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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Edward Tiryakian about Erving Goffman entitled "Parsons Was About 5'6" or 5'5" but When He Started to Speak, He Got to Be Six Feet Five"

Edward Tiryakian
Duke University

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Remembering Talcott Parsons and Pitirim Sorokin

Parsons Was About 5'6" or 5'5" but When He Started to Speak, He Got to Be Six Feet Five

Edward Tiryakian

This interview with Edward Tiryakian, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Duke University, was recorded on August 23, 2011, at the Mediterranean Café in Las Vegas. Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, after which Dr. Tiryakian edited the transcript and approved posting the present version in the Goffman Archives. Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. Supplementary information and additional materials inserted during the editing process appear in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as "[?]" The interviewer's questions are shortened in places.

[Posted 09-02-2013]

Shalin: OK, I think it is working. Today is August 23, I believe, Tuesday.

Tiryakian: 2011.

Shalin: 2011. Very important – ten years from now we'll forget. Edward Tiryakian is good enough to humor me and to talk about his experiences in the field. I would like to start with your parents. Did they have any impact on your choice of profession and career? After that, a little bit about your teachers, as far back as you can remember. Then, you can speak of how you came to sociology.

Tiryakian: My grandparents were professionals in the Ottoman Empire. They did not know each other but they were both born in Constantinople in the second half of the 19th century. My grandfather on my maternal side had been an agronomist. He got his degree in France at a well known school of agronomy. And his father had been the first Christian ambassador in the Ottoman Empire in charge of postal administration.

Shalin: Seems like well placed positions.

Tiryakian: Yes, the modernizing sultans in the 1830s and 1840s opened the bureaucracy to the minorities, and the relations were quite good. Being a person with this background, he was sent to France to a postal congress. Unfortunately, there was a cholera epidemic and he died in France.

Shalin: Which year, roughly, was it?

Tiryakian: The cholera epidemic was somewhere around 1850. My maternal grandfather, I mentioned before, was an agronomist. In 1896, a Turkish friend told him there were problems coming because there was a new sultan who was a bit schizophrenic or paranoid. He started to see the economic problems in the empire as being due to the minorities, especially the Armenians. So the Turkish friend told my maternal grandfather, "You better think of leaving." He took the hint, took his family and went west to Egypt. Egypt was a semi-autonomous province. Now going back to my paternal side, my grandfather on my paternal side had trained in law and medicine and then gone to Paris where he got his medical degree. I had found his dissertation, his thesis, in the Bibliothèque nationale.

Shalin: Do you remember his name?

Tiryakian: He was Dr. Ashod Tiryakian.

Shalin: That's the paternal side. What was the name of your ancestors on the maternal side?

Tiryakian: Agathon. Originally, they had an Armenian name. When they came to Constantinople around 1700s, they changed it to Agathon. It was easier [that way]. My paternal grandfather had started to practice medicine, and when his friend told him to leave, he took his family, my father, west. By crossing the desert they got to Teheran. He was a Free Mason, and he became a doctor at the Shah's court, but then decided after a while that he should think of reestablishing himself. So he sent his oldest son, my father, to the United States. My father came here in 1907 [**laughing**] to work for an uncle who had already come.

Shalin: And your father's name is. . .

Tiryakian: His first name is Ashod. My father established himself pretty well, went to Europe after World War I to find a wife in the Armenian community.

Shalin: In Turkey?

Tiryakian: Oh, no, in Switzerland. The grandfather in the Egyptian branch of the family had done very well in the cotton industry, retired, took his family in retirement, to Switzerland. I should speed up this narrative.

Shalin: Oh, no. Don't worry. Such details disappear from history so fast, and they are of considerable value.

Tiryakian: So, my father came to Switzerland, met my mother, married her, brought her to the States in 1921-22. I was born in 1929. After me – the crash.

Shalin: "Crash" meaning the Depression of 1929?

Tiryakian: Yes. October was a big crash, and I was born in August. Not only did my father have to take care of myself, his wife, he also had to, as the oldest child, to care for his two brothers and two sisters. The economic crash just destroyed him. So my mother took me to Europe where her retired father was to ease things financially.

Shalin: You were an American citizen already.

Tiryakian: She was an American citizen, I was born in the States, but at the age of six months I went to France where my grandfather has an apartment in Nice. So for the next nine years I was there.

Shalin: So your schooling started in Switzerland?

