Sorokin, Popper, and the Philosophy of History

MORRIS COHEN once called philosophy of history the chief intellectual matter of our time, and went on to observe that it was also philosophy's most neglected province. Few will deny that since the 19th century philosophies of history have exerted on Western minds an influence comparable to that exerted earlier by theology. At the same time, as Cohen implied, not only philosophers of history but equally their critics, among them respected historians and social scientists, have commonly displayed an embarrassing unfamiliarity with the canons and discriminations of rational thought.

The late P.A. Sorokin no doubt had that last in mind when, on his election in 1963 as President of the American Sociological Association, he proposed that at the Association's next general meeting he and Karl Popper, both notable for bracing sociological inquiry with a rigor drawn from natural science, present papers on philosophy of history and then engage in an open discussion. The proposal may also have reflected a belief that Sorokin's Social and Cultural Dynamics had made him the weightiest living champion of the idea that history is open to predictive theory, while Popper's Poverty of Historicism and Open Society and Its Enemies had made Popper the same idea's weightiest critic.

This article attempts to pick up the opportunity which in the end the Association felt it had to drop. Comparing the positions taken by Popper and Sorokin on identical issues in philosophy or, as both might prefer to call it, theory of history, the article attempts what a personal confrontation surely would have gone far toward achieving: joint puncture by both outstanding minds of fallacies that commonly turn discussions of historical theory into mere displays of temperament, a much needed illumination of predictive theory itself, and, possibly, agreement on the conceptual framework, the limits, and the peculiar difficulties of predictive theory in the field of history.

Today the two theories of history most in vogue among laymen seem that pivot of popular thought, continual human Progress and what many consider its alternative, which we can call Decay. Although Decay seldom receives explicit assertion, much of the reaction to books like Orwell's 1984, Seidenberg's Post-Historic Man, and Ellul's Technological Society suggests that fear of an irreversible trend toward man's debumanization or destruction is crystallizing.

Popper and Sorokin give us strong reasons for staying out of that embattled ring, and in so doing both effectively dispose of the hoary argument that, since some people take as evidence for Progress what others take as evidence for Decay, both theories elude objective criticism. Sorokin and Popper expose as a fallacy the conception of any irreversible or permanent trend whatever, which eliminates the question of such a trend's good or evil.

Sorokin adduces against supposedly permanent trends such as the increase of knowledge or population such familiar facts as the loss of knowledge that occurred with the crumbling of the Roman Empire.
and the decrease in population evidenced by uninhabited ruins, those at Angkor Vat, in the Middle East, or in the Rome of the Middle Ages, for example. Similar evidence bears on the ingrained belief that technological advance, especially, presents us with a permanent trend now lies at hand in recent histories of technology. These remind us that, for example, technology reached a height in Darius' Persian Empire (overthrown 333 B.C.), which it later failed to reach in Hellenistic times or in the Roman Empire. Facts like these reveal that the permanent trends asserted result from graphing straight lines from initial, pre-human zero points to present accumulations. That lines or trends so produced can be projected without limit into the future is open to serious question.

Tackling that issue analytically, Sorokin observes that the idea that historical change can proceed forever in a fixed direction usually arises from failure to ask a question that among physicists is routine: granted that certain causes or conditions produce certain results, within what limits does the correlation hold? Very ordinary considerations reveal the pertinence of this question. The harder one strikes a piano key, the louder the sound, until one breaks the piano. Improving the diet of half-starved people increases their stature and fertility, but once diet is adequate the correlation vanishes. Similarly, so long as conditions favor, population will continue to increase, but a finite habitat sets limits to which the increase must eventually yield. In the bare sense of information, natural knowledge may seem capable of unlimited accumulation, yet even here the unattainability of perfect knowledge of anything sets a limit no accumulation will transgress. Moreover, in the past both individuals and societies have often discarded natural knowledge as "foolishness with God" or as inimical to some ideology. Sorokin thus exposes in all notions of permanent or irreversible trends an unwarranted assumption that certain causal relationships, welcome or unwelcome, possess unlimited validity.

