

Jerusalem Hath Sinned

The Crisis of Our Age, by P. A. Sorokin. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company. 338 pages. \$3.50.

Social and Cultural Dynamics, by P. A. Sorokin. Vol. IV: *Basic Problems, Principles and Methods*. New York: American Book Company. 819 pages. \$6.

PITIRIM SOROKIN is a strange figure in the American academic world. Now chairman of the Department of Sociology at Harvard University, he was once secretary to Kerensky, and was born the son of an itinerant Russian artisan. In "The Crisis of Our Age," a non-technical restatement of his four-volume "Social and Cultural Dynamics," he speaks in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, calling on his generation to return to God, to put away relativism and skepticism, to admit that the values of this day and age are not worth fighting for. It is an impassioned document such as one rarely finds in sociological literature. And Sorokin states many things that are often little recognized in academic circles. He understands that any civilization creates its own value system and that it is great and vigorous in proportion to the degree to which this value system organizes the various aspects of its life. Its ethics, its law, its art, its government and its economics are unintelligible except as they are related to this system of meanings. When these meanings change, a new kind of living and of feeling supersede the old order of life. A view of life which was meaningful under the old order is meaningless under the new.

All this he argues passionately and convincingly. We are, he says, in the twilight of a sensate dispensation which began to dominate the Western world in the sixteenth century. Sensate values are this-worldly, secular and utilitarian. They are relativistic and skeptical. For five centuries they achieved great triumphs, but they contained in themselves a poisonous virus which is working itself out today. They were partial. They denied the value of the supersensory, of the intuitional, the values of religion. "In our zeal to serve Mammon we have forgotten to serve God." In our materialism we deny man as the child of God, the bearer of absolute values. Man has become a tool, a victim. The agony of our world is the fruit of these sensate strivings, but as a result of these agonies we will turn again to the eternal verities. We will have faith again in the absolute.

To read Sorokin when he is writing for the public is like nothing so much as reading the lamentations of Jeremiah: "Jerusalem hath grievously sinned; therefore she is removed." As with the prophets, the subject is not individual sin; it is the sins of a nation, of an age. And Sorokin hates the ways of this generation. Its art is "physio-dirty"; its philosophy and ethics are relativistic. In fifth-century Greece and in the Middle Ages, art was "the human soul conversing with its God" and it painted gods or saints or angels. It was rooted in spiritual values. Now we have Dadaists and jazz. "Jerusalem hath grievously sinned."

Nevertheless, this call to repentance is presented as a compendium of sociological knowledge and documented in four heavy volumes replete with statistics computed to the decimal point. It is a cultural fact of our age which Sorokin does not discuss: this generation makes an empiricist of a man born with the temper and convictions of an Old Testament prophet. And sociologically his argument begs the

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question. It relies throughout on a Spenglerian analogy with the maturing and aging of individuals: sensate culture, Sorokin says, had its glories in music, in painting, in literature, in architecture, in invention, which "require no apologia." Sensate values, therefore, even by his own analysis do not correlate with disintegration and cultural abasement; the latter arises only with the senility of sensate culture. Unless one is convinced, therefore, by the analogy with the individual organism, the question of sociological causes is still unanswered. The question is still: What does correlate with disintegration? Sorokin himself has an excellent discussion of the decay of contract in modern economy, which he ascribes to the fact that one party to the contract is no longer free to enter into it or to abstain, but this discussion stands quite apart from his main argument. He discusses present-day nationalism, too, but when he comes to diagnosis he passes over such things in favor of the exceedingly doubtful analogy between society and the individual life cycle. He is content to say merely that the body politic and any system of values bear in themselves from the beginning, like the human body, the seeds of their own decay. The proposition makes good poetry but it is stultifying in sociological analysis.

His other major proposition equally begs the question. He would throw out all relativism and enthrone again absolute values. But the problem in all science is to determine what is relative, and what cannot be tampered with. Of course there are in human societies absolutes with which one cannot tamper without courting violence and insecurity, and it is important to isolate these. But this cannot be done unless one is willing to admit as relative many institutions which are currently believed to have an absolute value. A sociology which is *a priori* committed to absolute values scraps at the very beginning one major problem of human societies. So far from denying cultural relativism, we need to take it into full account if we are to understand those social problems which lie beyond it. RUTH BENEDICT