

## **Note on the Discipline/ Réflexion sur la discipline**

### **Merton's Ambivalence Towards Autonomous Theory — and Ours<sup>1</sup>**

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Using the term ambivalence in the title of a talk honoring the life and work of Robert K. Merton seems perfectly plausible. For one thing, the man himself was the object of considerable ambivalence. Evoking the (expectable) negative sentiment customarily directed against outstanding public figures, Merton was resented for ways in which he appeared to deploy an interest in others in manipulative ways and to pursue a seemingly insatiable agenda of self-aggrandizement. On the other hand, there were those, myself included, who were awestruck by the depth of his collegial goodwill and of his proactive generosity toward younger colleagues and students. In this regard, David Caplovitz's review of a Merton Festschrift (1977) sets a high bar: Caplovitz not only extols Merton's brilliance as a lecturer and his talents as a poet, but also highlights the boundless energy and wit with which he tackled the prose of all hapless texts that came his way.

Again, there are those who now blame Bob Merton (along with Talcott Parsons) for having narrowed theoretic discourse in sociology and thereby derailed the project of robust advances American sociology to the extent that it has faltered irreversibly since his death (Turner 2004). And again, however, there are those, myself included, who regard Merton's lifework on behalf of

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sociology in general, and sociological theory in particular, as arguably the greatest single intellectual boost that the discipline received in more than half a century.

On those controversial issues I shall comment no further here. Rather, I want to take note of the fact that Merton was practically alone among sociologists of his time in theorizing about the phenomenon of ambivalence itself. In that vein he distinguished insightfully between psychological ambivalence and what he called ambivalence at the social level. The latter notion enabled him to conceptualize patterns of action in terms of socially structured alternatives presented in the form of binary oppositions. For example, he argued that

scientists feel obliged [both] to publish quickly *and* to avoid rushing into print, to value humility *as well as* take pride in originality; physicians are socialized [both] to show sympathy as well as detachment; business leaders are expected [both] to project a sharply defined vision of their firm's future *and* to avoid narrow commitments which distance their subordinates, to provide special facilities so departments can perform well, *and* to subordinate departmental goals to those of the whole organization. (Levine 1978, 1278)

For Merton, then, this meant that social roles should no longer be analyzed as coherent sets of normative expectations, but as clusters of norms and counter-norms that alternatively govern role-behavior. To be sure, the notion of socially structured alternatives appears in Parsons's conception of the pattern variables and elsewhere. However, Parsons wants to characterize social relations in terms of the dominant pattern alternative they embody. Merton stresses the significance of continuously operative counter-norms that alternate with dominant norms in defining social roles. This slight difference is big with theoretical implications. It means that opposition to a dominant norm need not be construed as deviant behavior, expressing some sort of alienative disposition, but rather as normatively valorized conduct. It thereby normalizes ostensible deviance. It intensifies the compulsivity of behavior that veers to one of the normative poles. It produces more openings for the identification of social conflict. It more readily leverages tendencies toward social change.

With but few exceptions,<sup>2</sup> this highly important theoretical position has been ignored in subsequent theorizing. Sociologists continue to find it difficult to tolerate the ambiguity involved in such formations (Levine 1985). Nevertheless, my responsibility here today is to comment on Robert K. Merton as *a modern master of sociology*. This leads me to broach a still broader topic, which has to do with Merton's role in shaping the dominant perspective regarding the nature and scope of sociological theory in our time. Cutting now to the quick about

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2. The exceptions include the work of Merton's student Rose Laub Coser (1979); my own efforts in *The Flight from Ambiguity* (1985); and the 1998 ASA presidential address by Neil Smelser, "The Rational and the Ambivalent in the Social Sciences."

that, I want to move past Merton as an object of ambivalence and as a theorist of ambivalence to Merton as an ambivalent subject. I want to analyze Merton's own deep ambivalence — toward what may be called autonomous theory in sociology — an ambivalence that has come to be shared by a significant portion of the profession.

