

The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists

Edited by

George Ritzer



THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO MAJOR
CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORISTS

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George Ritzer



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Preface

The publication of this two-volume paperback edition is a welcome event. While many social scientists and libraries added the original hardback, single-volume edition of *The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* to their collections, its price put it beyond the reach of all but the most well-heeled students. Thus instructors were unable, by and large, to assign it to their classes. The publication of these two volumes in paperback solves that problem by making the books much more affordable. Furthermore, dividing the original volume more-or-less in half allows those who teach classical theory to assign volume I, *The Blackwell Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists*, and those who teach contemporary theory to use volume II, *The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists*. In addition, for those who teach general courses in theory, both volumes can be assigned. The books can be used as basic texts, or as supplements to more conventional textbooks in social and sociological theory. Since the essays are original contributions authored by experts on particular theorists, the two volumes should also be useful to scholars looking for up-to-date and authoritative overviews of the work of the major social theorists.

Some minor changes have been made to the text, but in the main the essays are the same as those that appeared in the original hardback edition. One major change is that the original introductory essay has been used as the basis for new introductory essays, each directed at the unique concerns of the volume in which it appears. Thus the volume of the classics opens with an essay by Douglas Goodman entitled, "Narratives, *Geistesgeschichtes*, and the History of Social Theory." Goodman's essay outlines five narrative approaches to the history of sociology, making the case for critical and effective histories of social theory that place classical theoretical perspectives in dialogue with present-day theoretical orientations and challenge the ideal of theoretical progress. The volume on

contemporary theory begins with an essay by Todd Stillman, “Metatheorizing Contemporary Social Theorists.” Stillman catalogues the forces that contribute to intellectual breakthroughs and develops a systematic approach to the intellectual and social factors that have influenced contemporary social theorists.

Overall, these volumes present essays by leading contemporary social theorists on their classical predecessors and contemporary peers. Having written chapters or essays on many of the people covered here, I have a great appreciation for these essays. In fact, I learned a great deal from each of them and I believe that most, if not all, readers will find these essays edifying.

Beyond the contributors, there are a number of other people to thank. I begin with Susan Rabinowitz, who proposed that I undertake this project and was of great help throughout its creation and development. Ken Provencher at Blackwell helped to put the paperback volumes into print. I could not have done these books without the help of Douglas Goodman, who not only wrote the introductory essay to the classical volume but read and commented on all of the essays and helped with the innumerable details involved in bringing this project to fruition. I also need to thank Todd Stillman, who authored the introduction to the contemporary volume and kept track of the revisions. My undergraduate research assistants Zinnia Cho and Jan Geesin also provided valuable research assistance.

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Introduction: Metatheorizing Contemporary Social Theorists

TODD STILLMAN

The lives of contemporary social theorists can illuminate the foundations of contemporary social theory. Theories are tools for looking at the social world. Yet theorists who are not themselves immune to the influences of the social world conceive them. Because these tools are shaped by personal experiences, theoretical work bears the imprint of the social context in which it is produced. It follows that readers and researchers should use a theorist's work critically and reflexively; to understand the strengths and limitations of the theory, they must be sensitive to the context in which it is produced. Anthony Giddens says as much in reference to classical social theory: "[There are] deficiencies deriving from the context of their formation."¹ This holds true for contemporary theory as well.

Taking their cue from the sociologies of knowledge and science, the authors of these essays place the work of thirteen thinkers in the context of these thinker's lives and times. Factors such as sociohistorical developments, social networks and mentorship, and the idiosyncrasies of biography, combine with intellectual influences that range from nineteenth-century German philosophy to French existentialism to Freudian psychoanalysis. The chapters also chart the development of the theorists' thought over the course of their careers as they refine their ideas and extend their analyses to new theoretical problems. Authored by a practicing sociologist, each of these essays is an exercise in reflexive thinking; they turn the tools of the discipline on to major figures in the discipline.

The purpose of this introduction is to outline a systematic account of the major kinds of influences on these theorists and their work. It will draw on the ideas of metatheory, the systematic study of theory, to suggest that there are four general sources of influence on theory formation.² Influences are not wholly constitutive of a body of work, but they do provide clues to the social and intellectual resources that a theorist drew on. Much of what is distinctive in

the work of social theorists can be understood as attempts to assimilate their social and intellectual influences into a theoretical framework.

