



Robert K. Merton's Approach to Teaching the Classics in Sociology

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to provide some guidance and inspiration for the teaching of the classics in sociology by taking a close look at the way in which Robert K. Merton taught this topic at Columbia University. The course was entitled “History of Sociological Theory (Sociology 150)” and was given between 1958 and 1968. With the help of archival material, the article reconstructs what Merton said during his lectures, which texts he assigned, what kind of tests he gave, and what type of paper the students should write. Merton did not want the students to only study the texts of the classics but also try to figure out how these went about their research and were able to formulate their theories. This meant that he emphasized how the classics approached such activities as problem-finding, problem-solving and looking for strategic research sites. In the concluding section, the broad approach to theory in Merton's teaching is contrasted to the more narrow one he presented in *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Positive and negative aspects of Merton's approach to the classics are also discussed.

Keywords Classical theory · Robert K. Merton · Emile Durkheim · History of sociology · Theorizing

Those equipped with some *first-hand knowledge of history of sociology* – not reading *about* Tarde, Cooley, Pareto, Weber, Durkheim, but reading in them – have a *reservoir of conceptual associations* which can be drawn upon in their own research. [They will also be] more likely to seize upon observations otherwise neglected. [This is] in part what Pasteur meant by the “prepared mind” Merton in a note for his lectures on the classics¹

¹Merton B139F4. During a lecture at the University of Lille in 1854 Louis Pasteur said, “In the fields of observation chance favors only those minds which are prepared” (Pasteur, 1954). For an explication of this quote, see e.g. Merton & Barber, 2004:259.

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The basic question that this article raises is a very concrete one: how should the classics in sociology be taught according to Robert K. Merton, and what can we learn today from his approach?² The main source for addressing this question is archival material from 1958 to 1968, during which Merton taught a course at Columbia University called “History of Sociological Theory (Sociology 150)”.³ This material is very rich and allows us to reconstruct not only what Merton typically said in his lectures but also which texts by the classics he assigned; what type of questions he used in the tests; and what kind of term paper the students had to write.⁴ Some additional information on the course and how it was taught has also been procured through interviews with Harriet Zuckerman, who took Merton’s class several times, and with Jonathan Cole, who three times was his teaching assistant for this course (Zuckerman, 2021; Cole, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Use has also been made of an article that grew out of Merton’s teaching of Sociology 150 which most readers know as the introductory chapter to the 1968 edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure*, “On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory” (Merton, 1968:1–38).⁵ The article ends with a section which contains a summary of what is distinctive about Merton’s way of teaching the classics and also some suggestions for how it may be improved.

² For much help and assistance I would especially like to thank Michela Betta, Jonathan Cole, Harriet Zuckerman and the editor of *The American Sociologist*. I am also very grateful for comments and information from two anonymous reviewers, Seth Abrutyn and Charles Crothers.

³ It is true that Merton also referred to the classics in his lectures in other courses, but he never made them the exclusive focus except for in the course discussed in this article. Already in 1950 Merton was the opinion that it was important to “habituate the students to the careful and intensive study of the classics” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1972:384; emphasis added; see also e.g. Merton, 1948:165). This quote comes from a report Merton co-authored with Lazarsfeld in an attempt to get Columbia University to create a Professional School for Training in Social Research (something that did not happen). Insofar as the classics are concerned, the general idea was to make the students read these in such a way that they would be able to produce better sociological analyses. This was to be done by having the students work with case material based on the classics. “Preliminary efforts have resulted in procedures for preparing the special kind of case materials which draws upon the classics of social science, and for provisionally assessing their characteristic place in the training program” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1972:383; see also e.g. Morrison, 1976:91). To train the students in the classics in this way would also teach them some humanism and help to counter the tendency in sociology to exclusively focus on technical issues. In short, it would counter what Merton and Lazarsfeld called “*the new barbarism in social science*” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1972:384; emphasis in the text).

⁴ The material that Merton saved from teaching the course “History of Sociological Theory” (Sociology 150) during the period 1958–1968 consists of about 400 pages of lecture notes, course descriptions, tests and more, which can be found in Box 130 (folders 4–12) in the Robert K. Merton Collection at the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library. A few of the tests that were administered during the course can also be found in Box 124, folder 6 (“Examination Questions, 1953–1970”). The course consisted of around 13 classes during which Merton lectured. A full set of lecture notes exists for the course given in 1966, and for six lectures for the one given in 1958 (of which one is a transcription from a tape). Remaining notes have sometimes been made by Merton or are transcriptions from his lectures by one of the teaching assistants. None of the papers by the students were kept by Merton but at least one has survived – that of Harriet Zuckerman, entitled “Alexis de Tocqueville” (25 pp.; see Box 15 [“Sociology 150-Social Theory (HZ), 1959”] in Harriet Zuckerman Papers in the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library). According to the catalogue to the Robert K. Merton collection, Merton gave a one-year graduate course on “The History of Sociological Theory” also during the years 1945–1947 (Box 130, folders 1–3). While there exist files for these years (and with this title), these only contain material for a course on “the social organization of housing communities” and nothing on the history of sociological theory (for the course as well as the literature used in this course for the year of 1947, see Fox, n.d.).

⁵ The chapter was first published in 1967, in the short version of *Social Theory and Social Structure* called *On Theoretical Sociology* (Merton, 1967:1–37).

Merton's Course "History of Sociological Theory" (Sociology 150)

The course that Merton taught was at the graduate level and given over one term. It was a required course and consisted of about a dozen weekly meetings. During each of these, which lasted 110 min, Merton lectured based on notes. The exact number of the students who took the class during the years it was taught is not known. We know, however, that 59 students had signed up for the class in 1962, 27 of whom were female. Quite a few students, however, also audited Merton's class as did some faculty members. According to Harriet Zuckerman, "people sat on the window sills and on the floor if they didn't get to class early enough to get a seat in the room that held perhaps 60 students" (Zuckerman, 2021). All in all, somewhere between five hundred and a thousand graduate students in sociology may have taken Merton's course during 1958–1968.

Since every graduate student was required to take the class, it is clear that the department of sociology at Columbia University felt that a knowledge of the history of sociology represented a necessary and important part of each student's education. Many of the graduate students, it can be added, left with a Master's degree, while only a small number stayed on for their PhD (Cole, 2021b). For those who decided to continue, knowledge of classical theory also played an important role in the oral and written examinations that all PhD students had to pass.⁶ In brief, in order to get a doctoral degree in sociology at Columbia University during this time you had to know classical sociology.

