

TEMPLE

REVIEW

VOL. 47. NO. 1 ♦ A MAGAZINE FOR ALUMNI AND FRIENDS OF TEMPLE UNIVERSITY ♦ SPRING 1995

A black and white portrait of Robert Merton, an elderly man with a receding hairline and a slight smile. He is wearing a light-colored, textured jacket over a dark, button-down shirt. The background is a blurred bookshelf filled with books.

ROBERT MERTON

Unlocking
doors to the
sociology
of human
behavior



THE IMPROBABLE ADVENTURES OF AN AMERICAN SCHOLAR

by Ruth W. Schultz

When eight brilliant scientific minds are brought together and confined to a small space, what do they talk about? Do they succumb to idle chatter about the national baseball debacle, the vicissitudes of the weather or the pros and cons of boxer shorts vs. athletic briefs?

On just such an occasion, December 19 to be precise, sociologist Robert Merton was en route to the White House with seven other recipients of the National Medal of Science, the nation's highest scientific honor. His companions were physicists, chemists, biologists, and a mathematician. But since their laboratories as physical scientists are of a cloistered nature, and Merton's laboratory as a social scientist is the wider world, he was in the position to steer the conversation to his observation of their unconsciously exhibited, albeit sociologically predictable, behavior. But let him tell the story:

"I remarked to my fellow medalists, 'You remember that Newton thought of time as *quantitatively* and uniformly flowing. And he thought of space as absolute. Well, we sociologists think of time and space in terms of *qualitative* social time and social space. And those different kinds of social spaces lead people to engage in different behaviors. Notice, for example, how your behavior has been changing as we approach the sacred symbolic space of the White House, almost as though you were approaching a cathedral. Your voices have become more muted and your pace of walking has slowed.' I got no further before one of my companions interrupted: 'By God, you're right. That's just what we've been doing! We've been treating this as sacred ground.'"

Once inside, the group was ushered into the Oval Office, the "sacred space" of the President of the United States. Finding himself next to Mr. Clinton for the inevitable photo opportunity, Merton recalls remarking, "Mr. President, I had no idea you were so tall, I'm six feet and you must be at least an inch or so taller." To which the President replied, "Actually, when I first entered this office, I was six feet eight."

Merton has a history of interfacing with Presidents of varying heights on a variety of past issues. He was one of the "young liberals" invited to FDR's summer house at Campobello for discussions of projected political agendas, he took part in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program and carried on a correspondence with LBJ along with his Columbia colleagues in pressing

for the end of the war in Vietnam, and he boasts about achieving an "honorable place" on Richard Nixon's enemies list.

But on the auspicious day of the medal awards, he addressed a contemporary issue. Speaking on behalf of the medalists, he expressed to the President "our appreciation of the public recognition of the importance of science and technology to American society, culture and the economy — not least, by having included sociology in such recognition for the first time."

