
Robert K. Merton

PIOTR SZTOMPKA

THE PERSON

Robert King Merton was born on July 4, 1910 in Philadelphia, to a family of working-class Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. As a journalist puts it, he started “almost at the bottom of the social structure” (Hunt, 1961, p. 39).

Obviously gifted, from the earliest days he encountered conducive opportunities for his talents to unfold. Close to his Philadelphia home he found the Andrew Carnegie Library, where as a child he spent endless hours, voraciously consuming works in literature, science, and history, and especially biographies and autobiographies (apparently looking for a “role model,” as he was to call it later). Since that time he has always remained, to use his own words, “the inveterate loner working chiefly in libraries and in my study at home” (Merton, 1994, p. 16). The Academy of Music, with Leopold Stokowski at the helm, was within walking distance and a place of frequent visits. And later, in the mid-1920s, new institutions were added in the vicinity: the Central Library and the Museum of Art. Thus, outside of formal education at the South Philadelphia High School, young Merton was exposed to a rich educative environment (see Merton, 1994).

There were other opportunities though, having more to do with luck: meeting the right people at the right moments of his life. Among those there were: the librarians at Carnegie Library, who took an interest in the young book addict; George E. Simpson, young sociology instructor at Temple College, who made him a research assistant to the study of the public imagery of Blacks, and thus awoke a lifelong passion for social inquiry; Pitirim A. Sorokin, who after a brief encounter at an American Sociological Association convention encouraged Merton to apply for graduate study at Harvard, and soon after made him his research and teaching assistant, as well as a co-author of his work on social time and a

chapter in his monumental *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937–41); Talcott Parsons, who pushed his inquisitive mind toward the European founders of sociology – Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Simmel – and taught him analytic skills and conceptual sophistication; George Sarton, who seduced him toward the history of science; and finally a wartime immigrant from Vienna, mathematician-psychologist turned sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld, with whom Merton established the long-lasting collaboration at Columbia University and the famous Bureau of Applied Social Research, which they co-directed for several decades.

Let us return to more formal biographical facts. In 1927 Merton entered Temple College at Philadelphia, from which he graduated in 1931. Right after, he won a fellowship for graduate study at Harvard University, and in 1936 defended his doctoral dissertation “Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth-century England,” written under the guidance of George Sarton, and published as a book two years later (Merton, 1938). Here he put forward a hypothesis, akin to Max Weber’s famous claim on the link between Protestant ethic and the capitalist economy, arguing for a similar link between Protestant pietism and early experimental science. The “Merton Thesis” has been subjected to criticism, particularly from historians (see Kearney, 1973), and started continuous debates. Some of them have been recently put together in a book by I. Bernard Cohen (1990). Even before his doctoral dissertation, Merton’s first influential articles came out in print: “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Actions” in 1936 (Merton, 1996, pp. 173–82), and, in 1938, one of his crucial contributions, the article “Social Structure and Anomie” (Merton, 1996, pp. 132–52), starting a whole school in the theory of deviance and becoming a subject of continuing debate for more than half a century. From 1936 to 1939 Merton served as a tutor and instructor at Harvard, and then from 1939 until 1941 he held the positions of professor and chairman at the Department of Sociology at Tulane University in New Orleans. In 1941, choosing between job offers from Harvard and Columbia, Merton moved to Columbia University, where he remained on the faculty of the Sociology Department for 38 years, going through the positions of Assistant Professor, Associate Professor (1944), Full Professor (1947), Chairman (succeeding Paul Lazarsfeld in 1961), Giddings Professor of Sociology (1963), and University Professor (1974). After retirement, from 1979 to 1984 he remained active as a Special Service Professor. He withdrew from teaching in 1984.

Apart from the university, Merton has been much involved in wider academic life, both in the United States and internationally. Among his many official positions are the Presidencies of the American Sociological Association (1956), the Eastern Sociological Society (1968), and the Society for Social Studies of Science (1975). He has held innumerable posts on editorial boards, professional committees, and advising positions to publishing houses. Academic recognition includes membership of the National Academy of Sciences, Academia Europaea, and numerous foreign academies (the Polish Academy of Science was added to this list in 1997). He has received more than twenty honorary doctoral degrees from universities including Yale, Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, Leiden,

Jerusalem, Wales, Ghent, Oxford, and Krakow. He was a Fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation (1962), and the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Science, the Resident Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation (1979 until the present time), and MacArthur Prize Fellow (1983–8). From the American Sociological Association he received a Career of Distinguished Scholarship award, and in 1994 the President of the United States granted him the highest academic honor: the National Medal of Science.

Married twice, he has a son and two daughters from the first marriage. His son, Robert C. Merton, a professor at Harvard and an eminent specialist in the study of financial markets, won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1997.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Merton's life covers the major part of twentieth-century American history. Even though he has always been a man of academia, surrounded by and totally devoted to the intellectual community, he has also been touched by the turns of political and economic events. A perfect example of a self-made man, coming from the lowest echelons of class structure and advancing to the narrowest New York elite, as well as to worldwide fame, he could not but recognize the mobility, openness, and democratic virtues of American society making that feat possible. This led him quite early to embrace the liberal-democratic political creed to which he has remained faithful all his life. The experience of the Great Depression raised his sensitivity to social issues, racial discrimination, poverty, deviance, and anomie. And the drama of Stalinist terror, the Nazi ascendance to power and the Second World War, the Holocaust and the Gulag, and other atrocities, brought him to a strong condemnation of totalitarianism. He lived through the defeat of Nazism in 1945 as well as the the final collapse of communism in 1989, which provided happy corroboration of his political commitments.

He reacted to political events with the tools of his academic profession, mostly through research and writing, but was always concerned with the "potentials of relevance" of scientific ideas. He devoted systematic reflection to the role of the intellectual in public bureaucracy (1945), social responsibilities of technologists (1947), and the role of applied social science in the formation of policy (1949). The most "practical" of his own theoretical studies include work on deviance and anomie, racial discrimination, marriage patterns, political "machines," housing, propaganda and the "war-bond drive," and medical education. The most "ideological" of his articles dealt with the destruction of science in Nazi Germany and the defense of the "scientific ethos" (Merton, 1996, pp. 277–85), which for him was a kind of micro-model for the democratic polity. As a co-director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, he managed and supervised numerous other programs directed at pressing social issues.