Going further to assert the positive error of the notion that a social system can change perpetually in a fixed direction, Sorokin observes that such change would require the following conditions: a) that the system perpetually retain the characteristics favoring the change, b) that the system not be susceptible of any contrary change, and c) perpetual non-interference by external forces capable of stopping the change. None of these conditions seem likely ever to obtain in social reality.

Popper, attacking the conception of permanent trends in such philosophies of history as Comte's and Marx's, puts his finger squarely on a central confusion: the confusion of trends with laws. Trends, he rightly emphasizes, are radically different from laws and cannot like laws be considered permanent. One can say straight out that a valid law will continue to hold, forever, but one cannot say equally unconditionally that a trend will continue to proceed. Whether cultural or social, or for that matter biological, a trend is a historical happening that has proceeded in accord with many laws, some no doubt unknown, and it depends for continuance on conditions, possibly also unknown, that are subject to change. As a simple example, a tide floods for hours but when crucial conditions change the tide begins to ebh, all in accord with unchanging laws. Likewise: the long biological success of dinosaurs, followed by their extinction.

Popper concludes that a trend that has persisted for centuries or millenia may change within a decade or even more rapidly than that. He also writes:

"This, one may say, is the central mistake of historicism. Its 'laws of development' turn out to be absolute trends that, like laws, do not depend on initial conditions, and which carry us irresistibly in a certain direction into the future. They are the basis of unconditional prophecies, as opposed to conditional scientific predictions." (Emphasizes Popper's)

All of which brings Popper to a conclusion bearing with equal force on both Progress and Decay, a conclusion that seems to brook no challenge: "There can be no scientific theory of [permanent] historical development serving as a basis for prediction."

Confuting trends with laws and asserting


22 The Intercollegiate Review — Winter — Spring, 1972
that change in a fixed direction can go on without limit; all theories of permanent or irreversible Progress or Decay stand condemned by Popper and Sorokin both in what seem compelling appeals to fact and reason.  

Popper goes on in The Poverty of Historicism to make an observation crucial to the whole question of historical theory and identical with one Sorokin had made earlier. Popper observes that the possibilities for rational prediction in any field lie not at all where Progressists and exponents of Decay look for them, in unprecedented developments, but instead, as in astronomical prediction, in the discovery of phenomena that are repetitive and "allow us to neglect any symptoms of historical development" (with such development again understood as permanent). Prediction becomes possible where similar events occur or can be made to occur again and again. In the orbitings of planets, in the (impermanent) developments of tadpoles and stars, in laboratory experiments, repetitive events occur and provide the essential condition for prediction. Contrariwise, predictive or nomothetic science does not concern itself with and cannot predict things novel or unique.  

That joint statement of a basic canon of science has this salient and perhaps surprising consequence: should a predictive theory of history prove possible, it would be a theory of historical recurrences. In accord with this, Popper has stated that history may be predictable, but only so far as it is repetitive. Sorokin, a decade after emphasizing the same scientific cannon, announced a discovery of sociocultural, which is to say historical, repetition and went on to elaborate a predictive theory.  

But before summarizing Sorokin's often grossly misinterpreted theory to see if it survives a Popperian scrutiny, we first should mention Sorokin's and Popper's joint exposure of a methodological naiveté that robs Spengler's and Toynbee's recurrence theories of scientific status. In seeking to establish their theories Spengler and Toynbee adduce "examples." Historical events that accord with their theories, without reflecting that one establishes a theory quite the other way around, not by adducing instances that accord with it, but by showing that no instances contradict it. Further, as Thomas Aquinas long ago observed, a theory's complete agreement with facts cannot suffice to prove it true, because a totally different theory might also agree with the same facts. Recognizing this, scientists trying to establish a theory try to show that it is the only one from which the facts can be deduced. Spengler, Toynbee, and journalistic publicists without number ignore this basic canon.  

Before summarizing Sorokin's theory we should also detail the reasons Sorokin and Popper give us for rejecting two arguments that historians and social scientists commonly urge against the very possibility of a scientific theory of history. The first argument draws on Croce, or on Marx and Freud, and asserts the inescapable subjectivity of all views of history. All assertedly are shaped by their champions' involvement in the issues of their own time, and

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4. The arguments cited do not of course assert the impossibility of man's destruction or, say, his mutation into a superman. They do deny that such events are fore-ordained by or predictable on the basis of permanent or irreversible trends.  


