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# The Gini-Merton Connection. An Episode in the History of Sociology and Its International Circulation

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# The Gini-Merton Connection

## An Episode in the History of Sociology and Its International Circulation

by Marco Santoro

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There was a time in which American would-be philosophers, economists, and sociologists had to go to Berlin, Heidelberg and London to get the feeling of what was happening on the edge of their discipline.<sup>1</sup> There was a time in which promising students of sociology would choose their supervisor and department because of their links with the European heritage.<sup>2</sup> That was the same time in which it could also happen that a middle aged Italian professor of Statistics and Sociology was invited to go to Harvard to teach his own theories to American students of sociology. It was not a very long time ago – just eight decades. However, this may sound strange to contemporary ears, especially if not sensitive to cultural and historical variation. In order to understand this pattern we should adopt the mind of the anthropologist or the cultural historian, and keep in mind that things could always be different after all. Indeed, this is one of the foundational insights of good sociology as well [see Becker 1998]. This is the approach I'm adopting in presenting a set of documents I first read at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University, New York, where the “Robert K. Merton papers, 1928-2003” are deposited, and where I have looked for and found the correspondence between Merton (hereafter RKM) and Corrado Gini (hereafter CG).

<sup>1</sup> This is the case of such masters of sociology as Albion Small, Robert E. Park, W.E.B. Du Bois and Parsons himself.

<sup>2</sup> This is the case of R.K. Merton, who chose Harvard for his graduate studies mainly for the European links of the head of the Sociology department. See *infra*.

The correspondence consists of ten typescript letters, five by RKM and five by CG;<sup>3</sup> they are all in English except one by CG, which is in Italian. I reproduce them in this issue<sup>4</sup> as I found them in the Merton papers: this means that Merton's letters are unsigned drafts, while Gini's are signed final copies. The interest of this correspondence is double. First, it sheds light on the early period of Merton's scholarly life, before his move to Columbia (from 1941 onward) and the starting of his collaboration with Paul Lazarsfeld at the Bureau of Applied Social Research [see Barton 1979]. Second, it testifies to an intellectual relationship – if not friendship – subsequently acknowledged by Merton himself as meaningful for his formation and as a source for his own thinking. As referred by Catherine Persell, who interviewed RKM at his home in 1984, the picture of Corrado Gini was hanging in RKM's studio along other “meaningful others” for his intellectual formation, such as Pitirim Sorokin, George Sarton, Talcott Parsons, etc. However, albeit noticed by many, the relationship between RKM and CG has never been the object of investigation, analysis or interpretation. This paper is a first step in that direction.

Surely, Merton's correspondence is a large one (it addresses nearly 650 scholars throughout the world, whose letters run from 1930 to 2003), accounting for the largest series in the collection of his papers. Robert K. Merton's whole professional career is chronicled through these letters received from and sent to colleagues in the field of sociology, and individuals acting in a variety of scholarly fields, including philosophy, English, anthropology, mathematics, and science. Correspondents include noted sociologists, such as Parsons, Sorokin, Peter Blau, William J. Goode, Lewis Coser, Juan Linz, Alvin Gouldner, S.M. Lipset, James Coleman, and Pierre Bourdieu; publishers, such as Alfred Knopf and Howard Fertig; and scholars from other fields, such as Eugene Garfield (the founder of the Science Citation Index and then of Web of Science), historian of science George Sarton, philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn, economist Paul Samuelson, cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer, statistician Stephen Stigler, biologist Stephen Jay Gould, semiotician Umberto Eco<sup>5</sup> and many others.<sup>6</sup> In his mature days, RKM made references to some of his correspondences, and in

<sup>3</sup> It includes also a postcard sent to Merton by Gini from Vallombrosa, near Florence, where Gini was on holiday, dated 18 August 1937, whose short content is not reproduced here.

<sup>4</sup> See Gini and Merton 2017, edited and annotated by M. Santoro.

<sup>5</sup> The correspondence with Eco was occasioned by an editorial event, that is the preface he was asked to write for the Italian translation [Merton 1991] of *On the Shoulders of Giants* [Merton 1985b], which was subsequently included in the new English edition of the book [1993] upon Merton's request.

<sup>6</sup> For a full list, see the website of the “Robert K. Merton Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library” at: [http://findingaids.cul.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ld-pd\\_6911309/dsc/2](http://findingaids.cul.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ld-pd_6911309/dsc/2).

a few cases he published them [e.g. Merton 1977; 1982; 1985a; 1989; 1990; 1998a]. RKM was well aware that this informal material, as “private knowledge”, could offer fresh insights on academic life and the world of science that are very difficult if not impossible to obtain through other, more public sources, such as official reports, publications or even interviews – an awareness he developed during the research years for his PhD thesis on the genesis of a scientific culture in Seventeenth century England [Merton 1938a]. These correspondences may tell a lot about the intellectual exchange between practitioners of a discipline as well as about the collegial customs of communication at the time of their writing [e.g. Merton and Thacray 1972]. Not only did RKM use letters, even *his* letters, as empirical data to support his own sociological and historical analyses – e.g. on the rise of the sociology of science, or the working of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, or the genesis and growth of a friendship – but he also made of them a stimulus for writing a whole book in form of a (mainly fictitious) correspondence between him and a colleague [Merton 1985a].

Such a treasure couldn't remain unnoticed and neglected for long, and fortunately Merton's correspondence has already been the subject of sociological investigations by French sociologists Michel Dubois [2014a] and Arnald Saint-Martin [2014]. The nature and extension of the Mertonian epistolary is such that only a selection of letters has been researched till now – e.g. Dubois's work [2014a] is based on the analysis of a sample of approximately 450 letters exchanged with more than a hundred contacts. In a subsequent article the same author has focused on a single *unit* of this global communication network: the correspondence between Merton and sociologist Seabury Colum Gilfillan, chosen as exemplary of a failed encounter, the one between the sociological studies of science and those of technology [Dubois 2014b].

Like the latter, this article focuses on a single unit, the one between Merton and Gini. It does so with two objectives. The first one pertains to intellectual history and it aims to fill a gap in current knowledge of both RKM and CG. The fact that, as a young scholar, RKM worked as a teaching assistant to CG is not a novelty. However, nobody has devoted any attention to what this relationship concretely was, how it developed and under which circumstances it worked. The second objective pertains to the sociology of sociology, or better the historical sociology of the social sciences, and it focuses on this unit of communication seeing it as a partially missed opportunity, or a failed encounter – this time between two national disciplinary cultures, i.e. Italian and early American sociology. What emerges from the Gini-Merton correspondence is a case of (unexpected) academic friendship that fails to evolve into a productive collaborative relationships [Farrell 2001], or a case of an opportunity of exchange between two individuals that fails to evolve in collaboration and circulation between two national disciplinary cultures and communities. Being in a relatively close and

affectionate relationship with whom was to become one of the leading sociologists of the second half of the Twentieth century, CG was apparently unable to detect his younger friend's exceptional talent as both a scholar and an academic entrepreneur. As sociologists know, after all, talent or genius is something that doesn't exist independently from the recognition of others [e.g. DeNora 1995]. It is precisely such a recognition that was missing. Sure, as we will see, CG recognized RKM as a serious interlocutor and a fond correspondent. But that's it. Unable or unwilling (this is something we don't have enough evidence for now) to integrate his younger friend's insights and research results into his own sociological teaching and research, CG missed the opportunity to link his own sociological work to what would arguably become the most influential brand of sociology in the postwar period. The effect was not only a missed opportunity for Gini, but for Italian sociology as well – which had to wait till the mid-1950s to re-establish some fruitful contact with RKM and the wider American discipline of sociology.<sup>7</sup>

