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Harrison White

Harrison White (b. 1930) is one of the most original contemporary sociologists and a true pioneer who deservedly enjoys “the reputation of having started many sociological revolutions” (Abbott 1994: 985). The bulk of his production extends across many research areas and includes a number of novelties have helped reshape the modes of inquiry in several sub-fields of the discipline. For instance, *Canvases and Careers* (White & White 1965) has is widely considered to be “a modern classic” (Fyfe 1996: 772) in sociology of art and “a precursor of the production of culture perspective” (Riggins 1985: 244). The well-known notion of ‘vacancy chains’ (White 1970) is considered to have put forth “a radically different way of thinking about labor and organizations” (Stewman 1986: 214) and to have “turned [mobility research] on its head” (Coleman 1990: 714). Moreover, in *Identity and Control* (1992), White undertakes an unprecedented attempt to develop a general conceptual framework built on the theoretical and methodological premises of the social network analysis, and the end-result is an approach, which challenges much of conventional sociological thinking (Abbott 1994; Tilly 1993). Finally, and at the most profound level of his sociological thought, White is indisputably one of the most influential pioneers of the social network analysis, and has played a major role in the process of establishment and elaboration of this tradition.

Yet, such accreditations normally regard White’s specific contributions, and the full range of his methodological approach remains uncharted and awaits systematic exploration – a task that appears indispensable if we are to understand the source of his sustained ability to deliver significant novelties. What follows below however is an attempt to fill this void by highlighting some of the main aspects of White s conception and practice of sociological inquiry.

Mathematical Models, Analytical Case Studies and General Social Logics

White is primarily known as a model-builder, and for many observers his name is mainly associated with the abstract mathematical models that he has contrived over the years. This is a well-founded reputation of course, as making formal models stands out as a prominent and persistent feature of White’s scientific endeavor, dating back to his first publications in theoretical physics in the 1950s and continuing up to his most recent writings on production markets in the last two or three decades. Yet, neither the prominence nor the brilliance of these models should overshadow White’s deep-seated commitment to close, empirical investigation of social reality – a defining feature of his sociological thought that, rooted in his initial training in social sciences, finds a number of distinct expressions.

For one thing, this commitment should not be mistaken for an endorsement of the common mode of sociological inquiry known as survey analysis, which in his view fails with regard to the ultimate purpose of sociological research, notably the delivery of detailed causal accounts of the observed phenomena. More specifically, this mode of analysis according to White, concerns itself mostly with elaborating on statistically constructed entities, defined based on some attributes, which not-seldom are arbitrarily chosen and ascribed. Moreover, according to White, this mode of analysis employs a whole arsenal of arbitrarily constructed statistical measures to hypothesize causality among the constructed entities, instead of studying social regularities in the real world and the actual causal processes that generate these regularities. Commenting on the literature on mobility, White (1963b: 14) for instance criticizes the variable-based type of research for lacking specifications with regard to the actual “processes that facilitate or impede social mobility.” In his view, these studies can at best offer an abbreviated description of the end-results of such processes, failing to deliver specified causal accounts of how these results are actually generated. Many years later, he in the same spirit criticizes mainstream economists rather sternly for building on statistical constructs such as supply and demand. Supply and demand are, according to White (1981: 5-6) no real-world

phenomena or “no operational concepts to the participants” in production markets, and the perceived match between them “is merely a soothing tautology” and after-the-fact construction that masks the actual causal processes and mechanisms at work.

Dismissing this mode of analysis, White turns to social networks for a remedy. He finds social networks an apt analytical instrument, which, due to its focus on the real stuff of social reality – the actual interactions and relationships among the inhabitants of the real social world – has greater potentials of capturing the dynamics of social reality and dealing with its complexities. Social network in other words is a research tool that makes the analytical dissection of the phenomena under observation possible, in that it allows the researcher to map out and trace the numerous, uncorrelated chains of cause and effect and the complex interplays among them and permits thereby to produce finer-grained insights into and more precise accounts of the complex, generative processes behind the observable, aggregated phenomena.

