

# The legacy of Pitirim Sorokin in the transnational alliances of moral conservatives

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## Abstract

This article examines the legacy of Pitirim A. Sorokin (1889–1968), a Harvard sociologist from the Russian emigration. The authors scrutinise Sorokin as one of the nodal points for today's moral conservatism. As a scholar, Sorokin has been relegated to the margins of his discipline, but his legacy as a public intellectual has persisted in the United States and has soared in Russia over the last three decades. This article examines Sorokin's reception in these two nations, some of whose citizens have facilitated the burgeoning transnational phenomenon of twenty-first-century moral conservatism. Four aspects of Sorokin's legacy are especially relevant in this context: his emphasis on values, his notion of the 'sensate culture', his ideas about the family, and his vision for moral revival. The authors conclude that Sorokin functions as a nodal point that binds together individual actors and ideas across national, cultural and linguistic barriers. The article is based on a firsthand analysis of moral conservative discourse and documents, on qualitative interviews and on scholarly literature.

## Keywords

culture wars, moral conservatism, Pitirim Sorokin, Russia-US relations, transnational conservative alliances

## Introduction

When Karl Mannheim subtitled his 1925 study on conservatism 'a contribution to the sociology of knowledge', he did so in order to emphasise that he was interested in conservatism as a coherent form of reasoning, a style of thinking (*Denkstil*) born out of a specific historical and sociological constellation. He wanted neither to repudiate conservatism nor to side with it. Instead, in order to bring the 'morphology' of conservative thinking into the open, Mannheim's (1984) analysis addressed the

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historico-political, philosophical, intellectual, and sociological sources of early nineteenth-century German conservatism, layer by layer. In this way, he identified the nodal points (*Knotenpunkte*) that gave coherence to conservative thought; among them individual writers, intellectual schools and even publishing outlets. In this article, we have set ourselves the task of adding a contemporary wing to Mannheim's towering architecture of conservatism, following his method of historical and sociological analysis. More precisely, we aim to lay a few bricks on the groundwork for an analysis of twenty-first-century moral conservatism by identifying and analysing one of its nodal points and its argumentation.

In this article, we scrutinise the role played by Pitirim A. Sorokin (1889–1968), a Harvard sociologist from the Russian émigré, as the nodal point of contemporary moral conservatism. As a scholar, Sorokin has been relegated to the margins of his discipline, but his legacy as a public intellectual has persisted in the United States and has soared in Russia in the last three decades. The United States and Russia are the two poles between which we span our analysis, because unlike Mannheim, who studied conservatism as a national (German) phenomenon, we interpret twenty-first-century moral conservatism as a transnational phenomenon, for which Sorokin functions as a nodal point that binds together individual actors and ideas across national, cultural and linguistic barriers. In America, moral conservatism, otherwise known as 'social conservatism', is associated with the Christian Right, which has mobilised over issues such as the family, traditional gender roles, opposition to abortion and questions of religious freedom (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2004: 80–85). In Russia, moral conservatism is a relatively new phenomenon that draws upon both Orthodox Christianity and late-Soviet moral codes (Agadjanian, 2011). Moral conservatives who are discussed in this article constitute a small but vocal segment of the conservative spectrum in each of these countries and have forged transnational ties between each other.

Sorokin's life spans the length of the twentieth century. He was born in Tsarist Russia and spent time in prison due to his resistance to the Bolshevik Revolution, eventually being exiled and finding his way to the United States and the halls of the elite institution of Harvard University (see Johnston, 1995, 1996; Sorokin, 1963). Many scholars consider him to be a major figure for the sociological theory of the first half of the twentieth century (Ford et al., 1996; Jeffries, 2009; Maquet, 1951; Tiryakian, 1963), but in American academia his work has fallen out of the classical sociological canon, only to be 'rediscovered' from time to time (Jeffries, 2002; Nichols, 2001, 2005, 2012). The situation is different in Russia, where Sorokin was first deprecated as a 'bourgeois' scholar in the Soviet period but was then rediscovered and rehabilitated as a luminary of sociology only after the collapse of Communism (Kravchenko and Pokrovsky, 2001).

Not only was Sorokin a 'professional sociologist' who proceeded 'via discursive practices among experts trained in its distinctive frame of reference' (Nichols, 2009: 28), but his legacy also has an additional facet that draws together the recent American and Russian reception of his work. In the terminology of Michael Burawoy (2005), this side of Sorokin's work could be called a 'public sociology' that 'has an outward orientation toward a broad range of groups that constitute contemporary civil societies'. Lawrence T. Nichols (2009: 31), who uses Burawoy's concept, gives a list of Sorokin's works that belong to this field of 'public sociology', including *The Crisis of Our Age* (1941), *S.O.S.: The Meaning of Our Crisis* (1951), *The American Sex Revolution* (1956) and *The Basic Trends of Our Times* (1964). In this article, we argue that it is

this public and engaged side of Sorokin that is most alive today, thus making him a nodal point for twenty-first-century moral conservatism.

In what follows, we first analyse the role of Sorokin in today's moral conservative arguments in the United States and Russia, indicating how reference to Sorokin binds these two moral conservatisms together. We then identify four aspects in Sorokin's work that are determinant for his reception among today's moral conservatives: his emphasis on values, his ideas about the family, his notion of the 'sensate culture', and his vision of moral revival. We follow this with an evaluation of the differences between Russian and American moral conservatives in their interpretation of Sorokin. Finally, we discuss an important aspect of Sorokin's moral-religious legacy that remains almost completely neglected by moral conservatives.

