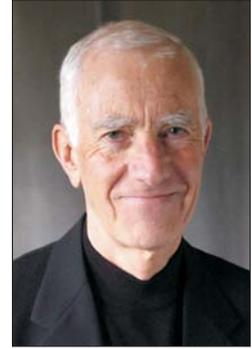


Contemplation in a Technological Era: Learning from Thomas Merton



Albert Borgmann

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Thomas Merton was an insightful observer of contemporary culture. In his writings, an ever-sharper picture of the technology emerges as well as a more and more resourceful answer to the cultural ailments—the counsel of contemplation. A philosophical response to Merton has to sustain the depth of his insights while articulating the systematic force of technology and the concrete reforms that provide a secure and practicable role for contemplation.

Contemplation is a word that few people use although it has a fairly definite meaning. Technology is a word that a lot of people use although its meaning is far from clear. In the life of Thomas Merton, contemplation at first was a definite goal, but gradually lost its sharpness, though not its force, whereas technology was at first an implicit and unspoken presence that toward the end of Merton's life assumed definite and troubling contours.

Thomas Merton was a prophet, a seer and a warner. As a seer, he had an intrepid openness that allowed him to see things the rest of us are too timid or too lazy to envision, and as a warner, he wrote with a supple vividness that captivated his readers. Prophecy and philosophy are kindred disciplines. Both are devoted to seeing and telling, but there is a division of emphasis. The prophet is passionate and topical; the philosopher should be dispassionate and systematic. The prophet challenges the philosopher. The philosopher questions the prophet. The prophet is the pioneer. The philosopher is the settler. The pioneer's work is exciting and inspiring, but it can't be

final. We have to settle down eventually and come to terms with everyday life. However, the settler has to be careful not to level down and disfigure what the pioneer has discovered. My goal then is to examine some of the things Merton has said about contemplation and technology and to suggest how they can be ordered into a vision that both meets the challenges of Merton and allows us to cope with everyday life.

Merton challenges philosophy to show how contemplation can have a fruitful place in the culture of technology. The first task then is to explicate technology as a cultural context or, to be more precise, to comprehend technology as the shape of contemporary life. Merton has always been keenly attuned to the promises and liabilities of his cultural setting.

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Technology became for him a central term and concern only in the later years of his life. Once he had an explicit grip on the technological cast of his time, his insights, however terse, were probing and disturbing.

Much like Jacques Ellul with whom he was familiar, Merton feared that technology was becoming an autonomous and destructive force.¹ It threatened to reduce life to a process of production and consumption; it led to a disintegration of traditional structures; and it left us with “a transient and meaningless sense of enjoyment” and “the contrived and obsessive gyrations of its empty mind.”² But Merton was no Luddite or romantic. He admired the accomplishments of science and technology, and he maintained his hope that technology could be changed from the ruler to a servant of contemporary life.³

Now the task before us is to fit Merton’s insights into a theory of technology. At times Merton got impatient with theory. It seemed too leisurely and abstract in a time of urgent and visceral issues. Philosophical theorizing does, too often, have the traits that offended Merton. But we can perhaps avoid them if we think of philosophical theory as the enterprise that helps us clear a space in our lives for occasions of grace. This is quite in Merton’s spirit when he approvingly quoted Clement of Alexandria: “The word prepares the way for action and disposes hearers to the practice of virtue.”⁴

The force that overlies and often suffocates those occasions is technology, as Merton realized. He also captured in a vignette the crucial shape of technology and the powers and dangers that are consequences of that shape. Early in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965), Merton said,

Technology is not in itself opposed to spirituality and to religion. But it presents a great temptation. For instance, where many machines are used in monastic work, (and it is right that they should be used), there can be a deadening of spirit and of sensibility, a blunting of perception, a loss of awareness, a lowering of tone, a general fatigue and lassitude, a proneness to unrest and guilt which we might be less likely to suffer if we simply went out and worked with our hands in the woods or in the fields.⁵

The crucial feature of the technological culture is the insertion of machinery between humanity and reality.

