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Andrea Bixio

# Sociologia

**Rivista Quadrimestrale di Scienze Storiche e Sociali**

Anno LVI n. 3 • 2022

*Le asimmetrie del potere: la prospettiva di genere nell'analisi socio-politica*

*Flaminia Saccà*

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GUGLIELMO RINZIVILLO

*Robert King Merton: Balance and Imbalance in Social Research*

1. The story of the well-known American sociologist Robert King Merton dates back to 1910. He was born on the 4th of July, 1910 in Philadelphia into a family of immigrants. Originally, he was called Meyer R. Schkolnick. Later, he chose to call himself Robert Merlin, because he often tried his hand at “magic”. At the age of 14, he changed his surname to Merton. Thanks to his mother’s influence, as a young man he grew passionate about study and began to frequent the Library, the Philadelphia Museum and attend the Academy of Music. The young man first studied at Temple University and then, in 1931, he enrolled at Harvard, where his teachers Pitirim Sorokin, Talcott Parsons and George Sarton. First, he studied under Talcott Parsons to later become one of his best-qualified collaborators and ‘opponents’. Between 1939 and 1941, he worked at the University of Tulane in New Orleans and during this period he married his first wife, Suzanne Carhart, with whom he had three children, one of whom, Robert C. Merton, was awarded a Nobel Prize for economics in 1997. In 1968, he separated from Suzanne and that same year he began a long relationship with the sociologist Harriet Zuckerman, whom he married in 1993 and who edited many of his writings. However, it was not at the prestigious University of Harvard but at the Columbia University in New York that Robert King Merton spent most of his eventful academic life during which he won many awards. In 1941, he became a full professor at that university and from 1942 to 1971 he worked alongside the great methodologist Paul Felix Lazarsfeld as associate director of the Office for Applied Social Research. In 1963, he was also appointed “Giddings Professor” in sociology and in the meantime, he engaged in numerous collaborations with internationally renowned professors such as the Italian Corrado Gini, an expert in statistics and a “visiting professor” at Harvard in 1936. These professional encounters, many of which were documented, provided stimuli of fundamental importance to Merton’s work, a veritable constellation of academic qualifications, starting from 1956, and with about thirty honorary awards. Among the many, we like to recall is that of the 3rd of April 2001, a ceremony we had the honour of attending when Rome’s Sapienza University awarded Merton an honorary degree in sociology. Furthermore, among the numerous honours that Merton has received operating in the scientific world and not only in his own country, we wish to mention the National Medal of Science the

highest American scientific award. Furthermore, we wish to recall that since 1956, in addition to honorary academic titles, he was nominated honorary president of the Scientific Council and edited one of the most extensive sociological research projects of the last decade, namely the international comparative research on anomie, for the Swiss Academy of Development (the SAD).

The American sociologist continued to carry out research even in his later years. As already mentioned above, Merton was the honorary president of the Scientific Council responsible for the activities of the Swiss Academy of Development responsible for one of the most extensive sociological research projects carried out in the period straddling the last decade of the twentieth and the early years of the twenty-first century. The aim was to conduct an international investigation of the phenomenon of anomie. The project took into consideration numerous critical and transformative processes like the transition to democracy of Eastern European countries, the modernisation of China in the 1990s, civil coexistence in post-apartheid South Africa, West Africa’s political and economic crises, the situation in Argentina and other Latin-American countries and the impact on Western Europe of globalisation and immigration from non-European countries. Merton’s prestige was such as to earn him the sobriquet of “Mr Sociology” within the environment of sociological studies. His exhaustive scientific production in the 1960s and 1970s of the twentieth century is detailed and complex. He began his studies in the nineteen-thirties and continued until the end of the last century, with research and ‘adventures’ of serendipity, which profoundly transformed the discipline of sociology and influenced, from the beginning, the methodologies and practices of all the other social and non-social disciplines. Merton, as we know, passed away in New York on the 23rd of February 2003.

It is opportune to recall that in his doctoral thesis, entitled *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (1938), he addressed the specific topic of the relationship between science and the development of capitalism<sup>1</sup>. I spoke personally about these issues many times with Professor Filippo Barbano of the University of Turin, before his death in 2011, seeing that it was he who introduced the author into Italy in an attempt to go more deeply into these particular issues, especially in the Italian translation of the work

<sup>1</sup> See B. TOSIO, *Imprenditorialità accademica. Contesti istituzionali e agire imprenditoriale nelle bioscienze in Europa*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2011, p. 24. See *Robert King Merton. Sociology of Science and Sociology as Science*, edited by Craig Calhoun, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 94 ss.