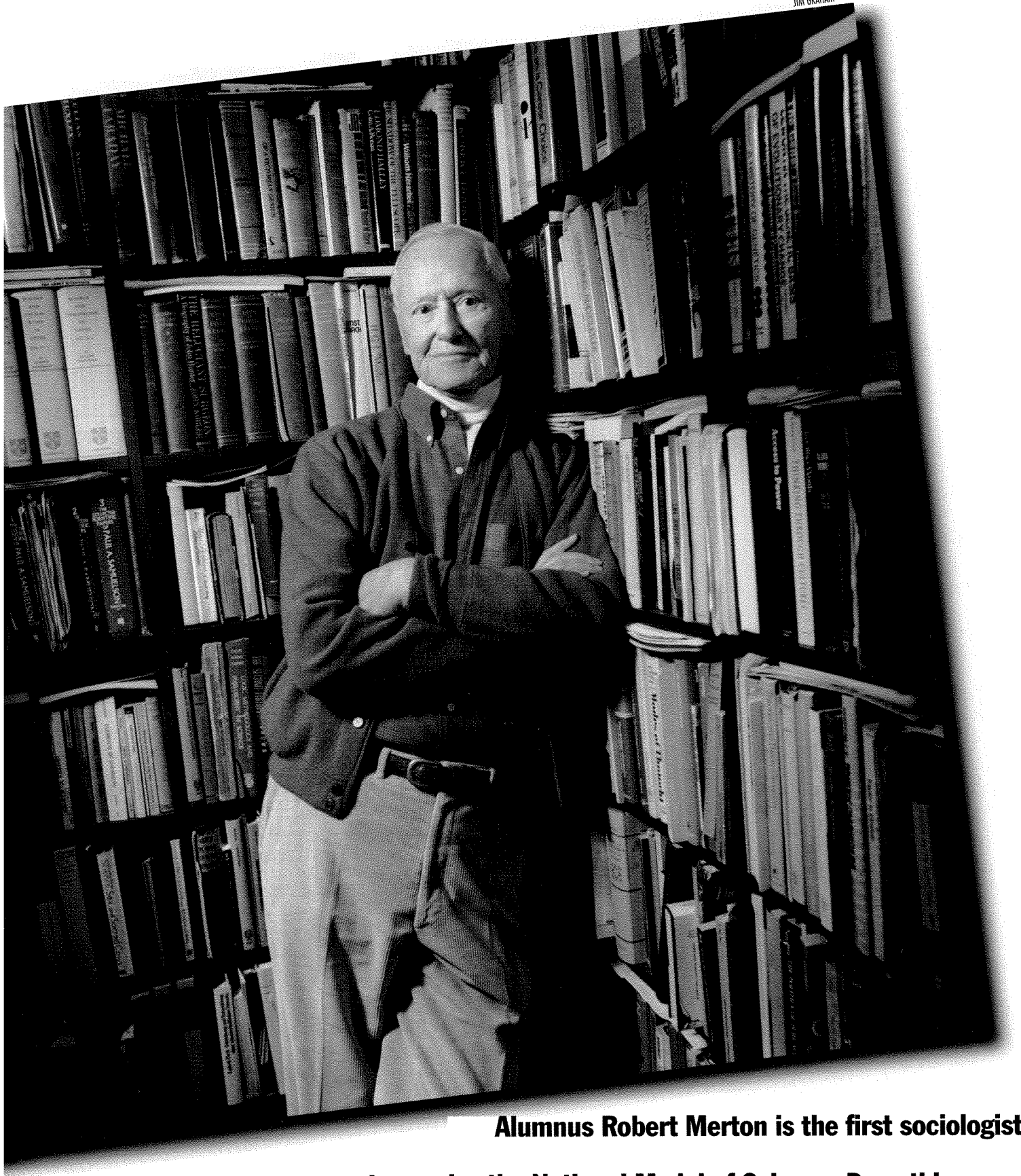
"*For the first time*" is a telling phrase. Being a first amounts to breaking hitherto impenetrable ground. In sociological terms, a *first* establishes a precedent for including the previously excluded; it leads to general recognition that "whatever is, is possible." JFK was the first Catholic President, Thurgood Marshall was the first African-American Supreme Court justice, Geraldine Ferraro was the first female vice-presidential candidate. Now that those doors have been opened, the rules have changed.

So Merton was pointing to a definitive social change when, for the first time in all these many years, sociology received full recognition by the White House by being placed on a par with the other advanced sciences. Why has it taken so long?

One of the many answers is that the discipline may well have been a victim of its own success. Social scientists have been discovering previously unknown aspects of society and coining terms that describe these observations for nearly a century — only to have these terms gobbled up by the insatiable appetite of the vernacular. So commonplace are these words by now that most of us are unaware that they ever had an author or that the author was a sociologist. The news on TV and in print could scarcely be delivered without using terms like *altruism* (Comte), *in-group/out-group* (Sumner), *stereotype* (Lippmann), *youth culture* (Parsons), *white-collar crime* (Sutherland), *significant other* (Sullivan and Mead), *minority group* (Young), *role model* (Merton), *self-fulfilling prophecy* (Merton), and *social dysfunction* (Merton).

