

Recent writings on Robert K Merton: a listing and some observations

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Abstract

Death and the advent of a variety of anniversaries are occasions when a discipline reflects on the accomplishments of its members, propounded by host universities, scholarly associations, focused conferences, journals, as well as the more normal course of the unfolding of a scholar's influence. The paper attempts to assemble Robert K Merton's posthumous publications together with the array of works directly relating to his body of sociological work. While it might be expected that particular themes would continue and this indeed occurs, there is also a wide range of attention to a large variety of Merton's work, including the launching of his emergent interest in sociological semantics. The assemblage of material suggests that Merton's work will continue to play an important role in inspiring sociological research.

Keywords

Robert K Merton; Publications; Archives; Oral Histories; Obituaries; Memorial volumes; History of Sociology

In the 2004 *Social Studies of Science* symposium Needham and Poros produced a semi-official completion of Robert K Merton's (RKM) writings. Other bibliographies include Garfield's compilations (2012); for a French version see Saint-Martin (no date) and most usefully annotated Simonson (2016). Since then, a few more reprints of Merton's writings have emerged and are recorded here: see below. But the purpose of this compilation is to record a moderately exhaustive selection of writings on Merton over the last couple of decades. In addition, in the spirit of Merton, an attempt is made to ascertain social patterns in the more recent reception of his work.

The methodology through which this listing has been compiled consisted in several bibliographical sweeps – especially *Sociological Abstracts* but also *Scopus* together with checking published bibliographies. There are major limitations on how exhaustive this compilation is. Many studies mention Mertonian concepts or themes – sometimes without

acknowledging these – and a broad rule of thumb is to include only that material which (apparently – often judgement has to be made on limited information such as only abstracts or keywords) – deal quite centrally with his work. Because of the difficulties of where to draw the lines of relevance mean that some important linkages are not made, but it is not possible to cover everything that is less relevant. Book reviews and dissertations were eschewed.

The most crucial event in ‘Merton studies’ has been the gathering, cataloguing and making accessible RKM’s papers at *Columbia Libraries*: an archive open to scholars, and already drawn on in some published research: see Dubois (2014, 2016), Santoro (2017), Turner (2014) in particular. For exploration of the role of archives in disciplinary formation in a cognate discipline see Bratslavsky (2015– see also more generally on archives and other methodological sources in Platt (2007)). As both argue archives allow the firmer building of discipline’s collective memories as they provide a focus in contrast to otherwise highly fugitive material.

Over this period a couple of interviews with RKM have been published: Cullen & Messner (2007); Merton (2001) while Simonson (e.g. see 2016) has interviewed amongst Bureau staff quite extensively. Serious research on Merton’s work and its production has been produced from Clark (2005), Crothers (2004, 2005) Dubois (2014, 2016), Hynek (2012, 2016), Nichols (2010, 2016), Simonson, and Turner. Further, several historical studies provide considerable context: in particular passages within the large volume on the history of American Sociology edited by Calhoun (2010); see also Gitre (2011); Haney (2008), Herpin & Jonas (2011), Isaac (2012), Marcel (2004), and Wheatland (2004).

RKM does not have a dedicated official website (although see Garfield, 2012), but teaching material proving synopses of his work, mainly relating to history of social theory is available on many websites, some rather inaccurate.

Several web-based video collections are particularly evocative: comments organised by Columbia University after RKM’s death (Wanner et al., 2003). Columbia also printed a memorial commentary and there was coverage by *New York Times* amongst other news sources. The ASA quickly produced a range of comments in *Footnotes* (Calhoun et al., 2003). The range of Obituaries/memorials (all 2003-2004 and as recorded in *Sociological Abstracts*) include: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (Holton); *Scientometrics* (Bonitz; Stigler, Cole, Fix); *Science, Technology, and Human Values* (Bijker) – and for country-specific journals: Belgium (Vranken); Denmark (Bertilsson); Finland (Allardt); Germany (Schmid; Scheuch); Holland (De Haan); Italy (Bucchi; Campelli, Ceri, Zocchi); Spain (Noguera, Torres & Lamo); Poland (Sztompka); Norway (Kalleberg).

Almost all obituaries are a few pages at most and consist in a potted biography, pointing to key texts written and some general comments about their significance: not much to be learned about the writer and her/his work. There is considerable literature using analysis of obituaries to penetrate wider patterns they appear to reflect. Although there are studies of sociologists’ autobiographies this does not appear to have been extended to their obituaries. (In some part as a newish discipline there is not a large ‘population’.) One promising (yet not fully published) study (by Cushman, 1993), covering cognate academics, explores the presentation of sovietologists’ obituaries.) The journal distribution of obituaries is interesting. Several specialty journals and a range of European-based ones ran obituaries. In the US there is clearly a strong division of labour between professional matters which are assigned the very professionally produced magazine *ASA Footnotes* and academic journals (including a small

stable run by ASA itself) with obituaries clearly assigned to the former. In other jurisdictions, journals are more often general-purpose, including obituaries and perhaps other ‘professional’ items alongside formal academic articles. International figures are acknowledged in appropriate specialty area journals. That RKM attracted a range of European reactions is remarkable. In part this flows (I think) from his stature as one of the last of a generation of leading social thinkers. Moreover, his essay-based writing style and broad interesting sociological ideas has been attractive in a world sociology context rather devoid of many thinkers of clear international stature. RKM’s writings clearly have an ‘elective affinity’/resonance with much of European intellectual styles of thought. Moreover, given his frequent visits of the continent this was, to some extent at least, reinforced by personal contact, especially amongst an older generation. Again there is a small sociological literature bearing on different styles of writing and how these vary internationally: see Abend (2006) and Abend et. al. (2013) which provides some useful discussion.