in question (1975). Moreover, I recently discussed this in my 2019 monograph, *Robert King Merton* (Utet, Turin), cited below, especially in the *Mertonian Postscript*, where I reported my first impressions of the original text of the work in question obtained during a stay in England at the “London School of Economics” in 1996, 1997 and 1998 and in some of the University of Cambridge’s institutes of Social Sciences where I spent many days at the library. The atmosphere there brought me closer and closer to the American sociology of the 1960s and 1970s, which allowed me to progress further and further into the discipline established by Merton. This in-loco reading of that material seems to have in the young scholar I was at the time, a never-ending desire to investigate the sociology of science as well as tap into the scientific history of sociological thought, on the edge of the first reiteration of the sociology of scientific knowledge in Europe and after the contestation of the Mertonian and Kuhnian paradigms. In 1992 I started my graduate-student activity at the newly founded Faculty of Sociology of Rome’s Sapienza University with a project on the Theory-Research (TR) relationship, intending to dedicate myself to building models of social sciences with particular reference to Merton’s sociology. At the time, the eyes of my coordinator Prof. Franco Ferrarotti, that must have seemed like a hazardous need for abstraction. In fact, after a certain time, Professor Ferrarotti rebelled against this initial project of mine, re-assessing the need to deal with the historicity of concepts in sociology and study the T-R relationship from another angle. So, I was obliged to change direction and postpone my interest in prototypes and the results of the sociology of science. Therefore, I discussed my PhD dissertation, three years later, with prof. Luciano Gallino (1927-2015) of the University of Turin, taking an interest in forms of historicity and the development of theory regarding the academic institutes of the time expounded by a ‘minor’ author of Italian sociology, Alessandro Groppali. Subsequently, I published my doctoral thesis in a volume called *Genesi e prassi nella sociologia in Italia* (Seam, Rome, 2000) with a preface by Filippo Barbano. The fact is that in 1938 Merton had established, in that precise original context of rational development, a link between the institutional development of science and the diffusion of particular religious values, highlighting how an increasing number of individuals from the British elite had devoted themselves to science, and how a significant amount of their work was not intended for any practical purpose. In practice, Merton sought to emphasise the fact that the institutionalisation of the sciences and the codification of the social role of the scientist presupposed a set of values and norms that gradually came to characterise the scientific community itself. This while also admitting that the Theory-Research relationship might be included in these ambivalences, resorting to the development of concepts and fields of empirical research that are highly pertinent to the sociologist’s perspective. He underlined the link between the institutionalisation of science and a core set of social values and norms, in particular, he discussed the mechanisms by means of which resources

and rewards, like the possibility to publish and the acquisition of prestige, are assigned and distributed within the scientific community. He also foregrounded the organisational and functional aspects of science as an institution, defining them collectively as “the social stability” and “the institutional integrity” of science.

One of Merton’s great merits was, unlike the great theorist Talcott Parsons, that of devoting himself to empirical research in order to integrate realistically with theoretical thinking. In this regard, the American scholar advanced numerous concepts and theories. In actual fact, I went back to talking about Merton when I was teaching methodology and technique of social research at the University of Cassino, between 1996 and 2000, and compared notes with Professor Francesco Maria Battisti, who passed away in 2008 and who had been fortunate enough to follow Merton’s lectures at Columbia University in the 1970s. This gave me a strong urge to delve more deeply into American scientific sociology and I recall with emotion my participation in research projects of the European Community that I was able to conduct in England for a number of years thanks to that teacher and the fiduciary contribution he made to research funding. Moreover, it is to him that I owe my ‘early’ discovery of serendipity and a certain vision of the sociology of the future that I have never lost sight of, thanks also to Merton’s sociology. Among the most important works of the American sociologist is the collection of essays called *Theory and social structure* written originally in 1949 and published in several subsequent editions. This is a work that presents a systematic array of middle-range theories, limited theories or “intermediate provisions” as I have defined them lately because they were provisional working hypotheses which the sociology of the time made possible. They did not indulge in unproductive generalisations, like those of the Parsonsian theoretical model. By emphasising the existence of functional alternatives, Merton also brought to light the fact that social institutions possessed the ability to perform more than one function. Social control, for example, could be exercised by the institutions of the school or family rather than by the judiciary. This meant, therefore, that to say that a social element was indispensable just because it exists is tantamount to forgetting that the same need can be met by different social elements, sometimes interchangeable. In the area in which Merton has had greater visibility was always that of the sociology of science as a social institution that derives its significance from the culture of the society in which it is immersed. At this point, it is important to note how Merton’s interest in the sociology of knowledge started with his reading of Max Scheler, Karl Mannheim, Emile Durkheim and Pitirim Sorokin, led to his first proposal of a paradigm for the sociology of knowledge and later broadened into an interest in the natural sciences. Thanks to this work several scholars acknowledged him as the founding father of a new discipline: the sociology of science. This area of theoretical research caused science to be considered from the practical point of view of its reflection upon the problems of social



equilibrium as well as contributing to the analysis of the unexpected consequences of scientific action, starting from the notion of considering science a product of social vivacity.<sup>2</sup> Merton's commitment in this sense was supreme. Due to the fundamental contribution he made to the study of social scientific organisation, he received an official award from the President of the United States of America, "for having founded the sociology of science and for his fundamental contribution to the study of social life". Merton also described the normative structure of science, that is, the values and rules of conduct that ensure the functioning of the production of knowledge. From the analysis that Merton carried out regarding the norms that should regulate the behaviour of scientists, he identified the values that should form the basis of the ethos of modern science and that imply "the persistent repudiation by scientists of the application of utilitarian norms to their work" namely: universalism, judgement of scientific statements regardless of who formulated them; communitarianism, relinquishment of the individual ownership of scientific results and discoveries; disinterest, that is, putting science before personal interests and, finally, systematic doubt, that is, a critical attitude<sup>3</sup>. Merton also advocated the adoption of these standards as an essential condition for the production of objective and rational knowledge.

