

DOI: 10.17516/1997-1370-0639

УДК 17

Sorokin Pitirim Revisited. His Place in Social Philosophy as a Transdisciplinary Thinker

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Received 16.03.2020, received in revised form 04.08.2020, accepted 11.08.2020

Abstract. The article reviews the contribution made by Pitirim Sorokin, Russian-American sociologist and philosopher, into the development of social thought during the Russian period of his work. It analyses the program of autonomation of sociology as a transdisciplinary science. It proves that Sorokin managed to anticipate many ideas of the system-communication theory being the most respected at the moment and to reveal the major conditions for crystallization of the modern communicatively differentiated society. With the achievements of science, psychology, philosophy, linguistics and evolution theory contemporary for him, Sorokin formulated a positive system-communication approach to social studies that was implemented and therefore verified in the theory of Niklas Luhmann only several decades after. The program included the analysis of the minimum manifestation of the society later referred to as “interaction”, which we can rightfully equalize with our contemporary interpretation of communication.

Keywords: Pitirim Sorokin, Niklas Luman, system-communicative theory, social systems.

Research area: philosophy.

Citation: Antonovskiy, A.Yu. (2020). Sorokin Pitirim revisited. His place in social philosophy as a transdisciplinary thinker. *J. Sib. Fed. Univ. Humanit. Soc. Sci.*, 13(8), 1250–1263. DOI: 10.17516/1997-1370-0639.

Introduction

Pitirim Alexandrovich Sorokin is one of the few Russian thinkers who could qualify for a classic in social theory (Jeffries, 2002, 2009). It should be remarked, however, that his theoretic contribution into the social thought development is mainly associated with the cultural and historical approach and his contribution to the organization theory (Peltonen, 2018) and religion studies (Uzlaner, Stoeckl, 2017).

Let us consider some ideas of Sorokin systematically presented in his book titled “The System of Sociology” written in the so-called positivist period of his work. The book published exactly 100 years ago during the civil war contained a project of development and disciplinary self-manifestation of a transdisciplinary social theory. Unfortunately, the book had never been translated into English, and the author later preferred to shift to the cultural-historical and cultural-sociological studies.

The centennial of this outstanding research celebrated in 2020 is a good reason to recall Pitirim Sorokin as a strict social theorist and to revisit the value and perspectives of this unfairly forgotten project. Moreover, it appears interesting to trace the Russian sociology development process which, represented and assisted by Sorokin, struggled to protect its autonomy, separate from the competing approaches and occupy its unique niche in the complex hierarchy of other academic disciplines.

Later, after immigration to America, Sorokin set up and chaired the sociology department of Harvard University. However, in the aftermath, a greater impact was made by the competitive structural-functional version of the social theory that was established as the major theoretical paradigm for many decades. Talcott Parsons, a young researcher who developed the theory, gathered a group of colleagues who formulated the comprehensive and transdisciplinary-oriented theory of society based on the achievements of cultural anthropology and social psychology. Sometimes covert, and sometimes overt (Buxton, 1996), the war of concepts between Parson’s functional theory and Sorokin’s cultural-historical

approach finished with a complete and unconditional victory of functionalism. The irony of the situation is that the interaction concept previously developed by Sorokin (as admitted by Sorokin himself (Coser, 1977: 490)) laid the foundation, anticipated and, to a great extent, significantly forestalled the structural-functional theory, even though severely criticized by the thinker himself (Sorokin, 1963: 251).

It could not be unnoticed, however, that Sorokin’s concept manifests congeniality with today’s most authoritative system-communication version of the social theory (Luhmann, 1997; Stichweh, 2015; Beaker, 2006). Nevertheless, this temporal priority should be rather referred to Sorokin’s late cultural-sociological discoveries¹ (Pitasi, 2014: 28).

Both structural-functional theory and the late Sorokin’s theory dominated by it relied upon the *problem-oriented* setup justifying the theoretical sociological criticism of their objects. They did solve the theoretical problem of defining the object of sociological study but attempted to solve the problem of the society itself, to reconstruct the conditions of possible social order (the Hobbesian problem). But if Parsons justified his solution referring to actual reproduction of society through the universal AGIL functions, Sorokin spoke of some “spiritual and metaphysical sources of order” (Pitasi, 2014: 29).

In the meanwhile, in his early period, in “The System of Sociology” Sorokin justified the disciplinary rights of sociology differently, focusing not on the constituent problem, but the constituent object he referred to as “interaction”. Below, we will attempt to reproduce the main postulates of this project, but “interaction” shall be interpreted as “communication”. Our humble mission is to find the ideas of Sorokin formulated in his “Russian” period that anticipated the achievements of the modern social theory and its system-communication version in particular. Methodologically, we shall rely upon the modern studies of the disciplinary and trans-disciplinary structure of science developed by German sociologist Rudolf Stichweh (Stichweh, 2013).

¹ “Sorokin’s concept of culture (which anticipates Luhmann for several decades) is more rigid than Luhmann’s”.