Ongoing empirical research on transnational moral conservative networks (Stoeckl, 2016) is the particular scholarly context within which we are exploring this topic. In our research, we had not initially expected to direct our focus towards Sorokin as a factor in this socio-political phenomenon; rather, we stumbled upon him in the course of our work and decided to examine his influence more deeply. We base this article on firsthand analysis of moral conservative discourse and documents, on qualitative interviews and on scholarly literature. With this article, we seek to contribute to two areas of sociological research: the history of sociological theory and political sociology. At a time when the national and specifically American 'culture wars' (Hunter, 1991) are becoming a global phenomenon (Buss and Herman, 2003; McCrudden, 2015), this article makes a theoretical and empirical contribution to the understanding of the emergence and coherence of transnational moral conservatism.

## **Sorokin and moral conservative thinkers in the United States and Russia**

Whereas the more recent sociological reception of Sorokin's oeuvre in the United States is limited to a few articles and book chapters (see Tiryakian, 1996), his fame as a prophet of social and moral crisis is on the rise. German scholar Susanne Pickel has produced insightful online data that underscore this argument. According to Pickel (2002), scholarly sociological works about Sorokin in the United States were few in number and drew almost exclusively on his works prior to 1942, whereas his reception was more conspicuous among moral conservative and religious authors, who mainly drew on his later works, and this in a highly selective fashion. Below, we will show that this clear-cut distinction must be qualified with regard to Sorokin's rural sociology, since he initiated this work well before 1942.

Another line of reception looks to Sorokin's later works, namely his altruism studies (see ; Jeffries, 2009; Krotov, 2014; Nichols, 1996: 57–59, 2005, 2007). Sorokin is considered the founder of the sociology of altruism, an approach that brought him much criticism and incomprehension during his lifetime. His research on creative altruism at Harvard was funded by Eli Lilly, a philanthropic businessman who began providing Sorokin with grants in the late 1940s (Johnston, 1996: 10–12). With the funds from these grants, Sorokin established The Harvard Center for Creative Altruism in 1949<sup>1</sup>, which would become his intellectual safe haven once he had lost a bureaucratic battle with Talcott Parsons (whose work Sorokin regularly criticised), resulting in the instability of his administrative position at Harvard (see Buxton, 1996: 31–44). It was actually Lilly who encouraged Sorokin to continue his prophetic 'public sociology'. The American philanthropist considered Sorokin 'one of the few scholars who could "fruitfully study the problems of the moral and mental regeneration of

today's confused and largely demoralized society” (Johnston, 1996: 10). Lilly's generosity allowed Sorokin to increase his productivity along the moral-religious line of his multifaceted talent, but this intellectual choice also brought about a growing alienation from his academic colleagues.

Here, we investigate the reception of Sorokin's studies, for which his proponents consider him a respected prophet of decline (see Tiryakian, 1988). In Russia, as well as in the United States, scholars, activists and policymakers turn to Sorokin as 'one who felt it his responsibility to decry certain conditions and behaviors, patterns of modernity, to warn of their consequences, and to seek or prepare us to go beyond the normative crisis of late modernity' (Tiryakian, 2001).

In the United States, Sorokin's reputation as a public intellectual is largely based on his post-1942 polemical works. For example, in his book *World Aflame*, Billy Graham (1965), quoted from Sorokin's book *The American Sex Revolution* (1956) and called Sorokin 'one of the most astute observers of America's sex scene'<sup>2</sup>. This book also became a major source for the documentary film 'Perversion for Profit', which warned against the negative consequences of sexual liberation (Perversion for Profit, 1965). More recently, Southern Baptist leader Albert Mohler, (2004, 2005, 2015) has repeated some of Sorokin's claims in order to argue against the legalisation of same-sex marriage. Other writers have concentrated on Sorokin's theory of the 'sensate culture' to decry the effects of secularisation and to call for a reconversion to the Christian faith (Benne, 2015; Berman, 2012; Dreher, 2013, 2015).

Besides this reception based on Sorokin's more prophetic works, his early sociological research on rural society has also played an important role in turning him into an author of reference for moral conservatives. Together with Carle Zimmerman, Sorokin developed a particular perspective on rural-urban sociology, according to which only a rural lifestyle based on a traditional model of the family, an economy of manual labour and home-based business, and a strong link of the individual to the inhabited territory is sociologically, demographically and economically sustainable (Sorokin and Zimmerman, 1929). Zimmerman (1947) carried this research program further, frequently expressing his intellectual indebtedness to Sorokin (American Sociologist, 2017; Zimmerman, 1968; Zimmerman and Unnithan, 1973).

The historian and pro-family activist Allan Carlson, who holds a teaching position in history and politics at Hillsdale College (Michigan), has become a central figure for turning Sorokin into a nodal point in American-Russian moral conservative relations. He further developed the Zimmerman-Sorokin program of rural sociology through his numerous books on the family (Carlson, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Carlson and Mero, 2005) Carlson is the founding director of the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society, a non-governmental organisation that engages in pro-family and pro-life activism, as well as in lobbying the United States government and the United Nations to adopt its proposed measures (the non-governmental organization (NGO) has been accredited with ECOSOC since 2003). He was also instrumental in founding the World Congress of Families (WCF) together with Russian sociologists, which we discuss further below.