Universalism regarded the evaluation to attribute to scientific results: this should concern only the results produced without taking into account the characteristics of the scientist who formulated them, his social class, his ethnicity or religion. According to Merton "acceptance or rejection of any proposition in the corpus of science must not depend on the personal and social characteristics of the scholar."<sup>4</sup> He then went on to specify that "when culture at large is opposed to universalism, the ethos of science is subjected to serious tension: ethnocentrism is not compatible with universalism. All this means that often the scientific ethos is assessed in contrast with more general social values, so that free access to research may be affirmed as a value to be achieved as well as a norm to make it operative. It does not include deviations from the norm of universalism and therefore references to certain extra-scientific characteristics, which persist to the extent that they are invoked and oppose the accomplishment of a set of rules that socially affect the culture and particular mode of behaviour of scientists

in a community"<sup>5</sup>. Merton argued that universalism can be affirmed in theory and be ineffective in practice. Yet, however imperfectly it may be practised it is part of the fundamental guiding principles of democracy. Universalism, therefore, rejects discrimination of a scientist based on his/her religious faith, political creed, ethnicity or other variables relating to his/her person. As regards the second element of the scientific ethos, Merton noted that "the communitarian characteristic of science should also be reflected in scientists' recognition of their dependence on a cultural heritage over which they can claim no privilege"<sup>6</sup>. Communitarianism refers to the fact that science is a collective product and its ownership derives from a common heritage. Science is a social activity grounded in previous endeavours and influenced by future events. The contribution made by the individual scientist is repaid in terms of prestige and social recognition which may even materialise in subsequent advancement of his/her career<sup>7</sup>. This means that scientific research becomes "competitive cooperation", where the results of research projects are pooled although the participants may compete for priority and authorship. The scientist does not hesitate to publish the results of his/her research, but will also do everything possible to be acknowledged as the first to produce them. As for the lack of interest in scientific research, this lies in the fact that the primary objective of the researcher is the advancement of knowledge, though the outcome may indirectly bring individual recognition. Advancement is not a cumulative indicator. Merton believed that the sole institutional goal of science was the increase of verified knowledge. Personal interests were therefore to be excluded from the scientist's work. Communitarianism (the moral obligation for every scientist to share every new discovery publicly with his/her colleagues) and disinterest (the moral drive which makes him/her put the interests of the community before his/her individual interests) are indispensable to ensure that each new claim of knowledge is critically examined in the light of universally accepted criteria<sup>8</sup>. The last institutional ethical imperative is closely connected to the previous ones, as knowledge must always be put to the test. The accumulation of knowledge proceeds by trial and error: in this sense, the discovery of an error in a scientific theory is a step forward in itself, not an instance of failure.

Knowledge is considered valid until proven

<sup>2</sup> See my *Some turning points in the early sociology of Robert King Merton* su "International Review of Sociology", vol. 31, Issue I (2021), pp. 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> See R. K. MERTON, *Scienza e struttura sociale democratica*, in *Teoria e struttura sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna, ed. 2000, XIX, p. 1059.

<sup>4</sup> See G. RINZIVILLO, *Robert King Merton*, Utet, Turin, 2019, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. R. K. MERTON, *Scienza e struttura sociale democratica*, in *Teoria e struttura sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna, ed. 2000, XIX, p. 1064.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. G. RINZIVILLO, *Robert King Merton*, Utet, Turin, 2019, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. B. TOSIO, *Imprenditorialità accademica. Contesti istituzionali e agire imprenditoriale nelle bioscienze in Europa*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2011, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. M. CINI, *Un paradiso perduto: dall'universo delle leggi naturali al mondo dei processi evolutivi*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2004, p. 263.

otherwise and until the better theories assert themselves, or are considered better suited to the observed empirical reality. Organised scepticism “*does not recognise the boundary between the sacred and the profane: anything can and must be questioned, criticised, modified or rejected, in an infinite process of continuous revision where dogma or faith have no place*”. In conclusion, we can see how Merton’s imperatives, often indicated using the acronym CUDOS (Communitarianism, Universalism, Disinterest, Originality and Skepticism), summarise practices that have become consolidated starting from technological, scientific, eighteenth-century Europe as a specific model of the production of knowledge in academic communities. These principles, although often disregarded at individual level, have dominated the field of science and were considered inseparable from its empirical norms. They reflected the idealised image of the world of research in universities, until the 1950s. Back then, it was the state above all that sustained science, leaving wide margins of freedom and autonomy to researchers, to whom it attributed the positive role of promoters of development and social well-being. In any case, Merton’s imperatives are still an ideal reference point, although nowadays scientific research and technological innovation have brought about profound changes<sup>9</sup>.

2. It is to Robert King Merton that we owe the formalisation of the functionalist method, which involves examining each social institution in the light of the contribution it provides to the maintenance of social order<sup>10</sup>. The basic notion upon which functionalism rests, is that society is a functional system, comparable to an organism; that every society is a dynamic unit which, in order to adapt to the environment and survive, has to satisfy certain needs, such as exploiting the resources available, remaining united, transmitting cultural models, etc. This implies that there has to be an adequate organisation, with specific tasks to meet specific needs. Merton, in his functional analysis, argued that the central idea of functionalism was interpretation of data relative to their consequences on the broader structures in which they are involved. Like Durkheim and Parsons, he analysed society to find out whether cultural and social structures were well-integrated or not. He was deeply interested in understanding why various kinds of society all seek functions that facilitate adaptation to a given social system. Merton distinguished between the recognised and intentional manifest functions and the latent ones which were neither understood nor desired. If the welfare system, for example, performs

the manifest function of caring for the less well-off, the latent function may aim at preventing the poor from organising forms of rebellion. Basically, the manifest functions are driven by conscious motivations, the latent ones are those related to the consequences of an action. By way of example, we can see that the former actually produce the intended result, while the latter regard the consequences of an action<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, Merton highlighted dysfunctional elements which hinder adaptation and which can disrupt social equilibrium, for example, high birth rates in the world’s low-income economies which are unable to provide sustenance to a growing population. Some components may present aspects that are simultaneously functional and dysfunctional, as in the case of technological progress, which can provide opportunities for the improvement of living conditions, the gratification of needs expressed in specific spatial-temporal contexts, but they may also damage the ecosystem.