Though his name is not as recognizable as the terms and concepts he has coined, Dr. Robert K. Merton, BA CAS '31, Hon. LLD '56, University Professor Emeritus at Columbia, and Temple alumnus, has been a towering presence among the world's





Alumnus Robert Merton is the first sociologist to receive the National Medal of Science. Does this mean that sociology is finally being recognized in the scientific community?

intelligentsia for 50 years. That is because he has not just been a player in the development of modern sociology, but a playwright. And what is particularly notable is that his work has been incorporated into the bodies of knowledge of other disciplines, particularly economics, criminology, history, philosophy, and political science. Indeed his masterpiece, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, has gone through 30 printings in a dozen languages.

Actually, Merton has always had a multi-disciplinary bent as well as an intellectual star quality that has attracted attention. Educated on scholarships at Temple and Harvard, he was plucked from the ranks at both schools to be his teachers' assistant. As a graduate student he was soon publishing papers of note, and as a novice scholar, he produced studies and paradigmatic

ROBERT MERTON ON "ETHNIC ENMITY AROUND THE WORLD" (1948)

"... under appropriate administrative conditions, the experience of interracial amity can supplant the fear of interracial conflict. These changes... do not occur automatically. The self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby fears are translated into reality, operates only in the absence of deliberate institutional controls. And it is only with the rejection of social fatalism implied in the notion of unchangeable human nature that the tragic circle of fear, social disaster, reinforced fear can be broken..."

"If we find ourselves doubting man's capacity to control man and his society, if we persist in our tendency to find in the patterns of the past the chart of the future, it is perhaps time to take up anew the wisdom of Tocqueville's 112-year-old apothegm: 'What we call necessary institutions are often no more than institutions to which we have grown accustomed.'"

"Nor can widespread, even typical, failures in planning human relations between ethnic groups be cited as evidence for pessimism. In the world laboratory of the sociologist, as in the more secluded laboratories of the physicist and chemist, it is the successful experiment which is decisive and not the thousand and one failures which preceded it." ♦

essays that continue to be among the most often-cited works in the field. He has been invited to address his peers at international symposia for decades, and has been inundated with honorary degrees, 25 at last count, from universities here and abroad.

Erudite, brainy, fastidious, he might well be insufferable if not for the fact that he is also charming and witty — a full-fledged sociological social animal. Who, we are told, entertains his guests with effervescent conversation on a variety of subjects while serving them the "best single malt in Scotland — not Glenfiddich, not Glenlivet, but the peerless Glendronach."

A regular concert-goer at the New York Philharmonic, he could be, until recently, coaxed into a few friendly sets of tennis on the courts at East Hampton where he keeps a summer/weekend home. And there on Long Island, in Manhattan, or elsewhere, he manages to remain Earthbound despite bearing the lofty sobriquet (which he unsuccessfully attempted to edit out of this article) of the "preeminent sociologist in the world."

That preeminent sociologist lives during most of the work week on New York's Upper West Side with his long-time collaborator, colleague, companion, and newly wedded second wife Harriet Zuckerman (Professor Emerita at Columbia and vice president of the Mellon Foundation). The couple occupies an expansive, high-ceilinged, pre-war apartment in a Columbia complex of mid-rises overlooking the Hudson. Despite the building's heady display of Italian marble and ornate ceiling moldings, it manages to be, à la academe, decidedly unpretentious. The elevators creak, the intercom apparatus is ancient, the lobby is doormanless for part of the day.

Dressed in casual Ivy League chic, he ushers us past a handsomely appointed living room and down the hall to his study. Awards, citations, and photographs of students, teachers and other heroes take up an entire wall and, as anticipated, manuscripts, journals, books, papers are everywhere — crammed into three walls of floor-to-ceiling bookcases, on tables, chairs, and, finally, piled on the floor. Twenty or so of these books he has written and co-authored. And six of the manuscripts are unpublished books — some that he's been reworking for 40 years. (A book about historical semantics and the sociology of science written in 1958 is only now on the way to the printer.)

Now in his 84th year, his gait and carriage are those of a much younger man. Long and lean, he has retained his patrician

looks and cultivated manner. A Boston Brahmin? A Newport silk-stocking? A prep-school aristocrat?