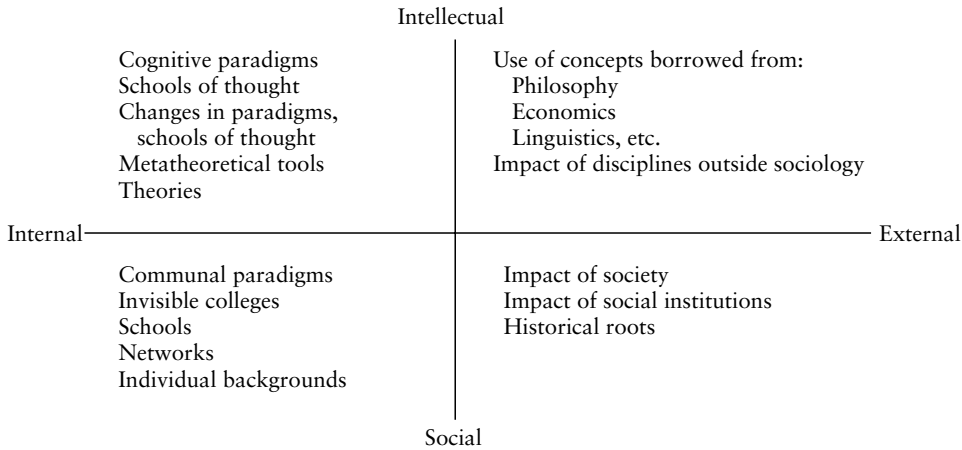
METATHEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Most theorizing takes an aspect of the social world as the object of analysis. It should go without saying that most social theory is developed in the context of an empirical case or comparatively across cases. The value of a theory, nonetheless, is found in whether it transcends the specificity of its cases. For example, Pierre Bourdieu developed his theory of cultural capital in the context of his work on the French educational system. Although conceived in the French context, Bourdieu's has been an influential theory of social reproduction, a useful analytic in a variety of empirical contexts. Most good theorizing follows this pattern.

Metatheorizing, by contrast, is a step removed from empirical research. Rather than take the social world as the object of analysis, it takes theories themselves as its object in an effort to understand their individual strengths and limitations as well as to develop overarching perspectives on sets of theories. A metatheoretical analysis of the theory of cultural capital might weigh which elements of the theory are nationally specific or consider how Bourdieu's own experiences with the French system influenced his views. Either one of these would help a reader to assess Bourdieu's contribution not merely to the study of French academe but also to the corpus of general theory on which sociologists draw. Thus the value of metatheorizing is that it examines the intellectual commitments of a theory with an eye toward critical assessment.

Metatheorizing is employed for a variety of ends. Although it is not always labeled as such, most theorists use metatheoretical analysis to clarify a central problem in extant theory as a prelude to proposing a theoretical perspective to deal with this problem. A good example of this sort of metatheorizing is Giddens's *Central Problems in Social Theory*, which develops a critical reading of structuralism into the influential theory of structuration. A second type of metatheory develops an overarching perspective on a set of theories. One prevalent variety sets out to synthesize a set of ideas by ratcheting up the level of abstraction. A good example of this type of metatheorizing is the first volume of Jeffrey Alexander's *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982), which develops an overarching perspective on classical sociology.³ Metatheorizing can also be undertaken as an end in itself. An intellectual biography of an influential theorist, for example, can develop a rich reading of the theorist's work. The authors of the essays in this volume have produced this sort of metatheory. They have synthesized the work of an important figure and placed it in an intellectual and social context that clarifies the origins and influence of the theory. No matter what the ends, metatheorizing is a useful term to capture what people do when they think about theory.

This introductory essay is primarily concerned with metatheorizing as a tool for better understanding social theory. Our basic proposition is that an



understanding of the context in which theories are formed is useful for assessing the strengths and limitations of a theory. To this end, the analytic presented in the figure will be useful to codify types of influences on the development of a social theory.⁴

Theorists are influenced by both intellectual and social factors. These can be further subdivided into factors internal to the discipline and factors external to the discipline. Internal intellectual factors include the influence of schools and traditions of thought on a theorist. External intellectual factors include ideas borrowed from other disciplines. Internal social factors include the influence of social networks and mentorship on a theorist's work. External social factors include the impact of historical change on the structures and institutions of the society being theorized.