Struggle for the subject and autonomy of sociology

As soon as it was born, sociology found itself in the situation of King Lear, like the philosophy that lost its disciplinary domain many other social sciences struggled to occupy (economic science, social anthropology, social psychology etc.). It needed to defend its right to a segment of the continual cognitive space of the external world of science, at the same time qualifying sociology as a social discipline in its own right. Pitirim Sorokin accepted the challenge, even though he had to take it twice. *Theoretically*, in “The System of Sociology” he managed to “reserve” a unique and still vacant specific domain of “interaction”. *Practically*, he brought the project to life by setting up the sociology department at Harvard University.

In our opinion, the unique situation when a Russian immigrant leads the institutionalization of American (and generally speaking, global) sociology is not naturally understandable and requires explanation. In any case, the subject matter is not a mere game of chance and may be described as “serendipity”, a term invented by his “disloyal disciple” Robert Merton (Merton, Barber, 2004). According to our hypothesis, this is the transdisciplinary nature of Sorokin’s social theory and, consequently, the performative influence of the theoretic concept on other researchers of Harvard that explains the credibility of the scientific and organizational project of Sorokin and the support he got at Harvard.

In his early period, Sorokin tended to derive the disciplinary claims of sociology not from the key problem of social order, but the *uniqueness* of the subject. The subject was formulated as “interaction between people”. Even though the subject matter is the relations between people, it is not the concept of an individual, but the “interpersonal relations category” that matters (Sorokin, 1920: 8). What is the ontological status of the “inter” prefix? Obviously, this “inter-personality” is not a person itself, it is not a representation of a social group or a social system; this denotes a unique class of interaction processes. This is a statement of reaching the trans-disciplinary border, as such “inter- relations” are considered by diverse

fields of study (e.g. biosociology, phytosociology etc.).

Sorokin establishes the autonomy of sociology with a positivist statement of the “scientific nature” of sociology. Firstly, “sociology can and should be a theoretic discipline that studies the world of people as it is. Any normativism should be driven away from sociology as a science. The Truth must be separated from the Good, Justice and other principles” (Sorokin, 2020, IX). Secondly, it must remain objective² and “transform from a science of ‘psychic realities’ into a science that studies the observable and measurable phenomena with a definite external being”. Thirdly, “sociology wishes to be an experienced and exact science, to stop ‘philosophizing’, to leave the philosophically constructive tractates behind” (Sorokin, 2020, X).

Sorokin attempts to “reserve” the autonomy borders by fighting back the expansive attacks of the competitor disciplines. He vigorously brushes away Ostwald’s “energetic approach”, where the relationships between individuals are reduced to the physical and chemical effects of Newtonian forces (“cooperation is a sum of forces” and “organization is a balance of forces”). He also throws aside other refined manifestations of “mechanism” including the works of Marx (as we remember, the key concept of the theory is “labour”, i.e. mechanic work defined through time as the measure of its value) and all types of biological reductionism³. The claims of psychology to the sociology domain are rejected by Sorokin due to the difference in their subjects. Psyche and consciousness are the subjects of psychology, while “it is not interested in the inter-psyche processes of communication, mutual actions and reactions of people”. “A sociologist does not care of what is going on in the soul of the insane” (Sorokin, 1920: 16). He is only interest-

² Remarkably, this positivist thesis was proclaimed by Sorokin almost at the same time with the famous (and conceptually similar) pamphlet of Max Weber “Science as a Vocation” (2019).

³ “...representatives of the ‘biologic school’, ... attempting to consider sociology as a part of biology, such as Waxweiler, have to separate the human interaction phenomena into an independent class, different from other kinds of interaction between organisms” (Sorokin, 1920: 11).

ed in the “symptoms based on which the society recognizes this person as insane and the social consequences of his insanity”. Long before Michel Foucault, Sorokin expressed the idea of the social origin of many mental illnesses. This is the society that defines the standards for the normal and mentally deviant; therefore, the fact of a mental deviation is a community-based phenomenon, determined by social-theoretical and cultural-historical circumstances.

However, in the final frame of his “apology of sociology”, Sorokin suddenly excuses the claims the other social sciences to the domain of sociology. “Whether we consider political economics, or the law science, or the religious studies, or any discipline focused on art, just like all other “social” sciences, all of them study the phenomena of human interaction” (Sorokin, 1920: 21).

Even in this paradoxical thesis, we see an obvious parallel with the key differential thesis of the system-communication theory. This theory studies the communication types listed by Sorokin (economic, legal, religious as the subjects of their specific disciplines (“communal economy”, “communal politics”, “communal science”, “communal law”, “communal religion”, “communal art” etc. and includes them into its domain) (Luhmann, 1998). But does it mean that sociology is a multitude or a corpus of special discipline? “Is sociology a mere label that defines an aggregation of all social disciplines, or does it exist on its own, as an independent branch of knowledge that does not merge with any other social science?” (Sorokin, 1920: 22).