Carlson (2013), who has described his religious stance as 'orthodox Lutheranism', has cited Sorokin and Zimmerman as two of three 'must-reads' for pro-family Protestants (the third is Robert Nisbet). According to Carlson (2017), he discovered Sorokin in the late 1970s when he was writing an article addressing the question of what went wrong with the American family. The first book he read by Sorokin was *The American Sex Revolution*. He then discovered Sorokin's work on cultural cycles and the sensate culture. It was through Sorokin's work that he became acquainted with

Zimmerman. For Carlson's 'manifesto' on the 'natural family' in twenty-first-century America, he takes practical cues from the work of Sorokin and Zimmerman on rural-urban sociology (Carlson and Mero, 2007). Two aspects of Sorokin's ideas about the family appear to have influenced Carlson: (a) Sorokin's idea that small, village-like communities are the best environment for families and (b) his anti-communism. Sorokin abhorred communism and bolshevism his entire life. In Sorokin's (1950) autobiographical writings, he condemned the moral decay under communism, which he had witnessed firsthand before leaving Russia. In Carlson's (1990, 2007b) works that are critical of European social-democratic welfare systems, the reader can easily detect the influence of Sorokin's negative judgment of communism. Carlson's own economic and policy stance is best described as libertarian.

Sorokin also inspired other authors who represented moral conservatism and gathered around the Howard Center and its predecessor, the Rockford Institute. These include Bryce Christensen and Harold O. J. Brown (1933–2007), the former director of the Center on Religion and Society at the Rockford Institute and former professor of biblical and systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. The former wrote an article on Sorokin and Solzhenitsyn (Christensen, 1996). The latter published a book-length commentary on Sorokin's *The Crisis of our Age* (Brown, 1996). Together, these authors have created what Doris Buss and Didi Herman (2003: 140) call 'a secularized, professional discourse on "the family" that has achieved a wide impact and is rarely associated with their conservative Christian politics' (p. 140). The professionalisation of the discourse also extends to its dissemination. In fact, Transaction Publishers has issued most of their writings, as well as Carlson's works and new editions of Sorokin's works, with the strong support of its founder, Irving Louis Horowitz, who according to Carlson (2017) was a big admirer of Sorokin.

With Donald Trump's recent win to the presidency of the United States, Sorokin's influence on American Christian pro-family circles is now apparent even at the highest political level. The forty-eighth Vice President of the United States, Michael Richard 'Mike' Pence, who is outspoken in his pro-life and pro-family positions, was influenced by Sorokin's ideas. Pence (2006) quoted Sorokin while advocating for his failed House Resolution, the *Marriage Protection Amendment* in 2006, at the height of debates in the United States about same-sex marriage: 'Marriage matters according to the researchers. Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin found that throughout history, societal collapse was always brought about following an advent of the deterioration of marriage and family'.

An author of reference for moral conservatives in the United States, Sorokin has not only contributed to the professionalisation and sociological foundation of the discourse on the traditional family, but he has also inspired this discourse's development into a transnational Christian conservative endeavour. This is particularly true for conservatives in Russia, the second pole on our map of contemporary moral conservatism. To a certain extent, Sorokin must be seen as one among many towering Russian figures who fled Bolshevik Russia to the West and whose legacy became important both in the Western intellectual landscape and in the Russian intellectual landscape following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The most famous example is Nikolai Berdyaev (Stroop, 2014), whom Robert Nisbet (1953) mentioned, together with Sorokin, as 'the major prophets of our age' (p. 8). Another relevant figure in this context is Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who played a role in the formation of late-twentieth-century American conservatism. One author has even called Sorokin a 'noble forerunner' to Solzhenitsyn (Christensen, 1996: 390).

Notwithstanding the extensive impact of Berdyaev and Solzhenitsyn on both the West and Russia, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that Sorokin now seems to have exceeded them in terms of his impact on today's transnational conservative movement.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first decade of social transition, Russian society has undergone a turn towards a conservatism that is associated with Orthodox Christianity, political authoritarianism and traditional values (Østbø, 2017; Stepanova, 2015; Uzlaner, 2016). This turn towards traditional values was not entirely homegrown but was influenced by contacts between Russian conservatives and like-minded actors in the West. Sorokin occupies a special place in this context, since he is a 'native' intellectual source for both Americans and Russians. He is, therefore, a unique figure.

Carlson actually acted as a bridge-builder between American and Russian pro-family activists when he travelled to Moscow in 1997 to meet demographer and sociologist Anatoly Antonov, a Russian scholar who held similar views. Antonov was among those Russian scholars who had already been attracted to Sorokin in the Soviet period, when his name and the study of his works were still forbidden. In an interview with our research team, Antonov (2017) recalls that he became acquainted with the works of Sorokin early in his career at Moscow State University when his research advisor brought some of Sorokin's books from abroad and encouraged his students in this clandestine reading. He acknowledged, 'Sorokin's writings on the crisis of the family influenced our [Soviet and post-Soviet] scientific way of thinking about the family' (Antonov, 2017). Thus, Carlson and Antonov shared an understanding of the crisis of the family and the roots of this crisis (with Sorokin 'as an animating spirit' of this collaboration Carlson, 2017, and together they founded the WCF (Stroop, 2016).