Sooner or later, autobiographical moments are bound to figure in such a story, so let me state right out that my commitment to a career in sociology sprang in no small part from my exposure to the first edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure*, published in 1949. For someone with a highly theoretical turn as well as a hunger for the elegant use of the English language, I found the intellectually sharp and subtly formulated essays in that book to be utterly captivating. Alongside what I regarded as the theoretically more powerful if less elegantly composed arguments of Parsons's *The Social System* (1951), I felt that I could do little else than try to follow in those footsteps if not stand upon those shoulders.

This commitment was fortified by my determination to devote much of my intellectual energy to exploring what seemed patently under-appropriated works of the classic authors in social theory. But then, a reconsideration of Merton's opus gave me pause. How, I asked myself, could this scholar, so deeply knowledgeable about classic authors like Weber, Durkheim, Mannheim, and Scheler make the epigraph of his major work the Whiteheadian quote, "A science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost"? Although the term ambivalence had not yet entered my vocabulary, I found myself caught on the rack of Merton's own ostensible ambivalence regarding the classic authors.

And then, as I embraced the Parsonian project with increasing excitement, I stumbled into yet another problem. I learned that at the very same professional meetings in 1946 where Parsons staked out his project for general theory in sociology — the project that bore fruit in *The Social System* and subsequent works — that Merton had torn into the notion of general theory with an appeal for what he called middle-range theorizing, which, taken seriously, worked to invalidate the entire Parsonian project.

This did not stop me from drawing on both masters from time to time as I went on to produce my first substantive monograph. In *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (1965), I employed the convergent analytic schema of forms of conformity and deviation that both Parsons and Merton had proposed. Later, I was struck by Arthur Stinchcombe's luminous essay on Merton's theory of social structure (1975), which argued that for all of Merton's strictures against the value of pursuing general theory in sociology he produced, time and again, conceptualizations that were exceptionally fruitful precisely because of the superiority of a general theory that was only implicit in his essays of the so-called middle range. What Stinchcombe argued was that in the various areas that Merton treated — from economic

opportunities to science to bureaucratic functioning to reference groups — Merton evinced an underlying, general conceptual framework. This framework propounded a core social process, a process that was built of socially structured alternatives that are both institutionally sanctioned and that in turn reinforce or alter established norms. The consequence, for Stinchcombe, is that, although “the piecemeal presentation of the theory” makes it readily extendable into many empirical areas, “the structure of the corpus of theoretical work does not forcefully communicate the elegance, economy, and precision of the theory” (31). It also inhibits the systematic exploration of other theoretic implications — precisely the kind of work Merton himself advocated, which I shall recall in a moment.

Had more sociologists attended to Stinchcombe’s critical reading of the Mertonian corpus, it might have enhanced awareness of Merton’s unwitting contributions to general theory. This might have tempered an animus against general theory inasmuch as the preeminent critic of general theory could be seen as needing to practice what he had preached against. Revisiting the Stinchcombe essay, moreover, may help us see that a recurrent ambivalence toward “theory” in fact manifests itself in spheres of Merton’s intellectual activity beyond the debate between general and middle-range theory.

I have alluded to the intimidating epigraph from Whitehead that confronted all readers of his classic tome, whose three editions may well have constituted the single most influential work in twentieth-century sociology. Were one to take that epigraph seriously, one might have subscribed to the memorandum that W.F. Ogburn typed around that time, which recommended that “sociologists abstain from scholarship on earlier texts and likened instruction on the work of earlier sociologists to teaching chemistry students about alchemy” (Levine 1995, 62). Had Merton himself taken it seriously, it would have prevented him from executing those masterly critical exegeses of Karl Mannheim and Max Scheler, and from leading his graduate students in a foray into Simmel’s sociological writings in the 1950s, investigating them assiduously for clues about the elements of group structure. More generally, it would have prevented him from presenting himself to the world as an exemplar of conscientious attention to past authors,<sup>3</sup> and from exhibiting, as Lewis Coser put it, a “self-conscious effort to ransack the whole house of European erudition for the benefit of his American readers ... evident ... in his abundant use of footnote references” (1975, 89).