This commitment to empirical research and the pertinent quest for detailed and analytically dense causal accounts of social phenomena take the form of the advocacy of penetrating case studies, which in White’s view allows the researcher to come directly in contact with the object of the study and to produce his or her own data on the real generative social forces and explanatory causes, namely the ongoing interactive processes. His own production catalogue offers several examples. For instance, in his doctoral dissertation in sociology White (1960) explores the impact of uncertainties inherent to industrial research upon the nature and pattern of relations among the managers of various departments within a medium-sized American metallurgical corporation, and does so by using socio-metric data that is obtained through questionnaires and personal interviews with the upper echelons of the firm, designed and conducted by White himself. Moreover, *Canvases and Careers* (White & White 1965) represents a thorough empirical study of the professional lives of a large number of painters in the Parisian art world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Based on detailed biographical material, the authors follow the careers of individual artists in and around the French Academy, and through meticulous information on training, income, exhibition occasions and critics, demonstrate how each artist’s career was intertwined and shaped by those of many others.

White’s preference for case studies revealing the causal mechanism that generate particular phenomena however does not imply a neglect of the more general features of social life. On the contrary, rather than confining social analysis to the description of singular and idiosyncratic social phenomena, White conceives of sociology as a *generalizing* science – a science characterized by a quest for identifying a limited set of general “social logics” which can function as conceptual tools for the analysis of apparently different phenomena across various substantive realms. On an occasion early in his career as sociologist, he (1968: 5) for instance announces that his prime aim is to develop “a few simple, abstract conceptual models, which are combined and permuted to explain observed systems in all their endless variety;” and a quarter of century later, he (1993: xiv) re-formulates the same ambition as an attempt to identify “familiar social logics in apparently different situations.”¹

Subscribing to this notion, White tends naturally to see mathematical models as the most adequate tool for pulling out and formalizing what is common and general in an array of particular, unrelated or dissimilar cases belonging to diverse segments of a highly differentiated social reality. To emphasize the generalizing aims of sociology as a science and to illustrate the potential of mathematics to serve this type of purpose, he (1963c: 78-9) compares three species of social organizations, which although apparently disparate have nonetheless “essentially similar structures”:

What point is there to sociology except as it is able to find and interrelate core properties of, say, a trio like feudalism (in England

1200), decentralization in the TVA (today), and the political pluralism in France (nineteenth century)? ... Quite a tangle: feudalism, decentralization, pluralism - different, yet cousins. A historian generous enough to pick up this symposium and read the affirmative articles may be shuddering at the wrenching of a few ideas about feudalism out of context in order to develop these crude analogies. Without context, concepts are not closely related to reality. But in their full context, concepts become descriptions, with little power of unification. It is the art of science to reduce the fullest possible appreciation of events in context to those core elements deemed essential and then to adhere ruthlessly to the abstraction while matching these core elements with those drawn from other contexts. Mathematics is the most incisive technique for such abstraction and matching.

That is, in White's view, due to their precision mathematical models are the prime instrument, useful in mining the common elements and features from apparently diverse real-world instances and in developing "unambiguous typologies" and "complete inventories" of its various occurrences (White 1963c: 82). These formal models are for him sharp analytical devices that prove enormously useful in mining out and abstracting the essential cores of social processes, mechanisms and formations from their numerous occurrences within various substantive realms of social landscape; And, of course, this can never be done in abstraction and detached from empirical social reality. Contrariwise, sociological models must, in White's view, be disciplined by rigorous field investigation rather than being derived deductively from some dubious axioms about the nature of social reality. For him, careful empirical groundwork is an absolute perquisite for construction of such models and in order to have empirical validity they need to contrived on the basis of insights obtained through meticulous detailed studies of real-world cases. It is out of this belief that White uncompromisingly discards as improperly constructed those models that lack sufficient empirical foundation, recommending strongly students of social phenomena to maintain continuous, close contact with reality through fieldwork and urging them to "get out and ask and watch" (White 1993: 15), "to look at [reality], to study it, and then develop imaginative ways to conceptualize and measure it" (White 1990: 91).

Seen in retrospective, however, White's prolonged practice of model making appears to have evolved around a pair of specific overriding issues, standing in the focal point of his entire work and weaving together his various models. The first one regards the working and impacts of social processes, cast in terms of stochastic arrivals and departures within more or less clearly delimited segments of social reality that can be viewed as natural open systems, resulting in the construction of a family of models developed for analyzing such processes (White 1962, 1970 and 1971; White & Christie 1958). The second issue concerns the properties as well as formation and reproduction mechanisms of social structures. White's attention to this issue begins with the analysis of kinship structures (White 1963), continues with block-modelling (White & Lorrain 1971, White, Boorman & Brieger 1976) and culminates in the construction of his market model (White 1981 and 2002). These two strands of modeling however are briefly presented below.

