

# ROBERT K. MERTON

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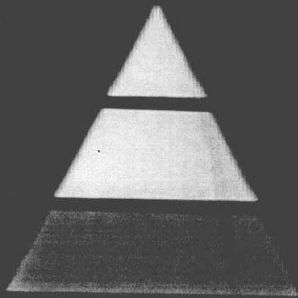
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Series Editor: Peter Hamilton

Robert K. Merton

CHARLES H. G. CROTHERS, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of Auckland, New Zealand

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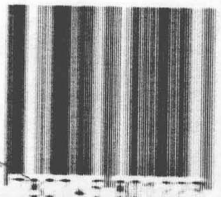


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## Editor's foreword

As a sociologist Robert Merton stands at a crossroads between the great sociologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the professional or institutionalized sociology of the present day.

His work and his academic career bridge two rather different styles of sociological expression. The first has as its role models Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Emile Durkheim, Pitirim Sorokin, Karl Mannheim, and their disciples or followers. It is a European model, rooted in social and cultural contexts in which the typical sociologist was an upper-middle-class intellectual concerned with an elite and esoteric form of knowledge. As a style it contrasts strongly with the 'mass-sociology' of the second half of the twentieth century, a subject used by and familiar to large numbers of students and others throughout the Western world, but given perhaps its highest form of expression in the American university system. This second, and heavily Americanized style of sociological expression, is both a child of the explosion of higher education in the post-Second World War world, and a major tool of the planning process in Western societies, which has seen the provision of such educational facilities as an indispensable step towards constant and maintained economic growth.

In the European form of sociology, the emphasis is almost always on the conceptual schema used to understand society and its structures. Since the object of sociology was essentially to provide a commentary or critique of social phenomena, to an audience whose interests were for the main part intellectual rather than practical, the elegance or scope of the 'grand theory' was preeminent. Its scientific validity was not the primary object of concern, and it was not designed to be applied to practical issues or problems.

Merton was one of the first modern sociologists to recognize the significance of the connection between the scientific validity of sociological theory and its practical role as a tool for resolving social problems, in their widest sense. As Charles Crothers makes clear in his careful examination of Merton's influence on modern sociology, his role has been one of directing a significant proportion of the professionalized and institutionalized socio-

**Charles Henry Gardner Crothers** has been Lecturer (1983–85), and is now Senior Lecturer (1985–) in the Department of Sociology, University of Auckland, New Zealand. He was previously Senior Research Officer (Social Planning) at the Town and Country Planning Division, Ministry of Works and Development, Wellington (1978–82), and Junior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Victoria University of Wellington (1975–78). He was awarded a B.A. (1968) in Geography from the University of Waikato; a B.A. (Hons) (1970), and a Ph.D. (1978), both in Sociology from the Victoria University of Wellington.

logy during its period of major and far-reaching growth — essentially from the 1950s until the 1970s.

The distinctive and fascinating aspect of Dr Crothers's treatment of Merton's work lies in his delineation of an emergent 'general theory' within the emphasis on 'theories of the middle range' for which Merton is so justly famous. Because Merton did not appear to be championing a 'grand theory' of classical but esoteric dimensions like his teacher and colleague Talcott Parsons, he has not attracted the partisan and factional critiques which have so obscured a measured and objective assessment of the Parsonian theoretical canon.

Nonetheless, and despite his disavowal of 'grand theory', Merton's influence on contemporary sociology is perhaps significantly greater than Parsons's. Dr Crothers provides the best and most accessible account of the development of Merton's work, focusing both on his role as 'discipline builder', and on his contributions to various important sub-disciplinary fields (science, medicine and deviance stand out), in a commentary that is both lucid and original.

As we progress further towards the next millennium the future of sociology seems assured, as an indispensable discipline for understanding and adapting to the rapid and unsettling pace of social change. Whilst sociology has not yet become a wholly 'respectable' discipline, the seriousness with which its more scientifically grounded propositions are now taken is in very large part due to the strategic role played by Robert Merton in the development of modern sociology. Dr Crothers's book will be essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the key nature of Merton's contribution to contemporary sociology.

Peter Hamilton

## Epigraph

. . . The limits of Merton's work derive in part from its essentially 'liberal' bathos . . . These limits do not derive only from Merton's liberal side but also from his 'rebel' side . . . , that is, Merton's limits derive as much from the rebel horse he rode, as from the liberal snaffle and curb with which he held it in check. . . . In passing a serious judgement on Merton's work . . . it should be seen historically, in terms of what it meant when it first appeared and made the rounds. . . . Merton's work on anomie . . . was a liberative work, for those who lived with it as part of a living culture as distinct from how it may now appear as part of the mere record of that once-lived culture.

There are several reasons for this. One is that Merton . . . kept open an avenue of access to Marxist theory. . . . Merton was much more Marxist than his silences on that question may make it seem. Unlike Parsons, Merton always knew his Marx and knew thoroughly the nuances of controversy in living Marxist culture. Merton developed his generalized analysis of the various forms of deviant culture by locating them within a systematic formalization of Durkheim's theory of anomie, from which he gained analytic distance by tacitly grounding himself in a Marxian ontology of social contradiction. It is perhaps this Hegelian dimension of Marxism that has had the most enduring effect on Merton's analytical rules, and which disposed him to view anomie as the unanticipated outcome of social institutions that thwarted men in their effort to acquire the very goods and values that these same institutions had encouraged them to pursue. In its openness to the internal contradictions of capitalist culture few Lukacians have been more incisive.

(Gouldner, 1973, pp. x, xi; this note included contrasts with C. Wright Mills which have been deleted as they seemed unnecessary for present purposes.)

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank several colleagues for reading part or all of my manuscript and/or for discussing issues arising from this study: Kit Malagoda, Georgina Murray, Nick Perry.

