

## BOOK REVIEW

# Merton Reloaded?

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Crothers, Charles (2021) *Reintroducing Robert K. Merton*, London; New York: Routledge  
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### *A good textbook*

In a clear and informed book, Charles Crothers, professor of sociology in Auckland in New Zealand, produces a comprehensive introduction to the sociology of Robert King Merton. In seven short chapters, Crothers follows the career of the American sociologist in a chronological manner and systematically elaborates a review of his work. The aim of the series in which the book is published, called *Reintroducing*, is to offer “concise and accessible books that remind us of the importance of sociological theorists whose work, while constituting a significant and lasting contribution to the discipline, is no longer widely discussed”. But precisely this idea can be linked to the Mertonian’s conception of the systematic of sociological theory which selects what is still alive in the sociological knowledge produced in the past (Saint-Martin, 2021). In a sense, the sociologist of Columbia was a figure of choice to inaugurate this new editorial agenda in which the history of sociology serves the sociological research nowadays. In this review, I will follow the chapters’ chronological order and critically discuss some of their significant points.

First, Crothers noticed that Merton fall into the social and intellectual process theorized by Merton himself, called *OBI* (obliteration by incorporation), which means that some Mertonian concepts are actually used by sociologists, but without mentioning its original author. It is not the first Crothers’s book on Merton (see Crothers 1987), and he knows very well the work of this fascinating intellectual figure. In the first chapter, he offers a multi-faced portrait of the sociologist based on the Mertonian exegesis. This plural portrait is a worthy idea because as Eviatar Zerubavel pointed out: “there were several Merton’s” (Zerubavel, 2019: 70). For many, he was simply an epigone of Talcott Parsons, an excellent theorist and the father of functionalism in sociology. And according to Alan Sica, the most of Merton’s work is already outdated (p. 5). But according to Crothers, Arthur Stinchcombe and Piotr Sztompka Merton is a central figure and an “unintended general social theorist” (ibid.). Despite those controversies, the only point on which all the exegetes probably agree is that Merton was a really good writer (p. 6). Crothers then offers a short guide to navigating into the Mertonian labyrinth and completes his introduction with a short biography.

### *A Magic Trick: how Meyers became Merton*

Meyer Schkolnick was born in 1910 in Philadelphia, in an immigrant Jewish and anarchist family. The young boy, educated in American values, grew up in a city with a “mix of Irish, Italians, and Russians” (p. 12). From an early age he was passionate about books, especially enjoying Laurence Sterne’s *Tristan Shandy*, which prepared him for future intellectual explorations (*ibid*). The young teenager was very interested by the sleight and soon became the new Houdini of the City. But his main magic trick probably concerned his name, because at this moment the young Meyers decided to become “Robert King Merton” as we know him now. Like many other great sociologists<sup>1</sup>, Merton was initially trained in Philosophy. But he switched to Sociology, this science in which one can find “the joy of discovering that it was possible to examine human behavior objectively and without using loaded moral preconceptions” (Merton, quoted by Crothers p. 13).

### *Harvard and the formation of a historical sociologist of science*

In the very stimulating intellectual context of the 1930s University of Harvard, the young student carried out most of its training “outside the field of sociology” (p. 21), especially in economics and economic history, history of science, philosophy, comparative religion, anthropology and also English literature (*ibid*). Under the direction of Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian emigrant who chaired the new department of Sociology, Merton discover the links between social and cultural phenomena. He was also a very passionate reader, and wrote some important reviews, notably on French Sociology (Merton, 1934) and German *Wissenssoziologie* or Sociology of Knowledge (Merton, 1937). Fascinated by Parsons’ theory of social action, and assisted by the historian of science George Sarton, Merton worked on his Ph.D. on the English Science of the XVII Century with a Weberian perspective. He focused on “looking particularly at the various interactions between society and the development of scientific work” (p. 23). An original approach in this early work is the methodical use of the prosopography and the combination of theoretical propositions and empirical investigation (p. 24). In the 1940s, Merton began to build a sociological model to analyze the scientific world as a social activity founded on a specific *ethos* and set of moral norms. In addition to this model, he expanded upon the Durkheimian conception of anomie, worked on the sociology of deviance, and conceptualized the unanticipated consequences of action or *UCA* (p. 33).

