

# THE IMPROBABLE ADVENTURES OF AN AMERICAN SCHOLAR

by Ruth W. Schultz

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