None of the above. Surprisingly, the neighborhood of his youth is not one generally credited with producing world-class scholars, but world-class cheesesteaks and pop singers; Merton hails from South Philadelphia.

"He was born at the bottom of the social structure," wrote alumnus Morton Hunt, *BA CAS '41* in a *New Yorker* profile in 1961. The son of Jewish immigrants from Russia, Merton did his growing up around 4th and Dickinson, playing in the street with the neighborhood boys. He recalls that his family (he had an older sister) was forced to move several times because of his father's financially precarious and oft-changing work situations that included dairy store operator, carpenter's assistant, and truck driver. Though not to the manner or to the manor born, he nevertheless pursued grander cultural opportunities, waiting in line for hours for the 25-cent seats in the clouds of the Academy of Music when Leopold Stokowski was leading the Philadelphia Orchestra, frequenting the Strawberry Mansion tennis courts, and braving the waters of the Schuylkill in a canoe. Despite the lack of ready money, Merton reports he never thought of his family as poor because of the variety of civic riches that were available.

During the annual Haskins Lecture about the life of a scholar which he delivered on the 75th anniversary of the American Council of Learned Societies as an "eminent humanist," he cited the cultural resources within walking distance of his home: Independence Hall, the Academy of Music, Leary's Book Store, the Graphic Sketch Club (where chamber music was performed), and, particularly, the nearby Carnegie Branch Library. He describes the 10,000-volume bibliotheca as his "private library" which he began to frequent at age five and where he reports having been indulged during the course of the next ten years by the all-female library staff, who cultivated his interest in literature, science, history, and, most of all, biographies and autobiographies.

South Philadelphia High was where he got a taste for Latin, French, physics and chemistry, but it was in the Carnegie Library that he became intimate with Baudelaire and Flaubert, Ibsen and Shaw by way of the writings of Philadelphia-born arts critic James Gibbons Huneker.

While cultivating an interest in European culture, he simultaneously found him-



Merton, pictured on the wooden steps of his home in South Philadelphia (c. 1920), was born at what has been described as “the bottom of the social structure.”

self dabbling in show biz. Maybe it was the tap water; like other famous South Philly residents, Robert Merton’s earliest public persona was as an entertainer. During his boyhood, his next-door neighbor, Charles “Hop” Hopkins, his “surrogate father” and, later, the husband of his sister, initiated him into the secrets of wizardry. And by the time he was 14, Merton was hiring himself out as a magician for children’s parties, a vocation which helped see him through Temple.

He was Meyer R. Schkolnick then when he learned that names in the performing arts were routinely Anglicized — a practice which led him to adopt the stage name Robert K. Merlin after the legendary Arthurian sorcerer. But when Hop observed that that surname was a bit hackneyed, Merlin was transmogrified into Merton.

By the time he arrived at Temple in 1927, his friends were calling him Bob Merton, and he reports he “rather liked the sound of it...it seemed more American back then in the ‘20s.” He changed his name legally at 19. His father, whom he recalls as a remote almost shadowy figure in his life, reacted with indifference. But he did have the approval of his mother, lovingly described as having a pivotal influence on him. A philosophical anarchist, she led, he recalls, an intense cultural life. Determined to get an education for herself at night school, she encouraged him to believe that a life of learning was a life worth pursuing.

Temple gets the credit for birthing the nascent sociologist. He was a philosophy major when, he says, he “ventured into a class in sociology given by a young instruc-



