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Lawrence T. Nichols¹

**The Sorokin-Merton Relationship:
Intergenerational Solidarity, Rivalry
and Affectionate Ambivalence**

The paper examines the relationship between Pitirim A. Sorokin and Robert K. Merton over several decades from the perspective of intergenerational interaction, stratification and mobility in the sciences. It assumes that successive generations are both natural allies and natural rivals, and that these macro-level dynamics also affect the micro-level personal relationships of teachers and their students. Drawing upon archival materials at both Columbia University and Harvard, I present a narrative account that locates the interactions between Sorokin and Merton in several “phases” based on mutual shifts in status. I also consider how this relationship was further complicated by the connection of each member with Talcott Parsons, who can be seen as a representative of an intermediate generation or perhaps half-generation. Parsons’s involvement led to the formation of situational dyads, or “coalitions in triads” that had consequences for individual careers and also for the condition of the overall triad. The relationships are thus both unique in their interpersonal particulars and also typical of socially and culturally structured patterns of inter-generational bonding and inter-generational displacement and succession. Even the emotional components, such as the exhilaration of generational advancement and the anxious distress

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of generational decline, are in a sense pre-ordained. Happily, the story concludes with a restored and strengthened inter-generational bonding that reflects well on Sorokin, Merton and Parsons.

Keywords: Pitirim A. Sorokin, Robert K. Merton, Talcott Parsons, Sociology of Science, Intergenerational Solidarity, Intergenerational Rivalry, Harvard University

Лоуренс Т. Николс. Отношения между Сорокиным и Мертоном: Межпоколенческая солидарность, соперничество и дружеская двойственность.

Эта статья посвящена исследованию длившихся несколько десятков лет отношений между Питиримом Сорокиным и Робертом Мертоном с точки зрения межпоколенческой интеграции, стратификации и мобильности в ученой среде. Предполагается, что следующие друг за другом поколения являются естественным образом как союзниками, так и соперниками и что динамика макроуровня также воздействует на отношения между преподавателями и студентами на микроуровне. На основе архивных материалов Гарвардского и Колумбийского университетов предлагается нарративное объяснение отношений между Сорокиным и Мертоном в разные «фазы» их служебной деятельности в связи с переменами в их статусе. Также анализируется, как эта дружба осложнялась взаимоотношениями каждого из них с Толкоттом Парсонсом, которого можно рассматривать как представителя промежуточного поколения, или полупоколения. Участие Парсонса вело к формированию ситуативной диады, или «коалиций в триадах», что оказывало влияние на индивидуальные карьеры и состояние целостных триад. Таким образом, сложившиеся взаимоотношения оказались уникальными в плане межиндивидуальных нюансов и типичными в плане социально и культурно обусловленной динамики межпоколенческой дружбы, а также межпоколенческого вытеснения и наследования. Даже эмоциональные компоненты, например чувство восторга от поколенческого прогресса и тяжелое переживание поколенческого упадка, являются в некотором смысле предопределенными. К счастью, история закончилась восстановлением и укреплением межпоколенческих связей и с позитивной стороны характеризует Сорокина, Мертона и Парсонса.

Ключевые слова: Питирим Сорокин, Роберт Мертон, Толкотт Парсонс, межпоколенческая солидарность, межпоколенческое соперничество, Гарвардский университет

Introduction

Science, as an ongoing creative project, requires a great deal of solidarity across generations of investigators and educators. I examined this fundamental issue some years ago (Nichols 1996) through a case study of the relationship between Edward A. Ross and Pitirim A. Sorokin, during the time between Sorokin's later years in Russia and his first decade in the United States. I found that Ross, the representative of an older generation, did a great deal to help his younger colleague Sorokin make a successful transition to American academic life, and that together they worked to build a science of sociology that would command respect from peer disciplines¹. This paper offers a similar analysis that focuses on the relationship between Sorokin and Robert K. Merton (1910—2003), one of his earliest graduate students at Harvard, who became one of the most

¹ Edward Alsworth Ross (1866—1951) did graduate work in economics at Johns Hopkins University and then transitioned into sociology, largely on the basis of a model he developed of “social control.” Much of his work was social psychological, and Sorokin dubbed him “the American Gabriel Tarde” because of the emphasis in both on processes of imitation. Ross liked to travel internationally and to write books for the general public based on his observations abroad, as he did on China, on South America and on Russia during the revolutionary period. Ross was often controversial. He was fired at Stanford University largely because of his critical views on the use of immigrant labor, a case that became important in the development of academic tenure. He was an outspoken reformer, often described as a Progressive, an early critic of white-collar crime, and he dined at the White House at the invitation of President Theodore Roosevelt. But he was also labeled a reactionary nativist, on the basis of his later on immigration, and a eugenicist. Ross served as president of the American Sociological Society in 1914 and 1915, and was also, interestingly, the son-in-law of Lester Frank Ward, the first president of the ASS. Tall in stature, Ross was a “large figure” in many senses, and comparable to Sorokin who had risen high in the world of Russian politics as well as the academy. Figures like Ross, Sorokin and Theodore Roosevelt were more typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they seem to have vanished from the American scene.

prominent sociologists in the U.S. in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

This analysis, however, goes beyond the conceptualization of the earlier article by considering also the process of competition and rivalry across scientific generations. For the “ethos of science” (a concept popularized by Merton) actually implies a mixed or ambivalent relationship between earlier and later groups of scientists (Merton 1942; 1973). On the one hand, younger members of the scientific community must learn from their elders, often in apprentice-like relationships that involve collaborative research, writing, publication and the search for external research grants. These relationships seem to be generally characterized by high solidarity and an acceptance by newcomers of their subordination to their predecessors who are the current “owners” and “managers” of the field or, one might say, its ‘adult members.’ But incoming generations (that is, the “heirs apparent” or “management trainees”) are always vulnerable, and subject to exploitation in the form of long hours of work at low rates of pay, sometimes exacerbated by a lack of appropriate recognition for their contributions that Merton (1968, 1988) memorably designated as the “Matthew Effect.”

On the other hand, the older, dominant generation is likewise vulnerable, because the scientific “ethos” implies that newer members transcend their predecessors, both in the nature of their investigations and also in their professional status. With the passing of time, especially as older generations approach retirement age (i.e., as “adults” become “senior citizens”), younger generations must step forward to assume leadership roles and become the dominant “adults” as well as “the new owners and managers” of the scientific enterprise. We can thus think in terms of at least three linked generations that include: (1) those in preparation; (2) those currently dominant; and (3) those formerly dominant whose influence is declining. The end result is a continual process of “flipping” or “inversion,” a “superordination-subordination dialectic,” in which “the last become first, and the first become last” in a professional, if not a Biblical sense. Economist Joseph Schumpeter’s notion (1942) of “creative destruction” might be applied here. Also the phrase “standing on the shoulders of giants” that Merton (1965) especially liked, which portrays the younger as rising to previously unattained heights by placing the older, literally, under

their feet. From the perspective of German sociologist Max Weber (1946), “science as a vocation” requires current generations of scientists to support younger colleagues, even “at their own expense” one might say, as a prerequisite of progress. But flesh and blood human beings are not always stoic or self-effacing, as the Sorokin-Merton case will demonstrate.

Merton himself commented on these dynamics, referring to them as “the ambivalence of scientists”:

Young scientists can have no happier condition than being apprenticed to a master of the scientific art. But they must become their own [persons], questing for autonomy and not content to remain in the shadow of great [scientists] (Merton 1976: 35).

This observation, made from the perspective of junior, less powerful partners in intergenerational relationships, is helpful in the understanding the case to be discussed, though it needs to be supplemented, as indicated above, by a consideration of the ambivalence of seniors, both those who currently hold power and those whose power is slipping away.

What follows is based mainly on correspondence between Sorokin and Merton that is preserved in the Robert K. Merton Papers in Butler Library, at Columbia University, though I also draw upon a small number of letters in the Talcott Parsons Papers as well as certain official records at Harvard. These materials allow us to create a narrative portrait of a relationship that extended over four decades and also to distinguish several distinct phases of interaction. What emerges is a story of mutual admiration and mutual aid combined with mutual critique and the pursuit of contrasting paths in sociology. Although there was always ambivalence between Sorokin and Merton, the letters reveal periods of relative harmony and easy cooperation, along with times of unease and distrust, including moments of resentment and anger. Importantly, the term “ambivalent” applies in a double sense, first to the personal bonds of a dyadic relationship, and second to those of a collective relationship between generations in science.

