

# Concepts and the Social Order

Robert K. Merton and the Future of Sociology

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## Repetition with Variation: A Mertonian Inquiry into a Lost Mertonian Concept <sup>1</sup>

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Throughout the chapters of this volume, my fellow contributors examine a range of concepts that originate in the work of Robert Merton and continue to circulate in contemporary sociological theory and research, but which have long-since grown detached from Merton's own name, in a clear instance of the intellectual process that Merton himself referred to as "obliteration by incorporation." In this chapter, I too am concerned with a valuable Mertonian concept, albeit *not* one that presently commands any currency in sociology or any place in the growing scholarship on Merton's work. This is the concept of "repetition with variation."

Mention of this concept is unlikely to strike a responsive chord among sociologists, even those closely familiar with the Mertonian oeuvre. A search of ten leading sociological journals—*Acta Sociologica*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *American Sociological Review*, the *Annual Review of Sociology*, the *British Journal of Sociology*, *Contemporary Sociology*, the *European Sociological Review*, *Social Forces*, *Sociological Theory*, and *Theory and Society*—reveals, for example, not a single reference *ever* to "repetition with variation." Likewise in the scholarly literature on Merton's writings, the concept is entirely absent from the monographs and edited volumes that deal with Mertonian ideas and their development (see Crothers 1987; Clark et al. 1990; Coser 1975; Mongardini and Tabboni 1998; Sztompka 1986, 1996).

In the spirit of Merton's remark that "the resurrection of a term fallen into disuse is an integral part of the development" of the social

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank my fellow participants in the Budapest seminar for their remarks on an earlier version of this chapter and especially to acknowledge Harriet Zuckerman for her very helpful advice (both at the seminar and subsequently by email). I also thank Carey Seal for answering a query about the field of classics.

sciences (Merton and Barber 2004, 67), one purpose of this chapter is to bring to light the place of the concept of “repetition with variation” in Robert Merton’s work. In pursuing this purpose, however, I have a second objective in view as well. This is to apply to the example of “repetition with variation” the distinctively *Mertonian style* of conceptual analysis that Merton advocated in the ambitious program for “sociological semantics” that he pioneered in a series of little-discussed writings that began appearing in the mid-1960s with *On the Shoulders of Giants* (Merton 1965) and became more pronounced during the last decade of his life (Merton 1995, 1995b, 1997, 2004; see also Merton and Barber 2004; Merton, Sills, and Stigler 1984; Sills and Merton 1990, 1992a, 1992b).

As Zuckerman (2010) has outlined this novel program and has delineated its tenets, Merton’s sociological semantics centers sociological inquiry on “words, phrases, aphorisms, slogans and other linguistic forms,” and it then undertakes to study the linguistic terms in question from two sides: first, by examining the focal term’s *social origins*, identifying which social groups used the term, along with when, where, and how they did so; and second, by charting the term’s *paths of diffusion*, i.e., its reception and subsequent evolution, changing meanings, dissemination or disappearance (Zuckerman 2010, 1, 6; also Camic 2010). Merton’s preferred manner of addressing these questions was by means of what he described as *historical case studies* of “culturally strategic words” and other expressions (Merton 1977, 77; 1982, 263, 1995, 4; 1997, 225).

Taking these late Merton writings as my template, this chapter is a small effort to advance the research program of sociological semantics by an abbreviated historical case study of Merton’s own concept of “repetition with variation.” I divide my analysis into four parts. In Part 1, I introduce the concept of “repetition with variation” as it appears in Merton’s early work. In Part 2, I back up chronologically to discuss some of the earlier sources, or originating contexts, that informed Merton’s use of the concept. In Part 3, I move forward in time briefly to examine the subsequent diffusion of “repetition with variation” and the place of the concept in the literature of sociology and the social sciences and humanities more broadly. In Part 4, I speculate on the reasons for this pattern of diffusion and, in so doing, return to the cor-

pus of Merton’s work to consider the traces therein of the idea of repetition with variation.<sup>2</sup>

In organizing the chapter in this way, I would acknowledge that I am departing from the Mertonian semantic program with respect to manner of presentation. When Merton reported the results of his own semantic case studies, his tendency was to adopt the chronologically fractured, “non-linear, advancing-by-doubling-back Shandean Method of composition” (Merton 1985, xix), which 18th-century British author Laurence Sterne famously used in *Tristram Shandy*, the nine-volume comic novel that Merton greatly admired. Entirely natural for writers in the league of Sterne and Merton, however, the Shandean Method was simply beyond the literary reach of the present author.

## 1

The concept of “repetition with variation” is one that Merton introduces, elucidates, and applies in his much-neglected 1946 book, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive*. This short monograph is an empirical study of a one-day event that occurred in the United States during the course of World War II. Merton describes the event as follows:

September 21, 1943 was War Bond Day for the Columbia Broadcast System. During a span of eighteen hours—from eight o’clock that morning until two the next morning—a radio star named Kate Smith spoke for a minute or two at repeated intervals [...]. On sixty-five distinct occasions in the course of the day, she begged, cajoled, demanded that her listeners buy [U.S.] war bonds. Within the narrow borders of her brief messages, Smith managed to touch a variety of themes enshrined in American culture. She talked of neighbor boys from American towns and villages, now facing danger and death in other lands [...]. She told dramatic tales of generosity and sacrifice by soldier and civilian alike [...]. She invoked themes of love and hate, of large hopes and desperate fears, or honor and shame. Apparently, there was nothing here of a cut-and-dry radio script. This was presented as a personal message, iterated and reiterated, [and] by the end of [the day Smith broke all] previous bond-selling records, [amassing] thirty-nine million dollars of bond pledges (1946, 2–3).

<sup>2</sup> In this paragraph, as throughout the chapter, I place quotation marks around “repetition with variation” when my principal focus is the concept, and I omit the quotations when referring primarily either to the idea or the process itself.

