Remembering Robert K. Merton

Craig Calhoun

Robert K. Merton, one of the towering figures on whose shoulders contemporary sociology rests, died Sunday, February 23rd. He was 92.

Merton was born July 4th, 1910, and his extraordinary life story evokes both the universalism of science and an American trajectory appropriate to the holiday birthday. Merton's parents were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and the future RKM was born Meyer R. Schkolnick. The family lived above his father's small dairy products shop in South Philadelphia until it burned down, without insurance, and his father became a carpenter's assistant. Merton's family lacked wealth, but he insisted his childhood did not lack opportunity—and cited such institutions as a very decent public high school and the library donated by Andrew Carnegie in which he first read *Tristram Shandy*. Indeed, suggested Merton in 1994, that seemingly deprived South Philadelphia slum provided "a youngster with every sort of capital—social capital, cultural capital, human capital, and, above all, what we may call public capital—that is, with every sort of capital except the personally financial."

He remained intellectually active until the end of his life, a witty and engaged presence at conferences, energetic in using email to stay in touch with an extraordinary range of contacts, and still writing.

The name Robert King Merton evolved out of a teenage career as an amateur magician. Merton took up conjuring partly through taking his sister's boyfriend as a "role model" (to borrow a phrase literally his own). As his own skill improved, he sought a stage name, initially "Merlin." Advised that this was hackneyed, he changed it to Merton. Already devoted to tracing origins, he chose a first name after Robert Houdin, the French magician whose name Harry Houdini (himself originally Erich Weiss) had adapted. And when he won a scholarship to Temple College he was content to let the new name (with its echoes of one of the oldest and greatest colleges at each of Cambridge and Oxford) become permanent.

At Temple—a school founded for "the poor boys and girls of Philadelphia" and not yet fully accredited or matured into a university, he chanced on a wonderful undergraduate teacher. It was serendipity, the mature Merton insisted. The sociologist George E. Simpson took him on as a research assistant in a project on race and the media and introduced him not only to sociology but to Ralph Bunche and Franklin Frazier. Simpson also took Merton to the ASA annual meeting where he met Pitirim Sorokin, founding chair of the Harvard sociology department. He applied to Harvard, even though his teachers told him this was usually beyond the reach of those graduating from Temple. And when he arrived, Sorokin took him on as a research assistant. By Merton's second year they were publishing together.

In addition to Sorokin, Merton apprenticed himself to the historian of science George Sarton—not just for his stay at Harvard but for years of the epistolary exchanges Merton loved. And—serendipity again (perhaps)—Merton decided to sit in on the first theory course offered by the young Talcott Parsons, just back from Europe and working through the ideas that would become *The Structure of Social Action*. The encounter with Parsons did not just inform his knowledge of European theory, but deepened his idea of sociology itself. Still, as he wrote later, "although much impressed by Parsons as a master-builder of sociological theory, I found myself departing from his mode of theorizing (as well as his mode of exposition)." Indeed, Merton was among the clearest and most careful prose stylists in sociology. He edited each essay over and again, and left behind added footnotes and revisions both large and small to a host of his writings. It was easy to imagine that he might have been a professional editor had he not been an academic.

Indeed, it is easy to imagine the young Merton turning in any of several directions. His first articles, written as a graduate student and published in 1934-5, addressed "Recent French Sociology," "The Course of Arabian Intellectual Development, 700-1300 A.D.," "Fluctuations in the Rate of Industrial Invention," and "Science and Military Technique." They appeared in journals of sociology, the history of science, economics, and simply science. Ultimately, he wrote his first major study on *Science, Technology, and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (1938), and in the process helped to invent the sociology of science.

By the time he was 40, Merton was one of America's most influential social scientists and had embarked on a lengthy career at Columbia University. He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and honored in a host of other ways. Since he had chosen sociology, he could not win a Nobel prize, of course, but his son did.
And at 90, Merton the father would call on his son for help learning enough new mathematics to read exciting work by younger colleagues like Duncan Watts. He remained intellectually active until the end of his life, a witty and engaged presence at conferences, energetic in using email to stay in touch with an extraordinary range of contacts, and still writing.