Tiryakian: In France. My first three years in school I learned the

history of the world through the French eyes.

Shalin: So your first language was French.

Tiryakian: My heart speaks in French, my head in English. Many years later I was doing some field research in Quebec on French autonomy. I gave a seminar in French on nationalism at the University of Laval and at Concordia University in Montreal in English. They knew I was giving a seminar on nationalism. So I gave the seminar in Concordia with very different reactions, which I did not expect. I found students at Laval whom I expected to be very nationalist and so pitched my discourse on the rights of people to independence, but they did not like that discourse at all. That surprised me. I said, "I don't seem to be connecting with you, people?" Well, it turned out that at the seminar, there were a couple of older people in Quebec who did not like separatist talk at all. There were also some immigrants from the French speaking areas in Africa who were sort of uneasy as to what nationalism could do to immigrants. In Concordia, which I thought was a state English place, students loved the nationalism because they were much more anti-establishment.

Shalin: Which year was it?

Tiryakian: That was 1973. But my peak experience in bilingualism . . . once a week I would go to Montreal and speak nothing but English, then in Laval nothing but French. I had a beautiful dream one night – I was talking in French, and then English subtitles appeared in my dream [**laughing**].

Shalin: Funny, that's true bilingualism.

Tiryakian: Anyway, back to 1939, just about this time of the year, the American Consul sent a letter to all American citizens living in the Southern Region of France, saying there were war clouds appearing, we advise you to go back to the States. My mother took the hint. This is another bit of history. Just as my grandfather took a hint 1896, my mother took the hint and booked tickets on an Italian ship leaving from Genoa.

Shalin: You were about 10 years of age at the time.

Tiryakian: I just turned 10. August 31 we took the train to Genoa, we spent the night at the hotel, next morning we got on Conte di Savoia. At 10 in the morning, September 1st, 1939, the announcement come on the ship that war had been declared and Germany invaded Poland. The ship leaves and half an hour later there is an announcement that a German submarine is following us. That made a strong impression on me. I made a few sketches of the submarine.

Shalin: You could see it?

Tiryakian: It was not underwater. But you see, Dmitri, in September of 1939 it was not known if Italy was going to join the war on what side. Anyway, I come back to the States in September. What I did not realize at the time was the symbolic significance of the apartment house where my father lived. It was the Princeton Apartment.

Shalin: You landed at Princeton?

Tiryakian: No, we lived in the suburbs of New York City. But when it came to thinking where I want to go to college – my father has passed away – my mother encouraged me to [this]. I visited Cornell, Columbia, and Princeton. I was [interested] in Princeton not only because I lived in the apartments called “Princeton” but because my mother remembered that when she was much younger living in Europe at the time of the Versailles Treaty, Woodrow Wilson made a very strong impression on European population. Wilson was Princeton’s president before becoming American president in 1912.

Shalin: So you are back in the United States. Did you go to school at . . .

Tiryakian: Public school in Mt. Vernon, New York. And suddenly within a year I had become an American again.

Shalin: Did you know English?

Tiryakian: No. My mother always spoke French to me, so I kept it.

Shalin: Did your mother stay at home?

Tiryakian: My father died in 1944. I only knew him for five years. My mother was widow.

Shalin: She didn't remarry?

Tiryakian: No.

Shalin: How did you feel in the U.S. after France? Was it traumatic?

Tiryakian: No, I can't say it was traumatic maybe because the school where I went had other people my age – there were Japanese, there were Italians. I went out for baseball, shared the school. I don't think there was a problem in American society. The high school where I went to in Mt.Vernon (A.B. Davis HS) had the most famous alumnus– Dick Clark – in the class ahead of mine. I don't know if the name means anything to you.

Shalin: I don't think so.

Tiryakian: Well, the New Year's Eve is a television broadcast from the New York Times Square, and Dick Clark presided there for years and years. He was probably the most popular [person] in our high school. I graduated from high school in 1948. But there was also an African-American elected class president in 1948. What I am trying to say is that in the 40s, American society was a melting pot.

Shalin: Although during the war Japanese didn't fare that well in that melting pot.

Tiryakian: No.

Shalin: Now, at what point did you begin to feel an intellectual stirring toward sociology, philosophy?