Dissecting Stochastic Process

Dating back to the late 1950s and early 1960s, this line of work begins with efforts to analyze stochastic process in open systems. White conceives any specific segment of social landscape as an open system of fixed positions, which, although maintaining its boundaries is nonetheless in constant transaction with its embedding environment and subjected to continuous in- and

out-flows of mobile entities. Mobility within any such system then is conceptualized in terms of arrivals and departures of the entities that keep entering the system, moving from one fixed position to another and eventually leaving it. In an early work, White (1962) develops a model for analyzing random and unstructured arrival, clustering and departure of people in causal, social gatherings. In another work, White and Christie (1958) put forth another model for the detailed examination of priority assignments, congestions and delays in situations where the entities that arrive into an open system and that differ in importance, are categorized and processed within the system according to a specific, hierarchical order of pre-defined priorities. According to White (1963c: 87-9), this model is capable of opening a new avenue to the analysis of similar delay and congestion processes across various settings like “suits arriving at a court” or “traffic flow on highways.” The core substantive idea beneath these models is empirically examined in the classical study of mobility within the career framework of the Parisian art world at the dawn of the modern era (White & White 1965). This segment of French society, with its clear boundaries, is implicitly envisioned in this study as a natural, open system in which the entering professional painters from outside are ordered, forwarded and matched into the available positions, according to judgments made by a central arbiter of taste and quality, namely the Royal Academy.

A few years later, White turn to mobility in labor markets, and incited by his dissatisfaction with the conventional modes of analysis, re-conceptualizes mobility as a stochastic network process that “enmeshed with contingencies” (White 1970: 1), is generated by erratic arrivals and departures of people and jobs. Such re-conceptualization is intended to make it possible to dissect the actual causal machinery that produces observable, aggregated effects and allow the researcher to “trace social processes at microscopic level” (White 1970: 328) and map out how strings of events chain together, crosscut one another and generate compound unforeseeable effects at the macro level.

The concept of vacancy chain and the mathematical modeling of this concept, which emerge out of a detailed examination of mobility within three American churches, is the analytical tool to do the job here, that is, to analyze in detail the complex intertwining of the sequences of cause and effect that vacancies generate within a career system conceived as an open natural system. *Chains of Opportunity* (White 1970) contains a rigorous empirical examination of the mobility and membership renewal processes in these churches and their priesthoods over five decades. Although in this study White relies on existing official datasets, he (1970: 48-51) explicitly points out that one of the chief reasons behind the choice of these particular organizations is the availability of detailed empirical data in the form of long time-series of assignments of clergymen to priestly offices, which provides the researcher with detailed accounts of the assignment of men to jobs for the whole population and which, thereby, makes it possible to infer chains of movements and series of replacements of the individual clergymen. Accordingly, however, a train of moves is set in motion when an initial vacancy is created in the system, due to the death or retirement of a senior clergyman for instance. This vacant position is then filled by another church member who, in his turn, leaves a vacant position behind him. He thus creates a new vacancy and a mobility opportunity for the next man who is qualified and mobile enough to move in and fill the vacancy. Such a chain, often created at the top layer of the system, can end either because a newcomer is called from outside the system to fill its last vacancy or because this job is abandoned and leaves the system. As men and jobs are processed within the system to match one another, they will produce long interacting sequences of cause and effect, which faring through the system, keep it in constant change and need of adjustment, with delay and congestion problems sometimes as a possible outcome.

Capturing one of the major, essential dynamics of social life, vacancy chain is “an abstraction, a theoretical construct” (White (1970: 17), which is “applicable to a wide variety

of systems of men and jobs. ... Jobs, as a category, could be replaced by offices in formal organizations – political parties, honorary societies, and so on” (White 1970: 318). For instance, marriage and housing markets represent processes that follow the same “social logic” and that therefore are analyzable with the help of same analytical device. As White (1970: 1) puts it, “a society in which frequent divorce and re-marriage is institutionalized would have a pattern of mobility parallel in form to that in a system of stable jobs.” Or, regarding mobility in residence in metropolitan areas, “many of the details and much of the argument must be recast, but the essential dynamics of the systems seem the same. Men correspond to families, jobs to houses, and vacancies in jobs to vacancies in houses” (White 1971: 90).