The analysis will also incorporate a limited discussion of the relationships that both Sorokin and Merton had with Talcott Parsons, who can be considered a representative of an intermediary generation, or perhaps a half-generation between those in training like Merton and those well-established like Sorokin. Parsons (1902-1979) joined Harvard’s so-

ciology department the year it opened but only, Sorokin (1963) says, because he, as department chair, overcame the resistance of university administrators to this transfer of a junior member of Economics. In this way, Sorokin helped create the opportunity for Parsons to rise to the top of the sociological profession and thereby become a rival to himself. At the same time, Sorokin's advocacy unintentionally prepared the way for Parsons to become a teacher and mentor to Merton, which would pull Merton away from Sorokin. There was thus a Harvard-based triad that contained three possible two-against-one alliances (i.e., dyads within a triad), as discussed by sociologist Georg Simmel (Wolff 1950; Caplow 1968).

Prelude: An Awestruck Moment

The Sorokin-Merton correspondence reveals that their initial encounter took place in December 1929, when Merton attended a research paper session at the annual conference of the American Sociological Society, in Washington, D.C. Then a third year undergraduate and sociology major at Temple College in Philadelphia, Merton had been brought to the conference by his mentor, professor George Simpson, for whom he served as a research assistant¹. Archival materials do not reveal what Merton thought as he listened to a presentation by Professor Hornell Hart

¹ In his Charles Homer Hoskins lecture, "A Life of Learning," Merton (1994: 10) reports that he helped gather material for Simpson's Ph.D. dissertation by "classifying, counting, measuring, and statistically summarizing all the references to Negroes over a span of decades in Philadelphia newspapers." The goal of the project was to gauge changes in the public imagery of Negroes — a term, Merton reminds his audiences, that was considered in the late 1920s to be more respectful than "blacks," even though the reverse is now the case. By working with Simpson, Merton became acquainted with a number of prominent African-Americans, including Ralph Bunche and Franklin Frazier, as well as Alain Locke, the first black Rhodes scholar who had trained at Harvard. In addition, he met African-Americans in the Philadelphia area who were "physicians, lawyers, writers, artists and musicians." All of this, as well as a course on race relations that he took at Temple, prepared him to teach Sociology 17, Race Relations and Cultural Contact, at Harvard in the late 1930s.

on “Some Measurements of Social Progress”¹, but they report what immediately followed. Professor Pitirim Sorokin, then still on the faculty of the University of Minnesota, rose during the discussion segment and delivered an incisive and apparently devastating critique of Hart that Merton never forgot (see Hart 1931)².

Indeed, as Merton (1957a) later revealed, he decided at that electric moment that he wanted to study under Sorokin. This interior event, imperceptible to others, might be described as “serendipitous,” an idea that fascinated Merton and about which he later published (Merton and Barber 2006). But whether serendipity or divine providence or random chance brought about the initial contact, the timing was remarkably good, on both sides. For Sorokin had quite recently accepted the offer of a full professorship at Harvard University, with the understanding that he would build a program of sociology there (Johnston 1995). In order to accomplish this, Sorokin would need bright, young and eager students like Merton, whom he recruited on the spot. Reflecting on this encounter sixty-five years later, Merton (1994: 11) commented:

I would surely not have dared to apply for graduate study at Harvard had Sorokin not encouraged me to do so. After all, my college advisers had warned me that Temple was still not fully accredited. To which I replied, rather ineptly, that it was the scholar Sorokin, not the institution Harvard, that mattered most to me.

¹ Temple College (now Temple University) traces its origins to 1884 when a Protestant minister, Russell Conwell, began offering classes in the basement of his Baptist Temple, at night to local working-class students in North Philadelphia. It was not, generally speaking, a gateway to top tier graduate schools such as Harvard’s, and Merton’s sense of having come from a relatively low level undergraduate institution may help explain his lifelong gratitude to Sorokin for “raising him up.” Sorokin himself had attended night school in order to compensate for the limitations of his early schooling, and he might have felt a bond with Merton in this regard.

² Sorokin’s lack of faith in “progress” set him at odds with many U.S. sociologists and other liberal academics, who often categorized him as a “white Russian” based on his well-known animosity toward the Bolsheviks. These clashing views shaped some critical reviews of Sorokin’s major work, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, as well as his published responses to reviewers.

Phase One: International Master and American Apprentice

Merton applied to Harvard the following academic year, 1930—1931, while Sorokin was in Cambridge but teaching in the Department of Economics, which had done much to nurture sociology for several decades (Nichols 1992). Merton was accepted into Harvard's graduate school for the fall 1931 term, the very semester when the new Department of Sociology began operations¹. But all did not go smoothly. Merton was from a relatively poor economic background, the Great Depression had severely reduced the U.S. economy, and Harvard could only provide very limited scholarship assistance, in fact only four hundred dollars. In order to supplement this, the university included in its acceptance letter an application for work as a waiter in one of the Harvard dining halls or in a cooperating restaurant in Harvard Square.

By the following spring the economic situation was still quite serious, and this moved Sorokin to send a letter on Merton's behalf to his friend Edward Ross at the University of Wisconsin. Writing on February 18th, Sorokin (1932) gave Ross the following report:

Mr. Merton is now pursuing graduate study in the department of sociology, largely under my personal direction. His mid-year grades were all A's, and he is probably the most brilliant of our graduate students this year. I should most certainly like to keep him here, but I am not sure that we can offer him a fellowship large enough to make it possible for him to stay another year.

¹ Merton was one of 428 students who entered the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 1931, when the school had a total enrollment of 1,105. Two Ph.D.'s in sociology were granted during the 1931—1932 academic year. One went to Norman E. Himes, who did a thesis on contraceptive practices and who obtained a position in sociology at Colgate University. The other was given to Nathan E. Whetten who did a dissertation on trade centers in Canadian provinces. Interestingly, Vervon O. Watts received a doctoral degree in economics with sociology as a special field and a thesis on the technological concept of production. John P. Wrenette also earned a Ph.D. in economics and subsequently became an assistant professor of sociology at Storrs Agricultural State Experiment Station in Connecticut. The cases of Watts and Wrenette show the close connection at Harvard between economics and sociology that persisted into the early 1930s. See Official Register of Harvard University 1933.

Fortunately, Harvard managed to provide one thousand dollars, and Merton remained. The incident illustrates how members of established generations often act as protectors or guardians of those in training, even on occasion arranging for a prize pupil to develop in a competing program.

Meanwhile, Merton's apprenticeship proceeded. As he took doctoral coursework he also became a researcher on what would be Sorokin's major work, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. His particular assignment was to gather empirical data on fluctuations of scientific discoveries in Europe over a period of many centuries. This experience would again be highly serendipitous for Merton, as it would provide a basis for his doctoral dissertation and the publications that would flow from it, including several journal articles and a lengthy monograph (Merton 1938a) in George Sarton's influential series, *OSIRIS*. Sorokin's *Dynamics* project, supported by Rockefeller Foundation monies to hire researchers¹, thus enabled Merton's emergence as a leading figure in the development of the sociology of science in the United States².

Sorokin also indirectly helped Merton to get published by asking him to write, in his place, a paper on recent French sociology to be presented at a professional conference. Though this was more command than request, Merton made the most of the situation, recalling:

This turned out to be the first of several such unpredictable and fruitful occasions provided by the expanding opportunity structure at Harvard. This one was doubly consequential, for it catapulted me at once ... into the role of published scholar and led to my being invited to do the first essay-review of Durkheim's newly translated *Division of Labor in Society*. ... these

¹ Some faculty at Harvard referred to the researchers on Dynamics as "a White Russian WPA," which was an uncharitable comparison with the Works Progress Administration of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal," a program that provided jobs for the unemployed. Sorokin himself was often labeled a "White Russian" in academic circles, which is arguably unfair since, despite his anti-Bolshevism he hardly desired to revive tsarism. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, many academics and liberals were sympathetic to the "workers' state" of the Soviet Union.

² Proposals were submitted to the Rockefeller Foundation, and monies were distributed to faculty at Harvard, via the Committee for Research in the Social Sciences of which Sorokin was a voting member.

two papers „, laid the groundwork for ... my own mode of structural and functional analysis (Merton 1994: 11—12).

It's also possible that Merton benefitted by observing Sorokin in the classroom, though there does not seem to be any direct evidence on this point. Former students and other observers have described Sorokin as “an incomparable showman” with “astonishing physical vitality” (Coser 1977), who would fill multiple blackboards with detailed erudite notes amid a cloud of chalk dust (Merton and Riley 1980). He was passionate and provocative, sometimes beginning class with a remark such as, “I have been reading my friend Lundberg. He is not born for this work.” Sorokin would also play music to demonstrate fluctuations of taste and style. Students reported seeing tears in his eyes while listening to works that especially moved him, such as Beethoven's “Mass in B Minor.” Some also recalled Sorokin striding rapidly to a waste basket, pulling out an empty soda bottle and then challenging them to show any connection between that object and other objects in the room, to explain whether the relationship was one of a “system” or a “congeries.”

