CHAPTER ONE

CRITICAL THEORY AND HARRISON WHITE

"Ours is an era of identity troubles intensified, so it seems. This need not be a personal sign. Identities go much broader and narrower, much deeper and shallower, than our conventional notions of adolescent uncertainty about self."

— Harrison White (1993c: 196)

As I stated in the introduction, my interpretation of Harrison White comes from the perspective of what is known as <u>critical theory</u>. In order to make good on my claim that White has contributions that might be beneficial to critical theory, in this chapter I map out in some detail the terrain of the latter. I address critical theory's insights as well as conceptual holes, foreshadow arguments that will be made more strongly in later chapters, and try to see how Harrison White can be read as a critical theorist. The chapter begins with some statements about the purpose and aims of critical theory. I then move on to discuss issues of "structure" and "action," and point out some weak links in recent attempts at their theorization.[1]

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[1] Those readers who wish to skip this introduction and conspectus on critical theory may pick up the argument at a slightly more rapid clip in the section on "White as Critical Theorist" in the latter half of this chapter.

My general purpose in this chapter is to show how White's efforts at social theorizing share many themes and motifs of critical theory. Let me first try to be clear by what I mean by this particular tradition of social thought.

What is Critical Theory?

It is an ambitious undertaking to identify the purposes of "critical theory" and the station of the "critical theorist," given the sheer heterogeneity of what these terms mean. While one could go the direction of the late Leo Lowanthal — an eye witness to the scene and an identity in his own right — to deny the very idea of a stable body of knowledge, research and action of something called "critical theory," there are nonetheless interesting patterns in the genealogy of critical theory that can be discerned.

According to Jonathan Turner (1998: 546), critical theorists believe that sociological and social theory "must be critical of oppressive arrangements and propose emancipatory alternatives." These alternatives are thought to depend upon a certain "emancipatory knowledge" which is to say, "all cognition, whether philosophical, sociological or psychological, that aims at human autonomy and liberation and is self-reflexive in structure" Shapiro (1976: 37 n. 49). As one of the most valuable coins in the box, according to Charles Lemert (1995), critical theory can be defined as intellectual work that offers up a "critique of domination" (Schroyer 1973: 27). Its purpose is to "raise consciousness about present oppression and to demonstrate the possibility of a qualitatively different society" (Agger 1998: 4).

Critical theory can be traced to the works of Kant, Hegel and Marx (see Shapiro 1976) and to the critical appropriation of these figures by Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt

School theorists[2] such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. It was there at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research during the formative years of 1924-1934 that this body of thought became so named. With Hitler's rise to power, the Frankfurt members were forced to emigrate, ultimately ending up in the USA. Critical theory ebbed and flowed in the subsequent years, becoming a relatively solid style of social inquiry in the 1970s, primarily in the USA. Antonio (1983: 325) suggests that, "the American antiwar movement and the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia contributed to the appeal of an approach that was critical of both late capitalism and state socialism."

Another reason for the appeal of critical theory is its far-reaching interests and diverse readership. Critical theory has a voice in intellectual streams as diverse as philosophy, aesthetic theory, literary criticism, feminism and cultural studies (for review, see Agger 1991). More specifically, critical theory can be read in endeavors such as the communicative action theory of Jürgen Habermas, the genealogical probings of Michel Foucault, and the socialist-feminist arguments offered by Nancy Fraser. Although I do not address them in this work, critical theory can also be articulated in connection with the work of Jean Baudrillard (Gane 1993), Jacques Derrida (Ryan [1982] 1984), Pierre Bourdieu (Calhoun 1995), Claus Offe, Axel Honneth, Ulrich Beck, Richard Rorty, as well as a host of others.[3]

According to Max Horkheimer (the authoritative head of the Frankfurt School for most of its history), critical theory differs from what he called "traditional" social theory in its explicit focus on the social relations of "injustice." Traditional theory is produced

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[2] This is obviously an abbreviated list of contributors to the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory. See Wiggershaus (1994).

during the rhythms of the normal social-scientific workday, supports powerful corporate interests, the destruction of the environment, and social forces that dominate culture and humanity. The Frankfurt theorists were strong critics of this mainstream, positivist, sociology, and Horkheimer belittled the "modern sociology assistant, who must restrict himself to his pseudo-exact paraphernalia if he doesn't want to be fired by his customers" (Cited in Wiggershaus [1986] 1994: 397).

Critical theory, argued Horkheimer, is framed more explicitly towards issues of (in) justice, of emancipation, of changing social organization and disrupting social institution. Whether or not this tradition has had much success in this regard is difficult for observers to discern. Yet it is undeniable that, if nothing else, elements of critical theory (whether in, say, Marxist, feminist, or postmodern mode), have played an important scientific and cultural role in enlarging the story sets of actually existing agents of historical transformation. In other words, all had some "theory" of what they were doing and what was happening to them, and such understandings were at least partially based on, if not these, then equally important texts.

From my perspective, the best forms of critical theory are those that raise important general questions concerning issues of social domination and social action. It seems to me that the aim of critical theory is to provide reasonable sociological speculations [4] — but also perhaps the more quotidian witticisms and aphoristic turns of phrase — which, if remembered and reenacted, might (or could) have some kind of

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[3] All texts must make choices about boundaries, and I hope to address some of these figures in future work.
[4] Thus the difference between "critical theory," and, say, the musings of someone such as Pat Buchanan. His line of thinking is categorically rhetorical. His method is one of scapegoating, and he does not provide a dialectical theory of society.

beneficial consequences for social actors in understanding and surmounting the obstacles

they encounter in the networks of everyday life. In so far as it provides this knowledge,

critical theory helps people to dance around and over important troubles in their lives.

Critical theory's raison d'être is to offer "positive implications for social action"

(Calhoun 1995: 35), implications that are generated from a piercing analysis of social

structure, a critical account of how organizations are "made."

While discourse on obedience and dissent obviously can be traced back to the

beginning of history itself, Marx's work still provides the torch for much critical theory.

