

**Ideas and Studies.** *Pitirim Alexandrovitch Sorokin, often referred to as the "bad boy" of American sociology, has since 1930 been alternately thrilling and shocking his student audiences at Harvard. Once secretary to the Prime Minister in the Russia of 1917, Sorokin was condemned to death and finally banished by the Soviets in 1922, an experience which may have sharpened his awareness of the evils of society as constituted, and the need for a new approach. His analyses of our sick society, started as early as 1921 with the two-volume "System of Sociology," written in Russian, culminated with his massive four-volume "Social and Cultural Dynamics" (1937-41) and last year's "Society, Culture, and Personality" (SRL Sept. 27). The latter summarized Sorokin's entire view of systematic sociology; the present volume which is reviewed below applies his theories to "The Reconstruction of Humanity."*

## *We Must Reform*

**THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HUMANITY.** By Pitirim A. Sorokin. Boston: The Beacon Press. 1948. 247 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by RUSHTON COULBORN

**T**HE MESSAGE of this book can be put shortly thus: we must reform our culture, our society, and ourselves; we have to tackle all three at once and re-orient them altruistically toward a supersensory, superrational absolute. If there is any novelty in this, it arises out of Mr. Sorokin's belief that history proceeds in successive phases in each one of which there is

major culture [which], with its social institutions, is not a mere conglomeration of diverse cultural and social phenomena, unrelated to one another causally and meaningfully, but in its greater and most important part . . . represents a unity or major system whose components are permeated by the same fundamental principle and articulate the same basic value.

There are two main kinds of these major cultures ("socio-cultural supersystems" is the less merciful technical term Sorokin uses on occasion), the "ideational," and the "sensate" and, as one gives place historically to the other, there is sometimes a transitional "idealistic" culture. In an ideational culture the basic value is absolute truth and goodness, and in a sensate culture it is the world, the flesh, and ultimately the devil. Since we are now utterly sensate, we are rapidly going to the devil and must forthwith become ideational or idealistic if we are to be saved. We, our society, and our culture are examined in the book and the damnation offered is good enough, though not better perhaps than in most similar sermons. The question raised by the book is,

of course, the validity of the constructive criticism.

Mr. Sorokin's work is akin to that of Toynbee, Spengler, Northrop, and, possibly, Kroeber, but, as usual in Sorokin's more recent books, there is a passage which announces that his is better than theirs. The large meaning of all this work is that men are trying to get control of their societies, by means of understanding them, in order to direct them. Whether they can do so will not be answerable unless and until they do, but the enterprise is, beyond all question, in the highest degree noble. It is, in fact, worth asking whether its nobility cannot be, if it comes to permeate our higher culture, a sufficient ideal for our regeneration. If we can begin to understand our societies as we already understand physical and biological nature, have we not something to live for? Such a proposition is at any rate worth offering as an alternative to Sorokin's absolutism, a formula which has undergone too great a destruction at the hands of modern philosophers to be resuscitated.

It is, in fact, resort to such old terminology as this which undermines confidence in Sorokin. And his own new terminology, of which a few specimens are given above, reminds the reader that the sublime is often in danger of becoming ridiculous. His methodology too simply reflects that of physical science which deals with far cruder stuff than societies and cultures. Did not an earlier simplistic attempt to adapt "science" to social problems lead on to the present experiment in Russia? And did not Spengler, with whom Sorokin admits kinship, prove an inspiration to Hitler, who claimed to be sublime, but first looked ridiculous and then became diabolic? Sorokin's demand for reforming our culture, our society, and

ourselves—for total reform—has a familiar ring.

And yet I doubt profoundly that every new gospel which is totalitarian is for that reason to be rejected. There are plenty of signs that mankind cannot be securely launched into the atomic age without undergoing a total, even a totalitarian, change. And any exploration of history with the aid which such a thinker as, say, Toynbee or Bergson can give must convince the explorer that man has only escaped earlier great perils by changing himself in a total way. The trouble is that, so far in our generation, we have heard only false gospels, while those in whom we may feel some confidence, the Toynbees and the Kroebers, think they are merely beginning to understand society. It is difficult, therefore, to regard Mr. Sorokin, who is so sure he is better than they, whose methods are as naively "scientific" as earlier methods, whose words are so often repugnant to common sense, as more than a very minor or perhaps even a dangerous prophet.

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### FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 257

*A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 257 will be found in the next issue.*

PA PW CSZ RTLC AZF GZTHL

GKN STDZW'C QPLBTHQZQ T

ETYKH KOPWPKW KH

TBXNPHZQ T WZF KWZ,

PWDZLCPUTCZ TWQ LZZ PA

GKN'HZ WKC UHKFPWU

LZWPRZ.

UZRZCC VNHUZLL

*Answer to Literary Crypt No. 256*

Not failure, but low aim, is crime.  
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

# Higher Education in Deutschland

THE ABUSE OF LEARNING: *The Failure of the German University.* By Frederic Lilge. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1948. 184 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by FELIX GILBERT

THE TITLE of this book suggests that the reader will be enlightened about charlatans, astrologers, and quacks, but indicates only very remotely and broadly the serious scholarly problem which the author tries to analyze. Not even the subtitle "The Failure of the German University" gives a precise definition of the contents of the book; its last two chapters only are concerned with the penetration of Nazism into the universities; the book is in the main a serious scholarly history of the development of German educational ideas during the nineteenth century.