Peter Hamilton has provided distant encouragement; Robert Merton helpfully supplied several fugitive references and patiently answered an array of factual questions; and Mei Everitt typed the script.

## Dedications

This study is dedicated to Robert K. Merton. I hope that it captures the style and thrust of his work, and perhaps provides a sketch of the overview he never presented.

Secondarily, I would like to indicate my great debt to Arthur Stinchcombe for having seen so deeply into the latent general theory at the heart of Merton's approach and for the wider group of Mertonians and even anti-Mertonians (spanning such a diverse grouping as Lewis Coser, David Caplovitz, Alvin Gouldner and Randall Collins) who have explored, developed or criticized his thought.

## Note on sources

Almost all the significant writings by Merton have been assembled in four volumes (with a very slight overlap in content). *Social Theory and Social Structure* was first published in 1949 with subsequent editions in 1957 and 1968. Each edition retains a four-part structure:

- on theoretical sociology (on relations between theory and research, and functional analysis);
- studies in social and cultural structure (anomie, bureaucracy and reference groups);
- sociology of knowledge and mass communications;
- sociology of science.

The 1957 edition includes four extra essays (two of which are 'continuities' that attempt to update analyses included in the first edition) which expand its volume by one-third, and it also incorporates some revisions. The 1968 edition differs from its predecessor only in a very considerable expansion of its introduction into two chapters.

All references in this study to material from *Social Theory and Social Structure* are to the 1968 edition (although the date when an essay was first published is also indicated when this is important in establishing a chronological sequence). Similarly, where this is possible, reference is always made to the version of any article which is available in one or other of the four volumes, and this is indicated by square brackets in the citation.

Another 13 essays are gathered from symposia and journal articles into the 1976 collection (1976b), *Sociological Ambivalence*. Several of these essays provide analyses of sociological ambivalence (which involves examining the stresses arising for individuals out of contrasting aspects of the

social structures they are embedded in), while other essays deal with a wide variety of theoretical issues, and a final set with ethnic relations.

In 1973 most of Merton's work in the Sociology of Science was assembled by Norman Storer into a volume with the same title. This volume also includes much of Merton's work in the sociology of knowledge. Storer provides a useful introduction and prefatory notes for each part, that sketch the background of, and develop themes within, Merton's sociology of science. The volume has five parts:

- The Sociology of Knowledge;
- The Sociology of Scientific Knowledge;
- The Normative Structure of Science;
- The Reward Structure of Science;
- Processes of Evaluation in Science.

A further selection is reproduced in *Social Research and the Practising Professions* (1982a) edited by Aaron Rosenblatt and Thomas F. Gieryn, who also provide a useful introduction. This volume seeks to relate Merton's analysis of the social organization of (social) science to his analysis of professions, and also to reprint some of his essays on the interaction between the two; it is therefore organized in three parts:

- Sociology of Social Research;
- Sociology of the Practising Professions;
- Social Research Applied to Public Policy.

An interesting feature is the construction by the editors of a "composite form" of Merton's essay on 'Social Problems and Sociological Theory' from the 1961, 1966, 1971 and 1976 editions of *Contemporary Social Problems*. (However, a closer textual examination of this reveals that several useful analytical points made in the 1976 edition are not included in this version.)

The more important books and articles in Merton's extensive bibliography are included in the select bibliography at the end of this book. A full listing up to 1975 has been published (Miles, 1975) and an update is available (Miles, 1985). The more important and useful secondary writings are also included in the bibliography (see also the listing of commentaries, continuities etc. of Merton's works in Miles (1975, 1985) and in the bibliographies assembled in several 'continuities' sections of *Social Theory and Social Structure*, in the bibliography attached to the 1970 reprinting of *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* and in

Storer's edition of *Merton's Sociology of Science*, 1973). Secondary writings on Merton are extensive and scattered, but relatively few provide useful exegesis or criticism: I have tried to winnow out only the more relevant rather than attempt an exhaustive catalogue. Some of this material is available through the *Festschrift* edited by Lewis Coser (1975a), through reviews of this, and also through a second but much less useful *Festschrift* edited by Gieryn (1980). Collins (1977) is critical of the generally positive stance taken by contributors in the Coser volume, but it is a valuable source precisely because of this. The second collection comes from a more remote set of commentators (American sociologists were excluded) and is thus somewhat disconnected from the main thrusts of Merton's work. Clinard (1964) is a collection debating the success of Merton's 'anomie theory' to that point in time.

Details of Merton's personal biography are sparse, as he has received direct attention only in Hunt's (1961) portrait in the *New Yorker*, a brief discussion between Coser and Nisbet (1975), an account of his teaching style commissioned by *Teaching Sociology* (Persell, 1984), and an interview (published in Italian) on his current theoretical work on "socially expected durations" (De Lellio, 1985). Other biographical material is almost entirely based on Hunt's article. However, Merton has himself published some attempts to document the 'career' of some of his projects (including a postscript to his essay on intermarriage [Merton, 1976], an extended personal memoir on the development of the sociology of science [Merton, 1977]) and also accounts of his working relationships with colleagues (Lazarsfeld [Merton, 1979b], Parsons [Merton, 1980b], Gouldner [Merton, 1982b], Znaniecki [Merton, 1983] and Sarton [Merton, 1985a]).

Since the writing of this book began, a book on Merton by Piotr Sztompka (*Robert K. Merton: an intellectual profile*; 1986) was announced by Macmillan, but it was not yet available by the time this study was sent to press. The description of this book indicates that Sztompka, too, sees Merton as a general theorist and, in addition, Sztompka sees Merton as 'the last classical sociologist'. Without seeing the supporting argument it is difficult to comment, although it seems to me rather that Merton straddles classical and contemporary sociology, with his roots in the former, but with his concerns for scientific cumulation strongly centred in the latter. To some extent it might be argued, along with Ben-David (1973, 1978) that he has largely worked in a mode intermediate between the two. Given Merton's own work on 'multiple discoveries' it is perhaps ironic that, after at least a decade when there has been little general attention to Merton's work, there should be a more-or-less simultaneous 'discovery' of its general significance.



