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 subdiscipline — 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 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."

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.)**

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 solvent 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