Anniversaries of various prior events can become occasions for celebration and reflection. For example, a further Columbia-sponsored memorial was produced 100-years after RKM’s birth (Bailyn, et al., 2010).

Turning to the substantive continuations of RKM’s work these tend to be channelled into each of the main areas he worked in, but with an emphasis on his more general theoretical work. Many theory texts continue to have Chapters on RKM - see Segre (2014) for a well-worked example. Encyclopedia/Handbook entries include: Crothers (2011); Fleck 2015; Sztompka (2017); Sica (2007). Both types of account (although less so longer entries which are more likely to be written by experts) tend to be limited in their interpretations and fail to draw on secondary literature as well as the primary sources. Often such accounts portray RKM in simplistic terms and rest on stereotyping, and certainly make little attempt to engage with later developments of RKM’s own work let alone the potential impact of exegeses. This can result in a considerable lag in interpretations. However, even with more expert accounts there seldom is much debate – or even scholarly cross-referencing to other items. The reception of RKM’s large array of theoretical work remains piecemeal.

The heavy-lifting in generating Merton commentary falls to several dedicated books and several special issues of journals. These include:

- Calhoun (2010) *RKM: Sociology of Science and Sociology as Science* which arose as a 2008 workshop hosted at Columbia University with the avowed purpose of casting a wide net over how RKM’s work related to enduring and emerging intellectual issues. Coverage includes methodology; culture; science, knowledge, rhetoric, history of ideas, and the emergent sociological semantics.
- Rigney (2010) *The Matthew effect: how advantage begets further advantage* pulls together studies of this RKM hypothesis across a variety of social arenas, including science, technology, politics, and schooling.
- Elkana et al (eds.) (2011) *Concepts and the social order : Robert K. Merton and the future of sociology* also emanated from a workshop (with the originating concern that perhaps RKM’s work was continuing in influence while not being formally recognised -‘OBI’ [obliteration by incorporation] to use Mertonian vocabulary. Contributors to this volume were asked to “write about an idea or concept which influenced their work, but one that in addition to the personal, also points to future importance in the way Sociology in general is moving”. So the overall aim is to provide insights into sociological knowledge production leading to histories of sociology in 3 countries; in relation to RKM’s role; and then a set of ‘considerations’ of RKM themes/concepts: sex roles; science; ambivalence, Mathew effect; sociological semantics,

sociology of knowledge. (Authors are: Camic, Eisenstadt, Ezrahi, Fabiani, Feldhay, Motzkin, Nowotny, Raina, Thackray, Wessely, and Zuckerman).

- Mica et al. (2012) *Sociology and the unintended : Robert Merton revisited* developed from a conference held in Gdansk, Poland in 2011 that was able to honour the 75th anniversary of Merton’s famous essay on the unintended consequences of purposive action (UC). The book is organised into three parts: theoretical refinements and redefinitions, cases studies of UCs, and UCs of norms and social interventions - endeavouring to update Merton’s work and also relate it to the treatments afforded this realm of social reality by other theoretical traditions. Whereas the conference supported some 40 papers the conference volume is of some 20 chapters. Since much of the material in this book is not closely tied to RKM’s formulations I’ve not included its constituent chapters separately in the bibliographic listing of items.
- Special issue of *Scientometrics* 60 2003
- *Social Studies of Science* 34 (6) 2004
- Kalleberg (ed.) 2007 *Journal of Classical Sociology* 7 (Also Barnes, Enebakk, Huff, Sztompka)
- *Theoretical Criminology* 11 (1) 2007.
- Turner, Stephen (2009) in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* on Merton and the Columbia Model of Theory Construction (also commentaries from Agassi, Crothers, Kincaid, Sztompka, with a further response from Turner).

Given the wide array of Mertonian interests and concepts deployed in pursuing these, how does the subsequent body of work relate to these? In indicating which areas have led to further work a broad classification of Merton’s work is used (see Table 1):

- Discipline-building
- Methodology
- General social processes
- Substantive sociologies (organised somewhat chronologically in terms of RKM’s interest in each: Historical sociology of science; communications studies, social psychology, anomie/deviance, sociology of science, sociological semantics.

