CRITIQUE AND SUMMARY OF THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS OF ROBERT K. MERTON

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Sandra Lee Kreeger
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OF ROBERT K. MERTON

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Sociology today is a highly compartmentalized discipline, having within its confines methodologists, theorists, and several other varieties of "ists," all of whom are considered to be sociologists. As a result of this specialization, sociological treatises (along with those of many other fields, to be sure), frequently suffer from a lack of breadth and comprehensiveness. Relatively little of the work done in sociology reflects the integration of rigorous research with clearly defined theory without distorting either. It is because the work of Robert K. Merton approaches this standard that it is felt to be worthy of careful study. Merton attempts to steer a course between the Scylla of theory which is mere logical system-building, and the Charybdis of empirical research which is no more than the observation of discrete phenomena. Because he is aware of both, in discussing one, he frequently mentions the implications of the other.

I. THE PROBLEM

The problem of this thesis is fourfold: It will involve a summary of Merton's major contributions to sociological theory; an investigation, where possible, of the source of his
ideas; an illustration of the way in which he has enlarged and expanded these ideas; and finally, of the heuristic value of his theoretical contributions. Indeed, this latter point may be considered one of the most important characteristics of his work. Merton himself indicates, at various places in his books, where he feels further research or synthesis is needed. Since Merton's work encompasses several widely divergent areas within sociology, an attempt will be made to discover whether there exists some sort of pattern or rationale underlying it all. Further, Merton's work, both as a whole, and the individual areas to be studied in detail in this thesis, will be discussed in relation to the body of sociological knowledge as it exists today.

Throughout the thesis, particular emphasis will be given to the revised edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure*,¹ since it represents Merton's own compilation of his work, presumably that which he thought to be of greatest importance. Merton's most significant studies are reproduced here, as well as some new observations.

The second chapter will be in the nature of a survey of Merton's work. It is in this chapter that the reliance on *Social Theory and Social Structure* will be most evident,

although some of his other work will be considered.

The next three chapters will be detailed studies of Merton's work in three areas of sociology; the first methodological, the second and third substantive areas. The first will be concerned with his consideration of the mutual interdependence of research and theory, the second with his study of bureaucracy, the third, with his sociology of knowledge.

II. IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

One way of documenting the importance of Merton's work in the field of sociology is to cite some of the innumerable references to his work which can be found in sociological literature. It is interesting to note how numerous and varied the references to Merton are in a pamphlet put out by the United Nations, which attempts to survey the field of sociology in the United States. In a section of this booklet entitled "Methods of Social Research, 1945-55," Peter H. Rossi states that the trend in methodology in that period was away from the model of the physical sciences, and towards the establishment of middle-range theories as was advocated by Merton. Rossi also points out the influence of Merton's work in establishing the reciprocal relationships between research and theory.

2Ibid., p. 23.
3Ibid., p. 24.
Rossi further indicates that the acceptance of the concept of
"theories of the middle range" has been a mixed blessing, inso-
far as it has enabled those researchers who would formerly have
been vulnerable to a charge of being "mere empiricists" to
raise the status of their work without actually changing its
form.¹

The work done by Merton and Lazarsfeld in the first
volume of Continuities in Social Research is seen by Rossi as
representing a new approach to the research critique; one in
which the work under review is not only evaluated, but the
researcher attempts to make his own theoretical methodological
contributions.²

Rossi makes one further reference to Merton's work which
will be mentioned here. This is in his reference to the devel-
opment of what he calls the "quasi-sociometric" techniques.
While these techniques are loosely based on Moreno's principles,
they make no attempt to study the entire group or community.³

In another section of this booklet,⁴ Alvin W. Gouldner
utilizes Merton's concept of "latent function" as the basis for
a new concept he proposes, that of "latent structure." Gouldner
has developed this concept by analogy to Merton's.

Robert L. Hall has pointed out the contributions Merton
has made to military sociology by studying it in terms of

¹Ibid.  ²Ibid., p. 26.  ³Ibid., p. 32.
⁴Ibid., p. 40.
reference group theory and the study of bureaucracy. In fact, Hall credits Merton's endeavors in this latter area with being basic to much of the subsequent work done in the area. 1

Another reference to Merton's contributions is made by Neal Gross, when he criticizes the bulk of the research done in the sociology of education by saying "the few hypotheses tested . . . are largely irrelevant to 'middle' or even 'lower' range theories." 2 This appears to indicate that Merton's concept of "theories of the middle range" has become so well assimilated into sociological desiderata as to require no explanation.

Bernard Barber, in the same volume, refers to Merton's paper "Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England" 3 as being one of the outstanding contributions of empirical research in the field of the sociology of knowledge. Barber states that Merton's work represents by far the greatest contributions to the sociology of knowledge done in the country in the period up to 1945. 4

Another reference to Merton in this book is that made by Charles R. Wright, who cites Merton's study of community influentials as being noteworthy. 5 Wright points out that

1 Ibid., p. 60. 2 Ibid., p. 67.
3 Merton, op. cit., Chapter XVIII (pp. 574-595).
4 Zetterberg, op. cit., p. 68. 5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 80.
Merton was the first to recognize that there are two kinds of opinion leaders: the local and the cosmopolitan. Wright also considers Merton's contribution to the study of mass communication in which he analyzed the effect of a war bond drive being conducted by Kate Smith as being important.

Merton's work in the sociology of the professions is cited by Mary Jean Huntington in her paper in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) booklet. She states Merton's examination of the consequences on professionals being employed by nonprofessionals, as in the government, shows a recognition of the problems this situation creates for the very definition of "profession." Huntington points out the need for more research in the field of the sociology of professions, and agrees with Merton that the greatest need is for cumulative research in this field.

The last reference to Merton's work in the UNESCO book will be included here, is one made by Suzanne Keller in a discussion of social stratification. She points out that the emphasis in this area has shifted from studying the group ties of racial and cultural minorities to a concern with the significant group ties of an individual experiencing upward mobility in the socio-economic strata. The major contributions in this field have been made by Merton, according to Keller.

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1Ibid., p. 82.  
2Ibid., p. 91.  
3Ibid., p. 92.  
4Ibid., p. 117.
It should be borne in mind, however, that although Merton's chief emphasis has been on demonstrating a sensible approach to the co-ordination of research and theory, he has not been uniformly successful in all aspects of this work. Nor has his work been accepted without discussion, as can be seen in the following statement.

The tendency to reverse the traditional roles of theory and research has not only been obvious in the work of the avowed empiricists but also is explicit in the statements of such carriers of the rational tradition as Merton. His "serendipity" is close to "trust to luck."\(^1\)

The fact remains, however, that Merton's work must have exerted a major influence on the theoretic orientations, as can be seen from the fact that McKinney's work is replete with references to Merton.\(^2\) Since this work is a compilation made from the contributions of several sociologists, the impact of Merton's thinking can be seen. Also visible is the extent to which his suggestions for reaching a rapprochement between research-and theory-minded sociologists have found acceptance.

In a sense, some of his ideas about the nature of sociological problems and the way in which they are best formulated, which were presented in germinal form in Social Theory


\(^2\)Ibid., passim.
and Social Structure, come to fruition in his introduction to Sociology Today. In this work he states specifically some of the problems confronting the researcher who seeks both to deal with a significant problem and to do so in such a way that he may get results which are in some measure true, and not merely conjectural.

III. METHODOLOGY

The materials to be used in this study will include the most salient works of Merton, with particular emphasis being placed on the core of his thought which appears in Social Theory and Social Structure. The analytical device to be employed will be that of the case-type study. This will involve the selection of three specific areas (the interdependence between research and theory, studies of bureaucracy, and the sociology of knowledge) in order to demonstrate the heuristic value of Merton's contributions.

In the present introduction, a brief resume of the biographical data available on Merton will be given as background material for the study of his work which is to follow. This will necessarily be brief, both because of the paucity of material available and because a long biographical discourse would be extraneous to the project at hand.

IV. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robert K. Merton was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 7, 1910. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Temple University in 1931, his Master of Arts degree from Harvard University in 1932, and his Doctor of Philosophy degree also from Harvard in 1936. He began as an assistant and tutor in sociology at Harvard from 1934 to 1936, and was an instructor and tutor from 1936 to 1939. In 1939 he moved to Tulane University where he was an associate professor, becoming professor and chairman of the Department there the following year. Since 1941 he has been at Columbia University. From 1941 to 1944 he held the position of assistant professor, from 1944 to 1947 that of associate professor, and has been a professor there since 1947. He has been the executive officer of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University since 1952, and associate director of the Bureau of Applied Research since 1942.

A partial listing of Merton's professional interests and achievements includes his being advisory editor in sociology for Harcourt, Brace and Company, past president of the Community Service Council of Hastings, New York, and a member of the board of directors of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Also, he is or has been a member of the advisory group for research on law and the behavioral sciences of the University of Chicago Law School, and the
advisory commission for the Mary Conover Mellon Foundation of Vassar College. Other professional affiliations of Merton's include his being a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and membership in the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the American Sociological Society (of which he was the president in 1957), the Eastern Sociological Society, the History of Science Society, the American Association of University Professors, and the International Commission in Study of the Social Relations and History of Science.

The foregoing information is intended to serve only as a background against which his work is to be examined. The remainder of this thesis will be concerned with that examination.
CHAPTER II

BASIC CONCEPTS IN MERTON'S WORK

This chapter attempts to present the concepts which underlie much of the work Merton has done. Some of them rank among his most important contributions to sociology; others are important chiefly as means to understanding what he presents later. They are not arranged here in order of their importance; rather, in the order in which Merton himself deals with them in Social Theory and Social Structure.

I. THE USE OF THEORIES OF THE MIDDLE RANGE

If some ambitious researcher in word association were to ask all American sociologists to say the first thing they thought of after hearing the name "Merton," the modal response would probably be "theories of the middle range." While the concept of "theory of the middle range" seems to be Merton's best-known contribution, it is by no means his most penetrating. It was presented in the nature of a suggestion, or, perhaps, exhortation for a realistic appraisal of present knowledge and goals in contemporary sociological research, rather than as a theory per se. He defines these "theories of the middle range" as:

...theories intermediate to the minor working hypotheses evolved in abundance during the day-by-day routines of research, and the all-inclusive speculations
comprising a master conceptual scheme from which it is hoped to derive a very large number of empirically observed uniformities of social behavior.\footnote{Robert K. Merton, \textit{Social Theory and Social Structure} (second edition; Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1957).}

Having thus defined "theories of the middle range," he asserts that this is what is meant whenever he speaks of "sociological theory" in his own work.

