratic societies are quite less dominated by State-bureaucracies requiring functionalist and simplistic studies for policy making.

doctrine thought by Sorokin was pointing in the right orientation that means to integrate all aspect of the social and even, if we extrapolate, of the cosmic reality. Nevertheless, it was a pioneering effort that must be redeploy with the insertion of a broader metaphysical definition of the spectrum of the cosmic reality where a valid inclusion of the spiritual plane of reality will be reconciled with the appearing face of the cosmos.

The truth of biocosmology depends on the future development of a real integrative epistemology, and a corresponding path of cognition, that allow the knower to observe and to know the world through a “unitarian/non-dualist” and “wholistic” consciousness.

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