Yet his legacy to this tradition is by no means unequivocal, and one is hard put to state

clearly Marx's signal contribution. In truth, he had so many: for example, his thesis on

the "production of nature" (Hazelrigg 1995); his belief that machines should serve

humanity and not vice-versa (Postone 1995); his advocacy of a model of nonalienated

existence (his poetry of the future) as an antidote to the horrors of the present (Fischer

[1970] 1996); his dissection of surplus value; his class analysis of power relations

(Hazelrigg 1972); and his faith in the collective action potential of whole classes of

people to unite and overthrow some of the more miserable conditions of their existence

(Avineri [1968] 1993). Yet, I suggest that all these different readings of Marx neglect

another dimension to his project, namely his brilliant heuristic models of social

domination and emancipation — his insights into just how men do make their own

history but not under conditions of their own choosing.[5] It is my sense that much critical

theory today lacks this heuristic dimension — it provides little theoretical sustenance to

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[5] For concise review of Marx's key propositions, see J. Turner (1998: 159).

help individuals make sense of their own lives and to change them for the better; it contains little to help them "make new worlds" (Hazelrigg 1989b).

Where is the Structure in Critical Theory?

One example where the danger of critical theory losing its analytic focus may be seen is in a recent text by Ben Agger entitled <u>Critical Social Theories</u> (1998). Agger's work offers an exemplary case of some of the limitations one finds in standard critical theory and, to my mind at least, calls out for precisely the sorts of specifications that can be found in Harrison White's network theory. Agger's text allows us to probe the aporias of contemporary critical theorizing, especially its rather weak notion of social structure.

Though not a self-identified "structural sociologist," the word "structure" occupies a central place in Agger's text. However, the meaning that Agger attaches to this construct is quite vague. While Agger claims that critical theory should provide what he calls "total structural understanding" (Agger 1998: 12), he is unclear on what, exactly, such an understanding entails. To be sure, Agger does, towards the end of his text, mention various research areas which he thinks might extend the promise of critical theory in the twenty-first century — for example, studies of state and social policy; social control; popular culture; discourse analysis and the media; sociology of education; and social movements — but Agger does not take the step of linking up these research topics with a structural phenomenology of a critical theory of society. In other words, Agger's supposed "structural analysis" (Agger 1998: 142), is really quite one-dimensional, if not empty.

If Agger is not altogether clear on what the core analytic of critical theory should involve, he certainly knows what it should not. He contrasts critical theory with what he calls "hypersociology." Unlike critical theory, which "rejects the concept of social laws" Agger claims that hypersociology represents "the contemplative and hence conservative posture of mainstream sociologists who seek to discover and describe laws of motion" (Agger: 25, 29). Doubtlessly, Agger would consider the work of Harrison White and his colleagues to be exemplars of "hypersociology," a move that neutralizes their threat to the field.

Yet I feel that Agger and like-minded critical theorists can gain much from studying books such as Identity and Control given that White also does precisely what Agger demands of a critical theory, namely that he reveals "society to be a fluid field of sometimes contradictory social forces that can be redirected, given theoretical understanding and political mobilization" (Agger 1998: 30). Moreover, one wonders if it is really wise to go with Agger's renunciation of "all concepts of social lawfulness because such concepts forget history and renounce agency" (1998: 9), since a main point of critical theory seems to be precisely the determination of "laws"[6] to history and agency (Cf. White 1992a: 255-257).

At root, the reader is left with very little that is memorable after a pass through Agger's book. Agger's counsel is basically one of telling us to keep the faith. He does little in the way of providing heuristic models and dynamic constructions that we could

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[6] In fact, White does not really speak the language of formal laws of social behavior. When he does invoke laws, it is in a weak, rather than a strong sense, referring to them as "plausible suggestion[s] confirmed with some regularity" (White 1965: 2).

use in our analyses of social domination and oppression.[7] Sharing an affliction common to many critical theorists, Agger seems to be reluctant to get into the middle — the organizational — ground of the dynamics of structure and agency. One reason that White's project seems so compelling is that he does precisely this. White wants to discover "laws of motion," and he does what Agger says can only be done by a critical theorist, namely, explain "social history in order to gain insights into how history can be changed" (Agger 1998: 38). Harrison White, to my mind, provides, far more "total structural understanding" than is found in Agger's own work, if not the rest of contemporary critical theory.

Where is the Action in Critical Theory?

Another way that pieces of White's theoretical project might fit into the furthering of critical social theory is through its development of critical theories of social action, or praxis. In spite of critical theory's "practical" intentions, theorizing these issues have not, in recent years, been met with much success. One could argue that this has been due, in part, to the hegemonic status of Jürgen Habermas' efforts to move "communicative action" and techniques of consensus gathering to the center of critical theory, and thereby displacing to the margin questions of strategic action and political practice.

In a recent statement, Habermas said that, "I don't think that we can ever again, or even that we should ever again, bridge the institutional differentiation between the science system and political agitation and political organization and political action . . . I know

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[7] Perhaps Agger's reticence or hesitation here is understandable, since, as Morrow (1995: ix) has noted, Agger's "conception of a 'dialectical sensibility' lies at the Adorno-Benjamin end of the spectrum of critical theory."

that Horkheimer began his career with a famous article denying just this" (Habermas 1992: 471). Dahms (1998: 20) sums up Habermas' position on the theory/ practice relation by arguing that, "Habermas does not struggle with, and even contemplate, the feasibility of projects geared towards resolving a comprehensive mediation of theory and practice, which he considers impossible."

This attitude goes back at least to the time of Habermas' Theory and Practice where he effectively partitioned out the division of labor on the theory/ practice question in the following way. Habermas ([1971] 1973: 32) stated that:

> The mediation of theory and praxis can only be clarified if to begin with we distinguish three functions, which are measured in terms of different criteria: the formation and extension of critical theorems, which can stand up to scientific discourse; the organization of processes of enlightenment, in which such theorems are applied and can be tested in a unique manner by the initiation of processes of reflection carried on within certain groups toward which these processes have been directed; and the selection of appropriate strategies, the solution of tactical questions, and the conduct of the political struggle.