The WCF is a transnational, non-governmental, pro-family organisation. It is mainly connected to and managed by the Howard Center, which coordinates communications with members from other countries. After the 1997 meeting between Carlson and Antonov, the Russian contingent's engagement in the WCF got off to a slow start. It would actually take until 2010 for Russian activity in the WCF to commence fully. In that year, Larry Jacobs, WCF's managing director, travelled to Russia on an official visit to speak at an event organised by the Russian pro-life organisation 'The Sanctity of Motherhood'. Jacobs recalled,

This was the first official WCF trip to Moscow since Allan Carlson's visit in 1997. We were delighted by the support we found there. Russian pro-life/pro-family forces are eager to cooperate with their counterparts in the West. Given its traditional support for faith and family, Russia will play an increasingly important part in the international struggle to preserve the natural family. (Christian NewsWire, 2010)

Participants in the 2010 Moscow meetings between American and Russian moral conservatives frequently mentioned the name of Pitirim Sorokin. Jacobs spoke at 'The Sixth All-Russia Scientific Conference – The Pitirim Sorokin Annual Sociology Forum', which was organised by Moscow State University's Sociology department, the Russian Sociology Association (RoSA) and the Pitirim Sorokin/Nikolai Kondratieff International Institute. Jacobs also met with Vladimir Dobrenkov, the dean of sociology at Moscow State University from 1989 to 2014, who expressed 'full support to the pro-family activities of the World Congress of Families' (Christian NewsWire, 2010).

The Americans met with open doors in their desire to engage Russian partners over the topic of the family by way of Sorokin's legacy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sorokin became an authority for Russian sociologists. In his interview, Antonov

(2017) remarked somewhat critically, ‘This is just what our country is like. We must always have a portrait hanging on the wall. Before, we had Marx or Lenin, and ... now we have Sorokin instead of Marx’. Dobrenkov, a self-proclaimed conservative, promoted Sorokin’s status as an important author of reference in sociology. It was Dobrenkov who invited Alexander Dugin to Moscow State University’s sociology department, despite Dugin’s mixed reputation as a radical conservative thinker (even by Russian standards).<sup>3</sup> In 2008, these two scholars established the Pitirim Sorokin Foundation at Moscow State University. The Sorokin Foundation stated as its mission ‘the revival of a national ideology based upon values that are traditional for Russia’.<sup>4</sup> Dugin (2011: 165) explains the importance of Sorokin’s legacy:

Russian conservatism as yet has not gained a clear structure or a coherent, consistent and systematic expression. Our conservatism remains emotional, rather than theoretical, and impulsive, rather than scientific. In the new historical situation, we must therefore attend to the legacy of Russian thinkers, philosophers, sociologists and economists who, in various historical conditions, have prepared an intellectual foundation for a new Russian conservatism.

Sorokin’s book on the American sexual revolution has become an important nodal point for Russian pro-family activists, much as it had for their American counterparts. Although the Russian translation (Sorokin, 2006) had a print run of only several hundred copies and soon went out-of-print, the text of the translation is available online and is well-known to Russian moral conservatives. For example, child-psychologist Irina Medvedeva (2013: minute 59), an active defender of family values and a convinced campaigner against juvenile justice<sup>5</sup>, claims in public lectures that Sorokin’s pamphlet should be an indispensable handbook for all who care about moral decay and would like to prevent it.

This overview of Sorokin’s influence on moral conservative thinkers in Russia and the United States demonstrates that Sorokin does indeed function as a nodal point (*Knotenpunkt*) (Mannheim, 1984) for moral conservative thinking in many ways. He has been an author of reference for moral conservative thinkers across time (from the 1950s until today); he tied moral conservative ideas to certain aspects of sociological study through his works on the family, rural life, and the ‘sensate culture’; and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, his works have united American and Russian moral conservatives into a community of mutual understanding and civil society activism. In the remainder of this article, we will first consider which aspects of Sorokin’s work are determinant for his reception among twenty-first-century moral conservatives. We will then examine whether and to what extent Russian and American moral conservatives interpret Sorokin differently.

## **Four factors that make Sorokin an author of reference for moral conservatism**

We identify four aspects of Sorokin’s work that are determinant for his reception among today’s moral conservatives: his emphasis on values, his notion of the ‘sensate culture’, his ideas about the family, and his hope for moral revival. We describe the meaning of each of these in Sorokin’s oeuvre and then expand from there to argue that these ideas have since become general features of contemporary moral conservatism.

### *Culture- and values-centrism*

When those from the progressive left discuss the Christian Right's moral conservatism, they often express incomprehension as to why conservatives think that culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern. Why is it that 'values matter most' (Frank, 2004) in conservative discourse, rather than the redistribution of wealth or equal justice under the law? The focus on values becomes more understandable when we clarify the foundations of the moral conservative approach to the study of society. In this respect, Sorokin is a good guide. An analysis of his works reveals the logic behind moral conservatives' ongoing anxiety over values and their relative neglect of economic issues, which understandably puzzles those scholars and observers who are more materialistically oriented.

Sorokin belongs to the 'idealistic' tradition in sociological theory, which tends to claim that the distinguishing factor between 'different universes of mind and meaning' primarily has to do with the way one or the other answers the crucial paired questions of 'the nature of ultimate reality' and what constitutes 'the supreme value' (Stark, 1991: 225). For Sorokin, the core of any socio-cultural system and its dynamics lay in its 'mentality'. As he explains in his magnum opus *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, any 'logically integrated system of culture' has two aspects:

The first belongs to the realm of inner experience, either in its unorganized form of unintegrated images, ideas, volitions, feelings, and emotions; or in its organized form of systems of thought woven out of these elements of the inner experience. This is the realm of mind, value, meaning. For the sake of brevity we shall refer to it by the term 'mentality of culture' (or 'culture mentality'). The second is composed of inorganic and organic phenomena: objects, events, and processes, which incarnate, or incorporate, or realize, or externalize, the internal experience. These external phenomena belong to a system of culture only as they are the manifestations of its internal aspect. Beyond this they cease to be a part of integrated culture. (Sorokin, 2010: 20)

