

Book reviews

Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Robert K. Merton. Sociology of Science and Sociology as Science*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010, xii + 320 pp.

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This rich but uneven collection of essays celebrates the gigantic figure of Robert K. Merton, a name that should not need any presentation. Still, as Craig Calhoun underlines in his introduction, Merton's very success condemned his ideas to be obliterated "by incorporation," that is to be forgotten as original contributions due to their incorporation within conventional wisdom. Calhoun calls for a more integrated and far-reaching vision of Merton's sociology, along with a reappraisal of his later, post-1960s work on sociological semantics [pp. 16-17]. The book comprises twelve essays focusing on general (Portes, Tilly, Sampson, Fuchs Epstein) and more specific themes (Zelizer), with a strong focus on the sociology of science (Gieryn, Panofsky, Kalleberg) and the sociology of knowledge (Sica, Simonson, Zuckerman, Camic). Many of the essays are truly enjoyable to read even when they break no new ground. Merton's work is carefully assessed, explained, and, at times, linked to contemporary research.

Apart from some "anecdote dropping" – which only demonstrates the continuing importance of RKM as a sacred object for American sociology – the book exposes itself to three main kinds of criticism. Speaking of Merton's celebrated *On the Shoulders of Giants*, Peter Simonson writes that the book is like "a long diddling guitar solo, played by a virtuoso musician maybe a bit too impressed with his riffs" [p. 239]. To further Simonson's metaphor, I would say that some of the papers sound like one of those Jimi Hendrix's memorial gigs where famous musicians content themselves to rehearse and repeat Jimi's licks again and again, without adding much to what he had played – maybe even reproducing his solos note-for-note. Merton's concepts are often cited but seldom used – sometimes the reader even gets the impression of some kind of "slogan dropping" – confirming Calhoun's *dictum* that Merton's phrases "served as mnemonic devices but often came to be remembered by themselves with little connection to Merton's original argument" [p. 16]. From my point of view, then, the most interesting essays are those which pay homage to Merton's legacy by furthering, or reworking, some of his intuitions or past work – like Gieryn's paradoxical "Paradigm for the Sociology of Science" or Panofsky's essay on the ethos of science – rather than trying to track his "hidden influences" or, even worse, his "anticipations."

Second, and related to my first, point: almost all accounts of Merton's work and fortune are cast in a history of ideas, i.e. in an "internalist" framework with almost no sociological insight or explanation. Just to mention one example, in explaining why there are no "anti-Mertonians" in contemporary sociology, Portes writes that "the set of concepts, typologies, and theories that Merton left us uniformly possess this quality of transparency, almost obviousness, once they were brought forward" [p. 36]. What does this kind of comment add to our understanding of Merton's ideas and their reception? What does it mean that an idea has a "quality of transparency"? Sociologists of ideas – that is, post-Mertonian sociologists of ideas! – would study how and why ideas get an aura of authority and transparency, studying disciplinary fields of intellectual

production, their boundaries, and their changes over time. Unfortunately, this kind of naïve assessment of the merits and demerits of Merton's ideas abounds all through the book, with the partial exception of Camic's reconstruction of Merton's sociological history of ideas. Sica's interesting treatment of the troubled relationship between Merton and Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, for example, would have much benefited from a wider analysis of the field of American sociology and its bearing on the reception of Mannheim's ideas – as Lawrence Scaff has done for Weber in his *Max Weber in America*. The same would have been true for the most interesting, and puzzling, fact concerning Merton's legacy: a passionate reader would like to know why Merton's defining moment as a sociologist almost ended at the beginning of the 1960s, and why all his important works certainly pre-date 1968. What had changed in the field of American (and maybe global) sociology? Why Merton's later works on the history of ideas and “sociological semantics,” carefully described and explained in Zuckerman's and Camic's essays, did not attain the same status of his earlier conceptual and empirical explorations?

Last, but not least, being the product of a distinguished bunch of US sociologists (all authors except one teach in American universities), the book is inexorably Anglo-centric. A wider examination of how Merton's ideas were read, interpreted, and used around the world would have heightened the import of this collection of essays. This would have probably reduced the impression, which a “peripheral” reader may have, that the main purpose of this collection is a frank, though not unwarranted, self-celebration of American sociology.

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