But what exactly did Merton want the students to know of the classics and the history of sociology? A first answer to this question can be had by looking at the following items from Sociology 150: the assigned readings, the test the students had to take, and the required paper. After a presentation of this material, an account will be given of the content of Merton's lectures.

According to Merton, the overall goal of the course was to teach the students how to start reading important sociological works from the past "in a productive way" (Merton

⁶ There exists little knowledge and discussion of the role of the oral and written examinations that PhD students many times have had to pass in order to get their degree. This is the main reason for including the following account of the oral and written examinations at Columbia University in the 1960s. The author, Jonathan Cole, got his PhD in 1969 and his thesis was directed by Merton:

We had both oral examinations in four fields and written examinations that were based upon an agreed upon set of readings (individual lists could be methodological, history of theory, contemporary theory, or a number of specialties - agreed upon with your examination committee). The orals were a major affair. I remember Lazarsfeld would always send students to the chalk board and ask them questions, for example, about the meaning of marginals and individual cells in a 16-fold table or of some other analytic problem in current (at the time) methods. Merton, who was on my committee, asked questions about both classical and contemporary theory. It was high anxiety studying because while you got to know the works very well, you had no idea about the questions that they would ask. It was much the same with the written examinations. I remember that it was the only 6 months of my life where I took up smoking.

But we learned so much through that examination process. Nothing like that exists now. All students were required to take exams in theory and methods and then could choose two others. Study groups were formed by some; not by others. I do think that some students took Merton's history of theory course several times in preparation for the orals as well as it being initially a required course. (Cole, 2021c)

B130F11). By this phrase he meant that they should learn to read the classics in a way that helped them in their own thinking as well as in their future research. In 1966 Merton began the course by saying the following:

This course is intended as a guide to the history of theory; it will not be an exhaustive analysis of any one theory or group of theories. The attempt will be to bring out the not so obvious aspects of the theories in questions, the aspects you might not pick up in your reading. *The objective is...to get you to start reading theories of the past in a productive way, not in a mimetic way.* (Merton B130F11; emphasis added)

One way to teach the classics would have been for Merton to cover all of them in a systematic manner, but as he makes clear in the quote above, this was not how he wanted to proceed. He first and foremost felt that it was important for the students to learn to “feel at home in the universe [of the classics]” (Merton B130F6). He also wanted them to know enough of the classics so that once the course was over, they would be able to study them on their own. Each student also had to write a term paper on one of the classics.⁷

During the introductory lecture Merton often cited a statement by the Norwegian mathematician Niels Abel: “One should study the masters, not the pupils” (e.g. Merton B130F4).⁸ This meant that the primary focus should be on studying the texts of the classics, not on secondary sources. What the classics can show you, as opposed to those who comment on their works, Merton continued, is how you have to *think* about sociology in order to do it well.

He also told the students that it was important not to imitate the theories and the formulations of the classics. The analysis should draw on the work of several people, not just one. In brief, the students should develop what Merton termed *an eclectic approach* to sociological theory.⁹

⁷ Should one use the term “classics”, “major works in sociological theory”, or what is the most suitable terminology? In his published work Merton often used “classics”, “classical theory”, and “classical works”; and this usage has been followed in article (e.g. Merton, 1968:27, 30, 35–8). The term “classical theory” is also commonly used in today’s sociology; and many departments in the United States still have courses in this topic (e.g. Abrutyn, 2013, 2021). In his lectures, as opposed to in his publications, Merton tended to use terms such as “master” (Merton B130F11), “major sociologists” (Merton B130F4), “major sociological figures” (Merton B130F4), and the like. In discussing Merton’s terminology on this topic, it can also be mentioned that he played an important role in the coming into being of *Masters of Sociological Thought* (1971, 1977) by Lewis Coser. “Robert K. Merton, my former teacher and long-term friend, not only suggested the idea of this book and assisted at its inception, but he gave crucial support in bringing to completion both its first and second edition” (Coser, 1977:xi). To this can be added that Coser had initially wanted to write his dissertation under Merton on Simmel, in the form of an intellectual biography. Merton, however, was “not encouraging”, noting that this topic was “unfashionable” (Jaworski, 1998:7, Coser, 1993:7). Coser never wrote such a biography; and none exists today, more than half a century later. Coser’s thesis was instead devoted to showing how Simmel’s ideas on conflict can be used to improve modern sociology (Coser, 1956).

⁸ Close to the Abel quote, Merton once wrote the following in his notes, “Durkheim said [the] same”. By this he was presumably referring to the following quote by Durkheim: “If you wish to mature your thought, devote yourself to the study of a great master; take a system apart, laying bare its innermost secrets. This is what I did and my educator was Renouvier” (Lukes, 1973:54).

⁹ This was a point Merton often repeated. He later refined his terminology and contrasted “disciplined eclecticism” to “ad hoc eclecticism” (Merton, 1976:23, 169).

Merton assigned roughly the same readings every year that he taught the class, and he also gave the same instructions to the students. They were, for example, told that they should select one book on the history of sociology from the reading list, and quickly read it through to get a sense of the topic. There were several to choose from, by authors such as Pitirim Sorokin, Harry Elmer Barnes and Nicholas Timasheff (Sorokin, 1928; Barnes, 1948; Timasheff, 1955). They should also read a few secondary texts on the classics, such as Talcott Parsons on Durkheim and Lewis Coser on Simmel (Parsons, 1937:635–41, Coser, 1958). The main bulk of the readings, however, consisted of excerpts from the classics that Merton had chosen and also lectured on. Altogether the students had to read a few hundred pages by each of the classics (see Box 1).

Merton told the students that the texts by the classics would at times seem “impossibly long”; and that they therefore had to learn “the art of skimming” and to focus on what is essential (Merton B130F4). This would also help them to pass the test at the end of the course. This test was three hours long, and the students had to answer five out of seven questions. To do this well, they had to have studied both the course literature and what Merton said in his lectures (see Box 2).