Although these categories are logically exhaustive, they are not mutually exclusive; some factors fit into more than one quadrant. It is therefore instructive to consider how each factor relates to the others. A class of relationships of interest to metatheorists is cases of external social factors having an effect on internal social ones. External social factors such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union clearly had an effect on internal social factors such as the number of seminars and conferences dedicated to the post-communist transition. Another mechanism relates internal intellectual and internal social factors insofar as traditions of thought exert influence through social networks and mentorship. Exploring such relationships can offer a window into the workings of subdisciplines. Cast more broadly, this analytic is a serviceable way to conceptualize the variety of factors that contribute to a theorist's social location and intellectual makeup.

Contemporary social theory is a product of this complex of influences on the work of social theorists. Fundamental changes to social institutions (e.g., the rise of compulsory education), advances in other disciplines (such as cognitive psychology and linguistics), the institutional power of major programs and "hot" new programs, the continuing influence of the sociological classics, along with other factors too numerous to list, form the backdrop in which new social theory

is formed. The remainder of this essay turns to specific examples of such influences drawn from the experiences of the thinkers covered in this volume.

INTERNAL INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

The norm in more recent years is for theorists to be most powerfully influenced by ideas internal to sociology, but to have a smattering of external inputs as well. Perhaps of greatest importance is the fact that many of the thinkers discussed in this book are famous for playing a major role in the creation of a perspective that has shaped social thinking. They themselves have become major internal intellectual influences on the thinkers and researchers who have been inspired by their ideas.

Among the thinkers in this volume the classical theorists Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber are, doubtless, the most important internal intellectual influences on contemporary social theorizing. The so-called “holy trinity” set out the major problems for social theory that continue to occupy contemporary thinkers. Marx provided a rationale for integrating social theory, empirical historical inquiry, and normative critique. Durkheim gave sociology the social fact, as a justification for studying society and as a powerful analytical tool. Weber’s ideas are founding principles in the sociology of religion, organizations, development, and politics, among many other fields.

Naturally, contemporary theorists have drawn unequally on the classics. They have their own orientation toward classical theory, which is rooted in a vision of what the practice of theory is and how the classical tradition informs this practice. A salient distinction can be drawn between two kinds of thinkers. Scientific thinkers like Merton rummage the classics in search of testable hypotheses. Critical thinkers like Habermas engage the classics as an interpretive exercise, developing new lines of interpretation to inform their own grand theoretical syntheses.

Robert Merton’s position on the relation of contemporary theory to particular classics is well known, and controversial. He said that, “the writings of classical authors in every field of learning can be read with profit time and again, additional ideas and intimations coming freshly into view with each re-reading.”⁵ But, as Sztompka argues in this volume, Merton also felt that the classics should only be read selectively with an eye toward critically appropriating what is relevant to current social issues and social scientific debates, while rejecting or modifying the rest. The classics best serve as a living tradition, subject to constant reinterpretation, rather than as a vast set of constraints on appropriate subjects, research methods, and theoretical orientations. As a policy, Merton always used the classics in the service of a theoretical or empirical analysis.

The mark of Durkheim on Merton’s work demonstrates his ideas about the value of the classics. This influence is evident in Merton’s scientific orientation, his embrace of structural functionalism, and his choice of research topics. In his influential essay on middle-range theorizing, he cites Durkheim’s *Suicide* as *the*

exemplar for middle-range theory because of the study's contextual, deductive approach to theory development. In his analysis of anomie and deviance, Merton draws on this landmark study of suicide but his rigorous analytic goes far beyond it in pursuit of the structural sources of deviance in a stratified society.⁶ Merton's use of Durkheim to further his own theoretical projects is consistent with his vision of the role of the classics for scientific sociological inquiry.

Jürgen Habermas writes in the grand tradition of sociological theory that Merton vigorously opposed. Habermas takes social theory to be a critical rather than a scientific enterprise, that is, the aim of theory is to write a pathology report of modern society in order to find a cure for its ills. He was trained in the Weberian Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt School, and his voluminous exegesis on Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead, and many others, forms the basis of his theory of communicative action. Early in his career, Habermas developed a neo-Marxian theory of the historical development of late capitalism that develops a theory of the role of the interventionist state in displacing economic crises into the political and cultural spheres.