Tiryakian: Well, number one, I always had good teachers in junior high school and in high school. I always had stimulating teachers. When I entered college I thought of medicine, maybe because of my grandfather. So my first two years I was essentially a premed. My first two years in college I thought of medicine as a career. I thought of doing clinical research on some bad things, like cancer research. I did very well in biology courses. The idea of doing experiments on animals . . .

Shalin: Did not appeal to you?

Tiryakian: I did not mind working on cadavers, but working on live animals did not appeal to me for whatever reason. So after two years I was looking for something else to major in. I took a sociology course. I took two sociology courses in my first two years as electives. It was interesting. Being only child to deal with groups and societies was sort of exciting. I took a course with a sociologist at Princeton by name of Melvin Tumin – T-u-m-i-n, who was in anthropology and sociology. He was very human.

Shalin: Humane?

Tiryakian: Yes. He invited me to his house. To be an undergraduate and invited to somebody's house was something very special – so I majored in sociology.

Shalin: In your third year you switched your major to sociology.

Tiryakian: Third year is when you start majoring. I took all the sociology courses and psychology and philosophy. And the person whom I found most fascinating intellectually was a young instructor who was just in his second year of teaching. Nobody seemed to understand what he was saying. But I have taken enough of philosophy to say this guy had a brilliant way of talking about crime

and deviance, the young man by the name of Harold Garfinkel.

Shalin: Oh, you took classes with Garfinkel! Which year would that be?

Tiryakian: 1950.

Shalin: Did he finish his Ph.D.?

Tiryakian: Well, there is a little story. At Princeton in the spring semester you have to take oral exams.

Shalin: As an undergraduate?

Tiryakian: Yes. I had taken a course with Garfinkel, so he was one of my examiners. My roommates poured me lots of beer before I went to the exam.

Shalin: Poured where?

Tiryakian: Into a glass. This was 6:30 at night, so I went to his office a bit tipsy. We had been on first name basis. "Harold, how are you!?" He looked at me looking deadly serious, "Please, this is an exam situation." This is a little bit [like] Goffman. He said, "Now, on this blackboard I put in two-by-two cells, the whites and blacks [engaged] in serious and non serious crime, and I want you to fill in the expected distribution of cells." Now, this was totally new to me [**laughing**], totally new! I was thinking, "My god! What do I do?" There was a deadly pause, and then Garfinkel broke into a big smile and said, "I just got the news today that they accepted my dissertation, let's get out and celebrate."

[**Laughter**]

Shalin: Wonderful story! Tell me a bit more about Harold as a person, how was he in the classroom?

Tiryakian: He was a showman. He could speak with great intensity and then pull back to make you see aspects of social . . . I

went on to read his dissertation. Have you read his dissertation?

Shalin: No, I didn't.

Tiryakian: His two volume dissertation.

Shalin: He didn't publish it.

Tiryakian: No, he didn't want to publish it. [It has two parts]. The first part is a very theoretical phenomenological discussion of the world of objects. . . . After this theoretical [part] he got the subjects at Harvard to sit down with transcripts and he gave them the following instructions: "You will hear the dean of admissions at Harvard Medical interviewing several prospective students. When you hear a student's response which you think might help his admission, check it." So the voice comes after these transcripts as it's the dean interviewing the students. One kid [is asked], "Why do you want to become a doctor?" "I come from a Jewish family in New York and medicine is the way to make money." The other kid, "Why do you want to become a doctor?" "Well, there are four generations of doctors in my family, and I feel like I have to give back to humanity." So Garfinkel comes back into the room, collects what students have done, and says, "Now, you are going to hear the evaluations of the dean to the admissions committee, and if you think there should be any changes in your scoring, let me know." You hear the dean of admissions, "The first person is the kind of a level-headed person who is going into medicine with open eyes, he will be a very good doctor. The other person is just doing it only because such are family expectations." It is about the cues, how others perceive the situation. So it is very ingenuous. See, there is a lot of deception in what Garfinkel has done.

Anyway, I had to make a decision do I want to go to law school or do I want to . . . Because Marion Levy who was also teaching in the department and had a Harvard Ph.D. encouraged me to go to study with Parsons. Mel Tumin was the other guy. Garfinkel was leaving – he got his Ph.D. at Harvard, right? So people were encouraging me to [go to] sociology. At the same time I felt that law would be a

stepping stone for me for international career and international law. I thought, "OK, I'll apply to law school and to graduate school." And I applied to Harvard Law, Yale Law, and to Social Relations – sociology – at Harvard. I got accepted by all of them. I was flipping coins, but then I thought, "I know what I can do. I will go to Harvard, and by going to Harvard I can start my two years of sociology and two years of law school, and then in my fifth year do sociology of law."