In other words, Habermas suggests that critical theorists should ignore, almost entirely, the "compulsions of strategic action" (Habermas [1971] 1973: 36). Questions of strategic action are considered anathema to his critical theory, and the result has been a series of philosophical cul-de-sacs on idealist questions of "ethics" instead.   As Johnson (1991: 189, 191), has written, in Habermas' frame, strategic action is depicted "not only as derivative, but as unsavory . . .. Habermas advances an unnecessarily malign view of strategic action." While it is easy to recognize, with Habermas, that tactics of "political struggle cannot at the outset be justified theoretically and then carried out organizationally," and that "there is no privileged access to truth" (Habermas [1971]

1973: 33, 34), it is still curious why inquiry into strategic action, <u>per se</u>, should be off-limits to critical theory.[8]

Following Habermas' lead, Harry Dahms has recently argued that "we must distinguish between theoretical issues and their inner logics, and practical issues and <u>their</u> inner logics" (1997: 211). Yet, as attractive as this argument may be, I am not so quick to divide up the political world in terms of "social, sociological, and critical-theorists" on the one hand, and the agents who strive to "overcome the prevalence of reification" (Dahms 1997: 210), on the other, as this bifurcation seems to unnecessarily reinforce already problematic dualisms.   The arguments of Harrison White, which run counter to those of both Habermas and Dahms, question this equation.

In White's view <u>all</u> social actors are to a certain extent sociological theorists. As he puts it, "Scientists of social phenomena are always amateurs, since those who make their living out of skilled understanding of the social condition are — almost everybody" White 1992a: 20). Conversely, all social actors, most especially academics, must strive to overcome reification.[9]

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[8] Naïve Habermasians who might want to dismiss White's work precisely because of this heavy emphasis on strategic action would be mistaken, however, because White's theory does not buy into the basic assumptions of Habermas' critique, especially the premise that strategic action is based upon some sort of rationalistic, utilitarian model of decision making. As Habermas puts it, teleological or "strategic" action "is often interpreted in utilitarian terms; the actor is supposed to choose and calculate means and ends from the standpoint of maximizing utility or expectations of utility. It is this model of action that lies behind decision-theoretic and game-theoretic approaches in economics, sociology, and social psychology" (Habermas [1981] 1984: 85). Yet White endorses a view of strategic action that does not endorse such a rational choice model, and indeed he is quite critical of it. Indeed, White argues that utilitarian models are limited in that they look at social action "in isolation from the matrix of ecological and constraints" (White 1992a: 304 n.12). White thus critiques the sorts of models that Habermas also criticizes, yet does so from a sociological, rather than a moral-philosophical position. As he puts it, "effective game theory has to concern the induction of identities and disciplines, of social organization" (White 1992a: 201-201 n.22). Furthermore, White has little truck with things such as "goals and preferences" which "are spun after the fact as part of accounting for what has already happened" (White 1992a: 8).
[9] Thus White mentions the "blocking action which is at the core of academic life" (White 1992a: 147).

Another basic point of contention revolves around the issue of consensus. While Habermas believes that consensus is not only a possible, but also a desirable social outcome, White doubts this is the case. From his perspective, the appearance of consensus is a corporatist form of the blocking of alternative meanings. He argues:

> Consensus is not, paradoxically, the product or even the goal of the collegial corporatist formation . . . [C]onsensus is the urgent outer face of elite control which can only stay in the shadows, given the brilliant light of consensus. Strings of dependency must abound in corporatism just because the obscure, real struggle is over control of strings. Control by corporates is counter to the reality lying beneath consensus hegemony, which itself is manifested on the ground in strings of dependency, in some form of clientelism. (White 1992a: 144)

In other words, White suggests that consensus is a mirage, a fact that social actors and observers and actors ignore at their own peril. One implication of this point is that actors and observers must then not only pay attention to the "public transcript" of a scene as it plays out in some social space, but also to the strings and chains of ties which constitute the differential benefits that various actors accrue from their positions in different social networks.[10]

Contrast Habermas' "discourse ethics" with some observations suggested by Jeremy Boissevain's work on social networks. One conclusion that Boissevain says he has drawn from his fieldwork experiences (in Malta and elsewhere), is that his research subjects always "fenced with values, modifying and selecting them to excuse or explain more venal personal motives." Boissevain concludes that, "Persons in conflict with others won not so much because they were 'right', that is, had morally the most telling

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[10] The "normative" question in White's work does, of course, loom large. Yet the common duality, e.g. communicative versus strategic action is mistaken, in that it assumes that these are mutually exclusive

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argument or defended more important values than their opponents, but because they had access to influential allies who could bring pressure on their rivals and their allies" (Bossevain 1974: 5). In the following pages, most especially in chapter four of this work, I hope that I can problematize contemporary critical theory from this sort of angle, and in so doing, move discussion of social action in critical theory beyond the Habermassian frame of "prudent decisions" (Habermas [1971] 1973: 32).

One could, of course, argue that my theoretical choices here are wrong-headed — that the primary goal of critical theory should be to elucidate the nature of the global capitalist system in its entirety and thereby provide a critical account of the triumph of the commodity form. Such a line of reasoning may well follow from Moishe Postone's (1993) recent work, to which we now turn.

Postone's Attempt at Rethinking Critical Theory

Postone's Time, Labor and Social Domination is important because it is one of the most sustained and comprehensive attempts at developing a more adequate foundation for critical theory. Postone's argument is intended to "serve as the starting point for a critical theory of capitalism that could overcome many of the shortcomings of the traditional interpretation [e.g. of Marx and critical theory], and address in a more satisfactory way many recent problems and developments" (Postone [1993] 1995: 15). For Postone, all recent efforts to get critical theory back on track, from Horkheimer through Habermas, have faltered in that they misunderstood the specific meaning behind Marx's conception of labor. Postone further argues against all previous manifestations of "traditional

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entities. As Boissevain (1974: 6) puts it, "Man is . . . also a manipulator, a self-interested operator, as well

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Marxism" (i.e. those who took working class movements as a guide for radical politics) and suggests that these social actors and spokespeople, too, got Marx wrong.

What, then, is the fundamental ground of dispute between Postone's account and so many previous interpretations of Marx? Postone suggests the rift is enormous.