## 1. A Tale of Two Scholars

The author of seminal books and articles now considered essential references, the revered master of an array of influential students who have become masters in their turn (e.g. Philip Selznick, Lewis Coser, Peter Blau, Alvin Gouldner, Arthur Stinchcombe, James Coleman, etc.), Robert K. Merton is credited with being the founder of the sociology of science, the champion of a structural blend of sociological theory, and an ancestor of the current vogue in analytic sociology.<sup>8</sup> Obscured for a while by Talcott Parsons – who was just eight years older than him and acted as a supervisor at Harvard when Merton was a PhD student there – since the decline

<sup>7</sup> On the relations of Italian sociology after the end of fascism and RKM see at least Mongardini and Tabboni [1998]. The list of Italian students and young scholars who went to Columbia to study with RKM (and Lazarsfeld, and their circle) is a very long one. I recall here Franco Ferrarotti, the first to win a chair in sociology in the Italian academic system (in 1960) and Filippo Barbano, who introduced RKM to an Italian readership in 1959 through the first translation of the first edition of his magnum opus, *Social Theory and Social Structure*. A second and a third edition would follow, always introduced by Barbano, along with the new editions of the book in English.

<sup>8</sup> A recent book on him begins with these words: “Robert K. Merton was among the most influential sociologists of the Twentieth century. He was the primary founder of the sociology of science, one of the clearest of all sociological theorists, and an innovator in empirical research methods. His work continues to be cited and used in the study of social structure, social psychology, deviance, professions, organizations, and culture, as well as perhaps most prominently science.” [Calhoun 2010, vii]. On Merton's place in the genealogy of analytic sociology, see Hedström and Udhen [2009]. For recent assessments see Calhoun [2010], Yehuda, Szigeti and Lissauer [2011], Mackert and Steinbicker [2013]. For a detailed reconstruction, based also on archival sources, of Merton's intellectual life while at Harvard, see Nichols [2010].

of Parsonsian functional and system theory in the 1960s, Merton has become, and has been recognized as, possibly the most consequential American sociologist, whose legacy goes much beyond that of his earlier teacher.

After graduating from Temple University in 1931, he received a fellowship for graduate study at Harvard University. His doctoral dissertation, defended in 1936 under the joint guidance of historian of science George Sarton and sociologist Sorokin, was published as his first book two years later [Merton 1938a]. Merton's contributions to sociological analysis began even earlier, however, with the publication of two influential articles: "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action" [Merton 1936a, reprinted in Sztompka (ed.) 1996], and "Social Time: A Methodological and Functional Analysis" [Sorokin and Merton 1937]. These were soon followed by "Social Structure and Anomie" [Merton 1938b, reprinted in Sztompka (ed.) 1996], a crucial article that initiated a new school in the theory of deviance. Merton stayed at Harvard as an instructor until 1939, when he accepted a position at Tulane University, in New Orleans, as associate professor and chairman of the Department of Sociology. Two years later he moved to Columbia University, as an assistant professor, where he made all his career serving on the faculty for thirty-eight years.

But who is Corrado Gini? What has to do with sociology? Well, if probably most social scientists have heard of his eponymous coefficient (the *Gini coefficient*)<sup>9</sup>, only a few of them may know that Gini has also been a reputed sociologist in his days, along with his most notorious identities of statistician and demographer. Surely, Gini was first of all a statistician, and as such he is remembered nowadays also in Italy. In some sense, we could say that Gini is to Italian statistics what Merton is to US sociology: an unavoidable reference, the genealogical point of departure of much that is known for statistics or sociology in, respectively, Italy and the United States. But Corrado Gini had also long lasting interests in the field of sociological theory – or at least for a brand of sociological theory grounded on the organismic analogy, a cyclical vision of historical change, and strong assumptions about the interconnections between biological systems and social life.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On the so called "Gini index" – one of those cultural constructs everybody heard of but few know about – see Santos and Busto Guerrero [2010], Ceriani and Verme [2012] and Selita and Kovas [2018]. For a recent survey of applications and further developments, see Yitzhaki and Schechtman [2013]. For an early application of the "Gini index" in the sociology of science (more in the tradition of Warren Hagstrom than Merton, however) see Allison and Stewart [1974].

<sup>10</sup> On the genesis, structure and history of the organismic analogy (and metaphor) in sociological theory see Levine [1995]. For a series of reasons (including Weber's and Marx' strong influence since the 1960s, the demise of Parsonsian functionalism and the resistance against sociobiology and neodarwinism) the organismic analogy has fallen out of favor in sociological theory in recent decades, to find some resurgence only in recent years [e.g. Turner and Maryanski 2008]. It is worth noting that

This is not the place to critically assess Gini's place in the history of sociology and sociological theory – a task someone should attend to however in the next future.<sup>11</sup> Suffice to say that his work in this field dates back at least to 1909, that albeit a minority in his overall production, his writings in sociological theory comprise a substantive bibliography, that several of these writings have been translated in English, French, German, Spanish since the 1920s, and that Gini has been the president of the Institute International de Sociologie for more than ten years, from 1950 till 1963 (and earlier he served as vice-president, since 1935)<sup>12</sup> – being the IIS the first and oldest professional association in the field of sociology in the world. Still, at a time when sociology was scorned by Italian philosophers and historians, he introduced sociology as a compulsory teaching in Italian university (including it in the new undergraduate Major in Statistics he founded in 1926). In 1935, he led a group of Italian scholars (which included Robert Michels) to the International Congress of Sociology in Paris, giving substance to what could be presented as “Italian sociology” – an entity he tried to give associational ground founding the next year a “Società Italiana di Sociologia”, and becoming its President.

However, since the rise of fascism Gini was also strongly linked to the new regime, becoming one of its outstanding intellectuals and spokespersons – albeit preserving a certain freedom of thought that brought him in conflict with Mussolini more than once [Cassata 2006; Ipsen 1996; Favero 2017]. In 1944 he had to leave his academic position as well as the presidency of the School of statistical sciences in Rome and of the Italian Society of Statistics (which he had founded) awaiting trial for his involvement with the regime. Albeit acquitted of the most serious charges, on January 1945 he was suspended for one year on the charge of apology of fascism. In 1946 he came back to his academic honors and duties, remaining an authoritative even if unfashionable academician till his retirement in 1961 and death in 1965. For his earlier engagements with sociology he still exerted some influence in the (re-)establishment of sociology in Italy after 1950, a process however at that point strongly affected by American cultural hegemony, and funding [Santoro 2013; Cossu and Bortolini 2017].

This “political dimension” of Gini's sociological theory will be relatively neglected in the next pages, for two reasons. The first is that Gini's sociological work

since the early 1950s, Italian students of Gini worked to update their master's sociological theories in light of the emergent system theory, from cybernetics to the Parsonsian theory of the social system. See Marotta [1959], Castellano [1950], Caranti [1950], and Dagum [1987]. Merton somehow foresaw this potentiality in his review of Gini [1935a]: see Merton [1936b].

<sup>11</sup> For first steps with reference to the history of Italian sociology, see Padovan [1999] and Santoro [2013].