The paper each student had to write should, to repeat, be exclusively devoted to the work of *one* of the classics. The reason for this had to do with Merton’s firm belief that the best way to learn from the major figures in social theory was to study one of them intensely. The paper, he instructed the students, should focus on the ideas of the person they had chosen but also take his or her social and intellectual context into account. The reason for paying attention to the context was not only to situate the ideas of the person; by proceeding in this way they would also better understand the thinking that went into these. Here as elsewhere in the class Merton wanted to make the students come as close as possible to see how the classics were going about their analyses, how they were *thinking*. “*We want to see how these men’s [and women’s] minds worked*” (Merton B130F1, emphasis added; see Box 3).¹⁰

If one were to sum up what the required readings, the test, and the paper, tell us about what Merton wanted the students to know, it would be as follows. The students should try to get a sense for the kind of thinking that went into the analyses of the classics by reading excerpts from several of their key works. They should especially try to learn from the ways in which the classics *thought*; and this meant in some sense also trying to go beyond the texts. One important way of getting to know how the classics were thinking was for the students to devote the term paper to an in-depth study of one of them.

Merton not only wanted to teach the students about important sociological works of the past, as part of their general education; he also wanted to lay a foundation for their future *use* of the classics in their own research. Finally, he made clear to them that the course was only a first introduction to the classics; once the course was over, they should keep reading and studying them on their own.

Something that made Merton’s course special was also his skill as a lecturer, and especially his desire to teach the students how to think as a sociologist by way of

¹⁰ Additions of inclusive expressions such as “and women’s” have occasionally been added to quotes by Merton, indicated by the use of brackets.

Box 1. Obligatory Literature in Merton's Course "History of Sociological Theory"

Comte, Auguste. *Positive Philosophy*, II, chs. 1, 3, 5, 6; *Positive Polity* (read enough to gain an idea of his conceptions of the sociology of institutions: family, religion, etc. and of the community).

Spencer, Herbert. *Principles of Sociology*. Vol. 1, Pt. 1, chs. I-II, XXVIII; Pt. 2, chs. II-V, XII, Vol. II, Pt. V, chs. I-II, IV-V, X, XVII-XVIII; *The Study of Sociology*, chs. I, III.

Marx, Karl. *German Ideology*, Pts. I, III; *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

Engels, Friedrich. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.

Durkheim, Emile. *Rules of Sociological Method*, chs. 1–2; *Suicide*, Book I, Introduction, Book II, chs. 1, 2, 4, 5, Book III, ch. 1; *Division of Labor in Society*, Book 1, chs. 2, 3, 7, Book II, chs. 1–2; *Education and Sociology*, ch. 1; *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Introduction, Book I, ch. 1, Book III, chs. 1, 3, 5, Conclusion.

Simmel, Georg. *The Sociology of Simmel* (ed. K. Wolff), Pt. 1, I, III, Pt. 2, I, III, IV, Pt. 3, I, II, Pt 5, III, IV; *Conflict*, chs. 1–3, and in the same volume *The Web of Group-Affiliations*.

example. According to the teaching assistant in the course, listening to Merton's lectures on the classics

... was a creative experience. And it was exhilarating to students because they saw someone *thinking on his feet* and going through new ideas that they had never heard of and never read before. (Cole, 2021b; see also Merton & Persell, 1984:358–59)

Part of the reason why Merton chose to lecture in this particular way had to do with his habit of trying out new ideas that occurred to him while he was lecturing (e.g. Merton,

Box 2. Some Test Questions from Merton's Course

1. Selecting cases in point from sociologists whose work has been examined in this course, indicate how their social environment and life history apparently affected their thought (e.g. selection of theoretical problems, substantive ideas or style of inquiry).

2. Define and briefly discuss five of the following concepts, including substantive examples of each:

- a) adumbrationism
- b) conscience collective
- c) positivism
- d) anomie
- e) alienation
- f) tertius gaudens
- g) industrial society

3. Compare in some detail the purposes and character of a sociological history of sociological theory and a history of sociological ideas.

Comment: According to Jonathan Cole, Merton was interested in designing the tests in his courses. When Cole proposed some of his own for Sociology 150, Merton would carefully study and edit them (Cole, 2021b). Merton often kept the tests he used in his courses; and several can be found today in the Robert K. Merton Collection at the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library (see e.g. Box 124, File 6). The sources to the questions above are Merton B126F6, B130F8, B130F11. For a test question Merton gave already in 1939 at Harvard, see Merton, 1995:19–20.

Box 3. Instructions for Writing the Required Paper

Each registered student will write a detailed paper on one man [or woman among the classics or on some other major sociologist]. This kind of intensive study of the consolidated thought of a man who has made a difference in the history of sociology is neglected in the contemporary sociological profession. Student writing such an intensive paper must know the man as a person and must know the times in which he lived – biographical and historical information used to shed light on why he turned to certain problems, why he abandoned old lines of work to adopt new ones, what animated him to approach certain issues analytically and polemically, what social relations he experienced (i.e., the man’s reference groups, whom he argued ideas with, expectations of associates, and all other relations which affected the content and development of his ideas). The student’s paper will, of course, deal with the actual substance of the subject’s ideas (what these ideas mean, how the theorist developed and organized them). (Merton B130F5).

1980a, 1998a:315–17). According to Cole, Merton typically spent two hours preparing for each lecture, and during this time he must not be disturbed. This meant that once he started to lecture, Merton knew exactly what he wanted to say. But he had also taught himself to be open to new ideas that came to him when he was lecturing; seize on these; and develop them in class. He took these new ideas very seriously, closely testing their strengths and weaknesses by “thinking aloud” (as he put it) in front of the students (Merton & Persell, 1984:358). Merton, in Cole’s view, “was a very innovating teacher” (Cole, 2021b).

Merton’s Lectures, Part 1: The Classics

By studying the masters, you may develop a sense of taste, and instinct for the jugular, for what is important and what is trivial.
- Merton in one of his lectures¹¹

Let us now look more closely at the content of Merton’s lectures. Merton always began the course by giving a lecture in which he went through several different answers to the question, “Why study the history of sociological theory?” All the remaining lectures were devoted to the classics and their authors; and in a typical course this meant twelve to thirteen lectures.

More than 90% of the lectures were in other words devoted to the classics; and this shows what Merton first and foremost wanted the students to learn. From the material in the Robert K. Merton Collection at the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, one however gets a sense that Merton himself was also interested in something else, namely the history of sociology as a separate and distinct area of study. And teaching this course gave him an opportunity to develop his ideas on this topic.