If Talcott Parsons believed that the individual sets him/herself goals achievable thanks to the means made available by society, Merton asserted that the community does not always provide tools adequate for the pursuit of the proposed purposes. Mertonian promoted important investigations into various sectors, such as bureaucracy or mass communications, and, while sharing the methodological principles of functional analysis, he drew up a theory characterised by strong critical sense, not merely observational, but one that tended to fulfil the demystifying commitment of science, including what concerned aspects of imbalance. The American author is however considered one of the main exponents of sociological functionalism, thus arguing that sociology itself is, first and foremost, an analysis of social functions and structures. Finally, Merton himself believes that shared values are summarized as decisive in explaining how society and institutions function. In his most important work *Theory and Social Structure*, which we have already mentioned, there is contained the core of a perspective which, with the so-called “middle-range theories”, marked the abandonment of all-encompassing conceptual systems in favour of a more critical and pluralist, more attentive to the contradictions and inconsistencies of empirical reality. As is more or less known, the functionalist perspective draws its original inspiration from the nineteenth-century work of Herbert Spencer, who compares society to a living organism, endowed with a structure, formed by interrelated parts, such as the family, religion, army, aimed at carrying out functions aimed at consolidating meritorious stability. The American author is however

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. M. L. VILLA, *La scienza sa di non sapere per questo funziona*, Guerini, Florence, 2016, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. R. COLLINS, *Quattro tradizioni sociologiche*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 2010, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> See. R. K. MERTON, *Teoria e struttura sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1971, p. 123. One example that Merton provided was that of the rain dances that some populations of Hopi Indians still perform while living at a primitive stage even today. These dances do not produce atmospheric effects (manifest function) but have the (latent) function of keeping social cohesion alive. Indeed, the manifest function of these dances is to “produce rain”, but the rain dance has unacknowledged functional effects on the tribe: it strengthens the solidarity of the group, provides moral cohesion to the tribe in the face of cases of tension and provides the people with the opportunity to meet. See *idem* edition 2000.



considered one of the central exponents of sociological functionalism. He argued that sociology itself was, first and foremost, an analysis of social functions and structures. Finally, Merton himself believed that shared values might be retained decisive for an explanation of how institutions and society function. His most important work *Social Theory and Social Structure*, which we have already mentioned, contained the core of a perspective which, with its so-called “middle-range theories”, marked the abandonment of all-encompassing conceptual systems in favour of a more critical and pluralist position, more attentive to the contradictions and inconsistencies of the empirical reality. As we are more or less aware, the functionalist perspective drew its original inspiration from the nineteenth-century work of Herbert Spencer, who compared society to a living organism, endowed with a structure, consisting of interrelated parts like the family, religion, army, aimed at carrying out functions aimed at consolidating meritorious stability. The roots of functionalism are to be found in the thinking of Saint Simon and Auguste Comte, both organicists, even if it was above all Émile Durkheim, considered the true initiator of this current, who, having enunciated the theoretical presuppositions of a functional type of analysis in 1895, in *The Rules of Sociological Method*. According to the functionalists, social reality constitutes a functional system aimed at satisfying certain needs in order to survive and adapt to the surrounding environment. Social organisation corresponds, therefore, to a unity, which, by means of complex mechanisms of regulation, tends towards the stability of internal conditions, called homeostasis, restoring the balance if a sudden change produces disintegrating effects.

The principles of sociological functionalism and, this applies also to Merton, involve precise methodological choices which lead to study society using functional analyses or to question the functions performed by institutions and their interrelationships within the overall context of society. Functionalism, on Durkheimian principles, in the period between the First and the Second World War, exercised a considerable influence on anthropologists like Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowsky. Starting from the second post-war period, it evolved, above all, thanks to the work of Talcott Parsons and of Robert King Merton. The functionalist current of thinking implies placing greater emphasis on analyses of the structural aspects of social systems and not on the analogy between the social and organic systems, but, on the preservation of the idea of society as a complex of interdependent political, economic, educational and religious institutions which perform their tasks by engaging in a relationship of mutual exchange.

Society, considered in an abstract and general manner, is the starting point of functionalist analyses that pose questions regarding the functions to be performed so that a community can exist, be preserved and perpetuated. Society as a system tends towards the integration of individuals, placed within social situations (status) and performing roles (i.e. social activities) defined

by the society that organised and even foresaw them in advance. To a certain extent, it is social equilibrium that takes precedence over sociological analysis. Merton was, therefore, a sociologist who highlighted the functions and functionalities of society but also the dysfunctional aspects of social action, the management of which is implicit in the production of consequences. He examined Parsons's functionalities as highly complex factors. He considered the reality experienced by individuals as a systemic interweave of the social interconnection of status and roles. Consequently, he held, the individual did not belong rigidly to society and was entrusted with functionalities devoid of contradictions or variations.