No, in the opinion of Sorokin, it maintains its unique range of subjects even after having been divided by the mentioned social disciplines. “Specialization and differentiation of sciences ... do not exclude, but, on the opposite, require the science to be synthesized” (Sorokin, 1920: 19).

**Petrażycki’s theorem,
second-order observation
and the term of the transdisciplinary**

Sorokin justifies this transdisciplinary “generalizing sociology” thesis, referring to Petrażycki’s theorem. The latter claims that

any special science requires and implies the presence of a metascience to pick an invariant subject or its model manifested in a multitude of special disciplines. For instance, botany and zoology are generalized by general biology as a supervising discipline. Here Sorokin formulates the concept of the second- and next-order observation. For example, according to Petrażycki, the theory of morals requires the theory of law, and the theory of law and theory of morals together need a generalizing theory, such as legal sociology etc.⁴

This idea of a generalizing, transdisciplinary-oriented science has been universally recognized in the system-communication theory of science that marks out *two types* of transdisciplinary sciences, “finding the invariants that make it possible to integrate the classes of problems studied by several disciplines that seemed heterogenous at first... On one hand, the subject matter is the models and notions (studied by formal disciplines, primarily mathematics and logic) that deal with the transcendent concept, raising the integration degree of a scientific system, ensuring the access to the progressive scientific knowledge and understanding of such... The second type of transdisciplinary concepts we find in the conceptual systems of ‘structuralism’ and ‘general system theory’ distinguished from the formal disciplines for having originated from the specific disciplinary contexts and specific phenomena origin areas (language, organisms) used as paradigm phenomena” (Stichweh, 2013: 25).

It is remarkable that proving his thesis, Sorokin referred to the achievements of the contemporary natural philosophy, contradicting his initial restriction on philosophizing. In particular, he turns to the Mach-Leibniz idea of the “economy of effort” or “economy of thought”. Sorokin draws a direct link between the theoretic sociology and the mnemonic function, e.g. explicitly referring to the Newtonian laws interpreted by Ernst Mach, though,

⁴ The theorem is formulated as follows: “If there is n types of related subjects, they require $n+1$ theoretic sciences and theories in general; for example, for two types, it takes $2+1=3$ theories” i.e. “plus one more discipline to formulate the principles typical for the common genus” (Petrażycki, 1905: 80).

for obvious reasons, does not mention the name of the latter.

“All Newton did was a transition from the forces between the bodies of finite dimensions to considering forces between infinitely little particles. The transition is associated with such an economy of mental energy” that compensates for the incapability of memory of “keeping every single settled fact” so that the “observation materials are encapsulated in a brief formula”. Therefore, Mach’s mnemonic and technical function of the “economy of effort” becomes the main alibi of sociology as a discipline claiming to be unique in this function and therefore autonomous on one hand, and a supervising meta-discipline “presenting” certain achievements and “single facts” produced by other social sciences on the other (Sorokin, 2020: 31-32).

However, the trans-disciplinary nature in Sorokin’s works manifests its specificity, not being limited to generalizing different phenomena into the framework notion of *interaction*. A special focus is made on finding mutual dependencies between special disciplines (united by sociology): “Different categories of interaction phenomena studied by individual sciences, e.g. economic, religious, legal, aesthetic phenomena etc. are not separated in real life; they are inseparably bound together and influence each other... For instance, the salary of a worker, besides the demand and supply ratio, depends on the known moral ideas. ... Division of labour is, to a certain extent, associated with the phenomenon of solidarity. ... The economic organization of society often depends on common religious beliefs. Geographic conditions make a certain impact on the organization of production, family structure and customs of the nation...” This is why any “specialist in economy... has to act as a sociologist as well, otherwise, he would not be a ‘specialist’... Thus, every specialist is always a sociologist” (Sorokin, 1920: 33).

Theoretic sociology structure

The main achievement of Sorokin’s young opponent Talcott Parson is believed to be the synthetic nature of his theory that connected the microlevel of sociological analysis (theo-

ry of action in Max Weber’s interpretation) to the macrolevel of the large-scale social systems (the idea of division of labour in society by Emile Durkheim). “That was Parsons who realized that an action could not be separated from the system” (Luhmann, 2002: 21).

However, this idea was first expressed and proven much earlier in “The System of Sociology”, within the framework of Pitirim Sorokin’s “social analytics”.

“The subject of social analytics is the studies of the structure of a social phenomenon and its forms; this discipline falls into two main subdisciplines: 1) the social analytics that studies the structure of elementary social phenomena and their elements, the systematics of their main forms 2) and the social analytics that deals with the structure of compound social units formed by different combinations of the elementary social phenomena” (Sorokin, 1920: 38).