Habermas's concern for the rationalization of society is derived from Weber, but his theory of communicative action splits rationalization into two complementary processes: the rationalization of the market and bureaucratic spheres (the system) and the rationalization of the sphere of everyday life. The latter was formerly the territory of culturally grounded understanding and mutual accommodations but in modern society was threatened by the increasing reach of bureaucratic rationality. By attributing an autonomous logic to different social spheres, Habermas backs away from the totalizing claims of Weber's rationalization thesis. But he also describes a dynamic that seems better to match our experience of rationalization. In this sense, Habermas's relation to the classics can be seen as an attempt to update or revise their best parts to suit our contemporary understandings and needs. Habermas's use of the classics is at odds with Merton's scientific ambitions but nevertheless suggests how readings of the classics can give rise to new grand theoretical projects. Both are illustrative of how the classics provide a foundation for contemporary social theory.

EXTERNAL INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

While the sociological classics have the most pronounced influence on all manner of social theorizing, contemporary social theory is notable for drawing on extra-disciplinary resources to make up for some of the shortfalls and lapses of the classical tradition. Habermas's theory of communicative action, as described above, draws not only on the classics but takes significant inspiration from pragmatist philosophy when developing its ideas about discourse ethics and moral norms. External intellectual influences have become priceless sources of theoretical innovations for contemporary social theorizing by supplying fresh ideas and data to be integrated with the dominant traditions.

Such a strategy makes creative use of paradigms developed elsewhere to make interventions in key theoretical problems. Both Richard Emerson and Michel

Foucault draw on extra-disciplinary resources to address how best to study and conceptualize power. Power had been a macro-sociological issue, a means that states and other powerful actors used to exert influence, but there was little work being done on the mechanism of influence. Both Foucault and Emerson turned toward micro-theories to address this important issue. For Emerson, behaviorism was an empirically satisfactory resource to investigate the workings of power in social exchange and social networks. For Foucault, interested in what he termed the “micro-physics” of power, structuralism provided a framework for understanding how expert discourses on pressing social issues like sexuality and criminality could shape actors and actions. Both interventions are notable for setting new research agendas based on their readings of extra-disciplinary materials.

Richard Emerson’s exchange theory draws part of its inspiration from B. F. Skinner’s empirical research into human behavior. Emerson’s commitment to behaviorism meant that he could ignore the subjective meaning of individual action while carrying out empirical studies of observable behavior. In his landmark 1972 article, Emerson wrote, “In this chapter we will not presume to know the needs and motivations of men. We will see how far we can go on this skimpy basis.”⁷ While many social scientists, notably the symbolic interactionists, were at the time (and are still today) committed to the investigation of meaningful behavior, Emerson’s power-dependency theory puts the issue of subjective meaning in brackets, in favor of a deductive, experimentally tested power-dependency model of exchange relations. The influence of Skinnerian behaviorism allowed Emerson to put his own ideas about power relations on a scientific footing.

The influence of structuralist linguistics on social theory is another case in point. Michel Foucault’s distinctive approach to the knowledge/power nexus owes something to structuralist ideas anticipated by Durkheim and Mauss but given their full expression by linguists such as Ferdinand Saussure and Roman Jakobson. These linguists adhered to a deterministic view of the relation between linguistic systems and everyday speech. Taken up by anthropologists and semioticians and applied to the study of mythic, and modern, culture, structuralism was in fashion in France during Foucault’s formative years. The degree of influence that structuralism had on Foucault is debatable, but it is clear that his ideas about the power of discourse to shape actors and their actions bears the mark of structuralism’s emphasis on the determining power of language. For all that is innovative, idiosyncratic, and personal in Foucault’s approach, his perspective would not have been articulated in quite the same manner if structuralism was not an intellectual influence – and a foil – of his project.

INTERNAL SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Internal social influences include factors like the stamp of social networks and individual backgrounds on a thinker’s ideas. A wide range of biographical factors all leave their mark. Social experiences such as migration, travel, work, and education can all impinge on a theorist’s thought. Race, class, and gender

also are also influential. Finally, networks, schools, invisible colleges and intellectual communities have an effect on career and reception. All these types of social experiences can lead theorists to new insights and directions.