As was mentioned above, his most significant social environment was academia. His graduate studies and the beginnings of his professional career coincided with the renaissance of American sociology in the 1930s, with Harvard

University as its most lively center, in Robert Nisbet's metaphor "the Venice" of that time (Coser and Nisbet, 1975, p. 6). His mature career was linked to "the Florence" of American sociology (*ibid.*) in post-war years, Columbia University. He stayed at Columbia Sociology Department through the peak period of its eminence, in the 1950s and 1960s, to which he himself contributed in considerable measure.

From the "core" of Columbia University, the concentric circles of his "significant others," whom he reciprocally influenced as a highly recognized and esteemed partner, extended to the intellectual, cultural, and artistic community of New York, then Western and Eastern Europe, and eventually an even wider world. He became a true cosmopolitan, maintaining permanent links with international academic communities, not limited by political or ideological biases. One of the founders, in 1948, of the International Sociological Association (ISA), as early as the 1950s he went with the first group of American sociologists to the USSR, paid numerous visits to Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, visited China, and was always ready to give a generous helping hand to the young apprentices in sociology from those politically exotic parts of the world (here I am happy to record my own personal debt). It would be hard to find a better example of the true "man of the world."

THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Merton believed that science develops cumulatively and incrementally by standing "on the shoulders of giants" (Merton, 1965). Hence, the crucial importance of scientific traditions. "I have long argued," Merton says, "that the writings of classical authors in every field of learning can be read with profit time and again, additional ideas and intimations coming freshly into view with each re-reading" (Merton, 1965, p. 45). This is particularly relevant for the adept of a young science like sociology: "the sociologist qua sociologist rather than as historian of sociology, has ample reason to study the works of a Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel and, for that matter, to turn back on occasion to the works of a Hobbes, Rousseau, Condorcet or Saint-Simon" (Merton, 1968, p. 35). But sociology limited to the interpretation of the masters would be sterile. In an attempt to avoid both narrow dogmatism and uncritical novelty, Merton's policy of relating to the masters seems to imply three directives. First is a selective approach; that is, the constant effort to derive from the masters of the past the core of their ideas and to sift it from inevitable marginal contributions, blind alleys, or outright mistakes. Second is reading the masters anew; that is, entering into a sort of critical dialogue with them, reworking their ideas in the light of new perspectives and approaches, later discoveries and experiences, newly acquired data. Third is the injunction to critically enrich, partly supplant, or reject past ideas, if found incomplete, deficient or obsolete: "the founding fathers are honored, not by zealous repetition of their early findings, but by extensions, modifications and, often enough, by rejection of some of their ideas and findings" (Merton, 1968, p. 587).

Merton is quite faithful to this professed policy. Various commentators have noted that he was among the first in his generation of American sociologists to turn their attention to the heritage of European sociology, to have mastered it in depth and to have "assimilated European thought patterns more thoroughly than most of his predecessors" (Coser and Nisbet, 1975, p. 4). But his attitude toward "founding fathers" has never been exegetic or dogmatic. Rather, it has been self-consciously critical, with an emphasis on possible continuities.

Who are those giants "on the shoulders" of which Merton self-consciously places himself? To begin with, there is his pre-eminent indebtedness to Émile Durkheim. In the list of his recognized idols he unfailingly places Durkheim in the forefront, and indicatively Durkheim is quoted more often than any other author in Merton's major volume, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968). There is a striking similarity in the dominant orientation of their sociologies: their common attempt to have sociology develop into a reasonably rigorous, "hard" science of a specifically social subject matter, with explanations in terms of identified social factors. Merton's sociology is also in continuity with Durkheim's in terms of common theoretical approach: functional and structural analysis. Finally, there are obvious substantive continuities: from Durkheim's study of suicide, and particularly "anomic suicide," to Merton's analyses of anomie and deviance; and from Durkheim's sociological research on religion, focusing on religious communities, to Merton's sociological analysis of science, undertaking detailed analysis of the structure and functioning of the communities of scholars.

Next in line of Merton's intellectual ancestors comes Karl Marx. In his approach to Marx, Merton rejects dogmatism: "I have long since abandoned the struggle to determine what 'Marxism' is or is not. Instead, I have taken all that I find good in Marxian thought – and that is a considerable amount – and neglected conceptions which do not seem to me to meet tests of validity" (Merton, 1982b, p. 917). Such an approach allows him to follow some Marxian ideas, while remaining far removed from Marxism in the political or ideological sense. Many common methodological and substantive ideas would include the emphasis on sociological, and particularly structural, factors in the explanation of human phenomena; or the focus on contradictions, conflicts, and circularity of social processes. Then, the idea of the existential determination of knowledge, turned into the idea of the social-structural determination of science, has uncontested Marxian roots.

Third in line of ancestry comes Georg Simmel. There is some commonality in their general approach to sociology: an emphasis on relationships and structures, the "form" or "geometry" of social reality. But Merton's indebtedness to Simmel becomes all the more apparent in the context of conceptual analyses. He reaches some quite similar substantive results. For example, Merton starts from Simmel's hunches in his analysis of patterned interactions, social visibility, and observability (Jaworski, 1990), in-group integration and inter-group conflicts, the completeness, openness, and closedness of groups, reference groups, and several others.

Max Weber has had less influence on Merton's work. To be sure, Merton explicitly identifies Weber as one of his "masters-at-a-distance," but except for the doctoral dissertation on the Puritan ethic and the origins of modern science, and the discussion of bureaucratic structure, it is hard to discover Weberian themes in Merton's work. On the rare occasions when Merton enters the world of Weber's sociology, he mostly accepts Weber's results as given. This is the case with the theory of action, the idea of "value-free" sociology, or the ideal type of bureaucratic organization.

So much for the classics of an earlier time. Among the later twentieth-century masters, some of whom were Merton's contemporaries or even immediate teachers, four names should be mentioned. An important influence on Merton's ideas, particularly in the field of sociology of science, was exerted by George Sarton, at the time of Merton's graduate studies undoubtedly "the acknowledged world dean among historians of science" (Merton, 1985, p. 477). The influence of Sarton can be found at the level of general interests: in science, its development, the operation of scientific communities, and specific techniques for studying historical sources. Apart from that, at the centennial of Sarton's birth, held at the University of Ghent, Merton acknowledged numerous tangible and intangible "gifts" that he received from his mentor; including the conducive micro-environment for the work on his doctoral dissertation, opening the pages of the newly established journal *Isis* for Merton's first publications, and publishing Merton's doctoral thesis in another of Sarton's periodicals, *Osiris* (1938).