Most immediately, the purpose of Merton's book is to explain the success of Smith's bond drive, conceptualized as "an extraordinary instance of mass persuasion" (1946, 3); and in constructing his analysis Merton characteristically eschews single-cause explanations and takes account of a wide range of factors. These factors include not only "the manifest content of [Smith's] radio appeals," but "a larger configuration in which the audience's images of Smith, the class structure of our society, the cultural standards of distinct strata of the population, and socially induced expectations, feelings, tensions were all intricately involved" (1946, 9).

At the outset of his account, however, Merton pauses to draw particular attention to what he sees as the distinctive and highly consequential "temporal pattern" of Smith's marathon (1946, 21-43). "Hearing Smith ten times in an evening does not produce a [...] response which is merely ten distinct reactions to a single program. On the contrary, it constitutes a new and different type of experience [...]. The repeated pleas merge into a cumulative whole, [which differs] from an aggregate of separate stimuli" (1946, 21). Having set the matter in this light, Merton quickly perceives that he has broached a sociological problem of far more general significance than the success of Smith's bond drive. He phrases this larger problem incisively: "*why does a stimulus applied successive times have an effect the  $n$ th time which it did not have the first?*" (1946, 34 [emphasis added]). In posing this question, Merton comments on the tendency of social scientists of his time<sup>3</sup> either simply to overlook the problem or to suffice with tired "analogies [such] as that of the drip of water wearing away a stone," despite the failure of these notions to illuminate the complex social-psychological processes involved not only in episodes of mass audience persuasion (1946, 34), but, by extension, in the larger family of social situations where, after the " $n$ th time," social actors uphold beliefs or engage in forms of conduct which they did not adopt after their first encounter with those same beliefs or recommended actions.

According to Merton, one line of thought would attribute this fundamental difference between the first and the  $n$ th times to the impact of repetition *per se*. Merton associates this viewpoint with some highly suspect sources: "Hitler is authority [...] for the observation that

<sup>3</sup> Merton's observation would apply to sociologists 60 years later as well.

even a great lie will be believed if it is asserted often enough; experienced advertisers do not expect results from a slogan until it has been frequently repeated; the child seems aware that his mother who says 'No' at first may relent if he teases long enough" (1946, 34). What dictators, advertisers, and persistent children do not grasp, however, is "that simple repetition is not always effective" (1946, 34). To the contrary, repetition can be counterproductive in terms of inducing new opinions and actions, as Merton elaborates:

It is widely recognized that simple repetition is not always effective. Very often it induces boredom, surfeit or active irritation, or at least a kind of defensive isolation. Thus people who live with the constant ticking of a noisy clock, the crowing of roosters, the rumble of a noisy furnace, or even the roar of passing trains, become so accommodated to these sounds that they pay no attention to them. What develops in such instances is a repeated pattern of ignoring the stimulus, and this pattern can be observed in the reaction of some radio listeners to the flow of routine appeals to buy bonds. The multiplication of spot announcements, instead of stimulating purchases, may lead to satiety and "radio deafness" (1946, 34-35).

That Smith's bond drive avoided these negative outcomes was the result, Merton insists, of the particular circumstance that her "*marathon did not consist of simple repetitions*, [but rather] utilized the classic formula of diversity within unity," so that each of her 65 successive appeals "contained a new instance, a new perspective, or struck a new note" on the need for listeners to buy war bonds (1946, 36 [emphasis in original]).

Hastening from this empirical observation to an identification of the general process that it reveals, Merton immediately brings to the fore the concept "repetition with variation," which he sees the Smith marathon as illustrating. In his words: "*Repetition with variation of appeals proved an important element in the process of persuasion. Smith's broadcasts aimed at one and the same goal, but each was unique. The effect, therefore, was not one of mere reiteration*" (1946, 36 [emphasis in original]).

Expanding the point, Merton characterizes "flexible repetition" as the mechanism that "enhanced the likelihood of persuasion" in this historical instance (1946, 37), conceptualizing the process of repetition with variation as exactly specifying the condition under which—and thus answering his question as to why—social stimuli succeed in

shaping actors' opinions and actions after the "nth time." In Merton's succinct formulation: it is the temporal "cumulation of diverse appeals [that proves] decisive" (1946, 37).

## 2

Among the lessons of Merton's late writings on sociological semantics is the finding that concepts rarely bolt from the blue. Almost invariably, they enfold complex intellectual histories that are simultaneously social histories—histories of their emergence and varied patterns of usage within different social groups. Unsurprisingly, the same proves to be the case in regard to "repetition with variation," with the proviso that the particular social groups involved in this concept's history consist mainly of specialized communities of intellectuals, inside and outside the academy. Long before Merton took the concept up sociologically in *Mass Persuasion*, "repetition with variation" had a rich history beyond sociology, and a full account of that history could easily expand to monograph length. For the specific purpose of understanding Merton's own distinctive use of the concept, however, a more selective analysis may serve to identify a few of the more immediate and salient socio-intellectual contexts in which "repetition with variation"—and kindred notions—circulated in the period prior to Merton's book.

It is beyond Merton's task in *Mass Persuasion* to furnish this contextualization himself, although he is careful, within the text, to disclaim that he himself is inventing the concept of "repetition with variation." This he does by referencing British experimental psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett's respected 1940 treatise *Political Propaganda* and quoting Bartlett's statement that "it is not sheer repetition that is influential [among propaganda methods], but repetition with variations" (1940, 69, as cited by Merton 1946, 36, n. 10)—one of several observations to the same effect that Bartlett offered in the course of singling out "repetition with well-considered variations" as a hallmark of democratic (versus Nazi) propaganda (1940, 70). Typically with Merton, however, any one reference turns out to be only a very small sampler from wider discourses with which he was familiar, and so it is in this instance as well. Indeed, behind Bartlett's book, lay at least four pertinent, broader socio-intellectual contexts with which Merton

had become well-acquainted by the time he used "repetition with variation" in *Mass Persuasion*.