The rationale for this (the use of middle range theory) is as follows: sociology, as a science, is not ready for the application of large-scale theoretical orientations or universals. There has not been sufficient groundwork to make that kind of theory fruitful in practice. If the body of sociological knowledge is to increase, it will, most likely, have to do so by small increments.

As Merton sees it, one of the major problems confronting the sociologist today is that he is made to feel that he should know, or be able to find, the answer to all social problems, \textit{that is}, that he should be omniscient. In other words, the layman tends to feel that if there really is a science of society, then it should be able to give him the answer to this or that specific problem, in the same way as the physicist can explain phenomena occurring in his realm of knowledge, and this feeling is held, in large part, by the social scientists themselves.

The comparison of the two branches of science is,
according to Merton, spurious. The fact that both social science and natural science are in existence at a given point in time does not imply that they are at the same stage of development. In fact, when one compares the man-hours that have been expended in natural science research since it became an accepted branch of learning with that devoted to social science since its inception, the apparent retardation of social science becomes readily understandable. At the present point of development, "Complete sociological systems today, as in systems of medical theory or of chemical theory, must give way to less imposing but better grounded theories of the middle range."\footnote{Ibid., p. 7.}

The above discussion points out two closely interrelated orientations which are basic to Merton's work: the need for more modest, workable theory, and need for recognition of the fact that sociology can be a valid science without necessarily having the answers to specific contemporary problems. In regard to this latter point, Merton does not intend that it be taken as an apology for sociologists seeking the least pragmatically important problems for their research, but rather that they do not ask more of their discipline than it can honestly provide them. He suggests that much of what is considered "theory" today is, in effect, nothing more than
speculation, and represents logical possibilities of relationships between variables which are not amenable to proof. These speculations could well be replaced with sound theory which, though it may appear to be less significant, is in the long run, of much greater value.

II. THE ANALYTICAL PARADIGM

Merton makes rather extensive use of the analytical paradigm as a method of presentation of codified materials. The paradigm is a device enabling the scientist to present in compact, "outline" form, the vocabulary, concepts, problems, and imputations of a theory of discipline which would otherwise be hidden in many pages of written material. It is "an initial and admittedly tentative step in the direction of . . . (codification) in sociology. . . ."¹ The use of the paradigm does not represent the introduction of something new to the problem but rather the clarification and codification of the concepts, definitions and problems which have become apparent through previous work in the field.

The paradigm brings these together in compact form, thus permitting simultaneous inspection of the major requirements. . . . and serving as an aid to self-correction, a result difficult to achieve when concepts are scattered and hidden in page after page of discursive exposition.²

Merton feels that sociology lacks formulae, or abbreviated symbolic expressions, and is therefore plagued with a

¹Ibid., p. 50. ²Ibid.
superfluity of words. As a result of this situation, sociological expressions tend to be discursive. Furthermore, sociologists, in the absence of a scientific "shorthand" similar to that of the natural sciences, sometimes show a tendency toward the tradition of the humanities rather than the sciences, that is, they try to recapture their personal reaction to the phenomena for the reader through the selection of exquisite phraseology rather than through the objective description which is the trademark of science. Through the use of the formal paradigm, Merton attempts to make explicit the tacit assumptions, concepts, and propositions which usually underlie sociological analyses.

To further elucidate the need for, and use of, the paradigm, Merton presents five closely related functions of this tool, which are paraphrased on the following pages.\(^1\) It should be added that he is aware that these five points do not encompass the entire function of the paradigm, but are, rather, indicative.

The first function of paradigms is their "notational function." They provide a compact presentation of concepts in such a way as to allow a "simultaneous presentation." This Merton compares with the importance of mathematical symbols, and suggests that it also serves as an aid to self-correction, as opposed to the situation obtaining when concepts are scattered through pages of excessively verbal exposition.

\(^1\)Ibid., pp. 14-16.
Second is the function of decreasing the likelihood of including hidden assumptions and concepts, since each new concept in a formal paradigm must either be incorporated within or logically derived from previous terms. This function acts as a deterrent to the use of ad hoc hypotheses.

The third function fulfilled by paradigms is that of supplying a foundation upon which knowledge can be accumulated. Merton compares this with the foundation of a building, which must be sound if the building is to reach significant heights.

Fourth, paradigms are conducive to systematic cross-tabulation and to analysis rather than to mere description. As such, they assist the researcher in finding the component parts of a system, theory or description.

The fifth function is that "paradigms make for the codification of methods of qualitative analysis in a manner approximating the logical, if not the empirical, rigor of quantitative analysis." That is to say, that through the use of the paradigm, the "illuminating insights" experienced by a researcher can be codified and publicly expressed, instead of remaining as esoteric and discursive expressions of insight. Here again, Merton compares sociological research with mathematics.

Merton finishes his discussion of the use of the paradigm with a note of warning to the effect that it can become, if misused, an excuse for indolence. There exists the temptation to overlook all data which are not called for by the form of the paradigm, thus absolutizing it, instead of using it tentatively as a tool.
III. MANIFEST AND LATENT FUNCTIONS

Merton sees the first task of sociologists working in terms of functions as being the codification of functional analysis. He regards it as being "at once the most promising and possibly the least codified of contemporary orientations to problems of sociological interpretation."¹ Since it has developed on many fronts with little correlation between them, its present status is patchy and unintegrated. As a result of this state of affairs, the entire orientation lacks depth.

Judging from the emphasis given the matter, it would appear that Merton regards the major obstacle in the way of expanding the utility of functional analysis to be one of terminological confusion. This confusion takes two forms: that of "single term, diverse concepts," and the converse, that of "single concept, diverse terms."

To illustrate the former confusion, Merton presents five connotations of the term "function," which, he says, are only representative of the many uses of the term. The first of these is what he calls the "popular usage," wherein "social function" is equated with "social affair," "meeting," and "party." This usage of the term is sufficiently infrequent in sociology so as to cause no great amount of confusion, and so is not considered further.

The second connotation of the term is that used by Max Weber, and is almost synonymous with "occupation." This usage

¹Ibid., p. 10.
is also the one commonly employed by economists today. Merton suggests following the suggestion of Sargent Florence in substituting the phrase "occupational analysis" for "function" in this connotation, as it is more nearly descriptive as well as less confusing.

The third usage is actually a special instance of the second one, and is found in both popular usage and political science. This refers to the activities appropriate to a given social status or political position, and gives rise to the term "functionary." Concerning this usage Merton states:

Although function in this sense overlaps the broader meaning assigned to the term in sociology and anthropology, it had best be excluded since it diverts attention from the fact that functions are performed not only by the occupants of designated positions, but by a wide range of standardized activities, social processes, culture patterns and belief-systems found in society.²

The most precise meaning of the word "function" is that which was introduced into mathematics by Leibniz. In this sense, it refers to a "variable considered in relation to one or more other variables in terms of which it may be expressed or on the value of which its own value depends."³ Although the context should make clear that this is the use of the term, social scientific works frequently confuse this precise usage with

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another one which also involves the concepts of reciprocity, interdependence, and mutuality.

The meaning which Merton lists as fifth is the one he says is most commonly employed in sociology. It has its origins ultimately in the aforementioned mathematical connotation, but more immediately it derives from the biological sciences where "function" refers to the contribution of a part of the organism toward the maintenance of the whole. This is the most common sociological usage, and has been taken from the area of functional anthropology.

The second case of terminological confusion in functional analysis which Merton considers, is that of "single concept, diverse terms." The problem here considered is somewhat easier to explain than the former one, and consists simply of the fact that such terms as "utility," "aim," "purpose," and "motive," are frequently used interchangeably with "function." This results in a gradual, often imperceptible movement away from rigorous functional analysis in a treatise. For example, by subtly interchanging these terms, the writer may inadvertently change his referent from the group to the individual and back. Such verbal gymnastics defeat the purpose of functional analysis, and can be eliminated through a careful choice of terms. If this process of rigorous use and definition of terms is not attended to, Merton feels, the subjective categories of disposition and the objective categories of observed consequences will become indistinguishable.
Merton then proceeds to give a lengthy discussion of what he calls "prevailing postulates in functional analysis" although, in his own words, these postulates are "debatable and unnecessary to the functional orientation."1 Since he first wrote this in 1948, they are in less common usage, and it is felt that they do not warrant inclusion here. Suffice it to say that they represent the use of "function" most closely allied to that of the biological sciences, with "function" frequently equated with "usefulness." In this sense, things are said to be "functional for a society."

In his discussion of functional analysis as ideology, Merton takes the position that it is neither inherently conservative nor inherently radical. This position would seem to be necessary in so far as he is discussing an analytical tool; if the use of functional analysis necessitated an ideological commitment by the researcher, it would be of severely limited utility as a scientific instrument. In order for Merton's discussion of functional analysis to be meaningful, it must be kept in mind that he is using it throughout in the connotation described in the preceding paragraph. After having given it as one use of the term, he nowhere discusses the implications of what he refers to as the "mathematical" usage. To the extent that he intends to give a complete picture of the use of functional analysis in sociology, this is a limitation, as the

1 Ibid., p. 25.
so-called "mathematical" usage is frequently encountered, for example: "Problems are functions of definitions." ¹

Following his own recommendation, Merton codifies his discussion of functional analysis by presenting a paradigm. ² Since this brings out the salient characteristics of the method of functional analysis, both its strengths and weaknesses, no more will be said about it here.

Merton uses the terms "manifest" and "latent" to designate the same relationship as did Freud, but Merton refers to functions. These concepts require no explanation insofar as they are described by their names, and so will not be defined here. The use of the concept "latent function" is, to Merton, the chief contribution of the sociologist to functional analysis. Without it, his work could well be taken over by men of "practical affairs," or included within other disciplines. To illustrate this, Merton gives an example of a Hopi rain dance. The manifest function of this ritual is to produce rain, and if this is the only result used as a criterion, it must be considered non-functional. Certainly, if one were to consider only the manifest function, a meteorologist would be more qualified to decide if it were functional than a sociologist. The peculiar contribution of the sociologist, in this instance, is to

² Merton, op. cit., pp. 50-54.
discover the latent functions this ritual may have for the society. To mention just one, as being illustrative, Merton suggests that it may increase group solidarity by joining all members of the group in one place with one purpose. This is certainly not part of the avowed or manifest function of the dance, but it is a latent function. By understanding and using this concept of latent function, Merton hopes to rely less on such residual categories as "inertia," "habit," and "custom."