Merton was perhaps the last of an extraordinary generation of sociologists whose work shaped the basic definition of the discipline in the mid-20th century. Along with Parsons, he helped make Emile Durkheim’s notion of functional analysis central to the field—though Merton preferred to speak of "structural-functional analysis" and tried to avoid reduction of an approach to an orthodoxy or "ism." Merton eschewed the building of grand theoretical systems in favor of what he called "middle-range theories" designed to guide empirical inquiry. He made famous the distinction of "manifest" from "latent" functions, denied that social cohesion could be assumed as “normal,” and gave analysis of social conflict more attention than did Parsons, though not enough to escape the widespread criticism of functionalism that started in the 1960s.

A crucial argument of Merton’s early work was that science is misunderstood as the product of individual geniuses able to break free from conventions and norms. Instead, he stressed the "ethos of science," the normative structure specific to the field that encouraged productivity, critical thinking, and pursuit of continually improved understanding. He was not always happy when students left the Mertonian fold in their efforts to push sociology forward, but he did always recognize that this was how science worked.

Sociology of science remained the field closest to Merton’s heart. But his contributions also deeply shaped the later development of such disparate fields of study as bureaucracy, deviance, communications, social psychology, social stratification, and indeed social structure itself. Indeed, his work was pivotal to the emergence of some of these as subfields. In the course of his simultaneously theoretical and empirical analyses, Merton coined such now-common phrases as "self-fulfilling prophecy" and "role model."

Somewhat surprisingly for a theorist, Merton was also one of the pioneers of modern policy research. He studied an integrated housing project, did a case study of the use of social research by the AT&T Corporation, and analyzed medical education. Most famously, working with his Columbia colleague Paul Lazarsfeld and a range of students and colleagues, he carried out studies of propaganda and mass communications during World War Two and wrote the classic, *Mass Persuasion* (1946).

Merton and Lazarsfeld formed an enormously productive partnership, training generations of students and developing a program of theoretically informed but empirically rigorous research. Among their most influential collaborations was *Continuities in Social Research: Studies in the Scope and Method of The American Soldier* (1950). This project, like several others, linked them to the SSRC. They also played crucial roles in the founding of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences—though not entirely synchronized in that case. Though Lazarsfeld was generally considered the methodologist of the pair, Merton also innovated in research methods, developing (with Marjorie Fiske and Patricia Kendall) the "focused group interview" that gave rise to the now-ubiquitous focus groups of political and market research. As Merton later remarked, focus groups are no replacement for surveys based on representative samples. Still, he said, he wished he could be paid a royalty fee whenever the technique was used.

Merton’s writings were not only broad ranging but extraordinarily influential. In addition to the virtues of clarity and sheer intellectual creativity, this was because they were addressed to working sociologists, providing an interpretation of the craft and tools for its improvement.
They were the ideal teaching tools for graduate students. While Merton wrote several important books, the extended essay was his chosen form and his classic book, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (originally published in 1949 and revised and expanded in 1957 and 1968), is a collection of some of his best. He worked hard to give each a precise organization, often offering a classificatory scheme to assist readers in applying his conceptualizations to different empirical phenomena. Frequently, he coined memorable phrases—as in a 1936 article entitled "the Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action."

Indeed, Merton not only coined but loved memorable phrases and the patterns of association and evocation in which they were passed on. One of his most famous books traces the phrase, "if I have seen farther it is by standing on the shoulders of giants," through centuries of use. The phrase is most commonly associated with Sir Isaac Newton, though with the widespread success of *On the Shoulders of Giants* (1965) Merton must be a very close second. What Merton showed with dazzling erudition and more than a few entertaining digressions was that the aphorism originated with Bernard of Chartres in the 12th century. This corrected not only those who cited merely Newton but those who credited the phrase to ancient authors, including apparently nonexistent ancient authors, perhaps thinking thereby to accord it greater dignity and impress readers with their Latin references (that South Philadelphia high school taught Merton four years of Latin).

