

Robert K. Merton, 1910–2003

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Robert K. Merton was a giant among 20th century social scientists. Both in print and in person, he had a profound influence on modern social science, and particularly on the study of bureaucracy, deviance, mass communications, social stratification, and sociology of knowledge and of science. He created an American style of sociological inquiry – “theories of the middle range” – that linked theories closely with empirical testing. He was the consummate essayist and lover of language. And he used it with such grace, tact and analytic precision that many of the terms he coined have a deceptively self-evident clarity and have passed into common usage. I am thinking, of course, of “the focus group,” “the Matthew Effect,” the perspectives of the “insider” and “outsider,” and “the self-fulfilling prophecy”.

The magic of Robert K. Merton reached audiences beyond sociology. Although many of his students, such as James S. Coleman, Peter Blau, Seymour Martin Lipset, Lewis Coser, Rose Coser, Alvin Gouldner, Alice Rossi, and Stephen Cole would become leading sociologists, Bob Merton’s influence was felt not only by historians of science, economists, political theorists, and anthropologists but also made its way across disciplinary boundaries into the worlds of the sciences, humanities, and law. The range and depth of his reach was recognized especially in his early election to the National Academy of Sciences and in his award of the National Medal of Science.

In fact, Merton’s influence has been so widespread and sustained that I find evidence of it wherever I turn. Just a few weeks ago, Nick Lemann, the remarkable journalist and Columbia’s new Journalism School dean, told me that he had ventured into the “classroom” chez Merton at 450 Riverside Drive while working on his book, *The Big Test*. There he joined the select group of “informal students” that Merton taught throughout his life. Linked to many disparate groups, Merton delighted in bringing them together, and in creating a more connected and “smaller world”.

Despite his seminal contributions to many areas of sociological knowledge, Robert Merton’s first scholarly love was the historical and sociological study of science. He was the father of the discipline. His *Science, Technology, & Society in Seventeenth Century England*, which was the 1938 published version of his Harvard doctoral

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dissertation, is almost certainly the most important sociological study of science ever produced. In August 1957, after 20 years spent cultivating other fields, Merton announced his return to the study of science in his renowned presidential address to the American Sociological Association – a talk entitled “Priorities of Scientific Discovery.” Many subsequent studies of the social system of science, of the ethos of science, and of the theoretical basis for conflicts over scientific priority followed from the ideas presented in that extraordinary address. For the next thirty years, Merton and his students developed and legitimated the study of science as a social institution.

Although Merton’s work touched on many disparate subjects, common theoretical elements and strategies knit them together into a highly coherent body of work. Whether focusing on the political machine or on the priority dispute between Newton and Leibniz over the invention of the calculus, Merton examined the way in which social structures constrain and direct the choices of individuals and the way in which, in turn, their choices had institutional consequences. Why was it so difficult to root out the political machine? How did the emphasis on originality in science lead to deviance among scientists? Merton often found solutions by going at the problem from an odd angle, by turning away from received wisdom and from the language in which it was enshrined. He looked for the unintended consequences of action – such as the way in which the ethos of Puritanism led to the growth of science in 17th century England.

Merton naturally gravitated toward irony and paradox. In his famous paper, “Social Structure and Anomie” he shows how an American virtue – the desire to succeed, to get ahead - creates an American vice – deviant behavior. He analyzed the way in which political bosses do more good with less justice than the just government does when it fails to fulfill the social needs of people who are unable to navigate complex government bureaucracies. In the ironies of the unintended consequences of patterned behavior, Merton found the magic – the material that was there but could not be seen immediately by most observers – an explanatory magic that was not revealed to his readers until Bob was ready to pull the rabbit out of the hat.

To begin to understand Bob you have to accept the idea that the power of personality can be almost as influential as the power of intellect. Merton was not only a transcendent mind, but also a life force. He was a mesmerizing classroom teacher, a magician in front of would-be prestidigitators. I came to know Bob Merton as my teacher in the mid-1960s, first as an undergraduate auditor of one of his most famous courses, “Analysis of Social Structures,” that was offered annually to over 150 students. The content of the course was often original from year to year. In it, Merton taught Mertonian theory – that is, he taught “himself.” The dramatic tension in RKM’s classes was palpable. We witnessed the genesis, the evolution, and sometimes the extinction of ideas. Concepts of social structure were chiseled out, smoothed over, and used as building blocks for larger theories of social structure. Little of this material could be found in his or others published work. There were dramatic reversals and dénouements,

disasters and triumphs, as students took stock and tried to establish their own identities through critical analyses of these Mertonisms. We watched someone with the skill of a Bobby Fisher toying with a Boris Spassky. We tried to follow along and anticipate the next six moves. But most often, Merton seemed magisterial to his students. Whether they were his own students or those who had drifted in from other social science disciplines, they were in awe of him and often scared of disappointing him.