> Marx's theory does not consider class relations, structured by private ownership and the market, to be the social relations most fundamental to capitalism. . . . [T]he critical thrust of his categories . . . is not simply to ground a theory of exploitation. Marx's theory neither affirms the capitalist process of production in order to criticize the patterns of capitalist distribution, nor implies that the proletariat is the revolutionary Subject that will realize itself in a future society. For Marx, the intrinsic contradiction of capitalist society is neither . . . between capitalist relations and industrial production, nor . . . between the capitalist class and the working class . . . Marx's theory does not assert that labor is the transhistorical structuring principle of social life; it does not grasp the constitution of social life in terms of a subject-object dialectic that is mediated by (concrete) labor. Indeed, it provides no transhistorical theory of labor, class, history, or the nature of social life itself. (Postone [1995] 1993: 8)

Postone condenses his very abstract argument by asserting that traditional Marxism has been wrong to critique capitalism from the "standpoint of labor," and that the point of critique should be, instead a "critique of labor in capitalism." The former mode of analysis, according to Postone, looks at only the immediate conditions of production, and, as such, is unable to point beyond itself. Given this, Postone thinks that "traditional Marxism," at the end of the day, only ends up "realizing" or "affirming" precisely what Marx wanted to abolish, namely, proletarian labor. While traditional Marxism successfully offers a critique of concrete labor, it neglects to grasp the forms of social domination attached to abstract labor.

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as a moral being. . . Pragmatic action is dressed up in normative clothes to make it acceptable."

What is most innovative and important about the Marxian critique, according to Postone, is its attempt to grasp the most "peculiar" dimension of modern capitalism, the "new sort of dependence" associated with living in a society determined by the value-form (Postone [1993] 1995: 149, 148). Postone goes on:

> [In capitalism] one's labor has a dual function: on the one hand, it is a specific sort of labor that produces particular goods for others, yet, on the other hand, labor, independent of its specific content, serves the producer as the means by which the products of others are acquired. Labor, in other words, becomes a peculiar means of acquiring goods in commodity-determined society; the specificity of the producers' labor is <u>abstracted</u> from the products they acquire with their labor. There is no intrinsic relation between the specific nature of the product acquired by means of that labor . . . This is quite different from social formations in which commodity production and exchange do not predominate, where the social distribution of labor and its products is effected by a wide variety of customs, traditional ties, overt relations of power, or, conceivably, conscious decision. (Postone [1993] 1995: 9)

Postone argues that it is precisely this centrality of labor as a veiled form of social mediation that not only differentiates capitalism from previous social forms, but is also precisely the locus of alienation and domination in modern capitalist society.

Postone's conception of social domination is, then, strongly demarcated from previous Marxian accounts of the plight of the worker in capitalism. In its traditional form, critical theories of domination have typically looked at the individual and social consequences of alienated labor in their most immediate and direct forms. In Postone's work, by contrast, contours of the "artificial negativity" of capitalism taken on a much more abstract nature. The peculiar nature of social domination in capitalism, writes Postone,

is not grounded in any person, class or institution; its ultimate locus is the pervasive structuring

social forms of capitalist society that are constituted by determinate forms of social practice.

Society, as the quasi-independent, impersonal compulsion on them, is constituted as an alienated

structure by the double character of labor in capitalism. The category of value, as the basic

category of capitalist relations of production, is also the initial determination of alienated social

structures. Capitalist social relations and alienated structures are identical. (Postone [1995] 1993:

159).

While Postone brings to the fore a neglected dimension of social domination in capitalist

society, his account seems to fall short in a number of ways. Most significantly, Postone

says very little about how his effort may help us explicate the nature of contemporary

capitalist societies. Few concrete examples are brought into his analysis as historical

support, and those that are invoked are borrowed from Marx's own Grundrisse. As

Postone admits, towards the end of the book, "I do not claim to have demonstrated the

adequacy of this theory as an analysis of capitalist, or modern, society" (Postone [1993]

1995: 394). Interesting words, these, especially given Postone's earlier statement that his

intention was to "undertake a fundamental reinterpretation of Marx's mature critical

theory in order to reconceptualize the nature of capitalist society" (Postone [1993] 1995:

3). More significantly, given its failure to address issues of praxis, one could make the

argument that, while its deep inquiry into the question of "Value" notwithstanding,

Postone's book is not really a work of critical theory because it harbors little in the way

of practical intent. Postone's approach is clearly critical and might even be arguably

"scientific," but it is not practical (cf. Fay 1987). At root, this omission seems to stem

from Postone's choice "not to address such considerations of the relation of structure to

action" (Postone [1995] 1993: 290n), an omission which takes much of the power out of his inquiry.

In a more recent statement on Derrida's deconstructive Marxism, Postone (1998) further elaborates his theory. Although noting some innovative aspects to Derrida's book, <u>Specters of Marx</u>, Postone claims that Derrida's argument falls short insofar as it does not embrace a social critique of capitalism. Postone argues "that an adequate social critique today must seriously engage the problematic of global capitalism, and that the tendency to bracket political-economic considerations which characterized a variety of critical approaches in the past two decades no longer is tenable" (Postone 1998: 370). Postone writes that the sorts of critical theory popularized in the 1960s are no longer applicable to our current historical condition. Postone wants a clean decoupling from previous interpretations of Marx and critical theory. He argues: "[T]he conditions of post-Fordist critical thought have changed dramatically since 1989, and . . . many of the issues of the 1960s that subsequently impelled such critical thought for several decades have become historically anachronistic" (Postone 1998: 378).

But surely the compulsions to which Postone alludes were around well before 1989. Yet Postone sees most manifestations of work in critical theory as being epiphenomenal, as he seems to marginalize all social and natural phenomena that are not <u>directly related</u> to his <u>problematic of global capitalism</u>. No longer relevant, Postone claims, are critical theories that embrace "the importance of contingency, resistance, culture, and the non-state-bureaucratic political sphere" (Postone 1998: 378). Again, in this article, Postone is quiescent on how we might go about prying open his "problematic of global capitalism."

Rather than the lofty heights to which Postone's theory soars, I attempt in the following chapters to sketch the outlines of a critical theory of middle range (Cf. Dahms 1998: 48). While Postone is adept at getting to the roots of abstract domination in modern capitalist society, he is not so proficient in explicating the mechanisms or networks of control which keep everything in place. The deciding question, of course, is whether Postone's text open up a space for more detailed and specific analyses of domination in modern society, and in this effort, I think his work fails.