Merton's book became famous enough to be known (at least among initiates) by the acronym "OTSOG." This was partly because it was so engagingly written, a scholarly detective story in the form of an epistolary novel, a compilation of associations and sometimes improbably connections that invited the allusion to Tristram Shandy in the subtitle. But it is also a serious inquiry into the phenomena of scholarly reference and citation, the development of reputations, and the place of science amid humane knowledge.

Merton continued to address the relationship between the first appearances of ideas and the occasions when they begin to have more serious influence, noting how many basic scientific advances were anticipated by "prediscoveries" that failed to change the way scientists thought. That in turn opened up the question of why this should be, whether in any specific case it was because the "prediscoverer" lacked stature, or because the context wasn't ready, because a crucial connection wasn't made, or because an empirical or practical test wasn't identified. The role of chance connections—serendipity—in scientific breakthroughs became another enduring focus for Merton's boundless curiosity and careful scholarship. Though he recently allowed a manuscript on the topic to go to press, he did not regard it as finished work. One suspects that on this as so many of his themes he had innumerable more index cards squirreled away, footnotes waiting to be added.

Of course, as Merton showed, discoveries once well known could be forgotten, leading to rediscoveries, especially by the young. Some of Merton's own work has itself been subject to partial eclipse and rediscovery, as for example the recent vogue for identifying causal "mechanisms" that can function in explanations of disparate phenomena reproduces important aspects of his notion of middle range theories.

Near the end of his life, Merton remarked on the oddity of living long enough to write contributions to the *festschriften* of so many of his students. The explanation was not mere longevity, of course, but the fact that he was extraordinarily influential as a teacher. While Merton wrote several important books, the extended essay was his chosen form and his classic book, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (originally published in 1949 and revised and expanded in 1957 and 1968), is a collection of some of his best. He worked hard to give each a precise organization, often offering a classificatory scheme to assist readers in applying his conceptualizations to different empirical phenomena. Frequently, he coined memorable phrases—as in a 1936 article entitled "the Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action."

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Robert Merton is survived by his wife and collaborator Harriett Zuckerman, by three children, nine grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren—and by thousands of sociologists whose work is shaped every day by his. ■

Craig Calhoun is president of the Social Science Research Council and professor of sociology and history at New York University.
Bob Merton was a major intellectual mentor of mine, beginning in the years I spent in graduate training at Columbia, as both a Teaching Assistant and a Research Assistant of his. My years of residence at Columbia were brief—only the 3 years from 1947 through 1950—but their intellectual and professional influence were so great that in memory they seem closer to a decade than to a mere three years. I was also privileged to be a close observer of the interactions between Merton and my second most influential mentor, Paul Lazarsfeld. Any Columbia graduate student exposed to both of these major figures in sociology in those years has internalized important lessons from them: we were left with standards of excellence in our own subsequent careers that are difficult to reach. On the other hand, in retrospect, I think some of their students have achieved a greater integration of intellectual and methodological acuity than either Bob or Paul were able to attain in their own work.

The first and foremost impression any graduate student of sociology at Columbia had of Robert Merton was the brilliance of his lectures. I took copious notes of his lectures, but it was in the quiet of Burgess Library when I added marginal comments on those notes that I was most excited by what he said as distinct from how he said it. In the library it was the exciting content that predominated as opposed to the great flair of his dramatic delivery that was so impressive. As his teaching assistant I wrote out more detailed notes and typed them up for his future use. Since his own notes were so extensive, I questioned why he wanted more notes from me. His answer provided a key to the brilliance of the lectures themselves: as he explained, the act of lecturing often triggered example after example that had not occurred to him while preparing his own notes, and he wanted a record of them. Suddenly I could remember and learn to note in the classroom the occasional pause while he looked off, and then with a rising, exciting voice, out would come a new, brilliant insight that added to the thesis he was proposing. I had a similar experience once in giving a lecture at the University of Chicago some years later, when I paused in the middle of a lecture to pursue a new idea that had hit me, and took off in a peroration sharing my insight with the audience. To my chagrin, the students laughed, which I took to be a rejection of the idea I shared with them. Only later did I learn that they were laughing in reaction to my suddenly slipping into a New Yorkese accent. Bob Merton laughed heartedly when I told him this story years later.