# 1

## The case for examining Merton

### 1.1 PROBLEMS IN STANDARD ACCOUNTS OF 'STANDARD AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY'

The theoretical grounding of many contemporary 'European' social theorists lies with the 'founding fathers' (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) and the complexly intertwined threads of exegesis and extension that stretch forward from them. The transmission-line of major theoretical ideas seems to mainly bypass those early and mid-twentieth century decades in which the development of sociological knowledge was largely left in American hands. And yet during these years of the American custody of sociology's conceptual storehouse, a range of conceptual developments were constructed that still have important roles to play in contemporary sociology. But many contemporary British and 'European' social theorists have very considerable difficulty in relating to, and being able to use, this American offering. Often, attempts are made by these theorists to weld Weberian revisions into a Marxian framework, which almost unconsciously smuggle in American concepts to accomplish this task. The tendency for an unknowing functionalism to lurk largely undetected behind many arguments is now well-attested (e.g. Alexander, 1982; Blau, 1975b, Gouldner, 1973b; Sztompka, 1974).

Even North American sociologists have considerable difficulty in conceptualizing the history of their own contributions to sociology. Many of the available accounts contradict each other and often involve somewhat idiosyncratic and not particularly successful typologies. Once various early American theorists have been treated and the 'Chicago School' described, treatment of the sociology of the 1950s and 1960s often falters. This is largely because individual thinkers are replaced by wider networks of scholars working collectively within broad traditions. The tools of theoretic-

cal exegesis in sociology seem rather too blunt to easily handle these broader developments and make adequate sense of the period. North American sociology of the post-war period is usually characterized using one or other, or both, of two labels — 'structural-functionalism' and 'empiricism' (cf. Eisenstadt and Curelaru, 1976; Freidrichs, 1970; Gouldner, 1970; Mills, 1959; Mullins, 1973; Shils, 1970).

The theoretical arm of post-World War II American sociology is often seen as a 'grand theory', which took a 'structural-functionalist' form, and which was detached from both empirical concerns and social criticism. Under the apparent theoretical aegis of Talcott Parsons, a complex and terminologically dense conceptual framework is seen as having developed a conservative social theory during the 'end of ideology' decades of the 1950s and 1960s. This approach is depicted as seeing social order as emanating from socialized conformity to cultural ideas, with a self-righting, equilibrium-seeking social system quickly restoring any departures from the status quo.

The other arm of post-war American sociology is often seen to involve an 'abstracted empiricism' wherein micro-problems about the explanations of the social distribution of attitudes and behaviour were relentlessly attacked by a myriad of social survey studies, without sufficient concern for understanding the structural anchoring of these social minutiae in wider social contexts. Instead of developing theoretical explanations, intellectual effort is seen as being deflected into polishing methodological niceties. This partially collective social psychology is seen as holding a 'positivist' philosophy of science in which the facticity of the social world is held to be unproblematic, so that a scientific derivation of 'laws' can be developed, in which the purity of freedom from moral commitments or concerns is defended by a doctrine of value-freedom. Yet worse, this 'value-free' empiricism is seen as being pressed into the service of the ruling class and the state in a social engineering role, that attempts to neatly remedy any blemishes without challenging the whole.

While this dual image of the post-war development of American sociology expresses a considerable grain of truth, it has difficulties in accounting for much of what the sociological development of the post-World War II decades involved. Certainly, rather more was going on in American sociology in this period, and it was rather more significant than this generally received account suggests. (As another commentator briefly queries after a similar depiction of American sociology, "I am not convinced that this is the whole truth about American sociology in this period . . ." (Bryant, 1976, p. 19).)

The picture must be immediately widened to include the 'loyal opposition' of symbolic interactionism, and its associated qualitative field

research methodology, which throughout the period was held to be particularly cherished by the scattered remnants of the older 'Chicago School'.

But the degree of polarization posited in this picture that American sociology covers both 'grand theory' and 'abstracted empiricism' creates further and more significant difficulties. How could such diverse tendencies be incorporated within a single (or even within the dominant) sociological tradition? I think it is plausible to argue that Parsonian grand theory was in fact a relatively separate cognitive development, borne by a narrow theoretical 'sect', which had relatively little direct influence on the development of American sociology. Nevertheless, the indirect influence was clearly considerable, as the network mapping of Mullins (1973) shows. Talcott Parsons's theoretical writings were used in particular as an umbrella under which the status of sociology as a theoretically orientated discipline could be sheltered. His work, too, was at least partially absorbed into the 'textbook culture' which undergirds the teaching enterprise aspect of sociology. And, Parsons reflected (as Sorokin, 1966, pointed out) much of the general conceptualizing of the time, and could then be used as a scholarly legitimation of this. But, his direct influence on sociological theorizing and research was perhaps far more limited than is often held. After all, his work did not lead to the ready development of research problems or the easy formulation of theoretical explanations.

The rising methodological sophistication of social research work and the more formal couching of theoretical models that characterized post-war American sociology cannot be easily dismissed as being only concerned with trivia. Its general attractiveness, as it spread around the world, was based on a perceived explanatory potential that many critics of its moral tone failed to grasp, and that its own advocates were not adequately able to articulate. If Parsons's grand theory was difficult to draw on, and since a 'proper' functional mode of explanation was only relatively rarely deployed (see Davis, 1959), the theoretical ideas used must surely have been drawn from some source. A close study of the rhetoric used to establish explanations in post-war American sociology is needed to ground this argument. It seems to me that Merton would be found in such an investigation to have played a crucial shaping role in the development of sociology over this period. This study is devoted to arguing this case.