Sorokin (2010: 20) then concludes that 'for the investigator of an integrated system of culture the internal aspect is paramount'. One should stress that Sorokin's theory 'considers the ontological convictions prevailing at a given time, not so much as culture-contents, but rather as culture-premises, from which the culture concerned proceeds and emanates as a whole' (Stark, 1991: 226). Or as Sorokin (2010) put it,

If the nature of the major premises of a culture plays such an important part in the qualification of its logical integration, it follows that the key principle by which the character of an integrated culture may be understood should be sought, first of all, in these premises. (p. 20)

Values are an important part of these premises or 'culture mentality'. The types of values that are prevalent determine the type of 'cultural supersystem' we are dealing with (Sorokin, 2010: 676). Frank R. Cowell (1970: 25) even claims that the concept of 'values' is Sorokin's most important contribution to sociology, asserting that 'Sorokin was the first to bring German and continental European sociological thought prominently to the notice of Americans'. The claim that Sorokin was the first to import European sociological thought into American academia is open to critical assessment (Endruweit, 2002), but it is beyond dispute that values were a central element of Sorokin's understanding of civilisations or socio-cultural systems (see also Talbutt, 1998). In this values-centred interpretation, culture becomes identical to a 'system of values'.

Sorokin famously distinguished between three types of cultural systems: (1) ideational culture, (2) sensate culture, and (3) idealistic (or integral) culture. According to his theory, each civilisation passes through cycles of change between ideational, sensate and idealistic phases (Sorokin, 2010: 39). Each phase is associated with corresponding sets of values. Ideational values are ‘absolute’, ‘transcendental’, ‘categoric’, ‘imperative’, ‘everlasting’, and ‘unchangeable’. Sensate values are ‘relativistic’, ‘hedonistic’, ‘eudaemonistic’, ‘utilitarian’, and ‘egoistic’. Idealistic values are a ‘golden middle’ between these two extremes (see the table in Sorokin, 2010: 39). Cultural change occurs when one set of values is exhausted and is then replaced by another set of values. The period of transition is marked by chaos (Cowell, 1970: 474).

Of significance is Sorokin’s ‘law of polarization’, according to which a cultural crisis on the threshold between one phase and the next is characterised by extreme polarisation. Sorokin (2010) argued that

such crises, with their insecurity, instability, anxiety, and sufferings, split human beings into the two opposite extreme types. Some of them are turned into pure eternalists who try to anchor human existence to something solid, lasting, capable of withstanding all the storms of the empirical reality; others are turned into the extreme sensual temporalists of the Carpe diem type, with their tendency to catch the pleasure of the moment for ‘tomorrow is uncertain’. (p. 315)

Sorokin’s categorisation of mankind into eternalists and temporalists matches the polarisation we observe in many of the moral conservative writings. Moral conservatives see the ground for existing political cleavages in contemporary societies precisely in the difference in values-orientations, and not in social injustice, economic inequality or other forms of social fragmentation. They take the current debates over same-sex marriage or transgender restrooms as signs of the polarisation that, following Sorokin, signifies the crisis of a culture.

Although we can find a direct reference to Sorokin’s theory of culture in only a few instances (Carlson, 2017), it is still clear that his writings have helped to create the language of today’s culture wars by shaping moral conservatives’ vision of social processes and dynamics. Once we understand Sorokin’s idealism, we can then begin to see how other elements in his vision of ‘public sociology’ emerge from this theoretical framework.

### *‘Sensate culture’ and the end of the West*

Sorokin’s concept of the dying sensate culture is the most visible Sorokinism in recent American conservative discourse. It is also the most attractive aspect of his work for Russian conservatives. They not only recognise traces of Russian Slavophilism in his diagnosis of a deep cultural crisis in the West (which must result in either total collapse or deep cultural transformation), but they also interpret their own situation of post-Soviet transition in a Sorokian sense, as the doomed demise of sensate culture. For example, Dobrenkov (2011: 159) has claimed that Russian society ‘is living through not simply a period of radical socio-economic and political reformation, but a period of a painful, violent transition from an ideational-idealistic socio-cultural system to a Western-style sensate socio-cultural system’.

Sorokin (2010) was convinced that Western civilisation was in the final stage of the sensate phase in cultural dynamics:

The organism of the Western society and culture seems to be undergoing one of the deepest and most significant crises of its life. The crisis is far greater than the ordinary; its depth is unfathomable, its end not yet in sight, and the whole of the Western society is involved in it. It is the crisis of a sensate culture, now in its overripe stage, the culture that has dominated the Western World during the last five centuries. (p. 622)

His sense of doom was so imminent that he did not shy away from prognosticating that Western civilisation would collapse within years. Even though he had to correct this position as time moved on and the expected collapse did not take place (Ivanov, 2011), he continued to identify signs of decline. The most important of these was, in his words, the 'sex revolution'.