Then come the two most influential teachers, under whom, and later with whom, Merton learned and worked: Pitirim Sorokin and Talcott Parsons. It was not entirely a direct and solely positive influence. Merton was apparently not an easy pupil. Admiring his teachers, he did not hesitate to criticize them and to build his own intellectual system partly in opposition to theirs. The case of Sorokin is particularly telling. Having the young Merton collaborate with him on one important chapter of his treatise *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937-41) and on an article on "Social Time" (1937), and some thirty years later publicly praising *On the Shoulders of Giants* (1965) as a masterpiece, Sorokin also went so far as to label Merton's paradigm of functional analysis as "a modern variation on Alexandrian or medieval scholasticism in its decaying period. It is heuristically sterile, empirically useless, and a logically cumbersome table of contents" (Sorokin, 1966, pp. 451-2). The same skepticism was expressed toward Merton's theory of reference group: "A multitude of Merton's propositions, especially in his theory of the reference groups, represent a codification of trivialities dressed up as scientific generalizations" (ibid., p. 452). The ambivalence of Sorokin's attitude is beautifully rendered by the personal inscription in one of his books: "To my darned enemy and dearest friend - Robert - from Pitirim."

Another of Merton's teachers is Talcott Parsons. Speaking for his entire generation of Harvard sociologists, Merton remarks: "Talcott was both cause and occasion for our taking sociological theory seriously" (Merton, 1980, p. 70). His influence on steering Merton's interest toward theoretical considerations was certainly immense. But for almost forty years, since a meeting of the ASA in the

1940s, which witnessed their first major, public clash, Parsons's abstract manner of theorizing was a subject of Merton's persistent challenge, leading him to propose in 1945 the notion of a "middle-range theory" (Merton, 1996, pp. 41–50). Similarly, the static and ahistoric "structural functionalism" proposed by Parsons was a subject of Merton's strong critique, contributing to the birth of his own dynamic "functional analysis" in 1949 (*ibid.*, pp. 65–86). But their theoretical debate always stayed within the borders of exemplary civility. As Merton recollects, "I remember the grace with which, some thirty years ago, he responded in a forum of this same Association to my mild mannered but determined criticism of certain aspects of his theoretical orientation" (Merton, 1980, p. 70). Years later Parsons came to acknowledge Merton's "major contribution to the understanding and clarification of the theoretical methodology of what he, I think quite appropriately, called 'functional analysis'" (Parsons, 1975, p. 67), and then saluted him "for his highly creative role in developing the foundations of this challenging intellectual situation" (*ibid.*, p. 80).

Finally, one must recognize Merton's decades-long "improbable collaboration" (Merton, 1994, p. 15) with Paul Lazarsfeld, producing fruit in several co-authored works, as well as in numerous research projects. It is a rare case of basically different styles of research and theorizing supplementing and enriching each other: Merton's focus on discursive, conceptual clarifications and elaborations, and Lazarsfeld's emphasis on turning concepts into operationalized, testable variables. A good example of the collaboration, their common study of friendship formation (Merton, 1954), came as close to real complementarity as could be expected in the case of two strong, independent individualities, with divergent backgrounds, thought patterns and scholarly goals.

THE WORK

Merton has been a very prolific writer. In his bibliography we find over a dozen books, another dozen edited, or coedited, volumes, and 180 major articles. These numbers continue to grow, as Merton retains his creative powers, and continuously adds new items to his impressive academic output.

There are some characteristic formal traits of his printed work. Most of his formidable output is in the form of extended essays, long articles, introductions, reviews, discussions: sometimes getting so long as to turn imperceptibly into a book, such as the "Shandean postscript" of 290 pages, his favorite *On the Shoulders of Giants* (Merton, 1965), or the "Episodic Memoir" of 150 pages, tracing the development of the sociology of science (Merton, 1979); but most often gathered up in collections, among which *Social Theory and Social Structure* (in its three major editions of 1949, 1957, and 1968), *The Sociology of Science* (1973), *Sociological Ambivalence* (1976), *Social Research and the Practicing Professions* (1982a) and *On Social Structure and Science* (1996) are most significant. Of true "books," in the sense so dear to the humanists and so alien to the natural scientists, he has written only one and only when he had to for formal reasons: his doctoral dissertation.

The thematic range of his interests is very wide: from drug addicts to professionals, from anomie to social time, from friendship formation to role conflicts, from functional analysis to scientific ethos, from medical education to multiple discoveries, from bureaucratic structure to the origins of medieval aphorisms. He seems to pick up various topics, here and there, and then pursue them methodically, meticulously, in depth, sometimes for many years. One of his strongest contributions is insightful concepts. As he identifies new aspects of social life which he finds sociologically significant, he coins neologisms to designate them. A number of these have entered the vocabularies of not only social science but the vernacular of everyday life. Some have already become cases of the process in the history of thought which Merton has identified as "obliteration by incorporation (OBI)," in which "the sources of an idea, finding or concept become obliterated by incorporation in canonical knowledge, so that only a few are still aware of their parentage" (Merton, 1968, pp. 27-8). Merton has also highlighted earlier concepts and terms which had gone largely unregarded, performing what he calls a "cognitive conduit." The list of concepts coined by Merton which entered the canon of contemporary sociology contains manifest and latent functions, dysfunctions, self-fulfilling prophecy, homophily and heterophily, status-sets and role-sets, opportunity structures, anticipatory socialization, reference group behavior, middle-range theories, sociological ambivalence, and others. The supplements to *Oxford English Dictionary* (volumes 1-3) credit ten neologisms to Merton. His theoretical and methodological orientations of functional analysis and structural analysis are widely applied, often without recognition of the authorship. This sort of acceptance is perhaps the strongest proof of Merton's impact on contemporary sociology.

In chronological order one may distinguish a number of phases in his lifelong work (Crothers, 1987, pp. 34-40; Clark, 1990, p. 15). In the 1930s, during his Harvard years, Merton was involved in empirical projects on the homeless of Boston, and prepared his doctoral dissertation on the link between Protestant pietism and the origins of science, to be published in 1938. He also worked on major theoretical articles: "Civilization and Culture" (1936), "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Actions" (1936), and "Social Structure and Anomie" (1938). His early interest in European sociology is documented by two review articles: "Recent French Sociology" (1934) and "Durkheim's Division of Labor in Society" (1934). He was to become one of the most cosmopolitan of American sociologists, acquiring a deep knowledge of the European heritage, and long after retirement insisted on his yearly routine of a summer tour of European capitals, savoring their cultural riches and rekindling his vast personal and professional networks of collaborators and friends.