Merton might have been thinking of plowing. There was a time when it was done with a single plow that was drawn by a mule with a monk guiding it, mule and man pacing the field up and down, turning one furrow after another. What prompted Merton’s observations could have been an array of four plows, pulled by a tractor moving half again as fast as a mule and a man, thus enabling the monk and the machinery to do six times the plowing that the monk used to do with the mule.

It is right that the tractor should be used; we are inclined to say with Merton. It frees up time in the life of the monastery. It dispenses with the mules that need to be fed morning and evening, summer and winter, that are prone to laming and kicking, that need to be trained and groomed and have their hooves trimmed and shod. And yet the monk on the tractor does not see the soil turn, does not smell the earth, does not feel the clods under his feet, does not hear the meadowlark, does not talk to the mule and appreciate her work.

It’s reasonable in the immediate setting of the monastery to employ machinery, and it is necessary in the wider setting of society at large. If the monastery is to survive, it has to come to terms with the world as Merton realized.⁶ Coming to terms with the economy is part of that task. A monastery has to be reasonably efficient in its operations. It cannot afford to waste time and cling to practices that lead to starvation. It must look for niches of comparative advantage to earn the money that’s needed for the purchases of the goods and services it cannot produce within its borders.⁷

We can generalize the pattern of technology that begins to emerge from Merton’s observations. Plowing used to be a practice that was embedded in the competence and circumstances of a community. There was the shop and the skill of the blacksmith who could repair a plow. There was the knowledge of how to get mules from mares and jacks. There were the hayfields that got the mules through the winter, and there was much else besides.

It all fell away when the tractor appeared. Not everything disappeared. The field, the soil, the furrows, the seed, and the harvest remained. The alteration of a practice can be a gradual affair. “Each year the new tractors get bigger and bigger, louder and louder,” Merton observed.⁸ The driver gets enclosed

in a cab; the cab gets air-conditioned. The driver can communicate with anyone and everyone. Agriculture and cyberspace begin to merge, and the world we knew when “we simply went out and worked with our hands in woods or in the fields” is receding ever more.

Some practices have detached themselves entirely from their contexts. For morally troubled Catholics, the custom and context of seeking help used to be the confession. The confessor knew the sinner’s community. He was immersed in the world of sacrament and theology. Today troubled priests and bishops are sent to a psychologist rather than a confessor. The machinery of expertise has replaced the context of the church. Help is no longer a gift. It has become a commodity you have to purchase.

For most of us, the practices of agriculture have entirely disappeared into the machinery of production. The commodities of food appear on supermarket shelves as if from nowhere, with fake reminders of the farms we know from children’s books. And thus the pattern of technology becomes visible in its stark and general two-sidedness of commodification and mechanization. Commodification is the detachment of things and practices from their traditional contexts, and it is the conversion of things and practices into freely available commodities. Mechanization is the replacement of traditional contexts and competencies by increasingly powerful and concealed machineries. As workers we indenture ourselves for the requirements of the machinery. As consumers we revel in the abundance of unencumbered pleasures.

Let’s turn to contemplation. It first became a definite moral concern in Aristotle’s ethics. Contemplation for him was nothing less than the loftiest and best kind of human activity. It was the exercise of the highest human faculty, viz., reason, devoted to the noblest objects, viz., those that are perfect and immutable, the laws of reality, the order of the cosmos, the divinities. It was said to yield the greatest pleasure and to lift humans most nearly to the level of divinity. Thus for Aristotle, the contemplative by far outranked the active life as well as the pleasurable life.

Aristotle’s concept of contemplation became influential for Christianity through the work of Albert

the Great and Thomas of Aquino. Thomas could easily accept the exalted finality of contemplation, but for him, of course, it was attainable only in heaven—the blessedness of being face to face with God. There could be foreshadowings of the beatific vision here on earth. But earthly life for most of us, most of the time, had to be one of active engagements. The question of how the contemplative life and the active life were to be related to one another has been an enduring one for Christians (the life of pleasure playing a subordinate role at best). These schematic accounts of technology and contemplation suggest a ready way of connecting them, or rather, of seeing them disconnected. The active and the pleasurable lives line up with machinery and commodity, with production and consumption, with labor and leisure. But contemplation, whether Aristotelian or Thomist, seems to have no place in the culture of technology and constitutes, if anything, a rebuke to technology. But how can we get beneath such schemata to the real challenges of the day? Those challenges have been set before us by Merton, and we now have to respond to them. There are three major ones.