Furthermore, I am not so confident as Postone that critical theorists should relinquish cultural critique. As Hazelrigg wrote in an early work: "[A] Marxian project of theorizing, if it is faithful to its namesake, must speak not merely as a theoretics but also and simultaneously as a politics, an ethics, an aesthetics – in short, as at least the imagination of a practice of producing life" (Hazelrigg 1982: 2). The late Gillian Rose ([1981] 1995: 219) makes the same basic point in a slightly different way: "The very notion of a Marxism, that is, that Marx's ideas are not realized, implies that Marxism is a culture, the very thing of which it has no idea." Leaving out these cultural elements for the sake of a more "pure," critical theory of political and economic issues seems to be a step backward. Just what social universe does Postone think he is living in when he asks us to think of economic issues without culture, of the problematic of global capitalism without contingency, resistance, and the non-state-bureaucratic political sphere?

While I will leave it up to another scholar to provide a comparative analysis and critique of Postone and Harrison White, respectively, I would just like to observe that, from the perspective of White's theory program, Postone's theory of domination seems far too determinist and heavy. White explodes the notion of a single dominance ordering

or logic to society, and his theory suggests a lot more movement on the part of social actors than Postone is willing to admit. Unlike Postone, White does not see "society" "as the quasi-independent, impersonal compulsion" which dominates individuals under capitalism. White's critique (which, as we shall see, is bound up in social ties, networks, stories, and social disciplines), is a lot cleaner than this. While said aspects of social structure are obviously bound up with Postone's notion of the "pervasive structuring social forms of capitalist society that are constituted by determinate forms of social practice," in my view White is better than Postone in revealing the inner mechanics of these social forms themselves. As White (1973) himself put it during his study of Marx, within Marxism, there is "no sense of concrete, large networks in the theory itself."

Continuing with the Critique from the Standpoint of Labor

Postone's efforts not withstanding, critical theorizing from the traditional "standpoint of labor" is not altogether dead nor anachronistic. If the labor movements in Western countries seemed defeated in the 1980s, in the 1990s there have been serious comebacks. Who would have thought even as recently as 1995, that in 1999 the American Medical Association would be planning a unionization drive? Labor organizing among graduate students, temporary workers, French farmers, people of color, and mammoth protests against organizations like the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank could very well indicate that working people cannot be written off as radical actors on the political scene.[11]

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[11] See, for example, Corr (1999).

One recent statement that continues this labor centered line of theorizing and thereby strives to concretize the relationship between critical theory and Marxism can be seen in the work of Dana Cloud (1994). Building on the efforts of British academic and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) member Alex Callinicos, Cloud argues that postmodernist theories of discourse and identity have had devastating consequences for leftist thought and political practice in the United States. Cloud argues that "Marxists believe that there is more to liberation than the articulation of alternative subjectivities; an end to poverty, hunger, exploitation, and abuse are more central, and require a notion of class position, agency and interests" (Cloud 1994: 242).[12] Given contemporary theorists' alleged distance from and antagonism toward the "working class," Cloud claims that American intellectuals have been sucked into a cloud chamber of idealism and that postmodernist discourse itself "is attractive to intellectuals as a way to justify continued lack of engagements in non-academic radical politics" (Cloud 1994: 242).

While it strikes me that much in Cloud's critique is worth listening to, on an analytical level, he provides little sustenance. Cloud decries the "move away from structuralist explanations of society and discourse," (Cloud 1994: 243), but then offers no insight concerning how this situation may be ameliorated. Surely a "structuralist" approach requires more than simply psychologizing the motivations of leading intellectuals. Moreover, Cloud's "working class" is a very static entity. Lip service is paid, to be sure, to issues of agency. Like the works he criticizes, however, Cloud pays little attention to theorizing the dynamics of action. Certainly the "working class" has the

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[12] There is an awareness of some of these issues in some portions of the "network" literature. As Doug McAdam (1988: 13) has noted, "Persons in the upper classes <u>do</u> tend to have more control over their environments than those in the lower classes. Certainly they have more resources – money, education,

capability to "stop production and bring the profit-making system down" (Cloud 1994: 242), but what if the social processes that cause this to happen are not necessarily intrinsic to an identity called the "working class"? What if, in other words, there are more general approaches to getting such action? This is the trajectory that I will be pursuing in chapter four. Perhaps the point is not to look to the "working class" for fresh action, but rather to analyze "fresh action" with an eye towards theorizing working class social movements, and networks of domination more generally.

Nancy Fraser and the Feminist Approach to Critical Theory

I hope that the critical perspective of Harrison White that I lay out in the following pages also manages to articulate similar sorts of concerns to those found in feminist and radical social theory. As an exemplar of this tradition, Nancy Fraser's influence on the trajectory of critical theory in the 1980s and 1990s has been enormous.   She sites her theoretical work in the spirit of the early Marx. As she writes: "To my mind, no one has yet improved on Marx's 1843 definition of critical theory as 'the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age'" (Fraser 1989: 113). While a laudable proclamation, is this antiquated message really precise enough for mapping the vicissitudes and contradictions of our <u>own</u> age?   More specifically, just which struggles and what wishes should be singled out for analysis in a critical theory, and what are the social mechanisms that make them so? What are the social-structural contexts in which social events play themselves out and how do we map them?   These are questions left largely unanswered by Fraser's critical theory.

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social contacts, etc. – with which to try to shape their environments. They are thus more apt to experience

What stands out in Fraser's writing is the strong and active commitment to members of progressive social movements. As Judith Butler (1997: 39) comments, Fraser "insists that such movements have everything to do with social justice, and argues that any left movement must respond to their challenges." Fraser states her program for critical theory in the following:

> A critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical identification. The questions it asks and the models it designs are informed by that identification and interest . . . And [a critical social theory] would demystify as ideological any rival approaches that obfuscated those relations (Fraser [1985] 1989: 113).

At root, Fraser's (1998: 149) project is one "committed to reclaiming the best elements of socialist politics and to integrating them with the best elements of the politics of the 'new social movements.'"

While sympathetic to Fraser's approach, there seems to be a problem in framing critical theory in such a fashion. One conundrum is that Fraser in fact tells us very little about how social movement mobilization operates, by slighting questions of agency and too heavily falling back on concerns such as recognition[13] and inclusionary discourse.

A more fundamental difficulty associated with Fraser's heavy reliance on "oppositional social movements," is that she seems to be invoking a claim similar to Althusser's statement that, "It is the masses — the exploited masses, that is, the exploited social classes — which make history" (in Hazelrigg 1989b: 240). This statement seems to carry with it the implication that the "masses" should be, for critical theorists, the main object/ reference of inquiry. But such a claim, as Hazelrigg has

their world as malleable and themselves as master of their fate, than those who are less well off."