But even if this was the case, Merton was also well aware that for the average student it was more important to become acquainted with the works of the classics than to learn how to carry out a study in the history of sociology. The result was a

¹¹ Merton B130F11.

compromise from Merton's side; some of the issues he mentioned during the introductory lecture had mainly to do with the history of sociology: how to carry out studies on this topic, including what errors to avoid and how to use a sociological approach. But Merton also angled his thoughts on this topic in the direction of the students and their need to get to know the works of the classics. How this was done will be discussed later in the article.

Once when Merton gave the introductory lecture, he said that it would perhaps have been better if it had given it at the very end of the course, since it assumed that the students already had some knowledge they would only have once they had taken the course. Something similar is also true for the argument in this article; and what Merton lectured on in the introductory lecture will therefore be presented first after an account has been given of what he said about the classics during the rest of the course.

Merton was of the opinion that the best way to introduce the students to the history of sociological theory was to focus on the work of those individuals who had made the most important contributions to the discipline. This was in his view the following persons: Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Pareto, Weber, Cooley and W.I. Thomas. Given the constraint of the course, he felt, however, that he had to restrict himself to discussing only a few of these; and he always chose the following five: Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim and Simmel.¹² As earlier mentioned, Merton was of the opinion that it was more important for the students to develop a general sense for how the classics thought and worked, than to acquire a general knowledge of all of the classics.¹³

By focussing on only a few central figures in sociology, Merton followed the lead of Parsons whose course in sociological theory he had taken at Harvard (Merton, 1980b).¹⁴ But as opposed to Parsons, Merton did not try to synthesize the ideas of

¹² Merton does not seem to have lectured on Weber, to judge from the course descriptions that remain from the course (that is, for the six out of ten times that Merton gave the course). In 1968, when most of the lectures were given by other people than Merton, Terence Hopkins gave two lectures on Weber. In 1959, when Merton was on leave, all of the lectures, including some on Weber, were given by Juan Linz. According to Jonathan Cole, "he [Merton] never really talked that much about Weber, whereas at many other places Weber was emphasized more than Durkheim" (Cole, 2021b). According to Harriet Zuckerman, Merton taught Weber in his courses at Columbia, "but not 'systematically' or seriously" (Zuckerman, 2021). He was also "well represented on Bob's bookshelves [but] he just didn't resonate to Weber". The fact that Merton did not think that it was essential to always teach Weber in his course on the classics can be interpreted in several ways. One that is hard to avoid is that Merton did not think it was essential for sociologists to study Weber's theory of social action, nor to use it as the fundamental unit of sociological analysis. In terms of his own use of Weber, Merton seems to primarily have been interested in Weber's theory of bureaucracy and what he said about science (see e.g. Merton et al., 1952; Merton, 1968:249–60, 261–278).

¹³ What do we know about Merton's view of the classics by looking at his personal library? This question still remains to be answered. As earlier mentioned (in note 12) we know that the works by Weber were "well represented" on his bookshelves; but that is also all. According to Harriet Zuckerman, Merton annotated "most" of his books; and many of these were included in the gift to the Robert K. Merton Collection at the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The archive, however, has given them away. According to Harriet Zuckerman, "[Bob also] devised what he called his Memory Books in which he typed out or had typed out long passages from his readings – with separate sheets classified by authors, by subject matter and I think by date of reading. These were in brown loose-leaf books and are surely in the archive" (Zuckerman, 2021).

¹⁴ Merton says in his autobiographical sketch, "A Life of Learning", that he took "Talcott Parsons' very first course in theory", which was called "Sociological Theories of Hobhouse, Durkheim, Simmel, Toennies, and Max Weber" (Merton, 1994:12). Merton also took Sorokin's course "Contemporary Sociological Theories" and was Sorokin's assistant in this course (Nichols, 2010:86).

the individuals he had selected into an overall theory (Parsons, 1937). In his view each classic should be appreciated in his or her own right.

Merton also told the students what to look for in the classics; and this was very important to him. At the beginning of his lectures on the individual sociologists, he said the following:

What we ought to keep in mind then is

1. What are the major problems X proposed to deal with?
2. What are the main methods he [or she] felt ought to be applied in the study of these problems?
3. What are his [or her] main conceptions and hypotheses concerning these problems? (Merton B130F11)

In studying the classics, the students should in other words start out by locating the following four items: the major problems that the author had decided to focus on; the main methods and data that were used; the main concepts; and the main hypotheses.

But what mattered most to Merton was the process - *the thinking and other activities* - that went into the production of a study. He, for example, told the students that *problem-finding* was often more difficult than *problem-solving*, a topic he had just written an article on (Merton, 1959). He also told the students that some problems keep recurring in sociology; and that this was one of the reasons why it was helpful to study the classics. Examples of such “*enduring problems*” were social differentiation, rates of social change, and social equilibrium (Merton B130F11; emphasis added). Merton warned the students that some of the problems sociologists researched were fictitious. One example of such a “*mock problem*” was the idea that a choice must be made between studying the dynamic aspects of society and its static aspects (Merton B130F11; emphasis added).

To go from a problem to its conceptualization meant in Merton’s mind that you first had to locate a distinct *social pattern*, that is actions, attitudes and the like that are repeated (e.g. Merton, 1959:60, Merton, 1968:114). Some data, he also noted, can be extra useful when you try to analyse some phenomenon. His term for this was *strategic research site*, which he described as “empirical material that exhibits to good advantage the data needed to solve a problem” (Merton B130F11).¹⁵ While it was important to formulate hypotheses in empirical research, Merton did not say much on this topic in his lectures. In fact, his focus was much more on “the general sociological orientation” of the classics, that is, on their capacity to “provide a general context for inquiry” (Cole, 2021b; see also Merton, 1968:141–3).

It was however not enough to just study the works of the classics to fully understand what was so precious about them. You also had to know something about the author and his or her time, in order to get a good sense for how they were thinking about a problem and the solution they had come up with. One item that Merton told the students to pay special attention to in this context was *the self-image* of the author. He noted, for example, that Simmel “felt he was an outsider all his life”, while “Weber [was] ‘in’ even before he thought he deserved it” (Merton B130F10).

¹⁵ The term was later changed to *strategic research materials* (e.g. Merton, 1987:10–23).