IV. SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ANOMIE

Most of the work done in the area of social structure has been predicated on the idea that these structures exist for the purpose of inhibiting and controlling man's innate biological drives, and are seen as operating in a completely repressive manner. This approach is exemplified in the social contract theories such as those propounded by Hobbes and Locke, and can be found more recently in the writings of Freud and the neo-Freudians such as Fromm. All of these theories are essentially psychological in orientation, since they consider a more or less fixed "human nature," and examine the ways in which social structures inhibit or distort this nature. By discarding the conception that social structures are primarily inhibitory, Merton attempts to consider the problem from a sociological point of view. In regarding social structures as not only inhibiting desires, but also capable of creating them, Merton is following the lead of the cultural anthropologists, which he acknowledges.
Merton takes the position that social science is faced with the problem of discerning why the frequency of deviant behavior is higher in some social structures than in others, and to what extent the structure determines the types of deviations to be found. He also sees the situation as being characterized by strong pressures toward nonconformity operating on segments of the society, rather than a universal pressure toward conformity. For example, social pressures are differentially operative on various social strata.

Merton then extracts two elements of cultural and social structures and examines them more carefully. These are "patterns of cultural goals" and "institutional norms," which, he says, are analytically separable although they tend to merge in reality. The goals, Merton says, are a basic part of what Linton discusses as "designs for group living," and many of them are related to man's basic biological needs. The other element is configuration of norms which defines and controls the means of achieving these goals. Since the criterion of acceptable behavior is based on value-laden sentiments, these norms are not always identical with efficiency norms. Merton suggests that the operation of these norms can be roughly indicated by the terms "prescription, preference, permission, and proscription."¹

Having defined the cultural goals and the institutionalized norms to be used in achieving them, Merton describes a

¹Ibid., p. 133.
typology of individual adaptation to the relation of norms and goals. These he sets out in a table which is reproduced here. The symbol (+) signifies "acceptance," (-) signifies "rejection," and (⊕) signifies "rejection of prevailing values and substitution of new values."

**TABLE I**

A TYPOLOGY OF MODES OF INDIVIDUAL ADAPTATION*

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<tr>
<td>I. Conformity</td>
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<td>II. Innovation</td>
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Although Merton is aware of the multiplicity of alternative typologies of adaptations described in the literature, he uses these because they represent a sociological rather than a psychological classification. The Freudian and neo-Freudian literature, which represents most of these alternatives, is based upon a concept of society which sees a state of conflict between man and the social structures.
Merton describes adaptation I, conformity, as being characteristic of a stable society. Number II, innovation, results when there exists great cultural emphasis on the success-goal, as is true in American society. The third adaptation, that of ritualism, represents a retreat from the problem of reconciling the goals and norms, and an abandonment of the goals. While this is not preferred by society, it is permitted, and so does not represent deviancy. Retreatism, the fourth adaptation, is a more thorough abandonment than is ritualism, but represents in large part, the same attitude. Merton considers this to be the least common, and considers the members of society who employ it as deviants, since they conform to neither the goals nor norms. Rebellion, the fifth and last of the adaptations he deals with, Merton regards as being different from the others, in that it involves a rejection of the existing values while it seeks to replace them with different ones. Prerequisite to the application of this mode of adaptation must be an attitude of regarding the norms as being in conflict with the attainment of the goals.

Merton discusses a "strain toward anomie," which exists when the cultural emphasis shifts from that on the competition toward reaching the goals to the goals themselves, and resulting in a weakening of the institutional control of means. This strain toward anomie does not operate equally among all strata of the society. Anomic, to Merton, is the result of a discrepancy between the means and goals within a social system.
Merton then devotes some space to the project of tracing the work done with the concept "anomie," starting, as is to be expected, with Durkheim. While the latter made clear that he intended the concept to apply to a state of normlessness in a society, Merton shows how the concept has come to refer largely to an individual or psychological state. This conception Merton credits to R. M. MacIver and to David Riesman.

V. REFERENCE GROUP THEORY

Much of Merton's discussion of reference group behavior is concerned with a study made during the war, The American Soldier. Since this material has by now been reworked many times, little will be said of it here, except to mention briefly the concept of "relative deprivation." This is the term given to the phenomenon which occurred when soldiers adopted the privations endured or not endured by other groups as a frame of reference for evaluating their own situation. Thus a new draftee might consider himself temporarily better off than a combat soldier, but in a worse position than a man who had not been drafted. A discussion is included in Merton's work of the statistical indices used in analyzing the data in The American Soldier.

When Merton discusses the problems of reference group behavior as they appear in research today, he states that it is of foremost importance to direct the researcher's attention to

non-membership groups. He declares that the influence of the membership group as a determinant of behavior is well known, and is in fact the central concern of sociology as a whole, so that until such time as reference group theory is sufficiently well advanced so as to account for both membership and non-membership groups, it should concentrate on the latter. This seems, however, to be a moot point, insofar as it assumes that theory in regard to membership groups will just advance on its own, without any especial focus of attention.

Furthermore, Merton does not clearly distinguish between the membership and non-membership groups on the one hand, and the normative and comparative groups which he states comprise a functional typology of reference groups on the other. If he means these to be other than duplications in terminology, he does not make clear what the differences are.

Merton then seeks to define membership groups, giving three criteria for membership in a group. These criteria are: "enduring and morally established forms of social interaction, self-definition as a member, and the same definition by others," and are not likely to produce controversy.

Following his discussion of group membership, however, Merton turns his attention to the concept of non-membership, which is a good deal more open to controversy than the former.

1Merton, op. cit., p. 286.
point. Here he tries to show how the degree and circumstances surrounding the fact that an individual is not a member of a given group influence his behavior and that of the group members. While Merton may be right in using the term "non-membership" as more than a residual category, that is, lumping together all those who do not belong to the group in question, the emphasis accorded the significance of the non-membership appears to be too great for its importance.

In pointing out the importance of non-membership to reference group theory, Merton first brings out Simmel's concept of "completeness." This refers to the proportion of potential members, or those who are eligible for membership to those who are actually members. It is a concept of relative, rather than absolute, size. The potential member who is not actually a member threatens the existence of the group by his independence.

Merton then analyzes non-membership in several dimensions, for example, eligibility and ineligibility for membership, attitudes toward membership, and time perspectives. While these concepts are undoubtedly of value in understanding the behavior of an individual, they are only secondarily group concepts, and as such, would appear to be of more moment to the psychologist than to the sociologist. Since the constellation of attitudes toward the group is necessarily idiosyncratic, one wonders why

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Merton, who has previously emphasized the use of sociological approaches, finds the concept of non-membership to be so important.

When Merton attempts to clarify this problem of membership and non-membership by showing that it is not coterminous with ingroup and outgroup concepts, he only succeeds in further beclouding the issue. By indicating that the members of a group are not always uniformly cohesive nor arrayed against non-members, he only points out that large, formal groups tend to break down into smaller, more cohesive units, a fact often observed in the study of small groups.

The remainder of Merton's discussion of reference groups, which is extensive, consists of a presentation of the concepts and problems of reference group theory as it exists today. This presentation is clear and more or less complete, but since it is largely summary in nature, and is not original with Merton, it will not be further summarized here.

VI. PATTERNS OF INFLUENCE

In Chapter X of Social Theory and Social Structure, pages 387-420, Merton discusses patterns of influence by reporting a study done on this subject in a small New England community. This study was done under the sponsorship of a national news magazine, which was interested in the possibilities of increasing advertising and/or circulation through
knowledge of this sort. Since it is a case study, its results are not presented as being of general applicability. The study itself is of a sort wherein the influential individuals in a community are first ascertained, and then the degree and extent of the influence is studied. The point of general importance which Merton makes in connection with this study is that the methods used in gathering information of this sort must be reported fully, if the material gathered is to be amenable to codification and comparison with similar studies.

VII. THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Chapter XI, pages 421-436 of Social Theory and Social Structure, consists of a discussion of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Merton begins his interesting and amusing dissertation on this subject by quoting what he calls the "Thomas theorem." It is so called because it was succinctly stated by W. I. Thomas as follows: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences," although Thomas was not the first to perceive that such was the case. Merton points out that the first part of this theorem alludes to the fact that men respond not only to the objective situation, but frequently, and perhaps primarily, to the meaning it has for them.

As a case in point, Merton recounts, through recourse to a fictionalized account of one bank, the role of the self-fulfilling prophecy in the bank failures of the 1930s. As is well-known,
the currency of the prophecy that the banks were failing motivated people to withdraw their accounts, thus causing the banks to indeed fail. Another example given by Merton is that of the student with "examination neurosis," that is, he is convinced he is going to fail the examination, and his concern over his impending failure causes him to fail. This phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy is peculiar to human affairs, and is never encountered in nature.

The self-fulfilling prophecy is then, according to Merton,

\[ \ldots \text{in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true. The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning.} \]

Merton then proceeds to show that it is exactly this same mechanism which acts so efficiently in maintaining prejudices against minority groups. Examples of this phenomenon are too numerous to require mention here, since they are generally familiar. They can be characterized by a comparison which Merton credits to the sociologist Donald Young as follows: "in-group virtues and out-group vices."

One rather curious point which Merton brings out in this discussion is that the discrimination on the part of the in-group

\[ ^1 \text{Merton, op. cit., p. 423.} \]
sometimes implies a fear that the out-group is superior. To exemplify this he mentions the quotas limiting the attendance of minority groups at universities. Merton's contention is that if the majority were not afraid of the superiority of the out-group, it would be unnecessary to limit the enrollment, as only a proportionate number of the minority would "make the grade" anyway. The most insidious aspect of this inversion of values is to Merton, the fact that eventually the members of a minority group themselves become convinced that their virtues are indeed vices and so try to deny them. This leads to consequences such as Jewish publications trying to show that there really are not a great many Jewish doctors and lawyers. Merton ends this discussion in an optimistic note, however, by stating that the self-fulfilling prophecy operates only in the absence of institutional controls.

Another aspect of this problem, to which Merton gives only passing notice, is the ethical question. In this, he briefly considers the obligations of the social scientist in making some dire prediction, if the prediction itself may cause it to occur. Merton decides, and with very little trouble, that the social scientist must still follow the dictates of scientific rigor, and make his prediction known.

VIII. THE SOCIOLOGY OF SCIENCE

Although Merton recognizes that the sociology of science is but a special case of the sociology of knowledge, he prefers
to consider it separately in order to better bring out two points: (1)

... to trace out the varied modes of interdependence of science and the social structure, treating science itself as a social institution diversely related to the other institutions of the time.  

and (2) in order to: "... attempt a functional analysis of this interdependence, with special reference to points of integration and malintegration." So as to reflect his emphasis as closely as possible, the same distinction between the sociology of knowledge and that of science will be followed here.

Merton declares that the influence of science upon social structures has long been recognized, while the reverse, that is, the influence that the social structure exerts upon scientific inquiry, has been ignored. He feels that they are mutually interdependent, and that the task of the sociology of science is to indicate the mutuality of the relationship.