Archival records show that Merton assisted Sorokin from the fall of 1934 through the fall of 1937, and that he worked in three undergraduate courses: Sociology A, Principles of Sociology (7 semesters); Sociology 1, Contemporary Sociological Theories (1 semester); and Sociology 5a, Problems of Sociological Method (1 semester). Enrollments were relatively large, especially in the foundational Sociology A, which attracted 182 students during the 1935—1936 academic year, as well as 118 in fall 1937. Most were seniors, juniors or sophomores, though Problems of Sociological Method had ten graduate students among its nineteen enrollees. Merton's particular job as TA was to run discussion sessions, usually a couple of days after one of Sorokin's lectures, to clarify and reinforce the week's material. He also performed menial duties such as bringing books to Sorokin from Widener Library and returning volumes that Sorokin had finished reading.

During the 1937—1938 academic year Merton began teaching independently, and he handled courses for four consecutive semesters. These included Sociology 4, Social Organization and Structure, which he taught twice, to a total of ninety students, including twenty-four graduate stu-

dents¹. In the fall of 1938 Merton also taught Sociology 17, Race Relations and Cultural Contact to seventeen students, including two graduate students. Interestingly, his courses drew higher enrollments than did those of Parsons on institutions and on sociological theory. Throughout this period Merton also carried out tutorial duties, both for men at Harvard and for women at nearby Radcliffe College².

There are many indications that Merton excelled in the classroom. For instance, at the time he left Harvard for Tulane University, Talcott Parsons wrote a friend that Merton was “far and away our most effective teacher.” Later, at Columbia University, some of Merton’s courses gained local renown, attracting not only a broad range of students but also many others from the metropolitan area who “sat in” unofficially (Marsh 2010). One listener, Professor David Elesh, recalls Merton’s lectures as “meticulously crafted works of art” (Schultz 1995: 74), and Merton himself affirmed this in an interview about his teaching:

¹ Examination papers in the Harvard University Archives show that Sociology 4 was the setting in which Merton first presented his ideas of “manifest and latent functions” as an “oral publication” (Merton 1994) a decade before their appearance in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (see Nichols 2010). Other archival documents show clearly that Merton was deeply engaged in efforts to develop functional analysis in the late 1930s, and he planned to bring out a book in this area more than a decade before Parsons’s influential publications of a “structural-functional” model in *The Social System* (Parsons 1951) and *Toward A General Theory of Action* (Parsons and Edward Shils 1951, Harvard University Press). In fairness, it should be mentioned that Parsons did significant work on functionalism in the 1940s, especially on an “analytical theory of stratification” and on the position and prospects of sociological theory. But the idea that Parsons “led the way” in the development of functionalism and that Merton “followed along” and “fine-tuned” Parsons’s ideas, is simply wrong. The earliest Harvard-based advocate of the functional approach was actually Merton’s classmate and friend, Kingsley Davis, who was influenced primarily by social anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner who was at Harvard from 1929 to 1935.

² At Radcliffe, Merton encountered Louisa Pinkham who would become the first woman doctoral fellow in sociology at Harvard in the early 1940s and a teaching assistant to Parsons. Pinkham, whom Merton described as his “favorite tutee,” would give influential expert testimony (under her married name, Louisa Holt) in the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* that would result in the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that public education systems based on racial separation were Unconstitutional.

... I prepared every lecture with great care. I did so even when I had ostensibly lectured on that “same” subject many times before. ... The intensive preparation involved new ideas, new aspects of old problems, new materials ... (Persell and Merton 1984: 360).

It seems fair to say that, like Sorokin, Merton was a showman or performer — a description never applied to Parsons — though he was more low-key, seductive rather than overpowering (Swedberg 2018). He could also be tough and demanding, as Arthur K. Davis (2013: 1) experienced when Merton (then still Sorokin’s assistant) “dispassionately atomized a juvenile term paper of mine.” For many both Sorokin and Merton, as educators, were unforgettable.

Meanwhile Sorokin and Merton developed a more personal relationship. For though he tended toward a tragic vision of the times, Sorokin also had a sociable side as manifested by informal parties for faculty and graduate students that he hosted at his home in Winchester. One doctoral student later recalled how he had spontaneously stood on a chair and begun singing at one such gathering, possibly under the influence of a punch being served, whose ingredients Sorokin would not reveal. It was quite likely in this setting that Pitirim and Elena Sorokin not only got to know Merton better but also became acquainted with his wife, the former Suzanne Carhart whom Merton had met at Temple and had married in 1934¹. In this way, the master-apprentice relationship became what Sorokin (1947) would call “multi-bonded.”

Phase Two: Dissident Journeyman

While still working closely with Sorokin, Merton came under the influence of other members of Harvard’s Department of Sociology, in-

¹ Robert K. Merton and Suzanne Carhart were married for 34 years and had three children, namely, Robert C., Stephanie and Vanessa. Suzanne, whose field was social work, became a homemaker during the marriage. She died in 1992. Robert C. Merton, who became a professor at MIT and at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, won a Nobel Prize in economics, in 1997, for work on the valuation of derivatives. Stephanie Merton Tombrello founded a non-profit organization SafetyBeltSafe USA, while Vanessa Merton became a professor and dean of law at Pace University.

cluding economic historian Edwin F. Gay (Merton 1994), physiologist Lawrence J. Henderson (Nichols 2010) and economist-sociologist Talcott Parsons¹. While valuing all of these, Merton found himself especially drawn to Parsons, who was then a vulnerable instructor and not yet a formidable rival to Sorokin. Merton (1980) came to know Parsons well through participation in an advanced course on theory, Sociology 21, in conjunction with which Parsons created a discussion circle (“the Adams House group”) that kept detailed written notes about its lively sessions (Johnston 1995)². There was an undeniable playfulness in the exchanges, probably facilitated by the fact that Parsons was only about ten years older than most early participants. By contrast, Sorokin, Parsons’s senior by thirteen years, was at least two decades older than most students. Also, as Barry Johnston (1986) notes, Sorokin was at a later phase of his career than Parsons. At this stage, Parsons treated Merton and other graduate students as near peers and as collaborators, and they found

¹ The analysis here does not deal with Merton’s relationship with another very important mentor, the distinguished historian of science, George Sarton (1884—1956), who had an office in Widener Library where he edited two important journals, *ISIS* and *OSIRIS*. Born in Belgium, he received a Ph.D. at the University of Ghent in 1911. Sarton and his family emigrated to the United States in 1915. Sarton developed an association with the Carnegie Foundation, which supported his work. He became a lecturer on the Harvard faculty in 1920 and received annual, Carnegie-funded reappointments until 1940, when President James B. Conant arranged for his promotion to professor of the history of science. As Merton recounts, he approached Sarton in fall 1933, at the start of his third year of graduate study when he was beginning dissertation research on science in England in the seventeenth century. Sarton gave Merton a place to work within his office suite, used him as a reviewer, published some of his early articles and eventually made him an associate editor. Sarton also published, in 1938, a revised version of Merton’s 1936 dissertation and thus helped launch him as an important early figure in the sociology of science. See Merton, “George Sarton: Episodic Recollections by an Unruly Apprentice.” Merton’s use of the term “unruly” again suggests the pattern discussed above, namely that of Merton never becoming a fully committed disciple of his teachers and mentors but having a somewhat ambivalent relationship with them all.

² The official title of the course was, “The Sociological Theories of Hobhouse, Durkheim, Simmel, Toennies and Max Weber.”

this quite exhilarating¹. Like Sorokin, Parsons loved European sociological theory, but he wanted to produce a more American paradigm, another factor that attracted the doctoral students. Indeed, in the mid-1930s Parsons's emerging model of "the voluntaristic theory of action" resembled the social psychological approach of "the definition of the situation" then prominent at the University of Chicago, an approach that strongly appealed to Merton (Nichols 2010)².

An especially important event in Merton's development was Parsons's translation and classroom use of Max Weber's famous 1905 essay, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," published in 1930 just about the time Merton was applying to Harvard. Merton came to believe that Weber's line of analysis could be extended from the realm of economics to that of science. He worked intensively to apply Weber's theory to the data he had been gathering for Sorokin's *Dynamics*. The initial result was a master's thesis on "Puritanism, Pietism and Science" that he submitted to Sorokin. To Merton's dismay, Sorokin sent a letter stating that although Merton's work was "okay" as "a term-paper," it could not withstand serious scrutiny in terms of the systems model of cultural change that Sorokin was then developing (Merton 1996). In a state of near panic, Merton responded that he was attempting something more modest, namely, explaining the disproportionate representation of Protestants among early modern British scientists. Sorokin ultimately accepted the thesis, despite his strong belief that the approach of explaining one "factor" by another, rather than applying a logic of system formation, was wrong.