As an undergraduate at Temple, Merton posed with other members of the

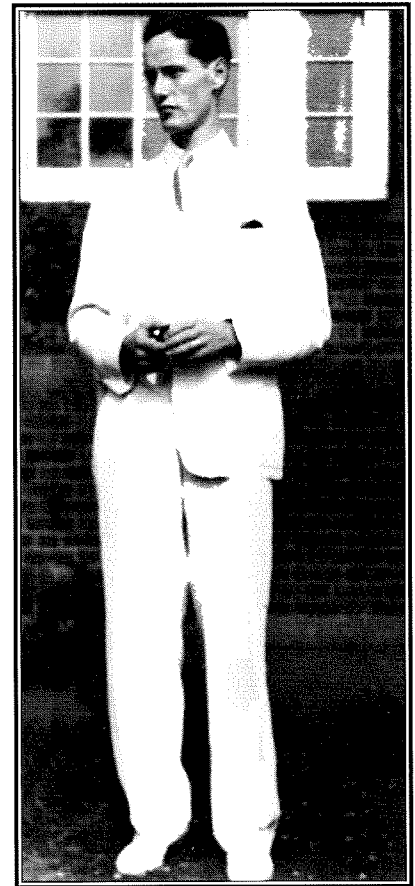
Sociology Club for the 1930 *Templar*. He was one of several students who selected speakers and made arrangements for their visit to the University.

tor, George E. Simpson, and there I found my subject.” (“Simpson, who was single and lived on campus, all but adopted Merton, making him...his principal drinking and talking companion,” wrote Morton Hunt, in the previously cited *New Yorker* profile.)

Obviously, that friendship has endured because in a recent correspondence with *Temple Review*, Simpson, now in his 90s, wrote from his home in Ohio that it is his good fortune to have had Merton not only as a student but “as a friend for more than two-thirds of a century.”

Recruited as Simpson’s research assistant (Simpson was working on his doctoral dissertation, *The Negro in the Philadelphia Press*), Merton’s maiden voyage onto the sea of sociological inquiry was the collection of data that would reveal changes in the public imagery of Philadelphia’s black community. Through Simpson, Merton came to know Ralph Bunche and members of Philadelphia’s elite black society of physicians, lawyers, artists, writers and musicians. And the chance meeting of these new friends would matter mightily in Merton’s later studies of racism.

Chance plays a major role in Merton’s life. In a 1948 paper on “Theory and Empirical Research,” he spends the better part of three pages discussing the workings of *serendipity* in scientific study — in fact, explaining how he serendipitously discovered the word in the 16-volume *Oxford Eng-*



Robert Merton made a name for himself as a graduate student at Harvard in 1934 when his work was published in an internationally reputed professional journal.

lish Dictionary that he favors, while looking up another. It was serendipity that brought him to Temple by way of a scholarship, serendipity that caused him to wander into George Simpson’s sociology class, and serendipity that transported him to Harvard.

At a meeting of the American Sociological Society (now Association), of which Merton would one day be elected president, Simpson introduced his protégé to Pitirim Alexandrovich Sorokin, a Russian emigré who had escaped execution when he was exiled by Lenin in a generous moment.

Sorokin had just founded the sociology department at Harvard, the last of the major universities to do so.

Merton was to follow Sorokin to Harvard for graduate work in 1931 where at first he was Sorokin's research assistant and then his teaching assistant. At Harvard, Merton also became a student of Talcott Parsons, an unheralded young instructor who would evolve into a master of general sociological theory. But then an interest in science and technology led Merton to knock on another scholar's door.

It was not a sociologist who was to be the catalyst for Merton's dissertation. Rather, it was the pioneering historian of science, George Sarton, who allowed Merton to focus on the sociological aspects of the growth of science in 17th-century England. Sarton didn't just mentor his new apprentice, "He proceeded methodically...to transform me from a graduate student into a novice scholar addressing an international community of scholars in print," Merton writes.

What Sarton did was to publish several articles of Merton's in a professional journal which he had founded. And in what Merton calls a "threshold gift," he also published Merton's enlarged dissertation, an event which was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the founding of a new sub-discipline — the sociology of science. Merton's *Science, Technology and Society in 17th Century England*, which had to do with how Puritanism unwittingly promoted a favorable attitude toward institutionalized science, has since been translated into a half-dozen languages, and continues to promote his theory that science "is a social institution with a distinctive, historically evolving ethos, normative structure, and reward system." This book and subsequent works in the field explain the mores and distinctive work practices of the scientific community.

It was in the throes of the Depression that Merton emerged as a freshly minted Ph.D. and he considered himself fortunate to get an instructor's post at Harvard. Three years later, Tulane offered him an associate professorship. And after two years in New Orleans (the second as professor and chair

of the sociology department), he accepted in 1941, in a classic case of deliberate downward mobility, an assistant professorship at Columbia University where he would remain for the balance of his extended teaching career.

