

LUIGI STURZO

A brief glance at newspaper headlines in recent months would be all the sociological study that one would need to conclude that American culture is in an advanced state of decay. The secularists seem to have won. They control the courts and the universities and the public schools. The victories of pro-abortionists in state and federal legislatures have institutionalized violence and cruelty in American life. If one were looking for a single image of our cultural degradation, it would be hard to find a more appropriate icon than the description of partial birth abortion, or, more correctly, partial birth infanticide. This doleful state of our culture has even led Paul Weyrich, the inventor of the term "moral majority," to state that he no longer believes that there is a moral majority. He holds that the United States is very close to becoming a state dominated by an alien ideology, an ideology bitterly hostile to Western culture. Weyrich's response is that we should in some way secede and form a sort of quarantine to protect ourselves from this new decadent culture. But deep in our hearts, deep in our conscience, we know that we can't, and we won't, give up.

Our response and our goal has to be: How can the values and the principles which have formed our western tradition be insinuated bit by bit into the mix of our culture as a leavening, so that our modern culture can be given new life and be ennobled by the values of the Christian West? One thinker who might help to show us the way is Luigi Sturzo.¹

Who was Luigi Sturzo?

Luigi Sturzo was born in Caltagirone, Sicily, on November 26, 1871. He was ordained a priest in 1894. He obtained his degree in philosophy at the Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome in 1897, and he received his doctorate in sacred theology at the Gregorian University in Rome the following year. For the next seven years he taught philosophy and sociology in the diocesan seminary at Caltagirone.

In 1891 Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The encyclical and the explanatory talks which followed it gave Luigi Sturzo his first glimpse of the world outside the seminary. Shortly after that, there broke out in Sicily revolts of peasants and of sulfur miners. The results were violent, and in some places bloody. The government declared a state of siege in Sicily, and the repression was hard. When Don Sturzo returned to Caltagirone for his summer vacation, he began to involve himself with the social and economic problems of Sicily. He founded associations of workers, farmers, and students, and traveled frequently through the province of Catania, organizing priests and people. This was the beginning of his political vocation.² At the same time he began to devote himself to social activities for the benefit of workers and peasants, and he served for many years as the Mayor of Caltagirone and Provincial Councilor of Catania. He was also the general secretary of Catholic Action in Italy. In January 1919, he founded the *Partito Popolare*, the first of the Christian Democratic parties. In 1924, when Mussolini had become the dictator of Italy, Sturzo left Italy, preferring exile to life in a Fascist totalitarian state. He began his exile in France, then moved to England. In 1940 he

came to the United States. After a long period of hospitalization in Florida, he lived in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn until 1946, when he returned to Italy, an Italy governed by the Christian Democratic party, and led by his former lieutenant, Alcide de Gasperi. Don Sturzo lived in Rome, honored by an appointment as Senator for life, and he died on August 8, 1959.

The brief biographical sketch just given would lead the casual reader to think of Don Luigi Sturzo as primarily a political leader, and the history books may well record his work as the outstanding democratic leader after the First World War. Nevertheless, students of sociology, and especially Catholic sociologists, should always have a special place in their heart for this outstanding Catholic intellectual. One recent study of Sturzo's thought³ lists thirty-one scholarly volumes and at least thirty major articles in scholarly journals written by him. There are in addition a number of unpublished writings in the archives of the Istituto Luigi Sturzo. It would be impossible to describe all these works in this brief article. All that can be done here is to list and describe Don Sturzo's principal works dealing with the social sciences. Nicholas S. Timasheff⁴ held that the central ideas of Sturzo's new approach to sociology were formulated for the first time in his *Essai de Sociologie*.⁵ Part One deals with sociality, form, concretization and historicity. Part Two deals with the syntheses of sociality and the dualisms, especially of authority and liberty, morality and law.

In 1943, Sturzo published his second major work of sociology, *The True Life: Sociology of the Supernatural*.⁶ In this work the introduction is very important since it brings out the nature of sociology and of history, and explains the thesis that an integral sociology must deal with the supernatural life in each one of us and in social formations. The point made clearly is that Sturzo is studying the societies of this world as they exist in fact, with their observable natural and supernatural elements.

Sturzo's theory of integral or historicist sociology led him to study the presence of the supernatural in history. In particular he considered, from the sociological standpoint, *the relations between church and state in Christian society from the beginning up to the death of Pope Pius XI in 1939*. The work appears at first sight to be an historical study; however, on closer scrutiny, it is clear that Sturzo examines the political and the religious components of social life within the framework of his integral sociology. *The study of the relationship between church and state in Christian societies helped him to work out his theory of duality and diarchy*.

In 1950, Don Sturzo published a major work in Italian which has never been translated into English, *Del Metodo Sociologico*.⁷ In his work *Spiritual Problems of our Time*,⁸ only the first chapter, "The Present" belongs to the field of sociological inquiry. This chapter brings out Sturzo's idea of historicism as the best approach to sociology.