¹ Sorokin's autobiography suggests that he likewise socialized with graduate students while at the University of Minnesota. Carle Zimmerman, who knew Sorokin at both Minnesota and Harvard, remarked that Sorokin seemed to have a "change of personality" after coming to Harvard, perhaps in the effort to "do great things" there.

² The "definition of the situation" concept is primarily identified with W. I. Thomas and is also presented in a book, *The Child in America* (1928) that he published with his wife, Dorothy Swaine Thomas. Interestingly, W. I. Thomas spent a year at Harvard in the mid-1930s and we may assume that Merton had direct contact with him at that time. Many of Merton's best-known publications are based on some notion of situational definitions, all the way from his 1938 article on "social structure and anomie" to his 1988 article on "the Matthew Effect, II."

Merton continued his researches and produced a two-volume dissertation in 1936, entitled “Sociological Aspects of Science in Seventeenth Century England,” in which he again relied on the Weberian “Protestant ethic” logic, rather than Sorokin’s (1937) schema of fluctuating “culture mentalities.” Sorokin, the chair of the thesis committee, accepted the work and Merton received the Ph.D. at a relatively young age. A revised version of the dissertation, as noted, appeared in George Sarton’s series, *OSIRIS*, two years later, under the revised title, “Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England” (Merton 1938a). From this perspective, one might conclude that Parsons had “won the competition” for Merton, and Sorokin might have begun to feel that the two were forming a permanent “coalition within the triad” (Caplow 1968).

But that would be an oversimplification. For despite his inclination toward Parsons and the Weberian view of historical change, Merton had also become a coauthor, with Sorokin, of two journal articles. The first (Sorokin and Merton 1935), a byproduct of the wide-ranging research that underlay *Dynamics*, was a brief historical analysis of Arabian intellectual development from the eighth through the fourteenth centuries. The second and more important joint publication (Sorokin and Merton 1937) was a “methodological and functional analysis” of “social time.” When the first three volumes of *Social and Cultural Dynamics* appeared in 1937, Sorokin also briefly noted that the chapter entitled “Movement of Scientific Discoveries and Technological Inventions” had been produced “in co-operation with R. K. Merton and J. W. Boldyreff” (Sorokin 1937, Vol. II: 125). Merton would later list this as one of his publications. Interestingly, despite Merton’s closeness to Parsons over several decades, the two never became coauthors. Thus, Parsons might have regarded Sorokin and Merton, at least at times, as a coalition within their triad.

As these events unfolded, Sorokin became increasingly aware of Merton’s relationship with Parsons, and he began to see Merton somewhat critically as “doing variations on the themes of Parsons.” Such “variations” were especially evident in Merton’s 1938 article, “Social Structure and Anomie,” which became one of the most widely cited articles ever published in the *American Sociological Review*. Merton began with the idea of “anomie,” sometimes translated as “normlessness,” that had been articulated by French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858—1917)

whom both Sorokin and Parsons respected. But he reformulated the idea in terms of an approach that Parsons was then developing, namely, the “means-ends schema,” a foundation of Parsons’s (1937) first major work, *The Structure of Social Action*. Merton’s treatment of anomie also incorporated the idea of opportunity, which echoed Max Weber’s “life chances.” Since that time, Merton’s article has been consistently cited in chapters on deviance in introductory sociology textbooks, as well as in theory chapters in texts on criminology and juvenile delinquency, and a considerable body of empirical research based on it has emerged. In a similar way, Merton’s influential 1936 article, “The Unintended Consequences of Purposeful Social Action,” is largely traceable to Parsons’s treatment of “rational action” (again largely rooted in Weber), rather than to Sorokin’s cultural analysis. Thus, Merton’s early “Parsonsian” writings became some of his “greatest hits,” whereas his publications with Sorokin have been largely forgotten¹.

As a teenager and young adult, Merton had occasionally performed magic, and some might say that his effort to work closely with both Sorokin and Parsons was another “clever trick,” especially in later years as the relationship between his mentors deteriorated badly. But the magic worked². Merton maintained his positive relationship with both, always regarding them as more distinguished than himself, and he honored both at the time of their passing, and even many years afterwards. Observers have sometimes wrongly cast Merton as a mere disciple of Parsons, despite Merton’s original and influential advocacy of a “middle range” approach and his development of a style of functional analysis that differed significantly from Parsons’s “system-needs” model. Merton dissented from both his mentors, but their intergenerational solidarity endured.

¹ Like most sociologists in the 1930s, Merton generally “left culture to the anthropologists” and concentrated instead on “interaction,” though with a strong social psychological emphasis. See Lawrence T. Nichols, “The Enduring Social Psychology of Robert K. Merton” for more on this often unnoticed aspect of Merton’s work.

² And it appears that the magic works still. For Merton’s date of birth is always given as 1910, despite the fact that his application to Harvard, preserved in his papers at Columbia, actually said 1908.

Phase Three: More Nearly Peers

As noted, Merton left Harvard in 1939 for a position as associate professor at Tulane University. After a year, he was named chair of the university's small department of sociology, and in this capacity he began to interact with Sorokin in a different way. In one letter, for instance, Merton (1940) inquired about the progress of two graduate students at Harvard, namely, Bernard Barber and Harry Johnson, whom Merton hoped might join him in New Orleans¹. Merton's elevation meant that he and his former teacher were now more nearly professional peers, though of course Sorokin remained at the pinnacle of sociology in the U.S., while Merton was still climbing the professional ladder.

In the spring of 1941 Merton sent a note in which he addressed his former thesis chair rather casually as "P. A.," a nickname for Sorokin used by some faculty and students at Harvard. Merton (1941b) asked specifically for a letter on behalf of Logan Wilson whom he wanted to hire at Tulane. Sorokin (1941c) responded the following week, telling Merton that he was ill but that he had sent the letter regarding Wilson to the dean of the college at Tulane.

In fall 1941 Merton took another significant step by accepting an appointment at Columbia University, even though this meant a demotion in rank, from full professor at Tulane (where he had been quickly promoted)

¹ Bernard Barber (1918—2006), who graduated summa cum laude in 1939, had been a student in Merton's undergraduate classes at Harvard in the late 1930s. The two later became colleagues in New York, with Merton at Columbia and Barber at affiliated Barnard College, and they often collaborated, especially in the area of the sociology of science. Correspondence in the Merton papers reveals a collegial relationship but one in which there was an evident distance, with Merton—about ten years older than Barber--always the superordinate. By contrast, Merton shared an easy fellowship with his graduate student peer Kingsley Davis (1908—1997), who earned a Harvard Ph.D. the same year as Merton (1936), who would also later have an appointment at Columbia and who served as president of the American Sociological Association two years after Merton. Interestingly, there were moments when Merton felt that Barber, despite their closeness, had failed to give due credit to his works—another instance of tension between generations in science.

to mere assistant professor in Morningside Heights. Upon receiving this news, Sorokin (1941) sent congratulations, reassuring Merton that he had chosen “wisely,” even though, Sorokin said, Columbia ought to have granted associate rank. Sorokin also predicted that Merton would rise quickly in his new setting. Since Columbia was a far more prestigious university than was Tulane, Merton’s move also helped raise his professional stature. Significantly, this also indirectly benefited Sorokin, who could claim some credit for his top student reaching the top tier of the American university system.

But all did not go smoothly in New York, where Merton was soon diagnosed with exhaustion and had to take leave to recover during his very first semester. He revealed his situation to Talcott Parsons in early December, telling him that “some weeks ago ... it wasn’t at all difficult to spend 16 hours a day in bed” (Merton 1941c). A couple of weeks later, in response to a letter from Parsons, Merton (1941d) revealed the depth of his feelings for his former mentor.

As you have probably guessed many times in the past, I find it difficult to talk about matters which are most significant to me; not least of all about a relationship which means as much to me as ours. Have you sensed that for ten years you have been my private exemplar of a decent human being and a real scholar? More than you can possibly realize I have found all manner of support in your moral and intellectual integrity. I’ll say no more because a display of sentiment has always embarrassed me.

Whether Sorokin also knew of Merton’s illness is not clear, but other letters from this period likewise indicate a comfortable relationship between Sorokin and Merton, with an ease of communication and personalized sharing. Thus, in 1940, upon learning of the birth of Merton’s first child, Sorokin (1940) sent a joyous note from himself and his wife Elena, wishing newborn Stephanie “a happy and smooth travel along the thorny and happy road of life that lies before her.” In November 1943 Sorokin sent a brief note inquiring whether Merton could come to Harvard as a visiting lecturer for the spring 1944 term. He also mentioned having stopped by Merton’s office during a recent trip to New York, in hopes of a visit, and was sorry that Merton had not been in.