Table 1: Categorisation of Items

<i>Methodology</i>
Philosophy of science: Richardson, Alan. (2004). Turner, S. (2009a).
Middle-range theory: Bazerman. (2008); Roy. (2014); Sampson. (2010); Tilly (2010). Theory/research nexus: Hynek (2012); Levine (2006).
Methods: Crothers (2009); Handcock & Gile (2011) Hedstrom & Jlikoski (2010), Hynek et al. (2015); Kincaid (2009); Stone (2011); Turner (2009).
Focus-groups: Lee (2010); Tadjewski (2015).
<i>General social processes</i>
Ambivalence: Arribas-Ayllon & Bartlett (2014); Levine (2006); Turner (2014).
Post-industrial society: Clark (2005).
Values Homophily: Hynek et al (2015).
Cumulative (Dis) advantage: DiPrete & Eirich. (2006).
Gender: Epstein (2011).

Unintended consequences: de Zwart (2015); Garfield (2004); Yuneng & Yang. (2008)
Self-fulfilling Prophecies: Nichols (2016); Rigney (2010); Sanderson (2013); Schnepfer (2004).
Bureaucracies: Haveman (2009).
Time: Subrt (2015).
<i>Historical sociology of science</i>
Protestantism: Becker (2011)
<i>Communications studies</i>
Local/Cosmopolitan: Anttilaa & Väänänenb (2013); Elvestad (2009).
Social psychology: Merton, Fiske, and Curtis. (2004) Nichols (2016); Simonson. (2004).
Communications/media Katz et al. (eds.) (2003); Simonson and Weimann (2003); Thomas (2006). Hynek (2011, 2012).Simonson (2005, 2006, 2010a; 2010b, 2016). Simonson et al. (2013): Hynek (2017).
<i>Anomie/Deviance</i>
Anomie/Deviance: Baumer (2007); Bjarnason (2009); Burkatzki (2008); Caes (2008); Chamlin & Sanders (2013); Cochran & Bjerregaard (2012); Cullen & Messner (2007); Deflem (2015); Konty (2005); Legge, et al. (2008); Maruna (2008); Mulkey, et al. (2005); Murphy & Robinson (2008) Parnaby & Leyden (2011) Parnaby & Sacco (2004); Young (2008) Zhao, Ruohui & Cao (2010); Schaible & Altheimer (2016) Stults & Baumer (2008)
<i>Sociology of Science</i>
Citations: Small (2004)
Ethos of Science: Demina (2005). Huff (2007); Kalleberg (2007b); Mirskaya (2008); Panofsky (2010); Segal & Richardson. (2003).
Sociology of science: Barnes (2007); Bijker (2004); Bortolini (2012); Bornmann (2008); Bucchi (2015); Cole (2004); Enebakk (2007); Garfield (2004); Gieryn (2010); Hargens (2004); Huff (2007); Jarvie & Agassi (2011); Jones (2009); Kalleberg (2007b) Lundberg (2011); Orozco et al (2010); Paccagnella (2007); Sztompka (2007); Turner (2007); Zocchi (2004).
Matthew effect: Gladwell (2008). Rigney (2010); Zuckerman. (2010b)
Sociological semantics: Zuckerman (2010a, 2011)
Serendipity: Campa (2007); Chazel (2006); Epstein (2005); Yaqub (2018).

General treatments include: Calhoun & Van Antwerpen (2007); Crothers (2014, 2013, 2004); Dubois (2014); Gieryn (2004); Kalleberg (2007a); Levine (2006); Martire (2009); Solinas-Saunders & Stacer (2015); Sztompka (2003); Tilly (2005); Turner (2014) and Zafirovski (2010).

Conclusion:

Interest in the work of RK Merton continues to increase and his work has not been relegated to an unused sacred/classical status. The *Web of Science* citation data can be organised to track the flow of citations and as of early 2018 (but excluding that year) citations to articles at least show marked increases, even when only part decades are involved: see Table 2. (Plotting the influence of RKM or any other writer is complex and this table is intended as a broad characterisation only).

Table 2: Overall pace of citation to Robert K Merton's articles.

Decade	Citations
-39	7
-49	64
-59	108
-69	281
-79	667
-89	769
-99	897
-09	2046
-17	4548

Calhoun opines that (2010a: vii) “his work continues to be cited and used in the study of social structure, social psychology, deviance, profession, organizations, and culture, as well as perhaps most prominently science”. These speculations are not really borne out by the more detailed examination above: certainly science and deviance are densely built on, but the other areas are pretty much ignored (e.g. organisations only yields one item). And of course the early RKM interest in communication studies receives much attention as that discipline appears to be going through a discipline formation process with much recovery of earlier history.

There are various barriers to the development of the work of an author. For example, as an (in part) intellectual biographer I am concerned that often writers drawing on a theorist’s works tend to work only off the primary source without paying attention to the secondary commentary literature – which is the reverse of a frequent criticism that secondary sources are too often relied on without accessing the original material: both are faults and a ‘mixed’ approach is preferred.

The point of this compilation is to help drive forward issues that flow from the work of Merton, but as the sheer size of this list shows this is an immense task not tackled here. However, it should provide a good platform for future work in each of the indicated areas of study.

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