In the 1940s he took part in a number of empirical projects carried out in the Bureau of Applied Social Research, including the study of a radio campaign known as the "war-bond drive," summarized in 1946 in the volume *Mass Persuasion*. Another of his contributions was the reinterpretation of the findings of wartime studies carried out by Samuel Stouffer and his team on the "American soldier," which resulted in an article (with A. Kitt Rossi) on reference groups, published for the first time in 1950 (Merton, 1968, pp. 279-334). The concept

of reference group was purged of its early psychological bias, and rephrased in sociological, structural terms. The distinction of normative and comparative reference groups, as well as various subtle permutations of "reference group behavior," have inspired a number of later scholars (Merton, 1968, pp. 335–440). At the same time Merton worked on several methodological and theoretical topics. In 1948 his seminal article "Self-fulfilling prophecy" came out (Merton, 1996, pp. 183–204), and in 1949 his major volume *Social Theory and Social Structure*, including articles on "middle-range strategy" and "manifest and latent functions," where the research program of linking empirical research and theoretical reflection, within the framework of so-called functional analysis, was put forward for the first time. It was particularly the idea of middle-range theorizing which, despite some criticisms (e.g. Opp, 1970), became widely adopted by sociologists.

In the 1950s his research work was still linked to the Bureau of Applied Social Research, but he also became involved in graduate training, and his lectures and seminars became arenas of conceptual and theoretical developments, unraveled in what he calls "oral publication," only to be published in print much later. The empirical studies of medical education left two products, a methodological volume, *The Focused Interview* (with M. Fiske and P. Kendall, 1956), and a more substantive book, *The Student-Physician* (1957). There are also two theoretical papers, which joined the list of those widely followed and discussed later, and were destined to enter the canon of sociological knowledge: "The Role-set: Problems in Sociological Theory" in 1957 (Merton, 1996, pp. 113–22), where Merton painted a picture of complex and overlapping relationships among social roles and statuses; and "Social Conformity, Deviation and Opportunity-structures" (1959), where he returned after twenty years to the theory of anomie, expanding his argument in considerable measure, only to enrich it even more in 1964 in the article "Anomie, Anomia and Social Interaction: Contexts of Deviant Behavior." The deviant adaptations were shown to result not merely from the condition of anomie, but also from the structurally given, available set of legitimate and illegitimate opportunities for pursuing the chosen goals.

In the 1960s and 1970s Merton returned to his "first love" (Lazarsfeld, 1975, p. 43), namely the sociology of science, a subdiscipline which he initiated, and significantly helped to build and institutionalize. The first sign of a thematic shift came in 1957 when he delivered a presidential lecture to an ASA convention: "Priorities in Scientific Discovery: a Chapter in the Sociology of Science" (Merton, 1996, pp. 286–304). Then a series of essays addressed various problems of the sociology of science: "Singletons and Multiples in Scientific Discovery" in 1961 (Merton, 1996, pp. 305–17); "The Matthew-effect in Science: the Reward and Communication Systems of Science" in 1968, revised in 1988 (Merton, 1996, pp. 318–36); "Insiders and Outsiders: a Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge" in 1972 (Merton, 1996, pp. 241–66); and others. In 1965, what he called his "prodigal brainchild" appeared under the title *On the Shoulders of Giants*, presenting a number of theoretical points in the sociology of science in the guise of erudition search for the origins of the medieval metaphor. The story of his favorite subdiscipline came out in 1979 as *The Sociology of Science*:

an Episodic Memoir. But in this period he also published crucial statements in general sociological theory: the essay on "structural analysis" in 1975 (Merton, 1996, pp. 101–12), and an earlier study of "sociological ambivalence" (with E. Barber) in 1963 (Merton, 1996, pp. 123–31).

In the 1980s and 1990s Merton has continued his work in various directions. Part of that is devoted to rewriting, polishing, and editing earlier, unpublished manuscripts and preparing collected volumes of essays for print. An example is *Social Research and the Practicing Professions* (1982a). But he also contributed new, original articles of considerable importance: "Client Ambivalences in Professional Relationships" (with V. Merton and E. Barber, 1983), "Socially Expected Durations" (1984), and "The Fallacy of the Latest Word: the Case of Pietism and Science" (1984). At the same time, he started a new *genre* in his work: erudite and dense reminiscences about his collaborators and friends: George Sarton, Talcott Parsons, Florian Znaniecki, Alvin Gouldner, Louis Schneider, Franco Ferrarotti, James Coleman, and Paul Lazarsfeld.

His most recent work returns to the area of the sociology of science with particular emphasis on the fate of scientific concepts and phrases. This starts with the monumental *Social Science Quotations* (Sills and Merton, 1991), and continues with articles on "serendipity," "opportunity structure," "the Matthew Effect," and "the Thomas Theorem," ending with a study of the very term "scientist" as the example of the gendered use of language. In 1994, at the instigation of friends, he turned his reflective focus on himself, and produced the "slight remembrance of things past" titled "A Life of Learning," "orally published" as the C. H. Haskins memorial lecture at Philadelphia (Merton, 1994, reprinted in Merton, 1996, pp. 339–59).

THE THEORY

From the rich mosaic of Merton's substantive contributions, produced at various levels of generality, in various areas, in various periods of his long career, there emerges a coherent system of ideas. Some of them refer to sociology: its goals, orientation, and methods. Some of them refer to society: its constitution and transformations. And in the background of all that, there is a particular image of science, as a cognitive enterprise, social institution and community of scholars. In my interpretation Merton has given us a comprehensive theory of society. But this is a contentious point, and some commentators see only the multiple, fragmentary contributions of Merton to many sociological problems and complain about the "curious omission" of "a systematic theory or a system of sociology" (Bierstedt, 1981, p. 445). I have entered into extensive debate with Robert Bierstedt on this issue, which for lack of space cannot be summarized here (see Sztompka, 1990, pp. 53–64; Bierstedt, 1990, pp. 67–74).

Two of Merton's formulations come closest to his definition of what sociology is all about. The calling of a sociologist is described as "lucidly presenting claims to logically interconnected and empirically confirmed propositions about the structure of society and its changes, the behavior of man within that structure

and the consequences of that behavior" (Merton, 1968, p. 70). And the goal of the whole discipline is characterized as follows: "In the large, sociology is engaged in finding out how man's behavior and fate are affected, if not minutely governed, by his place within particular kinds, and changing kinds, of social structure and culture" (Merton, 1976, p. 184). Thus, clearly the prime subject matter of sociology is conceived as the social structure, and it is to be studied in its multiple and varied aspects: genetic (how it came to be), as well as functional (how it affects behavior); static (how it operates), as well as dynamic (how it changes). The *focus on social structure* appears from the beginning as the defining trait of Merton's sociology. In my reading this is his main focus, but here I differ with some other commentators, who would classify Merton together with Parsons simply as "functionalists" (e.g. Turner, 1974).