6. No one would ever advance any theory unless a great deal seemed to agree with it. But so-called examples only illustrate a theory, making clear what it asserts. Consequently, ten thousand examples cannot confirm a theory, whereas, as we know, one contradictory instance does upset it. Tests of theories are searches for such instances.
thus all historiography or historical theory is "contemporary history" and none can be objective.

To this Popper and Sorokin oppose the Socratic reply that such an argument re-bounds against itself. The Oxford philosopher W. H. Walsh has put this objection most concisely: "[I]t asks us to believe, as a matter of rational conviction, that rational convictions are impossible. And this we cannot do." Popper and Sorokin also adduce a counter-argument more positive. As Popper puts it in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, the reason why a person, whatever his political or other persuasions, arrives at a theory or idea has a merely psychological interest and does not bear on the question of the theory's truth. What counts in evaluating a theory or idea is not how or why it originated, but how it has been tested and if further tests by other people corroborate it. That this last can happen in historical as well as physical inquiry would seem sufficiently proved by the loud objections all historians would raise to the statement "Columbus discovered Japan."

That the burning issues of some particular time or, as Marx and Freud would have it, a person's economic situation or his upbringing may affect his view of history in no way necessitates that view's in-ability to survive the tests of logic and fact which determine any view's acceptability as truth. To clear the field of a persistent (and most-trivial) obstacle to rational inquiry, we need say only this: the subjectivity of an idea or theory cannot prove it subjective only. It may also be objectively true, which is the point worth finding out.

The second argument commonly levelled by historians against theories of history asserts that historical events are unique and that, as implied earlier in discussion of the conditions for prediction, about things unique it is impossible to generalize. Taken seriously, Sorokin writes, this argument from the uniqueness of historical events would render worthless everything historians themselves have written about "modern war" instead of about particular wars, everything they have written about "Roman Law" instead of particular Roman laws. It would also require us to discard all the laws and principles of physical science, because events in nature, too, occur at definite times and are therefore historical. Moreover all of them are unique. Popper has stated this last, regularly unperceived fact this way:

- all the physical repetitions which we experience are approximate repetitions, and by saying that a repetition is approximate I mean that the repetition B of event A is not identical with A, or indistinguishable from A, but only more or less similar to A.

In truth, no event or thing in nature, no passage of the earth around the sun, no planet, no atom, no tarpole completely resembles or repeats any other in all its aspects. All physical events and things are unique. Yet a physical theory as sweeping and predictive as $E = mc^2$ exists and scientifically succeeds.

The puzzle is pretty easily unravelled. The objection arises from a naive belief similar to the one that confuses trends with laws or the one that takes examples as proof of theories. The humanists who urge the objection overlook all scientific theory's abstract, which is to say, partial, nature. Rightly convinced that no one will ever generalize or predict historical events in all their unique particularities, they fail to perceive that physical theory does not generalize or predict physical events in all their particularities. The law of inverse squares, for example, says nothing about a physical body's color, structure, origin and infinitely more. Scientific theory in any field surmounts whatever difficulty is posed by the indisputable uniqueness of all actual events, physical as much as historical, by taking notice only of those aspects which events of certain kinds have in common. Scientific theory is abstract; it explains and predicts only the typical and not the concrete uniqueness in which the typical unfolds.

For us, the principle involved above has large and wholesome significance. It means that an acceptable predictive theory of history, which we have earlier seen would have to be a theory of recurrences, would not at all entail determinism. It would not claim that certain events repeat themselves

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or are predictable in their totalities.\textsuperscript{9} Claiming only what predictive physical theories claim, that certain events repeat themselves and are predictable in certain aspects, it would leave ample room for human freedom and responsibility. It would indeed imply limits to that freedom, but so do the laws of physics and physiology and the dictates of common sense.

Now, with the field cleared of permanent trends, proofs by "examples," psychologicist assertions of the impossibility of objectivity, and blanket condemnations all theory, we can consider the theory of recurrences formulated by Sorokin in his masterwork, Social and Cultural Dynamics.