At the same time, as we have said above, Sorokin did not only anticipate the ideas of Parsons; he did the shift in the “system references” later done by Niklas Luhmann when he stepped from analysing the *system of action* as an elementary social phenomenon, accumulating in masses making up the social substrate, to analysing *communication* as an elementary form of existence of society. Thus, to our mind, speaking of “interaction”, Sorokin speaks of communication in the way it was interpreted by Niklas Luhmann.

Structurally, Sorokin’s “interaction” falls into the interacting persons (*Ego* and *Other* according to Niklas Luhmann). *Dynamically*, Sorokin’s “interaction” falls into the sequences of “acts-stimulations” and “inner states-experiences”. To our mind, this structure anticipates the system of variables which may in different anatomic combinations determine the forms of the communicative macrosystems (politics, science, economy, religion, art).

Before analysing the interaction system described by Sorokin, let us briefly revise Luhmann’s approach to the communication macrosystems.

These systems use polar means to reduce the complexity of the external world. For example: while an *Ego* as a *politician* subordinates

	Ego experiences	Ego acts
The Other experiences	Science (truth, values) Experiences of the <i>Ego</i> (for example, the data of experiments that prove the trueness of theoretical theses) must be confirmed by experiences of any <i>Other</i>	Intime system (love) Using its actions, <i>Ego</i> tries to cause experiences of the <i>Other</i>
The Other acts	Economic system (money) Actions of the <i>Other</i> (for example, claims to material benefits) do not cause an act response but are experienced by the <i>Ego</i> because the <i>Other</i> has ownership rights or money; Art system (work of art) The artist acts, the spectator experiences;	Politic system (power) Actions of the <i>Other</i> entail actions of the <i>Ego</i> if they are regulated by <i>Power</i> . Personal experiences must be withdrawn from the sphere of political and military communications.

Fig. 1

its actions to actions of a superior *Other*, an *Ego* as a scientist coordinates its experiences with experiences of the *Other*. No doubt, science consists of actions and communications but styles them as mutually authenticated experiences of the external world, as perceptions, observations, experiments. Science in this sense, together with value communication, is in the upper left square of the scheme of variables, or Luhmann's constellations: the *Ego* undergoes experiences in response to experiences of the *Other*. Politics is in the lower right square: the *Ego* acts, subordinating and reacting with its actions to actions of the *Other*.

Thus, four possible combinations of the four basic elements (experiences/acts, *Ego/Other*) are reproduced by Luhmann in the respective macrosystems, setting their typology (Fig. 1). This is a breakthrough idea of Luhmann connecting the structural constituents of *elementary* communication on the microlevel and the specificity of the communication *systems* on the macrolevel was anticipated by Pitirim Sorokin almost word by word referring to the notion of *interaction*.

"The people interaction phenomenon takes place when... the changes of the psychic experiences or external acts of one individual are caused by the experiences and external acts of the other (others)" (Sorokin, 1920: 44).

"The acting of B works Mrs A into a frenzy".

This example illustrates an elementary structure of communication:

The Other acts → *The Ego experiences*.

"The Decree issued by Commissar B calling A to arms makes him go to the Commissariat".

This example illustrates an elementary structure of political communication:

The Other acts → *The Ego acts*.

After that, Sorokin explicitly lists the mentioned elements or components of the "interaction":

"1) Presence of two or more individuals that determine each other's experiences and acts,

2) Presence of acts through which the mutual experiences and acts are conditioned,

3) Presence of conductors⁵, transmitting the acts or stimulation of acts from one individual to another";

⁵ In Niklas Luhmann's interaction variable model we could also see the respective "generalizing communicative media" (money, power, truth etc.) that integrated and assigned a meaning to the internal system communications (economics, politics, science etc.). In a similar conceptualization of the communication media, Sorokin identified them as "conductors". The concept of "conductors" will be considered below.

and then explicitly describes the transition from the elementary level of interaction-communication to the macrolevel of social life:

“Every researcher of whatever is classified as social life phenomena... should look for the most primitive case of their occurrence, a simplified and little model he could study to see more complicated facts as combinations of the elementary cases” (Sorokin, 1920: 87).

Sorokin’s statement that the typology of macrosystems is set by constellations of communication (“interaction”) variables was more than a revolutionary constructivist theory for that time, but, perceived by his contemporaries, could have set the foundation for the system-communication theory. Sorokin does not only suggest a nomenclature for the communicative macrosystems (economics, art, religion, law, science) but also points at some “immature” forms of sociality referred to today as social protest movements (Luhmann, 1996).

“All social relations, from economic to aesthetic, religious, legal and scientific, fall into the *interaction* relations.... Having decomposed the interactions into constituent elements, we happen to decompose the most complicated social phenomena... Any social phenomenon can be woven from a combination of the interaction process, from the mere humming of the crowd to the systematic struggle of the global proletariat” (Sorokin, 1920: 81).