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pointed out, "is marked by an ellipsis . . . for to claim that 'the <u>exploited</u> masses, that is, the exploited social classes,' make history is to seemingly imply that somehow 'the exploiting classes' do not" (Hazelrigg 1989b: 241).[14] In other words, equal insights and leads for research could and should be found by way of analyses of, for example, <u>non</u>-oppositional social movements.

Pierre Bourdieu voices a similar critique in a slightly different hue when he states that critical theorists shoot themselves in the foot when they "limit their investigations to specialties that are perceived as inferior (race relations, women's issues, and similar topics) and leave to the dominant not only the methods that are held to be noblest but also the empirical objects that are most prestigious" (Bourdieu 1991: 383). David Harvey's point on the issue is also apropos. He writes,

> One of the least admirable traits of political argument in recent times has been the romantic turn in radical politics towards "voices from the margins" as somehow more authentic, less corrupt, and therefore more revolutionary. The idea is that there are those who are so radically "other," so radically outside of the dominant systems of determination, so marginal in relation to the iron cage of circular and cumulative causation, that they and only they have the capacity to see through the fetishisms that fool the rest of us. They and only they have the capacity to generate radical change. (Harvey 1996: 100)

A final problem with Fraser's research program for critical theory is that it privileges one particular style of democracy, one that privileges the "parity of participation in social life" (Fraser 1998: 145). In contrast to such arguments — which resonate with Rousseauian and Habermasian models of optimal political participation — I suggest that

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[13] For a critique of such a concept of recognition, see Rorty (2000).
[14] Fraser's approach also implicitly seems to reinforce what Rorty (1998b) has referred to as the "cult of the poor" within leftist theory.

Harrison White's general theory of action tries to push thinking about issues of democracy into a different orbit. While I will be fleshing out this argument more thoroughly in later chapters, I would like to preface those remarks with a few statements here.

At root, all critical theories are interested in one form of democracy or another. Yet there is more than one way to be a democrat. Berkeley political scientist Eric Schickler (1994: 176-177), for example, conceptualizes "democracy as an ethos of opposition to unnecessary hierarchies." Arguing against theories that posit the desirability of an all inclusive, "town-meeting," sort of democratic public sphere, Schickler argues that

> [T]he democrat's objective . . . should be to call into question social structures of domination . . .
> The goal of this enterprise is not necessarily the elimination of elites of hierarchy, but rather to
> render elite control more tenuous through the generation of counter-elites and the undermining of
> existing constellations of power . . . [T]he goal of the democratization is to render elite control
> more tenuous rather than to maximize participation. (Schickler 1994: 177, 179)

Through his extensive writings on how to break the strangling embeddings of hierarchical pecking orders, it seems to me that White follows a somewhat similar agenda.

I hope that my arguments will help critical theory further clarify its relationship to practice by more successfully thematizing the social dynamics of agency and context. As I mentioned before, a key principle that drives Harrison White's work is the notion of self-similarity.[15] Applied to the realm of action or praxis, this means that historical actors of a very macro scope may get action in much the same way that actors do on more local levels of social structure. In other words, we don't have to wait around for a historical

subject to arrive on the scene before we theorize issues of agency, <u>viz</u>. "the <u>real</u>
movement which abolishes the present state of things," (Marx [1845-46] 1978: 162) as
we can see these dynamics in the here-and-now all around us.

Reification and Blocking Action

In his article "Beyond the Carousel of Reification," Harry Dahms states that "we must
engender a practical turn in critical theory, in terms of a 'syncretic' approach to practice"
(Dahms 1998: 8). By this, Dahms means an approach that analytically distinguishes, but
also merges, theoretical with practical issues.

Dahms' approach bears some resemblance with the sketch of critical theory I am
outlining here. In addition to agreeing with his comments about critical theory's practical
turn, Dahms' statements about the necessity of a "comparative" approach to theory shares
much with my critical appropriation of Harrison White. But rather than comparing
"societies" on the basis of some already accepted criteria, White's approach makes
analytic discriminations on other important grounds.[16]

In his essay, Dahms takes as his object of inquiry the category of reification (in
German, "thingification"), so central to the work of Lukács, Adorno, and Habermas.
Simply put, Dahms asks whither the study of reification in the present era, and more
specifically in the United States. Reification, Dahms argues is caused by "the mind-
numbing pseudo-divinity of capitalist production," and can be defined as "an
impoverishment of our ability to conceive of reality from a variety of social, political and

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[15] Compare James C. Scott's analysis, one that "begins with the premise that structurally similar forms of
domination will bear a family resemblance to one another" (Scott 1990: x).

philosophical standpoints" (Dahms 1998: 2, 1). Yet, according to Dahms, reification has slipped out of the conceptual arsenal of most critical theorists. He would like to see it once again become a core sociological construct, but acknowledges this is difficult to achieve since reification is not particularly "concrete and directly detectable" (Dahms 1998: 23).

Possibly, Harrison White's notion of "blocking action" could be of help here. Blocking action, White argues, concerns those "tendencies of action to freeze into institution or social organization, thereby denying innovation" (White 1992a: 245). Like reification, "blocking action is omnipresent," and all social formations, "complex or not, tend to settle into blocking action over time" (White 1992a: 149, 255). Under conditions of blocking action, dominated social actors become locked inside nested social shells (White 1993b: 84), and tied to "identities that absolutely straitjacket one through enforcement in everyday social disciplines" (White 1992a: 314-315).

Reification's emphasis on formal rationality and routinization is also echoed in White's account. As he puts it, "Getting action must continue to break up the hardening crust of issues and interests which continually congeal to block action" (White 1992a: 263-4). Blocking processes, according to White, are both caused by and express themselves in terms of some characteristic of social ties (whether extensive or involuted) that affix a social actor to a redundant culture, and who thereby becomes a helpless non-identity. Locked-in pressures and the hegemonic valuations derived from social disciplines prevent the actor from "switching" to an alternative social realm that might offer more control. White argues that, "control . . . comes only out of fluidity of role,

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[16] Where Dahms sees the benefits of a dialogue between critical theory and economic sociology (Dahms

because then one does <u>not</u> have goals imposed upon oneself by the social process"

(1992a: 211).