The first of these contexts was local and closely connected to the backstory of how Merton came to be involved in a study of Kate Smith's war bond drive within a few years of joining the sociology faculty of Columbia University in the fall of 1941.<sup>4</sup> This backstory has been uncovered by Simonson (2004), who has called attention to Merton's association with Paul Lazarsfeld and participation in some of the research projects that Lazarsfeld and his associates were conducting at Columbia's Office of Radio Research (of which Merton became Associate Director in 1942). These projects included commercial research on the impact on audiences of different kinds of radio programming and marketing campaigns, as well as several War World II-related "propaganda studies" for the U.S. Office of War Information—the study of Smith's radio marathon falling among the later (Simonson 2004, xix).

During these years, a recurring theme of Lazarsfeld's studies was the question of why radio and other forms of mass communication produce the audience effects that they have, and in addressing this issue Lazarsfeld was wont to observe the role of repetition:

A [...] characteristic of radio is that it continues in time. This means that a series of programs may become part of the daily or weekly habit patterns of the listeners, that cumulative effects can be build up over long or short periods. But it also means that it is liable to surfeit. It may be true that "if you hear a thing often enough you will come to believe it," but probably it is equally true that if you hear a thing too much you may not pay any attention to it at all after a time. Just *where repetition ceases to be effective, just where saturation points are reached, is still a problem which has to be faced anew* for each kind of program or message. (Fiske and Lazarsfeld 1945, 57 [emphasis added])

The "problem" that Lazarsfeld flags here is precisely the one Merton takes up the following year in *Mass Persuasion* and, pushing much further, therein proceeds actually to solve—and to solve not by appeal to the incidental particulars of "each kind of program message," but in a more comprehensive manner with his general distinction between

<sup>4</sup> In starting with the local, I follow the example of Merton's writings on sociological semantics about the significance of "socio-cognitive *micro*-environments" for men and women of ideas (see Merton 1977, 1995, 2004).

“simple repetition,” which results in “surfeit,” and “repetition with variation,” which produces message effectiveness.

This was a distinction that Lazarsfeld himself had evidently not grasped as of 1945. This was so although a more narrowly-couched and clumsy version of the distinction had appeared just a few years earlier in a book that Lazarsfeld edited (with Frank Stanton of CBS) on radio research. In one of the chapters of the book, one of Lazarsfeld’s assistants at the Office of Radio Research—the future luminary T. W. Adorno, as it happened—explored the requirements for effective radio symphonies. As he did so, Adorno—tapping into long traditions of commentary on “theme and variations” in musical composition—wrote of the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony:

Throughout the movement [there] remains clearly recognizable [...] the same motif; its rhythm is vigorously maintained. Yet there is no mere repetition, but development: the melodic content of the basic rhythm, that is to say the intervals which constitute it, change perpetually [...]. It is this unity within the manifold as well as this manifoldness within that unity which constitute the antiphonic work [...]. Only if the motif can develop from the restrained pianissimo to the striking yet affirming fortissimo, is it actually revealed as the “cell” which represents the whole, [and] only within the tension of such a gradation does its repetition become more than repetition. (Adorno 1941, 121–23)

Whether Merton was directly familiar with this particular thread in Adorno’s analysis, he was certainly aware that repetition and its vicissitudes were subjects of active discussion at the Columbia’s Office of Radio Research, and he proved equally alert to a second relevant intellectual context as well. This was the extensive contemporary social-psychological literature on the interrelated topics of persuasion, suggestion, propaganda, mass communication, public opinion, and advertising.<sup>5</sup> The writings of Lazarsfeld and his associates actually formed part of this fast-growing literature, as did the work of two other prominent authorities in the local intellectual environment, Columbia psychologist Albert Poffenberger and Barnard psychologist Harry Hollingworth. Poffenberger’s major text, *Psychology of Advertising*, for example, discussed at length the “cumulative effect of repetition” and

<sup>5</sup> This literature overlapped with the contemporary literature on the psychology of aesthetics, where “repetition with variation” also featured prominently (see, esp., Chandler 1934).

the special effectiveness of “repetition with variation” (1932, 220–21), while Hollingworth’s *Psychology of Audience* marshaled experimental evidence that “repetition of advertising appeals is twice as effective when the forms, style, and expression is varied” (1935, 144).

By no means, however, were these works—or this idea—unique to the Columbia milieu, and Merton’s close familiarity with this current in the contemporary literature of social psychology actually antedated his arrival at Columbia by a decade. As Simonson (2010) has shown, Merton took an intensive course on the social psychology of public opinion and propaganda when he was an undergraduate at Temple College in 1931; continued this interest while in graduate school at Harvard during the 1930s and a member of the “Parsons Sociological Group,” which dealt explicitly with the topics of persuasion and propaganda; and taught a social psychology course on these same subjects himself at Tulane in 1940. This encounter occurred in a period when major names in this social psychological literature included, on the American side, William James, Boris Sidis, Henry Foster Adams, and Charles Bird and, on the European side, Gustav LeBon, Gabriel Tarde, and Sigmund Freud; and throughout the writings of these figures, statements like the following were extremely commonplace:

Repetition of suggestions facilitates their consideration and acceptance. The early work of Sidis yields experimental substantiation, while emphasizing the caution that *repetition with variation of form is most effective* if the suggestion does not appear obtrusively [...]. Speakers who repeat their suggestions frequently and with variety are merely utilizing a well-known principle of learning. It is essential to integrate suggestions into as many attitudinal molds as possible, particularly when individuals are being prepared for delayed response. (Bird 1940, 279 [emphasis added])

Tellingly, the source that Merton expressly acknowledges in *Mass Persuasion* when he introduces “repetition with variation”—Bartlett’s *Political Propaganda* (1940)—was a late representative of this tradition in social psychology.<sup>6</sup>

If this tradition was a substantial one, the third context to which Merton was oriented was still more expansive. This was the literature of the Western humanist tradition, including ancient and early modern

<sup>6</sup> This is a tradition that Merton was still occupied with years later in his “Introduction” to LeBon’s *The Crowd* (Merton 1960).

texts on rhetoric as well as works of English fiction. This is not a literature that sociologists generally associate with Merton. Yet, as Simonson has recently pointed out, not only were writings on rhetoric “a ‘very important’ resource for [Merton] over the years”;<sup>7</sup> but prior to *Mass Persuasion* he was already deeply “knowledgeable of the terms and texts of the European rhetorical tradition,” going so far to include in the book (as part of his analysis of modern propaganda) “long quotations from classic texts in the rhetorical tradition—Plato’s *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, and Thomas Hobbes’ *Art of Rhetorick*” (2010, 1–3).