But tensions sometimes arose, especially in 1945 when Harvard’s Department of Sociology, now chaired by Talcott Parsons, searched for two

new colleagues to be given tenured appointments. Parsons (1945) very much wanted to bring Merton back to Cambridge, and he had the support of others, especially social psychologist Gordon W. Allport (1945) and cultural anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn (1945). But Sorokin (1945a, 1945b) opposed the appointment, on the grounds that Merton had not developed much since his years at Harvard, and that his dissertation remained his best published work. Harvard rural sociologist Carle C. Zimmerman (1945a, 1945b), Sorokin's friend and coauthor, took the same position. Due to restrictions on relevant historical records, it is difficult to trace the full sequence of events. Merton himself told Barry Johnston (1995: 156, 317n) that he declined an offer from Harvard, largely in order to continue his collaborative work with Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia¹. In the end George C. Homans and Samuel Stouffer, neither of whom would now be regarded as Merton's equal, filled the permanencies. Parsons, we might assume, probably resented Sorokin's opposition.

Sorokin apparently felt considerable unease over the situation and the danger of alienating Merton. He therefore sent a letter (Sorokin 1945c) that attempted to explain what he called his "indecisive" attitude regarding Merton's proposed candidacy, which caught Merton somewhat by sur-

¹ Paul Felix Lazarsfeld (1901—1976) was born and raised in Austria. He earned a Ph.D. in applied mathematics in 1925 at the University of Vienna, but his interests shifted to psychology. In 1929 he was appointed a lecturer in applied psychology at the University of Vienna, and he founded at the same time a research institute in that field. In 1933, Lazarsfeld emigrated to the United States with the help of a Rockefeller Foundation grant. He subsequently became the director of the Office of Radio Research at Princeton University (again with Rockefeller support) from 1937 until 1940, when the Office was transferred to Columbia University. It subsequently became the Bureau of Applied Social Research, which Lazarsfeld continued to direct. Meanwhile he also became a member of Columbia's Department of Sociology, where he became Merton's friend and collaborator. Merton and Lazarsfeld published jointly on propaganda analysis and mass communication. They also wrote a unique co-autobiographical study, "Friendship as a Social Process: A Substantive and Methodological Analysis," published in *Freedom and Control in Modern Society*, edited by M. Berger, T. Abel and C. Page (New York: Van Nostrand, 1954), pp. 18—66. Merton also expressed his admiration for Lazarsfeld in his Haskins lecture.

prise, because, he said, Parsons had not informed him that he was under consideration. Sorokin expressed the view that adding Merton might strengthen the department where it was already strong, in the area of sociological theory, and this would mean that other gaps in the curriculum would remain. Archival documents at Harvard show that Sorokin did indeed raise this point during the internal debate over the hiring, but it also seems clear that this was subordinate to his overall view that Merton had simply not “done enough.”

Merton (1945), who might have felt resentful or even angry, responded politely that he appreciated Sorokin’s concerns, but did not feel that his interests “overlap those of the present Harvard department to the extent that they did some six or seven years ago.” As further reassurance of his high regard, Sorokin also revealed that he had sent letters on Merton’s behalf to Robert MacIver and Robert Lynd at Columbia, in connection with Merton’s appointment and promotion there. It seems that Sorokin very much wanted to avoid a rupture, despite the apparent fact that he did not believe Merton’s scholarly record warranted a tenured position at Harvard.

Phase Four: Status Reversals

In 1946, Harvard launched an experiment in integrating portions of the social sciences, namely, a new Department of Social Relations (1946—1972) that Talcott Parsons chaired for the unit’s first decade (Johnston 1995; Nichols 1998; Johnston 1998). This policy shift, hailed by Dean Paul H. Buck and other advocates as a bold innovation, reduced sociology from an independent department to what members called a “wing” of the new organization. The launch of Social Relations followed several years of backstage maneuvering, with correspondence within the group of activists and meetings by invitation only, and the planners were careful to keep Sorokin in the dark. Interestingly, during this secretive phase Parsons (1944) sent Merton a copy of a key document, namely, a detailed memorandum on the proposed reorganization, telling Merton he should keep this strictly confidential.

These machinations, however, ignited what became known locally as “the second Russian Revolution,” as Sorokin vented his outrage at the demise of the unit he had chaired, including one very public instance at a din-

ner with the Visiting Committee appointed to assess the “Soc Rels” experiment. Talcott Parsons had tried to forestall such conflict by recommending in 1944 that Sorokin be given a new professorship in the philosophy of history that would remove him entirely from the department. The result was an intense animosity between Parsons and Sorokin, who increasingly withdrew and transferred his still considerable energies to running the new Harvard Center for Altruistic Integration and Creativity that he launched in 1949 with financial support from the Eli Lilly Foundation. From one point of view, this was a new beginning for Sorokin and the fruit of his massive labor on “the crisis of our age” (Johnston 1995). But many at Harvard, as well as many sociologists in the U.S., regarded Sorokin, then approaching the age of sixty, as in decline, even someone who no longer needed to be taken seriously. In Erving Goffman’s terms (1962), he suffered from “spoiled identity” in the context of professional American sociology (Nichols 1989), although he still enjoyed support among some academics and the general public, and although his works continued to be widely translated internationally.

Merton meanwhile continued to rise. In 1949 he brought out what is generally considered his major work, a collection of essays entitled *Social Theory and Social Structure*, for the purpose of what he called “codification” in social science. The volume’s initial chapter, on functional analysis, proved especially influential. All but two chapters had already appeared in print, sometimes in lesswell known journals, and Merton pulled them together and grouped them into sections that reflected his range of interests. *STSS* also contained Merton’s influential plea for a “middle range” approach to building the field of sociology, that is, one that went beyond mere fact finding and “journalistic-style” sociology, but one that also avoided what C. Wright Mills (1959) later castigated as “grand theory,” which some associated with both Parsons and Sorokin.

Merton acknowledged “debts” to both Sorokin and Parsons early in the volume. Sorokin, he said, “helped me escape from the provincialism of thinking that effective studies of society were confined within American borders” and also from thinking that the primary subject-matter of sociology was social problems (Merton 1949: 17). He credited Parsons, whom he called “my teacher and friend,” for stirring up intellectual enthusiasm “rather than creating docile disciples” (Merton 1949: 17). Nevertheless,

STSS can be regarded as Merton's "declaration of independence" from both of his mentors, and even a manifesto for "Columbia style" sociology.

Merton took issue with Sorokin's major work, *Dynamics* in Chapter 8, "The Sociology of Knowledge," an essay that had appeared several years earlier in the volume *Twentieth Century Sociology* (Gurvitch and Moore 1945). Characterizing Sorokin's overall position as "idealistic and emanationist," Merton attacked the logic of the analysis:

... it appears plainly tautological to say ... that "in a sensate society and culture the Sensate system of truth based on the testimony of the organs of senses has to be dominant." For sensate mentality has already been *defined* as one conceiving of "reality as only that which is presented to the sense organs." (Merton 1949: 227)

Merton further alleged that Sorokin had made inconsistent statements about his own epistemological position, that he had failed to show any connection between "existential conditions" and dominant "culture mentalities," and that he had not explained why particular groups in a society shared a particular mentality. Merton also took issue with Sorokin's defense of the "truth of faith," which rested on "intuition," complaining that while intuition might well be a source of scientific discovery it could not by itself validate discoveries.

Parsons meanwhile had been moving strongly toward functional analysis, and away from his 1937 paradigm of "the voluntaristic theory of action" that seems not to have attracted any significant following¹. He now sought Merton's views on his developing formulations, and sent him, in the fall of 1949, four draft chapters of what would become his major mature book, *The Social System* (Parsons 1951). Parsons was then also president of the American Sociological Society, and he was acquiring a reputation as the best general theorist in American sociology. He had sought Merton's comments even when Merton was an instructor at Harvard, but this was different, for he was evidently concerned about Merton's response.

¹ For Parsons's own account of the development of his thought see his memoir, "On Building Social Systems Theory: A Personal History," *Daedalus* 99, 4 (1970): 826—881. See also Bernard Barber, "Parsons's Second Project: The Social System: Sources, Development and Limitations," *The American Sociologist* 29, 2 (summer 1998): 77—82.

Parsons had good reason to feel this way, because at the 1947 annual meeting of the American Sociological Society, Merton, had voiced incisive criticisms of Parsons's paper on "the position of sociological theory." Merton took "strong exception" to Parsons's assertion that sociology's main task was to deal with "theory" rather than "theories," saying:

I believe that our main task *today* is to develop special theories applicable to limited ranges of data—theories, for example, of class dynamics ... or the flow of power and interpersonal influence in communities — rather than to seek here and now the "single" conceptual structure adequate to derive all these and other theories. (Merton 1948: 166)

Several decades later, Merton (1994: 13) recalled the incident, as well as his ambivalent relationship toward Parsons as theorist, in his autobiographical Haskins lecture:

Although much impressed by Parsons as a master-builder of sociological theory, I found myself departing from his mode of theorizing ... I still recall the grace with which he responded in a public forum to my mild-mannered but determined criticism of his kind of general theory. I had argued that his formulations were remote from providing a problematics and a direction for theory-oriented empirical inquiry into the observable worlds of culture and society and I went on to state the case for "theories of the middle range" as mediating between gross empiricism and grand speculative doctrines.