## 1.2 PROBLEMS IN ACCOUNTING FOR MERTON'S ROLE IN 'STANDARD AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY'

The putative importance of Merton's contribution is reasonably obvious. Apart from Talcott Parsons, he is the only other American social theorist of a general stature in that era. Beyond Merton there is a scatter of important

sociological writers — Coser, Gans, Goffman, Gouldner, Nisbet, Barrington Moore, etc. — but none seems to have sufficient stature, and to have sustained a sufficient depth of analysis, to have influenced a broad sector of sociological work. This general argument for the predominant influence of Parsons and Merton compared to other sociological writers of the period can be backed up by published personal testimony of major textbook writers (see below), and also by citation studies (Bain, 1962; Cole and Zuckerman, 1975; Cole, 1975; Garfield, 1977, 1980; Menzies, 1982; Mullins, 1973; Oromaner, 1968, 1970, 1980; Wells, 1979; Wells and Picou, 1981; Westie, 1973 [putting this range of studies alongside each other in a listing, of course, hardly implies that there is a detailed consensus in their findings]).

The logic of my argument might seem to press on to leave Merton holding centre stage in 'standard American sociology', since I have already argued that Parsons's role is rather more complex and slight than is usually understood, and that there are no other clear rivals in sight. But this position, too, is both simplistic and fallacious. I am content merely to establish a *prima facie* case for the very considerable importance of Merton's work in the development of American post-war sociology. Clearly other factors, and many other influences were at work.

Given this central importance of Merton, it might be expected that the general sociological implications of his work would have received detailed critical attention. After all, Talcott Parsons has attracted a bevy of commentators, and C. Wright Mills has been lionized or lambasted in several publications. Yet, although there are several major areas of sociological debate in which Merton's work features prominently, the analysis of Merton's general approach to sociology is slight, both in quality and quantity. There are a few, mostly brief, chapters on Merton in theory texts (e.g. Abel, 1970; Bierstedt, 1981; Coser, 1977; Cuzzort, 1969; Loomis and Loomis, 1965; Mulkay, 1971; Turner, 1974; Wallace, 1969, 1983) and a scattering of critical articles (in general, see Bibliography). In these Merton is usually portrayed as a structural-functional loyalist, differing only in minor detail (not least in graciousness of writing-style!) from the grand master. Even the more detailed of these accounts cover only highly selected portions of Merton's work, and are concerned more to describe than to analyse how he constructs his analyses. Some texts explicitly deny that "... he has produced a systematic theory or a system of sociology" (Bierstedt, 1981, p. 445).

The two *Festschriften* dedicated to Merton (Coser, 1975a; Gieryn, 1980) very largely contain papers by peers or students which direct little attention to the general elucidation of his ideas, and as is appropriate for such volumes, seem to have been used by them as a platform on which to

enunciate particular themes (often extensions of Merton's work) rather than to provide the opportunity for overall and critical evaluation: compare the evaluation contained in Firth's critical collection on Malinowski (Firth, 1957) or the treatment of Sorokin (Allen, 1963). Several of those chapters in the two *Festschriften* which do directly attend to his work are more concerned with measuring its impact through citations than in elucidating the internal logic of its conceptual structure.

There are several explanations of this relative neglect. Merton's own writing is clear and direct, and does not draw attention to the need for developing interpretative commentary. This is reinforced by Merton's explicit methodological doctrine of 'middle-range' theory which deflects attention from his own general theory-building (see Stinchcombe, 1975).

But there may also be psychosocial mechanisms at work that have acted as barriers to closer attention. To his own generation Merton was doubtless a 'prophet in his own land', to be cited only where particularly relevant, and to the succeeding generation his work was to be used rather than inspected. And he is not yet ancient enough to be extensively mined for historical work. There was no particular occasion in which broader examination was called for, and perhaps there is a structural resistance arising out of master-apprenticeship and similar scholarly patterns (cf. Merton, 1963a). This ambivalence towards a preceding intellectual generation is nicely pointed up in the Preface to Stinchcombe's *Constructing Social Theories*: "Robert K. Merton was another classic writer who ranked with Durkheim, Marx and Trotsky in my earlier intellectual life. I have been a bit bewildered by his becoming a contemporary as I grow older" (1968, p. vii).

### 1.3 STRUCTURE OF ARGUMENT

This study is concerned with trying to unscramble a difficulty in the recent history of sociology, which involves the gap between the apparent and the actual influence of Merton. On the one hand, Merton clearly had a considerable impact on American sociology as recognized by those he influenced. Indeed, I have argued that this impact may well have been quite considerably greater than that of Parsons or other social theorists of his era. But, it is difficult to pin down, in the absence of any depth of critical literature, what it is exactly about his writing and work that might account for his influence. The rather rag-bag and severely limited treatment by textbook commentators of Mertonian doctrines such as 'middle-range theories', or the 'paradigm of functional analysis', or 'patterns of anomie', or 'unintended consequences' suggests that there is little consensus on what the main features of his work are, and little appreciation of its overall architecture. Nor are Merton's own comments on his work much help: as

when *Social Theory and Social Structure* was declared a citation classic Merton (1980c) merely enumerates some of the areas of work it contains — reference-groups, local and cosmopolitan influentials, the self-fulfilling prophecy, unanticipated consequences, the paradigm of the sociology of knowledge, and sociology of science — without reference to any underlying theme.