Shalin: You decided to kill two birds with one stone.

Tiryakian: So, I went to [Harvard] and got Parsons to agree to be my advisor. That was a golden age at Social Relations.

Shalin: That was nineteen fifty – what?

Tiryakian: Two. There were about 12 or 15 others in my cohort, many of whom I still have contact with.

Shalin: Renée Fox was there.

Tiryakian: A year before. Bob Bellah was also a year or two [before me]. Neil Smelser was a year before. And there was a very famous seminar that had Parsons, Florence Kluckhohn, wife of Clyde, Kluckhohn, and Sam Stouffer. The three of them gave a seminar year in and year out. Parsons did the theory, Kluckhohn did more of anthropological field research, and Sam Stouffer – statistical and quantitative [methods].

Shalin: What was the name of this seminar?

Tiryakian: I don't remember the name of it. There was a very long table, and there were visitors allowed. When I took that seminar, Alain Touraine came and Guy Swanson came as visitors. Students enrolled and sat around the table. The visitors sat against the wall. There was a stratification system. Parsons was right at the head of the table. Next to him was Florence and then Sam Stouffer. On the right of Parsons there were the most advanced graduate students like Neil Smelser, Jessie Pitts.

Shalin: Was there a formal criterion and everybody knew their pecking order?

Tiryakian: Yes.

Shalin: I found something similar at Columbia University when I came to the U.S. Even though I already had a Ph.D., I felt I could use another one from Columbia. My teacher knew Robert Merton and through this connection I enrolled at Columbia where I stumbled into Merton's sociology of science seminar that he co-taught with Harriett Zuckerman. When I had first enrolled I sat down at the table along with other students. There were empty seats there. Then Harriet came to me and said. "Would you please move to the side? Those seats are reserved for regular students." I understood her well but couldn't believe my ears. Couldn't she have waited to tell me afterwards rather than announce it in a way that others could hear? That's when I realized that being formally enrolled in the class is not enough, that your place at the table is determined by the pecking order.

Tiryakian: Yes, informally it was by the seniority of graduate students. The first year I was way back and I could observe them. There is always an observer in me and I could observe the interactions. And it was pretty exhilarating, I mean, look at all these people! I noticed that when Parsons spoke . . . Parsons was about 5.6 or 5.5, when he came to the room and started to speak, he got to be six feet five. He had a real intellectual charisma.

Shalin: I heard that as a public speaker he didn't always shine.

Tiryakian: We-e-ll, he was not an exciting speaker but he said things intellectually and authoritatively, so that he commanded your attention. Sometime he would say things which I thought were trivial, but when he looked at you . . . Near the end of the hour he looked at me and . . . whatever he said, I started to nod. I thought, "This was stupid of me."

[Laughter]

Shalin: Did you stop nodding once you realized what you were doing?

Tiryakian: It's very hard to realize. I will close this episode with another vignette because I don't want to stay here forever and bother you.

Shalin: This is wonderful! Maybe we could continue at another time.

Tiryakian: I'd like to go to a 2:30 session. But we have another hour.

Shalin: We are only ten minutes away.

Tiryakian: So there was a break after an hour. It was a three hour seminar, so after an hour and a half [we would break]. It's my first day of the seminar with Parsons. People go to the restroom on the break, right? I am at man's urinal, thinking, "Wow, this is so exciting!" Then I look and in comes Parsons to a urinal next to me.

Shalin: **[Laughing]**

Tiryakian: And he looks at me, and I look at him, thinking, "What great things could I say? I mean what do you say – I am glad to see you **[laughing]**?" Forty five seconds later I didn't say a word, he didn't say a word, and he leaves. I am thinking, "Ah, I should have said something like, "Dr. Livingston, I presume?" . . . But I couldn't think of anything but "I blew it, I blew it!"

Shalin: You missed a chance to get close to a great man.

Tiryakian: Anyway, I had a good fortune of having Parsons, and that same semester I took a seminar with Clyde Kluckhohn and one with Gordon Allport, I got to know Florence Kluckhohn and her husband. It was just later that I got . . . to know Homans taking his

course on social organization and later as his teaching assistant.

Shalin: Tell me a little bit more about Parsons, his classroom habits, his ways outside the classroom.

