P. Sorokin’s Sociology of revolution in the context of theory of revolution of 19th–20th centuries

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the analysis of Pitirim Sorokin’s book “The Sociology of Revolution” in the context of scientific achievements in the field of the theory of revolution. The author analyzes: first, those ideas and thoughts that formed the basis of Sorokin's concept in comparison with those approaches and ideas that existed in his time; Secondly, those ideas and approaches that had been developing in the 20th century under the influence of Sorokin’s book. The author considers, that Sorokin’s “The Sociology of Revolution” needs to be considered in the scientific context of researches on the causes of social protest from Aristotle to Enlightenment, researches on the English and Great French Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries and the development of the theory of revolution in the 19th century. The author concludes that Sorokin's “The Sociology of Revolution” had absorbed into its concept existing approaches and ideas, and became a bright conceptual work, which gave a way to several generations of researchers of the theory of revolution in the 20th century. And its great influence is still valid.

Keywords: sociology of revolution; theory of revolution; theory of modernization; Pitirim Sorokin; Lyford Edwards; Crane Brinton; George Pettee; Teda Skocpol; Jack Goldstone

The name of the Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin is firmly connected with the laying of the foundations of the theory of revolution and the whole research direction, included in the humanities from the title of his work “The Sociology of Revolution”. Despite the high degree of interest in this work and P. Sorokin’s views on the revolution and his contribution to the development of the theory of revolution for almost a century, a number of questions are presented inaccurately and many nuances remain unsolved.

The first such controversial tangle of problems is the theory of revolution’s time and authorship of creating. Traditionally, the development of the “theory of revolution” begins with the work of Lyford Edwards “The Natural History of the Revolution” (1927), followed by the works of Crane Brinton (1938) and George Pettee (1938) [1–3]. Sometimes the work of Pitirim Sorokin “Sociology of the Revolution”, written in 1923 and published two years later in the United States [4] is also included in this pleiad [5–7]. First, P. Sorokin’s superiority in this group of research is beyond doubt: it was his work, to some extent, that pushed the research thought of the listed authors. Secondly, noting the integrity, complexity and focus of these studies, unlike all predecessors, on the creation and development of the theory of revolution, the origin of this theory must be increased at age by a whole century.

The transitional stage between the research of certain revolutions and attempts at generalization can be considered in the work of Christoph Koch, who carried out the first attempt at consolidated work – the presentation of the history of all revolutions, as the author imagined them: from Ancient times to revolutions of the 19th century in Europe. From the end of the 18th century to 1815 there were several editions (constantly supplemented by the author), and many reprints after his death [8].

In 1817 Antoine Ferrand’s book “Theory of Revolutions” had been published [9], but that work went unnoticed. Ferrand generally followed the principles of Christophe Koch and considered under revolutions various social upheavals from the Ancient World to the French Revolution, significantly increasing their number, as well as adding to them natural and scientific revolutions, and set his task to find patterns to this whole diverse complex of phenomena.

However, these works can be considered as the first attempt of generalization, but not a study of the theory of revolution.

In 1830 Thomas Bailey published his work “A Discourse on the Causes of Political Revolutions”, which can already be justly considered as the first particular study on the theory of revolution. The author not only explicitly aims to create a theory of revolution, but carries out his analysis on the basis of the revolutions of 1640 and 1688 in England, 1780 in America, 1789 and 1830 in France [10]. In 1861–
62, two more researches on the theory of revolution were published: Geo Yeaman’s lecture “Revolutions” (1861) and Joseph Clark’s “The History and Theory of Revolutions” (1862) [11, 12].

We shall take into consideration also Marx’s and Engels’ “Communist Manifesto” (1848), Marx’s: “Class Struggles in France” (1850), “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1852), “The Civil War in France” (1871), Engels’ “Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany” (1852) [13–17], and so we receive a rather large amount of work devoted to the “theory of revolution” over a 40-year period. Thus, in the period between the two French revolutions – the Revolution of 1830 and the Paris Commune of 1871 – there is the first real wave of special interest in the problem and intensive development of the topic of the general analysis of the revolutions’ phenomenon (rather than a separate national revolution).

The next such surge appeared in the early 20th century [18–22], however, except Kautsky’s “The Road to Power” (on the revolutionary situation) and mostly Lenin’s “May Day Action by Revolutionary Proletariat” (1913), “The Collapse of the Second International” (1915) and “State and Revolution” (1917), other authors didn't play important role in the development of the theory of revolution [22–26].

Thus, P. Sorokin’s study had in its basis not only the historiography of the English, American and French Revolutions, but also an almost century-long tradition of research thought in the field of “theory of revolution” [27].