The social theorists that one finds attractive appeal at an intuitive level, and it is the task of commentators on theory to make explicit these attractive features. In my own gut-level feeling, perhaps the most salient theoretical feature about Merton's theorizing is his concern for, and skill in providing, fine-tuned structural analyses that build around a fairly straightforward but nicely angled idea. So often his analyses seem 'to work', they seem to 'get things right'. In particular, his analyses of how social structures work and how they impinge on patterns of behaviour are so often provocatively clear. This orientation in his work is enhanced by the careful way in which he sets up problems for sociological analysis and the clear self-conscious style in which he develops his theories, and the modest, open-ended nature of his approach. If this intuitive feel that many have about the analytical payoffs in Merton's writing is correct, then we should try to pin down exactly how he goes about producing such analyses.

The general thrust of my approach to understanding Merton's work is two-fold. One arm is built around Hunt's (1961) observation that Merton was widely regarded as a central figure largely uncontaminated by sociology's many squabbling factions. Similarly, Turner (1974, p. 73) remarks that "His tempered and reasoned statements have typically resolved intellectually stagnating controversies in the field." (This is a different — but not markedly different — interpretation from the more usual image that Merton clasped closely to the centre of the dominant 'structural-functional' paradigm.) I shall argue that Merton had a central role in sociology as a 'discipline-builder', especially in setting research agenda, and in shaping the methodological stances suited to studying these questions. His role has been reinforced by the central organizational positions he has held.

The second arm of this argument builds on Stinchcombe's (1975) insight that Merton's own emphasis on 'middle-range theorizing' has blinded us, as well as Merton himself, to the fact that he has actually built up a flexible and powerful analytical framework that actually is a general theory. Despite the protests against general theory that spring from his own methodological doctrines, Merton does contribute a general social theory. This general theory can be recovered by careful examination of the complete array of his general writing and more specific studies (through a symptomatic reading

— cf. Turner, 1981, p. 8). My rendition of this underlying general theory attempts to both amend and extend Stinchcombe's essay.

These two mutually reinforcing lines of argument occupy the three main chapters of this study. They are preceded by a standard treatment of Merton's 'intellectual career' and the influences which have shaped it, and followed by a selected treatment of Merton's specialist work in particular fields — especially deviance, and the sociology of science. This treatment of his more specific work is intended to deflect little from my main concern, which is to uncover the general model of analysis underlying Merton's work. Rather, this chapter on Merton's substantive analyses will mainly reinforce this concern by showing how the more general model is drawn on in tackling more specific topics, and it also picks up on the more trenchant criticism his more specific work has attracted (compared to the less incisive reaction to his more general approaches). The penultimate chapter outlines some of the criticisms that have been made of his inattention to major questions in macrosociology and the moral implications of his understated ethical stance. The final chapter attempts a review of the value of his general sociological approach. The Epilogue brings together the haunting ironies which thread through the writing of this study.

#### 1.4 AIMS AND LIMITS OF STUDY

Merton has drawn a careful distinction between the 'history' of social theory and its 'systematics' (1948a[1968b, Chapter 1]), and has derided the frequent conflation of the two in many 'theory/history of theory' texts. This study must confront the question of which of these two categories it falls into. I have, so far, justified my interest in Merton's work in terms of its intrinsic interest, and the relative rarity of critical and comprehensive examinations of it, and more widely because I think that understanding Merton's approach to sociology is central to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of American post-war sociology. This may seem, at first blush, a rationale for a study in the history of social theory. And this study does include such an aspect, incorporating snatches of a sociology of Merton's sociology. But its main concern is the systematics of theory. After all, sorting out the cognitive structure is surely a prior task, which must be tackled before the historian can trace through the affiliations of ideas and examine the social influences which may have shaped the construction of the cognitive structure. And this study is concerned with systematics in another direction: I feel that Merton's approach and his analytical schema are still fresh and valid, and both are significant building bases for contemporary social analyses. In particular, this study intends to point up



some of the constraints and dilemmas involved in carrying out the tasks of developing any social theory, using Merton as a case study.

In order to attempt a critical rather than a definitive study, several limitations have had to be imposed. It is not necessary, or even appropriate, to indulge here in invidious comparison of the alternative impacts of Parsons and Merton (a position also adopted in Coser, 1977, p. 567), although I am not necessarily convinced that a close examination would favour the conventional picture of Parsons's dominance. Their relative impact at the theoretical level is open to argument, but I would support Coser's opinion, also shared by Stinchcombe (1975, p. 11) that "... there is little doubt that Merton's theoretical stress on problems of the middle range has been more pronounced in its impact on empirical research than has the Parsonian grand theory" (1977, p. 567).

Similarly, any temptation to trace the detail of debates and criticisms into the murky depths of the more distant parts of the secondary literature had to be resisted. Silence on some points does not imply that I am not biting my tongue through the lack of space for some decidedly argumentative footnotes.

The largest lacuna in this study is that it is based solely on Merton's published work and does not attempt to come to grips with either the ongoing front of theoretical developments which remain 'orally published', or the very considerable back-territory of material available only in typescript or semi-published form. Nor have I sought to incorporate Merton's own views on his work. While these limitations (although 'limitations' seems hardly the most well-chosen term!) at least make the present task more manageable, they do condemn this study to remaining a preliminary attempt at an overview.

# 2

## Merton's intellectual biography

### 2.1 BIOGRAPHY

Merton's formal biography is relatively straightforward. He was born in 1910 in Philadelphia. In 1927 he won a scholarship to Temple University and in 1931 a fellowship to Harvard University for graduate work in sociology. In 1932 he gained a Harvard M.A., and he began his doctoral dissertation, completing this in 1935; and in 1936 became an instructor and tutor at Harvard. In 1939 he was appointed as associate professor and then professor at Tulane University, New Orleans, serving as chairman of the department. In 1941 he became assistant professor at Columbia University, New York, being subsequently promoted to associate professor (1944) and full professor (1947), and succeeding Lazarsfeld as Chairman of the Department in 1961 for several years.