An example of work and college experiences leaving their mark on a theorist is found in the early career of Garfinkel, a student of Parsons and Schutz. Some of his inspiration came, surprisingly, from an accident of biography. An important concept for ethnomethodologists, traceable to his *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, is, “accountability.”⁸ Accountability refers to the *post hoc* justifications that actors give for their actions to the people or organizations to which they are held accountable. These justifications fail to paint a complete picture of any situation but rather are couched in terms that make a course of action comprehensible under the framework of rules and regulations in which actors operate. Garfinkel’s ideas about accountability were inspired by his college experiences at the University of Newark. While in Newark, Garfinkel took a business course on double entry bookkeeping and cost accounting. Garfinkel’s interrogation of this material led him to ask how accountants justify their decisions to put items in particular columns in their books, understanding that they would be accountable to their superiors and other agencies. Accountants, he understood, were clear about the fact that their indicators did not represent an underlying order but rather were a form of theorizing that developed conceptual order out of the empirical manifold of business practices. Garfinkel’s insights into the relations among an organization, an accountant, and the books, found their way into his thinking about ethnomethods, particularly his argument in “Good Reasons for Bad Clinical Records,” about the way in which clinicians render patient files accountable. The same sort of idea also served as an inspiration for his critique of Talcott Parsons’s formal analytical theorizing, in “Parsons’s Plenum.”

Bourdieu’s sense of how social inequality was reproduced through social institutions was deeply affected by his schooling in France. The son of a post-master, Bourdieu entered the elite École Normale Supérieure in 1951 (as a classmate of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault), where he was taught to think of himself as a member of the “state nobility.” Although Bourdieu excelled at the school, he also conceived of himself as an outsider and found himself deeply disappointed with what he saw as the corrupt power of the institutional elite. These feelings were reinforced through the early part of his academic career, when he found himself in a marginal position in French academic life.

Bourdieu’s commentary on the French educational system is marked by his having experienced the star system from the inside. Within the university system, he argued, power rather than simply merit shaped the distribution of opportunities. He said that the education system tended to promise more than it delivered. While intellectuals present themselves as working for the common good, they in fact reproduce social inequalities. They inspire devotion from those who want richer, freer lives but they disappoint them with the limits they impose. Bourdieu felt that by exposing the deep truth of the situation he could delegitimize the power of the old guard and challenge the myths in French education. This impulse to undermine the myths of modern institutions is one of the animating features of his entire corpus.

Also important is the theorist's ties to networks, schools, invisible colleges, and communities of thinkers. While attending the graduate school at the University of Chicago, Erving Goffman was the beneficiary of a rich legacy of American sociological thought. His teachers included such luminaries as Everett Hughes, Herbert Blumer, and Edward Shils. According to Fine and Manning, the institutional peculiarities of Chicago at the time – only seven faculty members and scores of graduate students – meant that the graduate students relied on each other to formulate their problems and advance their educations. They formed close friendships through their co-location in Hyde Park. At Chicago, Goffman had the good fortune of an extended intensive exchange of ideas with a succession of influential figures including Joseph Gusfield, Howard Becker, and Ralph Turner. As a group, they became skeptical of the dominant structural-functionalist perspective of the day and turned instead to rich, empirical sociological studies in the interactionist perspective. These scholars all developed a concern about totalitarian control, an interest in dramatic change, and in the bases of community and conformity. Their work set a sociological agenda for research into collective behavior, race and ethnicity, deviance, and work and occupations.

In sum, internal intellectual influences – personal experiences and other accidents of biography – place thinkers in situations that subsequently color their selection of topics, their manner of thinking, or their relation to mainstream social thought. By attending to such influences, it becomes clear that social theory is not the objective, scientific endeavor that some would have. Rather, the individual circumstances of social theorists characteristically become important resources for their theorizing.