This is the understanding of macro-micro-interaction that pushed Sorokin to a modern-looking idea of the system-communication sociology of science. This is about the capacity of communicative integration of the disciplinary heterogeneous science relied upon its *elementary substrate basis*, on one hand, and the *layered hierarchic nature* on the other. The hierarchic nature of the scientific disciplines where the basic levels are occupied by the most authoritative physics, chemistry and biology and the top levels belong to the younger sociology and psychology enables the latter to use the previously proven methodological principles and forms of structural and role organization of the more authoritative disciplines. This is how Pitirim Sorokin formulates the connection between the elementary substrate-basis and the hierarchic nature of sciences:

“A sociologist ... must use the experience of other sciences, such as chemistry and biology. Like a chemist who decomposes the entire colourful and complicated world of non-organic nature into atoms, like a biologist who studies the phenomena of life in a single cell, a sociologist must seek a “social cell” he could study to acquire the knowledge about the main properties of the social phenomena; moreover, like a chemist who explains the complex subjects and phenomena of the non-organic world through the combinations of atoms and their compounds, or molecules, or like a biologist who separates an organism into constituent cells to study the first as the combination of the second, the sociologist has to find the primitive component that would enable him to look at any social phenomena as a combination of such components” (Sorokin, 1920: 78).

One hundred years after, this disciplinary and integrative function of the “transfer of concepts” from the mature to the developing disciplines became the common point for the system-communication sociology of sciences: “The hierarchy of sciences... is an important factor for homogenization of the scientific field. The hierarchization of the disciplines intensifies the inter-discipline exchange and allows for transferring techniques, models and theories, typically, from predominantly hard-disciplines to soft-disciplines... As a rule, the transfer is directed from the more advanced to the less advanced disciplines, and the formal competences generated in one domain become significant in the new ones” (Stichweh, 2013: 30).

De-psychologization of the “internal conditions” and sociological anti-humanism

The most problematic pole in this multitude of the variable theory constituents (“experience/act, Ego/Other”) is the “experience” or “internal condition”, especially for the positivist-oriented social theory. The Russian stage of Sorokin’s idea evolution is usually defined as positivist, but it appears to be simplified for us. His understanding of “experience” reminds of the later “identity theory” of Smart and Place’s analytical philosophy of consciousness (Smart, 1959) and H. Putnam functionalist theory of

mind. In particular, Sorokin proves the thesis that any experience is in this or that way expressed externally, through behaviour and actions, and distinguishing between them is a mere consequence of interpretation or observation.

The process that opens to the experiencing party as a Qualia looks like a neurophysiological process to a foreign observer. Experience may be hidden from the observer, but it can anyway evoke a reaction of the Other, as “the psychic process and process in the mind are inseparable from each other” (Sorokin, 1920: 48).

Sorokin considers the ideas of Darwin, Lossky, Petrażycki and their proofs of the actors’ capacity of intuitive reconstruction of foreign mentality as a sort of evolutionary achievement, as a condition for survival and natural selection of the human community. But still, agreeing with Bekhterev, he concludes that the “Other Ego” as such remains inaccessible. Neither intuitionism, nor analogy, nor projection guarantees any access. As a result, reconstructing any internal conditions, the actor has to use only speech, gestures and facial expressions as relatively reliable ways to express any internal conditions⁶.

As we know, this discussion of the status of the mental conditions of actors (“interaction parties”) in the form of a *subjectivism/objectivism* dilemma made a dramatic impact on the development of sociology. “Which party in this argument should we join? Which of the two trends should we follow?” (Sorokin, 1920: 63). The solution he suggested can be understood in an exclusively system-communication manner. Sorokin recognizes that the psychic condition as such is inaccessible to an external observer, but, unlike a typical behaviourist, he sees this *inaccessibility* as relevance for communication. This latency, on one hand, provokes interaction (=communication), but on the other hand, makes it possible to understand the acts

of another interaction party. “...it would be irrational for a sociologist to ignore the subjective and psychic aspect of human activity... because now and then we tend to set diagnoses, such as ‘H. is in bad spirits today’; ‘U. looks sad’; ‘L. is furious’; ‘A. is excited’; ‘S. is craving for sweets’; ‘D. is plotting a dirty trick’ etc. And our diagnoses prove right... and in the majority of situations, we understand each other. The routine daily facts demonstrate that we are capable of understanding the psychic experience of the others based on their external manifestations and frequently we do it right” (Sorokin, 1920: 68).

In the examples above the subject matter is a typical or functional condition (as understood by H. Putnem) that sets certain programs or algorithms of behaviour. Such algorithms connect and explain the past and future actions in terms of interaction, make it possible to forecast them, to plan one’s responsive behaviour, and ensure the so-called “system recursion”. Or, in terms of system-communication theory, this is about *social expectations*.

In this regard, such “psychic phenomena as love, affection, heavy and unexpected grief, the horror of loss” as standard social expectations act as a guideline for action in certain situations, when typical experiences evoke typical acts. These conditions are the missing variables, acting as the “key to decode” the signs and symbols manifested in the optic and acoustic forms.