The most lasting influence of Bob Merton on my subsequent work was a project of ours when I served as his research assistant. He had lectured numerous times about the criteria we should keep in mind when reading a sociological study, or designing one's own. In marked contrast to an older model of sociology that kept to narrow criteria—"only social facts are needed to explain social facts"—Merton proposed four levels of analysis: cultural/historical, social structural, psychological, and physiological. I had numerous discussions with him about applying these levels of assessment to some sociological monographs, which became the subject of our project the following year.

Merton never made any systematic use of this four-levels approach in his mature work. He was surprised to learn that, in an intellectual autobiographical essay I wrote years later, I attributed to that early project of ours my own growing interest in cross-disciplinary research, and in particular the inclusion of biological factors along with social structural and psychological variables in studies of adult development. With a wry smile, he mused that perhaps he should have followed through on that early project.

Just as influential on my subsequent work has been Merton's standards of excellence in written prose. When we worked together on what became the essay on reference group behavior that we published in 1950, he convinced me for all time that nothing short of five or six drafts of a manuscript is likely to yield a polished product.
Robert Merton had magic. He could turn a New York City taxi into a seminar room. To share a ride with Merton was to watch sociological discoveries in the making. He would never allow the cabby simply to drive. Instead, he engaged in conversation that always avoided condescension while managing to extract some aperçu that illustrated perfectly this or that pattern of social life. Merton never missed a pedagogic opportunity, and as his student and assistant during the mid-1970s, I had plenty of them. After he paid the fare and we hit the sidewalk, Merton would get my attention with his eye and smile: "Did you see, Tom...." just in case I had missed the point. I cannot now remember the substantive details of those little lessons, but the bigger lesson is with me still: ordinary social life is patterned, it is describable and interpretable with good sociological concepts, theories can be confirmed by ordinary folks even on the fly.

Thus began for me, as undoubtedly for many others, a personal encounter between student and teacher that later developed into a sustained transatlantic friendship. What had impressed me in the first encounter was the insatiable curiosity and the ambition to know which supported and was supported by it. Curiosity led him into many different directions, while being guided by the right kind of ambition: to find the strategic problem site and the strategic problem definition. Together, they would open up new avenues for exploration with enduring impact. In today's world which is literally "out of joint," a broad vision is once more needed for the social sciences. RKM set a lasting example. It is for us to choose the next generation of problem definitions and strategic research sites.

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We have lost a master teacher, whose lessons go far beyond structural-functional analysis or the normative structure of science or self-fulfilling prophecies or sociological ambivalence or role-sets or... Merton leaves behind instructions for how (and why) to be a social scientist, not just how to do it. He epitomized the role of the scholar scientist, and by his example gave substance and purpose to the sociological calling. Merton demands so much of us, because he demanded so much of himself—perfection, and nothing less. When galley proofs arrived at Fayerweather 415, Merton would challenge me to find more typos than he could find. Funny, he always won this game (and I rationalized those consistent defeats
by suspecting that Merton counted not just corrected spellings and such but also stylistic rewritings that only he as author could make). He could find a typo in any book within five minutes, except in his own.

Merton in lecture was jazz, but not quite free-form. The lesson? Why, plainly: read everything (of course), and remember it well enough that you never need to fake it.

Merton in lecture was jazz, but not quite free-form. For three decades or more, he asked his assistant to take notes during the graduate course on social structures, and then type up the notes for later reference (and posterity). At the start of each lecture, Merton would go to the extreme upper-left corner of the board (which he could easily reach), and put up an outline that didn't seem to change much from week to week: "1. Unit-act. 2. Actor. 3. Conditions...." (lessons learned from his own teacher, Parsons). I also sensed that the outline did not change much from semester to semester, which made me wonder why it was so vital for me to take notes that surely did not vary much from those taken by decades of predecessors. But of course, that was wrong. The outline may have been a fixture, but the material covered on any day seemed like sheer sociological improvisation. Or so it appeared to the neophyte. Since Merton left little in life to chance, perhaps I confused spontaneity for disciplined imagination (he spent hours in the office before each class, crafting). The lesson here was not about status-sets and role-sets, but about the classroom as an occasion for creative intellectual activity, for working through new ideas that some day might be fit for print. Don't forget that.