Merton (1949) had reiterated and further explicated his view in the introductory chapter of *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Consequently, in December 1949, very shortly after sending Merton the draft chapters from *The Social System*, Parsons (1950:5) confronted their differences explicitly in his presidential talk, characterizing Merton's stance as a "reluctance to recognize the importance of high levels of generality." He softened this criticism by describing Merton as "my highly esteemed friend and former student," but he did not surrender his claim to primacy. For Parsons believed he was doing work that no one else had attempted—indeed to such a degree that his Social Relations colleague, social psychologist Jerome Bruner saw Parsons as in "an auto-intoxicative" state (Nichols 1998).

Archival documents at Columbia reveal there were additional grounds for Parsons to be concerned about Merton's attitude. For Merton had been teaching a course on sociological theorizing, Sociology 213—

214, in which he directed students to examine carefully all of Parsons's theoretical statements. The ultimate lesson of this exercise was that Parsons's work, though filled with definitions, actually contained nearly no empirical generalizations (Swedberg 2018), and that therefore the Merton-Lazarsfeld approach was much to be preferred. In this way, Merton created, one might say, his own version of the "Adams House group," distanced himself from Parsons and recruited students for what would become known as "Columbia style" sociology.

In late 1952 there was a very unpleasant, though brief, conflict in the Sorokin-Merton relationship. Reacting to the omission of his name in a published bibliography on the sociology of science written by Merton and Bernard Barber, Sorokin sent an angry note in which he referred also to a book he had recently sent Merton, *History, Civilization and Culture: An Introduction to the Historical and Social Philosophy of Pitirim A. Sorokin*, by British historian Frank R. Cowell¹.

Sorry I sent you Cowell's Introduction to Sorokin's theories. If before its sending I had read Merton-Barber *Bibliography for the Sociology of Science* I would certainly have avoided to send you a book that flagrantly contradicts your non-mentioning Sorokin's name ... I do not want to cause any discomfort either to you and Barber ... and to some of my former students who seem to be anxious to obliterate my name and contributions. (Sorokin 1952a).

A day later, however, Sorokin sent a handwritten apology:

Please do not pay any attention to my yesterday's letter. It was an impulsive momentary reaction of an irritable little man who has not ob-

¹ Frank Richard Cowell (1897—1978), eight years Sorokin's junior, was a British historian best known for his books *Cicero and the Roman Republic* (1948) and *Everyday Life in Ancient Rome* (1960), who became very interested in Sorokin's work and published two books explicating and advocating it. *History, Civilization and Culture* appeared in 1952. In 1970, shortly after Sorokin's death, Cowell brought out *Values in Human Society: The Contributions of Pitirim A. Sorokin to Sociology*. Surviving letters show that Sorokin was extremely pleased by *History, Civilization and Culture*, praising it as "a brilliant variation on my main themes." Also, interestingly, since Sorokin was an avid gardener, Cowell brought out a book in 1978 on *The Garden as a Fine Art, from Antiquity to Modern Times*.

tained, as yet, a control of his little ego by a bigger and wiser “self.” (Sorokin 1952b)

Merton meanwhile had also hastened to repair the breach, begging forgiveness for the omission in the bibliography. What is especially striking about the episode is the rapidity of the effort on both sides to restore good relations. Also noteworthy is Sorokin’s expression of fear and resentment that younger generations in science were intentionally “obliterating” his work — a feeling very likely experienced, in a patterned and predictable way, by members of declining generations as they witness the ascendance of those they formerly trained and supervised. Indeed, this brings to mind the stages of dying famously stated in Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s pioneering work: denial, negotiation, anger, depression, acceptance.

Subsequently, in 1953, Merton became the chair of sociology at Columbia. Sorokin’s thirteen years as department chair had ended in 1944, and Parsons’s twelve-year term directing Sociology and then Social Relations would conclude in 1956. Merton, then in his mid-forties, represented the new generation of administrative and professional leadership. A few years later, in 1957, Merton rose to the presidency of the American Sociological Association, coincidentally at the same age as Parsons had been, forty-seven. Sorokin meanwhile had reached the age of sixty-eight, had already retired from teaching as required by Harvard’s rules, and was approaching the mandatory age of retirement from the university (seventy).

Merton’s presidential address, “Priorities in Scientific Discovery: A Chapter in the Sociology of Science,” built on his doctoral work at Harvard. Merton (1957b: 639, 640, 655) referenced Parsons three times, in footnotes about “moral obligation,” “institutionalized motivation” and “active and passive deviance,” but he did not mention Sorokin or the research that he himself had done for *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. This omission might be explained—speculatively—in various ways. A more charitable view is that Merton felt that *Dynamics* dealt with “cultural systems” rather than “institutions” in the interactionist sense that U.S. sociologists favored, as in Bernard Barber’s work, *Science and the Social Order* (1952) that Merton cited. A less charitable view would be that Merton wished to avoid publicly associating his work with that of Sorokin, espe-

cially *Dynamics*. It might also have been the case that Merton saw Parsons, then still at the peak of his fame, as the relevant “standard of comparison” for his own career.

Indeed, for many, Merton was now Parsons’s only rival, or even someone who surpassed Parsons in terms of the lucidity of his writings and his ability to integrate sociological theory with empirical research. Newer generations, especially the large influx that followed World War II, would also have said that Merton had superseded Sorokin, whose earlier writings had been largely forgotten and whose more recent works on altruism were being largely ignored. Indeed, Sorokin himself (1957a) praised Merton’s “growth which brought you to the position of possibly the most influential leader of American sociology to younger and middle generations.”

While these various movements, up and down in “social space,” followed the logic of generational succession, another movement occurred on the personal level that reaffirmed earlier solidarity, and created a new bond. The occasion was the publication of a one-volume edition of *Dynamics* (Sorokin 1957b), along with Sorokin’s decision to send a complimentary copy to Merton with the following inscription: “To my darned enemy and dearest friend Robert—from Pitirim.” As he would later write (Merton 1996: 27), Sorokin’s choice of words seemed

... pointedly, and, I like to think, lovingly ambivalent. Its first component is to remind me of my failure to adopt the Sorokinian theory in the dissertation; the second alludes to our fourfold relationship in which I was engaged back then, as his teaching and research assistant, dogsbody, young collaborator, and appreciator (albeit a critical one) ...

Perhaps Merton should have said a “fivefold” relationship that involved also a father figure and a son. For the relatively brief inscription triggered a powerful emotional response and Merton (1957a) sent Sorokin a letter that poured out his feelings, as he had to Parsons in 1941.

The generosity of your inscription ... I shall never forget. ... That a teacher should so address his pupil is a cardinal deed and I treasure it.

... I owe so very much to you that I can never repay. It was your being at Harvard that led me to Harvard. A raw, uninformed youngster, I came with almost no inkling of what the intellectual life in general and sociology in particular could mean. It was your wide-ranging scholarship, un-

matched among sociologists of the time, that led me ... I despaired many times then, as I often have since, of living up to the standards of historical knowledge and language skills which you took as a matter of course. But, at least, I acquired a respect for these and have since tried to do ... all I could to justify my having been your student.

Merton's note elicited a comparably sentimental response from Sorokin (1957a) that suggests he might well have long had a paternalistic feeling toward his star pupil.

I am very deeply touched by your letter and by your two volumes with their inscriptions which you kindly sent to me. They unmistakably show your sincere affection and real friendship for me. On my part, I have always had a warm place in my heart for you and Mrs. Merton. I am glad that now we have brought these mutual affections out. I hope that these ties now would be binding us in the future. You know well that during your student days, and even days of instructorship, I regarded you as practically the most brilliant student among the graduate students of Minnesota or Harvard. With great interest I have followed your subsequent growth which brought you to the position of possibly the most influential leader of American sociology to younger or middle generations.

In 1959 another role reversal occurred when Sorokin (1959a), on the verge of mandatory retirement, asked for Merton's assistance in obtaining a research grant to support three projects: (1) the dynamics of moral phenomena; (2) recent sociological theories; and (3) an integral philosophy. Referring to Merton as "one of the influential members of the Department of the Behavioral Sciences of the Ford Foundation," Sorokin expressed the hope of obtaining about ten to thirty thousand dollars. Subsequent correspondence shows clearly that Merton (1959b) made efforts, ultimately unsuccessful, to secure funding. Sorokin (1959b) responded warmly:

Most cordial thanks for your kindest letter and for all the efforts which you have undertaken on my behalf. Regardless of the fruitfulness or fruitlessness of your efforts, I deeply appreciate them.