Thus, the understood “internal experience” in the language of modern system-communication theory only performs the function of selecting *information in a message*. A contact request can only be understood if we refer to the internal condition to understand the connection of the message with its possible internally attributed interpretations. Are those the conditions of “Discontent, indifference and impulsiveness” behind the “get out” expression? Is the expression “Goddamn it!” caused by “frustration, fury, or amusement?” These are examples of decoding information from a message provided by Sorokin. This is the understanding of how this very connection of the *message* sent by the *Other* and the *information* decoded by some *Ego* relies upon the hypothet-

⁶ Sorokin makes a remarkable reference to Pavlov who “never used psychological understanding of nervous activity for the success of his studies in 13 years” (Sorokin, 1920: 60). We may suggest that the subject matter is Pavlov’s infamous experiments on children (Yushchenko, 1928) that were co-determined by the attitude to the “internal condition” of the children.

ic internal condition as a link between the message and the meaning derived from it.

At that moment, this is the uncertainty of the “internal condition” that creates the need for further interaction (in the form of inquiry, clarification, continue of the conversation), acting, at the same time, as the precondition of the diversity of external expressions, i.e. the freedom of acts. “The nervous system, – writes Sorokin, – is like a weaver’s loom that sews according to standard templates, but can produce a different result to every impulse (depending on the weaver)” (Sorokin, 1920: 74).

Apriori-unreliable, ambivalent and unidentifiable from outside, such “internal conditions” are the preconditions and conditions for the free, but at the same time systematically-canalized nature of interaction (or communication). This postulates an underlying liberal idea of *free* communication excluding the situations like “The professor dictates, the secretary reproduces” (Sorokin 1920: 70). In the system-communication language, it would imply a clear definiteness of the information transmitted through the given message, that would, in its turn, result in the excessiveness of any communication and any understanding.⁷

Sorokin’s conceptualization of the “internal conditions” as information keys to decoding the standard and hard-to-interpret messages ensuring understanding within the interaction yields the same “anti-humanistic consequences” the system-communication sociology is reproached for today (Schimank, 2005: 59-76).

“... individual as an individual can never be considered as a microcosm of the social macrocosm. He can never be because everything an individual may become is an individual and nothing of what we refer to as “society” nor “social phenomena”... individual as an individual creates no foundation for the existence of such special science as sociology. As a physical being, he is studied by physical and mathematic sciences; as an organism, he is studied by biology, as a creature with consciousness or

psyche, he is studied by psychology. Since sociology has nothing to with an individual alone, it would have been unnecessary. An individual cannot be the sought model of what bears the title of social phenomena” (Sorokin, 1920: 79).

“Interaction conductors”

or generalized communicative media theory

The idea of generalized communicative media is an essential part of the system-communication theory derived from the transdisciplinary adoptions from psychology and neurophysiology. The concept of media that has become a colloquial term was conceptualized in an expansive theoretic form by Austro-American psychologist Fritz Heider (in his report “Thing and Medium” in 1927) (Heider, 2005). In this interpretation, media have become an integral part of N. Luhmann’s sociology (Luhmann, 1997: 190-413).

Sorokin develops his own transdisciplinary concept of media, where the transmitter role is assigned to the so-called “conductors”. “Contact with receptors is not immediate and direct; it may only occur through the emanation of special forces (vibrations of air perceived by vision, oscillations of airwaves perceived by hearing etc.)” (Sorokin, 1920: 84). “Without conductors, psyche would have been non-transmittable. Even direct physical touches used to “transmit” these or those psychic experiences (such as caress, threatening moves, a “friendly smile” or a “kiss of love” etc.) do not translate the psyche directly; they do it indirectly, through the conductors, which, in this case, are the bodies of the contacting people and the acts of their organs” (Sorokin, 1920: 116).

In this situation, interaction can be conducted by anything (utterances, writing, printing, electricity, various acoustic or optic media). The typology of such conductors does not rely on the substrate, but the conceptual parameters of functions, and, first of all, the specific ways of covering distance and, particularly, time, in optimizing the dynamics of communication. Just like in system-communication approach, Sorokin distinguishes between the communication spreading media (making interaction more likely in long distances or spaced in time) and the communication success media (money,

⁷ Futuristic ideas of such “non-communicative communication”, where information would be unequivocally transmitted through the given message is considered today as a consequence of various neuro-computer interfaces (Backer, 2006: 37).

power etc.), providing interaction within the communication macrosystems.

Symbolic functions of conductors

In the first case, “people interact with each other both physically and mentally, regardless of the huge distances separating them and the time gap between them”. “The living and the dead may communicate with each other. The will (act) of the dead evokes experience of the heirs” (Sorokin, 1920: 117). From this trivial circumstance, Sorokin derives the concept of the “symbolic meaning of conductors”. There is no rigid connection between the physical shape of the message and its symbolic meaning (information). “A piece of red cloth is a message, but the meaning it bears depends on the context: time, community, and subject” (Sorokin, 1920: 121). This is the symbolic meaning of the medium that causes both behaviour and experience. The causal role is rather played by the *social expectations* associated with the symbols and triggered by the red flag, than the initial psychic condition of the person who displayed it. As the bearers of crystallized meanings, these expectations are social structures providing the answers given by the perceiving parties, i.e. canalizes the interaction in a non-random way.