The classroom is also a risk, where the lecturer is always vulnerable (even, or maybe especially, for one of Merton's stature). Some of his best riffs were in response to questions that were animated by a student's desire to trip him up or perhaps expose a bit of ignorance (i.e., score a point). I remember one question in particular about Merleau-Ponty (who had little or no relevance to the lecture that day), and as Merton took what seemed to be a very long time to compose a response, I began to sweat empathetically. Not to worry: for at least the next half-hour, Merton served up a primer on Merleau-Ponty and his significance for sociological thought, and I still keep my notes for that lecture just in case one of my own students puts me to the test. The lesson? Why, plainly: read everything (of course), and remember it well enough that you never need to fake it.

By 1975 or so, the seminar on sociology of science became increasingly interesting, as the field began to try on fashions that were not cut from Mertonian cloth. A manuscript arrived one day bearing a strange title, "The Sociology of a Brain Peptide," written by a French scholar then unknown (but now with a considerable following). Merton asked me to look it over, and I reported back with complete bewilderment. He flipped through it himself, paused here and there, scowled, then tossed it in the trash:

" Pretentious mush." Well, one must read everything—but not all of it will be worth sustained attention. The scholarly life insists upon tough judgments of quality, and not every thought or book meets the very highest standards that Merton set for us. At times, the science seminar came close to humiliation in the name of education. Once, a draft paper of mine, having been bloodied all over by Merton's red pen (it never ran dry, did it?), was made into an object lesson so that my fellow students could avoid its many flaws and infelicities. But it wasn't personal: "elegant variation" and "freight-train adjectives" were such common specimens of bad writing that they could be found in Fowler's Modern English Usage (which Merton may have consulted as often as Durkheim). The lesson: your penultimate draft probably isn't there yet.

Even Merton's scholarly writings are didactic, not as textbooks, but because they put on display the recursive processes of reading, thinking, analyzing data and writing. The now-normative style of citations was not well suited to what he wanted to accomplish with the anything-but-lowly footnote. In his book on the role of religion in stimulating seventeenth-century English science (lesson: do not settle for trivial problems, even in a dissertation), Merton uses a footnote to explain how his exploration of the salutary connections between Puritanism and early modern science was inspired by yet another footnote, in Max Weber's magisterial Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (quoted in the German original). Imagine: two mere footnotes yielding perhaps the most enduring and debated theory in the history of science, eponymized as "the Merton Thesis."

Years later, and not that long ago, Merton did more magic—this time, for my young sons, with sleight of hand. The lesson I saw was not just prestidigitation: things are not what they seem! Social life is not chaotic, classroom teaching is not an interruption of creative thought, old books are not dust-collectors, good writing does not come easily, critical intellectual judgments may not be avoided, a passion for perfection is not perverse. Social scientists in this post-Mertonian world no longer argue over manifest and latent functions, or theories of the middle range. The man's bigger lessons, I hope, we never forget.

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Of My Master-at-a-Distance Turned Friend

Piotr Sztompka

Blaise Pascal once wrote that the birth of a great person is a most significant, though totally random event that may occur in the history of a society. One may paraphrase this by saying that to meet a great person is the most fortunate chance that may occur in an individual biography.

My chance came at the beginning of my academic career. After completing a Fulbright scholarship at the University of California, Berkeley, I published my first English-language book in 1974. In System and Function, I defended the functionalist approach against the then-current onslaught of radical, leftist criticism. Coming from a young Polish scholar, from behind the Iron Curtain, such ideas caused some heads to turn. One of these was Robert K. Merton's. Some time later, upon returning to Poland, I received a letter relaying his interest in my ideas, as well as his wondrous offer of a series of summer school appointments at Columbia University in order to bring me to New York so that we could discuss my work.