A few years later when I was his teaching assistant, it occurred to me and to his other students that Merton seemed larger than life. Consistent with my training, I tested that hypothesis in a survey of students in that course, *Analysis of Social Structures*. Over 150 responded to the question: How tall is Robert K. Merton? There was little variance in opinion. The class average had Merton at 6 feet 3 and a-half inches in height – a full two inches taller than he actually was. It was true. Merton was, in fact, larger than life.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Columbia Department of Sociology was full of energy and hope – energy that came from the presence of Merton and his closest colleague Paul Lazarsfeld, and from the other extraordinarily talented faculty who were there at the time – each generating a belief in the potential of sociology as a discipline. Merton, of course, led the way. He was its most renowned and most influential member.

Merton recruited me to graduate school in 1964 and early on I was fortunate to work with him as his research and teaching assistant. He had an extraordinary critical eye and sensibility and he was a meticulous editor of manuscripts. Nothing got past him. I once misused the word “stipend” in a draft of a paper I was writing. I experienced, then, what a generation of leading sociologists had before me – the Merton red editorial pen. Sociology was fortunate that it had its Robert Merton who understood so well that clear, elegant thought goes hand in hand with clear elegant language – and who led by example in his essays, as well as in his brilliant digressive satire of learning, *On the Shoulders of Giants*. This was especially so in mid-century, when sociological jargon appeared regularly for ridicule in magazines like *The New Yorker*. When Bob found my “stipend” error – and it surely was not the only one that he identified over the years – he gave me a hand-written memo many pages long on the etymology and various correct uses of the word “stipend.” When Bob’s papers become available in the rare books and manuscripts collection of the Columbia library, researchers will find out how much Merton’s editing helped to shape the arguments of many of the best works of sociology produced by his students and others over several generations.

If Bob was tough on his students, he was tougher on himself. Nothing left his hands for publication until his own high standards were met. Often, years would pass before Bob released papers for publication – sometimes reducing rather than enhancing the impact of these papers.

Of course, Bob was not without foibles. Bob had his moods that seemed to be related to how well his writing was going, writing that he began religiously at about 6 AM each morning. After class conversations about his ideas or mine were always

intense, but they were more or less rewarding depending on how Bob was feeling. After a while, I discovered that Bob had – as poker players say – a “tell”. In those days, Bob smoked both a pipe and cigars. After many experimental trials, I learned that when Bob was smoking a pipe, he was accessible. I could knock on his door and wind up spending a wonderful hour talking with him. However, if Bob were smoking a cigar, I would never knock on his inner door but instead do a fast about face and walk quickly and quietly out of 415 Fayerweather.

As my relationship with Bob evolved into friendship, he continued to teach me. His instruction was multidimensional. When Joanna and I were young-marrieds, he advised us not to put our scarce dollars into works of current fiction but instead to buy reference books. Over the years, books have come and gone in our house, but, as Bob predicted, the multi-volumed OED, the DNB, Strong’s Biblical Concordance, and many other reference works have happily remained – thanks to that good advice from a good friend. Bob’s teaching in other areas was equally wise. It was he, after all, who taught me the inestimable and transcendent value of very good single malt Scotch. And nothing of interest escaped Bob’s critical eye. When Joanna and I became part of his extended family, we would watch Knick games together. Bob would apply his analytic skills to breaking down opponent defenses, and would occasionally jump out of his seat in frustration at a particularly stupid play by Walt “Clyde” Frazier or Dick Barnett – two great Knick backcourt players. Over all these years, in ways too numerous to count and too various to enumerate, Bob – and Harriet – have always been ready, willing, and supremely able to give good and disinterested counsel. It is a debt that cannot be repaid.

The last time Bob and Harriet came over for a family dinner, my 24 year-old-daughter, Nonnie, a doctoral student in art history at Columbia, joined us. Bob and Nonnie were old friends and had corresponded a bit when she was at college and needed some advice about independent multiple discoveries. That evening, Bob, at 92, still standing tall and straight, had lost some of his physical energy, but not one iota of mental acuity, and, quite frankly, the presence of a beautiful young woman, seemed to energize him. With Bob in the lead, he and Nonnie began talking about the possibility of analyzing the history of art in terms of the social organization of artists. Bob delineated three lines of inquiry that might prove fruitful. He expounded on each of them and took Nonnie and the rest of us on a scholarly journey replete with lengthy detours. Afterward, Nonnie told us that she was always amazed and delighted when Bob, after long excursions and parentheses, finally wove the various strands of his argument coherently together. And so, yet another generation had fallen under the spell of that Mertonian magic.

The death of Robert K. Merton brings to a close the extraordinary work of 20th century sociology. It was my great good fortune that for the last 4 decades of that century, Bob was my teacher, my close colleague, my advisor and my friend. His death – as Harriet said in a recent conversation – has left behind a great silence.