EXTERNAL SOCIAL INFLUENCES

External social influences – such as long-running trends like industrialization or watershed events like World War I – can have a constitutive influence on a theorist. Economic depressions and wars have affected most of them. So have the national contexts in which they work. On the one hand, such events define the salient issues of the day and, in doing so, constitute the most pressing topics for social theory to address. Wars, revolutions, episodes of contentious politics, technological innovations, and changing modes of production are external social developments that have attracted the attention of social theorists. On the other hand, such events can affect the trajectory of a theorist's career and the reception of their ideas. A case in point would be the effects of the relocation of the Frankfurt School to the USA after the Nazis came into power and the effect that both Nazism and exposure to American popular culture had on the work of Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Lowenthal.

Once a social problem has drawn the attention of the public, social thinkers who wish to influence policy decisions and substantive debates orient their research to bear on these salient questions. James Coleman's career-long concern for influencing public debate is evident from the beginning of his career. *The Adolescent Society* is a fine example of how a contemporary social problem can

influence a thinker's agenda.⁹ Policymakers understood that education is profoundly important insofar as it has the ability to reinforce or ameliorate inequalities of opportunity in an industrial society. This understanding translates into a value system that emphasizes knowledge and skills. Yet a rift has opened between these values and the values of adolescents who prefer sports or socializing to academic achievement. Coleman asked why high school students fail to assimilate academic values. His theory of the leading crowd seeks to explain the low standing of academic achievement in the adolescent's value system. Coleman's ideas about education had a notable impact on the debates over education.

Daniel Bell's writings on the contemporary scene were notable because they conceptualized important changes in the economic and social landscape in ways that highlighted the inadequacy of extant social theory. In other words, Bell described an emerging type of society that had yet to be theorized. (The impact of Baudrillard's writings on the emergence of a postmodern society is similar in this regard.) Bell's social theorizing is animated by the idea that modernity is disintegrating into a post-industrial society. Perusing the social landscape, Bell sees that the contemporary scene is no longer centered on the manufacturing of tangible goods. The post-industrial society is one in which information technology and a service economy rise alongside the machine technology of industrial society. Within this society, the relative importance of the professional and technical class increases *vis-à-vis* other occupational classes. In this society, codified theoretical knowledge becomes the basis for social planning and social control. Such observations may seem commonplace today but, in the 1960s and 1970s, were prescient. Bell's theoretical ideas are elaborated from his observation of the contemporary scene, especially changing economic roles and technological innovation. Such developments are consistently a source of theoretical inspiration because they suggest that existing categories of analysis are inadequate and in need of rethinking.

Coleman and Bell can be seen as taking very different approaches to theorizing insofar as Coleman attempts to focus in on the detailed workings of particular social problem while Bell uses broad brushstrokes to characterize whole segments of social life. Yet the fundamental similarity of their approaches is that they are each reacting to the changing contemporary scene. Such an impulse is among the most common sources of new social theory.

METATHEORY AS A REFLEXIVE ACTIVITY

More than thirty years have passed since Alvin Gouldner made his plea for reflexive sociology in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*.¹⁰ Gouldner believed a "sociology of sociology" was needed to move beyond the "methodological dualism" of practitioners who assume they view the social world from a special objective vantage. A deepened understanding of the sociologist's position in the world, gained by turning the sociologies of knowledge, science, and occupations on the worlds of sociologists themselves, would create a new awareness of how sociologists' roles and their personal praxis affect their

work. In turn, this awareness might free sociologists from the strictures of their theoretical and methodological biases to produce valid and reliable information about the social world.

Although Gouldner's attack on scientific sociology became famous, reflexive thinking about theory did not begin with *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. Randall Collins claims that as a general phenomenon reflexivity "comes increasingly to the fore as the intergenerational sequence lengthens."¹¹ In a wide-ranging survey of several thousand years of philosophical thought, Collins finds reflexive thinking among such traditions as the Greek Sophists, nineteenth-century German thought, and the logical formalists. This suggests that reflexivity is a natural feature of intellectual communities. One way to interpret the dearth of reflexive thinking in mid-twentieth-century sociology is as the proverbial exception to the rule. In a quest for cumulative knowledge of society, reflexivity was for a time arrested. This is not to say that science is incapable of reflexively assessing its theories, methods, and practices – as all good science should – but rather that "normal science" is characterized by a community's general acceptance of foundational assumptions. Reflexive thinking is, and probably always has been, a key component of a vigorous intellectual community because critical assessment spurs innovation.