Structural Equivalence, Blockmodelling and Structural Analysis

Dissatisfied with the common notions of social structure, often underpinned by the attribute-based principle of partition, White dismisses any placement of actors in social categories created by the analyst through distinguishing among actors based on attributes like age, income, class background, ethnicity, etc. In his view, membership in social categories that are constructed by cross-tabulating various individual attributes or other statistical inferences lacks the causal power needed for explaining actors’ attitudes or behavior. According to his alternative mode of partition, social actors are clustered and classified with reference to the properties of their social relations, that is, the similarities and differences that are directly observable in the properties of the relationships in which actors are actually involved. Such similarities and differences are encompassed in the notion of structural equivalence, which in turn constitutes the very heart of White relational conception of social structure and the pertinent structural mode of analysis.

In White’s definition of the concept, the structurally equivalent nodes in any network population are those “who send or do not send ties of each given type to the same other sets.” White and Lorrain (1971: 63) give a more technical definition of the concept, holding that any network member “*a* is structurally equivalent to *b* if *a* relates to every [other nodes] in exactly the same ways as *b* does. From the point of view of the logic of the structure, then, *a* and *b* are absolutely equivalent, they are substitutable.”

The core substantive idea itself however has a long history in White’s work. In his studies on kinship structures in the early 1960s, White (1963a) divides a tribe into a small number of clans, each defined as a mutually exclusive group of tribe members who are structurally equivalent, as they occupy the same position with regard to marriageability and are interchangeable. As White (1963a: 28) puts it, “men in a clan are equivalent to one another: each obtains a wife from the same other clan, finds his father in the same clan, his son in the same clan, and gives his sister in marriage to the same clan.”

In the 1970s, however, White returns to this core concept, and in a series of articles co-authored with some of his doctoral students at Harvard (Francois Lorrain, Scott Boorman, Ronald Breiger and Gregory Heil) refines it analytically through the so-called block modelling procedure, which uses the criteria of structural equivalence (that is, the relational similarities of the actors) for partitioning and clustering the population at hand into several blocks. Each block is a cluster of nodes that have similar bundles of ties and are connected to similar set of other nodes through similar types of relationships. By the virtue of similarity of their ties, actors thus become members in the same category and share the same structural position. The procedure requires some mode of reduction is thus required to sort and somehow summarize all the actual relationships into a simpler, and yet sociologically meaningful, system of connectivity in the population observed. That is, as one of the main merits of this procedure, blockmodelling reduces the numerous relations that exist among the individual members of the network population to a limited number of blocks. It converts the overall complex pattern of connections in a context of multiple networks into a much simpler system of few, interrelated

blocks. Through the blockmodelling procedure, the original context is thus converted into a much simpler network of few blocks. Although the relations among the resultant blocks are more abstract than the actual ties among the population, the complexity of the context is reduced to a manageable level. Therefore, the blockmodelling approach is, in essence a procedure that distills the complex web of actual ties into patterns that are of a higher level of abstraction but simpler – “simpler not only in having fewer constituents but also in exhibiting interrelations which are more regular or transparent” (White & Lorrain 1971: 49). The final picture that emerges through this procedure is a simplified representation of the social structure implicit in the context, often concealed from the actors themselves.

So conceived, however, the suggested structural mode of analysis rests on the often unspoken postulate that ascribes social relations explanatory primacy, that is, the assumption that suggests that the social forces residing in actors’ ongoing relations are the ones with the most decisive impact on actors’ attitude or action. Accordingly, it is the similarity of position within relational structure, rather than communality of individual attributes for instance, that most satisfactorily accounts for the action of the embedded actors. Fully in line with the most basic premise of White’s ontology, this is a methodological assumption, which underpins his structural analysis and which finds a clear expression in his work on production market represents (White 1981 and 2002).

As White’s account of this most central institution of modern economy has it, any particular production market consists of a small set of structurally equivalent producer firms that, due to the similarity of their positions with regards to the particular stages of the manufacturing process in question, perform roughly the same function. These firms in other words are functionally equivalent in that, similarly located within the complex input-output system of modern production apparatus, they perform roughly the same function and manufacture basically the same product. In this capacity, they face by and large similar conditions both up- and downstream and, cohabiting in the same environment, share common types of dependencies, contingencies and vulnerabilities. More specifically, as these firms are situated in a common position within the overall production process of a given commodity, they process similar throughputs, consisting of resembling and often overlapping inflows of raw material and intermediate and outflows of equivalent products. Therefore, the events happening in the earlier stages in the process will have more or less similar impact on the quality, quantity and timing of the directional inflows of the multiple resources on which the operation of these firms depends. On the other hand, the structural equivalence of the firms means that they typically orient themselves toward the same body of consumers and therefore will be affected largely in similar ways by the conditions in the downstream market segments such as consumers’ taste and/or purchase power. It is on this ground – the general resemblances of the embedding conditions – that the feasibility of *rational imitation* as a coping strategy rests. That is, the awareness of the similarity of the structural position that they jointly occupy within the overall production process is the prime condition for the firms to consider themselves as members of a distinct set of actors or more precisely, as the set of the most relevant significant others who, operating under similar conditions, are the most comparable and therefore the most suitable ones to be imitated.