In denying the influence which the society exercises on science, according to Merton, scientists have established the doctrine of "pure" science, the absurdity of which he points out by quoting a toast reputed to have been made at a Cambridge dinner as follows: "To pure mathematics, and may it never be of any use to anybody." This should not be construed as a plea by Merton for making science the handmaiden of the state, of economics, or any other institution, but rather for recognizing

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\[ ^{1}\text{Ibid., p. 534.} \quad ^{2}\text{Ibid.} \quad ^{3}\text{Ibid., p. 543.} \]
science as the social institution it is, and as such, to be reciprocally related to the social structure as any other institution. Merton feels that the failure to recognize this, and the resulting tendency toward esotericism in science accounts for much of the public hostility toward it.

Other sociologists, for example, Russell Ackoff, also deplore the dichotomizing of scientific investigation into "pure" and "applied research."\(^1\) Ackoff's position is that the distinction is simply not valid. He states that no scientific inquiry can be completely "pure," in the sense of being impractical, insofar as one of the requirements of science is that the results be published. Such publication insures that the research will be useful in that other scientists read the results and thereby increase their knowledge. Thus, even if the investigation leads to no immediate social action, it still has some application.

After stating the place of science in society, Merton shows how it operates in: (1) an authoritarian structure, and (2) a democratic society. He then lists the ethos of science, and he attempts to demonstrate that these can be effective only in non-authoritarian atmosphere, where alien restrictions are not imposed.

Merton then proceeds to document his statements concerning the interdependence of science and society by reporting two

studies made by him at some length. The first of these is concerned with contemporary technology and its effects on workers, and the second with science and the social order in England at the 17th century.

A discussion of Merton's work in the sociology of science cannot be comprehensive without at least giving passing mention to Merton's article concerning priorities in scientific discovery. ¹ His thesis in this article, as in most of his work in this area, is to demonstrate that science is a social institution and is subject to all the controls of social institutions. Merton summarizes the article as follows:

Like other social institutions, the institution of science has its characteristic values, norms, and organization. Among these, the emphasis on the value of originality has a self-evident rationale, for it is originality that does much to advance science. Like other social institutions also, science has its system of allocating rewards for performance of roles.²

Much of the article is devoted to documenting the historical examples of disputes over scientific priority. After considering alternative theories, Merton concludes that these arise precisely because science is a social institution, and false claims threaten the institutional norms. The entire article is an admirable example of executing what Merton has stated to be the most needed kind of research in the sociology

²Ibid., p. 659.
science, that is, regarding science as one of the major social institutions of the time, and studying it within this framework.
CHAPTER III

THE MUTUAL INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN RESEARCH AND THEORY

I. THE BEARING OF THEORY ON RESEARCH

As has been pointed out previously, the bearing of theory on research occupies a place of central importance in Merton's approach to sociology. He specifically refers to the bearing of theory on research in all but the earliest of his work; hence in order that justice be done to Merton's sociology, it is felt that especial attention be given here. His comments on the interdependence of theory and research should be considered in connection with what has previously been said concerning the theories of the middle range, since they are actually, if not for purposes of analysis, a part of that discussion.¹

Merton begins this discussion by emphasizing the necessity of eliminating an existing situation which he describes as follows:

The recent history of sociological theory can in large measure be written in terms of an alternation between two contrasting emphases... For the first group the identifying motto would at times seem to be: "We do not know whether what we say is true, but at least it is significant." And for the radical

empiricist the motto may read: "This is demonstrably so, but we cannot indicate its significance." ¹

Merton points out that "there is no logical reason for their being ranged against each other." ² He further points out that this statement is likely to meet with unanimous agreement, and that such unanimity suggests that the statement is self-evident. But, he goes on, since one function of theory is to explore the obvious, a study of the matter is justified. While one may well doubt that such a chain of logic was necessary to justify the inquiry, the decision itself is probably well-taken.

Early in his discussion, Merton suggests that several distinct, although related activities have been lumped together under the heading "sociological theory." These are: "(1) methodology, (2) general sociological orientations; (3) analysis of sociological concepts; (4) post factum sociological interpretations; (5) empirical generalizations in sociology and (6) sociological theory." ³ Since these different types of activities have differing scientific functions, Merton thinks that they need to be clearly differentiated and defined.

He begins this differentiation by pointing out that sociological theory is substantive, while methodology is "the logic of scientific procedure." ⁴ Methodology is not bound up with the content of that which is being scientifically

¹Ibid., p. 85. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 86. ⁴Ibid.
investigated. Merton feels that current sociological training has overemphasized the study of methods *per se*, to the neglect of substantive sociology. He further states that this is characteristic of an immature discipline by comparing the situation to that of an apprentice who is conscious of each skill he learns, while the master takes the skills for granted and is free to concentrate on the larger task. If sociologists were to make fewer invidious comparisons between their field and contemporary natural science, they would feel less constrained to justify their own field.

In pointing out the differences between sociological theory and general sociological orientations, Merton states that a large proportion of what passes for the former, is, in fact, exemplary of the latter. Although Merton makes no attempt to depreciate the importance of these general orientations, he does remind us that they provide only the broadest and vaguest frameworks on which to base empirical investigation. They can and do suggest hypotheses frequently, but they do not yield them in the sense of prescribing hypotheses relevant to a given problem. In commenting on an illustration he has given of this point, Merton states: "...the general orientation indicated the relevance of *some* structural variables, but there still remained the task of ferreting out the particular variables to be included."¹

While Merton readily admits that these general orientations have had a greater effect on the development of scientific

¹Ibid., p. 88.
inquiry than have specific hypotheses, he thinks that they represent only a point of departure for the theorist. Again, he is aware that the contributions sociology has made to the other social sciences have been largely in the nature of general orientations rather than specific, tested hypotheses, but he thinks the lack of esteem in which sociology is frequently held is due in large part to this very reason; that is, that the sociologists are frequently unable to "take it from there." Although social scientists in disciplines other than sociology no longer exhibit sociological naivete, they cannot turn to the sociologist for specific sociological interpretations of their data. Without in any sense discrediting these general orientations, Merton seeks to differentiate them from true theory, and to encourage the development of the latter.

Merton then considers the analysis of sociological concepts in contradistinction to sociological theory. Of this he says: "It is at times held that theory is comprised of concepts, an assertion which, being incomplete, is neither true nor false but vague."¹ While conceptual analysis, or the definition and clarification of concepts is an indispensable part of theory, it does not in itself constitute theory. Merton feels that the anti-theoretic bias sometimes observed among sociologists is attributable to this confusion. Theory exists only when the concepts under consideration have been

¹Ibid.
organized into some form of interrelated scheme. Concepts, on the other hand, "are the variables between which empirical relationships are to be sought."1

Conceptual analysis is not to be devalued however in Merton's scheme. It is, in fact, of crucial importance to empirical inquiry. One of its functions is to specify what types of data are to be subsumed under the category "relevant to the research" without this, the trial and error method of research would be necessary, and since the non-relevant concepts are infinite in number, the process would be lengthy. Other functions of conceptual analysis are providing for the reconstruction of data by further refining the definitions of concepts during research, and resolving apparent controversies which do not, in fact, need to exist. Another is to provide observable indices of the data gathered, thus fulfilling a symbolic role, and, closely related to this last, to provide periodical and initial checks for determining whether the index is adequate. Merton's discussion of conceptual analysis appears to follow the work of G. A. Lundberg1 in many respects. Lundberg is especially concerned with the low level of scientific exactness which must result from poorly defined terminology and concepts such as those used in the social sciences. While he realizes that terms and categories are only tools, and hence

must not be absolutized, he states that they must nonetheless be made uniform, and that this uniformity can only be achieved by common agreement.

The next type of activity which is frequently erroneously included under the rubric "social theory" considered by Merton is that described by the term "post factum sociological interpretations." Merton says of this process that it has the logical structure of the clinical inquiry, and that its defining characteristic is that the interpretation is made only after all the data used have been collected. It thus leads to spurious and ad hoc explanations. Another criticism Merton makes on the use of this activity is that the interpretations cannot be disproved by the data, and tend to discourage further inquiry into a problem. He feels that post factum interpretations illustrate but do not test.

It would seem that Merton's discussion of this matter could be considerably more concise if he were to describe the problem in terms of induction and deduction, since it appears that the method of post factum interpretations as described coincides exactly with the method of pure induction in logic, and the criticisms made of the one are those made of the other. Merton has not added anything novel to the study of theoretical constructs by this duplication of terms.

Merton considers one other kind of activity often confused with sociological theory before going into the latter.
This is the "empirical generalization" which is: "...an isolated proposition summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables." While this procedure, like that of true sociological theory, is concerned with arriving at statements of social uniformities, it differs from true theory in that it is composed of isolated propositions rather than the integration of a body of knowledge. Empirical generalizations become theory only when interrelated and integrated into a meaningful configuration.

Under the category of "sociological theory," Merton discusses a second type of sociological generalization. These he calls "scientific laws," and differentiates them from the first type of generalizations by showing that the latter are statements "of invariance derivable from a theory." Merton then gives an illustration of such true theory, from which he derives the following five attributes.

1. It indicates that theoretic pertinence is not inherently present or absent in empirical generalizations but appears when the generalization is conceptualized in abstractions of higher order...which are embodied in more general statements of relationships.

2. Once having established the theoretic pertinence of a uniformity by deriving it from a set of interrelated propositions, we provide for the cumulation both of theory and of research findings.

3. The conversion of empirical uniformities into theoretic statements thus increases the fruitfulness of research through the successive exploration of implications.

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2 Ibid., p. 96.
4. By providing a rationale, the theory introduces a ground for prediction which is more secure than mere empirical extrapolation from previously observed trends.

5. If theory is to be productive, it must be sufficiently precise to be determinate.¹

This entire discussion of Merton's can be seen as a further encouragement and plea for codification of theory, and the increased integration of theory with research. In fact, at several points, Merton makes this explicit in his work.

II. THE BEARING OF RESEARCH ON THEORY

Merton is aware that the division between research and theory is not so absolute as it once was. The integration which has occurred, however, has been, for the most part, the incorporation of theoretical constructs within research designs, while the other side of the matter, the role empirical research can play in the development of social theory, has been largely ignored. That is the problem with which Merton proceeds to concern himself.

Merton has stated his position in this area most succinctly, and in order to provide an adequate basis for what follows, it is quoted here.

It is my central thesis that empirical research goes far beyond the passive role of verifying and testing theory: it does more than confirm or refute hypotheses. Research plays an active role: it performs at least

¹Ibid., pp. 97-08.
four major functions which help shape the development of theory. It initiates, it reformulates, it deflects and it clarifies theory.*

The next matter which Merton deals with in his examination of the bearing of research on theory is the "serendipity pattern." This concept probably ranks second only to that of the "theories of the middle range" in popular knowledge of his work. This is unfortunate insofar as it indicates an overemphasis of certain concepts which can be reduced to "catchwords" rather than an acceptance of the work for its worth or importance to the field. While the serendipity pattern is essentially a simple concept, its very simplicity has occasionally led to misinterpretation. It is explained as follows.