The generalizing function of conductors

Conductors are capable of generalizing not only by symbolizing and typifying the situations, setting the frameworks and contexts for communication; they do not only extract standard meanings or pieces of information from messages with their symbolism. Such extracted meaning must be regularly reproducible; this is the only condition for generalizing or integrating this or that community: “there is one more additional condition, the presence of a more or less homogenous manifestation (symbolisation) of the same experiences by the interacting individuals, thereby opening an opportunity of a correct and regular interpretation of the symbolic units by each of them” (Sorokin, 1920: 122).

This is where the key problem of sociology, i.e. the problem of social order is solved. Neither the closedness of the psyche nor the variability of interpreting symbols, nor mes-

sage meanings prevent the arrangement of interactions and maintenance of the social order. “It is clear that human heart is a mystery and revealing one’s true feelings is not an easy task, while external symbols can be always interpreted in different ways, which we can see, for instance, in the judicial pleadings of the parties. The defence attorney and prosecutor create pictures of opposite experiences based on the same symbols and deeds of the accused” (Sorokin, 1920: 123). Understanding and consensus are underlaid by *symbolism* and *reproducibility* of the rule (in this case, rule of law).

This is how Sorokin arrives at the understanding of the *symbolic generalizing communication media*, the key concept of the contemporary system-communication theory.

Differentiation of the interaction forms depending on the media form

From the function perspective, the concept of *conductor* is similar to the concept of *media* in the system-communication theory. They reinforce the “weak connections” between big masses of events. In both cases, these two concepts characterize huge masses of simultaneously executed and *poorly connected* elements or events (sentences of a language, masses of communications, orders, payments, truth-related utterances, artistic acts etc.). Or, quoting Sorokin, “The social life of people as a whole looks like an enormous, continuously circulating flow of words and their combinations streaming from one person to another, from one group to another” (Sorokin, 1920: 127).

For this totality of social interactions to be arrangeable and differentiable in separate macrosystems, these masses of possible events need to be limited by these or those special “conductors” performing the function of transmitting the interaction (e.g., acoustic conductors): “Any encounter, any conversation, any meeting, whether it is an academic lecture, a political meeting, a parliament or court session, a religious sermon, communication between a teacher and students, conversations within the family, at the market etc. are illustrations acoustic conductors playing their social role” (Sorokin, 1920: 128).

Today's system-communication theory reconstructs the social development and communicative transformations as a reaction to the transformations of the communicative media (starting from mutual perception, spoken language, writing, printing, telecommunication and the modern social media on computers). Within this theory, the expansion of any new media is considered to be a solution to a given integration task to minimize the preceding conflicts, which does not deny the generation of the new ones. New media translations provoke the so-called "cultural catastrophes". One of such catastrophes was associated with the emergence of the optic media, i.e. writing, that "shook the ancient world of secrets and taboos". Another catastrophe was triggered by book printing that caused religious wars and social revolutions (Baecker, 2006: 11)⁸.

According to Luhmann, writing and printing allowed for neutralizing the conflict-generating potential of the acoustic media, i.e. spoken language. The conflict potential relies upon the fact that as the language develops and shifts from the "picture-like", i.e. analogous presentation of reality, to higher abstraction, to more dynamic forms of description, new social and dynamic opportunities were crystallized and shaped. On one hand, new resources of the language (verb tenses etc.) made it possible to describe various processes and changes, but on the other hand, the form of a sentence provided the tools for denial, for saying no, and, therefore, for rejecting the suggested contact requests (Luhmann, 1997: 205-291).

This is the domain where Sorokin develops his concept of conductors. The acoustic conductors of the tribal societies translated the analogous ("picture-like") images that created a *static* picture of perception rich in elements but did not express any processes. The words were used to denote constant phenomena, and in this sense, could be equalized with things.

⁸ "Writing blows up the world of these taboos by making the moralising ... obvious and hence provides reasons, with an eye to whoever is sending the message. ... Printing is the next catastrophe, because now texts can be compared with each other and hence systematically criticized thanks to their reproduction, so that 'criticism' on a wider scale than ever before becomes a new form of heuristics".

All difficulties of interaction transformation were associated with this circumstance.

"The languages of the primitive communities always express the ideas of objects and acts as though these objects and acts were perceived by eyes and hearing; ... there are no words or gestures for expression of the abstract experiences and ideas, but there are words and gestures to denote absolutely certain, singular things and events; this explains the abundance of the prehistoric language in nouns, prepositions and verbs; the language was a picture-like work of art, a drawing of an object or an event" (Sorokin, 1920: 172).

