

Robert K. Merton: Among the Giants

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"If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." The origin of this aphorism, widely attributed to Sir Isaac Newton, is the subject of Robert K. Merton's 1965 book, *On the Shoulders of Giants*.<sup>1</sup> If this work is not one of Merton's better known publications, it is certainly one of his most unusual. So it is not without irony that today Merton himself is widely considered one of the giants of science. Those who continue to do research in the sociology of science will stand on Merton's shoulders.

However, this intellectual giant would be among the first to moderate this tribute and apply to himself his own assertion that, "Scientists have been dehumanized by being idealized and, on occasion, idolized.... Yet an honest appreciation would see them as men, not gods, and so subject to the pressures, passions and social relations in which men inevitably find themselves."<sup>2</sup>

Merton's name is almost synonymous with the term sociology of science, and his sociological studies are so far-ranging that he has become widely known beyond the parameters of his own discipline. Norman Storer

of Baruch College has observed, "If Robert K. Merton has not yet been publicly described as a founding father of the sociology of science, there is at least substantial agreement among those who know the field that its present strength and vitality are largely the result of his labors over the past forty years."<sup>3</sup>

A native Philadelphian, Merton began these "forty years labors" at Temple University. After receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1936 he joined its faculty, where he developed a theory of deviant behavior based on different types of social adaptation. Merton served on the faculty of Tulane University from 1939 to 1941. He then went to Columbia University, where he has remained for over 35 years. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1968 and its Institute of Medicine in 1973. He was elected the first President of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) in 1975.

Merton's titles are numerous; his achievements many. Of all his accomplishments, however, I think it is his recent election as a foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences--the first social scientist so

honored--that is most impressive. The Swedish Academy awards the annual Nobel Prizes in physics and chemistry.

Merton was also one of three prominent social scientists who recently joined the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City. This 70-year-old foundation, named after a 19th century financier, is committed to the improvement of social conditions in the U.S. To begin in the Fall of 1977, Merton, with Nathan Glazer of Harvard University and Bernard Gifford, deputy chancellor of the New York City Board of Education, will direct a program studying New York's problems and institutions. Under their guidance, the foundation is expected to emphasize "the relationship between social science and public policy, rather than a more abstract approach to sociology that it has sometimes been described as perpetuating."<sup>4</sup>

The invitation extended to Merton to join this foundation is an honor which serves to acknowledge his tremendous contributions and present influence in the field of sociology. Professor Irving Horowitz of the Department of Sociology and Political Science at Rutgers University underlines these points in describing Merton as "the complete sociologist." Horowitz comments that Merton "has been the quintessential professional in sociology for most of his career. His efforts in the sociology of science, deviant behavior, and establishing 'middle range' theories that would pass pragmatic tests of workability have uniquely serviced sociology and its practitioners.... It would hardly be

an exaggeration to say that this man is the most important single figure in the profession of sociology."<sup>5</sup>

My personal acquaintance with Bob Merton goes back about 15 years. I've often acknowledged his moral, intellectual, and personal support in developing the *SCT*<sup>®</sup> and especially the *Social Sciences Citation Index*<sup>™</sup>, on whose editorial advisory board he serves.<sup>6</sup> In recent years he has been helpful to me and ISI<sup>®</sup> in ways too numerous to list here.

An hour spent in the company of Bob Merton is a mixed blessing. Somehow you come away with a dozen ideas of your own (at least you think they're your own!) never quite realizing that what *he* said brought them about.

I have always had the kind of reaction to much of Merton's writing that I associate with a great novelist, not a great scientist. So much of what he says is so beautifully obvious--so transparently true--that one can't imagine why no one else bothered to point it out. He is a special kind of scientist: forever reminding us of the forest, while describing it tree by tree.

Merton's devotion to sociological pursuits, and the literary style by which he expresses himself, distinguishes him as a unique person. His interest in man's past, both scientific and literary, makes him a kind of classicist--or renaissance figure--concerned not only with man's past, but with how past values and perceptions may shape the future. On that subject it is appropriate to quote from Bob Merton's own extensive works. In

1957 he wondered how future historians would judge those now concerned with the sociology and history of science:

We can only guess what historians of the future will say about the condition of present-day sociology. But it seems safe to anticipate one of their observations. When the Trevelians [a family of English historians] of 2050 come to write that history—as they well might, for this clan of historians promises to go on forever—they will doubtless find it strange that so few sociologists (and historians) of the twentieth century could bring themselves, in their work, to treat science as one of the great social institutions of the time. They will observe that long after the sociology of science became an identifiable field of inquiry, it remained little cultivated in a world where science loomed large enough to present mankind with the choice of destruction or survival.<sup>7</sup>

I think it is fair to attribute to scholarly modesty his erroneous

speculation that the sociology of science would remain little cultivated. As a perennial optimist I can assert that owing to the enormous growth of interest in science policy studies and other branches of this field we can have hope that mankind will survive.

It has often been the case that we neglect to pay tribute to those for whom we have the greatest love and respect until it's too late for them to hear it. It is also somehow not fashionable for scientists to express such emotions publicly. When I first saw the recent festschrift<sup>8</sup> in honor of Bob Merton I felt excluded, but my frustration was lessened when I realized I would have an opportunity to confirm the Mertonian "law" called "the Matthew effect,"<sup>9</sup> by which scientific recognition is bestowed upon one who already has it. So I am delighted to pay homage to a real giant on no particular occasion but just for the pleasure in doing so.

#### REFERENCES

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