<sup>12</sup> On the rise of Gini at the head of IIS, see Turner [2010] and Cassata [2011].

long predates the rise of fascism, having its roots in writings and ideas originally published in the very first decade of the new century: in a sense, Gini contributed to shape the Fascist ideology with ideas about population and social life he has been crafting since his early intellectual steps; the second is that the exchanges between Gini and Merton never exhibited political overtones, being strictly embedded in their identity as academicians and researchers.<sup>13</sup>

The correspondence published in the following article (and collected in the Merton papers)<sup>14</sup> starts with a letter by Gini to Merton, sent by the former in November 1936 from Rome, where the Italian statistician and sociologist had returned after a few months spent in the United States, as visiting professor of sociology at Harvard. Gini had been invited by Pitirim Sorokin, chair of the new Department of Sociology, and by the committee for the Tercentenary Conference of Arts and Sciences, to be held there in September 1936.<sup>15</sup> Gini was invited to participate as a speaker to one of the five Symposia of the Conference, that on “Authority and the Individual”<sup>16</sup>, as well as to be granted an Honorary Degree along with such renowned scholars as Rudolf Carnap, Bronislaw Malinowski, Carl Jung, Jean Piaget, Ronald A. Fisher and John Dewey. The arrangement for the invitation to Gini included a course on “Self-regulation of the Social Organism” drawn from his own social theory. This was not the first time that Gini had gone to the United States as a visiting professor: in 1929 he was invited to give lectures on demography at the University of Chicago (organized by the Harris Memorial Foundation on Migration and Population)<sup>17</sup>, in

<sup>13</sup> The only time Gini makes a comment on a current political event, i.e. the election of F.D. Roosevelt in 1936 [see letter November 8th, 1936], Merton didn't respond.

<sup>14</sup> In this first publication I will make reference only to the Mertonian “side” of the correspondence, i.e. to the letters as collected in the Merton Papers. The episode as represented in the Corrado Gini papers, available at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome, will be the object of a follow up article.

<sup>15</sup> The Harvard Tercentenary was a truly international event, with delegates sent by universities and learned societies from all parts of the world. In all, about 160 foreign institutions were represented; including American institutions, these were over 500. Among the scientists invited to participate to the Conference of Arts and Sciences were Rudolf Carnap (philosophy, Deutsche Universitadt, Prague); Ronald A. Fisher (eugenics, University of London); Corrado Gini (statistics and sociology, Università di Roma “La Sapienza”); Pierre Janet (psychology, College de France); Carl G. Jung (analytic psychology, Technische Hochschule, Zurich); Tullio Levi-Civita (rational mechanics, Università di Roma “La Sapienza”); Bronislaw Malinowski (anthropology, LSE). See Elliott [1999] for a full list and a detailed historical reconstruction of the event.

<sup>16</sup> The other symposia were devoted to “Factors Determining Human Behavior,” “Physical Sciences,” “Biological Sciences” – the latter two comprising the majority of invited scholars – and “Independence, Convergence, and Borrowing in Institutions, Thought, and Art.”

<sup>17</sup> Gini's reputation at the time was also based on his being the President of the Italian “National Institute of Statistics” (ISTAT), founded in 1926. Also in this capacity he was invited to contribute to the Harris Foundation Lectures in Chicago. For evidence of Gini's presence in the American intellectual debate on statistics and population see Gini [1929; 1930a; 1930b; 1930c; 1930d], and the



1930 he was in residence at the University of Minnesota during the Spring quarter as a visiting professor of Sociology<sup>18</sup>, invited by a Russian sociologist who was pursuing his career in the United States after troubles with the Soviet regime. His name was Pitirim Sorokin.

## 2. When Merton Met Gini: Harvard 1936

A European scholar (he had migrated to the USA from Russia in 1923), proficient in many languages, Sorokin had been familiar with Gini's work on sociology since 1914, and he devoted him a substantial albeit critical section of his *Contemporary Sociological Theories* [Sorokin 1928, 422-432].<sup>19</sup> It was Sorokin that provided Gini with a teaching assistant, identifying him in his then PhD student Robert K. Merton. Born in 1910, Merton had arrived in Cambridge (Mass.) in the fall of 1931 to begin doctoral studies, having just earned a baccalaureate at Temple University, in Philadelphia. There he had majored in sociology while serving as a research assistant for George Simpson – who was at that time teaching there and writing his own dissertation (on “The Negro in the Philadelphia Press”) and who would have later translated Durkheim's *The Division of Social Labor* and assisted Theodor W. Adorno in his studies on popular music for the Princeton Radio Research Project directed by Paul F. Lazarsfeld [see Jenemann 2007]. At Harvard Merton was recruited by the Russian émigré Pitirim A. Sorokin, recently appointed as full professor of sociology (the first one in Harvard, in 1930). As shown by Nichols [2010], the sociology unit at Harvard was a very small one (rural sociologist Carle C. Zimmerman would be recruited the next year from the University of Minnesota, where Sorokin had been teaching as well), so “interdepartmental” faculty was added to help.

extended critical reading by Lundberg [1931]. See also Gini [1927a] for an attempt to present Fascism in a scientific dress to an English-speaking readership. For a recent assessment of the international debate on population and biology in the interwar period, Gini included, see Ramsden [2002].

<sup>18</sup> As reported in *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 24(168), Dec. 1929: 434-435.

<sup>19</sup> The correspondence between Sorokin and Gini started in May 1927, when the former – at that time still professor at the University of Minnesota – sent a copy of his book *Social Mobility* to the Italian scholar, whose work he had read since his student years, as he would remember many years later [Sorokin 1963, 440]. Gini replied [5 June] lamenting what he considered the limited use of his work, giving the Russian scholar a few information about his research and teaching in Sociology, and sending him a series of offprints of his writings on the topic, including Gini [1927b]. A few months later Sorokin would send a copy of his recently published *Contemporary Sociological Theories*, where Gini is thanked for his “readiness to render help requested” together with L. von Wiese in Germany, Gaston Richard in France, and Ivan Pavlov in Russia. See the correspondence between Sorokin and Gini collected in the digitized “Pitirim Sorokin Collection” hosted by the University of Saskatchewan, at the link: <http://cdm201201.cdmhost.com/cdm/landingpage/collection/p201201coll4>.

Among the scholars who contributed sociological teaching were not only Talcott Parsons, at that time an instructor in economics, but also the biochemist Lawrence J. Henderson (who then led the “Pareto circle” and, since 1938, gave a course in sociology that became legendary for the people who attended it over the years)<sup>20</sup>, economic historian Edwin F. Grey (who, as Merton recalled many years later, “triggered [his] enduring sociological interest in science and technology” suggesting him “to audit Harvard’s sole course in the history of science given jointly by the biochemist and self-taught Paretian sociologist L.J. Henderson, and by George Sarton, the world doyen among historians of science” (Merton [1994], as quoted in Nichols [2010, 76]), as well as a series of invited scholars from other universities, including the ex Chicagoan William I. Thomas and the German sociologist Leopold von Wiese.

The invitation for CG was part of a wider policy promoted by the President of Harvard in order to foster exchange with other universities and enhance the training offer. Invited professors were usually asked to give two courses, plus one for the (female) students of the Radcliffe College. The small Department of Sociology included also these temporary figures who were part and parcel of the academic life. Putting together the inner faculty, interdepartmental faculty and the visiting professors, the intellectual network available to the young Merton while a PhD student (as well as a teaching assistant to Sorokin, a students’ tutor and, since 1936, an instructor) was anything but small, offering him a stimulating environment but also an “opportunity structure” available to be exploited by the young and enterprising scholar – who had to carefully navigate among the different collaborative circles and local paradigms around him, trying to better manage the inevitable tensions [Nichols 2010, 78-83].

<sup>20</sup> See Henderson [1970]. The course “Sociology 23 Lectures” was for undergraduate, but was attended also by graduate students. It stopped in 1942 because of Henderson’s death. Among those who attended it, presenting their research in progress, are Homans (who served as TA), Parsons, Elton Mayo, Conrad Arensberg, Crane Brinton. Among those influenced by Henderson, we should include also W.F. Whyte, at the time a graduate student working on his thesis on *Little Italy*.