In *The American Sex Revolution*, the first version of which was published as an article (Sorokin, 1954), Sorokin (1956) warned of the effects of the liberalisation of moral norms for the future of Western culture. His basic position was that at the root of almost all social ills lay 'sexual anarchy' and 'familial degeneration'. The book was less a scientific essay than a polemical pamphlet, and to many of his contemporaries, it was unacceptably extreme. David R. Mace (1963: 142), for example, reviewed the essay and wrote that Sorokin was 'going too far'. He criticised Sorokin for making statements that lacked 'documentation' and for allowing himself, 'under the influence of the enthusiasm generated in him by the cause he is espousing, to carry his argument further than prudence would dictate' (Mace, 1963: 143). Sorokin (1963b) was unmoved by such criticism and replied

In our age of blatant advertising, deafening propaganda, and Gargantuan exaggeration of everything to be sold to the public, one has to hammer his points as hard as he can to be heard by the public, especially if his points are 'unpopular' and run against the prevalent fads and opinions. (p. 470)

Sorokin's diagnosis of Western sensate culture has become a recurrent trope in moral conservative discourse, both in America and in Russia. Especially in the Russian context, his authority has become more important than any empirical evidence in support of a more balanced vision of the state of Western society. Sorokin's pamphlet *The American Sex Revolution* was published in Russia as a scholarly edition, with several prefaces (to be discussed below) written by scholars who discuss the work's theses as if it were a serious academic research paper (Sorokin, 2006).

Meanwhile, in America, conservatives widely share Sorokin's vision of a doomed Western sensual civilisation. For example, Rod Dreher, the author of the bestseller *The Benedict Option* (Dreher, 2017), has argued that

Sorokin's ideas are absolutely key to the idea that traditionalist conservatives, religious and otherwise, would be wise to take the 'Benedict Option': to consciously withdraw to some extent from a dying cultural order and, in seeking out a way to live faith and virtue out in community, lay the groundwork for what may succeed the current order. (Dreher, 2008)

And as mentioned earlier, Brown (1996) published a commentary on sensate culture in the West nearly 60 years after Sorokin's *Social and Cultural Dynamics* originally appeared.

## *Emphasis on the family*

For moral conservatives, the survival or decline of society depends on the institution of the family. In a time when diverse forms of families not only exist, but are also legally recognised and widely accepted, moral conservatives insist on the superiority of the traditional or ‘natural’ family model. For them, the realities that same-sex marriage is now legally recognised in many Western countries, that divorce rates are high and that family life is no longer the logical aspiration for many individuals in the West signify that Western society is in crisis. Sorokin was a forerunner for this argument. In 1948, he wrote,

marriage and the family must be restored to their place of dignity among the greatest values in human life, not to be trifled with. As a socially sanctioned union of husband and wife, of parents and children, the family is to be radically differentiated from all unsanctioned sex association. (Sorokin, 1948: 148)

Sorokin began to express concern about the coming crisis of the family very early in his writings, and empirically speaking, many of his prophecies on this topic have actually come true (Hillery et al., 1996). As Russell Nieli (2006) writes, ‘Long before the term came into existence Sorokin was a “family values conservative”’.

Sorokin connected his theories about the family with sexual behaviour. His experience of the Russian Revolution was a strong source of inspiration for making the argument that sexual licence led to social unrest. Sorokin’s was a morally conservative anti-communism that seemed to be preoccupied with discussing sexual behaviour – something that must have puzzled many of his contemporaries. At a time when Soviet Russia was the quintessential political ‘other’ to the United States, Sorokin was making the argument that, when all was said and done, Soviet Russia and capitalist America were facing similar challenges that had to do with the regulation of their citizens’ sexual behaviour. As Nichols (2012) writes,

The emphatic focus on sexual behavior in Sorokin’s writings in the U.S. from the 1920s through the late 1950s was another substantive element setting him apart from his American peers. Although some colleagues, particularly demographers and family sociologists such as Kingsley Davis, did address sexual behavior [...], this was not common among those considered ‘theorists’ or ‘general theorists’. (p. 394)

According to Nichols (2012: 394), Sorokin argued that changes in sexual representations, attitudes and behaviour were key indicators of historical change for the institution of the family and for social relations generally. This general theory allowed him to find similarities between the United States and the Soviet Union at a time when these two countries, in the eyes of most contemporary observers, were antipodes.

Sorokin’s moral anti-communism stands behind the aversion of today’s moral conservatives to any kind of left-leaning family policy (see Carlson, 1990). On the face of it, the opposition of moral conservatives to a number of points on the left’s agenda of family policy is somewhat surprising. What could possibly be wrong about day care for children or state incentives for burden sharing in childrearing between parents, if these policies actually help families? In order to understand this, we must think through the whole logic of the moral conservative critique of the left’s family policy, as rooted in Sorokin’s (1950: 33) condemnation of the early communist sex revolution, which in his eyes only preceded the American one. Moral conservatives, who share this narrative, will consider even the most sensitive measure for improving the lives of

families unacceptable so long as the value of sexual liberty stands behind such a measure. This principled stance explains why the current debates about the family in international forums like the United Nations Human Rights Council only result in standoffs, despite convergence on some practical aims (Stoeckl and Medvedeva, 2017).

Only after a long delay did Sorokin's works on the family become known and discussed in Russia. In particular, the demographic interpretation of his work caught the attention of Russian sociologists. Demographic anxiety became a critically important issue of public debate after the fall of the USSR. Take, for instance, the discussions of the so-called 'Russian cross', concerning the concomitant dramatic rise in the death rate with the radical decline in the birth rate (Khalturina and Korotaev, 2006). Sorokin's theses on sexual license as the root of all evil and the natural family as the solution to all ills offered an answer to two highly sensitive questions that Russians were trying to come to terms with in the 1990s: What went wrong with the Soviet Union? And what was wrong with the post-Soviet present? In answer to these questions, they found a Sorokian answer: one and the same ill ultimately caused the Soviet Union to fail and the post-Soviet democratic transition to derail – sexual immorality. And more importantly, Russia was not unique in this crisis, but was merely following a global trend.

