

Presentation of the book “The Power of Love” written by Piritim Sorokin, Part I*

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One can say that I will be talking about a classic only to a certain extent, knowing that Sorokin had in fact been somewhat opposed by his contemporaries. Thus the sociological tradition presented to us here had passed through some rough times. I intend to talk about this great author of sociology by highlighting the points that really struck me. In this way I can also give an account of the text that I have been asked to present.

The work of Sorokin is not easy to read, but it really deserves to be tackled, at least in its most interesting parts. The second part of the book may be read all at one go, because it is a narrative, and it exhibits extraordinary historical figures. It speaks of episodes and gives news and historical facts.

It is my intention to show what Sorokin means to us to-day, to discover his role within a context which I consider to be a sort of sociological parable, that started with very great ambitions, as we have heard during this morning’s beautiful lecture given by Gennaro Iorio, showing how to understand almost all sciences with this thought in mind. The word sociology comes from “societas” and “logos” the verb, the word. Sociology should be the science of sciences, but presently it seems to be crushed by doubts. You have heard Baumann being quoted rather than Beck, and you have heard about man’s insecurity because of his loneliness and of his risks. So sociology is faced with a very profound task, that of humanizing society. This is a paradox, but at the same time it reveals the failure of a discipline meant to be an explanation that is fully comprehensive. In fact, only through this can Sociology be saved, given that it puts itself on the same line of thought as the message and cry that come from the heart of a society that does not merely need to be understood but also to be helped out of its tragedy.

My talk will focus on these two points.

My colleagues know that this is not a happy moment for sociology. It is definitely the fault of bad sociologists; maybe it is the fault or the responsibility of a society that does not want to be discussed. When sociology started, it was meant to be a critical science. It began when the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, that also proclaimed fraternity, started to question the society that preceded them. And this led to questions about what should be done to integrate society and what the elements that enforce it could be. Obviously, a constructive sociology is needed, but it must also be a sociology that can criticize the actual state of things. At this point, we realise that a reflection on sociology and on other social sciences is badly needed, because, to put it simply but effectively, as Sorokin teaches in his book “*The Power to Love*”, even sociology needs a soul. One must find the focal point from where to start.

In sociology there are social actors, there are subjects, individuals. In politics there are consumers, beneficiaries - this is the name given to those who benefit from political

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policies - but no persons. This forcefully reveals the importance of a social science and of a sociology that focus on the person.

So what is it that strikes me in Sorokin, a classical author one meets when studying sociology, but who is certainly not known because of this text?

We know that Sorokin is a sociologist of social mobility and this makes him different from his contemporaries, because he sees a dynamic and not a static society. This helps us perceive better his frame of mind.

This book was not known in Italy; one had the opportunity to find the English version in libraries, but anyhow, it presents a novelty. I must confess that it is new even to me and I was really amazed to discover this type of reflection - I think it is good to have this capacity of being amazed.

The first thing that struck me was the reference to an autobiographic experience. I think that this is very important because very often, in social sciences, the theoretical reflection starts from what one lives, even if this is not said. We work as sociologists because in the course of our life we came across certain situations that made us question ourselves very profoundly. In fact, Sorokin wrote this text – as he states in his introduction - because the terrible situations he encountered, (he was imprisoned for years; first he was in the Tsar's prisons and then in the Bolshevik prisons; he was condemned to death), convinced him of three fundamental things, namely:

- 1) that life is worth living,
- 2) that doing one's duty is one of the most beautiful things a person can do in his life,
- 3) that "cruelty, hatred, violence and injustice can never and will never lead to a psychological, moral or material rebirth. The only road to achieve this is the noble way of creative and generous love, a love that is not just preached but lived coherently".

These are the words of Sorokin the sociologist, who draws our attention to the adjectives that qualify love. It is not any kind of love, but it is a creative and generous love. It is a love that has the power to generate, and this is the most important point. Love can generate society, love can create society, and as reminded by the Trinitarian image, social living can proceed from love. From the sociological point of view, this is a very strong statement, because although it gives importance to relationships, to the subject, yet it also gives importance to man's experience of God and to the divine connotation of love. Bringing such ideas to society is definitely something out of the ordinary, but what we have heard here yesterday and to-day show that this can be achieved. What will generate all this? I am unable to answer this question, but I know that this is becoming one of the roads we should lead because we have no other alternatives. Post-modern sociology, as I have already said, is demanding the humanization of society, but it cannot indicate the roads to achieve this. It can only appeal to moral conscience, but this is an appeal that depicts a strong sign of crisis, of degeneration, in any case a sign of the difficulty our society is encountering.

