

# This Week's Citation Classic

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**Merton R K.** *Social theory and social structure.* New York: Free Press, 1949. 423 p.  
[Columbia University, New York, NY]

This book codifies structural and functional analysis which is then utilized in studies of social structure, the sociology of knowledge, and the sociology of science. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI™) indicates that this book has received over 2,970 unique citations since 1966. The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) indicates that this book has received over 175 unique citations since 1961.]

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"I am not at all sure of the reasons for *Social Theory and Social Structure* (STSS) still being cited 30 years after its first appearance. To answer that question with reasonable assurance would require a detailed citation analysis and readership study, hardly worth the effort. My own guess is that this results from a continuing, perhaps enlarged interest in the sort of theoretical 'paradigms' (in a pre-Kuhnian sense) introduced in the book for the analysis of cultural and social structures.

"Part of the book is given over to the structural analysis of classes of substantive problems which also happen to be of enduring interest. For example, as March, Simon, and Guetzkow note in their book *Organizations*<sup>1</sup>—itself a 'Citation Classic'<sup>2</sup>—my focus on 'unanticipated consequences' led to a model of bureaucratic structures designed to complement the classical Weberian model. So, too, I have the impression that the several hundred theoretical and empirical papers drawing upon the paradigm of anomie-and-opportunity structure for the analysis of structurally induced deviant behavior more often

cite the book rather than the paper which appeared in the late 1930s.

"Perhaps a bare inventory will be enough to indicate some of the sociological themes that continue to elicit interest: the systematizing of reference-group theory to consolidate sociological and psychological orientations; the concepts of local and cosmopolitan 'influentials' designed to differentiate flows of communication and influence in social systems; the concept of 'the self-fulfilling prophecy' as a special type of recurrent 'unanticipated consequences' which, especially in the last decade, has been investigated in diverse domains of social, political, economic, educational, and scientific behavior. Also, an explicit 'Paradigm for the Sociology of Knowledge,' dating back to the mid-1940s, which relates to the lately expanded interest in this field of inquiry, and, finally, a batch of early papers in the sociology of science, a field which has clearly taken off in the last 20 years or so.

"This inventory does not, of course, begin to account for these themes apparently remaining of interest to sociologists and other social scientists as well. I suspect that the continuing citations to a book become venerable through its advanced age may also reflect the possibly lower frequency in the social than in the biological and physical sciences of a pattern described in STSS<sup>3</sup> and elsewhere<sup>4,5</sup> as obliteration by incorporation (OBI). OBI is the obliteration of the source of ideas, methods, or findings by their incorporation into currently accepted knowledge. But since we don't yet know whether OBI is in fact less common in the social sciences, this only succeeds in explaining one unknown by another. And, as the ancients warned us all, that is not the best of explanatory practices."

1. March J G, Simon H & Guetzkow H. *Organizations*. New York: John Wiley, 1958. 262 p.
2. Simon H. Citation Classic. *Current Contents/Social & Behavioral Sciences* (40):12, 1 October 1979.
3. Merton R K. *Social theory and social structure*. New York: Free Press, 1968, p. 25-38.
4. Garfield E. The 'obliteration phenomenon' in science—and the advantage of being obliterated! *Current Contents* (51/52):5-7, 22 December 1975. (Reprinted in: Garfield E. *Essays of an information scientist*. Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 396-8.)
5. Messert P. Obliteration by incorporation. Unpublished manuscript, Columbia University, 1978.