Tiryakian: There was in a sense two Parsons. In a course that he was giving with you in the audience – that was that Parsons. He was also very actively working on expanding his theory. What was very important to Parsons was to extend his theory with students who were willing to put in extra time to work out the social system, and so forth. I went to a couple of those sessions which could last two hours, three hours, four hours, those mini-workshops kind of things. There was sort of an inner sanctum . . . disciples, and after a while I thought that I have to be my own person. . . .

You mentioned a big biography of Weber. I don't know if you know Fournier who published in French a biography of Mauss and a big biography of Durkheim which is just being translated into English.

Shalin: I would like to see it.

Tiryakian: Well, I'd like to know your reaction to it. I think it is so detailed that it doesn't [give] a big picture. But still, as far as I know, what would be a really big blockbuster would be a biography of Parsons, a major professional career that everybody knows.

Shalin: It hasn't been written yet?

Tiryakian: Do you want to do it? [**Laughing**]

Shalin: No, no. He doesn't inspire me in a way Goffman does. Renée Fox just published her memoir *In the Field* where she has a chapter on Harvard and Parsons. You might be interested to read it.

Tiryakian: She is a very sweet person, I like her very much.

Shalin: Coming back to Parsons, he was quite conscious of his legacy and looking for students who could continue his work.

Tiryakian: What is important is that Parsons had a conceptual frame, that he was always expanding this frame to incorporate new dimensions. It wasn't a two-by-two [schema]. Let's say he met you for the first time: "What are you working on?" "Well, I am interested in emigration and personality and social [order?]" "Oh, that's very interesting! Let's talk about it." That was what made Parsons take away from Sorokin the best students who came in the 1930s. Merton was the first student to register in the new department. Then the whole bunch – Bernard Barber, Jack Riley. By the end of the decade, they switched to Parsons.

Shalin: I imagine Sorokin didn't like that.

Tiryakian: That's putting it very mildly. There is nothing worse for an academic than to have your students defect to somebody else in the same department. The antipathy of Sorokin to Parsons stands [out?]. As I look at it, I ask myself a question, "What's a difference?" I found him to be an intellectual giant, but there is a difference. Sorokin had the European training and style of giving conferences – you take notes. But you could not teach Sorokin anything. He knew everything. What could you teach Sorokin?

Shalin: He was very well read.

Tiryakian: He was so well read, and he was so dogmatic in some ways. I happen to agree with a lot of what he has to say on sensate culture and so forth, but what could I say that he would not have known. With Parsons, I could say, "Look, I see some interesting linkages between Jaspers [?] and what you are doing." And Parson would say, "That's very interesting." Somebody else would come and say, "I think Marx is [?]." . . . Parsonse was always inviting students to contribute. That made a big difference. And I happened to be in my second year; at the start of the second year you find out whether or not you have a teaching fellowship, which was a major stipend. I went to see the executive secretary of the department and she said, "I have good news and bad news. Good news you have been awarded a fellowship on the basis of what you did your first year." "What's the bad

news?" "You have been assigned to Professor Sorokin."

Shalin: [Laughing] Were you chagrined?

Tiryakian: You have to understand, Dmitri, that in the sociology graduate student world Sorokin was almost a pariah figure. He did not teach any graduate course.

Shalin: Why not – because students wouldn't take them?

Tiryakian: I am not sure if it was because he was shunted.

Shalin: Was he teaching undergraduates?

Tiryakian: Yes. So I was assigned as his teaching assistant that fall.

Shalin: Was it in '54?

Tiryakian: '53. The executive secretary said, "Don't worry, in the spring we'll assign you to somebody else."

Shalin: What was your reaction?

Tiryakian: I said, "Well, OK." I mean, "I will see what there is." Then I started listening to Sorokin and I thought, "This is wonderful!" I was his teaching assistant, he didn't pay that much attention to me until, I don't know, a third into semester telephone call came for Professor Sorokin's secretary that Professor Sorokin has laryngitis and cannot give tomorrow's lecture. He wanted to know if I would like to give a lecture in his place or I would like to cancel the class. I said, "What's the topic?" And she said, "Herbert Spencer." I said, "Of course I'll do it." Herbert Spencer was as much of a pariah figure. Have you ever read the *Structure of Social Action*?

Shalin: Sure.