It is true that Merton started from an approach he called "functional analysis," but he immediately distanced himself, even by introducing that name, from doctrinaire "functionalism." For him, "the central orientation of functionalism" is "the practice of interpreting data by establishing their consequences for larger structures in which they are implicated" (Merton, 1968, pp. 100–1). In his famous "paradigm for functional analysis" in 1949, he outlined a strikingly open, deeply revised version of functionalism, allowing for the conceptualization of social conflict and social change. Thus, when a quarter century later in 1975 he wrote the important paper "Structural Analysis in Sociology" (Merton, 1996, pp. 101–12), it was not a radical break with functional analysis, but rather its logical extension. Structural analysis was a natural outgrowth of functional analysis, complementing but not at all supplanting it. Merton's own position is explicit: "The orientation is that variant of functional analysis in sociology which has evolved, over the years, into a distinct mode of structural analysis" (Merton, 1976, p. 9). Functional analysis specifies the consequences of a social phenomenon for its differentiated structural context; structural analysis searches for the determinants of the phenomenon in its structural context. Obviously, both orientations refer to the different sides of the same coin; they scrutinize two vectors of the same relationship, between a social phenomenon and its structural setting. There is no opposition of Merton the functionalist to Merton the structuralist; both theoretical orientations have been consolidated into one.

Merton's idea of the social structure, already central for his "functionalist" writings, includes four defining criteria. The focus on relations linking various components of society is clear in the early characterization of social structure: "by social structure is meant that organized set of social relationships in which members of the society or group are variously implicated" (Merton, 1968, p. 216). The emphasis on the patterned, regular, repetitive character of relations is one of the central themes pervading Merton's work, as is the term "patterned," a qualifier he is particularly fond of. As Paul Lazarsfeld noted: "Throughout his writings, this is probably the technical term he uses most often" (Lazarsfeld, 1975, p. 57). The third constitutive criterion of social structure – the idea of a deep, hidden, underlying level (corresponding to the concept of latent functions in functional analysis) – is the only aspect of Merton's approach directly influenced by the "logical-linguistic structuralism" of Claude Lévi-Strauss or Noam

Chomsky. As he puts it: "It is analytically useful to distinguish between manifest and latent levels of social structure" (Merton, 1976, p. 126).

But perhaps most important for Merton's notion of social structure is the fourth criterion, the idea of constraining or facilitating influences exerted by social structure on more concrete, and more directly accessible, social phenomena and events (behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, etc.). The concept of "structural context," and especially "structural constraint," as limiting the effective field of action, appeared in the early "paradigm for functional analysis," and was developed later: "Behavior is a result not merely of personal qualities, but of these in interaction with the patterned situations in which the individual behaves. It is these social contexts which greatly affect the extent to which the capacities of individuals are actually realized" (Merton, 1982a, p. 174). But the structural context was not conceived only in negative terms, as a limiting constraint, but also as a positive influence, facilitating, encouraging, stimulating certain choices by actors or agents: "the social structure strains the cultural values, making action in accord with them readily possible for those occupying certain statuses within the society and difficult or impossible for others. . . . The social structure acts as a barrier or as an open door to the acting out of cultural mandates" (Merton, 1968, pp. 216-17).

The best example of Merton's structural analysis is his famous theory of anomie. Understood as a structural condition of dissociation between uniform cultural demands of success and the differentiated opportunities for success, anomie is shown to generate various forms of deviant conduct: 'innovation', 'ritualism', 'retreatism' or 'rebellion', depending on the wider structural context within which it appears (Merton, 1938).

Starting from the general framework provided by his functionalist and structuralist orientation, Merton develops a more detailed image of the social structure. There are two traits which endow it with a distinct, unmistakably Mertonian flavor. First, social structure is seen as complex and multidimensional. It covers a plurality of components, elements, and items shaped into various kinds of networks or interlinkages. There are statuses, roles, role-sets, status-sets, norms, values, institutions, collectivities, groups, organizations, interests, etc., and they are depicted as cohering on numerous levels. A related, second property of Merton's idea of social structure is the emphasis on asymmetrical relationships: conflicts, contradictions, dysfunctions, strains, tensions, ambivalence. As Merton emphasizes: "It is fundamental, not incidental to the paradigm of structural analysis that social structures generate social conflict by being differentiated in historically differing extent and kind, into interlocking arrays of social statuses, strata, organizations, and communities that have their own and therefore potentially conflicting as well as common interests and values" (Merton, 1976, pp. 124-5). Merton's core idea is to consider human individuals (and their actions) as structurally located, anchored in the network of social relationships.

Attempting to cope with the immense variety of structural components, Merton proposes the distinction between the social structure in the narrow sense and the cultural structure: "the salient environment of individuals can be

usefully thought of as involving the cultural structure, on the one hand, and the social structure, on the other" (Merton, 1968, p. 216). Cultural structure comes to be characterized exclusively in normative terms: as a network of norms, values, roles and institutions. Similarly, the idea of social structure in the narrow sense is gradually enriched with the help of the notion of "opportunity-structure," inspired by the idea of "life-chances," and "vested interests," taken probably from Max Weber and Karl Marx. It is understood as a hierarchically differentiated access to resources, facilities, and valuables (wealth, power, prestige, education, etc.).

The components of social structure at both levels – of social structure proper and of cultural structure – are variously interrelated, both within each level, and across distinct levels. It is, in fact, only the study of those interrelations that reveals the complex quality of the social structure as a relational network. The most important feature of Merton's analysis, which sets him apart from traditional functionalists and other proponents of social equilibrium, consensus, and harmony, is his treatment of integration as problematic and contingent, not as given. The differing degrees of integration span the spectrum, from complete consensus to complete dissensus, with these extreme poles being only analytic possibilities, rarely occurring in empirical reality. And it is striking that, perhaps to counterbalance the bias of "normative functionalism," Merton focuses his analysis on situations closer to the pole of dissensus: various kinds of strains, tensions, contradictions and conflicts in the social structure. He treats them as normal, typical, permanent, and not as pathological disturbances or deviations. Against the predominant stereotype of Merton the functionalist, I believe that his is a conflictual image of society *par excellence*, as distant as can be from the image of a harmonious utopia. Look at some of his central theoretical categories: dysfunction, role-conflict, sociological ambivalence, anomie. All of them refer to the "ugly face" of society, as Ralf Dahrendorf would put it (Dahrendorf, 1968, pp. 129–50).