At the outset Sorokin exhibits an analytical competence unique among theorists of history. Rejecting the exaggerated organismicism that finds all of history flowing systematically from some Prime Mover such as the mode of production (Marx) or the maturing of mankind (Comte), he points out also, contra Spengler and Toynbee, that whole civilizations are not organically growing and dying systems, since many of their parts, for example a people, may go on living while other parts, for example a culture, die.\textsuperscript{10} He therefore begins by seeking systems, which is to say intelligibility, in culture only, with this taken in the limited sense of a given people's art, law, religion, philosophy, and science. And instead of merely asserting or offering examples of cultural systems he proposes it as an hypothesis for strenuous testing. Far from simple but brilliant in its searchingness, his hypothesis is that at certain times the dominant principles of art, law, and thought have articulated - i.e., logically followed from - an identical conception of reality that has gained, held, and eventually lost dominance at the same time in all the fields named. In some cultures, the hypothesis continues, the common systematizing conception has been that reality is physical or sensory. Sorokin calls this type of culture Sensate. In other cultures, called Idealistic, the conception has been that reality is supersensory or spiritual.

The following paradigm of characteristic Sensate and Idealistic principles, all flowing logically from the opposed conceptions or "major premises" above, will give "Sensate," "Idealistic," and the entire hypothesis more meaning:

**Sensate**

- Becoming, time
- Art represents sensory reality
- Law adjusted to circumstances
- Ethics of worldly happiness
- Observation, empirical scientists
- Needs are physical, satisfied by changing environment

**Idealistic**

- Being, eternity
- Art symbolizes supersensory reality
- Lawресhes to principle
- Ethics of spiritual principle
- Revelation, priests, oracles
- Needs are spiritual, satisfied by changing self\textsuperscript{11}

Sorokin also hypothesizes the historical existence of a third integrated culture type, called Integral (or Idealistic). Again a unified system, not an eclectic compromise, this type conceives reality as both sensory and supersensory, but with the latter aspect predominant. Individual exemplars of this rare type - e.g., Socrates, Thomas Aquinas - employ reason to mediate between empirical observation and supersensory revelation. They view needs as both spiritual and physical, but with the former predominant.

To test and confirm the historical existence of these types of integrated culture, Dynamics presents the results of an unprecedented effort of empirical research. Enlisting the assistance of a score of art, law, and other scholars, and keeping them ignorant of the hypothesis itself, Sorokin provided them with clearcut criteria of Sensate, Idealistic, and Integral mani-

\textsuperscript{9} Sorokin emphasizes that civilizations are "vast conglomerations of ideas, people, and artifacts, some of which merely happen to exist adjacent to each other." Such congeries may include integrated systems like those of law, mathematics, or individual works of art where all parts affect each other's functioning and change together, but entire civilizations are not such organic units and hence not susceptible to organic processes like birth and death. See Dynamics, Vol. 1, Ch. 1 and especially Sorokin's Modern Historical and Social Philosophies (New York: Dover paperback, 1983), pp. 206-17. Popper's similar reaction to a false organization occurs in discussion of "holism," Poverty, p. 78-83. See also "organic theory of society" in Index, The Open Society and Its Enemies (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1963).

\textsuperscript{10} Dynamics, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, especially pp. 97-99.
festations in their special fields. They then used these criteria to classify centuries and in some instances decades of various societies' art, law, and thought as dominantly Sensate, Ideational, Integral or unintegrated and mixed.

The criteria provided for the particular art of painting exemplified the definiteness and objectivity of the criteria generally. In painting, the major Ideational criterion was absence of concern for visible objects except as symbols of a supersecondary reality. The crudely executed anchors, fish, and olive branches that in Christian paintings in the catacombs symbolized faith, souls, and salvation exhibit this trait perfectly. As minor Ideational criteria Sorokin included artistic anonymity, lack of commercial interest, and avoidance of the nude. The criteria for Sensate painting were the opposite: accurate representation of visible objects, attribution to individual artists, concern for the market, frequent and often erotic use of the nude.