What bears notice is that, throughout this tradition, “repetition with variation” was a widely discussed rhetorical technique, as Merton would have known from the original sources as well as from later scholarly commentaries, among them the work of his friend, the literary theorist Kenneth Burke, who—at the same time Merton was composing *Mass Persuasion*—was writing *A Rhetoric of Motives*, which classified among the “traditional principles of rhetoric,” the “several kinds of repetition with variation” that Cicero differentiated (1950, 68). Not only this, but repetition with variation was also a frequently used *compositional practice* among ancient authors of both prose and poetry (Homer, Sophocles, Herodotus, Lucretius, Ovid, Virgil),<sup>8</sup> and Merton was a skillful reader of Latin (if not of Greek) since his high school days.<sup>9</sup>

Looking beyond the ancients, repetition with variation was also a highly favored literary device in England during the late medieval and early modern period to which Merton was attracted during his dissertation research on science and religion in 17th-century England (Merton 1970 [1936]) and whose literature interested him greatly throughout his lifetime (see esp. Merton 1965). As he read literary works from this period, Merton would have observed the technique on clear display in the writings of any number of authors, including Chaucer, Shakespeare, and, by the 18th century, none other than Laurence Sterne in

<sup>7</sup> With the words “very important,” Simonson quotes Merton in a conversation between the two of them.

<sup>8</sup> I base this statement on many articles of classical scholarship that I have located and examined via Jstor, but which do not warrant individual citations for the purposes of the present volume.

<sup>9</sup> I owe this information to Harriet Zuckerman.

the many volumes of *Tristram Shandy* itself (Bamford and Knowles 2008; Cook 1960; Fisk 2000; Richetti 1998).<sup>10</sup>

Merton’s engagement with the literature of Western humanism went hand in hand, moreover, with his immersion in a fourth context: that of modern science. The foregoing discussion of “repetition with variation” has perhaps reminded readers of a process well-established in the experimental natural sciences under the name of “replication.” The association is a straightforward one for the reason that scientists ordinarily view replication as the activity of confirming the findings of a particular experiment by *repeating* that experiment under *varying* laboratory conditions and then obtaining comparable results (for discussion of this view of replication, see Collins 1985). If we follow the *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, “replication,” although it is a term that goes back several centuries, only became the principal expression for the process of experimental confirmation in the course of the 20th century. Previously, “replication” shared the ground with other terms, one of which was the notion of repetition with variation.

For example, in the writings of the laboratory scientists with whom Merton was closest during his time at Harvard (and would afterwards hold in high esteem), the physiologist Walter B. Cannon and the biochemist Laurence J. Henderson, there appears to be no mention of “replication.” Instead, both researchers describe the process of scientific verification explicitly as the “repetition” of an experiment with different materials or under conditions that vary in other respects, as when Henderson touts an experimental design that has the “advantage of easy repetition” with different kinds of equipment (Richards and Henderson 1905, 11; see also Henderson 1913, 250) or when Cannon writes: “Our first procedure was a repetition of the Bohm and Hoffman experiments, [but] freed from the factor of pain” which subjects in earlier experiments had undergone (1922, 70; see also Cannon *et al.* 1924, 48). Through his extensive reading of the scientific literature of the early 20th century, Merton could scarcely have avoided frequent

<sup>10</sup> I exclude from this discussion of Western humanism all of the tradition’s more exclusively philosophical writings, although repetition in its different varieties received attention here as well, most notably perhaps in the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (Gendron 2008). Merton’s relationship to this strand of philosophical work remains to be examined.

encounters with this conception of experiments as repetitions with variations.

Even so, his scientific reading ranged much wider and, in the course of his dissertation research, extended backward in time to the dawn of modern science in 17th-century England—and to the writings of figures like natural philosopher Robert Boyle and scientific propagandists Francis Bacon and Thomas Sprat. This is significant for it is in these very writings that one actually finds some of the earliest English-language references to repetition with variation. Describing his own scientific investigations, for instance, Boyle spoke pointedly of the importance of “repetition”—of repeating experiments under varying conditions—recounting (*inter alia*) how “one repetition of [an] experiment” would produce one result, while another repetition might produce a different result (Boyle 1725, vol. 2, 286, vol. 3, 133). For his part, Bacon set forth the principle that:

An experiment is produced in two ways: viz., by repetition and extension, the experiment being either repeated or urged to a more subtle things, [by means of] the variation, production, translation, inversion, compulsion, application, conjunction, or any other manner of diversifying, [as] when a known experiment, having rested in one substance, is tried in another of like kind. (1605, 140–141).

Sprat’s *History of the Royal-Society of London*—a text foundational to Merton’s dissertation—inscribed this understanding of experimentation into its depiction of the Royal Society as a public setting for the “repetition” of experiments and for the recording of “variation” in their results (1667, 99, 197, 222, 244, 245, 254)—a theme that Sprat summarized for his audience in his statement: “Of the exactness, variation, and [...] repetition of experiments, I have discoursed” (1667, 215).

I do not intend the four contexts just described as a complete listing of the sources in which Merton would have encountered the concept of “repetition with variation” before it surfaced in *Mass Persuasion*. Neither do I wish to claim that he drew self-consciously on these literatures when he wrote—except, that is, when citing Bartlett’s book on political propaganda—nor that his use of the concept was intellectually derivative from the examples that these sources provided. To interpret the preceding account in any of these ways would be to misconceive the purpose of carrying out studies in sociological semantics of the kind that Merton proposed in his late work.