At Columbia, Merton, a conceptualist, began a collaboration with his philosophical opposite, Paul Lazarsfeld, that would last 35 years. Lazarsfeld was an empirical researcher, who had been a mathematician and a psychologist in previous professional incarnations. Together, during WWII, they worked for the agency that evolved into the



President Clinton congratulates Robert Merton upon becoming the first sociologist to receive the National Medal of Science. Merton is Temple's second alumnus to win the medal, the nation's highest scientific honor. (See page 36.)

Office of War Information to determine if certain radio programs were morale boosters. And as a result, Merton codified a technique designed to elicit responses to educational films and radio programs. He called it a "focussed group interview."

Merton is less than delighted that those procedures have become, outside academia, a widely used tool in advertising and political campaigns known as focus groups which he claims "at best can only yield guesses about the current state of the public mind until they are tested by detailed social surveys."

Detailed social surveys along with direct observation and historical evidence are the basis for Merton's theories that have shed precious light on a broad range of subjects. One of his early theories had to do with the social dynamics of the Depression. He observed that when rumors of insolvency produced a run on banks, even sol-

vent banks often became insolvent. In 1948, he wrote that "an initially widely accepted prediction is fulfilled...not because at the outset it was true, but because enough people in the social system...took it to be true, and, by acting accordingly, produced the outcome that would otherwise not have occurred." This phenomenon he described as a "self-fulfilling prophecy," a coinage that has become so indispensable that it appears to be an element of every-day wisdom.

Merton warned that a self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP) can be venomous because it "perpetuates a reign of error since the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof of having been right from the start."

The concept of self-fulfilling prophecy has widespread application, a case in point being how it perpetuates racial prejudice and conflict. If, according to Merton's analysis, a false premise is made — for instance, if an ethnic group is labeled as intrinsically inferior, dangerous, or otherwise undesirable — it evokes reactive behavior; qualified members of the group are passed over for employment. And deprived of work, enough group members resort to deviant activity to make the original false belief come true.

In addition to being an original thinker, Merton has been thoroughly committed to teaching throughout his career. And after spending 45 years in the classroom, he has, by now, directly influenced hundreds in the academic community and, indirectly, many more through his writings.

Dr. David Elesh, a sociology professor at Temple, was one of his students at Columbia. Elesh recalls, "Merton's lectures were meticulously crafted works of art. His classes were generally packed with 60 to 80 graduate students plus auditors, some of whom returned over and over again because the lectures were never the same. In fact, it appeared that he was thinking aloud and developing his ideas as he spoke. In his lectures, he would lead his students down the proverbial garden path, constantly baiting and challenging them to demonstrate that a theory didn't necessarily hold. Theories, we discovered, are useful only in limited terms. He taught a

generation of sociologists the sociology of paradox and irony.”

Temple criminal justice professor Nikos Passas is one of those Merton students who never sat in on a class at Columbia but was schooled in his writings. Passas interviewed him in London, met him at several symposia, and, like everyone with whom Merton develops a relationship, has a file of Merton correspondence that appears to expand exponentially.

Passas cites, in his research, the importance of Merton's studies on deviant behavior worldwide, particularly his “Social Structure and Anomie” (1938).

Passas points out that Merton was just 28 years old when he had the chutzpah to challenge the widely accepted belief that deviant behavior is largely caused by biologically rooted drives or abnormalities. “Much deviant behavior,” Merton said, “is a *normal*, that is to say, expectable response by those whose socially induced aspirations are systematically frustrated by society. It is when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain *common* success-goals for the population at large while the social structure rigorously restricts or completely closes access to approved modes of reaching these goals for a *considerable part of the same population*, that deviant behavior occurs on a large scale.”

“It follows,” says Passas, “that in American society, we have a very high crime rate because our culture is based on individualism, craven materialism, (sometimes ruthless) competition, and the exaltation of money and consumerism. At the same time there is less emphasis on the widely accepted rules we must follow to achieve these goals legitimately.”