Merton explained to the students why it is important to look at the self-image as follows:

At every point [of the course] we will want to make the effort to reconstruct the self-images of the major sociologists we will be dealing with. How did they see themselves as sociologists? What were their self-defined functions? And with regard to these self-images, how do certain self-images prove to be more characteristic of them in one period and other different images at another time; and secondly, to attempt to see how this affected the character of their sociological work. What had they elected to do? (Merton B130F6)

But in order to get close to the way that the classics were thinking, there was more than the works themselves and the self-image of the author that you had to be familiar with. At one point Merton enumerated the following factors as also being important:

- (1) intellectual linkages – the filiation of ideas
- (2) social context of intellectual work – will look at how this affects the foci of attention by theorists on some problems and the neglect of others which are around ‘in loose solution’
- (3) interpersonal relations between thinkers
- (4) idiosyncratic aspects of man’s [and woman’s] life – related to social contexts. (Merton B130F10)

The classic with whom Merton was most familiar, and whose work had also influenced him the most, was Durkheim. According to Jonathan Cole, “Merton identified with Durkheim as probably the first of the people who did middle-range theory” (Cole, 2021b). Also Harriet Zuckerman says that Merton “clearly identified [with Durkheim]” (Zuckerman, 2021). In what follows some excerpts from Merton’s lectures on Durkheim will be presented, in order to provide a sense of what it was like to take Merton’s course, and also to indicate what Merton wanted the students to know about Durkheim and his way of thinking.

Merton usually gave three two-hour lectures on Durkheim. The following excerpts come from the course he gave in the spring of 1966; and the reason for choosing this particular year is that it is the one for which the record of what Merton said is most complete.¹⁶

Merton began the first lecture on Durkheim with the following statement:

In turning to Emile Durkheim, we are turning to the first modern sociologist. With Durkheim we have a man who simultaneously developed and practiced a complex and scientific sociology. He saw as his task not only to practice but to create a new sociology. (Merton B130F11)

Note that Merton uses the terms *practice sociology* and *create sociology* when he talks about Durkheim; and this is characteristic for what he wanted the students to focus on when they studied Durkheim’s texts as well as those of the other classics.

¹⁶ See note 4 for more information on the course given in 1966.

Merton then provided some brief biographical information on Durkheim, after which he turned to Durkheim's major works. A few minutes were also spent on the reception of Durkheim in the United States. The Chicago sociologists, Merton said, had read some of Durkheim's writings but without realizing what was so special about them. The reason for this was that they were more interested in descriptions than in developing theory.¹⁷

"In the United States," Merton said, "Durkheim was born posthumously in the 1930s and is still with us" (Merton B130F11). In saying this he was presumably referring to the attention paid to the works of Durkheim by Parsons, Sorokin and also himself (e.g. Sorokin, 1928; Parsons, 1937; Merton, 1934, 1938). Merton then carefully went through Durkheim's major works, from *Division of Labor to Elementary Forms*, while pointing out the theoretical continuity in his production. "What is important in the work of significant theorists is not their subject matter but how the subjects are suited to their theoretical analysis...Underlying his [Durkheim's] diversity of subject matter were important theoretical continuities" (Merton B130F11).

What Merton had in mind when he referred to the theoretical continuity in Durkheim's writings were themes such as integration, the individual's subordination to the group, and the problem of how to relate theory to empirical material, especially statistics. Or to be more precise, he wanted the students to become aware of how Durkheim was thinking about these topics, and how his thought changed over his career.

The work by Durkheim that Merton considered to be his most important, and which was also the main reason why he called Durkheim "the first modern sociologist", was *Suicide* (Durkheim, 1897). In fact, this particular work was not only regarded by Merton as the most important work in the history of sociology, but also by many of his colleagues at Columbia University. What was especially attractive to Merton and his colleagues with *Suicide* was the skill with which Durkheim supported a significant sociological theory with systematic data in the form of statistics (e.g. Selvin, 1958).

This is how Merton introduced *Suicide* to the students, drawing their attention much more to the way Durkheim proceeded analytically than to the results of the study:

The significance of this as a model in subsequent social research cannot be overestimated. This is the first time Durkheim pursues his selection of a strategic research site, where he is putting his ideas to the test of a great array of empirical

¹⁷ When Merton mentioned the type of sociology that had been developed by the Chicago sociologists, he was very critical. He argued, among other things, that they had failed to develop an approach that was cumulative. "Empirical research [was also] designed to illustrate the sets of theoretical ideas, rather than to lead to the clarification and further specification of analytical conceptions" (Merton B130F4). The Chicago sociologists had "scaled down research problems to what [a] single individual could handle thru field work, and reworking of documentary statistics". The type of sociology that Merton himself identified with, and which in his view had become dominant in the United States since around the mid-1930s, was characterized as follows:

- a. Introduction of European theory, and restudy of the implications of this theory in terms of variables of analysis
- b. This reformulation with an eye to making the theory amenable to systematic research
- c. Emergence or re-emergence of new types of sociological fields of inquiry, which had either fallen into neglect in this country, or had never been a focus of interest [such as social class and stratification, the primary group, social control and more] (Merton B130F4)

uniformities. He was taking the challenge of using his conceptions of sociological determinants, and accounting for an indefinitely large array of empirical uniformities.

Why did he select suicide?

1. These sets were available.
2. Suicide is the individual act par excellence. It would seem to be the crucial case of an act which was socially undetermined. It is the most difficult case, which makes it the best to choose, since it makes possible the afortiori form of argument: if he could succeed in his analysis of this case, then the less individual acts ought to lend themselves to similar analysis quite easily. (Merton B130F11)

Merton then went on to give a detailed account of what Durkheim considered to be the major types of suicide, that is, egoistic, altruistic, and anomic suicide. The theoretical reason for developing this typology was described as follows; and note again how Merton emphasizes Durkheim's way of approaching the problems involved rather than presenting the results:

Durkheim starts with the array of empirical uniformities on rates of suicide. Before Durkheim, the practice had been to draw up ad hoc explanations, with each instance of suicide having its unique explanation. Durkheim's objective was to find a delimited array of hypotheses that would account for the whole set of uniformities. In this connection, though suicides look all alike, there can be distinguished three types of suicide, with each having its distinctive source. (Merton B130F11)

Merton summed up his discussion of *Suicide* by stating that Durkheim in this work had presented a model for how to proceed when you want to conduct sociological research:

The significance of the Durkheim monograph is not in how well his specific interpretations of suicide rates stand up today. It has become the format for an interpretation for a vast array of social behavior; it exemplifies the technique of reconceptualizing kinds of uniformities that are found in social statistics. (Merton B130F11)

Merton's Lectures, Part 2: The Introductory Lecture

Merton, to recall, always devoted the introductory lecture in his course to the question, "Why study the history of sociology?" Different scholars, he said, had given different answers to this question; and in his lecture he presented and commented on several of these. He also introduced a number of new ideas and concepts relating to the history of sociology that he had developed himself. If one adds these up, one nearly gets a full Mertonian program for how to study the history of sociology (see Box 4).