In 1963 he was appointed Franklin Henry Giddings Professor of Sociology; in 1974 he acquired the rank (shared by only three others at Columbia) of 'University Professor'; and from 1979 he has been 'Special Service Professor' and 'University Professor Emeritus'. From 1942 to 1971 he served as Associate Director in the Bureau of Applied Social Research.

Professional activities have included the Presidencies of the American Sociological Association (1956–1957), the Eastern Sociological Society (1968–69), the Sociological Research Association (1968) and the Society for Social Studies of Science (1975–76). Honorary degrees have been given by some 20 universities including Temple, Emory, Leyden, Western Reserve, Colgate, Yale, Wales, Chicago, Pennsylvania, Harvard, Jerusalem, Maryland, Brandeis, State University of New York, Columbia and Oxford. (It is significant that Merton's honour from Oxford — not an institution renowned for its hospitality to sociology — is a Doctorate of Letters rather than Philosophy.) Merton has been a Fellow of the Guggen-

heim Foundation (1962–63) and the Centre for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Science and has been both Resident Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation and Adjunct Professor at the Rockefeller University since 1979. Prizes have been awarded him by the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Institute of Medicine, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Talcott Parsons Prize for Social Science), the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Society for Social Studies of Science (Bernal Award), American Sociological Association (Common Wealth award and Career Distinguished Scholarship award) and, perhaps most prestigious of all, he has been a MacArthur Prize Fellow (1983–1988). He has also held numerous advisory posts across a range of social science, humanities and scientific areas.

## 2.2 SOCIAL CONTEXT OF BIOGRAPHY

It is possible to flesh out the stark details of the formal biography to a degree using published information, but this may only throw a faint degree of light on his career. Much of this background comes from a particularly useful profile written by Hunt (1961) for the *New Yorker*, which paints the following vivid *journalistic* account of his early life and his scholarly style of work (mainly as paraphrased in *Current Biography* (1965)).

Robert King Merton was born on July 5, 1910, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the second of two children of immigrants from Eastern Europe. His father scraped out a living as a carpenter and truck driver, and Merton grew up in the slums of South Philadelphia. Although he took part in the street fights of his neighbourhood as a member of a juvenile gang, he was also hungry for learning — a hunger he often satisfied at the local public library. By the time he was eight years old he was reading in all fields, but his favourite was biography. At twelve he became an amateur magician who performed for money at neighbourhood social functions.

Upon his graduation from the South Philadelphia High School for Boys in February, 1927, Merton won a scholarship to Temple University, where he soon established himself as a brilliant student. In his freshman year he majored in philosophy and became a protege of James Dunham, the dean of Temple and a professor of philosophy, but he switched to sociology in his sophomore year, after he had taken an introductory course in the subject from a young and enthusiastic instructor, George E. Simpson. Eventually Merton became Simpson's

research assistant and he recalls that his dedication to sociology intensified when he experienced “the joy of discovering that it was possible to examine human behaviour objectively and without using loaded moral preconceptions”.

When Merton received his B.A. degree from Temple University in 1931, he was honoured with a fellowship for graduate work at Harvard, where he took full advantage of the opportunity to study with such distinguished professors as Talcott Parsons, George Sarton, Pitirim Sorokin, and L. J. Henderson. For a time he lived on something like \$500 dollars a year, subsisting on a diet of sandwiches, milkshakes, and his own manufactured whiskey . . . .

Robert King Merton married Suzanne M. Carhart, a social worker whom he met when she was a student at Temple University, on September 8, 1934, soon after he was appointed as an instructor at Harvard. They have a son and two daughters. Although he is tall and lean and is austere and clerical in appearance, Merton soon dispels an initial impression of solemnity, and his associates, friends and neighbours know him a convivial man with a wide range of interests and a flair for brilliant conversation. A tireless worker and a perfectionist in whatever he undertakes, he . . . gets up as early as 4.30 in the morning to tackle his many professional projects . . . . He is an independent in politics. Critical of his own work, he sometimes takes years to finish an important project and release it to the publishers . . . .

What Merton does in his study after four-thirty every morning is to evaluate, classify, and abbreviate into notes the masses of material derived from his own readings and from surveys, interviews, and tabulations made under his direction by a dozen graduate students. Picking out some item . . . he studies it, pauses to puff on his pipe and stare meditatively at the ceiling, then turns to a battery of ten staggeringly cross-indexed filing cases containing the thousands of figures and millions of words he has compiled over the last twenty-five years and rummages through one of them for a document to compare with the paper before him. Having drawn some conclusion from the comparison, he jots a few notes on a pad, looks up a handful of obscure allusions, computes a quick mean deviation or chi-square analysis, and rattles off his findings on a typewriter, using paper of three different colors for extra-special cross-referencing.

It would be possible to flesh out a few more incidents in the social background to Merton's life from published material (for example, the way illness has stalked his life: he lists sprue, Meniere's syndrome, Dupuytren's

contracture, a gangrened appendix, pneumonias and cancer (Merton, 1982, p. 924) or the fact that his children at one stage festooned his household with 15 cats, with both children and secondly the cats being the subject of the dedication of *On the Shoulders of Giants*). Other glimpses of the Faculty at Columbia can be gleaned from Lipset's (1955) account of the department, autobiographies from MacIver (1968), Lipset (1969b) and Page (1982), and Horowitz's (1983) biography of C. Wright Mills. However, it may be appropriate to dwell only on the most crucial status-passage in his career, when in 1941 he joined first the Columbia faculty and then the Bureau of Applied Social Research.

Merton's 'joint' appointment to the Columbia faculty with Paul Lazarsfeld was a fortunate accident. When a full professorship fell vacant in 1940 the Department was split between Robert Lynd and Robert MacIver and could not agree on a nomination. A compromise was effected by the University President (Nicholas Murray Butler) who split the position into two assistant professorships — one emphasizing social theory and the other empirical research. Merton was appointed to one, and Lazarsfeld to the other. For a while the two had little contact, but then followed an intellectual seduction. Lazarsfeld invited Merton and his wife to dinner but diverted him to his research enterprise on audience-testing a government pre-war morale-building radio programme.