### *Arriving at Columbia: An exotic duo and a charismatic teacher*

In 1940 Merton obtained the post of assistant professor at the University of Columbia in New York. He worked with Paul Lazarsfeld in the newly created *Bureau of Applied Social Research*. Those years constituted an intense collaboration based on an “intellectual seduction” (p. 39), between Merton, the theoretician, and Lazarsfeld, the empiricist. But those years were also for Merton a transition between scholarly research in the libraries and applied social science funded by the government or private sector. In this mostly collective scientific enterprise, Merton learned to construct sociological explanations by using statistics and large data sets, and produced some innovative methodological tools such as focus groups. Professor Merton quickly became a superstar: “His teaching became famous, attracting repeat attendance at classes, outsiders dropping in, and leading to several published

<sup>1</sup> For others examples see Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, or Karl Mannheim.

accounts of his teaching success” (p. 41). Several testimonies from past students attested to Merton as an excellent teacher. Crothers writes on this point:

“students learned that there should always be an interplay between theory and empirical research, and therefore, their recommended career choice was to be *both* theorists and empirical researchers. They learned to critically examine theoretical work; to respecify and reconceptualize earlier theory and empirical findings, so as to cumulate these efforts.” (p. 42).

As Richard Swedberg pointed out, Merton also taught theorizing in sociology (Swedberg, 2014), which is not to learn Grand Social Theory but consists of “a special way of interaction with data” (p. 43). With Merton, one moved from learning sociology to thinking like a sociologist.

### *“Sociology of Science and Sociology as Science”<sup>2</sup>*

In the main period of his career, from the 1950s to the 1980s, Merton followed two main strategies. First, “he returns to his ‘roots’ or ‘first love’: sociology of science” (p. 77) and pursued the development of this sub-field of the sociological research. Secondly, as President of the American Sociological Association since 1957, he tries to extent the recognition of the discipline. He thought that sociology was at an early stage, but was convinced that one could collectively do a lot to make this discipline a rigorous scientific enterprise. And if the sociology of science was his main interest it was because this subfield had the peculiarity to be “self-exemplified”: all that it says can be returned on itself by “a mirror effect” (Saint-Martin, 2013: 29). In other words, Merton tried to make sociology become a real science by producing a scientific sociology of science. On this point, Crothers writes: “Merton’s later sociology of science centered on the key internal features of science as an institution” (p. 90-91). The main idea is that the social organization of science follow a normative structure in which Merton distinguishes four norms:

- “Communism: all scientists should have common ownership of scientific goods (intellectual property), to promote collaboration; secrecy is opposite of this norm;
- Universalism: scientific validity is independent of the sociopolitical status/personal attributes of its participants;
- Disinterestedness: scientific institutions act for the benefit of a common scientific enterprise, rather than for the personal gain of individuals within them; and
- Organized skepticism: scientific claims should be exposed to critical scrutiny before being accepted: both in methodology and institutional codes of conduct” (p. 92).

As Pierre Bourdieu observed, these norms are not realistic (Bourdieu, 2004). Despite this, it is interesting to note – because it is not often mentioned – that Merton had also elaborated some counter-norms, such as solitariness, interestedness, and dogmatism (p. 93); norms which tend to prevent the healthy development of science. Even though these norms are more ideal than real, the analysis of the social structure of science constitutes an advancement in the sociology of this specific activity.

Merton also produced a sociological analysis of the process of discovery. Crothers writes:

<sup>2</sup> Calhoun (2017).

“Central to this image of science was the idea that scientific discoveries were given to the scientific community by the discoverers but in return for an acknowledgment (through citations) that the discovery was the symbolic property of the discover” (p. 91).

The Mertonian sociology of science is a social world with a clear split between the few and the many: “While many scientists work quietly at assigned puzzles, the motivation for intense scientific activity is the reward of recognition which flows from having been the first to make a discovery” (p. 92). In Mertonian view, science is a social space characterized by intense competition and unequal positions among scientists. Another point concerns the process of production and diffusion in science. Merton was interested in writing, publication and communication, and conceived scientific work as a continuous process of rearrangement (p. 95).

### *Time and Words matter*

After 1984, Merton stopped teaching. But this event didn't end his career. He wrote on “social time” during this late period, and was especially interested about how decision about timeframes affected the action of individuals: “different time preferences lead to rather different decisions” (p. 112). He also elaborated a research program on sociological semantics. This program aimed to scrutinize the uses of words or expressions through social groups and history, in order to understand how and why their meaning differs, and why sometimes some words disappear. This work relied on multiples sources like dictionaries and texts databases (p. 114) and was achieved into the book *The Travel and Adventures of Serendipity: A Study in Sociological Semantics and the Sociology of Science*, co-written with Elinor Barber, and published posthumously in 2004.