While the specialists involved could not of course classify every manifestation in their fields, they covered their fields so thoroughly — one survey of painting classified over 32,000 works, another half as many — and showed such close agreement in their final classifications of periods that upset of these results by neglected data was precluded. If, for example, some hitherto unknown early medieval painting fitting Sensate criteria should turn up, which in itself seems all but impossible, it still would not invalidate the conclusion that early medieval painting was predominantly Ideational. For practical purposes the final classifications of periods of art, law, and thought that were arrived at can be said to be based on and therefore, the point of this huge team effort, tested by all the relevant data — quite a different matter from an accumulation of selected examples. Scientists and scholars who so endorsed Dynamics' handling of the data included Karl Compton of M.I.T., the French sociologist Jacques Maquet, F.S.C. Northrop, and Crone Brinton. And when the classifications in various fields had been put together, the initial hypothesis stood confirmed.

In the cultures studied, though all fields had occasionally, but at the same times, been mixed, all had at other times primarily articulated the Sensate premise and at still other times primarily the Ideational premise. Moreover in changing premises all fields had moved together from the same old premise to the same new one. Severely compressed, the classifications of periods of Greco-Roman and Western culture fell into the following order:

- **Greece**
  - Mycenaean culture
  - 9th, 8th cent.
  - 7th, 6th cent.
  - 5th cent.
  - 4th to 1st A.D.

- **Rome**
  - Etruscan
  - Mixed, but with Strong Ideational current
  - 3rd, 2nd cent.
  - 1st B.C., 1st A.D.
  - Same, but much imitation of Greek
  - (By 1st A.D. cultural fusion occurs)
  - 2nd, 3rd, 4th A.D.

- **Western**
  - 5th or 6th to 10th Ideational
  - 11th to 15th Mixed, but strong Ideational current
  - 17th to 20th Sensate

The diagram above reveals, instead of a permanent trend such as the one toward positivism that Comte attributed to continual maturing of the human mind, a trendless fluctuation. Dynamics also brings to light an equally trendless fluctuation in Egyptian, Chinese, and Indian culture, though in India, while Sensate currents have sometimes proved strong enough to require classifying some periods as mixed, the integrated cultures have always been Ideational.

Equally significant, in demonstrating that cultures corresponding to his abstract culture types not only have existed but have done so repeatedly, Sorokin appears to have uncovered the kind of repetitious events that both he and Popper have declared the first requisite for predictive theory. And by his focus on culture types rather than on particular historical cul-

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13. L. Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967) has brought striking support to this classification by demonstrating the pervasiveness of the characteristically Sensate idea of Progress in Greece and Rome. This upsets the long accepted notion that the idea was an unprecedented creation of the 18th Century.
atures Sorokin clearly will be able to avoid looking for laws or generalizations where, as von Hayek has said, they cannot in the nature of the case be found, in the succession of particular historical phenomena. Sorokin appears on the way, at least, to what Popper, in denying its realization elsewhere, has aptly called a "theoretical history . . . that corresponds to theoretical physics.

From this discovery of an apparently repetitive order in cultural history Sorokin went on to consider the extent of its influence on society. Avoiding what Popper calls "psychologism" (the notion that social manifestations are simply the results of human nature), Sorokin warns that though the culture of its members strongly influences any society's institutions and activities, these also respond to the actions of other societies and to affairs like economic success or failure, climate, and pestilence. This means that correlations between culture and its social matrix cannot prove as tight as those between the different fields of integrated cultures themselves.

Yet since an Ideational culture views its members as children of its god or gods, Sorokin observes that we might expect it to favor a familistic social organization. By similar token we might expect a Senate culture, which denies gods, to favor a contractual organization. At the same time we might expect other types, when its bearers feel it threatened, to resort to compulsion. Severely compressed, Sorokin's research into the kind of bond that in the past has cemented Western society and enabled it to function bears out these expectations:

- A.D. 800-1200 familistic, some compulsion
- 1200-1500 both compulsory and contractual elements increase
- 1500-1750 notably compulsory
- 1750-1914 contractual element gains dominance
- post-World War I contractual element declines, compulsory increase

Here again Dynamics shows us a trendless fluctuation, marked by reversals of centuries-long trends. This clearly falsifies all notions of permanent trends toward freedom, justice, etc., or the opposite.