One hot and humid summer day, I appeared at Fayerweather Hall at a small departmental reception and was introduced to a tall, handsome, slightly gray-haired gentleman in a tweed jacket and an ascot instead of the de rigeur tie. He was the center of attention, surrounded by most of the company present, and yet he was at once friendly and open, easygoing and helpful.

Following that first one came numerous subsequent meetings at his Riverside Drive apartment overflowing with books and manuscripts, with all manner of papers on the floor and a gallery of pictures on the walls. The portraits represented the great scholars—of sociology but also of the hard sciences—with whom he collaborated and corresponded.

Shortly thereafter, in typical American fashion, he began to address me on a first name basis, as "Piotr," and requested likewise. My traditional Polish upbringing, however, did not permit me the outrageous familiarity of "Bob" as most of his friends called him. The most I could force myself to utter was "Robert." He graciously accepted my reservations and this remained our own special secret until the end of his days. He always remembered who he was to me: all the correspondence that I received closed with an affectionately signed "Robert."

Over the years, Merton became perhaps the most significant influence on my life—intellectually as well as personally. He was a true "role model," as he might put it in his theory. I learned from him not only a wealth of ideas, but, most importantly, the manner and style of doing sociology—truly classic, analytical, precise, balanced, avoiding dogmatism and extremes. Short of becoming a latter day Joseph Conrad, I could not even dream of emulating his mastery of the English language, but a souvenir he handed me one day—the Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage—bears an encouraging handwritten inscription: "For Piotr, to help him on his way to become a stylist in the English language." I have been trying ever since. I have also attempted to acquire his perspective on moral, political, and human issues which he always generously shared—showing true concern, too, for quite private and personal problems such as living under martial law in 1981, or tending for my nonagenarian mother over the past decade.

My chances to reciprocate have come twice. The first was given me when Anthony Giddens requested that I author an intellectual biography of Merton for the series entitled "Theoretical traditions in the social sciences." This offer came in the gloomy winter of 1981 when, once more, Polish dreams of freedom and democracy had been dashed by the communist regime's crushing of the "Solidarnosc" movement. The opportunity to escape from the sad realities of the day into the realm of pure ideas was more than welcome. At that time we called such work an "internal exile." The task naturally mandated reading, at last, all that Merton had ever written, as well as everything that had been written about him. A sizable library it was indeed. This was the most instructive course in social theory that I had ever taken. When the book appeared in 1986 Merton was clearly pleased, purchasing thirty copies for his friends. Furthermore, he noticed that the logical connections I had discovered amongst his works unveiled a coherent theoretical system, rather than merely a brilliant mosaic as earlier commentators had tended to view it. "You plainly understand what I have been up to over the years, and in places more profoundly so than I did at the time of writing—and sometimes since," he penned in one of his letters.

The second opportunity came some years later when my master-at-a-distance was receiving his twenty-second in an amazing row of honorary doctoral degrees—this
It has been my great privilege and good fortune to have known Bob Merton for 52 years:

As a graduate student (Columbia, sociology).
As a neighbor (Hastings-on-Hudson, New York).
As a colleague (Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia).
As a correspondent (certainly his letters rival those of Charles Darwin!).
As a co-author (of an article on the Kelvin Dictum among others).
As a co-editor (of Social Science Quotations).
As a friend (who can put all that means in parentheses?).

Each of these relationships could be described at article length—one might even say book length—but since the space allotted to me is limited, I will focus here upon only one: our co-editorship of Social Science Quotations.

My goal is to describe important aspects of the unique Merton work style and erudition by recalling his participation in this joint editorial project.

Getting started

Why I made the wild decision in 1986 to edit a book of social science quotations is a little unclear now, 17 years later, but a major determinant was probably a co-authored article on the so-called Kelvin Dictum, published two years earlier. The first two sentences of the article, which were undoubtedly written by Bob, are the following:

The power of simple phrases, aphorisms, slogans, dicta—their ability to summarize, epitomize, exemplify, or even create complex programs of research or action—has long been recognized in politics. That they may play a similar role in the social sciences is also coming to be known.

But another—more remote in time—origin of Social Science Quotations is Bob's having published 20 years earlier an entire book on the origin and fate of one famous quotation, Isaac Newton's remark that "If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.