Mutual Relation between Research and Theory

The brief account presented above might suffice to illuminate White’s methodological outlook, inclusive his conception of mathematical models and their relation to empirical research. In addition, however, some remarks deem necessary in order to highlight the decisive role that mathematical models have played in the development of the general theoretical scheme put forth in *Identity and Control* (White 1992).

White's critical stance towards the conventional variable-driven accounts of social processes and attributed-based explanations of social facts, is joined with a rejection of much of the contemporary social science, being criticized for having stopped dealing with real and tangible social phenomena and for substituting them with analyst-made constructs for describing social reality. Out of the same empirical commitment that White finds unspecified causal assumptions among constructed entities inadequate, he also questions the validity of empirically unfounded concepts and theoretical schemes that build on such concepts, asserting that the concepts and theoretical schemes that sociologists invoke must be made empirically concretized and clarified, provided with empirically specified and determined referents.

It is due to this quest that White he calls for a return to the empirical social world, that is, to the actual social world that consists of real people who are invariably engaged in social interactions and relationships, trying to fit their actions with those of others. It is due to this quest that he finds social networks, not only to be the most adequate methodological tool but also the most suitable conceptual perspective. That is, in White's view, connectedness through ties and embeddedness in the tangible and concrete networks of relations represent the fundamental conditions of human social existence and the most crucial features of social reality. Connectedness and embeddedness are, therefore, indispensable to any adequate conceptualization of that reality and to any account of its constitution.

Therefore, regarding many of the most established sociological concepts – such as 'individual as person' and 'society' – as "myths" (White 1992: 8-9) or invalid objects of theorizing that do not correspond to any tangible, real phenomena. Consequently, he not only re-casts some of the most fundamental sociological concepts such as social structures and roles in network terms, but also formulates all the basic notions in his own theoretical scheme – *control, identity and discipline* (White 1992) – in terms of the interactive processes that unfold in multiple networks and the relational formations that emerge within such dynamic contexts. By doing so, he then paves the way for a network-based theory according to which social action is basically an emergent response produced, or a control effort triggered, by the actors who invariably are embedded in network formations – formations or *disciplines* which, although are relatively durable and stable, are nonetheless subjected to constant changes that reach and affect the embedded actors through the web of their connections, that is through the multiple, interwoven strings of ties transmitting, combining and amplifying the effects of events that take place much further away.

The Phenomenological Bent

As late development in White's sociological thinking regards his increasingly implicit quest for incorporating the ebb and flow of the lived experiences of the actors into his general theoretical framework. This phenomenological quest for exploring actors' inner world of cognition and perception and for venturing directly into the micro-space comprehension of their corner of the world and for restoring their immediate, subjective experience of their social practice might at first appear as inconsistent with White's advocacy of analytical modeling of social action. A closer look, however, reveals a continuity rather than a sudden shift. It suggests that this development is nothing but another expression, or further advancement, of White's persistent commitment to empirical reality. It suggests that it is nothing but another aspect of his characteristic thrust to approach this reality directly and without the intermediation of either methodological or theoretical, analysts-made constructs – be it the sleeping patterns of people in different cultures (Aubert & White 1959), or the actual experiences of businessmen in production markets, who, having only partial views of what takes place around them, try to preserve their identity in the face of the contingencies that permeated their relevant part of the world.

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¹ For a similar view see (Collins 1988 246-7). "The task of an explanatory [not descriptive] science is to formulate principles whenever we can: if there are principles which explain the general patterns found [across fields and scopes], then such principles have a validity of their own right" (Collins 1988: 246). ... "It is currently fashionable to be particularizing and historicist. A certain version of academic ideology claims that this is the only thing one

can be, that no general theory is possible. I think this position is self-undermining, since even its advocates acquire intellectual stature for themselves by rising above the plane of particular towards more general significance” (Collins 1988: 247). Without some general insights or theoretical implications with more general implications, “macro sociology is just another discretion of particular event.