In these works Don Luigi Sturzo has developed a distinctive approach to sociology. It is refreshing to see this social science based on a strong historical conception of society, and with an openness to the presence of the supernatural in history. It will be helpful now to spell out some of his positions which seem to be prophetic for a later generation.

After briefly listing the principal writings of Luigi Sturzo, it is now time to indicate the ideas which are central to his thought and which can be helpful to Catholic thinkers today. First of all, Sturzo considers his work to be a form of sociology. By this he means the study of social life in all its complexity. He notes that there are *two methods which can be used in studying societies, the experimental method*, which is analytic and works through questionnaires and surveys. *The historical method*, on the other hand, attempts to bring to life a society by considering it in all its concreteness and with all its changes over a period of time. Sturzo's sociology is historicist.

For Sturzo, a society is not a self-subsistent entity. The basis of a society is the human individual. Man is at once individual and social. *Society is the sum total of individuals*. Society is nothing other than their communicated thought.⁹ Where Clifford Geertz sees society as a tissue of relations, Sturzo sees those relations as individual thought and activity with an associative value. Social ends are seen by Sturzo not as objective and self-subsistent but inherent in human nature, and realized only by individuals. Society is therefore the multiple, simultaneous, and continuative projection of individuals in their activity. Sociology may then be seen as social anthropology.¹⁰

Sturzo understood that grace is present in history. The supernatural life is not something accidental added to man's natural life; it is a real transformation of human existence and human activity. Grace is an inner principle which unifies the lives of individuals and societies, giving them a supernatural imprint. Because of this presence of grace, the study of a society without considering that presence is a methodological abstraction, a running away from reality.¹¹

Sturzo's most important sociological writing is *Inner Laws of Society*. Nicholas S. Timasheff, in his book *The Sociology of Luigi Sturzo*,¹² asks whether sociological laws are possible. Are there laws which are testable propositions about regularities in social phenomena? A determinist such as Karl Marx can easily say yes. For a personalist, there can be no sociological laws because man is free. Sturzo agrees that the freedom of the individual is a presupposition which is evident to philosophy.¹³ On the other hand, for Sturzo, there are indeed sociological laws. Particular laws are often mentioned in the *Inner Laws*, and they are listed in the index of *The True Life*. Timasheff points out that, in the treatise *Del Metodo*, Sturzo holds that the possibility of sociological laws is a requisite for the very existence of the science of sociology. "If human activity in society were not subject to laws, . . . one should . . . acknowledge the defeat of sociology as a science. . . ."¹⁴

Sociological laws are not like physical or mathematical laws; they are more like historical and moral laws.¹⁵ Sturzo says explicitly that deterministic laws are excluded. For example, there can never be a sociological law making war necessary.¹⁶ For many writers on society, the concept of progress guides their thought. Sturzo was among the first of the sociologists to recognize that societies do not only advance or go forward (progress), but they can be seen with the help of various criteria either to advance to greater rationalization or to fall back. Sturzo therefore chose the concept of process as more appropriate than progress in describing societies. If change in society is evaluated by the

values of our western tradition, one can see many areas where retrogression has taken place. Robert Pollock, recognized as a good interpreter of Sturzo's thought, held that the great problem of our day is this: "How can values which have formed our western tradition be brought in contact with what is best in modern culture so that the former would revive and regain strength and the latter be ennobled?"¹⁷ For this reason sociological thought must undergo a radical transformation. The sociology of Luigi Sturzo, based on history, and with a dynamic orientation, and a concern for the poor, can help in our movement towards greater rationality.¹⁸ If society is to be transformed, it will be only through the exercise of individual freedom. Free and individual initiative must work to change the social environment. Social structures or scaffolding are necessary for the social action of individual men. Integral sociology looks for the presence of the supernatural initiatives of human beings whereby the divine action enters into the life of society. This initiative involves not only the work, animated by actual grace, but also the shaping of goals under the influence of faith.¹⁹

In devising political and social structures, Sturzo made plain his opposition to Machiavelli. For the latter, morality and religion may be seen as good things in so far as they keep the people in check, but politics, for Machiavelli, are independent of morals and religion. For him, members of society have to be totally subjected to the ruler. Politics are not to be ethical or moral but exclusively concerned about power. The one criterion is utility. To-day, when Machiavelli's works are available in every book shop, many people are his disciples without admitting it. It is helpful to recall that Machiavelli tears away the hypocritical and transparent veils and reveals the triumph of naked power in political life. Sturzo rejected Machiavelli's advocacy of a politics without moral criteria. For Sturzo, the presence of grace in history should give life to politics and to society itself.

