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Barry V. Johnston

Pitirim A. Sorokin: an Intellectual Biography

Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995

Back in the 1960's, a number of remarkable publications emerged — and events occurred — which tended toward the vindication of Pitirim Sorokin's scholarly work and position. Sorokin himself, then rather more mellow (or less confrontational) than before, participated ably in this justificatory exercise, as in his ASA presidential address, in the Salzburg ISCSA discussions, in the responses to critics in the fine Allen volume (Philip Allen's *Pitirim A. Sorokin in Review*), and in his autobiography, *A Long Journey*.

Some thirty years later, in part stimulated by the centennial of the great scholar's birth, another set of papers and books has been successively launched. A smaller flotilla, no doubt, but equally committed to the mission of vindicating and understanding Sorokin. (The volume *Sorokin and Civilization: a Centennial Assessment* has some of the features of Allen's work, and some of those of Edward Tiryakian's *festschrift*, though without the sorts of responses happily found in the former work.) Barry Johnston's book parallels *A Long Journey*, and the anthology of Sorokin's writings which Barry collected fills in for some publications now less available. My own *Reanimation in Philosophy* and *Rough Dialectics* endeavor to relate Sorokin favorably to the American and liberal context. Lawrence T. Nichols has contributed to *Rough Dialectics* and has published excellent articles on Sorokin. Gary Jaworski also is a notable Sorokin scholar. (I have probably omitted other significant works.)

Central to this later convoy, for which the seas are now less stormy and befogged by earlier misunderstandings, is this very tidy battleship, Barry Johnston's *Pitirim A. Sorokin: an Intellectual Biography*, a comprehensive and well researched life story. It balances the virtues of compactness, thoroughness, clarity, and fairness to a high degree. Johnston draws carefully upon numerous sources, from Sorokin's works and his criticisms of others, and from criticisms and praises of Sorokin.

The unity of the book chiefly derives from its treatment of Sorokin's American career. His times and travails in Russia are presented briefly in 22 pages. Given the availability of Sorokin's autobiographical *Leaves from a Russian Diary* as well as *A Long Journey*, this is no doubt wise. Sorokin's scholarly achievements while at the University of Minnesota, as on social mobility, sociological theories, and rural sociology, receive due and proper notice. Sources for Sorokin's works and controversies, pro and con, deserved and received diligent mining, as they have been given in Johnston's book, and so likewise in Larry Nichols' articles, particularly as those regard friendly relations with E.A. Ross and the development of difficulties at Harvard and in the profession at large.

A Long Journey is an excellent autobiography, and Johnston's work a preeminent biography. Why should we even consider reading them both? This goes to the heart of the difference between the genres. The first is Sorokin's own candid and very expressive story, *his* story; the second is a fine reconstructive effort at *the* story – including the reactions and interactions, extraordinarily laden with contrasting assumptions and attitudes. The drama works out to some gratifying measure of reconciliation at the conclusion. There is a beginning, a middle, and a rousing end. In it, all who deserve so get their fair innings. Misunderstandings are illumined from all directions by Johnston's judicious choices from many sources.

That Sorokin's earlier revolutionary activism and journalistic habits had made his scholarly critiques somewhat less than collegial in tone (to say the least) has to be taken into account. One distinguished scholar told me "He could be very cruel," and opined that his post-war altruism studies were in part compensatory. (At this point, I hasten to add that Barry makes an excellent case for the serious import of those pioneering researches. In turn, I opine that the mystical, monastic, and ascetic aspects of some of Sorokin's' data, as on saints, etc., were intellectually less available to Protestants and secularists and this may have contributed to the eventual decline and termination of amitology as a study.)

Barry, in his quiet way, does suggest where Sorokin himself had been less than fair, as to William Ogburn, Reed Bain, Talcott Parsons, Harry Alpert and quite a few others. Yet, “the whirligig of time brings its revenges” applied up and down the line; Sorokin’s own scholarly works — especially the *Dynamics*, 1937-1941, came in for as much or more incomprehension and beside-the-point abuse as he himself ever handed out. Given the ultimate (fairly) happy ending, I have often been tempted to regard much of the story as involving highly unconscious humor, a long and involved social comedy. Of course, “life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel.” But Barry, bless his heart, is more professionally serious than that. And so he should be. Scholars should keep straight faces, lest they “laugh right out in meeting.” (Mark Twain)

But funny or not, *the* story is a good one. Sorokin, as an outnumbered “lone wolf,” and ill-camouflaged for this “other part of the forest,” conducted daring broad daylight raids upon the darling ewe lambs of empiricists and microsociologists. He nevertheless finishes through the help of loyal friends, as Barry points out, as a reinstated elder statesman. His case had been made, and his tale has been well and fully told.

Palmer Talbutt