With these publications as background, the next event in this saga was a telephone call that I made to Bob announcing my intention to raise funds for preparing a volume of social science quotations and asking him if he would serve as chairman of an editorial advisory board—the highest ranking position I could dream up. He hesitated during this call, as well as during the next few calls. It finally dawned on me that he didn't want a ceremonial assignment but a working one. Accordingly, I asked him to be co-editor, he shouted his immediate acceptance over the telephone, and four years of hard and exciting work began.
What to name the baby?

Bob and I had often discussed Bartlett's Familiar Quotations in our conversations over the years and my files revealed that we soon called our projected volume Bartlett's II. But as soon as we settled on its official name—Social Science Quotations—"SSQ" became its in-house code name.

The subtitle—Who Said What, When, and Where—was created because we decided very early that—in contrast to the practice of the editors of most books of quotations, including Bartlett's—we would describe the author of each quotation by nationality, dates, and occupation or profession. The date, source, and page of each quotation would be in the text, while the end-of-the-book Bibliography would give the full documentation. This meticulous documentation cost us a lot of editorial and xeroxing time, but we were never sorry that we did it.

Quotations by non-social scientists

One important feature of Social Science Quotations that Bob insisted on is that it include quotations on society and the social sciences drawn from the writings of other than social scientists—providing only that each quotation contained what might be called a social science proposition. Examples of such authors include poets (Auden on Freud: "To us he is no more a person now but a whole climate of opinion"); novelists (Tolstoy in Anna Karenina: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"); dramatists (Shakespeare in As You Like It: "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players"); philosophers (Wittgenstein's "The world is all that is the case"); political figures (Bismarck's "Politics is the art of the possible"); revolutionaries (Lenin's "Politics begin where the masses are, not where there are thousands, but where there are millions, that is where serious politics begin"); and physicists (Einstein's "The Lord is subtle, but he is not malicious").

A sample RKM memorandum

Preparing this article required my examining my SSQ files, a necessary, sometimes painful, and yet joyous experience. Each letter, each memorandum, and each one of Bob's annotations on my memoranda was a warm bath in nostalgia. On July 26, 1989, for example, Bob sent me one of his many memoranda, which were often keyed to xeroxed copies of quotations. (This 1989 memorandum states that it is being sent from "East Hampton, Shangri-La." Bob presumably had also remembered that when President Roosevelt was asked at a press conference to reveal from where the bombers used during General Doolittle's famous April 1942 air raid of Tokyo were launched, he replied, with his famous grin, "Shangri-La").

This 1989 memorandum has 27 numbered paragraphs; I can include only 10 of them here. The quotations underlying his queries are not given, even if they were located (many were not); the point of this display is to illustrate the range of his inquiries. (I will follow his frequent practice of putting personal names in solid capital letters.)

Selections from a 1989 RKM memorandum

1. Who initiated the now-current phrase "rising expectations"? [It turned out to be TOCQUEVILLE.]
2. We should definitely include a quotation from KIERKEGAARD on concepts generally and perhaps the extended quotation on the concept of irony in particular.
3. We must include SIMMEL on the Caesar aphorism.
4. Have we done a search thru ISAIAH BERLIN, another eminently quotable & not merely eminent scholar?
5. We must include the OTTO NEURATH metaphor of rebuilding a ship on the open sea.
6. The CICERO source on the quotation for the comparison group for the survivors of shipwrecks which he attributes to DIAGORAS: I'll want to check this with the DIAGORAS LAERTIUS version which I used in my very first published paper, "Recent French Sociology" (1934).
7. Must include WITTGENSTEIN on The Golden Bough.
8. Let's include this AUDEN jingle on MARX.
9. Here's a must from EDWARD GIBBON.
10. "Methodological individualism" is understandably attributed to KARL POPPER, since he elucidated it at great length.

Et cetera, et cetera!

Attached to this 27-paragraph memorandum was a clipping from the New York Times, reminding its readers that Karl Marx had once said that "the world will remember my boils." Bob had over-written in red ink this mock-serious comment: "A must of course!