The first is this. Merton shows us, more urgently and irrecusably than any writer I know, how deeply the glory and the misery of being human are intertwined, and not only with one another but also with our circumstances, and how hard it can be in this thicket of entanglements to hear the Good News. That humans are poised between greatness and failure is the obvious lesson of history. There are inspiring and humbling feats of generosity, forgiveness, ingenuity, and fortitude, and then there are the terrors of cruelty, cowardice, and indifference. For Christians, glory is the nearness of God; misery is the painful experience of inadequacy.

The second challenge Merton holds before us is to look into the depths of modernity. Technology, as we think of it here, is the character of the modern era. It surfaces most clearly in research and development, in industry and commerce, and in appliances and utilities. But technology exerts its power not only in what it does and enables, but also in what it abandons and disables, in the ways in which it withdraws vitality from institutions and customs, leaves the former as pretentious shells and inflames the latter to a last show of arrogance.

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The third and final major challenge is the task of understanding clearly how human ambivalence and the modulations of technology interact, and of working out the lessons Merton has been teaching us about those interactions.

Beginning then with the first epiphany of the technological culture, we see Merton depicting it in the unlikely place of southern France and the early part of the twentieth century. On the first page of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton says,

Neither of my parents suffered from the little spooky prejudices that devour the people who know nothing but automobiles and movies and what's in the ice-box and what's in the papers and which neighbors are getting a divorce.⁹

Three pages farther into the book, Merton turns to the authority that stands in judgment of "the little spooky prejudices." It's the medieval monastery that's been moved from St. Michel-de-Cuxa and reassembled in northern Manhattan. "Synthetic as it is," Merton says, "it still preserves enough of its own reality to be a reproach to everything else around it, except the trees and the Palisades."¹⁰

Here is the pivotal contrast between technology and contemplation, seen as malaise and salvation. The ailment is the attenuation of everyday life by the fascination with the products of technology—cars, movies, refrigerated food, and mass communication. Those look like tame and old-fashioned technologies by today's standards. But Merton could already see the flimsy and distracting unreality of the emerging technological culture. Merton saw salvation in the reality of the monastery, displaced and displayed, to be sure, but commanding none the less.

Though his parents immunized Merton against the popular manifestations of the culture of technology, he vividly experienced the hidden injuries of it, the loss of rightful authority in the cultural institutions of his time. Outwardly, Merton received the best education imaginable, the elite school of Oakham, then Cambridge, and finally Columbia. He was widely traveled, fluent in French and English, able to read Greek and Latin. Though Merton was hard on his study habits and quiet about his accomplishments, there was evidently enough diligence and more than enough intelligence to make him an outstanding student. Merton did not generally object to the subjects and texts he was taught. What angered

him was the lack of institutional conviction in all this teaching. Cambridge traded on its faded glory, and Columbia was driven by a mindless busyness. Individual teachers, with exceptions gratefully noted by Merton, were moved by vanity or fads.

Deprived of moral guidance and favored by material benefits, young Merton gloried in his scornful individualism, and even when at Columbia, and seemingly on his way to a successful career as a writer and critic, the glamour of his accomplishments overlay an emptiness and despair that drove him close to a nervous breakdown. Merton ardently desired to escape this glorious misery and reach a world of spiritual authority and peace.

After many struggles, Merton found order and solace in the Catholic church; and after more struggles, in the Trappist Order. Monastic contemplation, emerging toward the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, appeared to be the solution to the moral and intellectual decay that the advancing culture of technology had left in its wake. Merton was sincere and eloquent in his professions of peaceful happiness at the several stations of his conversion and devotion. But when his journey to peaceful contemplation appeared to have reached its destination in Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery, Merton found himself immersed in another kind of struggle.

Merton at times seemed to say that contemplation is merely the rejection and not the redemption of the technological culture.