Sorokin comes to another major conclusion in Dynamics' pioneering study of war magnitudes. While he finds the present century showing the greatest magnitude or burden of war proportionate to population, a finding Quincy Wright and later students of war endorsed, no permanent trend emerges. What does emerge is a clear tendency for war to decrease during periods when culture is integrated on either Senate or Ideational premises—e.g., the Middle Ages or the 19th century—and to increase during periods of cultural disintegration and transition—e.g., the 16th and 17th centuries.

Since wars often involve alien societies who bear some of the responsibility for them, the tendency described should appear most clearly in internal rebellions and disorders, and Sorokin's research confirms this expectation. The fact should not surprise us, he remarks, because cultural integration provides common premises for argument whereas when premises themselves come into dispute the appeal is likely to be to force. It seems a pity that present efforts to reduce war and other disorders proceed in disregard of these rational and well documented conclusions.

Making culture, which is to say men's minds, an "independent variable," and cutting to the marrow of men's minds with the Senate—Ideational distinction, Sorokin's discovery of an intelligible order in cultural history, an order bearing significantly on social history, seems as pertinent to the ancient world as to the modern, to the Orient as to the Occident. It far surpasses any other historical generalization in the surprising deductions it allows us to make.

From the clear dominance in any society of an art portraying the visible world, as did European painting in the 18th and 19th centuries, we can deduce the simultaneous dominance of empiricism in thought, an ethics of worldly happiness, and reliance on bargaining and contract. If in art or thought we find basic principles more disputed than agreed on, as is the case today, we can deduce a similar dispute in law and a high incidence of war and internal disorders.

But despite these and other unparalleled results, Sorokin's theory as so far summarized is only descriptive and cannot claim


predictive power. Here we return to Popper, who has pinpointed as a crucial element in any predictive theory one that he finds lacking in theories like Spengler's and Toynbee's: "valid reason to expect of any repetition . . . that it will continue to run parallel to its prototype"—in other words, valid reason to believe that it really is a repetition and not a superficial coincidence. Such a reason would of course be a universal principle or principles from which, as from Newton's gravity and inertia, the repetitions observed and similar repetitions in the future could be deduced.

Here Spengler offers only the metaphor that civilizations are organisms, which they are not. Toynbee attempts a universal principle with his Challenge and Response, but as several critics have noted this is not really universal; it does not apply, for example, when a people survives or triumphs through help from outside allies.

Sorokin begins his search for universal explanatory-predictive principles, a search that relativists would declare futile a priori, by considering the principle or cause of historical change, of which cultural fluctuations and their social concomitants afford vivid instances. He observes that for generations the fashion has been to account for change via some external cause acting on the culture or society undergoing change. Occasionally this suffices, as with changes forced by an alien conqueror or a plague. But when taken as it has been, as a universal principle, this environmentalism carries with it the untenable and thoroughly deterministic implication that men and societies are purely passive objects incapable of initiating change. Further, when we are told that changes in the family, say, result from economic changes, we cannot help asking what changed the economy. If the answer is technology, we ask what changed technology. Trying to end such a regress, environmentalists can only point to some non-human Ur-cause or Prime Mover such as Marx's mode of production or the evolutionists' evolution. This not only involves a false organismism but, as Sorokin writes, appeal to a self-changing Ur-cause contradicts the central environmentalist contention that nothing initiates its own change. Appeal to evolution attributes social and cultural changes, among the most frequent and rapid known, to biological change, one of the rarest and slowest.

Having exposed these and other cogent arguments the untenability of environmentalism, Sorokin writes:

"Since any sociocultural system is composed of human beings as one of its components, and since any organism, so long as it exists, cannot help changing, the sociocultural system . . . cannot help changing, regardless of its external conditions, even [if they are] absolutely constant."