Box 4. Concepts and Ideas by Merton for the Study of the History of Sociology

Key Ideas in History of Sociology

1. “significant” problems – problem-finding
2. SRS [Strategic Research Sites]
3. near-misses
4. “neglect” – unperceived basic contributions
5. retroactive effects...retrospective spotting
6. prof'l adumbrationism
7. palimpsestic syndrome
8. reward system
9. reference-groups in science: “invisible colleges”
10. institutionalization
11. multiples
12. foreshortened perspective (clouded crystal ball)

Comment: This list comes from a note by Merton for his course “History of Sociological Theory” (Merton B130F4). His full program for how to study the history of sociology can be found in Ch. 1 of *Social Theory and Social Structure*, “On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory”. Several of Merton’s other writings also contain valuable contributions to the history of sociology (e.g. Merton, 1979, 1982, 1988, 1990, 1998b; see also e.g. Crothers, 2003).

The topic of how to carry out a study in the history of sociology is not the main focus of this article, but as earlier mentioned Merton made an effort to show the students how some of his ideas on this topic could also be of help in their attempt to make sense of the classics. This is the reason for the following brief mention of Merton’s key ideas on this topic:

1. The Filiation of Ideas and Concepts

Merton used the term “filiation” as a reminder that the development of ideas and concepts is non-linear and complex in nature. He was very critical of the way that Timasheff and other historians of sociology treated this topic, because they thought it was straightforward and easy to understand.

There exist many reasons for the complexity of the filiation of ideas, Merton said (see also e.g. Merton, 1995). Some of these have already been mentioned, such as the impact of the self-image of the sociologist, and the social and intellectual context of his or her life. Another factor that makes it hard to establish how sociological concepts and ideas have come into being and developed over time, has to do with the following. This is that “*what men of science actually do*” when they conduct research, according to Merton, is very different from “*the textbook version*” and the account of the research that is published (e.g. Merton B130F6; emphasis added).

This means, Merton continued, that the way in which students typically encounter sociology, namely in the form of a written text, is deceptive in that the research it presents has come into being in a very different manner. Here as elsewhere when sociology is being taught, he argued, the focus should be on *how to do research and how to think sociologically*, less so on the published text. The golden rule for how to

approach the classics and other sociological studies was formulated as follows by Merton: “Theorizing rather than *theory*: it is the behavior of the men [and women] called social theorists that we examine, not the products of that behavior alone” (Merton B130F6).

Merton also pointed out to the students that it is very difficult to get material on the way in which studies in sociology have actually come into being and what their authors were thinking when they were carrying out the research. But progress was being made also on this topic:

A recent book, Phillip Hammond’s *Sociologists at Work* [Hammond, 1964], represents a rare exception – an attempt to remedy this situation. It contains the biographies of twelve actual research projects. Try reading some of them, and comparing these biographies to the original work which is being described. You will find little similarity between the account given in Hammond and the account you might infer just looking at the finished piece of work described. (Merton B130F11)¹⁸

2. The Role of Conflict and Discontinuity

It was also important for the students to realize that the element of conflict is very much part of the history of sociology and the lives of sociologists, just as discontinuity. Merton referred on this point to the important way in which these topics had been handled by Thomas Kuhn and some other young scholars in their attempt to develop a new type of history of science. Historians of sociology, Merton emphasized, would do well to follow their lead.

As an example of how conflict has shaped the course of sociology, Merton mentioned Comte’s relationship to Quetelet. When Quetelet in 1835 published a book on “social physics”, Comte became extremely upset since he regarded this term to be his personal property since he had used it first (Quetelet, 1835). He therefore decided to replace it with another term: “*sociologie*”. “He wanted something that would be his distinctive trademark and we still bear the consequences of that decision” (Merton B130F6).

3. Adumbrationism

Merton especially disliked one way in which some historians of sociology dealt with their topic, and this was their insistence that every new idea in sociology was in fact not new at all; it had already been discovered by somebody else in the past, often by several

¹⁸ The accounts in Hammond’s book represent, as Merton notes, an important first step to knowing more about the ways in which sociological research is actually carried out. It can be added that Phillip E. Hammond (1931–2009) got his PhD in sociology at Columbia in 1960, and that Merton refers approvingly to the some of the chapters in his book as studies of “the Columbia micro-environment [in sociology]” (Merton, 1998b:201 n. 3, 210 n. 84; for Merton’s concept of micro-environment, see Merton, 1979:82–94; for Hammond, see e.g. Stone, 2020). Merton adds that “by the mid-sixties something of a local tradition had developed in the Columbia Department of Sociology centered on the value of such autobiographical accounts [as in Hammond]” (Merton, 1990:63, n 1). For an enumeration of the studies in this tradition, see Merton, 1996:353, n.2.

people. The statement that “nothing is new under the sun”, Merton said, fails to make clear the crucial difference that exists between developing a new idea in sociology, on the one hand, and pointing to various notions that *in hindsight* look very similar, on the other. Merton named this phenomenon adumbrationism; and he often mentioned Sorokin’s *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (1928) as a warning example of this.

4. Scientific Schools

Merton was very critical of the way in which sociological schools were typically treated in histories of sociology, more or less as a collection of individuals with similar ideas (Merton B130F4). A school, he told the students, has its own kind of social structure; and it consists of two different types of links: between people, on the one hand, and between ideas, on the other. Members can be organized in different ways, say around a master or in a more loose and decentralized manner, which is more common today. In both of these cases, however, the members typically live in the same intellectual universe and use the same discourse. Members in a school also approach the work of outsiders with a similar kind of selective attention.

3. Heuristics: The Rediscovery of Past Ideas and the Retroactive Reading of the Past

Merton told the students that studying the classics could help them to make certain types of discoveries. During their reading they might, for example, come across interesting concepts and ideas that had been forgotten or overlooked. The “full implications” of some concepts and ideas might also not have been realized (Merton B130F4). Merton sometimes referred to this form of heuristics as “rediscovery” (Merton B130F4).