For Talcott Parsons, the key entity had always been the social system as a whole, whereby he carried out an extremely complex analysis where he categorised the various functional sectors and sub-sectors of the system itself. In a nutshell, he produced a description of society on a very abstract level only, without providing an explanation. The clearest formulation of the assumptions of classical structural-functionalism remains that of Merton. He held that: 1) A society should be considered a system comprising interrelated parts: an organisation of interconnected, repetitive, structured activities. 2) Society naturally tended towards a state of dynamic equilibrium; if disharmony occurred, forces were created which tended to restore stability. 3) Given a society, all repetitive activities contributed to its state of equilibrium. In other words, all continuous forms of structured action kept the social system stable. 4) A part, at least, of the formal and repetitive actions present in a social structure was indispensable for the maintenance of the structure itself. This meant that functional factors existed capable of satisfying essential systemic social needs, without which the given system could not have gone on existing. However, the sociologist Merton and his many followers had to admit that at times everything did not work out in such a way as to ensure the best for everyone. To this end, they coined the term “dysfunction”, accompanied by that of “function” which, to a certain extent, reiterated the definition of disturbance of the balance, which indicated a situation of imbalance affecting the system itself. The functionalist method was, at best, too vague to act as a stimulus to the quest for explanations. Furthermore, it was Merton who identified situations where the individual was not socialised and failed to adhere to the methods and purposes of society, therefore not accepting any socially pre-established status and role functional to the maintenance of the social system. Hence the term *deviance*.

3. Robert King Merton, has been considered by historians of sociological thinking as one of the most systematic scholars who dealt with the concept of function and who has attributed particular importance to the role of the so-called sociological middle-range theory, from which much of his methodological position stemmed. Opposing the idea of functionalists like Talcott Parsons who contemplated the construction of an all-encompassing theory. In opposition to pure

empiricism, Merton proposed a new idea of “middle-range theories” or a series of logically linked concepts focusing on a given object of study from which to derive and empirically verify specific hypotheses. According to him, these were “*theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behaviour, social organisation and social change.*”<sup>12</sup>. In sociology, middle-range theories were used, above all, to guide empirical research. They actually occupied an intermediate position between general theories of social systems, too remote from particular categories of behaviour, organisation and social change, to be able to provide an explanation for what is observed and detailed descriptions that were not generalised in the least. More explicitly it was possible to deduce, he held, that they regarded circumscribed aspects of social phenomena. Their main feature was that they were very simple. Examples of theories of this kind were for Merton, those of Émile Durkheim regarding suicide and of Max Weber concerning Puritan ethics and the spirit of capitalism. According to Merton, those theories were aimed at modelling, not so much society (or social phenomena) as a whole, but as small segments or parcels of it, starting from the consideration that concentration on this medium level would make it easier to connect theory and empirical research.<sup>13</sup>

In these “middle-range theories”, the meaning of the quest for dysfunctions of social action is specified better when affirming forms of equilibrium that emphasise the fact that the topics they study are not chosen by scientists on the basis of the logic of their field of scientific research, but derive from the questions posed to science by society. This point was fundamental. One of the most important aspects of Merton’s work was the decision to abandon his quest for an all-encompassing theory of society. In this regard, he specified that middle-range theories were not derived logically from an all-encompassing theory of social systems, even if they might often be contained within general theories. Merton’s controversy with Parsons’ all-encompassing sociological theory is well known. “*This search for a total theoretical system for sociology, where observations of all kinds regarding behaviour, organisation and social change, find their preordained place readily. It contains the same excessive demands and the same possibility of success as general philosophical systems that have fallen into disuse and rightly so*”<sup>14</sup>

Merton tried, in particular, to understand how social structures might influence some individuals, and not others, to the point of orienting them towards deviant choices and not towards conformity. He

sought, therefore, to achieve this goal by drawing up the “middle-range theory”, that is, far from both pure theoretical generalisation (like Parsons had done), and from empiricism which limited itself to the simple collection of empirical data without framing them in a theory. Therefore, he established his studies on the basis of cognitive hypotheses and interpretative theories of a strictly sociological nature. Then he verified by means of methodologically correct research carried out in the field. In other words, Merton did not construct a general theory of society by which to deduce concepts and tools for interpreting every possible social phenomenon. Instead, he proceeded by constructing middle-range theories, containing a series of very specific hypotheses to be verified empirically over a limited range of phenomena. The American sociologist, in his most famous work *Theory and Social Structure* asserted that “*Middle-range theory is used principally in sociology to guide empirical inquiry. It is intermediate to general theories of social systems which are too remote from particular classes of social behaviour, organisation and change to account for what is observed and to those detailed orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalised at all. Middle-range theory involves abstractions, of course, but they are close enough to observed data to be incorporated in propositions that permit empirical testing. One speaks of a theory of reference groups, of social mobility, or role-conflict and of the formation of social norms*”<sup>15</sup>. Merton, with regard to this point, invited sociologists to focus on middle-range theories, meaning that “every theory needed to be close to an empirical discovery, while, at the same time, every empirical investigation needed to be developed within the context of a theory relevant to it.” However, this did not mean that general or more abstract sociological theory should be abandoned. Rather, the explicit formulation of a preference for middle-range theories only confirmed an old tradition in sociology, namely that of operating both at the level of general theories of society and that of more specific theories.”<sup>16</sup> To formulate middle-range hypotheses involved, therefore, placing the relationship between theory and empirical research at the centre of analyses. Together with the rejection of a general theory, Merton disallowed the idea that sociology might be reduced, practically, to a simple accumulation of empirical knowledge without an adequate theoretical framework. There needed to be active interaction between theory and field research. Merton wrote in this regard that research performed four functions in relation to theory, namely, that of Arousing it; Reformulating it; Reorienting it; Clarifying it. On its part, the theory needed to back research up by providing it with working hypotheses to be verified in the field. Merton also criticised the supporters of so-