This volume is a testament to the value of reflexive thinking about key figures using the tools of our discipline. Each of these chapters provides insights into the structure of a major thinker's thought and the forces that contributed to the development of his or her ideas. Only when these forces are taken into account, can the context-specific elements of a body of work be appreciated. It is up to the readers of this volume to make the most of this contextual approach to social theory and to decide which elements of a theory remain useful when they are taken from the context of their formation and applied to emerging areas of interest.

Metatheory is a systematic tool for theorizing reflexively. The tools of metatheory are useful because they codify the many ways in which theory can be appraised and investigated as an object of analysis. By turning the tools of the discipline on its major thinkers, this volume reveals some of the important sources of contemporary social theory, be they accidents of biography or world-historical transformations. By revealing these sources, this volume will be a valuable tool for students of social theory to better appraise the works they study.

How much of contemporary social theory can be attributed to the circumstance under which it was creation? Quite a bit – as this volume shows. Metatheory is our best available tool for making this point and for continuing to think reflexively about our discipline.

Notes

- 1 A. Giddens (1979) *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. London: Macmillan, p. 1.
- 2 G. Ritzer (1991) *Metatheorizing in Sociology*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

- 3 J. Alexander (1982) *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, vol. 1: *Positivism, Presuppositions, and Current Controversies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 4 This figure appears in Ritzer 1991, p. 18.
- 5 R. K. Merton (1968) *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press, p. 65.
- 6 É. Durkheim (1897/1951) *Suicide*. New York: Free Press.
- 7 R. Emerson (1972) Exchange Theory, Part 1: A Psychological Basis for Social Exchange. In J. Berger, M. Zelditch, Jr., and B. Anderson (eds) *Sociological Theories in Progress*, vol. 2. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p. 44.
- 8 H. Garfinkel (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- 9 J. Coleman (1961) *The Adolescent Society*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- 10 A. Gouldner (1970) *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. New York: Basic Books.
- 11 R. Collins (1999) *The Sociology of Philosophies: a Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 787.

1

Robert K. Merton

PIOTR SZTOMPKA

THE PERSON

Robert King Merton was born on July 4, 1910 in Philadelphia, to a family of working-class Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. As a journalist puts it, he started “almost at the bottom of the social structure” (Hunt, 1961, p. 39).

Obviously gifted, from the earliest days he encountered conducive opportunities for his talents to unfold. Close to his Philadelphia home he found the Andrew Carnegie Library, where as a child he spent endless hours, voraciously consuming works in literature, science, and history, and especially biographies and autobiographies (apparently looking for a “role model,” as he was to call it later). Since that time he has always remained, to use his own words, “the inveterate loner working chiefly in libraries and in my study at home” (Merton, 1994, p. 16). The Academy of Music, with Leopold Stokowski at the helm, was within walking distance and a place of frequent visits. And later, in the mid-1920s, new institutions were added in the vicinity: the Central Library and the Museum of Art. Thus, outside of formal education at the South Philadelphia High School, young Merton was exposed to a rich educative environment (see Merton, 1994).

There were other opportunities though, having more to do with luck: meeting the right people at the right moments of his life. Among those there were: the librarians at Carnegie Library, who took an interest in the young book addict; George E. Simpson, young sociology instructor at Temple College, who made him a research assistant to the study of the public imagery of Blacks, and thus awoke a lifelong passion for social inquiry; Pitirim A. Sorokin, who after a brief encounter at an American Sociological Association convention encouraged Merton to apply for graduate study at Harvard, and soon after made him his research and teaching assistant, as well as a co-author of his work on social time and a

chapter in his monumental *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937–41); Talcott Parsons, who pushed his inquisitive mind toward the European founders of sociology – Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Simmel – and taught him analytic skills and conceptual sophistication; George Sarton, who seduced him toward the history of science; and finally a wartime immigrant from Vienna, mathematician-psychologist turned sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld, with whom Merton established the long-lasting collaboration at Columbia University and the famous Bureau of Applied Social Research, which they co-directed for several decades.