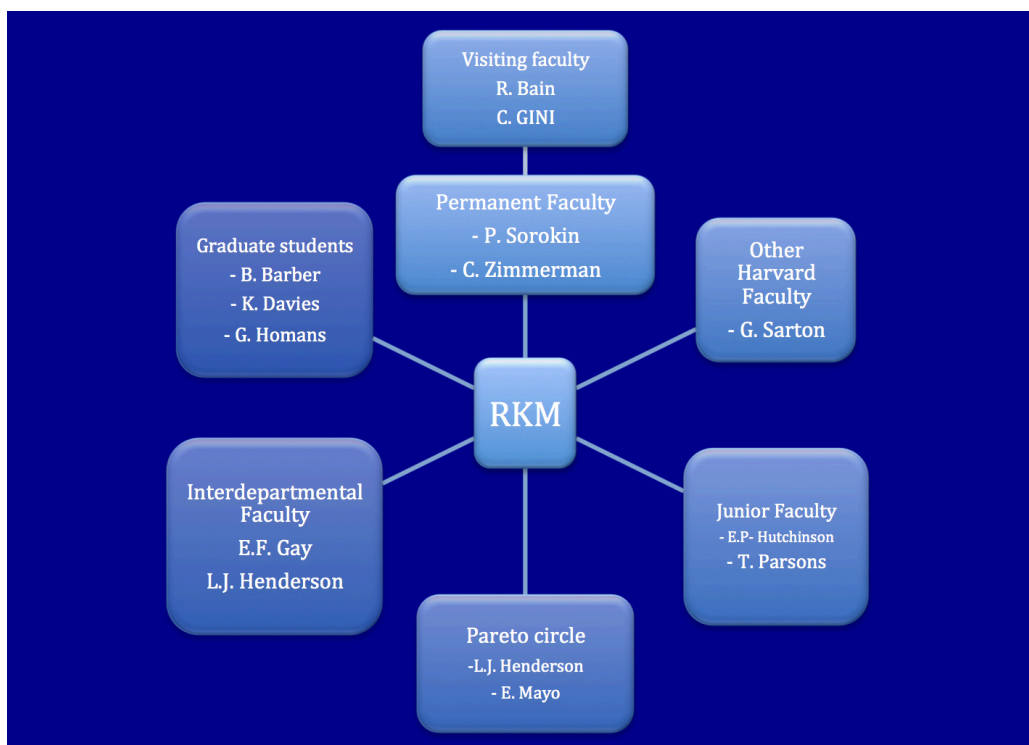


FIG. 1. Robert K. Merton's Social Network(s) at Harvard.

*Note:* People are selected also according to RKM correspondence, 1934-1939; for the inclusion of E.P. Hutchinson see the Gini-Merton correspondence [2017].

*Source:* Adapted from Nichols [2010].

As a newly appointed instructor as well as a TA for Sorokin, Merton was asked by his supervisor to assist also the invited CG. RKM didn't know Italian, so he was also asked to learn it quickly in order to help the Italian scholar to lecture in English – something the latter was not really prepared to, as he himself admits in one of his letter. This is how Merton told the whole story, fifty years later:

It happens that Gini had spent the academic year 1935-36 as a visiting professor at Harvard, preliminary to receiving an honorary degree at the grand Tercentenary of the University. It happens also that, as a graduate student there in the spring of 1935, I was *commanded* by the chairman of the Department of Sociology, professor Pitirim A. Sorokin, to acquire a firm reading knowledge of Italian by the Autumn. The reason? Starting that fall, I would be the year-long teaching and research assistant of Professor Gini (Even the masterful and sometimes imperious Sorokin did not demand that I also acquire a fluent speaking knowledge of the language). Obeying his command, I translated, during that year, a number of Gini's papers for presentation in classroom and in print [Merton 1998b, 302].<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> It is more than a curiosity to recall that these words have been written as an Afterword to a

Merton provided not only translations but also synthetic resumes of the lessons Gini would have given to students – having Merton in classroom as English-language supporter.<sup>22</sup> The course was based on *Prime linee di patologia economica*, a book that Gini published in 1935 whose content had been partially anticipated in two long articles published in 1923 [Gini 1923a; 1923b], which constituted the basis for a cycle of lessons given at the Bocconi University in Milan since that same year 1923 (the 1935 book was indeed the fourth, and much enlarged, edition of these lessons). Since 1927 Gini was also teaching a course in Sociology at the University of Rome, La Sapienza, as part of the undergraduate curriculum in Statistical Sciences he had just established. The sociology course lessons of the academic year 1927-1928 were also published – as a textbook for students – in a mimeographed form, together with the inaugural lesson of the course [Gini 1927b; 1927c]. In *Prime linee*, Gini presented the tenets of its sociological theory, applying them to a current subject in those years, i.e. economic crisis.

book devoted to Merton and edited by two Italian sociologists, which collects papers presented to him in 1987, for the first meeting of the *Incontri Europei di Amalfi*, where the American sociologist was awarded the Amalfi prize. See Mongardini and Tabboni [1998].

<sup>22</sup> I will publish a few of the available summaries and outlines in a following article. RKM's support to Gini while lecturing in Harvard's Memorial Hall has become one of his favorite stories. This is how Harriet Zuckerman retold it to me: "After countless rehearsals, (and a transliterated script Bob prepared so that Gini would get the English pronunciations right), it was clear that once launched, Gini spoke English far too quickly for anyone to understand him. He and Bob agreed that Bob (who would be sitting in the front row) must tug on his lapel (note everyone wore jackets at the time) when Gini became incomprehensible – which would then signal Gini to slow down. Of course Gini, after a good beginning, did become incomprehensible, which led to Bob to start tugging (when he told the story, he acted it out), but Gini was off to the races and paid no attention. This left Bob tugging to no avail, an outcome which seems to have led others to think he had some awful tic. The result was that most of the audience streamed out of the Hall long before Gini was finished leaving a near empty space at the end [...] Clearly the story has no intellectual significance but does say something about the tie that developed between the two of them, which put the very senior Gini under the tutelage of the very junior Bob, but in no way signaled anything important about their relative standing" [Email, 29 January 2018].

TAB. 1. *List of Book Reviews and Translations of Gini's Titles\* by R.K. Merton*

Year	Book Reviews	Translations
1936	C. Gini, "Prime Linee di Patologia Economica." <i>American Sociological Review</i> 1(2): 324-325.  E.H. Sonnabend, "Il Fattore Demografico nell'Organizzazione Sociale dei Bantu." <i>Rural Sociology</i> 1(4): 529-530.	C. Gini, "Real and Apparent Exceptions to the Uniformity of a Lower Natural Increase of the Upper Classes." <i>Rural Sociology</i> 1(3): 257-280.
1937	C. Gini, "Saggi di Demografia." <i>Rural Sociology</i> 2: 107-109.  L. Cioli, "Orientamenti e Sviluppi della Politica Economica Attraverso il Tempo." <i>Rural Sociology</i> 2: 103-104.  P. Revelli, "La Densità della Popolazione nella Storia della Geografia." <i>Rural Sociology</i> 2(2): 412-442.	C. Gini, "Problems of the International Distribution of Population and Raw Materials." <i>The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i> 189: 201-214.  C. Gini, "An Attempt to Harmonize Discordant Theories and Contradictory Observations in the Field of Social Phenomena." <i>Rural Sociology</i> 2(2): 167-179. (Not acknowledged).
1940	C. Gini <i>et al.</i> , "I Contributi Italiani al Progresso della Statistica." <i>ISIS</i> 32: 469.	