### *A Grand Social Theory?*

In the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, Crothers seeks to convince the reader that a general social theory can be reconstructed through Merton's work. But this aim can appear problematic given that Merton had carefully refuted the notion of Grand Social Theory in his discussions of Parsons' works. Following Merton's view, this kind of general theory of society risks being useless, or simply wrong. According to him, the more one adopts a wide scope of analysis, the more one risks producing interpretations that do not 'fit with facts'. A more satisfactory way of reinvesting the Mertonian heritage in Sociology is to look at Merton's research program. Crothers shows that this is characterized by some specific features such as problem finding, conceptualization, conceptual clarification, construction of generalizations and typologies of the 'middle range', and a productive return to the classics (as Crothers's book seeks to do) (p. 122-123). Another aspect of Merton's sociology which continues to be of interest is the question of the social character of the individual (p. 133). Here, psychology and sociology are fundamentally interrelated. The construction of the personality structure in childhood and its transformation throughout one's entire life is a central point to understand how the social environment always shapes our personality.

### *Scientist as humanist*

Crothers opens the final chapter with a very strange idea: “Ironically, there is little need for sociological exposé of Merton’s life as I would argue it bore only lightly on his intellectual career [...]” (p. 154). The fact that the aim of a textbook differs from an intellectual biography is absolutely clear. But it is another matter to argue that there is no link between Merton’s life and his scientific production. Of course, there are links, and the other chapters show that the social environment was crucial to his intellectual development. If it is not the aim of this book to reconstitute precisely the intellectual habitus and the self-concept (Gross, 2008) of Merton himself, it is however not a good reason to argue that the sociology of sociology is useless here, especially with regards to a sociologist who had defended the self-exemplification of the discipline, and used his sociological theory in order to understand his own life (Merton, 1994; on this point see also Saint-Martin 2016).

Despite this sociological disavowal, Crothers points out two key elements in Merton's intellectual style. First, he wrote only essays, based on a very important rhetorical dimension. This part of the sociological prose is interesting for the history of sociology, but also for contemporary scholars who probably have much to learn from the Mertonian style. Indeed, for Merton, words matter. In trying to be the most rigorous scientifically but also very careful in humanistic erudition, Merton probably appears as the best figure of the “third culture” that Wolf Lepenies identified within the sociological enterprise (Lepenies, 2008). Furthermore, the Merton’s reviewing papers are still valuable, because for him reviewing was a noble intellectual activity, and this practical art of reading others appeared to be the best way to write better.

### *Merton as touchstone*

The latest book of Charles Crothers possibly has both the advantages and disadvantages of a textbook. On one hand, it combines clarity and synthetic capacity. But on the other hand, it sometimes reifies a sociological work based on intellectual exploration into a too strict conceptualization. If the chronological construction of the book has a pedagogical interest and the inter-titles are valuable, the listing and the multiplication of typologies are not always readable and sometimes impede a deeper understanding of Merton’s oeuvre. Furthermore, there are sometimes annoying repetitions<sup>3</sup> and a few problems in references<sup>4</sup>, even though we appreciate the detailed bibliography for each chapter and the final index.

In the end, one could ask: What is the relevance of Merton’s legacy for sociology today? I think that the answer is clear: being systematic matters. It seems that what is remembered from Merton (with or without his name) in the sociological cognitive memory today is still valuable (systematic, *OBI*, Middle-range theory, theorizing, self-fulfilling prophesy, serendipity, sociological semantic), and what is forgotten is maybe outdated because since the main works of Merton, societies have considerably changed, and sociological research too. Ultimately, Merton appears foremost as a “classic” of sociology in the sense “of touchstone”, a word used by Arthur Stinchcombe to designate “a good example of doing a beautiful scientific work” (Stinchcombe, 1982:2).

<sup>3</sup> See for example p. 51 and p. 168 on the differences between American and European ways of thinking.

<sup>4</sup> For example Saint-Martin, Arnaud (2014), « Robert K. Merton épistolier, ou la gestion de l’influence par correspondance », is quoted two times page 170. The author maybe wants to refer to (Saint-Martin, 2013), but this book is absent from the bibliography.

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