The authors of the introduction to the Russian translation of *The American Sex Revolution* draw direct parallels between the American sexual revolution of the 1960s and Russian events following the collapse of the USSR. In the words of Natalia Rimashevskaya (Rimashevskaya and Markova, 2006: 6), a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 'Astonishingly, *The American Sex Revolution*, written by Pitirim Sorokin exactly fifty years ago, is incredibly pressing for Russia today ... P. A. Sorokin destroys the myths of the sexual revolution'. Yet another preface to this Sorokin edition, written by Yuri Yakovets (2006), president of the Pitirim Sorokin/Nikolai Kondratiev International Institute, claims that

the publication of this book in Russia will facilitate victory over the deepest moral and demographic crisis the country has faced at the end of the twentieth century, which threatens the future of Russian civilisation and could lead to its degeneracy and its disappearance from the geo-civilisational map of the world. (p. 10)

### ***The promise of a revival: And the difference between American and Russian moral conservatism***

Whereas Sorokin's ideas about the family have allowed moral conservatives from the United States and Russia to recognise each other in a common fate and a common set of shared goals, another aspect of Sorokin's work reveals the difference in their self-perceptions. Despite his alarmism, Sorokin was not ultimately a pessimist. He predicted that at the end of every fading 'sensate culture', a new idealistic or integralist culture would appear, with new religious values. At the end of the tunnel of the crisis of sensate culture, he saw a light – the onset of 'more religiously communitarian and distinctly nonsensate values of an older Christian integral culture, the latter reasserting itself after decades in decline' (Nieli, 2006). Conservatives in both Russia and the United States share this vision, at least on a theoretical level; on a practical level, however, their understanding of what this means for their respective contexts differs radically.

For Russian moral conservatives, Sorokin's prediction inspires them to identify post-Soviet Russia as the harbinger of the coming idealistic (or even ideational) culture.

In this regard, Dobrenkov (2011: 159) has written, ‘We in Russia hope to escape the clutches of the sensate culture and to create an ideational culture, to fill the foundation with traditional values’. He offers a prescription for this to come to fruition:

In the most general terms, the national conservative ideology of Russia must come from a strong hand, from a high collective spirituality, from a Russia that is based upon the traditional values of Orthodoxy and other confessions for the unity of the state and the people. (Dobrenkov, 2011: 158)

In short, Russian Orthodoxy, traditional moral values, and political authoritarianism are the features of this new, integrated Russian culture. From this perspective, the West represents the dying sensate culture. The West is associated tout court with liberalism and ‘alien values’. In writings that take this perspective, there is no trace of recognition that Sorokin described a mutual East-West predicament. As Dobrenkov (2011: 161) writes in his Sorokin article: ‘Western civilisation is destined to destruction, and nothing and no one will help it’.

If American moral conservatives were ever to become aware of it, this Russian optimism and demonstration of cultural superiority would likely be rather alienating. American conservatives have also creatively proposed ways that people in the West could follow Sorokin’s way out of the crisis of sensate culture, mostly calling for a return to Christian values. For example, Brown (1996: 232) speaks with delight about Sorokin’s idea of moral resurrection and culture conversion from selfishness to altruism and higher values. Yet, he is not very optimistic concerning the possibilities of such a conversion in the United States. This is where Russian and American conservatives differ. Russian conservatives believe that the ‘sensate culture’ has managed to touch only the superficial layers of their culture; for this reason, it can be easily eradicated along with the liberals who are the bearers of moral decay. In contrast, American conservatives believe that the ‘sensate culture’ has managed to penetrate too deeply into the nation’s soil, to the point that there may no longer be any hope of converting the whole culture back to a more idealistic orientation. Rod Dreher (2017) provides a good example of this kind of thinking with his ‘withdrawal strategy’, as expressed in his book *The Benedict Option*, where he actually advocates for a Christian retreat from a sensate culture that is already doomed. This pessimism about their own culture may explain why American conservatives look with hope to their Russian colleagues (Buchanan, 2013).

## **The neglected part of Sorokin’s legacy**

Thus far, we have been talking about those aspects of Sorokin’s legacy that were well received by moral conservatives. One element of Sorokin’s legacy, however, remains almost absent from this moral-religious line of reception. When Sorokin (1940: 13–15) was given a chance to state his credo, he called himself a ‘conservative Christian anarchist’. While the first two parts of his credo are accurately reflected above, Sorokin’s radical, anarchist side has been missing from our story of his moral conservative reception. As a result, one might get a distorted, one-sided image of a once-great sociologist who, as he grew older, turned into a grumbler throwing out dark prophecies about the end of the West due to its illicit sexual behaviour and the overall demise of social mores. Though he called himself a ‘conservative Christian’, Sorokin – as a non-conformist anarchist – expressed his rejection of all social creeds and political factions, including the *conservative* faction. He mentioned Conservatives among

Communists, Fascists, Radicals, Capitalists and other groups from whom he feels alienated (Sorokin, 1940: 15). The reason for this detachment was simple: he considered all of these creeds and factions as parts of the ‘old-regime culture’, which was too busy with ‘sensory, sensual and material empirical values’ (Sorokin, 1940: 15). As demonstrated by his research on creative altruism, Sorokin was not worried about demography, fertility rates or child-rearing, but he was striving for a profound moral reconstruction of humanity through the transformative power of ‘unselfish love’ (Sorokin, 2002). This emphasis on ‘unselfish love’ is the positive side of his moral message, which significantly counterbalances the ‘negative’ side as a prophet of imminent demise.