By the time “The Sociology of Revolution” was written, the concept of revolution had many definitions. The authors of the 18th–19th centuries meant by revolution a change of power, a change of political order [28, 29].

In the encyclopedia of Diderot and D’Alembert (started in 1751) the revolution is defined as follows: “Revolution in the political language means a significant change in the governance of the state. This word comes from Latin ‘revolver’ – turn over” [30]. The second edition of the Encyclopedia of Britannica (1771–73) defined the revolution as «grand change or turn in government» [31]. Joseph Clark in “The History and Theory of Revolutions” (1862) defined revolution as “a radical or organic change in the constitution of government, accomplished either peacefully or violently” [11].

Dahl’s dictionary of the “Great Russian language”, (published in 1867) (on which P. Sorokin was brought up), indicated that the revolution means “a coup, a sudden change of state, order, relations”, as well as “confusion of the state, rebellion, indignation, rebellion, violent coup of civil life” [32]. Granat brothers’ encyclopedia, popular in the late 19th century Russia, defined the revolution as “any sudden coup both in the physical world and in political and social life, especially the violent change of the existing state system” [33].

“Historical and Socio-Political Dictionary”, the first specialized reference book in Russia on history, politics and social science, published in 1906, placed in the article “revolution” the following text: “Revolution is a coup; in political and social life, a sharp coup, with the aim of fundamentally transforming the existing orders carried out directly by the popular masses or under their pressure” [34].

Pitirim Sorokin stated at the very beginning of his study: «It is not my intention to add to all these definitions one more» [35]. Sorokin goes by listing those revolutions that will be dealt with and stipulates that he excludes from the study the American revolution of the eighteenth century which doesn’t represent “the struggle of one part of the same society with another but rather the struggle of a society with another quite different from the former” [35].

However, such a broad interpretation of the revolution – the struggle of one part of society with another – led Sorokin to view such a phenomenon as a revolution for the states of ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, and Rome [35]. Such a state of affairs had its own traditions: for many authors of the XVII–XIX centuries revolutions were a phenomenon that had occurred in the history of mankind since ancient times [36–38], and this statement passed into sociology as well.

This approach in the study – not to give a new definition of revolution in order not to multiply their existing number – became one of the most popular among researchers of revolutions from P. Sorokin to nowadays. Lyford Edwards hadn’t accepted approach (two years after the Sorokin’s monograph) and brought out his definition [39] and thus gave impetus to the emergence of new definitions of this phenomenon in the next hundred years.

The search for new definitions and refinements has eventually led to the fact that at the present stage revolutions are considered as a phenomenon of the Modern and Contemporary history, which had no place in the Ancient World [40–44].

Sorokin’s important contribution to the study of revolutions – in fact, why he can be boldly classified as founding father of the theory of revolution – was expressed by the fact that he called for all revolutions, despite their external differences, to be considered as a phenomenon of the same order. Sorokin wrote: «It has been given on the historical scene rather often (revolution – E.S.). Every staging of it is new. The conditions of time and space, scenery and actors, their costumes, monologues, dialogues and the chorus of the crowd, the quantity of the acts and of "striking scenes" – all these are variated. But, nevertheless, in all this dissimilarity a great many similarities are repeated. All these different actors amidst the different scenery act the same play called “revolution”» [35].

P. Sorokin found similarity between revolutions not only in stages and filling, but also in “actors” – personal: «Did not the same repeat itself before the Russian Revolution? Emperor Nicholas II was a replica of Louis XVI. The empress was a copy of Marie Antoinette. The courtiers? Were not the decrepit Goremykin, the incompetent Sturmer, the demented Protopopoff and the abnormal Mrs. Virouboff, etc., merely a bad copy of the court of Louis XVI? Not one single minister with will-power and brains; we see a collection of psychical and physical impotents, of talentless rulers and of effeminate and cynical dwarfs» [35].

By the beginning of the 20th century, there was already a perception of revolutions as a process going on two stages in its development. (Attempts to attribute superiority in the authorship of the two-part model of revolutions: revolution – counterrevolution (reaction) – to some authors of the 20th century do not correspond to facts) [45].

The first stage is related to the movement of the revolution “to the left” – (“ascending” in Marx’s definition), the second – to the thermidorian coup, counter-revolution and the reaction and completion of the revolution. Most researchers viewed this process as cyclical with the
difference of whether to see a closed circle or a spiral motion in the cycle [13, 33, 34, 46–49].