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. R. K. MERTON, *Teoria e struttura sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2000, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. AA. VV., “Sociologia: Rivista quadrimestrale di scienze storiche e social”, ediz. Gangemi, Rome, 2, 2008, p. 28 e sg.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. R. K. MERTON, *Teoria e struttura sociale*, 1949, p. 326. See idem edition 2000. MERTON

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. R. K. MERTON, *Teoria e struttura sociale*, 1949, p. 68. See idem edition 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. S. GINER, *Manuale di sociologia*, Meltemi, Rome, 1996, p. 28.

called “strong” functionalism, rejecting its postulates. This caused him to collide with what had been asserted by Talcott Parsons, sought to build a system whose explanatory scope was universally valid. Merton conceived functionalism as a heuristic method, though he admitted, ultimately, that it contained dysfunctional factors, which tended towards disintegration rather than integration, and of elements that performed no functions. In this regard, Merton identified and criticised the three postulates of functionalism. *The functional unity of society*. He criticised this postulate by stating that all the elements of a culture and all social activities were functional to the entire social or cultural system. This total functional unity was contradicted by the fact that the degree of integration of a society was an empirical variable that changed from time to time within the same society, and differed from one society to another (e.g. religion is cohesion, but also reason of conflict)<sup>17</sup>. *The postulate of universal functionalism*. On the issue of this postulate, he doubted that every aspect of a social or cultural system performed a positive function in relation to social integration. He claimed that it had never been proven that everything that exists had, just because it existed, a positive function regarding social integration. There were residual forms of culture, handed down from the past (such as customs and traditions automatically reproduced out of habit), which no longer had any true function. *The postulate of indispensability*. Regarding this postulate Merton did not believe that every element of a society or culture was indispensable for the performance of specific functions. The same functions could be performed by different elements. He did not believe that even the same elements might have multiple functions, so the same function might be fulfilled variously by different elements. There may exist a broad range of what he called functional alternatives, or surrogates, capable of performing the same task<sup>18</sup>.

A noteworthy example of middle-range theories is the expansion of the Durkheimian notion of anomie (i.e. lack of norms). This term used first by Émile Durkheim, means the clash between individual impulses and social norms that takes place in a personality that has not been perfectly socialised. Essentially, at the heart of the Durkheimian theory of anomie lies the concept of the *homo duplex*, according to which the impulsive and unsocialised part of human nature needs to be inhibited and controlled by the socialisation of morality. Merton’s theory, on the other hand, was strictly sociological in nature, as it was not based on conflict within the personality, but on the conflict within the social structure. He represented society as an ambivalent entity that encouraged its members to achieve success at all costs while, at the same time, it

regulated and limited the opportunity of pursuing this goal. The anomic behaviour of individuals was, in this context, a normal response. Based on the reworking of the Durkheimian concept of anomie, Robert Merton developed a theory that considered deviance as a product of anomic situations. By anomie Merton meant, “*a fracture in the cultural structure that occurs particularly when a conflict arises between cultural norms and the goals these norms impose and the socially structured capacities of group members to act in conformity with them. When the cultural structure and the social structure are not integrated and the first requires behaviour that the second impedes, a tension that leads to the violation of the rules or the absence of the rules ensues*”<sup>19</sup>. For Merton, anomie arises, therefore, from the tension between different elements of a structurally ambivalent social system. In practice, he argued that anomie was based on “continuous interaction and frequent tension between a cultural structure, which defines the goals, intentions and legitimate interests to be achieved and considered important, and on the other defines, regulates and controls the lawful ways and norms to which all must conform in order to achieve these goals (the distribution and organisation of values, norms and interests); and a social structure, which defines the status and role of the acting subjects, and, consequently, identifies the opportunities and means that each individual possesses to achieve certain goals (the distribution and organisation of status and social position)”<sup>20</sup>. This tension actually created he held “the paradoxical situation whereby antisocial behaviour is, to a certain extent, caused inevitably by certain shared values and by social stratification implying differentiated access to legitimate means by which to pursue socially valued objectives”. The element of tension was constituted by the fact that the culturally valued ambitions were shared by all the members of a social system, while the means considered legitimate to achieve these ambitions were available to few.

Merton the sociologist thus introduced the concept of “sociological ambivalence”, which as a characteristic of the social structure had its roots in a system of statuses and roles.<sup>21</sup> In a broader sense, Merton’s sociological ambivalence referred to an incompatibility of expectations regarding attitudes, beliefs and behaviour that society assigned to specific statuses, or to a series and/or plurality of statuses, to which a *role set* corresponded. In a narrower sense, on the other hand, sociological ambivalence referred to the incompatibility of the expectations that society assigns to a specific role within a specific social status (for example, the role of the therapist which differs from that of the researcher, administrator, professional colleague, members of professional associations, which taken collectively help

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. G. RINZIVILLO, *Robert King Merton*, Utet, Turin, 2019, p. 167

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. G. BONAZZI, *Storia del pensiero organizzativo*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2008, p. 220.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. K. R. MERTON, *op. cit.*, 1971, pp. 349-350.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. B. BARBERO AVANZINI, *Devianza e controllo sociale*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2002, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. M. A. TOSCANO, *Introduzione alla sociologia*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1996, p. 320.



to define the status of a medical doctor). Furthermore, Merton used this concept to explain deviance in the USA and divided social norms into two types; on the one hand, the social and culturally defined goals, on the other, the rules governing the legitimate institutional means by means of which these goals might be achieved.<sup>22</sup> This scholar redefined anomie as a discrepancy between means and ends produced by the social structure that proposed goals without providing all the means required to achieve them. According to Merton “contemporary American culture seems to approach the extreme type where considerable importance is attributed to certain successful goals, without giving equal importance to institutionalised means”<sup>23</sup>. Hence, the Mertonian hypothesis that deviance (or aberrant behaviour) constituted a symptom of the “dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations (goals) and socially structured ways (means) by which to realize these aspirations”. A by-no-means negligible form of imbalance.