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3. Merton once confessed that “I chose to adopt the practice of a self-selected master-at-a-distance, Emile Durkheim, rather than the practice of my master-at-close-range, George Sarton” (1962).

All told, there were three areas in which Merton evinced ambivalence about what we tend to associate with the notion of social theory. Although he sometimes voiced objections to all three, he proved a virtuoso in doing each of them. In addition to the project of general theory, and the call to investigate more studiously the classics of the field, he displayed ambivalence in yet a third area: what may be called the legitimacy of autonomous theory. It is to this theme that I wish to devote the remainder of my remarks. And indeed, I shall argue that, with the possible exception of his one-time mentor Parsons, Merton did more to legitimate the practice of autonomous social theory than any other sociologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He did so both as advocate and exemplar, and he gave us a phrase with which to represent this vocation, “theory work.”

In the statement that I presented as chair of the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association some years ago (1997), I sketched a panorama of ways in which social theory work can be usefully undertaken. In response to the question, “What do we profess when we profess Social Theory?”, I distinguished four meanings of the term:

1) abstract or rational, as contrasted with empirical, 2) general, as contrasted with particular, 3) contemplative, as contrasted with practical, and 4) exegetical, as contrasted with heuristic. For each of those meanings, I observed, “theory can be pursued either *in conjunction with* its contrast term or *separately from it*” (2). Theory work is pursued in conjunction with empirical work, then, in one of the following modes:

Theory<sub>1</sub> relates abstract conceptualization to sets of facts, as Homans did in *The Human Group* (by examining sets of case studies to derive abstract propositions about interaction systems); theory<sub>2</sub> links notions of a general order to particular elements or sectors, as Eisenstadt does in *Japanese Civilization* (by referring certain political or religious developments in Japan to overarching characteristics of its civilizational pattern); theory<sub>3</sub> links theoretical analyses to policy recommendations, like Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (by arguing that changed socioeconomic conditions of inner-city black populations requires policies geared to job-creation and training rather than cultural reform or anti-discrimination laws); while theory<sub>4</sub> links the exegetical recovery of texts with ongoing investigation, like Coser in *The Functions of Social Conflict* (by consulting an old Simmel text as a source for state-of-the-art propositions about the consequences of inter- and intragroup conflict) (2).

It is theory work of this sort — theory conjoined with empirical investigation — that Merton is most famous for having furthered. He did so in a number of celebrated substantive papers, such as “Puritanism, Pietism and Science” ([1936] 1968), “Social Structure and Anomie” ([1938] 1968), “Priorities in Scientific Discovery” ([1957] 1973), and “Age, Ageing, and Age Structure in Science” ([1971] 1973 [with Harriet Zuckerman]). In addition, he did so programmatically in that influential brace of epistemological papers, “The Bearing of Sociological Theory on Empirical Research,” and, “The Bearing of Empirical Research on Sociological Theory.” From this work alone, one might just get the impression that for Merton the only legitimate kind of theory work is that carried out in close conjunction with empirical research. This impression,

however, would fail to represent the other side of Merton's ambivalence. For although Merton might be thought to hold that the only good theory is theory conjoined with research, thereby repudiating the legitimacy of "autonomous" theory work, Merton no less than Parsons was an incurable theorist, one who showed us many ways in which autonomous theory work forms an essential part of the enterprise of scientific sociology.

