

Call for submissions for  
a special issue of *Serendipities*

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### **ROBERT K. MERTON'S *NORMATIVE STRUCTURE AT 80***

In an essay entitled "The Normative Structure of Science" Robert K. Merton described the ethos of science as comprising four dimensions or criteria (Merton actually called them 'imperatives'): universalism, communism, disinterestedness and organized skepticism.

The text is dated '1942'; however, most people will have read the text in one of its reprinted versions, e.g. in Merton's *The Sociology of Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1973, 267-278).

Just to recall the argument briefly:

- (1) Universalism referred to the fact that truth claims in science need to be free of "pre-established personal and social attributes" such as race, nationality and class (he forgot to mention sex and/or gender).
- (2) Communism referred to the maxim that there should be neither exclusive nor personal possession of the research findings, i.e. all results should be treated as part and parcel of a common heritage and enterprise and should therefore be shared. Researchers should not see their results as exclusive property. However, this did not mean that the individual researcher (or team) should not be properly named, credited and acknowledged in relation to his/her/their achievement, findings or discoveries.
- (3) Disinterestedness stood for the way the research was conducted and communicated. There should be no fraud, no personal gain but only moral integrity, something that public and testable results will have to scrutinize and watch over. Ultimately, the researcher should only be accountable to his fellow researchers and the larger scientific community.
- (4) Organized skepticism should guide the research throughout the research process. The results should be subject to systematic scrutiny. In this sense competition can serve as a healthy corrector. Any overlapping interest with any institutions or organizations or their agenda and special interests should be seen with skeptical eyes and screened and assessed critically for potential bias.

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In light of the developments that have taken place since RKM first formulated these four imperatives it is high time to take a closer look at their validity and whether these maxims still can legitimately claim to govern what goes on in the sciences, particularly in connection with moral dimensions and/or the ethics of research.

As the title of his original paper suggests, RKM penned the text with the sciences in mind. It would be helpful to elaborate further and discuss whether these maxims also had any consequences for investigations either in the social sciences or in the humanities. What is

ethical research? What are its moral impulses? What happened to other relevant questions not raised in RKM's text such as societal 'mores'/'Sittlichkeit' and their relation to research? Can these be reduced to mere use and impact?

An “ethicization” of scholarship seems to be in vogue, a development indicated by the creation of ethics codes, special boards of ethical approval of research proposals, and noticeable also in other forms of ethical rhetoric used by scholars. Different but not entirely unrelated are contemporary debates concerned with ‘open science’, ‘open sources’ and similar topics related to research policies, all of them painting a very different scholarly environment compared to the one RKM originally had in mind.

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We are looking for contributions that take Merton's list as an opportunity to reflect upon the changes that have occurred over the last 80 years. We are also interested in those who think that the Mertonian spirit is still alive and well and perhaps just needs to be amended.

Papers that cover the field of science are welcome as long as the author draws comparisons to the social sciences and the humanities. It is our stated aim, however, that the planned special issue should focus mainly on the applicability and relevance of the Mertonian norms to the social sciences and the humanities

We are particularly interested in arguments that have a historical perspective or dimension, yet we remain open to questions that relate to the present condition of the social sciences and those disciplines in the humanities that make use of the social sciences either theoretically or methodologically.

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Timetable: We ask authors interested to contribute a paper to send to both editors (see below) an abstract of not more than 800 words before June 30, 2021. Accepted proposals should be submitted by the end of 2021. After this each paper will be peer reviewed and we expect to publish the special issue in the first half of 2022.

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