This way, he explained deviance as the symptom of an organisation of society within which culturally defined goals and socially structured means are separate. To adapt to the cultural values of society, individuals are induced to follow different role models<sup>24</sup>: We indicate conformity with the number (1); that is, the achievement of social objectives by legitimate means; (2) innovation, that is, achievement of the same goals (+in the diagram), rejecting legitimate means (-the diagram). In this case, the individual, in order to achieve success, resorts to illegal means. This can happen at any level of society; on certain occasions, however, it can be difficult to recognise the use of lawful or illegal means (for example, at the level of economic competition or struggle between competitors, both in business and in politics). It is difficult, therefore, to distinguish between truly deviant behaviour and risky acts, violations of the rules on the limit of legality.<sup>25</sup> (3) Ritualism: this means following legitimate norms without sharing social goals. One example is the bureaucrat who “does her/his duty”, in an obtuse way, respecting the rules formally without considering the results. In other words, it involves abandoning or lowering the goals of economic success and social ascent, while remaining bound by institutional norms. The syndrome of the social ritualist is included in a series of cultural clichés, “I do not bite off more than I can chew”, “I am satisfied with what I have”. Competition is refused to avoid frustration; one does not aim high so as not to be disappointed. It was actually Merton who asked whether these attitudes might be considered deviant; his answer was “yes”. In actual fact the ritualist in her/his own way deviant because s/

he rejects the goals of success typical of most members of society.<sup>26</sup> Merton added that the proper functioning of a social structure depended also on knowing how to instil the most appropriate feelings and attitudes in members of a group. This happens more precisely when trying to describe bureaucracy. The elements typical of bureaucracy (based on division by competence, hierarchy, specialisation, the training of officials, career and job security) perform given functions: offering universalistic and impartial treatment to the public, eliminating friction and rivalry between the members of the organisation, ensuring maximum efficiency in the pursuit of goals.

With the term “ritualism” Merton indicated the cultural attitude of bureaucracy which posits as an end in itself loyalty to norms and rules which it places at the top of its list while losing sight of the true purposes of organisation. This way, attitudes of bureaucratic “fussiness” regard situations where an official, who adheres to the rules only, forgets that the ultimate goal of the institution for which he works is that of serving the public. Unlike Weber’s, this model of bureaucracy emphasises the unforeseen and unexpected consequences we find in the behaviour of bureaucracy. Alongside bureaucratic ritualism, he identified another kind of behaviour which, according to Merton, implied a “trained inability” originating from structural sources, “*the bureaucrat has an official life that is outlined for him in terms of a gradual career, through promotion by seniority, retirement, salary increases, etc., all measures that tend to stimulate disciplined action in compliance with official regulations. But it is precisely these measures which increase the likelihood of adherence to the regulations that also lead to the excessive attachment of importance to the meticulous observance of the regulations which causes uncertainty in decisions, a conservative mentality and technicism*”<sup>27</sup>. In other words, when Merton spoke of trained inability, he meant the case when in unexpected circumstances occurs the “actions based on training and technical ability, which in the past had given a positive result, may be inappropriate under changed conditions”. According to Merton, bureaucracy requires strict compliance with regulations; consequently, these are transformed from means into ends; at the same time, the flexibility necessary to adapt the rules to the specificity of particular cases is lacking. In this case bureaucracy, remaining rigid and static, is unable to adapt to novelty, and this failure to adapt only feeds the anxiety and frustration of the official, who will not be able to pursue the purposes for which the bureaucratic institution was created.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. D. MELOSSI, *Stato, controllo sociale, devianza*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2002, p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. A. IZZO, *Storia del pensiero sociologico*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1997, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. D. MELOSSI, *Stato, controllo sociale, devianza*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2002, p. 168.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. B. BARBERO AVANZINI, *Devianza e controllo sociale*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2002, p. 85. See my *Robert King Merton*, Utet, Turin, 2019, p. 233.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. A. IZZO, *Storia del pensiero sociologico*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1997, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. A. M. ZOCCHI, *Robert K Merton: Un conservatore?*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2016, p. 38

4. Renunciation: this is the attitude of those who reject both the goals and the legitimate means by which to achieve them and withdraw from social life. These are individuals who do not share the set of community values but are, sociologically, aliens to society itself. They are vagabonds, beggars, the socially deprived, drug addicts, chronic alcoholics, psychopaths, visionaries and those who have renounced ordinary shared cultural goals and prescribed behaviour styles. Their renunciation derives from having accepted and charged the goals and norms with emotional value, despite the difficulties needed to be overcome to achieve them. The result is a conflict that produces a sense of defeat, resignation, mutism and, ultimately, flight from society; (5) rebellion: this takes the form of a rejection of aims and means and their substitution with other means and ends. These subjects

propose other values and a different social structure; they are animated by a strong revolutionary drive and believe in programmes which see them active and cohesive centred around new guiding principles often developed by themselves.<sup>28</sup>

A part of the doctrine has, therefore, revealed some features characteristic of the analysis conducted, as if Robert King Merton's reflection on anomie, on aberrant forms of adherence to social norms and the social motivations of deviant behaviour contained many original ideas, even if it is necessary, however, to point out that he has been criticised because he tended to consider all kinds of deviance as associated with morbid states of anomie, a modern form of social disintegration about which sociology has never said enough.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. B. BARBERO AVANZINI, *Devianza e controllo sociale*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2002, pag. 86.