Sorokin therefore advances, as a universal principle accounting for sociocultural change and permitting prediction of its continuance, a principle of immanent change. This principle does not deny the sometimes powerful influence of external forces; it does consider change both normal and nor-

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16. Actually, as Rudolph Virchow vainly noted in Darwin's day and as J. Huxley, G. C. Sime-ton, and other biologists and anthropologists recognize today, Homo sapiens has not changed in his physical habitus, which includes his brain, since his emergence.
nally the result of forces or properties within a changing system itself. 17

Here Sorokin has tried to satisfy the basic canon that demands not only that a theory be shown adequate to facts but that it be shown the only such theory possible. He has shown the alternative to immanent change, environmentalism, untenable.

As environmentalism does not, the principle of immanent change allows scope for a basic measure of human creativity and freedom, which are in many places affirmed by Popper. Critics of the principle have charged it with "anthropomorphism" or "mysticism" on the scientific ground that physical science recognizes only such principles as inertia and external force. But as Popper has pointed out, citing von Hayek, one does not err in thinking anthropomorphically about man. 18 Indeed, one better had...

But with his principle of immanent change Sorokin has only partly solved his problem. To meet the essential requirements set forth by Popper above, Sorokin must do more than account for change itself; he must account for the recurrent nature of the sociocultural changes whose existence he has empirically demonstrated.

Once more he considers the alternatives, which are a) change or development in a permanent direction, and b) the emergence of systems wholly new. We have seen a) disposed of earlier in discussion of permanent trends. With b) the key word is "wholly." While Sorokin does not of course contend that actual, historical sociocultural systems repeat themselves in all respects, he does contend that wholly new systems do not occur. In support of this he notes that historians and social scientists habitually classify economic, political, familial, and other systems by means of a few basic categories - e.g., for economic systems: hunting and collecting, pastoral, agricultural, industrial. He also notes that in the long history of natural science a few basic thought systems such as atomism, vitalism, and mechanism emerge, vanish, and recur. Of course every atomism, just as every monarchy or marriage, or every historic culture fitting Ideational or Soc-


19. Especially with regard to physical theories, Progressists often denigrate such partial repetitions as "merely formal." Scientists have spoken otherwise. Heisenberg's Physics and Philosophy (Gifford Lectures 1953-56, New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962) emphasizes at length the similarity between quantum theory and certain ancient theories. Popper has written that there can "no longer be any doubt about the astonishing similarity, not to say identity, of the aims, interests, activities, arguments, and methods of, say, Galileo and Archimedes, or Copernicus and Plato, or Kepler and Aristarchus" (Conjectures, p. 78 n. 10). When scientists differ with Progressists, it is a safe rule to side with scientists... And in siding with Popper here we can dispose of a conditional argument against historical prediction advanced in Poverty: "If there is such a thing as a growth of knowledge, then we cannot anticipate today what we shall know only tomorrow" - which means that similar as knowledge influences events, we cannot predict them. True, but in the respects Popper has mentioned, growth of knowledge is often absent.
requirement of nomothetic theory that Popper has justly emphasized.20

It is not on a mistaken organicism or a mystic fatalism but on a rational and, he said, elegant deduction from the undeniable unceasingness of change and the undeniable existence of limits to human possibilities and choices that Sorokin rests his theory of sociocultural, which is to say historical, recurrence.

To conclude this necessarily thumbnail summary of a monumental intellectual achievement, a summary that ignores many illuminating facets of Sorokin's theory as well as a few non-crucial instances where his data or reasoning seem questionable:
The theory puts the contemporary West, hence most of the contemporary world, in a period of transition occasioned by the disintegration of a Senate culture that achieved dominance in the 18th century and began to disintegrate around 1900. In art, the Senate aim of representing visible objects has in many quarters been abandoned. In thought, the empiricism characteristic of Senate culture has via instrumentalism, operationism, etc., created an increasing distrust in empirical science itself as a finder and repository of truth. In society at large, contracts from marriage contracts to those involved in monetary policy and international treaties, are taken by all parties as mere descriptions of situations which all regard as increasingly ephemeral. These and countless other indications of a Senate culture's disintegration are massively supported by our century's high incidence of war and internal disorders.