The image of society underlying Merton's social theory is dynamic, incorporating structurally produced change in and of social structures: "social structures generate both changes within the structure and changes of the structure and... these types of change come about through cumulatively patterned choices in behavior and the amplification of dysfunctional consequences resulting from certain kinds of strains, conflicts, and contradictions in the differentiated social structure" (Merton, 1976, p. 125). As the Loomises noted long ago, Merton is "irrevocably committed to a study of the dynamics of social change no less than to stabilities of social structures" (Loomis and Loomis, 1961, p. 315).

There are two types of structural change which fall within the purview of Merton's dynamics. The first type involves the regular "functioning" or everyday "operation" of society. Such changes consist in ongoing adaptive processes which reproduce specified states of a social structure, or at least keep them within the limits which give that structure its identity. The second type of changes involves the "transformation" of society. This consists of the morphogenetic processes that disrupt the existing structure and create a basically new one in its place. The first type of change brings about the reproduction of an old

social order; the second type of change brings about the production of a new social order.

The illustrations of Merton's study of adaptive processes are relatively well known. His analyses of the articulation of roles in the role-set and of the social mechanisms of adaptation in status-sets are particularly telling (Merton, 1968, pp. 425, 434). They attempt to face "the general problem of identifying the social mechanisms which serve to articulate the expectations of those in the role-set so that the occupant of a status is confronted with less conflict than would obtain if these mechanisms were not at work" (Merton, 1968, p. 425).

But adaptive processes cover only a part of social dynamics. Changes in social structure reducing inefficiency, conflict, strains, and tensions from what they would otherwise be must be distinguished from the changes of social structure which transform it significantly to produce new structural arrangements. It is rarely recognized that Merton's theory also contributes to this area of social dynamics. In Merton's theoretical orientation, the general scheme of structure-building process can be condensed as follows: under conditions still little understood, structural conflict brings about transformations of social structure up to a point when a new structure emerges and the structural conflict is reproduced in a new form. The basic logic underlying the process is that of amplification rather than compensation or, to put it differently, positive rather than negative feedback.

Merton singles out two general mechanisms of structure-building. The first may be described as the mechanism of accumulated dysfunctions; the second as the mechanism of accumulated innovations. The accumulation of dysfunctions occurs when certain structural elements are dysfunctional for a social system as a whole, or some of its core segments. For example, the unrestrained pattern of egoistic hedonism, if sufficiently widespread, may lead to the disruption of the social system. The larger the number of such dysfunctional elements, and the more dysfunctional each of them, the more likely is the system to break down. Another case appears when some elements are basically functional for a social system, but have some additional, dysfunctional side-effects. For example, the competitive success orientation or "achievement syndrome" may be beneficial for the economy, but at the same time may lead to the neglect of family life and consequent breakdown of family structure. The question now becomes that of the relative weight of the accumulated dysfunctional side-effects, which, passing over a hypothetical threshold, outbalance functional outcomes and lead to institutional breakdown and "basic social change" in the form of replacement of structure. A different and, in Merton's conception, basic and empirically frequent case obtains when certain structures are functional for certain groups or strata in the society and dysfunctional for others. Examples are progressive taxation, social security, apartheid, affirmative action. The net outcome – toward stability or toward change – is then determined by the comparative (relative) power of the diverse groups or strata beneficially or adversely affected by those patterned social arrangements. As groups or strata dysfunctionally affected attain sufficient power, they are likely to introduce structural changes. The final type occurs when some structural elements are functional for certain

subsystems and dysfunctional for others. For example, traditional mores or *Gemeinschaft* forms of collectivities, certainly beneficial for the integration of society may often stand in the way of economic modernization, thus becoming dysfunctional for the economic subsystem. The pressure for change here depends on the complex set of historical circumstances determining the relative functional significance of the subsystems dysfunctionally affected. If the dysfunctions touch the subsystems of strategic, core significance – in a modern society the economic institutions, political regime, etc. – structural change is likely.

The alternative mechanism of structure-building is the accumulation of innovations. Here Merton focuses on one selected case: the crecscive change of normative structures, particularly through the “institutionalized evasions of institutional rules.” Structure-building *via* norm evasion starts from incidents of aberrant behavior by individuals who find the norms too demanding for them, even though generally legitimate. For example, the thief who does not question the legitimacy of the fifth commandment will be outraged if something is stolen from him, and not particularly surprised if caught and sentenced. Some part of evasions from norms remains fully private, invisible, undetected. But when evasions become more widespread, undertaken by a plurality of individuals, repeated on various occasions, the public awareness is apt to be awakened. When villains get identified, the examples of particularly skillful evaders may become the subject of public lore, often tainted with envy. The occurrence of common incentives to evasion among the large collectivities of individuals – coupled with the widespread belief that “everybody does it” and the tendency to imitate successful evaders – accounts for the patterning of evasions: their regular and repeatable character. Tax evasions, cheating on exams, avoidance of customs duties and currency controls, petty theft in business firms, etc., provide familiar examples. But note that, even though rarely sanctioned, the norms are here still accorded some legitimacy. The most crucial phase comes when, as Merton puts it, “A mounting frequency of deviant but ‘successful’ behavior tends to lessen and, as an extreme potentiality, to eliminate the legitimacy of the institutional norms for others in the system” (Merton, 1968, p. 234). It is only now that his early concept of “institutionalized evasions” fully applies. Institutionalization in this sense is more than the mere patterning, since it involves not only repetition or regularity of behavior but the granting of a degree of legitimacy, widespread acceptance, or even positive sanctioning of evasive behavior.

This leads to the final phase of a structure-building: attaining by evasions the status of sanctioned norms, fully legitimized and embedded in a new normative structure. A cycle of structure-building ends, and of course a next one is opened, as new norms inevitably begin to be evaded, at least by some members of society, and the process of normative change starts to operate again.

A particular implementation of structural orientation is to be found in Merton’s sociology of science, the field that comprises the empirical sociology of scientific communities as producing, selecting, and distributing scientific knowledge. Apart from mapping the whole field of this new sociological subdiscipline, Merton has contributed influential ideas to its three focal topics: the scientific ethos, the scientific community, and the origins of modern science.