\* Including titles issued under the aegis of Gini.

Source: Author's Elaboration.

Gini's sociological theory can be read as a development of Pareto's theory of the circulation of élites enriched by a blend of biochemical system theory and statistically based population theory, that Gini himself called "neo-organicism" [Gini 1927c; 1936a; 1936b; see also Padovan 1999; Cassata 2008b; Prévost 2009; Santoro 2013; Nocenzi 2016]. However, whereas Pareto adopted a mechanistic approach congenial with his education as an engineer and his work as a mathematical economist, Gini would firmly choose an organismic one. His recognized predecessor was Renée Worms, the French sociologist who founded the Institute international de Sociologie in 1894 [see Clark 1973], an association of scholars to which Gini contributed first as a speaker in its congresses then as vice-chair (in 1936) and at last as its President (from 1950 till 1961). What Gini could do with respect to Worms, according to himself, was to build upon an improved biological theory, based on biochemical research.

What for Worms was a formal analogy could become a substantial analogy for Gini – making the comparison between organism and society a more profitable one from a heuristic point of view. Gini had however something else to add: a statistical knowledge that made it possible for him to test and integrate his theoretical ideas with empirical data. For its insistence upon the demographic factor, quite apparent in his early sociological contributions [Gini 1909; 1912; 1927b], Sorokin included Gini’s sociological theories in what he called the “Bio-social school”, as an exemplar of “Demographic sociology”. However, Gini’s contributions to the social sciences went well beyond his sociological *theories*: as a statistician and demographer, Gini never ceased to collect data and organize surveys. In the 1930s, as the President of the Italian Committee on the Problems of Population, he was engaged in empirical studies of “primitive people” and various ethnic groups all over the world [see Berlivet 2016].

To appreciate how Gini’s sociological theory could be received in that context we should recall that his ideas and concepts were resonant with what at the time was circulating at Harvard as one of the best exemplar in sociological theory, i.e. Pareto’s theory of the social system. Centered around the aforementioned Henderson, the so-called “Pareto circle” gathered a team of young scholars which included, among others: Talcott Parsons, at the time a simple instructor [1936]; George Homans, at the time a PhD student in history who would become a prominent sociologist; the historian Crane Brinton (who would authored in 1938 the classic *The Anatomy of Revolution*); and others scholars, including the economist Schumpeter [cfr. Heyl 1968; Cot 2011; Isaac 2012]. Pareto had been a major source of inspiration for Gini probably since the former’s short course in Sociology given in 1906 at the University of Bologna, where Gini graduated in Law. From Pareto, Gini drew the original inspiration of his research on the distribution of wealth – at the beginnings of the calculation of his influential index – as well as the main idea at the center of his sociological theory, the idea of social metabolism.<sup>23</sup> Not surprisingly, the list of readings provided by Gini (with RKM’s assistance, probably) for his course included the recent English translation of Pareto’s *Trattato di Sociologia* [1934] as well as introductory books to Pareto just published from members of the “Pareto circle” [Homans and Curtis 1934; Henderson 1935]. As a scientist (a biochemist), Lawrence Henderson should have been especially attracted by Gini’s biological approach. Yet, nowhere I have been able to find evidence of any relation between Henderson (and his “Pareto circle”) and Gini while the latter was in Harvard – nor the letters make any reference to them (while making reference to other Harvard scholars, such as

<sup>23</sup> For a comparison of Gini and Pareto, see Levi della Vida [1936]; for a recent assessment, Prévost [2009, 187].

the demographer Hutchinson and the historian Silverstein). To make sense of this apparent anomaly, it is useful to recall that, with the exception of Merton, the group animating and attending the Pareto seminars had no relations with Sorokin's circle and, we can imagine, his invited scholars, like Corrado Gini. In a sense, they were on two opposing fronts, the "old school" of Sorokin being superseded by the rising star of Parsons and Henderson's students and fellows (e.g. Homans, Barber, Merton himself). Gini's official involvement with Mussolini's regime could also have played a role in separating the two worlds – even if the Pareto circle was far from being politically homogenous.<sup>24</sup> However, in the absence of documents and adequate witnesses<sup>25</sup>, we can only speculate about the missing link.

Anyway, the degree to which Gini's lessons could resonate with the ideas debated in the "Pareto circle" about social system and social equilibrium is apparent from the following statement that Merton wrote in his review of Gini's *Prime Linee di Patologia Economica*:

Every society is normally in stable equilibrium, i.e., tends to recover its initial equilibrium when subjected to the action of disturbing forces which do not exceed a certain intensity or duration (mechanism of self-preservation). Moreover, the mechanism of self-reequilibration generally tends to restore equilibrium in instances where these forces are of unusual intensity. In other words, the former mechanism operates to induce recovery from slight displacements (de-equilibria); the latter from severe disturbances (disequilibria). Since these mechanisms are seldom completely effective, there results an evolution of the social system which, since it seems largely independent of the external environment, may be termed self-regulation in development. The same circumstances occurring at different phases of this development may lead to different consequences [Merton 1936b, 325].

Nowhere in the correspondence we can find statements like this, however, or even comments to them. The letters are not about sociological theory nor about that period of early acquaintanceship and collaboration, and focus instead on events and happenings occurring after Gini's return to Italy; they say little about theoretical issues, but tell us something about the kind of professional and personal relations the two men had been developing in those months, and the kind of intellectual pursuits they were engaged in those years.

The relation looks very asymmetrical, as showed by the deference with which Merton, then in his late twenties, addresses the much older and established Italian

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Homans, who was the heir of a wealthy family in Boston, did not hide he was attracted to Pareto because his ideas gave him arguments against Left-oriented students [Homans 1962, 4].

<sup>25</sup> There is no reference to Gini in Henderson's, Parsons' and Homans' writings of the period. Gini is absent also from the most valuable recent historical reconstructions of the Pareto circle, e.g. Isaac [2012].

professor (who was at the time in his early fifties). Academically, the relation started as one between a promising PhD student and an internationally renowned scholar, renowned enough to be invited to a big academic event and to be granted an honorary degree. This asymmetry is evident not only in the tone of the conversation but in its very contents. In general, Merton is much more interested in Gini's work, even the statistical one, than the reverse. This has surely to do with the well-known Merton's encyclopedic thirst of knowledge and his omnivore curiosity for any research field. However, Merton surely had a veritable esteem for Gini's scholarship, as witnessed by notations in his own writings as well as late reminiscences.<sup>26</sup> This esteem was enough to induce Merton to ask Gini's advice about some of his own research projects, and to circulate Gini's writings in American academic circles. It is probably too much to say that the young Merton acted as a spokesperson to Gini, but in fact what Merton did for Gini had much to do with what we could name academic promotion/marketing in a foreign academic field.<sup>27</sup> Merton acted not only as a translator but possibly also as a middleman for the publication in English of articles that CG had originally written and published in Italian and of reviews of his books – taking profit of the parallel birth of new sociological journals, such as *Rural Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review*, to which he could be linked through other members of the Department, like Carle Zimmerman [see Lengermann 1979; Collard 1984; Holik and Hassinger 1986]. He made himself available to review also books written under the aegis of Gini and as output of his intellectual circle,<sup>28</sup> and to distribute off-prints of Gini's writings to

<sup>26</sup> See again Merton's contribution to Mongardini and Tabboni [1998], where he refers to Gini as an "institutional master"; see also this excerpt from a letter by Merton sent to Alfredo Rizzi of the Italian CNR (National Centre of Research) in 1987: "Just today I have learned of your much appreciated intention to have a work dedicated to the statistical contributions of Corrado Gini. Having been his teaching and research assistant during the academic year of 1935-36 which he spent at Harvard University, I take great pleasure in hearing of this planned treatment of Gini's statistical work. [...] It would be of considerable interest to sociologists to have a study of Gini's sociological contributions to empirical social research and comparative sociology as well, of course, as to demography." [Letter from Merton to Rizzi, 23 October 1987, available in the *Merton Papers* in the "Correspondence with Corrado Gini" folder). For what I know, Merton's suggestion or auspice didn't translate into any research project, or at least into any published report.