It follows from Sorokin's principle of imminent change, and can be stated as a law, that no culture lasts forever. Historically none has. Before he had fully elaborated his theory in Dynamics its four data-packed volumes, Sorokin observed 20th century culture and society in that theory's light, and, to the amazement and sometimes lofty amusement of Progressivist social scientists, he predicted the continuance of a period of cultural confusion, wars, and disorders which he said had begun around the time of World War I. Before the Depression or Hitler's rise to power, let alone World War II and its aftermath, had disturbed Progressists' doleful slumber, he predicted what everyone would agree has happened, namely, that a high incidence of confusion and disorder would persist and probably increase—until, he went on, men achieved a fresh cultural integration on Integral or, more likely in view of Integral culture's rarity, Idealistic premises.81

Most unfortunately, Popper has written not a word about Sorokin's theory, which, were Popper acquainted with it, might sharply qualify Popper's apparent hostility to historical theory in general. As we have seen, that hostility arises in large part from detection of the crucial flaws in permanent trend or development theories such as Comte's and Marx's and in recurrence theories such as Spengler's and Toynbee's—but Sorokin has described the same flaws in terms often identical with Popper's own, and Sorokin's theory is free of those flaws. Sorokin's theory seems unaffected by the various objections raised in Popper's Society, Open Society, and Conjectures to a "theoretical history...that corresponds to theoretical physics."

But mention of physics brings to mind a final, major objection to any theoretical history: the objects of historical study are not susceptible to isolation and controlled experiment in anything like the same degree as physical objects.

As I know from conversations with him, Sorokin himself would be the last to deny the force of that objection.22 Also, it follows from the same impossibility of isolation and controlled experiment that Sorokin's predictions are not timed and that his theory therefore lacks what Popper emphasizes as the high degree of testability and exposure to falsification of many physical theories.

Still, Copernicus' example reminds us that controlled experiments are not essential to scientific success. Moreover, if in their lack of timing Sorokin's predictions fall short of those made in laboratories or at Cape Kennedy, they do compare with the much looser but still significant predictions physical science makes about such un- or only slightly controlled affairs as weather, crops, and human health. And though Sorokin's theory does not tell us when the radical cultural reversal it predicts will stand completed, it does clearly define that reversal and offer abundant evidence that it has begun. That evidence and the theory generally satisfied the late A. L. Kroeber, who announced his broad

22. See also Contemporary Sociological Theories, pp. 784-5.
agreement with Sorokin. Probably independently of Sorokin, but in agreement, Ortega y Gasset in his testamentary Mon and Crisis also predicted modern man’s eventual cultural “turnabout.”

Finally, Sorokin could not well be challenged if he remarked that on the basis of some theory of history, fragmentary or structured, both men and nations make many of their decisions and attempt to provide for the future. Does not provision interlock with provision? Provision absent, provision seems hardly possible. Practically, the question we confront is what theory of history we will use—and with what sense of such theory’s difficulties and of all theory’s limitations. As with all sound theory, Sorokin’s predicts the recurrence of abstract types or forms only; it does not allow prediction of the sometimes huge novelities—e.g., the early Church, modern technology—in which the typically Ida-


24. Augustine of course denies identical historical recurrence, but he endorses the idea of non-
identical or typal recurrence in earthly history in many places—e.g., when he calls Babylon the first Rome and Rome the second Babylon.

In conclusion I submit that both Popper

and Sorokin have dealt fatal blows to the linear or permanent trend theories of history, usually Progressivist but now tending toward pessimism, that have dominated Western thinking since the 18th century. I further submit that Sorokin and Popper have punctured the arguments commonly brought against the very possibility of a predictive theory of history. Finally, it seems to me that Sorokin, via brilliant mastery of empirical research and conceptual analysis, has made into a well defined and amply documented theory the perception of earthly history’s significant recurrence that was common to the greatest Greeks, to Augustine and other Christian Fathers, and to the poets, dramatists, and scholars of the Renaissance.24 Theirs was a perception and Sorokin’s is a theory profoundly philosophic and poetic—and, I venture, true. In this time of cultural conflict and disorder we can ignore it and pin our hopes on Seneca nostrums, be these political, educational, or whatever, only at our own and our children’s growing peril.