Another way in which you could make discoveries with the help of the classics was the following. As time goes by, Merton pointed out, the past seems to change, or rather, those aspects of the past that are of interest to us today. He described this as a case of “*the present affecting the past*”; when you read the classics, you may see or discover something in them that was never intended by their authors (Merton B130F4, 6; emphasis added). Merton called this for “retroactive reading of the past”; and he thought that its potential for generating new ideas was great:

What I am suggesting is that this thoroughly interactive affect of current knowledge upon the re-reading of the past is one of the most striking features in the development of thought, and it is in that sense that the writings of the past, in empirical reality, take on ever changing meaning, often far beyond the meaning that could have been attributed to them by their authors. (Merton B130F6)

Merton’s Chapter on the History of Sociology in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968)

As earlier mentioned, Merton was working out the ideas for how to study the history of sociology as a distinct subarea in sociology while he was teaching the course on the

history of sociological theory. The article that resulted from this is known to most sociologists as the first chapter in the 1968 edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Merton, 1968:1–38).¹⁹ Its full title is “On the History and Systematics of Theory”; and I will refer to it as “the 1968 chapter.” This chapter is primarily of interest in the context of this article in that it shows how very different Merton treated the history of sociological theory when he lectured on this topic in Sociology 150, and when he wrote about it. 35 of its 38 pages are, for example, devoted to a discussion of what a solid, sociological study in the history of sociological theory should look like; while only the remaining three pages are devoted to why it is important to study the classics.

In the 1968 chapter, much more than in his lectures, Merton also insisted that the history of sociological theory, on the one hand, and theory, on the other, represent two very different topics; and that these must not be mixed up. In fact, it would be “fatal” to do so (Merton, 1968:2). Many of the concepts that Merton had briefly mentioned during the introductory lecture on “Why study the history of sociological theory?”, and which he viewed as belonging to the area of the history of sociological theory, he however also used as part of his lectures on the classics (such as adumbrationism, the filiation of ideas, and so on). In the 1968 article, in contrast, he did not do this.

As an example of the difference between the 1968 chapter and the lectures, one can also mention the following. In his lectures Merton had said, to recall, that it is very important to realize that studies in sociology do not say anything about the ways in which the research has actually been carried out; and that this is something you need to take into account in order to theorize well and produce good sociology. In the 1968 chapter, in contrast, this phenomenon is just mentioned in passing, and as an example of the type of unconventional data that are useful when you conduct a study in the history of sociology.

During his lectures Merton made a great effort to spell out in concrete detail what the students should look for in the classics. In the 1968 chapter, in contrast, this is not done at all. What is new and interesting with what Merton says in this chapter about the classics is something different. This is that sociologists should *reread* the classics during their careers, an advice that shows that the 1968 chapter was written for Merton’s fellow sociologists and not for his students.

If one were to sum up the relevance of the 1968 chapter for the topic of this article, it would be as follows. The chapter grew out of Merton’s lectures in the course “History of Sociological Theory”; and some of the interesting ideas that are discussed here are not only relevant for conducting a study in the history of sociology but also for getting a good grip on the classics. The fact that they are so clearly and carefully expressed in the 1968 chapter makes this text very useful also for students who wants to learn from the classics.

Before leaving the 1968 chapter for good, it should also be mentioned that 1968 was the last year Merton taught the course on classics. Why this is the case is not known. Maybe he felt that his own private agenda for teaching the course had been fulfilled, once he had finished the chapter on the history of sociology for *Social Theory and Social Structure*. What was perhaps also a sign that he had lost interest in the course is

¹⁹ The chapter, as mentioned in note 5, was initially published in 1967 in *On Theoretical Sociology* (Merton, 1967:1–37).

the way that the course was organized in 1968. Merton had only assigned half of the lectures to himself; the rest were to be taught by colleagues, such as Juan Linz (two lectures on Pareto), Theodore Caplow (two on Simmel) and Terence Hopkins (two on Weber).

But something else may also have added to Merton's decision not to teach the course again, and it was of a very different nature from the two reasons that have just been mentioned. It had to do with something that was going on in society at large, more precisely with the growing unrest on U.S. campuses during the spring of 1968. How these events collided with and interrupted the teaching of Merton's last course on the classics is told in an [Appendix](#).

Summary and Discussion

From what has been said so far in this article, it is clear that Merton had developed his own way of teaching the classics to students. The aim of his teaching was not only to familiarize the students with the content of the classics, but also to teach them how to explore the ways in which the classics went about their analysis and what happened *before* they sat down to formulate the final text. Since this was the two main ambitions of Merton, it was enough if the students studied some of the classics, in combination with selecting one of them for an extra intense study. Merton was also careful to point out to the students that they should always use the ideas of several sociologists, not just one. Their approach in relation to the classics (as elsewhere in handling theory), should be *eclectic*.

When the students worked their way through the classics, Merton said, they should especially focus on trying to figure out how the classics handled issues relating to the analytical core of every study (primarily problem-finding and problem solving). The students should also try to figure out what could help them in the classics to make discoveries of their own. These discoveries could be of two types: discoveries of forgotten ideas or concepts (*rediscoveries*) and discoveries due to the fact that they were reading the classics from the perspective of today and modern sociology (*retro-active readings of the past*).

But even if it is instructive to become acquainted with the way that Merton taught the classics, his way of teaching this topic also raises some questions that need to be discussed. For one thing, much has happened since the days when Merton taught his course (1958–1968). If you teach the classics today, attention also needs to be paid to such topics as gender, race and the Eurocentric vision (e.g. Connell, 1997; Collins, 1997; Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998; Mouzelis, 2008; Susen, 2020). The present, as Merton put it, influences the past,

One way to bring Merton's way of teaching the classics up to date in this respect would be to include some other sociologists than those that he chose to lecture on. One could, for example, replace Comte and Spencer with, say, W.E.B. Du Bois and Harriet Martineau. As with all the other sociologists, the self-images as well as the social and intellectual contexts of these two persons would have to be taken into account in a presentation of their work. One could also use some of Merton's tools to lay bare the ways in which they were

theorizing, such as looking at the way they handled the tasks of problem-finding, problem-solving, and how to locate strategic research sites.