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La rivista *Sociologia* è una delle più antiche pubblicazioni di sociologia edite in Italia (1956). Essa fu ideata da Luigi Sturzo già negli anni del suo esilio americano, in un tempo nel quale la cultura italiana tendeva ad osteggiare lo sviluppo di una disciplina che alla fine dell'ottocento nel nostro Paese aveva stentato ad affermarsi anche per la debolezza teorica che aveva caratterizzato le sue prime espressioni. La rinascita di questa disciplina dopo il secondo conflitto mondiale si deve, dunque, in gran parte al fatto che negli Stati Uniti Sturzo era già considerato uno dei sociologi stranieri più rilevanti. La nascita della rivista ha segnato, perciò, una modernizzazione degli studi relativi alle scienze sociali italiane e una riapertura del dialogo con la cultura di oltre oceano. Scorrendo i numeri di *Sociologia* si può seguire, dunque, lo sviluppo della disciplina e la maturazione culturale di quelli che, a partire dagli anni cinquanta, si sono poi affermati come i più rilevanti sociologi italiani e stranieri. L'impostazione scientifica e culturale della rivista è stata sempre caratterizzata da alcune linee di sviluppo particolarmente rilevanti che, a partire dal duemila e otto, data di inizio dell'attuale direzione, sono state riprese, specificate e approfondite. Linee di sviluppo che vanno qui di seguito ricordate. A) Valorizzazione della sociologia come disciplina generale. Se non si vuole abbandonare l'insegnamento di Comte, va considerato che la sociologia costituisce un sapere che guarda al sociale come ad un tipo di esperienza che ci consente di comprendere le ragioni dello sviluppo della vicenda umana concepita nel suo insieme. Da questo punto di vista la sociologia è nata e si è sviluppata sulla base di un rapporto dialettico e spesso conflittuale con la filosofia. B) Promozione della sociologia come scienza particolare accanto alle altre scienze dell'uomo. Infatti, il sociale, se rappresenta la modalità fondamentale di ogni tipo di espressione dell'esperienza umana, costituisce anche qualcosa che è specifico rispetto ai fenomeni che sono oggetto di altre scienze sociali: il diritto, l'economia, l'antropologia, la storia... A causa e grazie a queste due dimensioni la sociologia si può presentare ad un tempo come teoria generale e come ricerca particolare diretta a ricostruire ed interpretare dati sociali relativi e singoli settori della società. C) Attenzione alla sociologia come paradigma. Soprattutto a partire dall'età della rivoluzione industriale, la sociologia ha dato luogo ad un nuovo paradigma, quello appunto sociologico, che è divenuto qualcosa che ha caratterizzato anche le discipline limitrofe. Si pensi alla teoria delle aspettative e all'impianto non astrattamente economicistico dell'economia, all'anti-formalismo che è alla base di tutte le scienze giuridiche contemporanee, alla prospettiva che oggi qualifica la scienza politica più avanzata, alla stessa teologia, la quale si sta presentando sempre più come teologia 'pubblica', caratterizzata da un punto di vista sociologico, alla storiografia, la quale si è rinnovata già a partire dalla prima parte del novecento mediante l'inserzione del paradigma sociologico in quello propriamente storico, all'epistemologia, che per definire i concetti di verificabilità e di falsificabilità deve affidarsi alla fine ad un elemento sociologico, al consenso della comunità scientifica. Dunque, una sociologia, che voglia essere consapevole pienamente delle sue potenzialità, deve essere in continuo dialogo con le altre discipline; deve accogliere le riflessioni 'altre', proprio perché è opportuno sia attenta alla funzione svolta dal proprio paradigma nell'ambito dei saperi limitrofi. È su tali presupposti, in linea con l'insegnamento di Luigi Sturzo, che la sociologia, pur rimanendo aperta ai diversi orientamenti culturali che ne caratterizzano il percorso scientifico, può tornare a quella storicità concreta, a quella dimensione di esperienza effettiva che definisce, più nel profondo, il suo terreno elettivo. È all'esperienza, infatti, colta nella pratica della ricerca e nella sua lettura teoretica, concettuale e riflessiva, che la cultura sociologica, per andare oltre l'astratta costruzione del dato, deve rivolgere il suo sguardo. La sociologia, se vuole cogliere il carattere concreto della vita, deve riuscire a penetrare nelle strutture concettuali in cui si risolve la costituzione storica del sociale. Per questi motivi, sulla scorta delle suggestioni ereditate dai più sensibili sociologi dell'età della rinascita della nostra disciplina, la rivista *Sociologia* accoglie le riflessioni a) della teoria sociologica e della storia della sociologia, b) della ricerca empirica e dell'analisi concettuale, c) delle discipline limitrofe fondate su un impianto eminentemente sociologico. Per questo motivo ritiene di svolgere, all'interno della nostra *koïnè* culturale, un'includibile funzione, tanto più necessaria, in quanto non sempre sufficientemente promossa e valorizzata anche a livello internazionale.



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