Do everything you can to avoid the amusements and the noise of the business of men. Keep as far away as you can from the places where they gather to cheat and insult one another, to laugh at one another, or to mock one another with their false gestures of friendship. Do not read their newspapers, if you can help it. Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. Do not bother with their unearthly songs or their intolerable concerns for the way their bodies look and feel.

Do not smoke their cigarettes or drink the things they drink or share their preoccupation with different kinds of food. Do not complicate your life by looking at the pictures in their magazines.¹¹

Merton, ever circumspect and generous, goes on to qualify his Abraham a Sancta Clara sermon. In particular, he warned against the turn to solitude and "the untroubled presence of God" as an escape only.

He was well aware of the conventional objection to contemplation, especially to the kind of contemplation sought by mystics, the objection, i.e., that contemplation dispenses with the community and the teachings of the church. He declared that contemplation is at heart communal, doctrinal, and active.¹² These declarations had the ring of mere assertions. Merton's reflections seemed more immediate and moving when they mourned the concealment of God and testified to the pain of fruitless searching. Often he went on to say that God's absence is God's presence and that in pain there is joy.¹³ But these assurances seem strenuous and severe.

For all the miserable glory of Merton's early experiences of contemplation, there are two necessary lessons we must take from his reflections. The first is the need for a clear-eyed recognition of the power of technology. For most people, the misery of the human condition does not take the form of Merton's painful sensitivity to the failings of ourselves and of society. On the contrary, it is mindlessness, either the sullen mindlessness of unloved work and pointless consumption or the hyperactive mindlessness of frenetic work and conspicuous consumption. The second lesson concerns the need of a resolute search for the center of our lives, for a final presence that will not play us false.

Though necessary, these lessons are not quite equal to the problem of technology. A deeper and more articulate awareness of technology is needed and with a more generous understanding of contemplation. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton sets an example of this sort of insight and liberality. He saw that the stark contrast between the technological culture and the grace of redemption obscures the force both of technology and of grace. Let me first explain the hidden injuries of technology and then turn to the unforethinkable moments of grace.

Technology is more than the obvious adversary of contemplation. To the careful observer it says: *Et in Arcadia ego*—In the midst of religious devotion, here I am. Technology infects contemplation and insinuates itself into the monastery and the church when they seem resolutely opposed to the culture at large; for mere opposition inflames, cramps, and cripples the pious. The opposition may begin with "certain refusals which are noble, which are affirmations of a higher truth, epiphanies of reality, witnesses to

God," as Merton notes. But when the emphasis falls entirely on the refusal, the self gets constricted in a cramp, and when someone "has reduced himself, narrowed himself down to the point where he is nothing but this miserable cramp clutched on to itself, when the cramp destroys itself, it destroys him."¹⁴

It's not only the pious who are reduced to defeat, and worse, to self-defeat, by the uncomprehending refusal of the dominant culture. The same fate can befall a young black who sees nothing but racism in contemporary culture, even in the pleasures the culture has left for young African-Americans, "the humor, the song, the behind-the-back pass." As the young Barack Obama began to suspect,

At best, these things were a refuge; at worst, a trap. Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat.¹⁵

The culture of technology leaves us with blind resistance and nowhere to go while it makes its presence felt everywhere, as Merton sorrowfully observed. Taped recordings invade the refectory, "official fluorescent light" dispels the majesty of the sunrise, the noise of tractors and chain saws offends the quiet of the cloister.¹⁶ Most troubling, the church gets used as a machine that produces self-righteousness.¹⁷ The shell of its administration consists of "baroque seals and Renaissance chanceries" while its soul has been commandeered by "IBM machines."¹⁸

Real contemplation finally opens up for Merton in the unforethinkable moments of grace—the innocent beauty of dawn, the splendor of nature on the Vigil of Pentecost, or "sunlight falling on a tall vase of red and white carnations and green leaves on the altar of the novitiate chapel."¹⁹ Grace comes to pass in "the splendor of the simple," as Heidegger says. The setting of contemplation has a splendid rather than an austere simplicity. "The simplicity that would have kept these flowers off this altar," Merton says, "is perhaps less simple than the simplicity which enjoys them there, but does not need them to be there."²⁰ Similarly, the contemplative life should not be the strenuous clinging to an idea of sanctity, but the celebration of resurrection and creation.²¹