"The serendipity pattern refers to the fairly common experience of observing an unanticipated, anomalous and strategic datum which becomes the occasion for developing a new theory or for extending an existing theory." Merton goes on to show how it is not only the occurrence of such a datum in research which accounts for the phenomenon of serendipity but also the previous condition of the researcher which enables him to use the occasion as an opportunity for enlarging his theory. Thus, the theoretically unprepared researcher may be hindered by such an

1*Ibid., p. 103.

*NOTE: For more information on this last function of theory, Merton recommends the reader refer to the work of Paul F. Lazarsfeld. This sort of recommendation occurs periodically in Merton's work, and is one of the reasons why it is felt to be of a nature which easily lends itself to further investigation.

occurrence, while the more prepared one will be enabled to capitalize on it. Again in this discussion, Merton's insistence on the necessity of integrating theory and research can be seen.

While there is little likelihood that anyone will choose to quarrel with the idea that the better prepared researcher is in a better position to utilize unexpected results, or with the fact that such results do occur, the problem of whether this phenomenon requires such a discussion is somewhat moot. That is, it is obvious that the occurrence of an "unexpected, anomalous," fact can only have one of a very few consequences. It can refute the original hypothesis, a fact which Merton seems to have ignored, or it can have the results he specifies. Assuming it does not refute the research, then Merton's possibilities necessarily follow. While the use of the term "serendipity" is justified insofar as he feels it adequately describes the fact, the analysis and discussion of a "serendipity pattern" appears to be a needless multiplication of entities.

In fairness to Merton, it must be remembered that his discussion of serendipity was formulated in 1946, when the awareness of the interaction between research and theory was not so widespread as it is today. Also, the discussion represents only the first of the four functions he says that research performs for theory, albeit the one accorded the most extensive discussion.

The other functions are also discussed, but since this discussion is really a summary statement of the usual theoretic
aspects of the functions of theory, they will receive only brief treatment here. The second function is the "recasting" of theory, or the pressure that new data exert for the elaboration or extension of a theory. The third is the "refocusing of theoretic interest"¹ which refers to the effect the development of new methods of empirical research have on existing theory. The last function of research in theory which Merton deals with is the clarification of concepts. This is perhaps the most obvious of all, for it simply holds that while the clarification of concepts is frequently held to be within the peculiar domain of the theorist, research actually exerts a powerful pressure in that direction.

This entire discussion of Merton's on the interrelation between research and theory is of such a nature that it is difficult to say from whom he got his germinal ideas, and Merton himself does not say. It is the result rather of a career in the field, with its attending discernments and impressions. What Merton has said in this area is by no means unique; it is, however, a concise statement of a situation of which most sociologists are already aware, together with some practicable suggestions for dealing with it.

Not all of the work is original with Merton, as he readily concedes. For example, although the term "serendipity"

¹Ibid., p. 111.
is usually associated with his name, Merton himself gives credit for its coinage to Horace Walpole who first used it in 1754. The physiologist Walter B. Cannon uses it and gives examples of serendipity patterns in various sciences in a work published in 1945.\footnote{Walter B. Cannon, The Way of an Investigator (New York: W. W. Norton, 1945), chap. 6. Referred to in Merton, op. cit., p. 103.}

Merton's discussion of this matter, then, is important not because it represents a unique or original contribution, but because he has brought to light and made explicit a problem which is usually dealt with only implicitly.
CHAPTER IV

THE STUDY OF BUREAUCRACY¹

Any sociological discussion of bureaucracy necessarily rests ultimately on the pioneering work done by Max Weber in this field. Merton recognizes this debt not only in his initial statements in the study but also many times throughout its length. In fact, so closely does Merton follow and recognize Weber's lead that, in some respects, the work of the former can be seen as an extension and modernization of the latter.

Merton describes bureaucracy as consisting of a system of clear-cut and formalized duties and responsibilities, and the modes of contact within that system of duties. Friction is reduced to a minimum by such formalization, and authority is clearly designated and impersonal, with all elements within the system calculated to tend toward efficiency. Extraneous pressures are minimized by such implements as vocational tenure and pensions. Another salient characteristic of bureaucracy, according to Merton, is secrecy of technique, although public discussion of policy may occur.

Although the emphasis in a bureaucratic structure is on efficiency, there exist many instances of dysfunction in such

structures. This is due, in large part, to the fact that bureaucracy depends on conformity, regimentation, and strict accordance to known rules and policies, and little provision is made for the exceptional. There is insufficient flexibility to permit adequate management of the novel or changed situation. Here again is found the phenomenon of a means, in this case, conformity to rules, becoming an end, and the bureaucrat is more concerned with dealing with a case according to existing rules than with competently dealing with the case.

Merton feels that the "trained incapacity" which results in a bureaucratic organization must have structural sources. He recapitulates the process as follows:

1. An effective bureaucracy demands reliability of response and strict devotion to regulations.
2. Such devotion to the rules leads to their transformation into absolutes; they are no longer conceived as relative to a set of purposes.
3. This interferes with ready adaptation under special conditions not clearly envisioned by those who drew up the general rules.
4. Thus, the very elements which conduce toward efficiency in general produce inefficiency in specific instances.¹

One of the structural elements which tends to produce these occurrences in a bureaucratic structure is the esprit de corps generated among the bureaucrats within the structure. When this feeling is established, a complaint or threat against any official is seen as representing a threat to all. Another, though less important element is the feeling of "vested

¹Ibid., p. 200.
interests," although Merton states that this is of less
importance than may appear at first.

The secondary, as opposed to primary, relations which
c characterize the bureaucratic situation is another structural
source of trained incapacity. The bureaucrat is trained to
regard all cases as falling within categories, while the client
regards his case as a special and highly personal one. This
may lead to wide discrepancies in their evaluations of the
merits of a case. Furthermore, the bureaucrat sees his posi-
tion as being one of power and prestige, whereas the client
tends to see him as a servant. The bureaucracy, then, is con-
stantly plagued by the intrusion of primary group norms on what
is essentially a secondary relationship. The very formality of
relationships characteristic of the bureaucratic organization
tends toward the emergence of the political machine, since this
latter type of organization is equipped to bypass the formal,
impersonal, regularly-established bureaucracy and secure bene-
fits for constituents in a highly personal way.

Merton points to the need for further research in this
area for several reasons. One of these is the fact that the
tendency toward increased bureaucratization in Western Society,
which Max Weber had predicted, is now a fact. The other
reasons are related to the premise that empirical studies of
the interaction of bureaucracy and personality will shed more
light on the social structure. He then proceeds to list a few
of the questions which could profitably be taken as the subject of empirical research in this area.

Merton takes up the question of "the role of the intellectual in public bureaucracy," a discussion which can perhaps be characterized by Aristotle's advice, "Physician, heal thyself!" The reasons which Merton offers for the importance of such a study are that while much study has been given to social problems and deviations in the past, increased attention to problems which are rooted in the social structure but which have a more direct bearing on the development of that structure may lead to a deeper understanding of it. One of the advantages which Merton hopes to secure by a study of the intellectual in the social structure is a firmer basis on which to build the sociology of knowledge. He feels that without adequate data in this area, the sociology of knowledge will remain a discipline concerned with "wide-sweeping generalizations" without adequate empirical test.

Merton's definition of "intellectual" borders on the operational, and at the same time, indicates an indebtedness, which Merton acknowledges, to Znaniecki. It is as follows:

We shall consider persons as intellectuals in so far as they devote themselves to cultivating and formulating knowledge. They have access to and advance a cultural fund of knowledge which does not derive solely from their direct personal experience.  

\[1\]Ibid., p. 209.
Merton emphasizes the point that "the intellectual" refers to a social role, and not to a total person. He then goes on to point out that his discussion is concerned with a certain classification of intellectuals, namely, "those who are specialists in the field of social, economic, and political knowledge." Merton makes this emphasis explicit, because he feels that the role of the social scientist in bureaucracy is frequently quite different from that of other types of intellectuals. This difference he ascribes to the indeterminacy so often present in the findings of the social scientist, and to the effects this indeterminacy has on the relations between the scientist and others in the bureaucracy.

Merton recognizes two kinds of intellectuals: those who hold advisory or technical positions within a bureaucracy for which he performs a staff function, and the unattached intellectual for whom the public constitutes a clientele. Intermediate between these, according to Merton, is the unattached intellectual who, in times of crisis, temporarily enters a bureaucracy.

For the most part, Merton's discussion of the role of the intellectual in the public bureaucracy consists of a description of the situation found by many of the social scientists who entered governmental service during and after World War II. The entire discussion is rather lacking in that

\[1\text{Ibid., p. 210.}\]
heuristic factor characteristic of much of his work, and is perhaps of more value as a guide to the social scientist who contemplates entering governmental service than to the researcher or theoretician per se.

The foregoing paragraph is not intended as disparaging all of Merton's work in bureaucracy, nor is it intended that Merton should not be considered as having advanced this area of inquiry. He has contributed greatly to the convenience of the student of bureaucracy by the work done in his Reader in Bureaucracy,¹ in which the studies and theories of bureaucracy done by a number of sociologists in their diverse works have been extrapolated and compiled into one well-organized volume. The fact remains, however, that Merton's original contributions to the study of bureaucracy are much more limited than they appear at first examination. His discussion of the interaction of bureaucracy and personality, while instructive, has evidently not been followed up. He has, however, utilized Weber's theory of bureaucracy in his own study of 17th Century England, which Merton wrote early in his career.

Certain parallels can be drawn between Merton's work in bureaucracy and that of Alvin W. Gouldner. The most important of these is that both derive their basic orientation from Max

Weber's theoretical treatment of bureaucracy. Also, both attempt to expand and modernize Weber's theories in the light of subsequent research. While Merton has devoted himself largely to this aspect of the problem, Gouldner has attempted to analyze the bureaucratic structure of a factory in the field by means of this theoretical orientation.

In addition to basing his approach on Weber's work, Gouldner states that much of it has been taken from Merton's contributions to the study of bureaucracy. Also, he has in some measure given testimony to the adequacy of Merton's discussion of Weber's principles by including part of it in his own book, "instead of undertaking what has already been well done." ¹

Gouldner makes considerable use of the concepts of manifest and latent functions, which Merton presents in his discussion of functional analysis. The way in which Merton uses these terms has been discussed in chapter two of this paper, and is consequently not repeated here.