The analysis of scientific ethos was introduced in the context of penetrating critique of the fate of science under the totalitarian, Nazi regime in Germany. Merton shows that the context functionally indispensable for the proper operation of the system of science is the liberal-democratic order. He believes that the future of science is allied with the spread of the democratic attitude and institutions. The scientific ethos appears as a micro-model of the democratic ethos. It is defined as follows: "The ethos of science is that affectively toned complex of values and norms which is held to be binding on scientists" (Merton, 1968, p. 595). The paramount values are: objectivity, the commitment to the pursuit of knowledge as adequate and as complete as possible; and originality, the commitment to the pursuit of new knowledge. Norms, or "institutional imperatives," define the acceptable or preferred means for realizing those values. There are four of them. "Universalism" requires science to be impersonal. "Communism" requires that scientific knowledge be treated not as private property of its creator, but rather as a common good, to be freely communicated and distributed. "Disinterestedness" demands the subordination of extrinsic interests to the intrinsic satisfaction of finding the truth. "Organized scepticism" requires the scientist to doubt, and then to check whether the doubt is well founded. This is carried out through public criticism by scientists of claimed contributions to scientific knowledge (Merton, 1996, pp. 267-76).

Merton is well aware that this idealized picture of the scientific ethos is rarely found in reality. The most interesting reason for deviance is found in the internal ambivalences and anomie inherent in the ethos itself. Anomic conduct in science derives primarily from the great values placed upon originality, and uniformly so for all working scientists, whereas the opportunities and possibilities of achieving original results are most variable, owing to personal constraints (talents, abilities, competences), as well as to structural constraints (limited resources, underdeveloped scientific culture, unavailable experimental technologies etc.). "In this situation of stress, all manner of adaptive behaviors are called into play, some of these being far beyond the mores of science" (Merton, 1973, p. 323). Examples include outright fraud, the fabrication of data, the denouncing of rivals, aggressive self-assertion, and plagiarism.

The other aspect of science that Merton vigorously investigates is the scientific community, a specific type of social organization made up of scientists in their role behavior and mutual, interactive relationships. There are several subsystems that are singled out within the scientific community. The first is the "system of institutionalized vigilance": the examination, appraisal, criticism, and verification of scientific results by academic peers. The second is the "communication system of science": the complex mechanism of scientific publication, making the results visible. Here Merton introduces the biblical metaphor and the concept of the "Matthew Effect," observing that the works published by recognized scholars have much better chances of visibility in the scientific community than equally significant or original contributions by scholars of less renown. Another concept of "obliteration by incorporation" signifies the situation in which both the original source and the literal formulation of an idea are forgotten, owing to its long and widespread use. The notion of "cognitive conduits" refers to the

spreading and inheriting of ideas over time. Another subsystem of the scientific community is the evaluation and reward system of science, the complex mechanisms of scientific recognition and reward-allocation, again biased in favor of already recognized scholars. All these processes lead to the emergence of the stratification system of science, the patterned differentiation of scholars according to identifiable criteria. Finally, there is the informal influence system of science: the network of personal ties, acquaintanceships, friendships, and loyalties that cut across other systems and significantly modify their operation. Merton pays ever-growing attention to this elusive domain giving new prominence to the seventeenth-century concept of the "invisible college" (used earlier by D. de Solla Price), as well as the twentieth-century idea of the "thought collective" (introduced by Ludwig Fleck).

The third focus of Merton's concern with science, in fact the earliest in his own research biography, is the historical origins of science and its subsequent development. In his doctoral dissertation (Merton, 1938) he put forward the widely discussed "Merton's Thesis," in some ways parallel to the earlier "Weber's Thesis" concerning the origins of capitalism. Studying the origins of empirical science in seventeenth-century England, Merton observed a linkage between religious commitments and a sustained interest in science. He noted that English scientists in that period were disproportionately ascetic Protestants or Puritans. The values and attitudes characteristic of Puritanism were seen to have had the effect of stimulating scientific research by inviting the empirical and rational quest for identifying the God-given order in the world and for practical applications; just as they legitimized scientific research through religious justification. Once having obtained institutional legitimacy, science largely severed its link with religion, finally to become a counterforce, curbing the influence of religion. But as the first push, religion was seen as crucially important.

IMPACT

There are various measures that can be applied to evaluate a scholar's impact on his or her discipline. One is the existence of a "school," the wide network of pupils, collaborators, and followers creatively working out the bits and pieces of the master's heritage, as well as the amount of critical evaluation that his work merits. Another is the extent of reception that the work receives, which can be estimated by looking at the number of editions and translations, the time staying in print, and the citation indexes. The third, a bit paradoxical, is the degree to which the concepts and ideas undergo what Merton himself called "obliteration by incorporation," i.e. melt into the accepted, textbook canon of sociology, no longer linked to their originator.

On all three counts Merton ranks very high. As an academic teacher he had the good luck to encounter "successive cohorts of brilliant students" (Merton, 1994, p. 17). It is perhaps not an accident that so many of Merton's students at Columbia found their way into the pages of sociological textbooks: Rose and Lewis Coser, James Coleman, Robert Bierstedt, Peter Blau, Seymour M. Lipset,

Irving L. Horowitz, Alvin Gouldner, Philip Selznick, Louis Schneider, Robin Williams, Alice and Peter Rossi, Jonathan and Steven Cole, Juan Linz, Franco Ferrarotti, Hans L. Zetterberg, Ralf Dahrendorf, and many others. Now, after so many years Merton may be proud "writing papers designed specifically for those honorific volumes known as *Festschriften*. Not, as might be supposed, *Festschriften* in honor of teachers or aged peers but in honor of onetime students" (Merton, 1994, p. 17). The network of close collaborators would embrace other towering figures of twentieth-century sociology: Talcott Parsons, Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Lynd, C. Wright Mills, Shmuel Eisenstadt. He served innumerable others, freely accepting their manuscripts for reviewing and editing. The number of published books that went through his meticulous editorial grinding exceeds two hundred. There are also hundreds of sociologists worldwide with whom he exchanged correspondence, thoroughly discussing their ideas. The bibliography of writings about Robert Merton amounts to more than four hundred items, including several monographs and collective books.

Most of his own books have gone through a series of printings and multiple foreign editions, with *Social Theory and Social Structure* appearing in almost twenty languages. Some articles are frequently republished in sociological "readers." Most of them are still in print, sometimes half a century after original publication. And the citation indexes are truly impressive. For a period from 1969 to 1989 his Social Science Citation Index count totals 6800, and his Science Citation Index count, 1350 (Clark, 1990, p. 23). This by far exceeds the number of citations to any other living sociologist. Particularly striking is the great number of citations to works published as long as forty or fifty years ago, like *Social Theory and Social Structure* of 1949, or the two famous articles on "unanticipated consequences of social actions" of 1936, and "anomic and social structure" of 1938. Citation data show that the latter "has probably been more frequently cited and reprinted than any paper in sociology" (Cole, 1975, p. 175).