Echoes of quotations

I suspect it was Bob who invented the concept of quotation echoes: defined as subsequent uses of quotations, either deliberate or unintentional, acknowledged or unacknowledged. Some quotations become cultural heirlooms, passed from generation to generation. Here are some examples of echoes that we largely discovered accidentally in our search for appropriate quotations. We examined many more quotations than we could possibly
use, and if one of us hit upon an echo, it was cause for an immediate phone call.

**Quotation:** "The historian's one task is to tell the thing as it happened" (Lucian, 2nd century).

**Echos:** (1) "This [history] wants only to show what actually happened [wie es eigentlich gewesen]" (Leopold von Ranke 1824). (2) "[The historian] may search for, but he cannot find, the 'objective truth' of history, or write it 'as it actually was'" (Charles A. Beard 1935).

**Quotation:** "Politics is fate" (Napoleon 1808).

**Echos:** (1) "One might say here, varying a well-known saying of the great Napoleon: 'Anatomy is destiny'" (Freud 1912). (2) "Am I saying . . . that 'anatomy is destiny'? Yes" (Erik H. Erikson 1968).

**Quotation:** "One need not be a Caesar truly to understand Caesar" (Georg Simmel 1905).

**Echos:** "As is often said, "one need not be Caesar to understand Caesar" (Max Weber 1913). (2) "I can understand the acts and motives of Caesar as well as of the cave-man" (Alfred Schutz 1942).

**Quotation:** "Politics are a smooth file, which cuts gradually" (Montesquieu 1748).

**Echo:** "Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards" (Max Weber 1919).

**Quotation:** "The survival of the fittest ... is that which Mr. Darwin has called 'natural selection'" (Herbert Spencer 1864-1867).

**Echos:** (1) "The expression often used by Mr. Herbert Spencer of the Survival of the Fittest is more accurate" (Darwin [1859] 1869). (2) "The Principle of the Survival of the Fittest could be regarded as one vast generalisation of the Ricardian economics" (Keynes 1926).

Bob himself frequently created in the course of his publishing lifetime many concepts that had a specific reference at the time they were created but are now found as echoes in both social science publications and everyday speech. One finds such phrases as "self-fulfilling prophecy," "role model" and "unintended consequences" used as frequently in op-ed columns in the *New York Times* and on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* as in the halls of academia. In these halls, such Merton concepts as "manifest and latent functions" and "theories of the middle range" still on occasion find their way into discussions of contemporary issues.

"Obliteration [of source] by incorporation" (the process by which the words and ideas of an accomplished scholar are incorporated into the vocabulary of science without reference to him or her) is perhaps the perfect Mertonian concept: it describes a process throughout science that is simultaneously happening to many of his own phrases.

Titles also have echoes. The "theorist" Bob Merton and the "methodologist" Paul Lazarsfeld were colleagues at Columbia for 35 years; this unbroken and fruitful collaboration for such a long time is almost unmatched in the history of science. In 1975, Lazarsfeld published an article titled "Working with Merton." In 1998, Bob published an article that echoed that title: "Working with Lazarsfeld." I have provided a second echo by naming this article "Editing with Merton."

For the remainder of my life I will miss the joy of seeing and talking to Bob, including our frequent exchanges of discoveries of quotations and their echoes—a practice started in 1986 and continued until his death. My gratitude to him can never be fully expressed. Here I can only echo Hamlet’s friend Horatio, who said to his dying friend,"Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

**Here I can only echo Hamlet’s friend Horatio, who said to his dying friend, "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."**

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David L. Sills, a sociologist, was an Executive Associate at the Council from 1973 until his retirement in December 1988. Among his other responsibilities during these 16 years, he served as editor of *Items*.

**Endnotes**


- "The Kelvin Dictum was proclaimed by the British physicist Lord Kelvin in 1883; it has since become a popular motto for those natural and social scientists who believe that quantification is essential in order to establish proof. In Kelvin’s words, "when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge of is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind." See Robert K. Merton, David L. Sills, and Stephen M. Stigler, "The Kelvin Dictum and Social Science: An Excursion into the History of an Idea," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 20, October 1984, page 319.