Gouldner, however, has changed the definitions of the terms in order to better serve the needs of the empirical problem which he faced. As Gouldner uses the terms, "manifest" refers to:

... those consequences of a social pattern, e.g., bureaucracy, which are culturally prescribed for it; the term "latent"... (refers) likewise to a pattern's

actual consequences but, in this case, these are not culturally prescribed or preferred.\(^1\)

The reason Gouldner gives for substituting these denotations of the terms, (which he calls "working distinctions") for those used by Merton makes it difficult in actual empirical research to determine whether an actor recognizes or intends certain consequences. This he states is "particularly true in conflict situations where the actors may be deliberately dissemble."\(^2\)

March and Simon\(^3\) consider Merton's work in bureaucracy important as it represents the first attempt to indicate the important dysfunctional consequences of bureaucratic organization, using Weber's theory as a background. They see Merton as being primarily concerned with dysfunctional organizational learning; that is, organizational members generalize a response from previous situations where it was appropriate, and apply it to a new situation where it results in situations unanticipated and undesired by the organization.

A further contribution made by March and Simon in regard to Merton's work is that they have simplified it and reduced a large part of it to a series of propositions, as follows. The system begins with a demand for control made on the organization

\(^{1}\text{Ibid., p. 25.}\) \(^{2}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{3}\text{James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, Organizations (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1958), p. 37.}\)
from the top. This takes the form of increased emphasis on the reliability of behavior. This demand of reliability comes about because the top hierarchy perceives a need for increased predictability of behavior. The techniques used are the institution of standardized operating procedures, and control is effected largely through checking to see that these procedures are actually implemented.\(^1\)

The above procedures result in three consequences. The first is a reduction in the amount of personalized relationships, as the individuals within the organization respond as and to roles and offices, rather than individuals. The second consequence is an increasing tendency to internalize the rules of the organization. This, in turn, results in the means favored by the organization to achieve certain ends becoming ends in themselves. The third consequence is an increasing use of limited categories as a decision-making technique. The tendency increases to use the first formally applicable category, rather than to find the best solution.\(^2\)

The predictability of behavior is increased as a result of these factors, but it is predictable because it has become rigid. Since it eliminates internal competition, it results in a feeling of shared goals within the organization, which in turn results in a tendency for the members of the organization

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 38. \(^2\)Ibid., pp. 38-39.
to defend each other and the organization from outside criticism. This tends to further increase the rigidity of behavior. The main drawback to this system, however, is that it results in a higher degree of client dissatisfaction. This tends to get progressively worse, as complaints tend to increase the rigidity which caused it in the first place.¹

¹Ibid., pp. 39-40.
CHAPTER V

THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

I. GENERAL ORIENTATION OF MERTON'S APPROACH

Merton divides the study of the sociology of knowledge into two categories: the sociology of knowledge per se, and the study of mass communications. The former he says is an example of the "global theory" type of sociology, more typical of the European theorists than the American, while the latter can be considered as an example of the "American Species." These two classifications again point out an idea which permeates Merton's work: that of the contrast between the true albeit insignificant datum versus the doubtful but important generalization. Because Merton's discussion of the sociology of knowledge embodies so many of the principles which he has sought to emphasize throughout his work, and brings them into relief, a proportionately larger amount of attention will be given the subject here.

Merton devotes a lengthy discussion to the similarities and differences between the European (largely German) sociology of knowledge, which he refers to as Wissenssoziologie and the American product of mass communications research. In order to appreciate his reasons for considering these two types
of study as largely equivalent, it will be necessary to summarize his conclusions here. First, Merton describes Wissenssoziologie as follows.

The European variant is devoted to digging up the social roots of knowledge, to searching out the ways in which knowledge and thought are affected by the environing social structure. The chief focus here is the shaping of intellectual perspectives by society.1 This European product, moreover, is primarily concerned with the intellectual products of experts as opposed to the thought of the population at large.

The American version, according to Merton, concentrates its attention on opinion rather than knowledge, a distinction which he feels is valid although not always absolute. Merton recognizes that this distinction is really one of emphasis of attention rather than of different entities. The American product reflects a concern with the thought of the masses, regardless of the value or substantiation of that thought. Merton makes several other comparisons between the two along much the same lines, saying for example that the American variant, mass communications research, is concerned with discrete items of information rather than with codified systems of knowledge. Although these distinctions could be expanded at some length, and Merton does so, it will be sufficient here merely to point out that mass communications research is a

cross-sectional, statistical method, while *Wissenssoziologie* tends more toward being a longitudinal, theoretical approach in depth. Merton summarizes this distinction in an amusing, although admittedly oversimplified expression: ". . . the American knows what he is talking about, and that is not much; the European knows not what he is talking about, and that is a great deal."¹

In attempting to demonstrate that these two types of studies are really related, and to explain wherein their differences originate, Merton proceeds to describe their respective perspectives on data and facts. These differences include the fact that "the European is hospitable and even cordial in his receptivity to candidates for the status of an empirical datum."² By this, Merton refers to the procedure of letting a few documents, particularly those from a remote period, serve as fact upon which theories explaining the entire thought of the period are based. Merton feels that if the sociologist making the assertion has sufficiently high prestige, or if the assertion is made forcefully and often enough, it will be accepted as empirical datum, regardless of its authenticity. He illustrates this point with several quotes taken from Mannheim. Merton claims that such statements are not only significant and instructive, if true, but nearly crucial; the point, of course, being that there is no way of ascertaining

¹Ibid., p. 442. ²Ibid.
their verity. One of the dangers of this type of theorizing, he points out, is that it is so obviously in accordance with previous experience and "common sense," that it quickly gains the unearned status of fact.

While Merton's criticism of the American school is somewhat less drastic, it is sufficiently severe to indicate that he is dissatisfied with both of them as independent and perhaps competing ideologies. One of his criticisms of the American product is that it concentrates so closely and intensively on the immediate empirical problem that it leads to a premature abandonment of hypothesizing. It cannot, in short, look beyond the immediate task. In contrast to the European version, which "almost disdains to establish the very facts it purports to explain,"¹ the American version focuses its attention so narrowly on the establishment of facts that it frequently neglects even to consider the theoretical relevance of these facts.

Merton sees these differing perspectives on data reflected in the selection of subject matter and the definitions of problems selected by the two schools of thought. The European tends to deal with knowledge and thought of the historical past, while his American counterpart deals in the present. This is because the empirical methods to which the latter is

¹Ibid., pp. 443-444.
committed can not be satisfied by the types of data and methods of its collection available in historical studies. For the same reasons, the American devotes himself to studies of the short-run, such as the responses to propaganda, the effectiveness of different media, et cetera. This is not because he is oblivious to long-run effects but rather because he feels that the type of data such studies require is not obtainable at this time.

As a result of their respective orientations, the American is frequently in the position of having to eliminate the problem in which he was originally interested in order to deal with scientific rigor with the remaining matters, while the European finds himself speculating without any foundation on his original problem. What Merton thinks about this state of affairs can best be summarized in his own words.

Again, it is to be considered at just which points the rigor of the first [American] and the breadth of the second [European] are inevitably antagonistic, and for the rest, to work out the means of bringing them together.¹

Merton elaborates some of the differences which occur between the two variants in their respective research techniques and procedures. These differences, for the most part, are inherent in the natures of the two types of inquiry, although Merton nowhere makes this explicit.

Even the term, research technique, has, for the

European sociologist of knowledge, an unfriendly connotation, Merton reports. "It is considered almost debasing to set forth the prosaic details of how an analysis in the sociology of knowledge was conducted."¹ Merton also states that to devote much attention to the methods of a study is a perversion of values to the European, who feels that such care is deserved only by the finished product.

This approach can be contrasted with that of the American version, which has, over a period of years, produced ever more techniques and devices for gathering and analyzing data. Merton lists a few of these procedures for handling data in mass communications research, but since it is a list which can be multiplied at great length, it will not be reproduced here. Suffice it to say that the primary concern of the American, mass-communications researcher is that of establishing reliability, while that of the European sociologist of knowledge is not all concerned with this problem.

One of the problems which Merton suggests as being perhaps worthy of further study is whether the European and American workers, in their respective schools of thought, come from the same relative social origins. If it is true, as Mannheim claims, that the sociologist of knowledge is on the periphery of social groups, can the same be said of his American counterpart?

¹Ibid.
Merton states that although the sociology of knowledge has emerged as a special discipline within sociology only in the last generation, the ideas which it embodies are of much earlier origin. Its development as a field of study was primarily in Europe, and more specifically in France and Germany, with Germany probably serving as the locus for the greater part. It became a matter of importance to American sociologists only when the social and economic conditions in this country became similar to those existing in Europe at the time the study developed there.

Merton, following Karl Mannheim, shows that the sociology of knowledge takes on pertinence only under certain conditions. These include increasing social conflict, and divergence of attitudes and values among groups in the society to the point where the orientation which the groups once held in common is overshadowed by their differences. The different universes of discourse which ensue are such that the existence of each threatens that of the others. This threat leads to a distrust so powerful that the content of beliefs, ideologies, et cetera, is a subject of less inquiry to members of other groups than is the question of how it is that such beliefs come to be held. Thought, in short, becomes functionalized.

These ideas of Merton's follow quite closely those put forth by Karl Mannheim, who in turn received much of his intellectual impetus from the ideas of Karl Marx. Differing from
Marx, Mannheim showed that these concepts applied equally to one's own and to one's enemy's thought, a subject which will be discussed in more detail later. Merton has made the contribution, among others in this field, of showing the pertinence of this for American society.

Merton shows that the necessary distrust of the content of thought and the occurrence of functionalized thought and *ad hominem* arguments now exist in the United States, as witnessed by the appearance in the language of such words as "buncombe," "debunk," and the popular acceptance of books dealing with the subjects of influencing or manipulating people. The sociology of knowledge has become a common area of study because:

...American academicians, presented with schemes of analysis which appear to order the chaos of cultural conflict, contending values and points of view, have promptly seized upon and assimilated these analytical schemes.

Another reason at which Merton hints as being behind the increased attention given the sociology of knowledge is the wide acceptance of Freudian concepts, implying reasons other than the obvious for a given idea being held. In some respects, the sociology of knowledge is an extension of these concepts from the individual to the societal plane. The prerequisite for the existence of such a discipline in the first place is, Merton states, still following Mannheim, the realization that

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 459.\]
all thought, not merely error or illusion, is conditioned by social factors.