Three decades earlier, Sorokin had been able to access funds that the Rockefeller Foundation had given to Harvard, monies that allowed him to hire Merton and other researchers for *Dynamics*. But now, the process of generational succession placed him in a dependent position.

Phase Five: Nearly Peers Once More

As already noted, by the late 1950s Sorokin's status within the sociological profession in the U.S. had long been in decline, largely due to the rejection by academic peers of the analysis in his major work, *Dyanmics*, and also because many sociologists regarded his more recent studies of altruism as moralizing rather than as science. Sorokin had also severely criticized much of his own profession in the 1956 volume, *Fads and Foibles in Sociology*, which a reviewer from the University of Chicago had labeled "a pitiable climax to a distinguished career" (Horton 1956). Meanwhile, as reflected in his correspondence with Merton, Sorokin had come to feel that many colleagues were against him and might even be trying to "erase his name."

Merton did much—almost certainly more than anyone else — to effect a reconciliation and to restore Sorokin to a place of honor in the U.S. In 1962 he arranged for Sorokin to participate in a session he organized for the American Sociological Association conference, where Sorokin gave a paper on "the practical influence of generalized sociological theories." At about the same time, Merton became very actively involved in a grassroots effort, initially led by Otis Duncan, to get Sorokin's name placed on the 1963 ballot for president of the ASA. Duncan, Merton and others, including Sorokin's longtime colleague and friend Carle C. Zimmerman, succeeded in forcing a second round of balloting by writing in Sorokin's name on the first ballot. The initial nominees, Wilbert E. Moore (another graduate of the department Sorokin had chaired) and Arnold Rose, chose not to withdraw and Sorokin swept to a landslide victory (Johnston 1987).

Meanwhile Merton made further tangible contributions to Sorokin's restoration by coauthoring essays for two *festschrift* volumes, namely, *Pitirim A. Sorokin in Review* (edited by Philip Allen) and *Sociological Theory, Values and Sociocultural Change* (edited by Edward A. Tiryakian, a professor at Duke University who had been Sorokin's teaching assistant in the early 1950s). In the Allen volume, Merton, along with fellow Harvard graduate and Columbia colleague Bernard Barber, took issue with some of Sorokin's formulations in the sociology of science, especially the emphasis on the role of intuition in scientific knowledge. Sorokin (1963c) provided a rejoinder in which—importantly—he treated his former students

and critics respectfully, as relative peers (Nichols 1989). For the Tiryakian volume Merton wrote a paper with Elinor Barber on “sociological ambivalence” that did not directly engage Sorokin’s writings.

Interestingly, Talcott Parsons (2013) also participated in the Tiryakian volume, contributing an essay on “Christianity and Modern Industrial Society” that contested Sorokin’s analysis of religion from a Weberian perspective of “inner-worldly” religiosity. Evidently concerned about how Sorokin might respond, Parsons (1959) sent a draft to Merton, telling him:

I am naturally very anxious to have your comments ... with special respect naturally to what you feel about my statements of Sorokin’s position and the tone in which I have stated anything that is explicitly or implicitly critical of that position.

Merton (1959a) sent a very reassuring response, telling Parsons that the draft was “one of your best formulations.” With regard to Parsons’s main concern, Merton said:

I think the tone is just right. It straightforwardly acknowledges the clash of opinions without any vestige of polemic. It states the issues on which differences occur and states them fairly. I’m persuaded that P.A. will greatly appreciate the hearing you have given his own views even though he might not find it possible to accept yours ... In a word, I think you have carried it off nobly ...

The two thus formed another temporary coalition within the triad, mostly to honor Sorokin, though Parsons’s essay might be interpreted uncharitably as disguised aggression. But only Merton could have bridged the gap between his two mutually alienated mentors. And probably only Merton could have re-introduced Sorokin to professional sociological conferences in the U.S., thereby performing a service somewhat reminiscent of what George Simpson did for Merton in 1929.

Sorokin’s election as ASA president resulted in a renewed connection with many members of the field and also in an introduction to newer generations that knew little or nothing of his earlier, path-finding publications. Now, amid the social turbulence and anti-Vietnam-war activism of the mid-1960s, some found inspiration in Sorokin’s writings, especially his recent condemnation of the criminality of ruling groups (Sorokin and Lunden 1959). As a result, some would soon wear buttons that proclaimed, “Sorokin lives!” at the annual ASA conference.

Coincidentally, Talcott Parsons had been serving as the secretary of ASA, and he reportedly threatened to resign if Sorokin were elected president. But in the end Parsons stayed, and he collaborated with Sorokin in planning the program of the 1965 conference in Chicago. Given Parsons's prominence at that time, his acceptance of Sorokin can be considered a significant step in Sorokin's restoration to a place of honor. For this, like Merton's support, consisted in the public linkage of an identity in good standing with one that had been damaged. It was, one might say, a form of "vouching" for the worth of another, in this case within the realm of social science.

In his presidential address, "Sociology of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," Sorokin (1965c) mostly maintained a diplomatic tone. Beginning with the premise that the history of many disciplines exhibited an alteration between periods of analytical fact-finding and periods of synthesizing, he predicted that sociology would in the future choose to move beyond a recent emphasis on fact-finding to new creative syntheses. He mentioned Merton's "middle-range" approach and implied that this involved the danger of remaining in the increasingly sterile fact-finding mode that could only illumine small "specks" of the vast sociocultural universe. But he presented a much sharper critique of what listeners very likely understood as Parsons's approach, because Sorokin explicitly rejected key terms that Parsons favored. As he asserted:

... many of the recent abstract theories suffer from an "ascetic detachment" from empirical sociocultural realities. Representing a peculiar mixture of "ghostly" social-system models, devoid of empirical content, mechanistic analogies of "equilibrium," "inertia," "thermodynamic laws," "cybernetic feed-back" or "homeostasis," and speculative "pre-requisites" for systems' self-preservation, these abstract schemas of social systems form abstract networks with mesh so large that practically all "empirical fish" slip through, leaving nothing in the hands of the fisherman-researcher. (Sorokin 1965c: 842)

Thus, despite its generally courteous tone, Sorokin's address might be interpreted as a claim that his approach, called "integral sociology," had succeeded where Merton's middle-range and fact-finding emphasis and Parsons's "ghostly" social-systems model had failed. But at least within the context of the "restoration ceremony" at ASA (Nichols 1989), both Parsons

and Merton were willing to be generously tolerant, to “not take it personally.” They showed restraint or forbearance, as Sorokin also did by tempering his criticisms, and in this way the former Harvard-based triad was finally restored, on the best available terms.

Sorokin seems to have experienced a satisfying “afterglow” following the 1965 ASA conference in Chicago, even though he had to undergo an appendectomy. Upon returning from the hospital in mid-September, he found a book Merton (1965) had written and sent, *On The Shoulders of Giants*. He therefore sent Merton a letter (Sorokin 1965a) thanking him for the volume and for Merton’s “friendly remarks” in the plenary session that he had chaired. Calling it “a truly joyful experience,” Sorokin also expressed his pleasure at the participation of former Harvard students Robert Bierstedt and Wilbert E. Moore that made for a happy reunion. A couple of weeks later he wrote again, praising Merton for the volume that Merton nicknamed “*OTSOG*”:

I have greatly enjoyed reading your *On The Shoulders of Giants*. It is not only a sample of careful research in the history of certain ideas at a definite historical period but what is more important it is a literary masterpiece. Hearty congratulations! (Sorokin 1965b)

Less than two years later, Sorokin’s health deteriorated, and he received a terminal diagnosis in spring 1967. Realizing that time was short, he wrote to Merton:

... I have been “existing” (not living) with depressive moods, boredom and practically waiting for death to put an end to this empty, painful, and boring existence. Since death is inevitable for all human beings, and since I have been given a fairly long life—and rich, eventful life, I do not have any reason to complain ... at the near-by “exit” from the kingdom of life. ... If this happens to be my “farewell note,” I wish you everything good and creative. (Sorokin 1967a)

In late November of that year, Merton sent a heartbroken response, telling Sorokin he had tried many times to do so but could not find the right words. Sorokin replied:

Warmest thanks for your warm and truly friendly letter! Your good feeling and attitude to me are fully reciprocated on my part. I always had the warm spot in my “heart” for you; have rejoiced at your creative work and growth to the most eminent leadership for the American and the

world's sociologists; have been proud that in a slight way I have been connected with this leadership in the form of our early cooperation; in brief (it is a curious phenomenon) we both seem to have been more appreciative and more warmly bound together than we both have shown "externally"—in our articles and papers about each other and in our overt behavior. At this last part of my life I am happy to have been associated mutually with you and I wish you a still greater continuation of your creative work in the future. (Sorokin 1967b)

Such was the mentor's final blessing to his star pupil whom he came to treasure as a friend.