There is also the question of how to deal with the relationship between theory and methods. It should be emphasized that while Merton was well aware of this issue, he said very little about the methods that the classics used and nothing at all about the links and overlap that exist between theory and methods. As we know, most of the classics (and not only Durkheim) used empirical material of some sort; and how they did this needs to be discussed, especially how they linked empirical material to their theories.

Methods, as we know, are also based on assumptions that to some extent qualify as theory; and also this needs to be more clearly spelled out when you teach the classics today than what Merton did in his course. When Merton in one of his books, for example, talked about the possibility of creating an “introspectometer” that would be able to record all the subjective impressions of a person (!), this idea was based on certain assumptions that need to be made explicit and briefly discussed (Merton, 1990:22–3, Lemow, 2010).

Another question that deserves to be discussed, based on our knowledge of what Merton said in his lectures in Soc 150, is if he does not draw a too sharp a line in his *writings* between theory, on the one hand, and the history of sociology, on the other. In Ch. 1 in *Social Theory and Social Structure* Merton argues that the history of sociology is a distinct specialty of its own and has no links either to modern sociological theory or to classical theory. In his *lectures*, in contrast, he proceeded in a different fashion. He here used elements from the history of sociology to illuminate classical theory in an interesting and helpful way.

The last but perhaps the most important question that Merton’s course on the classics raises is if his well-known way of conceptualizing theory in *Social Theory and Social Structure* does not need some revision. In this work, to recall, Merton famously defines theory in the following way: “[a] logically interconnected set of propositions from which empirical uniformities can be derived [and tested]” (Merton, 1968:39, 66). This, however, is a very abstract way of looking at theory, much more reflecting issues of interest to the philosophy of science than what is important to know when you conduct sociological research. In his lectures on classical theory, just as in his earlier course on theorizing (1942–1954), Merton worked with a much broader and also more practical definition of what theory is (Swedberg, 2019). This latter includes the creation and testing of hypotheses, but also covers many other activities, such as problem-finding, problem-solving, looking for strategic research sites, and more.

The broad notion of theory that Merton used in his course on the classics is perhaps also what should be used today when modern theory and classical theory are taught to students. To do so would give them a realistic view of what theory is as well as a useful one. Merton described the main gist of this broad and practical approach to theory when he said the following during one of the lectures in his course:

Theorizing rather than *theory*: it is the behavior of the men [and women] called social theorists that we examine, not the products of that behavior alone. (Merton B130F6)

Appendix. Merton's Course on the Classics and the Student Rebellion at Columbia University in 1968.

The student rebellion at Columbia University broke out in April 1968. More precisely, it began on Tuesday April 23, the very day that Terence Hopkins was scheduled to give his second lecture on Weber in Merton's class on the classics. Merton, to recall, had this year decided to farm out half of the classes to colleagues: two lectures on Pareto to Juan Linz, two on Simmel to Theodore Caplow, and two on Weber to Terence Hopkins.

During the same afternoon of April 23 several hundred students, led by members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Student Afro-American Society (SAS), occupied Hamilton Hall, a major building on the campus, and took an acting dean as their hostage. The protesters charged the university with support for the Vietnam War and violating the human rights of the Harlem residents (e.g. Stulberg, 1968; Cronin, 2018).

A few days later five buildings at Columbia University were occupied, including Fayerweather Hall where the Department of Sociology was situated. The sociology building was taken over by radical students on April 25 at 2 AM. The occupants declared the Fayerweather Commune and barricaded themselves in the building (e.g. Stulberg, 1968, Slonecker, 2008:980–84). On April 30, in the early morning hours, the Tactical Police Force of NYPD cleared out the five buildings on the campus, including Fayerweather Hall. Students and some faculty members tried to block the two entrances to the sociology building by linking arms, but were easily pushed aside by the police. During the night, about 700 people were arrested and 100 injured (n.a., 1968).

Later that day Merton was supposed to give a lecture on Durkheim in Fayerweather Hall. If this took place is not clear; and the same is true for the last two lectures, scheduled for May 7 and May 14. The final test was however administered on May 28 by Jonathan Cole (Merton B124F6). After the spring term was over, Merton would sometimes use questions in his exams, in which he asked the students to analyse the student rebellion at Columbia with the help of sociology. He, however, did not do this on May 28; maybe he felt it was better to let things cool down a bit.²⁰

The events at Columbia University during the spring of 1968 had a disturbing impact on Merton as well as on his close friend and collaborator Paul Lazarsfeld. Both had a past as leftists but could at this stage of their lives be described as left-to-liberal (e.g. Lipset, 1994:202–3). Lazarsfeld, however, was singled out by the radical students for abuse because of his work at the Bureau of Applied Social Research (e.g. Clark, 2011). According to Jonathan Cole,

²⁰ In October 1968 Merton for example included two questions on the student uprising in a test that he gave in his course on social structure. One of these read: "Discuss the conflict at Columbia last Spring in terms of the theories of legitimacy and authority found in the work of Weber and Barnard" (Merton B124F6).

During the 68 riots he [Paul Lazarsfeld] was vilified by the students. He was literally pushed down the stairs of Low Memorial Library by a group of students who claimed he was a fascist and a pig, and all the rest of that. These things really did discourage Merton. (Cole, 2021b)

Merton, who seems to have disliked confrontations and kept a low profile in political matters, joined several other sociology professors in trying to calm things down during the riot (Lipset, 1994:203, Cole, 2021b). Little, however, is known about his activities on this score. In a photo from April 29 or the day before the police stormed Fayerweather Hall, one can however see Merton in the background. The accompanying text states that “pipe-smoking Professor Robert Merton [was part of a group of professors who] sought a peaceful solution” (Columbia College Today, 1968:63). According to Jonathan Cole, “I do believe he [Merton] was on a Committee chaired by the Dean of the Law School at the time, Michael Sovern, who tried to mediate some dispute resolution. That [committee] was ultimately successful” (Cole, 2021c).

It took Columbia University, including its Department of Sociology, many years to recuperate from the effects of the student rebellion (e.g. Cole, 2021b). Student enrolment shrank and the economy of the university suffered as well. In hindsight these events also contributed to the decline of the Columbia School in Sociology. This was also true for the very special type of sociology that Merton himself had tried to launch: a type of practical, middle-range sociology that was also informed, as we now know, by a study of the classics.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no conflict of interest in this paper.

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