Up to this point, everything said here about Merton's work in the sociology of knowledge has reviewed what he has done with the ideas originally put forth by Marx and Mannheim, particularly the latter. Merton has, however, made original contributions in this field, the most notable being the paradigm for the sociology of knowledge.¹ This device serves initially to compare the various studies and theories in this field, to codify them, and to present the sociology of knowledge in a synoptic form. Other advantages he hopes to secure from such an analytical model are: facilitation of discovery of theoretical weaknesses, and determination of the nature of the problems confronting the worker. Merton's paradigm serves many, and perhaps all, of his avowed goals admirably. He readily admits that it does not include all categories which are sometimes used in the sociology of knowledge, one of the most apparent omissions being the relations between genesis and validity. Nevertheless, the paradigm for the sociology of knowledge is probably the most successful attempt made to date to present this important, if rather poorly defined area of sociology in a form amenable to comprehension and further analysis. Through the use of the

¹A brief listing of the topics in this paradigm includes the location of the existential basis of mental production, the mental productions considered, the way in which mental productions are related to the existential basis, why manifest and
paradigm, Merton is able to present these central questions of the sociology of knowledge in a single page, whereas spelling them out would take a lengthy discussion.

One of the crucial factors to be considered in an analysis employing the sociology of knowledge is that of the existential bases of thought. In fact, this is one of the pillars upon which the whole structure rests. Merton traces the use of this concept historically, beginning, as almost any historical discussion of the sociology of knowledge must, with Marx. The existential basis of thought may be said to exist insofar as thought is not imminently determined and may still be seen to be at least partially attributable to extra-cognitive factors.

Merton also shows how Mannheim, although taking his ideas from Marx, differed from the latter in that he felt the problem required by indicating which existential situations conditioned a particular ideology, rather than attributing it to class position alone. In addition, Merton mentions how the work of Durkheim and Granet, and of Sorokin, fit into the sociology of knowledge as it appears today, particularly with regard to the problem of determining the existential bases of knowledge.

Another almost classical problem in the sociology of knowledge is that of the types of knowledge which are to be latent functions are imputed to the existentially conditioned mental productions, and, finally, when these imputed relations obtain. Ibid., pp. 460-461.
considered. The traditional approach to this, as reported by Merton, is to exempt the natural and biological sciences from that kind of thought which is influenced by situational factors. This problem again eventually becomes involved in the same discussion of the relations between genesis and validity. Merton shows that Durkheim and Sorokin, dealing with thought in categories as they did, were less positive about the necessity to exempt natural scientific thought from the situations found to hold true for other thought than were workers in the Marx-Mannheim tradition. In addition, Merton feels that the work of Durkheim, Granet, Malinowski, Sorokin, and some others, has been less influential in defining the sociology of knowledge than that of Mannheim because the aforementioned men did not deal with the problem in such a way as to make it comparable on a cross-cultural basis, while in considering the work of Marx or Mannheim, the categories, at least, are applicable.

Merton considers the relations existing between knowledge and the existential basis to be the nuclear problem in the sociology of knowledge, and feels that the problem is usually dealt with by implication rather than directly. Nevertheless, in his own discussion, he merely traces historically this lack of clarity, and does not offer any ideas as to what these relations are. Rather than duplicate his rather lengthy discourse, it will suffice for the purpose of illustration to say that he shows that these relations are generally felt to be of the nature of the existential situation providing the framework on which thought and knowledge rest.
Merton then briefly considers the functions of existentially conditioned knowledge. These are represented by theories such as the Marxist, which, in addition to providing causal explanations of knowledge, ascribe social functions to knowledge. The Marxists, for example, held that all knowledge, including scientific and technological becomes a tool in the hands of the dominant classes. Such theories usually result in a confusion of needs and functions in a morass of a priori fallacies.

As he has done in several previous areas, Merton concludes his general discussion of the sociology of knowledge by calling attention to some of the further problems confronting the researcher and briefly mentioning some of the recent work done in this field. Some of the problems which he indicates need further attention are: the class bases or social roles of intellectuals, their degree of alienation from the populace at large, the pressures toward technicism and away from dangerous areas of thought, and, in fact, the entire problem of the shifting role of the intellectual. Many current or recent studies have touched on the periphery of these problems, but Merton feels that nothing even approximating the definitive has been attempted.

Two case studies of Merton's approach to the sociology of knowledge which follow will demonstrate the heuristic value of Merton's approach.
Karl Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge

Karl Mannheim's work in the sociology of knowledge is given special treatment both here and in Merton's discussion because it is, perhaps, the definitive work in this area. It was Mannheim who first devoted any sort of systematic inquiry to the sociological, as opposed to the purely philosophical implications of the existential influences on thought. This subject stands today much as he presented it.

Along with Marx and Engels, Merton mentions Hegel as being one of the chief sources from which Mannheim got his basic concepts in the sociology of knowledge. Since the latter's theory rests in large part on the principles embodied in historicism, these intellectual roots are to be expected. Merton also traces large segments of Mannheim's thought to the neo-Kantians such as Dilthey, Rickert, Troeltsch, and Weber, and says that Mannheim actually differed less from these men than he may have thought. On the other hand, says Merton, it would be a mistake to assume that because Mannheim got many of his ideas from all of the above-mentioned theorists and some others, that his work did not significantly differ from theirs. The fact is that in several respects Mannheim's work represents the polar opposite of that of the people who gave him his original ideas. Again, it must be understood, according to Merton, that Mannheim was not always consistent in his work,
and while specifically repudiating such concepts of the neo-Kantians as the dualism between "Erkennen and Erklären on the one hand and Erleben and Verstehen on the other,"¹ he incorporates this into much of his work. The last group of theorists which Merton mentions as being influential on Mannheim's thinking is that of the phenomenologists, such as Husserl, Jaspers, Heidegger, and, especially, Max Scheler.

With a word of caution to the student of Mannheim to the effect that Mannheim's thought has undergone constant development from the earlier to later stages, so that not all his work can be taken as being equally representative of his final opinion, Merton proceeds to analyze Mannheim's work in the sociology of knowledge. Since much of Mannheim's work was not brought "up to date" in order to reflect his mature opinions, it is possible that some of the discrepancies found in his work are really less in the nature of contradictions than revisions.

Much of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge follows from his analysis of the concept "ideology," so Merton first discusses this concept apart from its correlative "utopia." These two words, it may be inserted here, comprise the title of Mannheim's chief work in the sociology of knowledge. "Awareness of ideological thought comes when an adversary's assertions are regarded as untrue by virtue of their determination by his life-situation."² In this conception, the distortions are not

¹Ibid., p. 491. ²Ibid., p. 492.
thought of as being deliberate, and so the ideology is different from the lie.

Another important characteristic of Mannheim's discussion of ideology which Merton discusses, is the distinction between the "particular" and "total" conceptions of ideology. Merton has extracted the three most important differences from Mannheim's discussion of the distinctions between these two as follows.

The particular conception views only certain of the opponent's assertions as ideological, that is, it grants to him the possibility of non-ideological thought; the total conception designates the opponent's entire system of thought as inevitably ideological. Again, the particular conception necessarily involves analysis on the psychological plane, whereas the total conception is concerned with the noological level. Finally, the first view involves a "psychology of interests" whereas the second seeks only to establish a "correspondence" between the social setting and the system of thought.

Merton sees the first instance of the two conceptions being merged as occurring in Marx's work, which represents the first definite shift from the psychological to the social plane. The next and final step necessary before a sociology of knowledge could emerge was the shift from the "special formulation" of ideology to a "general formulation." The difference is that in the former only the thought of one's enemies is considered a function of their life situation while in the latter, all thought is so regarded. Thus the sociology of knowledge moves from a polemical weapon to an intellectual tool.

1Ibid., p. 403.
Merton also takes up the matter of substantive theorems in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, which he does by considering the sociology as divisible for purposes of analysis into two areas. The first of these is that of theory proper, and the second, "an historico-sociological method of research." These two areas are recognized by Mannheim. In fact, Merton takes the distinction directly from Mannheim. After considering the degree to which these are inextricably bound up with each other and the ways in which they operate, however, Merton makes a more useful classification of the types of problems to be considered in this field. This classification divides the problems into:

... those of a substantive Wissenssoziologie, which includes the empirical and procedural aspects, and those pertaining to the epistemological relevance of the sociology of knowledge.¹

It is under the rubric of substantive theorems which Merton mentions Mannheim's concept of "utopia," which is distinguished from "ideology" in that the latter permits of change within the existing institutional framework, whereas the ideas incorporated in the former are so radical as to entail the disruption and overthrow of the institutional framework if they are to be implemented.

Merton severely criticizes Mannheim's work for the confusion which exists therein concerning the types of knowledge to which his discipline is applicable. Merton feels that since

¹Ibid., p. 494.
Mannheim's empirical studies deal only with cultural materials, they are not greatly handicapped by this confusion, but the value of his general theorems is made questionable. Mannheim approaches a clarification of the matter only when he states that natural scientific and mathematical studies are exempt from existential determination, but cultural and social sciences are especially liable to it, a position with which Merton takes issue. The genesis of this position may well be found in Winnoband and Rickert.

In considering the nature of the connectives which Mannheim postulates between knowledge and society, Merton concludes that Mannheim's analysis is limited by "his failure to specify the type or mode of relations between social structure and knowledge. This "...leads to vagueness and obscurity at the very heart of his central thesis concerning the 'existential determination of knowledge.'" Merton then proceeds to illustrate this lack of clarity with five examples taken from Mannheim's work in which he variously states what the nature of the connective is.

The last problem which Merton takes up in considering Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is that of relativism, to which he, following Mannheim, devotes considerable attention. This matter of relativism is so important to the discipline because it involves the epistemological consequences of the

\[ \text{Ibid., p. 498.} \quad \text{2 Cf. Ibid., pp. 499-502.} \]
sociology of knowledge. Even so, Merton chooses not to examine these consequences in full detail, because he feels that this has been adequately done elsewhere, and "moreover, Mannheim acknowledges that the substantive results of Wissenssoziologie—which comprise the most distinctly rewarding part of the field—do not lead to his epistemological conclusions."¹

The controversy in this area revolves around Mannheim's conception of general, total, ideology which has been discussed earlier. Since "the thought of all parties in all epochs is of an ideological nature," as Mannheim states, he is courting the logical fallacy of relativism, as he is well aware. Mannheim goes through a good many logical and verbal contortions to avoid this impasse, and Merton has tried to make some semblance of order out of this chaos by classifying these Mannheim's efforts under three major headings. These are: The Dynamic Criteria of Validity, Relationism, and Structural Warranties of Validity.² Since it is not our purpose here to enter into an examination of the philosophical problems contained in the sociology of knowledge in general, and Mannheim's in particular, it will suffice here to say that Merton's extraction of these three concepts constitutes a major contribution.