*To understand Sturzo it is important to realize how deeply he was committed to democracy. His understanding of democracy was not doctrinaire. He said: "Democracy in the concrete is itself experience, and its progress is still in course."*²⁰ In his book *Italy and the Coming World*, Don Sturzo spoke in favor of democracy as the general spirit of a social and political movement. When that work was published in 1945, Sturzo supported the formation in Italy of a party with a democratic spirit, uplifting the working classes economically and morally, educating them to the use of the franchise, and encouraging them to vote. Even though Don Luigi has a place in history as the godfather of the Christian Democratic party, he consistently called for political action by Catholics, not in the name of the Church but as citizens concerned with true freedom and democracy.²¹

It is to be hoped that this brief summary of the voluminous and closely written works of Don Luigi Sturzo will lead scholars to rediscover his works today, over forty years after his death. It now remains to ask whether any of his ideas can be helpful to us as we enter the new millennium.

The first point that can be helpful to us in Sturzo's work is his insistence on the importance of sociology in our attempts to insinuate the gospel message into society and to reform it. Some have attempted to do this, but their understanding of sociology tends

to be purely analytic and impoverished, due to a lack of the historical and supernatural dimensions. Society will not be successfully reconstructed on the basis of Gallup polls. Sturzo championed an integral and historical sociology which would do justice to all the dimensions of society in the concrete.

In particular, Sturzo emphasized the importance of seeing the presence of grace in history. He wrote:

True sociology is the science of society in its concrete existence and in its historical development. If the supernatural is an historical and social fact, it must fall within the field of sociological investigation.²²

When we study human life, we have to look at both its social character and its personal quality. From the purely natural point of view, personal life is a synthesis of the lower faculties with the higher faculties. "Yet there is another life which we call supernatural, which is, as it were, grafted on to the natural life, and has its own character, development and finality."²³

As it is one of the moral sciences, sociology must be aware of human freedom which cannot be eliminated or minimized. Since the supernatural life is so closely tied to the natural life, and since the practice of a truly lived supernatural life disciplines and elevates all the natural faculties, one reaches toward the ideal of a complete harmony between the lower and the higher faculties and between the natural and the supernatural life. It follows that the practice of Christian perfection, the love of God and the love of our neighbor, cannot be excluded from our understanding of human freedom in society. True holiness is not limited to the time spent in prayer, but it directs all the initiatives of human freedom. It follows that Sturzo's insight into the need for awareness of the presence of grace in history is an essential component of Catholic attempts to achieve social reform.

The entire political life of Luigi Sturzo was dedicated to democracy. As the young mayor of Caltagirone, he tried to bring about improved conditions for the poor through democratic reforms. When Pope Benedict XV relaxed the non-expedit, which limited Catholic political participation, Don Luigi helped to establish the *Partito Popolare*. His democratic hopes were quickly dashed when Mussolini took power, leading to Sturzo's long exile. Where citizens live in democracies, the Church finds its own special role in contributing to moral and civil education.²⁴

Society is never static. Like human life, it is always in process, and moved by internal dynamisms. Sturzo held that two principles regulate human activity, the inner principle of rationality and the external principle of the conditioning factors in a particular society. Sturzo was optimistic, and he looked forward to the ultimate victory of rationality, in history. But since the rational quest for truth and goodness does not overcome human freedom and its possible choice of pseudo rationality, the path to victory is not without setbacks. The quest for rationality demands the articulation of ends and goals. These

goals have to be developed by intellectual leaders, and they have to be communicated effectively to the members of the society.

From his study of history, Sturzo concluded that in societies there is a constant trend towards unification, but at every moment one is confronted by duality, the duality of the ideal and the practical, the duality of the spiritual and the materialistic, the duality of actions aimed at the goals and the resistance of social conditions. Sturzo held that these dualisms can be creative.

The social process never stops. Pluralism tends to coalesce around dual poles, and the dualism works to achieve unity. To make progress towards rationality, it is necessary to identify the poles of the dynamism and to attempt to achieve rationality by their interaction.

In the reform of society it is common to see the dual poles of the process identified as liberal or conservative. From Sturzo's viewpoint it seems clear that true social reconstruction can be achieved only through the competition and co-operation and, indeed, conflict of liberal and conservative groups.

In the United States, the social action of Catholics in the twentieth century has to a great extent been dominated and directed by Church-created entities. The state conferences of bishops and, especially, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops have articulated goals, but they have not been able to enlist the political support of the Catholic people. The proof of this is our failure to stop the plague of abortion. In the 1996 election, Bill Clinton, the abortion President, received a majority of the votes of Catholics. Compared with the effectiveness of the much smaller Jewish community, *Catholics in the United States are politically impotent*. It seems clear that we should study the public relations and communications methods of the Jews if we are to reconstruct society in a more rational way.