After the program, when an assistant of Lazarsfeld's questioned the audience on the reasons for its recorded likes and dislikes, Merton perked up; he detected theoretical shortcomings in the way questions were being put. He started passing scribbled notes to Lazarsfeld . . . .

As a second batch of listeners entered the studio, Lazarsfeld asked Merton if he would do the post-program questioning. Merton did . . . . (Lazarsfeld, 1975, p. 36)

Thereafter, Merton became engaged in work with the emerging Bureau of Applied Social Research, supervising projects and becoming a co-director. Both worked at the Bureau, and Lazarsfeld would nobble Merton in the late afternoon and early evening for discussions (in Bureau idiom "scheming sessions") in which ways for improving studies and developing the Bureau were explored. The collaboration proved fruitful over the long run in ways that the later Parsons-Stouffer theory-methods combination at Harvard never managed to achieve (Coleman, 1972, pp. 400, 401).

### 2.3 PERFORMANCE IN THE ARRAY OF SOCIOLOGICAL ROLES

It was appropriate to organize the above fleshing out of Merton's biography using the notion of a status-sequence. This next section will briefly examine

Merton's performance in various of the array of roles available to the status-occupant of any university teaching/research position: as scholar, editor, 'lover of words', reviewer, teacher, organizer, consultant and social critic (cf. the list given by Merton, 1973, pp. 519-522).

#### 2.3.1 Scholarship

It is difficult, amidst the maze of different editions and reprintings (see Miles, 1975, 1985), to exactly pin down the dimensions of Merton's scholarly output, but its characteristics in outline are:

- 12 books
- 11 edited books
- 125 articles
- 120 book reviews (Persell, 1984).

He has also been a compiler of several series of reprinted books. As with Parsons (Hamilton, 1983, p. 44) Merton had his early books published by the Free Press, a new firm which actively published sociological work. His work has been widely translated (for example, *Social Theory and Social Structure* has been translated into a dozen languages) and frequently reprinted (for example, 'Social Structure and Anomie' has been reprinted some 40 times. Besides, this ". . . for all his publications, Merton has a writing block" (Caplovitz, 1977, p. 143). He has several unpublished book manuscripts and many unpublished paper drafts, many in the form of notes for teaching or conference presentations. Indeed, Merton (1980a) has drawn attention to the importance in his work, and that of others, of the advancing front of 'oral publications' which often precede printed scholarly form. But Merton has also been careful to avoid publication of unworthy material, and has not regretted some of his 'non-publication'.

Merton usually presents his work in the form of an essay, a form of writing over which he exhibits consummate control. It is probably fairly easy to recognize the particular style of a Mertonian essay, but it is rather more difficult to distinguish analytically its key characteristics. Merton departs from more austere forms of essay-writing in that he deploys headed sections and uses listings, emphases, tables and other devices to enumerate points or to point up interrelationships. Another hallmark of his writings is an abundance of reference notes (as opposed to Parsons's sparse use of references) designed ". . . to place American sociology . . . in the mainstream of worldwide scholarship [since] Merton wrote in an intellectual climate in which sophisticated scholarship could not be taken for granted" (Cosser, 1975b, pp. 89, 90).

However, the dense thicket of historical and contemporary references seems sometimes diverting, and even Coser pointedly remarks that Merton's abundant footnoting has a 'functional autonomy' of its own!

Coser's codification of the ways in which Merton attempts to relate his work to the European tradition is also a useful general picture of his essay-writing approach:

When choosing a problem for investigation, Merton seems most of the time to have been stimulated by (1) a public issue that was salient at the time; or by (2) a theoretical formulation by a previous thinker . . . ; or by (3) general scholarly interest in a particular area of inquiry. The execution of the project, in turn, led him to either (a) use previous scholarship to buttress his argument; or (b) use that scholarship in order to suggest formulations, refinements and reformulations; or (c) use that scholarship to suggest new lines of inquiry (Coser, 1975b, p. 91).

Merton is very careful in his attribution of concepts and terms to predecessors, at the risk of being accused (see Sorokin, 1966) of merely repeating the work of others. Yet Merton seldom uses any concept without imparting to it a novel twist.

Besides his theoretical essays, Merton has also variously been involved in the proposing, design, execution and (occasionally!) publication of a range of empirical projects and also some work in the codification of methodology.

Merton has frequently worked closely with collaborators and research assistants (often, it appears, wives of colleagues). Beyond his immediate working environment, Merton has been particularly supportive of other scholars, drawing widely on their work and providing encouragement. Merton has seldom engaged in any extended polemic or even exchange of views, although from time to time he has firmly and carefully commented on the work of others where he has felt it was insufficiently scholarly. Dahrendorf, Dubin, Feuer, Mills, Mitroff, and others, have been subject to vigorous critique without rancour. However, Merton has been quite reluctant to enter the lists in defence of his own work. In this he is consistent with his own arguments (the 'kinder cole' principle: Merton, 1965) about the distorting effect of public polemics amongst scientists.

One difficulty with Merton's writings is that over time many of his pieces have been revised, often without explicit signposting. Many papers have been worked up orally in lectures or seminars, presented as a conference paper, published in a major journal and then included in several editions of *Social Theory and Social Structure*. While this practice shows Merton's

commitment to the ongoing reworking and extension of his work, it can be a difficulty for scholarship, with confusion arising as commentators use different versions.

### 2.3.2 Editing

A major, but largely invisible, role that Merton discharged has been his close and active editing of other scholars' writings. Caplovitz argues that these tasks of reading and commenting have taken up much of Merton's professional life, and have severely cut into his own publishing performance.