Tiryakian: OK, who now reads Spencer? She called me when it

must have been, I don't know, one o'clock in the afternoon, and this course may have been the next day at 11 o'clock. I went to Widener Library, took a stack of books on Spencer, and put together a lecture on Spencer. It probably was well received. I guess he heard about it, then he started taking interest in me. Two weeks later he called me into his office and said, "Tiryakian, I've got a letter from a friend of mine at Duke University and they have an assistant professorship – do you want it?"

Shalin: And you were only in your second year?

Tiryakian: So I said, "Professor Sorokin, that's very fine of you, but there are two problems." "What?" "Well," I said, "first of all, I haven't passed my comprehensives yet." He said, "Oh. What's your second problem?" I said, "I don't know where Duke University is." He said, "I've got a map." He showed me on the map. Little did I know that I'd wind up at Duke University. But we became very good [friends]. Well, that semester I was his teaching assistant. Sometime in November, I never forget, he came with copies of a mimeograph which became a sort of an underground thing. What he has done was on one side he put excerpts from Parsons' *Social System* and on the other side excerpts from the text that Sorokin had in *Society, Personality, and Culture*. The language was very similar.

Shalin: That was a personal attack on Parsons.

Tiryakian: He essentially said, "Plagiarism."

Shalin: Oh, and he distributed it?

Tiryakian: And charged me with distributing this to the class!!

Shalin: Your undergraduate students?

Tiryakian: Yes.

Shalin: Undergraduate students generally are not involved with department politics.

Tiryakian: . . . He was also writing a book on fashion, foibles, and sociology, so the way he put it, "It is very interesting how you have these parallels in sociology." Anyway, that document was circulated. For me that was very very embarrassing because Parsons was my advisor.

Shalin: Did Parsons reciprocate Sorokin's animosity?

Tiryakian: OK, I'll skip a few years . . . Then I became an assistant professor at Princeton.

Shalin: You didn't go to Duke.

Tiryakian: No. . . . And I thought there should be some public recognition of Sorokin, like a Festschrift. Marion Levy had been at Harvard, he was a departmental colleague. Wilbert Moore was a departmental colleague and he had the exposure at Harvard to him. So I got those two as contributors, then [brought in] Merton, Bernard Barber. Somebody told me that Sorokin's good friend in France was Georges Gurvitch. I had problems with his essay but . . . actually it was a very good essay on the multiplicity of social times. Then somebody said, "Are you going to have Parsons?" And I thought, "Oh, hell, what shall I do?" So I wrote to Parsons. I always addressed him "Professor Parsons" for many years. "Would you be willing to . . ." And he sent me an essay. If you ever look up the volume that I did, *Sociological Theory of Values and Sociological Change* (Transaction published a reissue in 2013 with a new introduction of mine), the essay that Parsons put there turned out to be a very significant essay for his developing the notion of differentiation of values from the seedbed societies of Israel and Greece. It was a very fine piece. I never heard Parsons say anything critical of Sorokin, although if somebody said you plagiarized him [**laughing**] . . .

Shalin: Parsons knew about Sorokin's attack.

Tiryakian: He must have known.

Shalin: The essay was not related to Sorokin. It was a contribution to theory.

Tiryakian: It was on the evolutionary values and religion. Now, Sorokin wrote an essay in a European journal . . . Parsons' perspective on religion is rather optimistic. Sorokin wrote an essay on religion in sensate societies, which paints a much more pessimistic, bleak picture. He sent me a copy of the essay with [a note]. That's my answer to Parsons [**laughing**]. I don't think Sorokin had ever gotten over losing students. . . . Parsons knew much economic history.

Shalin: Parsons was a gentleman in this spat.

Tiryakian: There were other people who took pot shots at Parsons. I was thinking of C. Wright Mills.

Shalin: Did you know him personally?

Tiryakian: No. But Parsons wrote criticism of Mills, Mills wrote a criticism of Parsons. Dennis Wrong [did the same]. I mean, there were so many people taking potshots at Parsons. I think what hurt Parsons, maybe more than anything else, is that in the late 1960s when he retired and was no longer a powerful person, Homans became chair of the department and yanked Parsons out of his office. "Sorry, you are retired – no office."

Shalin: That was standard practice or was it directed specifically against Parsons?