As I mentioned earlier, Dahms' endorsement for "comparative theory" resonates

with my argument concerning how White's approach might refine the conceptual

schemes of critical theory. While White would undoubtedly agree with Dahms' (1998:

43) statement about the importance of studying "concrete social formations," the former's

approach urges researchers to focus much more on similarities, rather than differences, of

process. To Dahms' (1998: 37) claim that "the most interesting issue should be to

determine how modern societies are different from each other," White's (1992a: 5) might

proclaim "self-similarity of social organization . . . [a principle] according to which the

same dynamic processes apply over and over again across different sizes and scopes." A

more fundamental point of contention is that, for all practical purposes, Harrison White

would like to abolish the construct of "society" in its entirety, urging instead comparisons

at "middle range of size: markets, work groups, [and] small cities" (White 1992a: 20)

White as Critical Theorist

The intended point of this dissertation is to make explicit Harrison White's critical social

theory. In support of this argument, I will try to defend three claims. The first is that

White provides us with new tools with which to discern the networks of power. By this I

mean to suggest that a new sort of critical institutionalism can be constructed from

White's theory, one which can make visible forms or sources of power (e.g. networks,

disciplines, identity) that are hidden or obscured from other theoretical vantage points.

1998: 22), I perceive an elective affinity between critical theory and network analysis.

The second claim is that a network theory of social domination grounded in White's work can round out assessments of social domination. White's theory, in other words, allows us to recast theories of social domination and emancipation in network terms.

The third claim I will try to defend and elaborate in this work is that White's theory helps explain how actors maneuver out of hegemonic relations as they strive to gain what he has named "fresh action." This implies that White's theory has an emancipatory intent, that it points to a way of transcending power and domination.

One way to explain the emergence of White's critical theory might focus on the deep epistemological overlaps with critical theory. The first concerns a theoretical plane that critical theorists used to refer to as "Totality" (Jay 1984: 13). Like the best work in critical theory, Harrison White shares a "willingness to assume a totalistic perspective and speak for all members of the relevant whole, whether it be local, national, or global" (Jay 1984: 13).[17] Critical theorists (as well as sociologists more generally) often imply that such a totalistic perspective is exhausted by placing social events and actions within what they call "social, political and economic context." White's approach attempts to delve even further below, above, and within these social contexts, in order to get at the deeper roots that make these terms meaningful. White thereby creates a new vocabulary for social observers, which, in its outlines, forms a new holistic theoretical system.[18]

White's conception of totality is no staid, inert affair. Rather, like Marx and the

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[17] Bertell Ollman (1971: 62) refers to this analytic perspective as "a voyage of exploration that has the whole world for its object but a world which is conceived of as relationally contained in each of its parts."
[18] While bearing some resemblances to constructs such as "system" and "whole," the concept of totality seems to imply more relational dynamics than the former, and its emphasis on a man driven nature trumps the latter. Yet totality, like society, is also a reification, hence the elaborate (some might say annoying) neologisms and vocabulary one finds in White's project.

whole tradition of "conflict theory" which followed, the essential social actors in White's

conceptual space "are in continual contention with one another, not in harmony" (Meyer

1993: 309). Harrison White thus offers a new dialectical social theory, one that consists

of "deriving structures and actions from confrontations of antithetical forces" (Tilly 1993:

3). His ideas are on a similar plane "to works like those of Habermas, Goffman, or some

phenomenologists, such as Scheler, Schutz or Husserl" (White in Swedborg 1991: 88),[19]

but they are much more radical in design.

Dialectical theories can be evaluated in a number of ways. Richard Rorty, for

one, suggests that "the dialectical method is not an argumentative procedure or way of

unifying subject and object, but simply a literary skill — skill at producing surprising

gestalt switches by making smooth, rapid, transitions from one terminology to another"

(Rorty 1998: 78). On the other hand, a theory (method) can also be called dialectical in

so far as it makes interesting theoretical statements about social contradictions. Bertell

Ollman (1971) suggests this to be one of the keys to critical theory, from Hegel onwards.

As Ollman (1971: 15) argues, "The job of the scientist…is to learn the relevant

information and piece it together so as to reconstruct in his mind the intricate relations,

most of them not directly observable, that exist in reality."

Regardless of how one decides to slice it, any attentive reader can pick up on

White's dialectical approach. One does not need to get far into Identity and Control

before one notices the "surprising gestalt switches" and rapid transitions in White's

discourse, all of which are indicative of his amazing ability to make dialectical

connections. In the first four pages of the book, for example, his argument covers the

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[19] More recently White (1998c) has suggested that he "is not in Habermas' game." According to White

social dynamics of sociology class-rooms; suggests that human social organization resembles "long string reptating as in a polymer goo," (White 1992a: 4); provides some technical commentary on the principles of "dispersion" and "self-similarity;" offers comments on the sleeping rituals of the Yanonmamo; and sees deep meaning in the way children pick teams for kick-ball on the play-ground. At times like these, White's dialectical method seems quite mad, and in fact he seems to share with Marx a penchant for "an insane discourse whose irony alone can express the truth of an irrational reality," (Kemple 1995: 68), or, in White's terms, of "the dangerous and weird universe of capital" (White 1992a: 261). This eclectic style pervades much of White's work, and occasion, seems to match the "severe style" often found in continental philosophy. As Gillian Rose argues in Hegel Contra Sociology,

> The severe style is so concerned to give a true representation of its object and makes little concession to the spectator. It is designed solely to do justice to the integrity of the object. It is distinguished from a 'lofty' or 'ideal' style which maintains the integrity of the object, but is concerned, too, that the representation should harmonize with the meaning. An object in the lofty or ideal style receives a more 'complete exposition' than an object presented in the severe style. (Rose [1981] 1995: 51)

While Harrison White's writings are obviously a long way from Hegel, White shares with this tradition a demanding style of presentation.