Although it is (as noted above) among the central tasks of sociological semantics to examine the “social origins” of the particular words, phrases, slogans, etc., that have become the foci of investigation, one must beware of conflating *origins* in this sense with *causes* in the more mechanistic sense in which sociologists sometime conceive of causes. To find that thinker A (here, Merton) made use of concept X (“repetition with variation”) which had previously appeared in context B (the Columbia Office of Radio Research), context C (contemporary social psychology), context D (Western humanism), and context E (modern science) is not to reductively attribute A’s invocation of X to sources B, C, D, and E and, by this attribution, to bring analysis of that invocation to a close, pending the discovery of other antecedent sources. The significance for thinker A of antecedents B, C, D, and E lies not in the casual efficacy of those antecedents but rather in *their interpretive implications*: not in the brute fact that concept X previously appeared in contexts B, C, D, and E, but in *how these sources had differentially used the concept*. This is so because, insofar as one takes account of the specific ways in which B, C, D, and E used the concept, one’s ability to hear thinker A becomes historically more attuned and progressively better prepared to appreciate how—in light of how B, C, D, and E invoked X—A, in turn, used the concept and in what, if any, signature ways.

Listening to Merton in *Mass Persuasion* against the background of other contexts where “repetition with variation” circulated throws into relief what is so distinctive—and so important—about his own usage. In Adorno’s work at the Columbia Office of Radio Research, repetition with variation was a technique of effective musical composition; in the literatures of Western humanism, it was a device that rhetoricians, poets, and novelists employed to produce certain responses from their auditors and readers; in the literature of modern science, it was a process scientists carried out to confirm experimental results; and in the literature of contemporary social psychology, it was a practice that commercial advertisers, political propagandists, and other retailers of mass suggestions engaged in to sway the opinions of a population within the reach of their marketing campaigns. Perhaps because Merton had encountered all of these literatures and thus understood that repetition with variation was not confined to the realm either of musical composition, or of rhetoric, of prose and poetry, of scientific experimentation, or of mass marketing campaigns, but was,

instead, a concept descriptive of a foundational process that occurred in all of these fields, his usage in *Mass Persuasion* is broader than those found in any of his sources, even the work of social psychologists, to which he is closest. For, while it is his analysis of the social psychology of Kate Smith's dramatic success at mass persuasion which prompts Merton to introduce the concept of "repetition with variation," from the first he presents this historical case not only as an instance of mass persuasion (though it is that), but—to repeat—as an example of a more encompassing pattern whereby "a stimulus applied successive times has an effect the *n*th time which it did not have the first." With this parsing, Merton effectively generalizes well beyond the several literatures in which "repetition with variation" had previously appeared to open a window (as observed above) onto a much wider range of social situations where, following multiple iterations, human beings accept ideas or undertake actions which they did not adopt or pursue after their initial exposure to those ideas or actions. In this sense, Merton's was a new usage, a distinctive sociological reformulation of a concept that the literatures of science, humanism, and social psychology had each used in narrower and more limited ways.

### 3

In his studies of sociological semantics, Merton regularly complements his investigations of the social origins of the linguistic expressions that he examines with inquiries into the subsequent diffusion of these expressions, and his own concept of "repetition with variation" merits consideration from this second angle as well. Significantly, however, when one attempts to follow the concept's reception—whether inside or outside sociology—very few traces emerge.

Merton's semantic writings teach that the "fate" of any word, phrase, concept, or other term is "contingent," entirely dependent on later historical developments, i.e., on "what other [users] make" at future points in time of the particular expression that is under investigation (1977, 107; 1985, xx). According to Merton, these subsequent "responses [can] vary [...] from out-and-out rejection of the word, to passive recognition of its existence, to active interest in [...] its continuing usage" (Merton and Barber 2004, 61), among multiple other possibilities, including that of "obliteration by incorporation" (Merton 1968a,

35), which several of my co-contributors to this volume have discussed in reference to some of Merton's own ideas.

With regard to Merton's concept of "repetition by variation," yet another possibility appears to have occurred. It is a development nearest to the scenario that Merton considers when he considers examples of "out-and-out rejection" and "resistance" (1977, 107–08), though these descriptors fail to fit the present case because they connote an element of active opposition that "repetition with variation" did not encounter. Rather, in publications over the course of the 60+ years since *Mass Persuasion* first appeared,<sup>11</sup> sociologists seem simply to have *neglected to notice* the concept, save for a very small number of exceptions from the one sub-area of sociology where the book found its most natural audience, the field of public opinion and mass communication research.

Of these rare exceptions, the most substantial was Joseph Klapper's *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960), a comprehensive work of synthesis produced at Lazarsfeld's Columbia Bureau of Applied Social Research (the descendant of the Office of Radio Research) as part of a series which Lazarsfeld was co-editing on communication research. In the volume, "repetition with variation"—expressly associated with Merton (and Bartlett)—not only featured prominently among the communications-factors "related to the effectiveness of persuasion," but was characterized as well as a sociological principle that commanded solid empirical support, including the research of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) and Cartwright (1949) (Klapper 1960, 98, 119–120; see also Klapper 1949).<sup>12</sup> A decade later, sociologist Alan Booth, citing Klapper (though not Merton), reaffirmed the role of "repetition with variation" in shaping public opinion (1970–71, 605). These meager references, however, capture the extent to which sociologists used the concept; and, while uniformly positive, both Klapper and Booth continued to present "repetition with variation" in the manner of the social psychological literature that Merton had drawn upon, overlooking his expanded sociological reformation of the concept.

<sup>11</sup> This statement is based on results of searches using the standard online engines such as Jstor and Google Books.

<sup>12</sup> The texts of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) and Cartwright (1949) appear to be less explicit about "repetition with variation" than Klapper suggests.