<sup>27</sup> See Bourdieu [2002]. It would be probably too much to say that Merton was acquiring symbolic and social capital acting on behalf of Gini, even if we shouldn't forget his early age and above all his being at the very beginning of his academic career, when everything could work as a potential helpful resource. For what I know, just one minor item in the Merton's bibliography was published thanks to Gini's social network: see Merton [1937d]. In any case, Merton's academic career moved along institutional tracks definitely removed from those of Gini's, especially after he left Harvard for Tulane University first and Columbia then. However, we could speculate that Merton's sympathetic relation to Paul F. Lazarsfeld at Columbia could had been prepared in some way by his previous familiarity with the (European) statistician Gini and his methodological work.

<sup>28</sup> In those years Gini was strongly involved in the organization and coordination of the research



everyone who could be interested in them. Still, Merton was ready to give his advices and knowledge about Gini's work to students and scholars interested in the latter.<sup>29</sup>

What did Merton learn from Gini? Which impact did his work as a teaching assistant and translator of Gini have on his own research and thought? It is always difficult to assess intellectual influence [Zuckerman 1987], but some sketchy suggestions can be advanced, based on actual citations and less objective but possibly more revealing clues (following what historian Carlo Ginzburg famously named the “indiciary paradigm”).

Nowhere Merton explicitly recognizes Gini as a source of intellectual influence upon himself. However, there are a few passages in his writings where some influence on his thought and vision of sociological analysis may be detected, e.g. in the chapter *The Bearing of Sociological Theory on Empirical Research* [Merton 1949, 97-111].<sup>30</sup> I would suggest that the notions of “latent function” and “dysfunction” that Merton developed in his constructive criticism of functionalism were both implicitly embedded in CG's focus on, and analysis of, the “pathologies” of economic and social life [see Gini 1915; 1923a; 1923b; 1935a].<sup>31</sup> Still, we don't need to speculate too much on the impact that the reading of Gini's methodological writings could have had on the identification of the notion of “unintended effects of purposive social action” as

and publishing activities of the *Comitato Italiano per lo studio dei problemi della popolazione*, a research committee he himself had ideated and founded in 1928 to conduct demographic but sometimes also anthropological studies on both “primitive” populations and particular ethnic groups (such as the Samaritans or the Slavs). These researches were in fact usually organized as fieldwork studies (expeditions) in foreign countries, variously located in Southern Europe (included peripheral regions of Italy, e.g. Sardinia and Calabria), Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, South Africa, and Central America. See, for a reconstruction and interpretation of this impressive research enterprise, the recent Berlivet [2016].

<sup>29</sup> In April 1937 a letter arrived to RKM by a graduate student, Arthur A. Jones, from the University of Pennsylvania, asking him bibliographical help for a paper on Gini's social theory that he intended to write. Merton replied to Jones offering references and relevant information – including the list of Gini's articles that he had translated into English.

<sup>30</sup> Let me quote directly from Merton's book: “Conceptual analysis may often resolve apparent antinomies in empirical findings by indicating that such contradictions are more apparent than real. This familiar phrase refers, in part, to the fact that initially crudely defined concepts have tacitly included significantly different elements so that data organized in terms of these concepts differ materially and thus exhibit apparently contradictory tendencies. The function of conceptual analysis in this instance is to maximize the likelihood of the comparability, in significant respects, of data which are to be included in a research.” [1949, 88]. The reference to Gini is made explicit in the relative footnote: “Elaborate formulations of this type of analysis are to be found in Corrado Gini, *Prime Linee di Patologia Economica* [1935a]; for a brief discussion see C. Gini, “Un Tentativo di Armonizzare Teorie Disparate e Osservazioni Contrastanti nel Campo dei Fenomeni Sociali.” *Rivista di Politica Economica*, 1935(12), 1-24” [1949, 374]. The chapter was anticipated as an article four years earlier [Merton 1945].

<sup>31</sup> The risk of this suggestion is of course to fall into one of the fallacies in the history of ideas that RKM himself has noticed, i.e. the search for anticipations or better “adumbrations” [Merton 1961].

a crucial social mechanism and a central analytic concept in sociological theorizing, as Merton himself recognizes it in the last footnote of his now classic article [Merton 1936a, 904]. More importantly, Gini may have contributed to the development of Merton's sensitiveness to a better integration between theoretical work and empirical research, and more in general toward empirical data and their statistical treatment. Surely, Merton didn't wait for Gini to start his own empirical studies on the rate of innovations or the prosopography of scientists in modern England [Sorokin and Merton 1935; Merton 1938a], but Gini was clearly the most committed, and talented, statistician and the heaviest collector of empirical data he met in those early years of his apprenticeship.<sup>32</sup> Last, the notion of social structure could have been reinforced not only by Gini's recognition of "social classes" as element of the social system contributing to its dynamics as an effect of their differentiated demographic trends [see Gini 1909; 1930b], but also by the various studies on the "social organization" of "primitive populations" – as the Bantu [Sonnabend 1935] – he had directed, promoted, and sent in book format to his young American friend for journal review.

### 3. Looking Inside a Private Exchange

As noticed by Dubois [2014b], exchange of letters is an elementary form of asynchronous interaction between two individuals involving some exchanges and reciprocity. If this is the case, what had been circulating between Merton and Gini through their five year correspondence?

While Gini and Merton were not engaged in a master-disciple relationship of the likes Merton could have with Sorokin (his PhD supervisor and academic mentor), George Sarton (who worked in a different discipline and department, even if he was a major influence on him), and especially Parsons (who was just eight years older and an instructor in Economics at the time of Merton's graduate years, but recognized as an intellectual reference point for all those attending Henderson's Pareto seminar), some elements of this relationship seem to emerge from their exchanged letters, even if submerged in the middle of other components.

Surely, we can easily detect a purely cognitive component in this exchange of letters: as researchers and scholars, their correspondence was a vehicle for an exchange of information and knowledge (for example, when Gini asked about an article on statistical correlation whose author he wasn't able to identify, or Merton requested further information about the native Mexican population of the Seris). This cognitive component is not the dominant feature of this correspondence, however, and other

<sup>32</sup> Recall also what Merton wrote in 1987 to Alfredo Rizzi, quoted in footnote 25.

functions seem to prevail (see Figure 2 for a visualization based on the occurrence of words). There is no doubt that the correspondence was fueled by a more instrumental, strategic logic – something having to do less with research work than with academic position. For Gini this function is manifest every time he asks Merton about the reviews in American journals of books by him or by members of his intellectual circle (e.g. Sonnabend, Mukerjee, Revelli), as well as every time he sends to Merton his offprints for dissemination among potentially interested American scholars. On Merton's side this instrumental character is less evident, even if we can imagine he could only appreciate the opportunity to publish in a respected journal as *Scientia* (interestingly, Gini apparently never asked Merton to contribute to his own journals, *Metron* and especially *Genus*)<sup>33</sup>, and still more could appreciate having relations with an influential European scholar relatively well known in the States. Europe has always been an important intellectual reference for Merton (he decided to go to Harvard because of Sorokin and his European links), and a personal relation with a powerful academic man based in Rome could have some advantages.