In addition to advocating a new perspective on totality, as well as new dialectical framework for analyzing social structure, White's endeavors share even more with critical theory. In his book, Critical Social Science (1987) Brian Fay argues that for a social theory to properly count as "critical" it must fulfil some rather stringent

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(1999d), Habermas has "spent his whole life writing prologues."

requirements. Fay argues that a critical theory must be simultaneously scientific, critical and practical. He writes:

> These theories would be scientific in the sense of providing comprehensive explanations of wide areas of human life in terms of a few basic principles, explanations subject to public, empirical evidence. They would be critical in the sense of offering a sustained negative evaluation of the social order at hand. And they would be practical in the sense of stimulating members of a society to alter their lives by fostering in them the sort of self-knowledge and understanding of their social conditions which can serve as the basis for such an alteration. (Fay 1987: 23).

Harrison White's work is quite obviously scientific, from his early and consistent efforts in mathematical sociology, to his more recent work on discourse analysis. In an early lecture at Harvard, he stated: "A fruitful approach in every science has been the development of a few simple, abstract conceptual models, which are combined and permuted to explain observed systems in all their endless variety . . .. Truths are not collected like marbles. Truth is an attempt to find principles of how natural systems work" (White 1968: 1-3). In later work, he stresses similar themes: "Certainly what you observe at a given moment is only there because of some underlying orderliness of process" (White 1992a: 7). More recently, in an interview White (1999) suggested that the beauty and aim of science is in "getting phenomena." The point is "not to rail against people," he said, but rather lies in doing "something positive."

Portions of White's oeuvre also fit the second stipulation offered by Fay, namely that a critical theory worthy of its name must then be truly critical. White is critical of social science and social relations in contemporary "society." Regarding the former, he is critical of structuralism, of rational choice theory, of "Mickey mouse" sociology in all its forms, of survey research, of statistical inference, of overly tidy conceptions of social

structure, and of unthinking notions of society and persons. Simply put, White's analytic suggests that most of what passes for sociology is analogous to sea foam while the real treasures lie beneath the ocean's depths. As he puts it, "Varieties of social forms may be agreed within a particular population as a linguistic convention and cultural frame without their having much reality on the ground" (White 1992a: 34). These conventions and frames (especially those of social science) "distract us from [the] frightening fact of social structure" (White 1980c), an object of social inquiry which White argues powerful sociological theory must contend.

White's body of work is also critical of social relations in society, both past and present. In his theory we find strong criticism of corporatist social forms, of hegemonic meanings, of unitary dominance orderings, and, more generally, of social formations and relationships which work to "block action."

The structural theory of Harrison White also has a practical dimension. He writes that the main motivation guiding Identity and Control is how identities (social actors) attain what he calls "fresh action" amidst the turbulence and skew of social order, and he strives mightily to provide guides through which "maneuver[ing] the social" (White 1997a: 53) might be possible. His principles of self-similarity, "a nesting of similar forms on successive scales" (White 1992a: 318) and transposability (i.e. the transposing of such self-similar forms in discourse and analysis) broaden the canvas of, and perceptions for, social action. White claims: "A world of nursery schools — children, teachers, parents, inspectors, leagues — is to be disentangled in the same analytic scheme of social molecules as a world of investment banking or the interacting states of 'the Arab nation'"

(White 1992: 33). He reiterates this view in his recent book on the art-worlds:[20] "Art is special in many ways, which is why we are so interested in and involved in the arts. But, at the same time, the social mechanics of art worlds are not so different from those in all the other worlds in which we build our social lives" (White 1993: 9).[21] More significantly, White offers insights into social mobilization that can be of practical use to social actors at a variety of scopes. In his introduction to <u>Identity and Control</u>, he writes: "By the rationale expressed in this book, practitioners of all sorts – including concrete-minded practitioners of daily living – must come to find the argument persuasive and also useful as a way to do other work" (White 1992: 20). At the center of the book one finds " 'principles' for intervening in social organization, for getting action" (White 1992a: 230).

In sum, this dissertation argues that White's key categories (e.g. ties, stories, decoupling, action and identity) can refine critical theories of social action and social domination, and in this they point to more sophisticated measures and of oppression, identity development, and political mobilization.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have suggested some avenues of work in critical theory that I think might be related to the critical social theory of Harrison White. While we are still somewhat

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[20] Readers who are accustomed to the view of Harrison White as a formalistic sociologist should take at look at this pragmatic guidebook to the art-world, as it brings out so clearly the practical dimension to White's <u>oeuvre</u>. As he notes, "The subtitle of this book could be 'how to survive as an artist' . . . I would wish [this book] to be as handy as, and to orient you as efficiently, as a nature field guide" (White 1993: xiv, 12).

[21] Charles Tilly makes a similar point in his recent article on social movements, stating that, "the endemic individualism of history and social science have long kept analysts from recognizing parallels and connections among political processes, parallels and connections that transcend geographic boundaries and scales" (Tilly 1998: 479).

distant from the specific utilities that I see White's theory making, in this chapter I have tried to create a space within which the following ideas may unfold.

As I stated earlier, I believe it is the mission of critical theory to provide systematic and parsimonious models of social relationships that are constitutive of (among other things) social domination, oppression, alienation, and praxis. It is hoped that these conceptual schemes will be of value not only to professional social scientists, but also to the public at large. As Manning Marable suggests, social theory is at its best "when it gives us some tools to empower ourselves against an unfair, unjust system" (Marable [1993] 1996: 152). When critical theory ceases providing these conceptual tools, it ceases to be critical, and ends up colluding with systems of domination rather than challenging them.

In the remainder of this work, I try to use Harrison White's general theory in order to better think about critical theories of social structure and action based in social networks. As one commentator has written, "we must stop thinking in terms of roots, and start thinking in terms of routes" (Grossberg 1997: 290). I hope that my project furthers such an agenda. Such an effort is difficult, however, because, as Habermas has pointed out, the division of labor in sociological theory makes an explicitly comparative approach to theory (see Dahms 1998) quite difficult, if not impossible. Habermas ([1981] 1989: 375) suggests that the situation has reached the point where different theory camps, "scarcely have anything to say to one another. Efforts at theory comparison do not issue in reciprocal critique; fruitful critique that might foster a common undertaking can hardly be developed across these distances, but at most within one or another camp."

If network analysis' paucity in theory is aligned with cultural studies' general neglect of abstract models of social process, an interesting fusion may occur and elicit "tangible plumbing for the poetic flows of culture analysts" (White 1988: 36). This will be discussed in chapter three. In the next chapter, I lay the groundwork for understanding Harrison White's network theory of social structure by explicating the genealogy, theoretical motivations, and central arguments of social network analysis.