Looking beyond the discipline of sociology, the diffusion story was much the same. During the two decades that immediately followed the publication of *Mass Persuasion*, scholars from the neighboring fields of mass communication and communication arts occasionally mentioned “repetition with variation”—approvingly, although exclusively in its social-psychological aspect—when they discussed Merton’s book (see McBurney *et al.* 1951, 155; Brembeck and Howell 1952, 177–78; Schramm 1954/1961, 320). Beyond these fleeting citations, however, their engagement with the concept as developed in Merton’s writings (writings that for some time remained part of the literature of these fields [see Schramm and Roberts 1971]) seems to have come to a permanent end.

Even so, the history of “repetition with variation” itself was by no means finished. To accurately capture this history, however, one must be careful not to conflate the pattern in sociology (and neighboring fields) with developments elsewhere in the social sciences and the humanities. In terms of sociology, “repetition with variation” was a concept that had lacked recognition in the period before *Mass Persuasion*, and—except for the short-lived efforts of researchers like Klapper and Booth—that situation simply did not change in the decades following the book’s publication. In a number of other academic fields, however, “repetition with variation”—the concept, as well as the idea—was (as section 2 documented) an established presence long before *Mass Persuasion* appeared, and it subsequently continued to command this position.

Indeed, over the course of the past century, each successive decade appears to have called forth more references to and more varied applications of “repetition with variation” than every preceding decade.<sup>13</sup> This pattern has been part of the rising tide of interest by scholars outside of sociology in the phenomenon of repetition—and of different types of repetition—in a wide range of contexts. According to one recent summary, for example:

Current theory in linguistic pragmatics, in rhetoric, in cultural anthropology, and in literary theory, stresses the situated, interactive, rhetorical nature of [human] understanding. Various approaches to the ways, understanding are constructed in the process of interaction—such as interactional sociolinguistics, epistemic rhetoric, ethnography of com-

<sup>13</sup> This statement, too, rests on information gleaned using standard online search engines like Jstore and Google Books.

munication, functionalist poetics, and reader response theory—make reference to the crucial role of repetition in this process. Linguists have examined repetition in conversation and in language acquisition. Anthropologists and folklorists have studied the role of parallelism as a feature of performance and as a recurring characteristic of ritual forms of talk. Students of poetics discuss repetition as a key feature of artistic language. Literary theorists and rhetoricians discuss [...] the ways in which the authors of new texts make use of old texts. Clearly, anyone interested in a comprehensive theory of understanding must pay close attention to the mechanisms and functions of repetition. (Johnstone 1994, xi)

And this extensive enumeration says nothing of the significant role of repetition with variation in psychology and applied psychology, human development, educational theory and practice, philosophy, and multiple streams of discourse analysis (see Tannen 2007). To take just three examples: “repetition with variation” enters frequently in the books of literary critic Harold Bloom (e.g., 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1987, 1988, 1998), the work of historian and cultural theorist Dominick LaCapra (1983, 1985, 1989), and various currents of Continental philosophy, including—beneath the mantle of “différence et répétition”—the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida (see Gendron 2008).

In none of these lines of scholarship, however, does “repetition with variation” bear any association with the work of Robert Merton.<sup>14</sup> To the contrary: the text of *Mass Persuasion* and the figure of Robert Merton are both conspicuously absent throughout the vast literature on repetition with variation.<sup>15</sup> This said, it would be incorrect, I believe, to classify this absence as an instance of “obliteration by incorporation,” or OBI. One speaks of OBI when an intellectual field or tradition has so fully absorbed a particular concept, idea, method, or finding that the original source or parentage of this formulation is no longer cited or even remembered (Merton 1968a, 25–38). In the bodies of scholarship where “repetition with variation” is presently on active duty, however, there are no indications that Merton’s use of the concept was *ever* recognized, let alone subsequently absorbed so fully

<sup>14</sup> After his return to Germany, Adorno’s writings (especially those on musical composition) continued to speak of repetition and variations, and these writings do inform the Continental philosophical tradition on the subject. Whether or not Adorno read *Mass Persuasion*, however, his appropriation of the concept predated its use by Merton.

<sup>15</sup> Another result of research using standard online search engines.

that his book and his name ceased over time to be cited. Rather, as used by contemporary scholars, the concept seems to derive from *other sources*, among them some of the very strands of work that formed part of Merton's own encounter with "repetition with variation"—viz., the literatures of social psychology, Western humanism, and modern science.<sup>16</sup> What is more, the practice of contemporary scholars who invoke "repetition with variation" has not been to suppress and obliterate these other sources of the concept, but in many cases to acknowledge them openly (see e.g., Gendron 2008; Johnstone 1994; Tannen 2008).

That scholars in these fields have neglected to acknowledge Merton's use of "repetition with variation," in other words, is not because they have grown accustomed to taking it for granted, but because they have yet to notice and reckon with it. At stake here, moreover, is an issue larger than the vagaries of academic citation practices. If the account in section 2 is cogent, Merton did more than simply apply "repetition with variation" in his analysis of Kate Smith's war bond drive; he sociologically broadened the concept, imparting to it a more generalized meaning than it had in the various separate literatures where the expression had previously circulated. Given, however, that his treatment of "repetition with variation" has been overlooked in the six decades since *Mass Persuasion*, this sociological reformulation of the concept has had no opportunity to air and take hold even among scholars in the social sciences and humanities who deal with repetition with variation. In this sense, the fate of Merton's concept represents the trajectory of a "vanishing family branch"—of VFB, rather than OBI—for, although "repetition with variation" would remain an intellectual force, outside of sociology at least, during the period subsequent to Merton's contribution, his own innovation with regard to the concept would disseminate no further.

## 4

Why Merton's concept of "repetition with variation" experienced this fate is a question that, for the present time, must be left to speculation. With a very few exceptions, as section 3 documents, Merton's concept did not diffuse, and accounting for historical *non-happenings* is gener-

<sup>16</sup> Unlike Merton writing in the 1940s, however, more contemporary scholars tend to draw on more recent entries to these literatures.

ally an ill-advised undertaking. What is more, a large part of the story, the fact that scholars outside of sociology overlooked Merton's concept almost universally, seems scarcely to require further explanation. That non-sociologists would neglect the contribution of a sociologist that barely registered on sociologists themselves is obviously an unremarkable occurrence, particularly in an historical era when scholarly publications were proliferating in such great numbers that most scholars were unable to keep abreast even of the literature of their own fields.