Pitirim Sorokin, relying on the developed idea of “revolution-counterrevolution”, suggested to use the four-part universal scheme for all revolutions: revolutions are framed with “the normal period” and are divided into two stages in which the second represents “reaction” [35]. «“Reaction” is not a phenomenon beyond the limits of revolution but is an unavoidable part of the revolutionary process itself, its second half. The dictatorship of Robespierre or Lenin, Cromwell or Zizka, signified not the end but the flare of revolution. The former was only the mark of its transition into the second stage – the stage of “reaction” or “restraint” but not its end. Only when “reaction” is finished, when society enters the period of its normal evolution–only then revolution may be considered as finished» [35].

Thus, the second stage of the revolution, or counter-revolution, is a necessary consequence of the first. Sorokin considers: «It is a detail of little importance if the strait-jacket be put on by a Cavaignac or a Robespierre; by a Lenin or a “white general”. One as well as the others do the same work, pressed thereto by necessity» [35].

A characteristic sign of the second stage – reactions – Sorokin described as a return of society to the old foundations: «There begins a trying period of speedy reeducation of the dulled legal, moral and religious reflexes. In order to do it quickly, the strongest stimulants must be devised and applied. We actually see them at work. The brutalized revolutionary society is compelled to go in two, five or ten years' time through a course of moral, religious and legal education for the initial acquirement of which humanity had to spend scores and hundreds of years... Life is gradually normalized, which in its turn aids in the rebirth and strengthening of moral, legal and religious reactions» [35].

In the problem of the algorithm of revolutions, one of the discussed questions has always been the question of the inevitable terror. As a witness to the Russian Revolution of 1917, Sorokin explicitly stated that terror and dictatorship were inevitable results of the revolution [35].

In reviewing the causes of the riot, Aristotle called for a search for their roots in psychology and people's needs. According to Sorokin, two of the most important human needs are food and reproduction [50]. It is this postulate that we will find in the 20th century in P. Sorokin's principles. These are the basic demands of people whose infringement leads to dissatisfaction and response. Seven more reasons are added to them. “For men are excited against one another by the love of gain and honour – not, as in the case which I have just supposed, in order to obtain them for themselves, but at seeing others, justly or unjustly, engrossing them. Other causes are insolation, fear, love of superiority, contempt, disproportionate increase in some part of the state; causes of another sort are election intrigues, carelessness, neglect about trifles, dissimilarity of elements” [50].

Sorokin emphasizes that human behavior is determined by his instincts and inborn reflexes [34], and when «one, two or more of the fundamental instincts should not find sufficient satisfaction, that they should be hard pressed» it leads to collapse of “balance” in human behavior: «if the conditions of the environment are modified in such a way that they violate the fundamental instincts of the masses, then we have to face a complete disorganization of conduct; we stand before an outburst of the masses, a social earthquake, called riot, rebellion, revolution. Such, in general terms, is the origin of revolutions and such are their fundamental causes» [35].

Sorokin saw the reasons for the revolutions in the repressed inborn reflexes and weakening of social control [34]. He wrote: «When to the growing revolutionary force of the “repressed” instincts those groups can oppose the force of restraint, and thus counter-balance the pressure, revolution is not unavoidable. There will be only a series of spontaneous suppressed riots. But when the groups which stand for order are unable to exercise that restraining influence, a revolution is inevitable. Thus we have found occasion to note (1) the growing repression of the main instincts; (2) its general character and (3) the impotence of the groups which stand for order – such are the three necessary elements in an adequate description of the conditions for the outbreak of revolutions» [35].

Sorokin focused on the “revolutionary mass”, by which he understands both the active participants of the revolution and those who are drawn into its orbit. In the era of revolutions, Sorokin is sure, there is the perversion of conduct, «the first stage of revolution renders society more primitive and brings men nearer to the conduct of animals» [35]. The common manifestation for this “mass” is “law of revolutionary illusionism and childish superstition”: «a society which is on the way to revolution believes in the possibility of attaining the most improbable fancies, the most Utopian aims» [35].

Sorokin noted: «Pre-revolutionary epochs literally strike the observer by the incapacity of the authorities and the degeneracy of the ruling privileged classes; they appear equally incapable of carrying out the ordinary functions of power, to say nothing of opposing revolution by force; nor are they able to divide and weaken the opposition, or to reduce the restrictions and provide controllable outlets for the repressed instincts in non-revolutionary forms. All pre-revolutionary governments bear the symptoms of something not unlike anæmia. Impotence, indecision, incompetence, embarrassment, light-headed carelessness on the one hand, depravity, corruption and fastidiously on the other; such are the characteristic features of pre-revolutionary governing classes» [34].