However, the correspondence has other components as well, easily identifiable when considering forms and stylistic codes adopted by the correspondents according to their respective social statuses and academic reputations. In 1936, Merton wasn't an unknown student anymore, but he wasn't yet a recognized scholar, whereas Gini was already famous for a few seminal contributions, including his eponymous index – a mark that couldn't fail to be noticed by Merton as a sociologist of knowledge and science (the “Gini index” was still in the 1990s reminded by Merton in a short list of eponymous discoveries [Merton 1995, 379]. The deference with which RKM writes to CG is apparent, as the disposition of the younger to ask advice and support from the older (see the request of bibliography useful for RKM's course on “Social Organization”, and especially the request of suggestions and even letters of reference for the ethnographic research RKM was planning to conduct among natives while

<sup>33</sup> Founded by Gini in 1920, *Metron* was a specialized journal in statistical methodology, still active (currently published by Springer). Closer to Merton's interests was *Genus*, a journal Gini founded in 1934 (still existing and published by Springer like *Metron*) to foster an interdisciplinary approach to population studies, that worked as a venue for the publication of anthropological and sociological studies as well [see Gini 1934]. *Genus* worked for a while as a platform for Gini's sociological activities, hosting the proceedings of the Italian Sociological Society that he had founded in 1935. A few sociological, social psychological and cultural anthropological texts were reviewed in the journal when no other place existed in Italy for this kind of reviews – books and sometimes articles by Stuart Chapin, Carle Zimmerman, A.L. Kroeber, Maurice Halbwachs, Werner Sombart, Kurt Lewin, T. Lynn Smith, Margaret Mead, Robert E. L. Faris, S.N. Eisenstadt, E. Franklin Frazier, William Foote Whyte, Georges Gurvitch, Karl Mannheim, Thorsten Sellin, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, M.F. Ashley Montagu, Pitirim A. Sorokin, Hadley Cantril, Robert Redfield, Arnold Rose, J.L. Moreno, Helmut Schelsky, Bronislaw Malinovsky, J. B. Conant, William F. Ogburn, etc., but none authored by R.K. Merton.



someone put it [Castellano 1965] – and this was a sure ground of intellectual and possibly moral affinity between the two men. Noteworthy are Merton's requests of advice for a projected, but never accomplished, sociological study of Mexican natives – a research field Gini had some expertise upon for his work, as both researcher and supervisor for others' researches, in what he named "demography of primitive people", a mixture of physical and cultural anthropology he devoted much energy in the 1930s and 1940s. Maybe surprisingly to contemporary eyes, Merton communicates with some trepidation to his older correspondent also his move from more historical pursuits (represented by his PhD thesis on the social and cultural conditions of the rise of a scientific ethos in Seventeenth century England and his early researches with Sorokin on the cumulative history of innovations [e.g. Sorokin and Merton 1935] toward the analysis of social organization and social structure – a topic that would become the veritable trademark of Mertonian sociology and that Gini greeted as more scientific.<sup>35</sup>

Nowhere it appears from his letters, however, that Gini had an idea of whom Merton would have become in a decade and little more – from being a promising PhD student to an influential sociologist not only in the States but in Europe as well and possibly the world. The last letter dates back to 1940 – just nine years before the publication of what would become a truly classic in the social sciences, Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure* (STSS), whose seeds had been sown in the same years of his frequentation with Gini – and for the first time Gini seems interested in having Merton's feedback to one of his texts. It was a text on American society and culture, however, something for which Merton could be consulted as a sociologist as well as a "native".<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> In a letter in 1940, RKM announces CG that he is writing a book on social structure – a clear reference to what would have become (in 1949) the first edition of STSS, less a new book than a resonated collection of selected previous writings, many of which developed through "oral publication" at lesson [Hodges Persell 1984]. On the centrality of the idea of social structure in Mertonian sociology see Coser [1975], Sztompka [1986], Stinchcombe [1990], Crothers [2004], Marsh [2010].

<sup>36</sup> Merton's very early articles, none of which would be collected in STSS, date back to 1934-1935 and are devoted to French sociology and the social history of innovations (coauthored with Sorokin). See also Merton [1936a], not included in the book but still a "must" reference for sociologists. In his letters Merton makes reference to several contributions to *Wissensoziologie* (the "Sociology of knowledge" as "invented" and practiced in Germany by scholars like Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim), that he was publishing or writing in 1936, adding that he won't send them to Gini because he understands he "will not find them of particular interest." [See letter November 24, 1936]. For references see Merton [1936c; 1936d; 1937e]. For Merton's early career and publications see especially Nichols [2010].

#### 4. Some Provisional Conclusive Remarks

Looking at these exchanges with a truly sociological eye would help to locate them in their historical and institutional context, recognizing them as sociologically relevant documents of intellectual life and not mere anecdotic evidence of a private relationship. They testify to classifications, hierarchies (of disciplines, of countries, of languages) and even “structures of feelings” (as Raymond Williams would name them) that are different from ours. Taking them seriously helps us to reflexively consider our own classifications, hierarchies and structures of feelings. The surprising encounter between RKM – the future worldwide famous American sociologist – and CG – the nationalist Italian statistician – was indeed much less improbable at its time than we can imagine today. There was a time in which American sociology at Harvard could still be under the leadership of a Russian scholar of Komi descent<sup>37</sup> and democratic faith escaped from post-revolutionary Russia (i.e. the Soviet state), where an almost 2,000 page treatise in sociology originally written and published in Italian (the *Trattato di sociologia generale* by Pareto) could become the admired object of seminars and books by Harvard students and professors even outside sociology, and where an American PhD student and TA could be asked to learn Italian in a few weeks to help a visiting professor from the Old Europe to transmit his sociological ideas to paying students from well connected American families. This was a time, as we wrote earlier, in which Harvard had still to look at European research and education institutes to find sources of cultural legitimation – to receive titles of nobility.

The encounter between RKM and CG was indeed a sort of social experiment on its own – something that it would have been difficult to happen at the time if not in the United States. Born Meyer Robert Schkolnick, Merton came from a Yiddish-speaking, Russian-Jewish family who had immigrated to the United States just in 1904, only six years before his birth. His early life was far from easy, spent among economic restrictions and a quest for a decent and decorous life – especially felt by RKM’s mother. There was nothing for granted in his educational career, and he has often insisted on the importance of the public library system for his own, in many ways self-taught, education.<sup>38</sup> It was this early experience to inspire him still as an

<sup>37</sup> Sorokin’s mother was of Komi descent.

<sup>38</sup> In his lecture to the American Council of Learned Societies in 1994, Merton recalled that thanks to the libraries, schools, orchestras to which he had access, and even to the youth gang he had joined, his early years had prepared him well for what he called a life of learning. “My fellow sociologists will have noticed that seemingly deprived South Philadelphia slum was providing a youngster with every sort of capital – social capital, cultural capital, human capital, and above all, what we may call public capital – that is, with every sort of capital except the personally financial” [Merton 1996].

undergraduate student at Temple University, where he gained his living as a research assistant to sociologist George Simpson, engaged in his own PhD research on race relations in Philadelphia. If the American dream had some realization in the field of sociology, this was when Merton was accepted at Harvard as a PhD student at the newly founded Department of Sociology. The son of a rich landowner in Veneto (his family lived at Motta di Livenza, a small town close to Treviso, a commercial city near Venice), CG had in turn an aristocratic, elitist, hierarchical vision of life, that left its mark on all of his sociological production. A student of Law at the University of Bologna, winner of a prize for his undergraduate thesis (PhD programs were introduced in Italy only in the 1980s), CG had a prodigious and fast academic career, gaining full professorship in his early thirties first at Padua then in Rome.