Less obvious is why sociologists failed to notice the concept, which came to them by the hand of one of the preeminent, most respected, and most widely-read figures in sociology during the second half of the twentieth century—Robert K. Merton? To this part of the question, two factors suggest themselves as elements of what was likely a more complex historical process.

The first of these factors was the institutional relocation of the relevant academic topics. As seen above, Merton introduced "repetition with variation" in a monograph principally concerned with mass communication—a subject that he and Lazarsfeld situated squarely within sociology but which would not remain there. To the contrary: in the years ahead, as Katz has described, "communication research and studies of public opinion" were increasingly "abandoned by sociology" and, in the U.S. at least, transferred to separate "schools, colleges, and departments of communications, building of mergers of traditions of rhetoric and speech, journalism and publicistik, critical traditions in film and literature, and sociopsychologically oriented media research" (1987, S40). Almost inevitably, this institutional relocation significantly reduced the potential sociological readership of *Mass Persuasion*, diminishing the chances that sociologists would encounter "repetition with variation" and put the concept into wider circulation inside their own discipline.

The second factor was the motility of Merton's own intellectual interests. In the preceding discussion of sociologists' use of "repetition with variation" in the decades following the publication of *Mass Persuasion*, one likely sociologist-user of the concept went unmentioned, and that is, of course, Merton himself in the years that lay before him. As it happened, however, Merton was among those who did not subsequently make use of the concept; inadvertently, he thus deprived "rep-

etition with variation" of the broader stage it would have occupied if he had included the concept in, say, *Social Theory and Social Structure* or in other of his major works.

Why Merton did not return to the concept, though, is another non-event that scarcely lends itself to a conclusive account. Of relevance, presumably, is that Merton, too, soon moved away from the area of mass communication, publishing a handful of pieces on the subject during the next three years but thereafter ceasing active research on the subject.<sup>17</sup> In even the most wide-ranging of these additional pieces (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948), moreover, the questions addressed differed from those raised in *Mass Persuasion* and were not such as to lead Merton to reintroduce or revisit "repetition with variation."

The same holds true throughout his later work on all the other topics that he went on to examine, whether they were matters of occasional interest to him (housing, medical education, friendship) or of more permanent concern, such as the sociology of science or sociological theory. Indeed, in some ways, his sociology of science would appear to be deeply at variance with his interest in *Mass Persuasion* in repetition with variation, inasmuch as his writings on science deal regularly with innovation, invention, and discovery, and with the social institutions and processes that foster the creation in the natural sciences of new knowledge, as distinguished from the reiteration of existing ideas (see esp. Merton 1957a, 1973b; Merton and Barber 2004).

A similar emphasis on the discovery of new knowledge enters prominently into Merton's writings on sociological theory. In his famous essay "On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory," for example, Merton is at pains to warn against the practice of describing the history of sociology in the manner of the "adumbrationist" historian of ideas who magnifies intellectual "similarities between past and present" and, in this way, denies that "sociology grows through occasional new orientations and through increments of knowledge gained through inquiry guided by these orientations" (1968a, 22–24). Merton illustrates this objectionable practice by citing his former Harvard

<sup>17</sup> In all three editions of *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949, 1957, and 1968), however, Merton continued to make "mass communications" a prominent topic of the volume's Part III and to reprint his 1943 article with Lazarsfeld, "Studies in Radio and Film Propaganda." In his 1960 "Introduction" to LeBon's *The Crowd*, he returned again to the subject (see n. 5 above).

mentor Pitirim Sorokin (1928), who frequently asserted that modern sociological ideas are the "'mere repetition'"—sometimes "with variations"—of ancient ideas (1968a, 24–25). From Merton's point of view, this kind of focus on repetition seriously jeopardizes recognition of "the possibility of significant new departures in the history of sociological thought" (1968a, 25).

On the basis of passages like these, one might plausibly propose that Merton's concern with the discovery of new knowledge—both in the natural sciences and in sociology—sidelined his earlier interest in processes of repetition with variation, with the consequence that the concept of "repetition with variation" disappeared from his work. A broader reading of Merton's *oeuvre*, however, suggests something more complicated: viz., that while Merton ceased to use the concept as such, he remained acutely—and, among sociologists, perhaps singularly—alert to instances of the phenomenon itself.

In support of this interpretation (which I here offer as no more than a hypothesis for future research on Merton's work), I conclude with three brief illustrations. All three differ from the prime example of "repetition with variation" in *Mass Persuasion* because they have to do not with the members of a mass audience, but with the types of social actors that concerned Merton in his later work—scientists, sociologists, and other men and women of ideas. Awareness of this difference may, at some level, have made Merton hesitant to apply the same concept by name, although the illustrations arguably involve (in different ways) an analogous temporal patterning of effects.

First, there is Merton's recurrent concern with "multiples" in science.<sup>18</sup> In Merton's view, scientific discoveries are rarely "singletons"; indeed, he offers the "hypotheses [...] that all scientific discoveries are in principle multiples" (1961, 356)—i.e., "substantively identical or functionally equivalent ideas and empirical findings set forth by two or more scientists, each unaware of the other's work" (1968a, 9). In developing this thesis, however, he is quick to add that multiples are not ordinarily complete replicas: for example, "no two of the twelve scientists who 'grasped [the] essential parts of the concept of energy and its conservation' had precisely the same conception"; and "for the

<sup>18</sup> The points made in the next two paragraphs were not in the original version of this paper. I owe their addition to Harriet Zuckerman, who impressed upon me the place on repetition in Merton's sociology of science.

typically less precise formulations in much of the social sciences, it becomes even more difficult to establish substantive identity or functional equivalence of independently evolved conceptions" (1968a, 10).