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Such moments of grace are the redemption of Aristotelian contemplation. Aristotelian contemplation suffers from two major defects. First, it is abstract as a practice and in its objects; second, it is solitary. Merton's mature conception of contemplation cures these defects and redeems Aristotelian contemplation. At the same time, Merton's contemplation shares two features with Aristotle's *theoria*. The first is the proximity of the divine, "this flower, this light, this moment, this silence: *Dominus est. Eternity.*"²² The second is the disclosure of the cosmos. The affirmation of grace in good action "integrates us," Merton says,

into the whole living movement and development of the cosmos, it brings us into harmony with all the rest of the world, it situates us in our place, it helps us fulfill our task and to participate fruitfully in the whole world's work and its history, as it reaches out for its ultimate meaning and fulfillment.²³

As his quotations show, Merton's contemplative moments go beyond Aristotle's contemplation in two ways: first, they are grounded in the immediacy and concreteness of life; and second, they include responsibility for the human community.²⁴ Thus, in reply to a deeper recognition of the technological culture, contemplation comes into focus as the moment of grace that is close to divinity and discloses the cosmos, but is also immediate and concrete and responsible for the welfare of all people.

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander was written nearly half a century ago. Technology since has not stood still. We can summarize both the trajectory of Merton's thought and the trajectory of technology since Merton's death by considering the phenomenon of distraction. Young Merton was torn asunder by the conceits of the high culture that had its vitality and authority drained by technology. He reveled in pretentious individualism first and all but spent his vital energy in fashionable intellectualism. He was distracted beyond his awareness.

In the early years of his monastic life, Merton must have experienced the acuity of distraction that has classically assaulted contemplatives in the midst of their solitude and devotion, the kind of aggressive distraction that St. Anthony suffered memorably on Mathias Grünewald's Isenheim altar. Fantastic beasts have knocked down the venerable saint. They are tearing his hair, biting his hand, and are setting on

him from all sides. The spectacular and offensive nature of these distractions was an artifact of the kind of contemplation Merton was to leave behind. It's also a revealing foil of contemporary distraction.

Merton finally came to recognize that distraction today is not a dramatic assault in the midst of contemplation, but part of the normal fabric of reality, of the affluence of the well-to-do and of the publicity that was a constant invitation for himself.²⁵ In either case, the simplicity and peace of the moments of grace are imperiled.

There were computers and IBM machines in Merton's lifetime. But he could not have imagined the cultural revolution that was caused by the rise of the most recent phase of technology, by IT, information technology. The revolution by now is all but forgotten. We are living under the regime that the revolution of the late seventies and early eighties has established and that is now so well entrenched that today "technology" simply often stands for information technology.

Distraction might have been like a long rainy season, as it was for young Merton, or like the occasional hurricane that the monastic Merton knew. Today it is like a permanent, if attractively glamorous, fog. It's the atmosphere we live in. It has, to be sure, "the phantasms of a lewd and somewhat idiotic burlesque," but for many today it's no longer "fabricated in their imagination."²⁶ It is worked out in the graphic details of video games, YouTube, and pornography.

Those distractions are morally offensive, of course, but they are at least marked off by their unsavory explicitness. The kind of distraction that displaces the moments of grace more inconspicuously and effectively comes in the guise of the plausible, the understandable, and the increasingly normal. It's the email that announces itself and may well be important, the twitter that could be urgent, the news that might tell us how a crucial decision has come down. Any one of these messages could plausibly have a legitimate claim on our attention. But these bits of information don't come as definite and single events. They are droplets in the endless mist of cyberspace, one bumping into another and all of them composing a fog that envelopes and occupies the spaces and times that were formerly the places and

moments of contemplation or at least of conversation—the family dinner, the staff meeting, the vacation cottage, quiet reading, daydreaming, leisurely walks. These devastations have not gone unnoticed. But they are often chronicled with nostalgia and resignation.