Tiryakian: I think it was very much against Parsons. Now, Homans, he was OK, but he knew he was not of the same intellectual level, and he sort of took revenge on Parsons by taking away his office. At the same time there was potshot criticism, for example, from a couple of the Indiana people. If you look at the piece that came out in the late 60s and early 70s by Hazelrig and Kolb, [stating] that Parsons did not know Weber and ta-ta-ta. I had my hands full as departmental chair, so I couldn't do anything. But Renée Fox did. At Penn she and one or two other guys who knew

Parson invited him to come to give this seminar, and some of his late stuff is still darn good in terms of evolution of societies! That helped. Then, Heidelberg gave him an honorary degree. You know that?

Shalin: No.

Tiryakian: That has nothing to do with me. He was invited to Heidelberg, and they got the most distinguished German scholars on Weber at this session in honor of [Parsons]. One was Luhmann. All the others gave their testimonials in English. Luhmann did it in German. I met Luhmann, I heard him in English. It is solid but it could be droning on and on. So it goes on and on, and Parsons just dozes. Then Luhmann finishes, Parsons wakes up and gets up and says, "That's very interesting, Professor Luhmann, but you left out **time** from your analysis of modernity." And Luhmann is all shaken up – Parsons had seemed to be asleep – and Luhmann stammers, "You're right, you're right!"

One other episode. Parsons died on a train in Europe. He was coming back home.

Shalin: Do you remember the year?

Tiryakian: It must have been '78 or '79. His last published book on human condition came out in '78-'79, so the next year I am in Japan. One of my best Ph.D.s was a Japanese student who lives in Kyoto. He says, "My father has arranged for us to have a little private dinner. I say, "Oh! It's very nice." So we go to a sort of private club. Have you been to Japan?"

Shalin: No.

Tiryakian: It's all etiquette, and so on and so forth. We are going to a private room. Roughly – see that door out there? – roughly [the distance] from there to where you are. A relatively small enclosure. In one corner a lovely Japanese woman with a lyre – L-y-r-e – plucking away. Then there is my student, his college teacher, and myself, three of us. Each of us having a lovely geisha

girl pouring beer and sake, beer and sake, along with the Japanese food. I started to feel this is something I mean I cannot describe in words the mood, the beautiful soft lyre, lovely geisha girls, beer and sake.

Shalin: You feel mellow.

Tiryakian: Really feeling mellow! Then the teacher of my student says, "I have something here." Takes out something, like this recording instrument [that you use], and says, "Let's play it." Then, I hear the voice of Parsons.

Shalin: Which year was that?

Tiryakian: The end of 1979. Parsons had been there maybe in the fall of '78. So this was transcribed at the time of his visit in Japan. And I think it was the teacher who was asking, "What do you think about sociology in America?" So Parsons said, "Well, this is what is going on and that," and then, "One of my students wrote a very fine essay on American society and religious ethics – Edward Tiryakian." I hear my name, and Oh! I am telling you, Dmitri. . .

Shalin: A voice from the past.

Tiryakian: A voice from the past. And he remembered that as a worthwhile piece – Oh! Now, I also had a very good relationship with Sorokin as a friend . . . I was very much involved with the committee that decided in 1974 or so that Sorokin should be the president of the ASA.

Shalin: The write-in campaign.

Tiryakian: The write-in campaign, right.

Shalin: And he became president in . . .

Tiryakian: 1975, '76 . . . no, no, in the 60s. It was 1965, and I still remember distinctly going into San Francisco in 1969 when radical students had taken Sorokin as their totemic figure. I still have their button that says – "Sorokin Lives." In fact, I should have

worn it at this convention. Sorokin made me the chair of the program committee. Anyway, Sorokin was very generous person.

Shalin: Once you get to know each other, he became much more personal.

Tiryakian: Yes, as a friend. But there was a generation thing. What was the age difference between Sorokin and myself? Sorokin was born, what, in 1880? Let's say that he was active in the revolutionary movement, so in 1905 he may have been in his 20s. That's fifty years [difference]. You can be good friends but you are not on the same plane. We became very good friends, even [when I was] a graduate student. I also went back to Harvard to teach for a year after Princeton. That was 1963. Was Sorokin there? In any case, I remember when Sorokin invited me and my wife to visit him at his home in Winchester. There were most beautiful azaleas. Helen – Elena – his wife was very gifted biologist. So we ring the door bell, the door opens, and Sorokin greets us, "Oh, good to see you. How about some champagne?" Sorokin pours us champagne and looks at me, "One must appreciate the best of sensate culture" [**laughing**].