Let us however go back to the text. The original title of the book: *The Power, the ways and the methods of love. The techniques for the production of love*, referred to a positivistic sensitivity that certainly has been lost. The title indicates that love is produced by means of particular techniques and instruments. In reality, the techniques mentioned here have a particular meaning. The term used may upset us but it does not refer to what we imagine or suspect when we initially come across it. There is a methodological and epistemological price to pay, and Sorokin says this very clearly: the price is that we cannot imagine love unless we experience what he calls integral knowledge, a knowledge which contains the various aspects of subjects like sociology, but also psychology, physics, ethics, and somehow, also the relationship with the divine.

Here the words of John Paul II come to mind; he suggests that knowledge should be acquired through faith and reason. We find the same thought in Sorokin; he refers to an integral knowledge that reminds one of the Russian tradition, which is strongly longed for at our universities. Knowledge to-day tends to be very specialized and fragmented; it lacks a unitary sense and has lost its taste. Yet Sorokin's call for integral knowledge was misunderstood by his contemporaries, who accused him of not being scientific enough. On his part, while debating quantitative sociology, Sorokin accused his contemporaries of being obsessed by quantities; he accused them of falling into a sort of *quantity mania*, while he started a debate that had both epistemological and methodological significance, thus intervening on questions of indisputable importance, namely on what we manage to get to know and on how we get to know it.

Sorokin continues his reflection with methodological discipline and very meticulously analyses all the dimensions of love which he considers in seven aspects, namely: religious, ethical, ontological, physical, biological, psychological and social. The paragraph about the religious aspect is very beautiful because he compares the experience of God found in various religious views and studies how this experience of God associates itself to the idea of what is good. The social aspect of love is defined in this way: "Love is a significant interaction or relationship between two or more persons, where the aspirations and aims of a person are shared and brought to their fulfillment by other persons". In spite of the fact that he is against the quantitative dimension, he tries to measure love and says that it has five dimensions, that are not scalar but that can be measured. These dimensions are: its *intensity* that is related to the gift: the greater and the more precious the gift, the greater is love; its *extension* that can go from hatred to love because the quality of love changes according to sentiments; its *duration*; its *purity*, or rather whether love is an end in itself or not (because there is also egoistic love); and finally its *fairness*, considering whether it corresponds to its scope or is something different from it.

"Society produces very little love; there is very little love in society", states Sorokin, who somehow accuses his colleagues of lack of attention towards this subject.

What must be done to produce more love in society? This is another interesting point. Sorokin turns to individuals, to social groups, to institutions, to culture and somehow

urges them all to produce love. In fact, love is produced if common people are able to live experiences of love in their everyday life, because, primarily, love forms part of our everyday life. Love cannot exclude others: it must rather be inclusive, projecting itself towards others. Love, then, is present where there are those great figures having a great power to love. Sorokin calls them “the geniuses of love” and we need these great heroes of love, these charismatic figures because they can help us understand what love is.

Only after understanding what love is, can it be institutionalized and crystallized: once institutions are permeated with the grace of love, they can contribute towards producing and spreading this sentiment, thus giving life to “a permanent atmosphere that embraces all human beings from birth to death” - as quoted from the text. This beautiful expression reminds me of the experience of the social state, of the welfare contained in the motto: “From cradle to coffin”. This grim expression, together with the one used by Sorokin, contains very effectively the paradox of the present social state, its main gap: as I have already said before, there are no persons present in the social state; there are beneficiaries, there are the clients of the politicians that need to be satisfied, there are the consumers. But Sorokin’s perspective exceeds the most advanced concept of those who know what to do “to have friendly institutions”. He denounces the failure of society he calls “sensist”, a society engulfed by its own selfish interests, competition, hatred, its negative instinct and by the exasperating importance of economic factors, and has become the arena of a series of social tragedies and of degrading social situations. But there is also a contrasting society and Sorokin shows that it exists by relating facts about it. This consists of groups of people and of individuals who entrust themselves to love and who produce the medicine needed for the failures of the society with a “sensist” culture. Sorokin starts by mentioning the unitary dimension of love, that asks one’s ego to identify itself with another, thus resulting in a “we” where solidarity and harmony are present and if there is separation, there is “unhappiness and an effort to be together again”.

