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Piotr Sztompka

*Professor of Sociology
Jagiellonian University at Krakow, Poland*

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To Robert K. Merton,
my master-at-a-distance turned friend—
on his seventy-fifth birthday

‘He has attempted to arrive at a synthesis of many of the traditions in the shadow of which he stands and so to transcend every particular influence. Putting them to use, he rose above them all while remaining deeply in their debt.’—Lewis A. Coser (1975, p. 99)

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Preface

Like thousands of sociologists all over the world I have made indirect acquaintance with Robert K. Merton via his books, and particularly the seminal *Social Theory and Social Structure*.¹ My initiation in sociology, and my growing fascination with the field, owed much to the twenty-and-one essays contained in that volume. At that time I already had a vague intuition that Merton's work somehow differed from many other volumes I was reading. Other authors attracted me by their erudition, or deductive precision, or systematic coherence, or insightfulness, or originality. But none of those virtues *per se* seemed a fitting characterisation for Merton. And then I hit upon the term 'wisdom', defined by *Webster's New World Dictionary* as 'the quality of being wise; the power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, understanding, etc.; good judgement; discretion; sagacity'.² Up to now Merton has remained for me the embodiment of *sociological wisdom*: the modern sage of social science.

Fifteen years ago I met the sage in person, in his open-neck shirt and colourful scarf, at a party for visiting professors at Columbia University, and soon after, at his book-packed study on Riverside Drive in New York. Immediately friendly, open, sympathetic, concerned with the work and fate of a young apprentice from a far-away country. To my admiration for the work, the admiration for a man was added.

And then, several other meetings and innumerable hours of involved debates followed, both in New York, and at international congresses. There were also many letters, but I will never forget one little postcard signed Bob, that I received at perhaps the most difficult time for me and my country, bringing encouragement, friendship and solidarity.

Thus when Anthony Giddens approached me with the offer of writing a book on Merton's social theory for his series at Macmillan

Publishers, I could not be more enthusiastic – for both scientific and personal reasons. Now that my intellectual adventure with Merton's work is over, though certainly encoded deeply and permanently in my sociological thinking as one of the most challenging and educative experiences, I have to make a record of my indebtedness and gratitude.

The largest share of that goes, naturally enough, to my proper subject-matter, Robert Merton himself. After all, had he not been writing so profusely and so well on so many topics, my reading and re-reading of his voluminous work would not have been as exciting, rewarding and enriching. But my deep gratitude is also due for more direct help – his generosity in giving me full access to otherwise unobtainable resources and files: to minor publications, reprints, manuscripts, proofs, conference papers, outlines of future work, as well as unique samples of his scientific correspondence with other scholars and intellectuals. I have also had the privilege and benefit of his thorough and insightful comments, criticisms and suggestions at the stage of conceiving the book, as well as constant, though discreet encouragement at the time of actual writing. Wasn't it wonderful for example to receive those 'Twenty-five suggestions [on writing] to ladies and gentlemen who have completed an American college education and are now pursuing graduate studies as candidates for higher degrees', given to his students some seventy years ago by Franklin H. Giddings? Or Merton's own 'Memorandum to whom it should concern from one who is concerned about the singular use of plurality and other such assaults on the English language',³ summing up some egregious practices he observed as editor. Thus, briefly and formally, for the record, had it not been for Robert K. Merton, this book would not have been possible – *literally and figuratively*, in all senses of this statement.

To Professor Anthony Giddens from the University of Cambridge I am deeply indebted for the idea of my taking up this challenging endeavour, as well as for many insightful and important editorial suggestions.

Mary Wilson Miles served as an intermediary between Merton and myself and provided immense help in many practical matters, especially in the collection of bibliographical sources. For her efforts, heartfelt thanks.

And Steven Kennedy, the social science editor at Macmillan Publishers, remained poised and accommodating, in spite of

technical problems created by the geographical distance separating author and publisher. He also displayed in abundance the virtue crucial for publishers – patience.

The final version of the manuscript was prepared in the stimulating and friendly environment of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where I stayed as a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1984–5.

Krakow/Ann Arbor

Piotr Sztompka

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Robert K. Merton: Selected Biographical Moments

- 1910 Born into working-class family in Philadelphia
- 1931 Receives A.B. from Temple University
- 1936 Receives Ph.D. from Harvard University
Publishes 'The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social action'
- 1936–9 Tutor and instructor at Harvard
- 1937 Publishes (with P. A. Sorokin) 'Social Time: A Functional and Methodological Analysis'
- 1938 Publishes first book, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth-century England*
Publishes 'Social Structure and Anomie'
- 1939 Publishes 'Bureaucratic Structure and Personality'
- 1939–41 Associate Professor, then Professor and Chairman, Department of Sociology at Tulane University in New Orleans
- 1941–79 Assistant Professor to Professor; Giddings Professor of Sociology
- 1942 Publishes 'A Note on Science and Democracy (The Normative Structure of Science)'
- 1946 Publishes *Mass Persuasion*
- 1948 Publishes 'The Self-fulfilling Prophecy'
- 1949 Publishes *Social Theory and Social Structure*
- 1950 Publishes (with Alice Kitt Rossi) 'Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behavior'
- 1954 Publishes (with P. F. Lazarsfeld) 'Friendship as a Social Process: A Substantive and Methodological Analysis'
- 1956 Publishes (with M. Fiske and P. Kendall) *The Focused Interview*
- 1957 Publishes (with G. L. Reader, P. L. Kendall *et al.*) *The Student-physician*

- Publishes 'The Role-set: Problems in Sociological Theory'
- Publishes 'Priorities in Scientific Discovery: A Chapter in the Sociology of Science'
- Elected President of American Sociological Association*
- 1964 Publishes 'Anomie, Anomia and Social Interaction: Contexts of Deviant Behavior'
- 1965 Publishes *On the Shoulders of Giants*
- 1968 Publishes 'The Matthew-effect in Science: the Reward and Communication Systems of Science'
- 1968 Receives honorary degrees from Yale University and the University of Chicago**
- 1971 Publishes (with Harriet Zuckerman) 'Patterns of Evaluation in Science: Institutionalization, Structure, and Functions of the Referee System'
- 1972 Publishes 'Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge'
- 1973 Publishes *The Sociology of Science*
- 1975 Elected first President of Society for Social Studies of Science
- 1976 Publishes *Sociological Ambivalence*
- 1979 Publishes *The Sociology of Science: An Episodic Memoir*
Edits (with T. J. Trenn) Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (translation from the German)
- 1980 Receives honorary degree from Harvard University
- 1982 Publishes *Social Research and the Practicing Professions*
- 1983 Publishes (with Vanessa Merton and Elinor Barber) 'Client Ambivalences in Professional Relationships'
MacArthur Prize Fellow
- 1984 Publishes 'Socially Expected Durations I: A Case Study of Concept Formation in Sociology'
Publishes 'The Fallacy of the Latest Word: The Case of Pietism and Science'
- 1979–84 University Professor Emeritus and Special Service Professor at Columbia University
- 1984 University Professor Emeritus at Columbia University

* He has served as President of several other academic societies and is an honorary member in a dozen academies and learned societies.

** He has received some twenty honorary degrees from universities in the United States and abroad.