Shalin: He was practicing what he was preaching.

Tiryakian: I told you about my correspondence.

Shalin: Yes, I will try to contact Penn State and see how to access your correspondence with people like Sorokin. Sometimes they let you make a copy, other times you have to come and examine the collection on the spot. I know you need to go to your session and I will take you there shortly. Now, I know that Robert Merton was Sorokin's assistant, and he was somewhat ambivalent about Sorokin.

Tiryakian: Yes. He wrote about ambivalence.

Shalin: I discovered that in the 1990s Merton gave an interview to a Russian scholar about his teacher. It was translated and published in Russia. I never saw him speak about Sorokin in such

details. For the first time it occurred to me – and of course being ambivalent is a normal experience for a teaching assistant and he eventually went to Parsons like other students – it occurred to me that Merton's distaste for general sociological theory was partly due to his rebellion against Sorokin. His middle-range theorizing expressed his ambivalence toward Sorokin. Of course he was also objecting to Parsons' grand theorizing.

Tiryakian: Yes, yes.

Shalin: But it started before Parsons, when Sorokin made Merton carry stacks of books to his office, then shortly afterwards ordering him return the books to the library and bring more.

Tiryakian: That might be. I once asked Sorokin who was his best student, he said "Merton."

Shalin: Interesting.

Tiryakian: Well, they collaborated, wrote papers together.

Shalin: Yes, but Merton grew increasingly critical of him. He was respectful but . . .

Tiryakian: That could be very complex. Sorokin had a deep Orthodox soul.

Shalin: Was he religious?

Tiryakian: I said "deep," I didn't say religious. The way he treats religion – to me it is very Orthodox. Whereas Merton comes from a much more secular Jewish background, and much more American background. So the idea of the rise and decline of civilizations is not something Merton would think very readily. There may be an intellectual difference, but I don't see it as . . .

Shalin: Personal?

Tiryakian: Yes, if Sorokin tells, "Go and find me 5 books on Mark

Anthony," that is what you expect from a teaching assistant.

Shalin: Sure, that is a minor thing. In this Russian interview, Merton says that Sorokin was a warm person, that he was friendly, but that he could also be dogmatic. He is trying to be fair, but you sense there personal agenda. He casts Sorokin as someone given to theorizing on a grand scale with little attention to empirical details. Not the middle-range theorist Merton was.

Tiryakian: What I am trying to patch together – and you have in some ways better data than I do because you know Russian – is that Merton was basically not a theorist. Not in either Parsons or Sorokin's mold. But very few people are. Gurvitch was. Merton could be a perfectionist the way Sorokin was not. Merton's dissertation on the rise of science – he was perfectionist in combing through historical materials, or his brilliant little monograph on serendipity. He could comb that better than anybody else. He could also lecture more effectively than Parsons and Sorokin. I also had an intellectual treat listening to Merton's presidential address at the ASA. He could hold the audience spellbound.

Shalin: Yes, he had an autobiographical piece that he did in the 1990s where he disclosed that his first name was "Skolnick."

Tiryakian: I was there, in Philadelphia. It was the American Council of Learned Societies meeting.

Shalin: It was an interesting piece. Indeed, it was masterful.

Tiryakian: But he knew he was not on the same level of theory. And Homans knew it. He was resentful of Parsons.

Shalin: Same as Sorokin?

Tiryakian: He didn't know him [Sorokin]. I'll tell you, Dmitri, I have seen many people who would get close to Parsons who were infected with the [spirit of ?] . . . who expected to [inherit the mantle] like Prince of Wales . . . I saw this with Marion Levy at Princeton who was waiting for the phone call, Neil Smelser who was

as good as they come, but Bob Bellah was Parsons' best student.

Shalin: Is this your opinion or that's what Parsons' thought? Cause there was the full stable of illustrious students.

Tiryakian: That's the whole thing! But nobody got the official designation. Because Parsons kept on.

Shalin: Right, he wasn't ready to pass on the mantle.

Tiryakian: I keep telling people that I see Parsons' last essay on action theory and the human condition as a really monumental piece that could well be seen as the start of another phase.

Shalin: He let intellectual life to the very end.

Tiryakian: Yes, absolutely.

Shalin: Well, this is wonderful stuff. I would bring you back now. If you don't mind we'll continue someday.

Tiryakian: Come to New York in 2013 for the ASA.

[End of Recording]