Sociologically, we cannot exclude that this differential background may have had some impact on CG's reluctance to acknowledge his younger friend's talent, giving him the full credit he deserved and would deserve more and more after he moved to Columbia, published his master opus *Social Theory and Social Structure*, and became one of the stars not only of American sociology but of American academy and science. Sure, most of Merton's major contributions to social theory and social research occurred in the 1940s and 1950s, that is after Gini's visiting period at Harvard and even after the last letter of their correspondence. In the 1940s, he took part in a number of empirical projects carried out by the Bureau of Applied Social Research, including a major study of the radio campaign known as the "war-bond drive" [Merton 1946]. Several of his most influential concepts were introduced in a series of publications between 1948 and 1950. In 1948 his seminal article on the self-fulfilling prophecy came out [reprinted in Sztompka (ed.) 1996], in 1950 his important concept of reference groups was featured in a re-interpretation of Stouffer's *American Soldier* studies [Merton and Rossi 1950], and in 1949 his monumental volume, *Social Theory and Social Structure* came to light, bringing together the results of his various investigations and establishing the foundations of his theory of functional analysis [Merton 1949 (1957; 1968)]. However, RKM's early articles were far from being "common" or "standard" contributions. Suffice to recall here his 1936 article on the unintended consequences of purposive social action and his 1938 article on anomie and deviance, which would have set the terms for at least twenty years of research on this matter. Still, his editorial skills and talents – *extraordinaire* as would have been qualified by Eugene Garfield [1983] – were already evident to others, such as George Sarton, who nominated him as an associate editor to his journal *Isis*.

So, why did Gini fail to develop a stronger and lasting relationship with RKM? Clearly, it takes two to make a relationship, and we should consider also the reluctance by RKM to keep such a relationship with a geographically distant, middle-aged

scholar, whose intellectual references were more backward-looking than future-oriented. Looking at RKM's scientific production in the months immediately following the last letter of his correspondence with CG, what strikes is the apparent disappearance of the latter: surprisingly, CG is never referred to in the article RKM publishes just after his move to Columbia – but based on a research conducted while at Tulane – on such a very “Ginian” topic as marriage [Merton 1941].

However, there are other stronger candidates for making sense of this reluctance, I think. One is the entry of Italy in war against the United States, which could only reinforce CG's deeply rooted Anti-Americanism, i.e. his long lasting diffidence toward American society and culture not just as a source of genuine cultural innovation but as a place of civilization as such – a diffidence that CG often exhibited in his own writings, especially in his last book centered on the American culture of labor [see Cassata 2005]. The second is the cultural if not political belonging that couldn't but outdistance the liberal, democratic, antiracist, American sociologist from the conservative, (ex)fascist, prone to racism – albeit supported on a presumed (but poorly demonstrated) scientific ground – Italian statistician *and* sociologist. We should maybe discuss now CG's alleged racism<sup>39</sup>, but this would make for another article and could not be that relevant in this context, as “race” never appears in this correspondence as a topic or even a passing reference. Anyway, it would be hard to argue that CG didn't believe in the existence of human races and to neglect that he worked hard almost all his life to find supposedly scientific evidence of them, that his international professional network especially after WWII included many believers in racial inequality like him (well located in both his early eugenic circles and the whole establishment of the Institute International de Sociologie, that he chaired for more than a decade since 1950), and that for these deeply rooted beliefs he put himself firmly against UNESCO, with its sociological derivation, the newly founded International Sociological Association (ISA), in the immediate postwar period.<sup>40</sup>

This introduces the third – possibly the most effective – factor, that is the vision RKM and CG had of sociology as a discipline. While RKM's vision was clear-

<sup>39</sup> See Cassata [2008a; 2008b; 2011]. R.K. Merton's position against “biological determinism” was made clear in Merton and Montague [1940] – in fact a detailed, critical and methodological analysis of two books authored by the American criminologist E.A. Hooton, where no reference is made to Gini's work, however [but see p. 384 for a reference to the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso].

<sup>40</sup> On this front, the Gini-Merton relationship shows strong similarities with the Gilfillan-Merton one, examined by Dubois [2014b]: like Gini in the 1920s and 1930s and even later, Gilfillan was committed to eugenics in the late 1960s, and if Merton could have but “little intellectual and ideological affinity with [Gilfillan] in this matter”, the same judgment applies *a fortiori* to his relation with Gini. On eugenics from an historical point of view see at least Cassata [2011], and more in general Bashford and Levine [2010].



ly one that claimed for sociology a full status as an autonomous disciplinary field, to be furthered and institutionalized in and for itself, possibly including inside its boundaries other disciplines or branches of social knowledge as demography, criminology and the methodology of social sciences (an objective he cultivated along with Lazarsfeld)<sup>41</sup>, for CG sociology was always intended and practiced as an element in a larger field, which should included many social science disciplines such as demography, sociology, anthropology, social psychology etc., all clearly to be subordinated to what was for him the queen of science, Statistics [Prévost 2009; Favero 2017]. Put it simply, Merton and Gini had not only different but also contradictory intellectual and academic projects, which could only amplify their distance over time. At last, their promising relationship remained a personal one, firmly located in their memory at best (at least, we have evidence that this was the case with Merton), their consequences never trespassing the boundaries of a private affair.

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<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting that the course of Merton's career paralleled the growth and acceptance of sociology as a legitimated academic discipline in the United States. At the time of Merton's entry into the sociological profession in the 1930s there were fewer than 1,000 sociologists in the United States. When Merton was elected president of the American Sociological Association in 1957, there were 4,500 members. Merton's career paralleled also the growth of American sociology in the global sociological field: see on this rise Calhoun [2007], Fleck [2011] and, with specific reference to a scholar very close to Merton, Pollak [1979]. The price of a growing centrality, if not domination, for US sociology has been the loss of its original cosmopolitan character, and the rise of parochialism: see Lie [1995].

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## The Gini-Merton Connection

### An Episode in the History of Sociology and Its International Circulation

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Abstract: R.K. Merton's correspondence is a large one (it addresses nearly 650 scholars throughout the world, whose letters run from 1930 to 2003). This article focuses on a single unit, the one between Merton and the Italian statistician, demographer and sociologist Gini, from 1936 to 1940. The interest of this correspondence is double. First, it sheds light on the early period of Merton's scholarly life, before his move to Columbia (from 1941 onward) and the starting of his collaboration with Paul Lazarsfeld at the Bureau of Applied Social Research. Second, it testifies to an intellectual relationship – if not friendship – subsequently acknowledged by Merton himself as meaningful for his formation and as a source for his own thinking. The fact that, as a young scholar, Merton worked as a teaching assistant to Gini while the latter was visiting professor at Harvard (1936) is not a novelty. However, nobody has devoted any attention to what this relationship concretely was, how it developed and under which circumstances it worked. The article has therefore two objectives. The first one pertains to intellectual history and it aims to fill a gap in current knowledge of Merton's relationship to Gini. The second objective pertains to the sociology of sociology, or better the historical sociology of the social sciences, and it focuses on this unit of communication seeing it as a partially missed opportunity, or a failed encounter – this time between two national disciplinary cultures, i.e. Italian and early American sociology. What emerges from the Gini-Merton correspondence is a case of (unexpected) academic friendship that fails to evolve into a productive collaborative relationship [Farrell 2001], or a case of an opportunity of exchange between two individuals that fails to evolve in collaboration and circulation between two national disciplinary cultures and communities.

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*Keywords: RK Merton; Corrado Gini; Intellectual Correspondence; International Circulation of Ideas; Harvard University; Sociological Theory; Organicism; Functionalism; Fascism.*

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