The simultaneousness and coincidence between the perception and spoken expression in such tribal societies were the guarantee of consensus, as there were no significant differences between the world of the interacting individuals. The language itself would not let them break the borders of the given perception of the environment. With regard to the interaction constituents, it meant that the identity of the experiences (internal conditions) and verbal expressions ensured the identity of the Ego and the Other, the objects and symbols, experiences and acts (including message acts). In other words, the primitive languages of small communities guaranteed mutual confidence of the words, acts and coincidence with the thoughts and acts of the Other, i.e. the confidence in social consensus.

Only the new optic medium (the "light and colour conductors" in Sorokin's terminology) made it possible to distinguish a subject and its verbal representation. In other terms, words became the variables of the natural language, and, therefore (besides hiding the intentions) the communicating parties acquired the opportunity of using them in a free manner, of modelling the words separately from the things they could present without "damaging" the world of subjects.

As the complexity of society requiring more global spaces and times was growing, the spoken language lost its function of social integration. It was writing that performed the compensating integrating function, or, to be more precise, the written law, written decrees of the authorities, artistic and academic texts,

and money that connect people regardless of the huge distances.

The keepers of the optic media (“light conductors”) and the social memory accumulation spots (and, in this regard, an essential cultural and historical milestone, ensuring the “interaction” through space and time in a long-term perspective) are libraries. They were the factor that undermined the stability of the ancient world. They facilitated the crystallization of the communicative success media, making new types of incredible interactions or communications possible since they appeared. This outstanding social and integration role of the optic conductors and libraries as their storage places is stated by Sorokin. “From this point of view, every library can be regarded as a huge and complex telephone station where through the books hundreds of people find their connection with living and dead authors every day and find themselves in a quiet conversation with each other” (Sorokin, 1920: 130).

One hundred years ago this idea of the optic media as a condition for crystallization of the modern system-differentiated society became commonly recognized. “The guarantees of stability in the society of printing cannot lie any longer in families and in the regions. No dynasty and no territory is a match for this sort of restlessness. In its place, certainly without making them redundant, there step in, according to Luhmann, the libraries and the functional systems. The librarians provide the rubrics, under which politics can and must recognise itself as politics, business as business, science as science and then also art as art and religion as religion” (Baecker, 2006: 14).

Writing (as optic media in general or the “light conductors”) changes the structure of social time and drives the interactions beyond the limits of the lifetime of an individual or his personal memory. This is the phenomenon of telecommunication in the broadest sense, where the communication parties are texts

(i.e. the communications themselves), and people with their spatial and temporal limits find themselves to be the “links in a chain of conductors”, ensuring the transmission of the communication texts through the chain. Writing and printing generated new media as means of communicative success (authority, truth, money etc.) that underlaid the emergence of macrosystems. Sorokin reconstructs these processes further in his work “The System of Sociology”, but here we have to finish reconstruction of the trans-disciplinary project of Pitirim Sorokin. Sorokin managed to anticipate many ideas of the universalist theory of society, being the most credible theories today, and to record the main preconditions for crystallization of the contemporary communicatively-differentiated society. With the achievements of science, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, evolution theory contemporary to him, Sorokin formulated a positive program for the system-communication approach to the social studies, which was applied and therefore verified only several decades after, in the system-communication theory of Niklas Luhmann. The program included the analysis of the minimum manifestation of the society denoted with the term of “interactions”, that we can rightfully equalize to today’s notion of communication. The respective constellations of the elements of this “social atom” created the typology of the global society macrosystem, and the correlations found between the micro- and macrolevels were credibly described and justified. Sorokin suggested his own theory of “communication translation media” he referred to as “conductors”. He developed a typology, described the functions and properties of the symbolic tools and conditions for communication later denoted as “communication success media”.

The priority of Sorokin in the mentioned fields of knowledge should be restored, which requires further work on the reconstruction of his heritage with a special focus on the Russian period of his work.

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Питирим Сорокин как трансдисциплинарный мыслитель. Забывтое наследие и место в традиции

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Аннотация. В статье реконструируется вклад русско-американского социолога и философа Питирима Сорокина в развитие социальной мысли в российский период его творчества. Анализируется программа автономизации социологии как трансдисциплинарной науки. Обосновывается, что Сорокину удалось предвосхитить многие идеи наиболее влиятельной на сегодняшний день системно-коммуникативной теории, зафиксировать важнейшие предпосылки кристаллизации современного коммуникативно-дифференцированного общества. Используя достижения современного ему естествознания, психологии, философии, лингвистики, эволюционной теории, Сорокин сформулировал позитивную программу системно-коммуникативного подхода к исследованию общества, которая реализовалась и тем самым верифицировалась лишь десятилетия спустя в рамках теории Никласа Лумана. Эта программа включала в себя анализ минимального проявления общества, которое получила название взаимодействия, а мы с полным правом можем отождествить с современным понятием коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: Питирим Сорокин, Никлас Луман, системно-коммуникативная теория, социальные системы.

Научная специальность: 09.00.00 – философские науки.