Finally, I was struck by the definition of love given by Sorokin in its being a relationship with another person, and this is what I would like to share with you. What is the person in this context with reference to love? Sorokin uses an expression, which is a bit difficult: “super conscious”. He uses this expression technically, referring to the super conscious ego. One is surprised by the fact that a person’s experience may be complete not only if it refers to the multiplicity of disciplinary references I have mentioned, but also if it is a divine experience, if man relates to the divine that exists in him. Sorokin’s idea of the person is one of the decisive points of his reflection, and in this way love becomes really the highest moral value and all other positive values can be integrated with it very harmoniously.

The sociology of Sorokin is very demanding, and it lends itself to an epistemological reconstruction of the idea of social relationship, that presently risks to be too closed in itself, to be distinct, to have nothing to do with other subjects or persons. We can very simplistically distinguish two ways in which to look at society: on one hand we can look at it the way sociologists do – systematic, solistic, organistic; on the other hand we can look at it as fragmented and individualistic, where the unusual becomes specific and

somehow justifies its right to exist. Sociology related to a system dates back to the great tradition, from Durkheim to Parsons, and there is also Simmel, and naturally, we owe a lot to it. In very simple terms, one can say that it starts from society, but somehow, at a certain point it ignores the subjects, the persons. On the other hand, the vision of a sociology that is not related to a system is a very heterogeneous vision, and there are those, who in the name of the failure of systems or in the name of obligation or moral obligations, think that society is a dionysiac fact, derived from vital impulses and instinctive factors.

There is, however, a reaction to this view, which developed from the thought of recent post-modern minds like Baumann, Beck and others. In it, one can read the attempt to humanize society, to reconstruct a social behaviour by starting from something that is out of society. This need is felt, and this something is “the other person’s face” as Baumann says, while he uses the words of the philosopher Levinas and bases sociology on something that is not sociological at all.

The problem remains: what should be done to shift all this into sociological theorization? This is a fundamental point, because on one hand, our authors help us identify the sense of drama in to-day’s society and consequently the drama of sociology itself, that almost sees no point of its existence as a science - because if society disappears somehow so will sociology -, and on the other hand they still do not give us systematic answers.

In my opinion, one needs to try to give these answers even by applying those points, those intuitions, those anticipations that emerged during the course of sociological tradition, both when the dimension of the community was recalled, and also to-day when one speaks of communitarianism, and so of social relationships that are not only of the contractual type but also of the communitarian type. There is a series of references that should somehow be taken again and put together, not to form a new social theory - I would be ambitious to say this and I should not be the one to say it - but to try to reconstruct an epistemology and a methodology, sociology that is appropriate to the present situation.

I conclude by saying that all this is very important and urgent, because social sciences can offer very interesting tentative answers where the governance of society is concerned. I take as an example the debate that is going on to-day between two different lines of thought. The “American dream” about the market society, drafted by the sociologist and culturalist Rifkin, hopes that through competition all problems are solved, eliminating inequality and social injustices. In contrast to this there is the “European dream” or the model of social cohesion where politics intervene in business matters, introducing variants and rationality. But then, as Darendhorf says, this seems to be a model where wealth is under the thumb of democracy, accepting business without accepting either the democratic model that goes with it, nor the possibility of regulating the market. One can very clearly give an alternative reply to these two methods and this is the Economy of Communion, that does not deny the market, but uses it, regulates it in a different manner and gives it its own rules. However, there must be an appropriate cultural and

sociological reflection or else we will witness continuous clashes between those who believe in the market and those who believe in politics. This is why sociology exists.

Political reflection and discussion still lack the ability of regaining a concept that goes back to the time of Sturzo, when civil society was considered a body that could organize itself, produce norms and values, enhance the value of internal resources, and could be in a position to create relationships of love, as Sorokin says.

So Sorokin seems to accompany us on a journey and, together with others mentioned during these days, he prophetically empowers certain intuitions and lays an important foundation for a project, which consists of working together on these themes. Various sociologists have already started to recognise their importance.

I think that putting all these parts together and attempting to build a systematic thought about society's incentive to love may be of value not only scientifically but also politically and culturally. And this is capable of generating the unexpected.