In the course of collaborating with Piotr Sztompka on the *Heritage of Sociology* volume about Merton, we articulated a series of specific practices that Merton propounded and modeled — practices that constitute a distinctly Mertonian program for theoretical work in sociology. This program includes:

- Problem finding — defining scientific questions, finding rationales for them, and specifying what must be done to answer them.
- Conceptual articulation and reconceptualization — advancing from an early, rudimentary, particularized, and largely unexplicated idea (proto-concept) to a genuine concept — an idea that has been defined, generalized and explicated to the point where it can effectively guide inquiry into seemingly diverse phenomena.<sup>4</sup>
- Conceptual clarification — making explicit the character of data subsumed under a concept and suggesting observable indices for conceptualized phenomena that cannot be directly observed.
- Construction of middle-range generalizations — formulating generalizations that deal with limited aspects of phenomena or that apply to limited ranges of phenomena.
- Functional analysis — specifying the consequences, positive and negative, of given social phenomena for the various social structures in which they are implicated.
- Structural analysis — specifying the antecedent structural conditions that give rise to social phenomena.
- Construction of typologies — systematizing the types of behavioral patterns found among actors in various domains.
- Codification — ordering the available empirical generalizations in a given domain, showing connections among generalizations in apparently different spheres of behavior, and tracing continuities within research traditions.
- Construction of paradigms (in a sense that antedates Kuhn's usage of the term) — systematizing the concepts and problems of a given domain of inquiry in compact form

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4. Merton regarded this as a central task for sociological theory. See Merton 1984, 287; Coleman 1990, 29.

- Formalization — deriving the implications of theoretical assumptions and postulates for other investigable properties of social phenomena (yet remaining aware of the danger of pursuing logical consistency to the point of sterile theorizing).
- Recasting theory — extending theoretical formulations in new directions in response to the appearance of unanticipated, anomalous, and strategic facts (serendipity) or the repeated observation of facts previously neglected.
- Specification of ignorance — expressly recognizing what is not yet known but what needs to be known in order to advance the pursuit of knowledge.
- Location in theoretical space — understanding the implications of theoretical pluralism for a given perspective or research program, including the fact that perspectival differences may entail complementary or unconnected as well as contradictory theories.
- Productive return to classics — mining the classics for crisper formulations, authoritative support, and critical rejoinders regarding current formulations, and for models of intellectual excellence.

It was by specifying these practices and insisting on their significance for sociology as a scientific discipline that Merton successfully lent new dignity to the role of theory in sociology. Since he did so at a time when so much of sociological progress seemed to hinge on fashioning new observational and analytic techniques, the enormity of his achievement can scarcely be gainsaid. In this process, he had to deal with two other imposing contemporary figures. On the one hand, he was motivated to mark out a space for himself that was distinct from Parsons but not directly confrontational, as an alternative general theory would have been. On the other hand, he was offering a conceptual framework whereby his role was ascendant vis-à-vis that of his close colleague Paul Lazarsfeld. Both of these constraints led him to shy away from constructing general theory and from advocating autonomous theory work too loudly. In the apt words of Craig Calhoun, “he sought to parlay his dominated position in the field of autonomous theory into a dominant position in the field of sociology at large” (2005).

It is rarely appreciated that Merton’s program for theory work in sociology quite legitimates the efforts of those who devote most, if not all, of their professional time to autonomous theorizing. To some extent, this is a consequence of Merton’s own failure to recognize what he actually accomplished. His ambivalences toward general theory were so strong that they “undercut any clear self-description of the very sort of advances in theory work he in fact achieved” (Calhoun 2005). What is more, failure to appreciate the way in which Merton’s teachings powerfully legitimated the role of theory work represents a pervasive confusion between *general* theory and *autonomous* theory. Even if Merton’s dismissal of general theory is valid — which Stinchcombe and many

others have thrown into question — we must acknowledge that there are plenty of other functions for autonomous theorizing that Merton advocated and exemplified.

These functions are not easy to perform. Doing justice to them requires no less focused training and discipline than the functions of ethnography, statistical analysis, social historiography, or survey research. As such, I find that an entire course devoted to helping students engage just a few of such functions offers them no more than passing acquaintance with the discipline required. Merton's ambivalence about autonomous theory notwithstanding, it behooves us to revisit his words and deeds that articulate and exemplify the kinds of intellectual work that sociological theory at its best can contribute.

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