If for representatives of Marxism – one of the strongest social teachings of the 20th century, popular in Sorokin's time in Russia – «Revolutions are the locomotives of history» [51], «the highest act of politics» [52], for P. Sorokin the revolutions are the destruction of the state and the way of social degradation. In this dispute with Marxists, Sorokin continued a dispute over the pernicious or beneficial effects of revolutions on the state and society, their progressiveness or regressiveness, which began with the first revolutions, particularly escalating after the Great French Revolution [53–56].

As a witness to the revolution, Sorokin makes a very emotional conclusion: «The practical deduction of all that has been said above is, that he who desires the extermination of his people, the decrease of the birth rate, the deterioration of the racial fund of the nation, the destruction of its noblest elements, the degradation of the survivors, plague, cholera, typhus, syphilis, psychical illnesses, should prepare a violent
revolution and render it deep-rooted and widespread. It is one of the best ways to achieve the above-mentioned effects. Those who do not desire them can uphold reforms, not bloodthirsty revolutions» [35].

P. Sorokin argued that revolutions lead to the deformation of reactions of obedience and rule, labor and sexual reflexes, deformation of so-called religious, moral and legal, conventional, aesthetic and other forms of social behavior. Moreover, Sorokin believes, they lead to a decline in production in the country, to general depletion, thus destroying and disorganizing the entire economic life of society [35]. The analysis of the data led the sociologist to conclude that revolutions diminish the population and retard its growth by heightening the death and diminishing the birth rate while in most cases, though not always, they augment the number of marriages» [35]: «Revolution is an example of a “selection of the unfittest”. It exterminates the “best” elements of the population (as to hereditary qualities) and protects the vitality of the “worst”. By thus exterminating the “best” revolutions destroy the bearers of desirable hereditary qualities, the progenitors of a corresponding posterity and, consequently, impoverish the “biological hereditary fund of positive national qualities”. At the same time they cause deterioration of the physical health and vitality of the survivors» [35].

Having absorbed existing approaches and research baggage into his concept, P. Sorokin's “The Sociology of Revolution” influenced many research trends. First of all, in the development of the question “Why people rebel?”. The book of American social scientist Ted Gurr [57], published in 1970 and became in many ways the generalization for the whole 20th century, in a number of its conclusions is genetically related to the work of the Russian sociologist.

If we sum up, for example, and systematize all concepts of the causes of revolutions, there are four complexes: 1) personal factor (rulers and officials); 2) economics; 3) the state of mass psychology (discontent, including insanity, caprice) and 4) the block of social causes. In the development of three of these four (except "economics"), “The Sociology of Revolution” made a significant contribution.

A great influence on the development of the theory of revolutions in the 20th century was made by the concept of the equilibrium of the social system and its dysfunction, which appeared in the second half of the century. Chalmers Johnson and Lawrence Stone argued that if one component of a real system does not maintain equilibrium, the entire system goes out of equilibrium. A condition that causes disequilibrated social system and requires corrective action is called dysfunction of the system. Revolutions, in their view, make the necessary changes if the dominant elite resists changes, i.e. dysfunctions reach a level superior to the adaptability of the system [58, 59]. This principle, after Teda Skocpol’s “States and Social Revolutions”, was put in the basis of an entire direction of researchers, a principle that Jack Goldstone called the hallmark of the “third generation in theory of revolution” [5–7]. And the fundamentals of this concept is based on the conclusions of Pitirim Sorokin on social groups and intra-group conflicts.

Every social group, – Sorokin affirmed, – (clan, totem, fratria, genus, family, state or church) represents a pacified environment, with a certain organization, with a certain fixed pattern of behavior, with a certain charter of proper, prohibited, and recommended interaction of its members. In permanent group there is no continuous intra-group war of all against all, and on the contrary, the consensus of mutual behavior of its members is the normal state of it [60]. Of course, in each social group there are dissenters, but under pressure of penalties and awards these dissidents behave according to official norms [60].

Lyford Edwards borrowed this idea with “dissidents”, in which he saw, for the most part, strangers [39], and made that provision as one of the cornerstone of his concept.

So, P. Sorokin’s “The Sociology of Revolution” needs to be considered in the context of a research thought on the causes of social protest from Aristotle to Enlightenment, researches on the English and Great French Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries and the development of the theory of revolution in the 19th century. Having absorbed into its concept existing approaches and research baggage, Sorokin's “The Sociology of Revolution” has become a bright conceptual work, which has opened in the 20th century the wave of development of the theory of revolution of the 20–30’s, contributed, together with a revision of the writings of Edwards, Brinton, and Pettee, to the birth of a new wave in the 1960s, and then in the 1980s–1990s. Today a new generation of revolution researchers returns to this work again and again.

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