Similarly, one must come to a more robust understanding of Sorokin’s particular religious worldview. In his autobiography, he confesses that ‘[The Russian Orthodox] religious climate ... served as a stimulus and outlet for the development of my creative propensities’ and that ‘the moral precepts of Christianity, especially of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes, decisively conditioned my moral values not only in youth but for the rest of my life’ (Sorokin, 1963: 40–41). Yet, this was not a dogmatic religiosity. Sorokin (1963a: 258) refused to ‘join any institutionalized religion’ and was a believer ‘in [his] own way’. Fascinated by the ethical power of Christ’s message, Sorokin devoted his later research at the Center for Creative Altruism to the study of ‘unselfish love’ and of practical ways to foster moral transformation through such love. He observed examples of such love in the lives of such religious geniuses as ‘Lao-tzu and Confucius, Buddha and Mahavira, Moses and Hillel, Jesus and St. Francis of Assisi, All Hallaj and Al Ghazzali, Gandhi and Schweitzer’ (Sorokin, 2002: 307). He did not care much about religious or confessional boundaries, searching instead for the core that united all great religions (see Sorokin, 1948: 154–155). For him the core of religion was the way of profound individual and social transformation through ‘altruistic love’ alongside Truth and Beauty as ‘the only real powers’ (Sorokin, 1963a: 326). In his autobiography, one finds unequivocal criticism of converts to Christianity who learned a number of doctrinal statements by heart but failed to experience a deep transformation of the patterns of their behaviour towards other people (Sorokin, 1963a: 272).

The contemporary moral conservatives discussed thus far in this article have all but ignored this deeply-informed religious side of Sorokin’s legacy, his religiosity in its purest form. When we asked Allan Carlson (2017) about this ‘altruistic’ part of Sorokin’s legacy, he replied that he utilised this aspect of his teaching ‘less than [he] should have’. Another conservative interpreter of Sorokin even criticised him for an alleged lack of proper religiosity, claiming that despite ‘his stout resistance to moral relativism, it appears that Sorokin succumbed to theological relativism’ (Christensen, 1996: 389–390). In our analysis of the Russian conservative reception of Sorokin’s ideas, we have found no traces of Sorokin’s ‘ecumenical teachings’. Thus, reception of Sorokin among moral conservatives is indeed paradoxical. Although religious leaders and groups in Russia and the US are primarily responsible for keeping Sorokin’s ideas alive, they have virtually neglected his genuinely religious-moral message, having at best set it on the back burner.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have added a contemporary wing to the architecture of conservatism that Mannheim originally laid out in 1925. By identifying Pitirim Sorokin as a nodal point for contemporary moral conservatism and by historically and sociologically

analysing aspects of its discourse, we have laid a few bricks on the road to an analysis of conservatism in the twenty-first century.

We earlier referred to Sorokin as a ‘prophet’ of sorts, not in the sense that he was accurate when he foretold the end of the West and the coming crisis of the sensate culture. Rather, he was prophetic in that he set forth the terms according to which societies across the globe face religious-moral conflict. Sorokin identified the trench lines of the contemporary ‘culture wars’. He laid the groundwork for today’s transnational coalitions between moral conservative groups such as the WCF, developing aspects of the conceptual framework, the logic, and the language used by these conservatives in their discussions of current socio-cultural transformations. As Nieli (2006) has expressed it:

[T]he emergence of a religiously-grounded ‘family values conservatism’ – the kind one sees, for instance, in contemporary groups like Focus on the Family or the Family Research Council – was something Sorokin predicted more than fifty years ago at a time when most sociologists thought the American family was doing just fine and few voices were being raised about the possible harms emanating from general cultural changes and cultural decline. (p. 368)

Sorokin (1963a: 224), keenly aware of the risk of academic neglect, commented in his autobiography on the fate of his intellectual legacy: ‘If my works were significant, they eventually would come into their own; if they were valueless, they did not deserve any recognition. In either case the results would be fair and square, though not equally pleasant to me’. Whether or not Sorokin would have been pleased with the reception of his work, we have here demonstrated that his work has become especially relevant for a growing transnational movement of moral conservatism in the twenty-first century.

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## **Notes**

1. Within his altruism studies project, Sorokin included the work of Anthony Bloom (1954), a notable Orthodox theologian who later became the Metropolitan of Sourozh.
2. For a more detailed analysis of Sorokin’s influence on Billy Graham, see Moslener (2015: 71–75).
3. In the end, Dobrenkov and Dugin had to leave Moscow State University together in 2014 (Safronov and Antonova, 2014).
4. The Center is no longer functioning. The archived site can be accessed via: [https://web.archive.org/web/20150401000000\\*/www.sorokinfond.ru/](https://web.archive.org/web/20150401000000*/www.sorokinfond.ru/) (accessed 24 May 2017).
5. The term ‘juvenile justice’ is actually shorthand in present-day Russia for a legal and political debate about the required reforms in family law that Russia, as a member state of the Council of Europe, is obliged to implement. According to scholars Bystrova and Tcherni (2015: 47), those who are campaigning against juvenile justice in Russia tend to depict juvenile justice initiatives ‘as attempts by the West, under the auspices of caring for the rights of children, to break apart Russian families and taint Russian traditions of child-rearing involving strict discipline (corporal punishment)’. They further argue, ‘The Russian Orthodox Church is one of the most vocal opponents of juvenile justice reform, and even the words “juvenile justice” are now perceived as menacing by the Russian public’. The authors would like to thank April L. French for this comment.

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