Merton, says Passas, was talking not only about what motivates armed robbers, but also about those occasional scientists who falsify their research to publish articles, qualify for grants, and gain recognition.

“Merton's theory of anomie,” Passas says, “traces the weakening power of social norms which, in turn, encourages deviant behavior. And once deviant acts are successful (i.e., not detected or seriously penalized) and observed by others, deviant patterns become more pervasive.”

Here again, a theory that Merton proposed 50 years ago addresses contemporary problems of widespread drug use, and both white-collar and street crime. Temple sociology prof Kevin Delaney says that Merton's anomie is an example of “an idea so rich that decades later it is still spurring scholars to continue to test and refine his theories.”

Legions of Merton's readers wax rhapsodic not only about what Merton says but how he says it, as they are privy to his love affair with the English language (how else could one explain the use of words like “hugger-mugger”). But the layreader need be warned. Merton digests multi-volumed dictionaries like other people read novels. In order to read his books, therefore, one must be equipped with at least an unabridged dictionary. Accumulating uninterrupted blocks of time for rereading and thought-mulling is a necessity. And, because he makes so many references to literary figures and their works, along with historians, philosophers, economists and scientists of every stripe, one must also keep at the ready an over-populated biographical dictionary. The truth is that Robert Merton speaks to an audience of his peers. And among that audience he has his detractors as well as his fans.

Detractors question whether his work is too slick and express dismay about his seeming indifference to women's issues. His fans call him accessible, brilliant, “a Nobel-class thinker.”

Retiring from the classroom in 1979 did not mean that he curtailed his writing or what Simpson calls his “indefatigable pursuit of knowledge.” Now the Foundation Fellow at the Russell Sage Foundation, a New York-based social research institute committed to the improvement of social conditions, he says his quasi-retirement means he is free from the “tyranny of schedules” set by others. Free of publishing deadlines, editing obligations, book-review commitments, he has more time to be with his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Son Robert C. Merton is a mathematical economist at Harvard, daughter Stephanie Tombrello runs a non-profit organization which she founded to promote automobile safety devices for children, and a second daughter, Vanessa Merton, is associate dean at Pace University Law School and limits her practice to *pro bono* law. “Idealists,” he comments.

Is he an idealist?

Not necessarily. Even though he acts as citizen as well as scientist, and his work has influenced city planning commissions, legislation, public housing, and parole boards, he does not attempt to address these ends directly. He sees himself, instead, as a cultivator and synthesizer of the knowledge which can empower those who put public policy in place.

His “pure” research goes on. The continuing relevancy of his work is not only that he analyzes social problems, but that he

explains *why* those problems exist and thereby stimulates the public debate that helps to break down fallacious beliefs and generalizations.

Despite the vast range in which he orbits, Robert Merton can be whittled down to a basic ethos — that the “enlargement of understanding has significance beyond utility.” He asks rhetorically, even crankily, “In the narrow sense of having a practical function, is art useful? Is music useful? Is literature useful? And if not, should we do away with them? What a narrow, subversive notion of what life is about.

“No, *no*. For me the meaning of life is the pursuit of fundamental knowledge — wherever it leads.” ♦

A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE IN ACTION

Robert Merton once observed that there is a difference between graduates and alumni. “Alumni,” he said, “are graduates who remember how much they owe to the university from which they were graduated. And they testify to their remembrance of past benefits by their present actions.”

Merton has lived up to his definition of an alumnus by continuing to identify himself with Temple and by acting to advance the University's development.

In 1956, he returned to Temple to receive an honorary doctor of laws degree. In 1962, he spoke at the forum of the Liberal Arts Alumni Association on “Multiple Discoveries in Science.” From 1964 to '68, he served as a member of the Board of Trustees. In 1981, he spent two days on campus talking privately with faculty and graduate students and participating in a Temple forum on the complex subject of progress in science. And, in that same year, he was named the first Alumni Fellow by the GAA. He has consistently supported the University financially, and in 1989, in recognition of his accomplishments, immediate GAA past president Leonard Mellman endowed the annual Robert Merton Prize for Temple's most accomplished graduate majoring in sociology.

The legacy lives on. ♦