In this sense, "multiples" bear a distinct resemblance to repetitions *with variations*, though Merton's accent here generally falls more on the element of repetition than that of variation. In any event, he insists that multiples form a "strategic research site" for sociologists of science, revealing much about the processes of scientific discovery and scientific communication, including what he calls the "functions of redundancy" (1973a, 371; 1968, 450). Indeed, taking issue with scientific policy-makers alarmed about "wasteful duplication," Merton argues that "redundancy in independent efforts to solve a scientific problem" actually increases the "probability of solution"; and he quotes with approval an interview, conducted by Harriet Zuckerman, of a Nobel laureate who remarked: "In respect to research; duplication of effort is a good thing [...] if there are different groups in different laboratories working on the same thing, their approach is sufficiently different [to increase the probability of successful outcome]" (1968, 450–51 and fn. 30 [words in brackets added by Merton]). Not only this, but repetition (with variation) redounds positively to the communication channels of science, especially in the contemporary era of "exponential increase in the volume of scientific publications": "often a new idea or new empirical finding has been achieved and published, only to go unnoticed by others," whereas "multiples—that is, redundant discoveries—have a greater chance of being heard by others in the social system of science and so, then and there, to affect its further development" (1968, 449; 1973a, 380).

Second, repetition with variation seems to echo through Merton's frequent claims for the significance of "continuities" in the growth of sociological knowledge. The very titles of several of his writings—titles that themselves exemplify the literary practice of repetition with variation—convey this message, which was central to Merton's research and teaching: *Continuities in Social Research* (Merton and Lazarsfeld 1950); "Continuities in the Theory of Reference Groups and Social Structure" (Merton 1957b); "Continuities in the Theory of Social Structure and Anomie" (Merton 1957c); *Continuities in Structural Inquiry* (Blau and Merton 1981). For what are the "continuities" that Merton describes, in these publications and elsewhere, if not fruitful repetitions with variation upon earlier sociological conceptual-

izations and findings? Merton says as much himself when he sets as "the hallmark of systematic inquiry" by which sociological knowledge develops the identification of those "theoretical and empirical continuities in inquiry which extend, modify and correct earlier formulations" (1957d, 177)—his supposition being that robust later-day sociological formulations are neither creations *ex nihilo* nor "mere repetitions" of past sociological statements but carefully refined variations on existing ideas. Worth noting in this regard is Merton's familiarity with Lewis B. Namier's essay "Symmetry and Repetition," which likened intellectual "continuity" to "variations" on established themes and offered the memorable aphorism: "Continuity is a compromise between novelty and repetition" (1941, 72)<sup>19</sup>—a view implicit in the Mertonian notion of continuity.

Third, in Merton's late program for sociological semantics, a process much like repetition with variation reappears to assume another pivotal role.<sup>20</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, Merton's concern with tracing the social origins and paths of diffusion of the linguistic expressions that he examines is a concern that goes hand in hand with an interest in identifying the social processes and mechanisms that produce these outcomes (Camic 2010). In describing these mechanisms, Merton develops the concept of the "sociocognitive microenvironment," which he uses to designate the local "social and cognitive network" or "sociometric structure" in which the women and men involved in the origin and spread of the relevant words, concepts, or other ideational forms interact with one another (Merton 2004b, 260–60; 1977, 98–99). According to Merton, unpacking the dynamics of sociocognitive microenvironments is pivotal to the sociological explanation of the origins and diffusion of ideas and other linguistic expressions (1977, 2005a, 2004b). What is more, understanding these dynamics requires a grasp

<sup>19</sup> Sills and Merton include a passage from Namier's short essay in *Social Science Quotation* (1990, 319), albeit not the passage that I have just quoted.

<sup>20</sup> In this paragraph, I focus on an explanatory argument that Merton makes in his semantic writings. Looking beyond this particular explanatory argument, one might also raise the question of whether a concern with repetition with variation does not lie at the very core of Merton's semantic program. For, as he traces of the fate of expressions like "on the shoulders of giants," "serendipity," and so on, what Merton specifically appears to be doing is charting the varied repetitions of these expressions across time and space.

of their fundamental temporal character, since, in the empirical cases that Merton examines (1977, 1995), it is not sufficient that actors encounter a single conducive microenvironment, but that they experience “successive microenvironments” that exert cumulative effects by conveying similar cognitive materials in different social contexts (1977, 86)—a development that Merton might well have called “repetition with variation.” For, in emphasizing the importance for the origin and spread of new ideas not of any one sociocognitive environment by itself, but of a mutually-reinforcing “succession” of microenvironments (1995, 34), Merton calls renewed attention to a social process that he had clearly recognized decades earlier in *Mass Persuasion*.

Indeed, without too much straining, what one can observe in the three examples—of multiples in science, continuities in sociological theory and research, and successive microenvironments in the evolution of ideational forms—are the ways in which a stimulus (a scientific discovery; a sociological formulation; a sociocognitive network) has effects (on scientific communities; on the growth of sociological knowledge; on the social actors who originate and spread a linguistic expression) after multiple varied iterations which the same stimulus did not produce initially. In all three cases, in other words, Merton arguably continues to illuminate the sociological problem raised by his 1946 reformulation of concept of “repetition with variation” as to “why a stimulus applied successive times has an effect the  $n$ th time which it does not have the first”—tacitly pointing, as he does so, to the enduring value of the concept.

We come at this point, however, to the outer bounds of the agenda for sociological semantics. Whether sociologists going forward make further and more explicit use of Merton’s concept, either in their own research or in the interpretation of his work, is a question for a later and more comprehensive inquiry into the fate of “repetition with variation.” As Merton develops the program for sociological semantics in his later work, it is a program that does not forecast future trends but rather devotes itself to historical research into the origins and diffusion of significant linguistic expressions. In this respect, the program nonetheless offers a model with wide applicability, including extension to the study of some of the concepts that inform Robert Merton’s own writings.