¹Ibid., pp. 502-503. ²Cf. ibid., p. 503.
Merton's Propaganda Analysis

One would wish, after Merton's discussion of the sociology of knowledge in which he regards propaganda analysis as the American variant of that field, that he would treat it as such in his own work, but this is not the case. Instead, when he turns his attention to propaganda studies in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, it is only to report some specific studies and to point out the techniques used. Although he includes the report in the section reserved for the sociology of knowledge in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, there is nothing in the report itself to warrant this. It rests, rather, on his general theoretical approach to the area, which is not borne out in his actual treatment.

What Merton actually does with the study of propaganda can be best expressed in his own words.

This is a report on certain studies of domestic propaganda in radio and motion pictures. Having said this, let us define the term propaganda and let us make the definition hold throughout our discussion. We understand by propaganda any and all sets of symbols which influence opinion, belief or action on issues regarded by the community as controversial. These symbols may be written, printed, spoken, pictorial or musical. If, however, the topic is regarded as beyond debate, it is not subject to propaganda.\(^2\)


One can but find commendable this practice of beginning a study by defining the terms used therein and attempting to be consistent in what is intended by those terms, which, in fact, he does in this case.

Another point which Merton and Lazarsfeld make clear and which should be remembered as being basic to their use of the term "propaganda," is the view that "propaganda has no necessary relation to truth or falsity. If we succumb to the view that propaganda and falsity are one, we are well on the way to nihilism." With one final explanation to the effect that there has already been a plethora of general discussions about propaganda, and a paucity of detailed, empirically sound studies, they begin their discussion, based on several studies conducted at Columbia University during World War II.

The rationale underlying Merton and Lazarsfeld's study is the fact that previous studies in propaganda had revealed that propaganda materials often produce unanticipated responses in the subjects, but there existed no research indicating which aspects of a given piece of propaganda produced the unanticipated (or, for that matter, the desired) responses. Their attempt to meet this need comes under the rubrics of content-analysis, when the focus is on the material itself, and response-analysis when it emphasizes the reactions of the subjects. Actually, they used both, first employing the

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1Ibid., p. 509.
former, and then the latter, with each subject.

One of the phenomena with which Merton and Lazarsfeld deal is that of the "boomerang effect," in which a piece of propaganda has the opposite effect from that intended by the writers. They discuss four different types of this phenomenon, the first of these being the "specialist" boomerang. Of this, they say, "it results from an erroneous psychological appraisal of the state of mind of the audience."¹ In order for the propagandist to have a reliable picture of the public attitudes at a given time, and so avoid the occurrence of this type of reaction, it is necessary that he consult such devices as public opinion polls before constructing his propaganda. For maximum effectiveness, the results of these mass observation studies should be linked with detailed propaganda analysis.

Of a second type of boomerang response, they say: "it arises from the dilemma confronting the writer who must address his propaganda to a psychologically heterogeneous audience, i.e., the members of which are in different states of mind on the given issue."² This type of boomerang effect is part of the irreducible minimum of such responses, since that portion of the propaganda which is most effective for one segment of the population may have the opposite effect on another.

A third type of boomerang, called the "structural" boomerang, is considered the most significant since it can be

¹Ibid., p. 519, (italics given).
²Ibid., (italics given).
largely eliminated by adequate propaganda analysis. It results from various themes within the propaganda working at cross-purposes. Structural analysis of the themes can avoid this problem.

The fourth and final type of boomerang response with which Merton and Lazarsfeld deal is called, paraphrasing Whitehead, "the fallacy of misplaced exemplification." This refers to the situation which occurs when points are illustrated with examples which are presumed to be familiar to the members of the audience. If the examples chosen do not correspond with the first-hand experience of the listener or reader, as the case may be, he is likely to discredit the entire piece of propaganda. The fact that the examples used may in fact refer to truths in no way affects the result, so long as the recipient of the propaganda does not find them in accord with his own experience.

Merton and Lazarsfeld suggest the use of "technological propaganda" as a device for countering what they call "propaganditis," or the distrust of all propaganda. This means that instead of making direct appeals to sentiment, documentary facts, calculated to produce the desired responses, should be presented. Along the same lines is the practice of presenting the reader an array of facts and letting him draw the inevitable conclusion, instead of presenting the conclusion outright.

\[1\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 521, \ (italics \ given).\]
It is only in the discussion of reactions to propaganda that the similarity to his adaptation of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge becomes readily apparent. Here one sees the reference to the situation which occurs when attention is directed not to the content of an assertion, but rather to the person of the asserter, and the motives he may have had in making the assertion. While this situation is indeed characteristic of the frame of mind prerequisite for both types of analysis, they are not strictly comparable, since in the case of the sociology of knowledge, this applies to the attitude of the sociologist himself, while in the case of propaganda analysis, it refers to a possible reaction, or perhaps, defense of the public, for which the propaganda analyst must be prepared. If, however, in considering them equivalent, Merton refers to the activities of the sociologist of knowledge on the one hand, and those of the propaganda analyst on the other when both are examining the processes of thinking and of communications, a rough kind of correspondence can be seen. While interesting in itself, this correspondence is of too rough and indistinct a nature to be of any real use as an analytical or conceptual tool.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has attempted to summarize Merton's contributions to sociological theory. It has as well endeavored, where possible, to trace the source of his ideas. Most important, this paper has been concerned with the way in which Merton has enlarged these germinal ideas and the demonstration of their heuristic value. Finally, the question was raised regarding the existence of some sort of pattern or rationale underlying the whole of Merton's work.

His most lasting contribution to sociology may well be his attempts to make order out of the chaos of conflicting points of view and approaches to sociology which exist today, rather than the importance of his original contributions to some specific area or discipline within the field. While his development of the concept of "middle-range" theories, for example, is original, and he has made other such contribution, they do not appear as valuable as the work he has done in trying to integrate the various approaches to sociology which are often at cross-purposes. Even the concept of "theories of the middle range" was developed as a means of bringing theory and research closer together. The fact that his attempts along these lines have met with some degree of success can be seen
from the contemporary sociologists who are in one way or another intellectually indebted to Merton.¹ For example, the following studies are typical of the diversity of uses to which Merton's conceptual clarifications have been put. The studies serve to indicate as well the enormous utility of such concepts.

Peter M. Blau uses Merton's concepts of manifest and latent function in his analysis of social values and norms.² Frank Westie's³ reliance on Merton's work in his discussion of the interrelationship of research and theory is another example of the heuristic value of Merton's contribution. Still another use of functionalism as clarified by Merton is found in Claude C. Bowman's use of "functional analysis" in his study of theory and method in sociology.⁴ James M. Beshers also relies heavily on Merton's discussion of the relationship of theory and research.⁵ Merton's influence is clearly seen in

¹Cf. chap. I, pp. 5-6.


³Another example of the heuristic value of Merton's work can be found in Frank R. Westie's use of the interrelationships of research and theory. Frank R. Westie, "Closer Relations between Theory and Research," American Sociological Review, XXII, No. 2 (April, 1957), 150.

⁴Claude C. Bowman, "Is Sociology Too Detached?" American Sociological Review, XXI (October, 1956), 567.

Bredmeier's work on the methodology of functionalism,¹ and again in a general discussion in Becker and Boskoff.²

It is, necessarily, both presumptuous and useless to attempt to give an over-all evaluation of work having the scope of Merton's. Since his avowed goals are not likely to meet with opposition, as he himself realizes, it will perhaps be a more reasonable undertaking to confine one's attention here to the extent to which he has achieved those goals. Since Merton deals, for the most part, with a broad segment of sociological theory rather than with discrete empirical studies primarily, even this type of statement must be largely one of opinion rather than completely demonstrable.

While it may not be possible to say just how successful Merton has been, that is, to give any kind of quantitative statement of the degree of his success, nevertheless, the fact that he has achieved a measure of success is reflected in the numerous references to his work in contemporary sociological treatises. It is realized that this in no way indicates the truth or value of his work, but merely attests to its influence, which has been widespread.


Merton's chief contribution takes the form of a rationale which pervades all his work; namely, as has been stated previously, his attempt to bring theory down to testable and workable proportions, while raising empirical studies to significant and meaningful levels, which culminated in his famous middle-range theory concept. This concept, together with Herbert Blumer's concept of "sensitizing theory," has had a most constructive effect on the theoretic orientations of contemporary sociologists.

Another area of his work along much the same lines, which merits some mention here, is that which has been described earlier as dealing with manifest and latent functions. In this treatise, he has pointed out one of the problems which so frequently plague sociologists in this as well as other areas, that of terminological confusion. In addition, he has presented some suggestions for overcoming this obstacle, by clarifying some of the ways in which terms are used, and suggesting some limitations on their use. It is also worth noting that although Merton raises an issue on the importance of clearly defining terms, and presents several denotations and connotations of the term "function," showing how misuse or perhaps insufficiently rigorous use of this term has resulted in much confusion, he himself falls into the common error of "changing meanings in mid-stream" as it were, in later discussions.

Despite the aforementioned lapse, Merton is, on the whole, singularly consistent in his use of terms. Another most
desirable characteristic of his work is that he early states an interest in bringing theory and research to a common interest, and all of his subsequent work reflects that attempt, whether explicitly or implicitly.

The final area about which some evaluatory remarks will be attempted is Merton's discussion of the sociology of knowledge. This area of sociology falls prey not only to the terminological confusions and other problems attending any theoretical sociology but also to those of the philosophical system from which it sprang. In addition, it is beset with difficulties arising from problems of translation, since it has been, until quite recently, a continental European discipline. Merton has, at the very least, called attention to some of these difficulties which are too often overlooked by those working in this area, as well as being the first, as Becker and Boskoff point out, to realize the similarities between this discipline and mass-communications research. It has been pointed out earlier here, that these similarities are too often left implicit, but this does not alter the fact that his has been a significant advance to the fund of knowledge in this area. In addition, he has made the perhaps invaluable contribution of providing a paradigm for the sociology of knowledge which for the first time presents the discipline in an easily examined form wherein its logical strengths and weaknesses become readily apparent. This device also serves
as a prototype for paradigmatic analysis in sociology.

In conclusion, it is submitted that Merton should be judged less on the basis of the extent any of his studies per se have advanced sociological research, and more on the degree to which his theoretic approach has influenced the course of sociological development. His work, though considerably more modest and practicable, parallels that of the system-builders of an earlier day, in that he has tried to take the discrete and often opposing data extant, and form some sort of meaningful configuration from them. He has also, on the other hand, done much analytical work, designed to break down some of the grandiose theories which have been inherited from earlier thinkers into meaningful and demonstrable units. His chief contribution may well prove to be what he has tried to do in ameliorating the easily-stated but almost impossibly difficult problem of narrowing the schism between theory and research in sociology. He has, at the very least, pointed out some of the ways in which this matter can be faced.
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