Let me conclude by aligning Merton's prophetic pronouncement with philosophical analysis. Technology, Merton has said, furnishes "a transient and meaningless sense of enjoyment" and leaves us with "the contrived and obsessive gyrations of its empty mind."²⁷ Even within the monastery, it can lead to "a deadening of spirit and sensibility, a blunting of perception, a loss of awareness, a lowering of tone, a general fatigue and lassitude, a proneness to unrest and guilt."²⁸

Transcribing this into more contemporary and systematic language, we can say that the culture of technology has finally depressed the glory and the misery of the human condition to distraction and indecision. For most people in this country, the overt challenges of global warming and global justice are uncertain specters in the distant background. The profound challenge of the good life is an ever-postponed task. The foreground of life is occupied with worries about the stability of work and the little and quickly fading thrills of consumption. As members of the technological society, we have systematically uprooted the relations that once had grounded our lives in a certain community, a definite place, and an overarching time. The machineries that now support us fail to engage us, and the commodities that are supposed to please us have turned out to be joyless. Misery has become a low-grade headache, and glory has been transmuted into fugitive pleasure. We have become insensitive to the Good News.

Though he was harsh in his view of the technological culture, Merton was never merely severe. His basic understanding of the world was generous and graceful, and he would have applauded the decency of people and the moments of affection and celebration that still animate their lives. The one thing that Merton perhaps did not appreciate fully and explicitly is the importance of the setting of moments of grace. He was often critical of the confinements and conceits of the monastic life though he never repudiated it. But it was the enclosure of the chapel or the

disclosure of the fields and woods that occasioned for him the nearness of divinity. We have to give such occasions a secure place and a regular time in our lives. Contemplation needs a cloister, a space where the splendor of the simple is secure from mindless distraction and busyness.

We have to learn to adopt and adapt the cloister to the conditions of technology. Just as the cloister used to be surrounded and supported by the buildings of the monastery, and the monastery by the fields and woods, so we need to clear, within the supporting structures of technology, places and times in our lives for the celebration of what finally matters. Most important, we have to make time and room for the family dinner. We can't leave moments of grace to the vagaries of luck or accident. The culture of the table needs to have the central and firm location in our lives that the cloister used to have within the monastery.

We must follow Merton in joining all people of good will in the work of establishing sites where the sacred and the tangible are regularly reconciled and celebrated in communities small and large. Contemplation today has to be celebration. But, as Christians, we cannot forget that, however splendid and fulfilling a particular celebration may be, it will have its final affirmation in eternal contemplation.

What Thomas Merton finally teaches us is that today we need the steady and world-affirming Christianity that Obama had found in his own life:

It was because of these newfound understandings—that religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic and social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that I knew and loved—that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church of Christ one day and be baptized. It came about as a choice and not an epiphany; the questions I had did not magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side of Chicago, I felt God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.²⁹ ♦

Notes

¹Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965; reprint, New York: Doubleday, 2009), 59, 70, 254.

²*Ibid.*, 71 and 286.

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³Ibid., 67, 71, 222, 252.

⁴Ibid., 88.

⁵Ibid., 18.

⁶Ibid., 177.

⁷Ibid., 19–21.

⁸Ibid., 231.

⁹Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948; reprint, Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1951), 3.

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

¹¹Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Books, 1949), 60–1.

¹²Ibid., 48–9, 56, 87, 115.

¹³Ibid., 138, 153, 155–6, 176–7.

¹⁴Ibid., 225; see also 118, 150, 154, 208.

¹⁵Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995; reprint, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 85.

¹⁶Merton, *Conjectures*, 33, 177, 231, 307.

¹⁷Ibid., 112.

¹⁸Ibid., 251–2.

¹⁹Ibid., 128, 143, 175, 297.

²⁰Ibid., 144.

²¹Ibid., 157–8.

²²Ibid., 143.

²³Ibid., 114. See also 300–5.

²⁴Ibid., 95–6.

²⁵Ibid., 224, 273.

²⁶Merton, *Seeds*, 142.

²⁷Merton, *Conjectures*, 71, 286.

²⁸Ibid., 18.

²⁹Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 20.

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