Merton became engaged as an editor in four different ways. Early in his career, he was frequently asked by publishers to evaluate manuscripts that they were considering publishing. Second, he edited the papers of the various contributors to collections of essays that he edited, notably *Sociology Today* and *Contemporary Social Problems*. Third, some twenty-five years ago he became the sociological editor for Harcourt Brace and thus evaluated all the social science books they considered publishing; and finally he receives each year a large number of unsolicited manuscripts from former students and colleagues for his opinions of their work (Caplovitz, 1977, p. 146).

Caplovitz notes that an early publisher's request was, at the suggestion of Franz Neumann, to evaluate Sweezy's *The Theory of Capitalist Development*. Other manuscripts criticized in detail include James West's *Plainville, USA*, Wilbert E. Moore's *Industrial Relations and the Social Order*, Robert MacIver's *Social Causation*, Kingsley Davis's *Human Society*, Alfred Kroeber's *Anthropology* (second edition), Theodore Caplow's *The Principles of Organization*, Alvin and Helen Gouldner's *Modern Sociology* and Matilda White Riley's *Sociological Research: a case approach* (Caplovitz, 1977, pp. 147, 148).

The extensive scattering of thankful notes for Merton's editing comments in authors' Prefaces ranges from Talcott Parsons in his *Structure of Social Action* (1937) to Anthony Giddens's *The Constitution of Society* (1984).

Much of Merton's contribution in 'close' editing work lies in offering reformulations of and additions to arguments, as well as in showing how prose can be sharpened or highlighted and needless words omitted. Merton's 'rough' editing works to clear up and structure the presentation of arguments (Caplovitz, 1977). His editing for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich — as well as of many other books — often involved highlighting and summar-



izing key themes through an introductory preface. However, Merton appears in his editing work not to attempt to restructure the writer's manuscript along lines that suited his own theories, although undoubtedly many of his comments were based on his own work. Instead, he clearly has a great ability to work into the author's own lines of argument. But this very ability to blend in with the formulations of other writers may have lessened the extent to which his editing work aided the development of his own work.

### 2.3.3 Reviewing

Merton was very active as a book reviewer, especially early in his career, many written as part of a series. Most of these have been straightforward descriptive and critical notices, but in several (e.g. 1941b) Merton has actively summarized and developed the author's material.

### 2.3.4 'Lover of words'

A particular quality of Merton's writing is his love, akin to a poet's or philologist's, of words and language (Caplovitz, 1977). This interest in words is a concern to sharpen and highlight concepts with evocative terms, and not the usual poet's attempt to point to a meaning with subtle and complex imagery. In this respect, his terminology has a vividness that sharply contrasts with the dullness of Parsons's prose. Many of these terms are recovered from archaic usage, a practice enhanced by his favourite reading, which Caplovitz tells us is "... not the ASR or AJS, but rather those eighteenth and nineteenth century literary magazines, *The Edinburgh Review*, *Notes and Inquiries* and *Athenaeum*" and because "he is a fond collector of rare books that he uncovers in-out-of-the way second-hand bookstores" (Caplovitz, 1977, p. 144). Hunt (1961) provides an extended description of one example of Merton's writing style:

Many of Merton's writings, furthermore, are liberally flavoured with apposite references to literature and history. An introduction he wrote to an anthology called *Sociology Today* either quotes or alludes to John Aubrey, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Seneca, Descartes, Hegel, and John Stuart Mill, and another of his books, *Mass Persuasion*, is sprinkled with choice morsels from Thomas Hobbes, Plato, Aristotle, de Tocqueville, Julian Huxley, and Kate Smith.

This love of words further extends to the coining, or more usually recovery, of some splendid terms. This has often been highly successful. His resurrection of the richly evocative term 'serendipity' in the field of

sociology has been taken up by the discipline and the media. In a paper on the drift of sociological ideas into the vernacular, Merton has supplied a list of his own neologisms:

... self-fulfilling prophecy, manifest and latent functions, the displacement of goals, retreatism (a social phenomenon become widely known a generation later as 'opting out'), opportunity-structures, role-sets and status-sets, local and cosmopolitan influentials, the Matthew effect, accumulation of advantage, theories of the middle range, homophily (friendships between people of the same kind, not as more recently proposed, a synonym for homosexuality) and heterophily, strategic research site, obliteration by incorporation, potentials of relevance and the acronym OTSOG (standing for the title of a book of mine, *On The Shoulders of Giants* . . . : 1982a, p. 102).

Several of his accounts (and especially several unpublished ones) have explored the history of use of a particular aphorism — most notably the supposedly Newtonian phrase "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" (1965), and also the changing use of the term 'serendipity'.

His interest in words spills over into the occasional use of poetry (sometimes suitably paraphrased for the purpose at hand) to drive home a particular point, and into a severely controlled scholarly wit (perhaps most clearly expressed in his little "Foreword to a Preface for an Introduction to a Prolegomenon to a Discourse on a Certain Subject": 1969). Merton's erudition has been supported by his command of several languages — French, German and Italian. However, this facility has not been accompanied by an oral fluency, which in earlier days restrained a possible interest in study overseas (De Lellio, 1985).

### 2.3.5 Teaching

Merton has taught a variety of courses and seminars, but since going to Columbia, only at graduate level (Persell, 1984). While some of his minor and shortlived options have included race relations and cities, most attention was devoted to courses in the theory of social control (up to the mid-1950s) and structural analysis. Besides these lecture formats, he was involved with seminars on particular topics (in earlier days, some offered with Lazarsfeld) and more recently seminars in the sociology of science with Harriet Zuckerman.

In his course on social control Merton "... took all the giants of the discipline and showed how the work of each complemented that of others