Apart from general sociological theory there are some subdisciplines of sociology whose development was strongly influenced by Merton's contributions. One could mention the sociology of science and the sociology of deviance, where strong Mertonian "schools" are still operating.

ASSESSMENT

Robert K. Merton certainly belongs to the most influential sociological theorists of the twentieth century. Two kinds of contributions make him a "modern sociological classic": his exemplary style of doing sociology and his substantive contribution to sociological theory.

The most concise characterization of Merton's style of thought may be put in three words: balance, system, and discipline. He has a strong aversion to extremes. The most famous illustration of this is his strategy of "middle-range theory," based on the rejection of both narrow empiricism and abstract, scholastic theorizing. The systematic quality of his work is emphasized by the repeated use of what he calls "paradigms," introduced long before, and in

meaning different from, Kuhn's, namely as heuristic schemes destined to introduce a measure of order and lucidity into qualitative and discursive sociological analysis, by codifying the results of prior inquiry and specifying the directions of further research. The most famous are his paradigms for functional analysis, for structural analysis, for deviant social behavior, and for the sociology of knowledge. The disciplined quality of Merton's work is self-consciously expressed by his concepts of "disciplined inquiry" and "disciplined eclecticism." The first means "systematic and serious, that is to say, the intellectually responsible and austere pursuit of what is first entertained as an interesting idea" (Merton, 1968, p. xiv). Merton's persistence in tracing the implications and ramifications of his central insights is legendary. Decade after decade he returns to the same themes, each time developing them conceptually and enriching them with new empirical evidence. For example, his major reworkings of the theme of "anomic" came out in 1938, 1949, 1955, 1959, 1964, and 1997. The idea of "disciplined eclecticism" encourages openness and antidogmatism: the critical and systematic adaptation of a plurality of theoretical orientations and theories in solving sociological problems. Thus Merton presents a truly classical model of how sociology should be done, perhaps a needed reminder in the time of a certain methodological anarchy. But of course his contribution is not limited to a methodological model. He applies the model himself, reaching fundamental results, including an original and fruitful image of society.

The preceding analysis of Merton's work was intended to corroborate five claims. First, I believe that despite the dispersed, piecemeal, fragmentary nature of Merton's contributions, they add up to a coherent system of thought. Of course, the system is far from complete: there are many empty spots, many lacunae, many fields of "specified ignorance" (to use his favorite term). But all the islands of enlightenment fit nicely into the overall topography. And the dark or shadowy areas provide the system with strong potentials for elaboration, suggest further problems for fruitful inquiry.

Second, I believe that despite his own research focus on the middle level of generality ("middle range theories"), Merton has unwittingly produced a general theory of society. His contributions add up to a consistent picture of the social world. Third, against the stereotypes identifying Merton as an embodiment of functionalism, I believe that his orientation is and always has been mainly structuralist. Drawing inspiration from Durkheim, he perceives all social phenomena as located in a structural context, interlinked with other phenomena within wider social wholes. Those linkages are of two sorts: causal, when a phenomenon is constrained or facilitated by structural context; and functional, when a phenomenon produces structural effects (functions). "Functional analysis" clearly appears as a specific mode of a more general structural approach pervading Merton's inquiry.

Fourth, he is a conflict theorist *par excellence*. His image of social life is saturated with contradictions, strains, tensions, ambivalence, dysfunctions, and conflicts of all sorts. There is nothing of the tranquil, harmonious, consensual, equilibrated utopia in a human drama as depicted by Merton: with its torment of uncertainty and unintended, latent consequences of any action; with its agony of

ambivalence and cross-cutting pressures of norms, roles, and statuses; with its fright of normlessness, or anomie; with its risk of defeat or "self-destroying prophecies."

Fifth, his theory is dynamic in the full sense of the term. As I attempted to illustrate in detail, he not only recognizes various modalities of change, but focuses on structural changes, i.e. those which are structurally generated and structurally consequential. And he not only studies reproductive (or adaptive) processes, but devotes considerable attention to the structure-building through which new, or fundamentally modified, structures are socially constructed.

The structural theory of society – incorporating "social statics" and "social dynamics," "social anatomy" and "social physiology," consensus and conflict, stability and change, reproduction and emergence – provides a fully fledged, multidimensional paradigm for sociology. It is deeply rooted in the classical sociological tradition of the nineteenth century. In fact, Merton synthesizes and extends the classical sociological tradition. He attains balanced, intermediate positions on various traditional issues, unravels entangled premises to reach their rational core, unmuddles the muddle of sociological controversies. This allows him to introduce a further measure of order and systematization to the classical heritage. Merton's determined effort to clarify, codify, consolidate, and organize disparate pieces of sociological wisdom results in a mosaic that is rewarding aesthetically as well as intellectually. The synthesis becomes much more than a summary of earlier ideas: it results in their selective and critical reformulation and cumulation. At many points, novel concepts, insights, and ideas are added to the classical heritage.

Thus, perhaps Merton's most important service to the development of contemporary sociology is the vindication of the classical style of doing sociology and the classical heritage of theoretical ideas. He shows with new vigor that the ideas of the nineteenth-century masters are not at all exhausted or dead. In his work, paradigms of classical thought gain new vitality, as they are shown to be fruitful: both in the explanatory sense, as means of accounting for large areas of social experience and for solving the puzzles confronting men and women in their social life; and in the heuristic sense, as means of raising new questions and suggesting new puzzles for solution.

An important, and only seemingly paradoxical, function of Merton's synthesis is to indicate directions of inquiry that will eventually elaborate and overcome it. Its systematic and lucid quality enables us to perceive not only past and current knowledge but also "the various sorts of failure: intelligent errors and unintelligent ones, noctically induced and organizationally induced foci of interest and blind spots in inquiry, promising lands abandoned, and garden-paths long explored, scientific contributions ignored or neglected by contemporaries, ... serendipity lost" (Merton, 1975, p. 336). Ultimately, it leads toward mapping further domains of "specified ignorance": "what is not yet known but needs to be known in order to lay the foundation for still more knowledge" (Merton, 1976, p. 112). It is precisely here that the past and the future of our discipline meet. Merton's work provides a solid bridge from the accomplishments of the classical masters to the future vistas of sociology.

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