Fifty years ago, three or four volumes would have been considered hardly sufficient for such an enterprise. To compress the story of this development into 180 pages is a difficult undertaking; to have done this, within such brief compass, clearly, comprehensively, and interestingly, deserves high praise.

Of course, it is possible to find fault with details and to dispute some of the author's evaluations. The reviewer regrets, for instance, that the author neglected to state that August Boeckh, Germany's greatest modern classical philologist, was not only the author of a work on "The Public Economy of the Athenians," but also of the brilliant "Encyclopedia," an attempt to summarize the achievements of the whole classical civilization; Mr. Lilge would then have avoided the erroneous judgment that Boeckh's "sole interest was in the empirical reconstruction of antiquity, not in its educational values." Or one could have wished that Mr. Lilge had abstained from the traditional praise of Ranke's historical objectivity at the expense of the "biased" political historians, Mommsen and Droysen, as the perspective of time has certainly modified this characterization; Ranke has emerged as more biased and the political historians as more objective than had previously been assumed. It seems necessary to direct attention to these distortions because there is danger that, because of its very excellence, the book might be taken for more than for what it is intended—for a general intellectual history of Germany instead of a survey of the development of educational ideas. Many thinkers, who are here judged on the basis of their contribu-

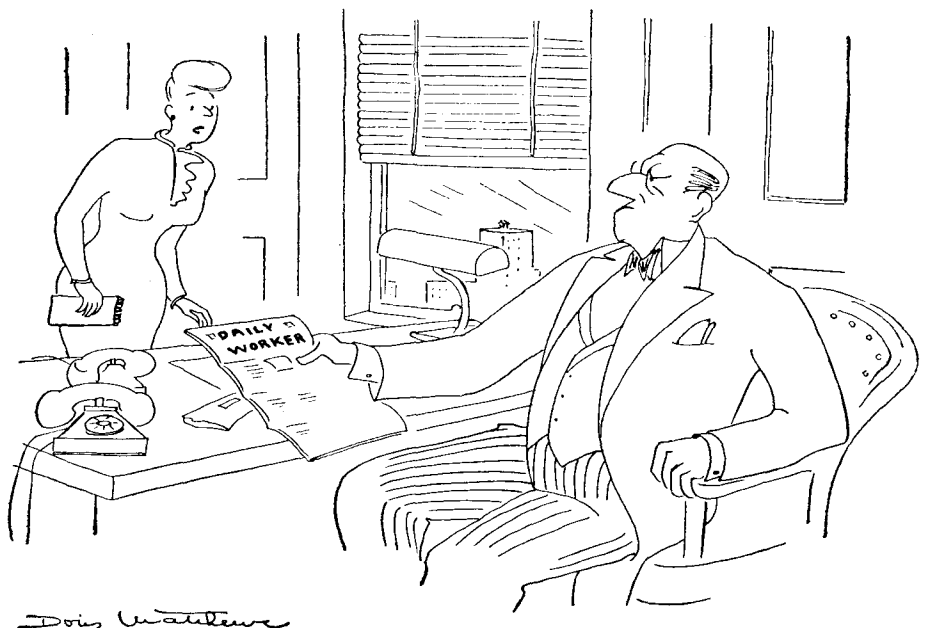
tion to educational life, would appear in a somewhat different light if their general contribution to intellectual life were to be gauged. But if one keeps in mind that the book is concerned only with one of the threads, out of which the intellectual fabric is woven—higher education—it is excellent.

The story clearly reveals some extremely important facts frequently overlooked in discussions of German university life: for instance, the role of the natural sciences. In a chapter, fittingly entitled "The Idolatry of Science," Mr. Lilge explains that the philosophy of German idealism, which dominated the regeneration of German universities at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was so entirely averse to the methods and interests of the natural sciences that they could gain a place for themselves only after a bitter fight against the dominating philosophical trends. This gap between traditional philosophy and the natural sciences was never bridged, *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* remained separate, the natural sciences evolved a crudely materialistic philosophy of their own, and with the industrialization of Germany and the triumphs of the technical age, this crude materialism became a strong influence in the German universities during the second part of the nineteenth century, at a time when the outsider believed the universities were still chiefly cultivating the traditions of humanism and idealism.

Another important factor, rightly stressed by Mr. Lilge, is the role which modern irrationalism played in the German universities after the begin-

ning of the twentieth century. It is an oversimplification to regard the shameful surrender of the German universities to the Nazis simply as proof of the weakness of an educational concept in which the chief emphasis is laid on scholarship and research. These values had been undermined long before the Nazis came to power; the Nazis only completed the triumph of anti-intellectualism, of intuitive and mythological concepts of scholarship.

Yet this self-surrender of the German intelligentsia cannot be explained simply in terms of a clash of ideas. The one fundamental criticism to be raised against Mr. Lilge's book is his lack of any indication that this clash was only one factor explaining the weak resistance of the universities against the Nazis. The outcome and the nature of this struggle of ideas can be fully understood only within the broader framework of an analysis of the social function of the universities. The German universities were more than institutions devoted to research and the education of scholars, they played a role in the political and social life of Germany, they were instruments of the ruling classes. The students came exclusively from the middle classes, primarily the upper middle classes, and the universities patterned the outlook of these classes according to the interest of the existing political system. The penetration of irrationalism into the universities is intimately connected with the progressive weakening of the position of the middle classes in the German social structure, when a purely rational defense of the predominance of these groups in political and social life had become more and more difficult. Mr.



Doris Wadsworth

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