In early 1968, Merton joined other mourners at a service for Sorokin in Harvard's Memorial Chapel. In keeping with longstanding practice, a committee of peers had prepared a "memorial minute" that concluded as follows:

Pitirim Sorokin was a complex and in some ways a paradoxical man. Carrying with him the tragic burdens of a life spent largely in exile, he felt deeply the conflicts of the time in which he lived and gave them notable expression. His influence on social science and beyond, through both his writing and his teaching, has been immense. (Bales et al. 1968).

The committee included sociologists Robert F. Bales and George C. Homans, anthropologist Frances Kluckhohn Taylor and clinical psychologist Robert W. White, and it was chaired by Talcott Parsons. Pitirim's widow Elena sent Merton a handwritten note of thanks, addressed, "Dear Bob." She added: "Since your son is in school here perhaps sometimes you could come here for lunch or dinner during the ESA meetings in Boston" (Sorokin 1968).

Postlude: Sorokin and Merton at the Millenium

Following Sorokin's death, there were a number of organized efforts to preserve his memory and honor his legacy. Sorokin's papers had been given to the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, Canada, through the efforts of a former student, Richard DuWors. A condition of the gift was that the university hold a Sorokin lecture annually, and that these talks be published. Sorokin's friend Carle Zimmerman spoke on "Sorokin: The World's Greatest Sociologist," and Elena Sorokin shared her experience of

“Life with Sorokin.” Meanwhile the American Sociological Association established a Sorokin Award for outstanding research on social change.

Introductory textbooks in sociology often mentioned Sorokin, but usually briefly, in chapters on social change, where he was identified—wrongly—as a proponent of a “cyclical” view. In 1977, however, Lewis Coser, a former student of Merton’s, helped restore Sorokin to a place of honor by adding a chapter on him to the second edition of *Masters of Sociological Thought*. Don Martindale (1975), a sociologist at the University of Minnesota who had maintained a friendly relationship with Sorokin for several decades, did likewise in a short volume, *Prominent Sociologists Since World War II*. And in 1995 Donald Levine, a University of Chicago sociologist, re-engaged with Sorokin’s works in his volume *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*.

Merton had not participated in these efforts, but in the late 1990s he became involved with the emergent Sorokin revival in Russia, the Komi Republic and other parts of the former Soviet Union (e.g., Doykov 2005; Krotov 2005, 2012; Sapov 2013; Smetanin et al. 2009; Zyuzev 2010). Professor Nikita Pokrovsky of the University of Moscow had initiated a correspondence with Merton, partly in conjunction with the translation Merton’s writings into Russian. As a result, Merton, then approaching ninety, contributed a paper to the event called “The Return of Pitirim Sorokin,” and this was published in the proceedings of the conference (Kravchenko and Pokrovsky 2001). Seven decades after their first, serendipitous encounter, Merton was still happy to honor his former teacher, mentor, coauthor and friend as “in a class by himself.”

Conclusion

The paper has examined a relationship that is both typical and unique. It is typical in the sense of embodying institutionalized processes and patterns, especially the interaction between a teacher from an older, and a pupil from a younger generation. Here the older generation of scientists is initially superordinate, but it is later superseded, in a relatively orderly way, by its younger counterparts. The traditional “ethos of science” requires both the early submission of the younger and also their later displacement of their teachers. This pattern might be compared, in some respects, to the

processes of “invasion and succession” in both plant and human communities (Park and Burgess 1921).

The analysis recognized antagonistic aspects of the Sorokin-Merton relationship that unfolded even as both maintained a formal politeness and a personalized courtesy. Thus, Merton really did reject Sorokin’s emphasis on culture, as well as Sorokin’s theory of change, and he rejected also Sorokin’s emphasis on vast “supersystems.” And Sorokin really did reject Merton’s application of Weber’s “Protestant ethic” theory, really did much to block Merton’s possible tenured appointment at Harvard, and really did characterize much of Merton’s mature work as “variations on themes of Parsons”¹.

The discussion also probed the ways in which the already complex Sorokin-Merton relationship was further complicated by the presence of another colleague who had an ambivalent relationship with them both, namely, Talcott Parsons. From a “generational” perspective, Parsons was in an intermediary position by being thirteen years younger than Sorokin and less than ten years older than Merton. By the logic of generational succession, this group should have displaced the group that included Sorokin. Meanwhile Parsons was Merton’s teacher and superior, but there was more closeness between them than in the Sorokin-Merton relationship of that period. Indeed, there was also an affectionate quality, though perhaps mainly on Merton’s side. Later, as reported above, Merton would develop into a major rival to Parsons.

When Sorokin first came to Harvard in 1930, Parsons did not pose the slightest threat to his stature, as he was a young and vulnerable instructor in economics whose only sociological publication was a translation of Weber’s 1905 essay. But Parsons became a threat by aspiring to do general sociological theory and articulating two paradigms, namely, the voluntaristic theory of action and functionalist systems analysis. Merton’s strategy of “middle range” sociological work, by contrast, was much more modest, much less of a challenge to Sorokin.

¹ In his final work, *Sociological Theories of Today*, Sorokin (1966: 455n) softened this criticism somewhat, saying, “Nevertheless, like Beethoven’s variation on Mozartian themes or Brahms’ variation on the themes of Paganini, Merton’s variations are admirable in many ways and certainly contribute a great deal to our knowledge.”

There was also much mutual rejection between Sorokin and Parsons, along with an animosity not seen in the Sorokin-Merton relationship. In the early 1930s Sorokin condemned a manuscript on institutions that Parsons submitted for his comments. Not long thereafter he told Parsons that his first major work *The Structure of Social Action*, was virtually “unreadable” and that its conceptual scheme was weak (Johnston 1995). In the early 1950s he had his teaching assistant (Tiryakian) place under the doors of all the faculty in Social Relations a table comparing Parsons’s recent formulations with his own earlier ones, thus nearly accusing Parsons of outright plagiarism. Sorokin tried to publish this table in the *American Sociological Review* but the editor and the entire editorial board rejected it, which led to an angry exchange of letters. Sorokin (1966: 420—431) included the table in his final book, which came out *after* the apparent public reconciliation between Parsons and Sorokin at the 1965 ASA conference.

In a similar way, Parsons’s embrace of Weber’s “innerworldly” religiosity was a direct dissent against Sorokin’s diagnosis of modern secularization. Initially, this was simply a difference of view. After receiving tenure, however, Parsons became more openly aggressive. Thus, in an influential journal article, Parsons (1940: 841) explicitly rejected Sorokin’s approach to social stratification, calling it a “dangerous usage” and “a two-dimensional spatial analogy” and he offered an “analytical” alternative. At about the same time, knowing he had the support of influential members of the faculty to succeed Sorokin, he set up a meeting with Harvard President James B. Conant to complain about Sorokin’s administrative performance. Several years later, shortly before his elevation as chair, he told Dean Paul Buck, that the organization of sociology had been “badly bungled” and that Sorokin should never have been selected to lead a great intellectual development. Immediately upon becoming chair he fired the departmental secretary, Marjorie Noble, whom he considered too loyal to Sorokin (Johnston 1995: 155—156), and he sought to have Sorokin removed via a professorship in the philosophy of history.

Had there not been such acrimony between Sorokin and Parsons, or had they not been in the same academic department, it is possible that Sorokin might have supported the proposal of bringing Merton to Cambridge in the mid-1940s. But, in the actual circumstances, a ten-

ured appointment for Merton would likely have meant an important ally for Parsons, especially given Merton's commitment to the development of functional analysis.

An especially intriguing aspect of the Sorokin-Merton relationship is that, despite Merton's deep commitment to the "ethos of science" and its implied succession of generations, he did not wish to be elevated above his former teacher and coauthor. He likewise tended to defer to Parsons as a larger figure in sociology, even while dissenting from Parsons's approach to theorizing.

The analysis here also dealt with the factor of emotions involving two very distinguished scholars who were, first and foremost, flesh-and-blood passionate human beings. For them, the project of building a science of sociology, to which both were deeply committed, was far more than a mental exercise. It was also, always, an affair of the heart.

Sociologists have long been aware of the accomplishments of both Sorokin and Merton, as individuals. What has not been generally noticed is the linkage between these achievements, that is, the sense in which they were joint achievements. Sorokin and Merton were much more than coauthors in the 1930s during a typical teacher-student relationship. There were longtime collaborators, sometimes working directly and sometimes indirectly, who helped one another succeed over a period of four decades. And yet they sometimes did act at cross-purposes. By examining both sides of this dyadic dialectic, and also situating it within a professional triad as well as the intergenerational dialectic of ever reversing superordination and subordination, this paper has attempted to illumine both individual careers and larger dynamics of the social sciences.

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