Let us return to more formal biographical facts. In 1927 Merton entered Temple College at Philadelphia, from which he graduated in 1931. Right after, he won a fellowship for graduate study at Harvard University, and in 1936 defended his doctoral dissertation “Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth-century England,” written under the guidance of George Sarton, and published as a book two years later (Merton, 1938). Here he put forward a hypothesis, akin to Max Weber’s famous claim on the link between Protestant ethic and the capitalist economy, arguing for a similar link between Protestant pietism and early experimental science. The “Merton Thesis” has been subjected to criticism, particularly from historians (see Kearney, 1973), and started continuous debates. Some of them have been recently put together in a book by I. Bernard Cohen (1990). Even before his doctoral dissertation, Merton’s first influential articles came out in print: “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Actions” in 1936 (Merton, 1996, pp. 173–82), and, in 1938, one of his crucial contributions, the article “Social Structure and Anomie” (Merton, 1996, pp. 132–52), starting a whole school in the theory of deviance and becoming a subject of continuing debate for more than half a century. From 1936 to 1939 Merton served as a tutor and instructor at Harvard, and then from 1939 until 1941 he held the positions of professor and chairman at the Department of Sociology at Tulane University in New Orleans. In 1941, choosing between job offers from Harvard and Columbia, Merton moved to Columbia University, where he remained on the faculty of the Sociology Department for 38 years, going through the positions of Assistant Professor, Associate Professor (1944), Full Professor (1947), Chairman (succeeding Paul Lazarsfeld in 1961), Giddings Professor of Sociology (1963), and University Professor (1974). After retirement, from 1979 to 1984 he remained active as a Special Service Professor. He withdrew from teaching in 1984.

Apart from the university, Merton has been much involved in wider academic life, both in the United States and internationally. Among his many official positions are the Presidencies of the American Sociological Association (1956), the Eastern Sociological Society (1968), and the Society for Social Studies of Science (1975). He has held innumerable posts on editorial boards, professional committees, and advising positions to publishing houses. Academic recognition includes membership of the National Academy of Sciences, Academia Europaea, and numerous foreign academies (the Polish Academy of Science was added to this list in 1997). He has received more than twenty honorary doctoral degrees from universities including Yale, Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, Leiden,

Jerusalem, Wales, Ghent, Oxford, and Krakow. He was a Fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation (1962), and the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Science, the Resident Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation (1979 until the present time), and MacArthur Prize Fellow (1983–8). From the American Sociological Association he received a Career of Distinguished Scholarship award, and in 1994 the President of the United States granted him the highest academic honor: the National Medal of Science.

Married twice, he has a son and two daughters from the first marriage. His son, Robert C. Merton, a professor at Harvard and an eminent specialist in the study of financial markets, won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1997.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Merton's life covers the major part of twentieth-century American history. Even though he has always been a man of academia, surrounded by and totally devoted to the intellectual community, he has also been touched by the turns of political and economic events. A perfect example of a self-made man, coming from the lowest echelons of class structure and advancing to the narrowest New York elite, as well as to worldwide fame, he could not but recognize the mobility, openness, and democratic virtues of American society making that feat possible. This led him quite early to embrace the liberal-democratic political creed to which he has remained faithful all his life. The experience of the Great Depression raised his sensitivity to social issues, racial discrimination, poverty, deviance, and anomie. And the drama of Stalinist terror, the Nazi ascendance to power and the Second World War, the Holocaust and the Gulag, and other atrocities, brought him to a strong condemnation of totalitarianism. He lived through the defeat of Nazism in 1945 as well as the the final collapse of communism in 1989, which provided happy corroboration of his political commitments.

He reacted to political events with the tools of his academic profession, mostly through research and writing, but was always concerned with the "potentials of relevance" of scientific ideas. He devoted systematic reflection to the role of the intellectual in public bureaucracy (1945), social responsibilities of technologists (1947), and the role of applied social science in the formation of policy (1949). The most "practical" of his own theoretical studies include work on deviance and anomie, racial discrimination, marriage patterns, political "machines," housing, propaganda and the "war-bond drive," and medical education. The most "ideological" of his articles dealt with the destruction of science in Nazi Germany and the defense of the "scientific ethos" (Merton, 1996, pp. 277–85), which for him was a kind of micro-model for the democratic polity. As a co-director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, he managed and supervised numerous other programs directed at pressing social issues.

As was mentioned above, his most significant social environment was academia. His graduate studies and the beginnings of his professional career coincided with the renaissance of American sociology in the 1930s, with Harvard