In the European context in which Sturzo's thought developed, the theme of democratic action seems to have been focused exclusively on political parties. The parliamentary systems and the use of proportional representation meant that political and economic view-points were best expressed by means of political parties, even with a minute share of the vote. In utilizing the insights of Sturzo in the United States, with its two party system, the importance of a variety of advocacy institutions seems to be more appropriate.

The key to the effectiveness of Jewish political and social action efforts lies in the development of organizations funded by their members and coordinated through associations of their leaders. These entities are not political parties, nor are they specifically religious entities; they are secular associations of some of the Jewish people. But their members are active participants in the political parties. There is no Jewish party, but no party would nominate any candidate who attacked the right of Israel to exist. While some of the organizations tend to be more liberal, and others to be more

conservative, they stand together to support and defend the values and interests of the American Jews.

It seems clear that if the American Catholic community, which forms about one fourth of the population, is to have any impact on the social and political life of the United States, we will have to develop new public relations techniques. This work cannot be funded by the conferences of bishops or the dioceses or the parishes. The organizations to be formed would have to be educational, non-profit groups, reflecting various viewpoints and philosophies. Nevertheless, their work would have to be coordinated through a conference of presidents.

These organizations would have to be democratic in spirit, governed by their own leaders, responsive to the persons of wealth who would serve on their boards of directors. Despite their differences in political viewpoints, however, all of these organizations would have to support the *basic values of our Catholic tradition*. Right now, the most important of these values is the surpassing dignity of every human person. Catholics young and old, Catholics rich and poor, Catholics liberal and conservative, we will not be able to succeed in advancing any other of our goals if we don't get together on abortion. If we win the big one, we can knock off the lesser targets one by one. If we lose the big one, Catholics will continue to be and to seem politically impotent.

Luigi Sturzo is one of the great thinkers in the history of the Church. He was concerned to reform society, not in an authoritarian way but through a genuine democratic spirit. He saw the presence of polarities in the Church and in society, and he was not desirous of eliminating them. He saw these polarities as creative in the growing rationalization of social living. At the same time he did his reforming work under the inspiration of *Catholic social principles*. These principles were seen not as an ideology but as a wisdom, based on the concrete historical knowledge of an integral sociology. Just as Luigi Sturzo began his reforming work under the influence of *Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum* in his native Italy in the period just before and just after the First World War, now we have to pray for the emergence of a thinker, authentically Catholic, inspired by the *Gospel of Life and The Splendor of Truth of Pope John Paul II*, and authentically American, inspired by the great documents of our tradition. We need an American Luigi Sturzo.

Notes

1. For Bibliography: Joseph A. Varacalli, "Don Luigi Sturzo" in *The Italian American Experience: an Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland, 1999.
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3. Alfred de Lascia, *Filosofia e Storia in Luigi Sturzo* (Rome: Edizioni Cinque Lune, 1981).
4. Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Sociology of Luigi Sturzo*, (Montreal: Palm Publishers; Baltimore and Dublin: Helicon Press, 1962).

5. *Essai de Sociologie* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1935); English trans., *Inner Laws of Society: A New Sociology* trans. Barbara Barclay Carter (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1944).
6. *Luigi Sturzo The True Life: Sociology of the Supernatural* trans., Barbara Barclay Carter (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press; Paterson, New Jersey: Saint Anthony Guild Press, 1942). The Italian original was published in 1943.
7. Luigi Sturzo, *Del Metodo Sociologico: risposta ai critici* (Bergamo: Edizioni Atlas, 1950). This book also includes a translation from English into Italian of two papers, one by Msgr. Paul Hanley Furfey and the other by Dr. Robert Pollock.
8. Luigi Sturzo, *Spiritual Problems of Our Times* (New York and Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., Inc., 1945).
9. Luigi Sturzo, *Inner Laws of Society: A New Sociology*, p. XIVf.
10. Luigi Sturzo, *Inner Laws of Society*, p. XIII.
11. Luigi Sturzo, *The True Life: Sociology of the Supernatural*, p. If.
12. Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Sociology of Luigi Sturzo*, p. 85.
13. Luigi Sturzo, *Inner Laws*, p. 162.
14. Sturzo, *Method*, p. 26, cited by Timasheff, p. 87.
15. Timasheff, p. 88.
16. Luigi Sturzo, *The International Community and the Right of War* (London, 1929), cited by Timasheff, p. 88.
17. Timasheff, p. 196.
18. Timasheff, p. 196.
19. Timasheff, p. 196.
20. Luigi Sturzo, *Church and State*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 1962) p. 383. (The work first appeared in French in 1938 and in English in 1939.)
21. Don Luigi Sturzo, *Italy and the Coming World* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1945.) p. 73.
22. Luigi Sturzo, *The True Life: Sociology of the Supernatural*, p. 4.
23. *The True Life*, p. 26.
24. *The True Life*, p. 264.