

## CONCLUSION

“Mobilization cannot exist as an actual social process except as a set of foils and counterfoils. Mobilization means wrestling about ostensibly fixed and abstract claims ...Power, for example over engrossment and disbursement of social and physical material, is what mobilizing aims toward.”

— Harrison White (1992a: 55, 59)

Habermas suggests that there are two main purposes to critical social theory: to offer sustained critiques of human societies and to offer trenchant criticism of existing social scientific approaches that study human societies. Regarding the latter, Habermas comments: “Critical social theory does not relate to established lines of research as a competitor; starting from its concept of the rise of modern societies, it attempts to explain the specific limitations and the relative rights of those approaches” (Habermas [1981] 1989: 375). Given that Harrison White’s network approach may become one of the more “established lines of research” (cf. Brint 1992) in contemporary sociology, his work seems to necessitate an extended response from critical theory. Such a response, however, seems slow in coming. Although White is known by critical theorists such as, say, Craig Calhoun (1993; 1999), his work does not appear in much literature in critical theory (some reasons for which I outline this work). Part of the motivation of this dissertation was to bring Harrison White’s theory to bear on the workings of “critical

social science” (cf. Fay 1987), and to therefore provoke others to also place White under the microscope.

Aside from meeting my more personal ambitions — those interests meaningful to oneself that must accompany any project of social inquiry worthy of its name (Bentz and Shapiro 1998) — I think that this study has basically been successful. I think that the arguments and observations in the above chapters do manage to explicate how Harrison White may be used for the purposes of critical social theory. Although I do not think that White in any way represents a panacea for rejuvenating critical theory, I think he does offer new conceptual tools for the critical analysis of social institutions and organizations. Not only have I not by any means exhausted all possible critical interpretations of Harrison White, but also it is important to remember that his contributions to social science expand far beyond the texts analyzed in this work. There are still many different uses to which White’s theory may be put. Also, given the number of students that he has taught over the years, there is a large “White Tie” community in or on the fringes of US sociology, all of whom undoubtedly have a wealth of memories and textual artifacts which could be included in some future, perhaps more sociological, study (cf. Mullins 1973) on Harrison White.

Perhaps the major implication of this study concerns how aspects of Harrison White’s analysis of clientelism might improve the scope of critical theory. As we saw in chapter three, White claims there are two major institutions, what he calls corporatism and clientelism (see chapter four). A big problem, it seems to me, is that critical theory has focused for too long on sort of corporatist entities such as the State, “communism” or

the “public sphere,” and it has obscured and ignored the more particular structural dynamics of social networks out of which these social practices are constructed.

In sum, in this dissertation I have argued that Harrison White (e.g. 1992a, 1993a, and 1998a) displays elements of a theoretical system that can be used as important structural underpinnings for critical theories of society. I have tried to show how White’s core constructs of, for example, networks, disciplines, styles and identity, may give critical theory new tools to better describe social events and entities in “network societies” (Arguilla and Ronfeldt 1996; Castells 1996; 1998). If those who are interested take the time to experiment with White’s “final vocabulary” (Cf. Rorty 1989), the gamble of this work is that they may find some good leads for rethinking and extending the mission of critical social theory and critical social science.

I single out some of those traditions and perspectives that may benefit from Harrison White’s general theory in chapter one of this work. I address a number of recent contributions to critical theory in order to see where there might be sufficient openings to situate Harrison White’s arguments. I go on to argue that concepts such as “structure” and “action” remain under-theorized in critical theory, and that White’s theory can be of help in this regard. I also analyze some seminal texts in Western Marxism and feminism as emblematic of recent trends in critical theory and to show how they also resonate with concerns mapped out by Harrison White. While there are certainly many worthy contributors and perspectives to critical theory that are left out of the analysis in this chapter, I do feel that, on the whole, the exemplars of critical theory that I bring to the table are both representative of, and influential in, the discipline.

Chapter two articulates what has been called the “network approach” to the study of social structure and analyzes Harrison White’s position within this tradition. Although in many ways Harrison White’s approach seems to take much of the shine off contemporary projects in “network analysis” — as the term network sort of withers away and is replaced by more specific constructs — I thought that it was nonetheless important to include a chapter that provides a critical review of this paradigm. Harrison White continues — if somewhat infrequently — to stress the importance of social network as basic guiding principle for sociology and it is important to see how his work relates to other exemplars of the network tradition.

Chapter three is really the heart of this dissertation and contains most of its content. In this chapter I lay bare what I perceive to be are the key components to Harrison White’s general theory. I spend a lot of time discussing his idiosyncratic and unique vocabulary and how his terms all fit together to form a relatively consistent conceptual apparatus. I realize that some of my writing in this chapter is perhaps in places a little too expository, but I have tried to be more analytical with the most important concepts (e.g. identity and control), and to show how they are important for critical theory. A special problem arising in a dissertation of this sort (i.e. when the theorist under consideration —though important and influential—is little known), is the paucity of alternative readings on your subject. Many contemporary works in critical theory often take such multiple interpretations and readings for granted, and the issue becomes, for example, not what Derrida’s argument is, but rather whether or not you agree with how Rorty, Fraser, or Habermas reads Derrida’s argument. Indeed, most theorists today are probably overly interpreted and theorized by others in the discipline, a

fact that narrows the range of theory available. Conversely, it is a much more different thing to try to come to terms with an important theorist who is virtually invisible in the literature. Some of the statements in chapter three may appear to be little more than attempts at self-clarification. Be that as it may, I also think that these descriptions do not detract from the larger argument I am making in this dissertation — one that concerns the critical theory of Harrison White — and they could be bypassed at the reader's discretion.

In chapter four, I draw out some implications of White's analysis for the study of social domination. According to White, social domination is both caused by and expresses itself in some matrix of social ties that affix a social actor to a redundant culture, a state of helplessness, or prevent the actor from "switching" to alternate realms. After analyzing these three modes of social domination, I then turn White's theory of action. As we have seen, for Harrison White, fresh action involves the "spinning out of control struggles by identities," breaking "the stranglehold of pecking orders," and inducing "larger social space" (White 1992a: 70). My argument is that "fresh action" is in some sense equivalent to, and may help to bolster, critical theory's conception of praxis in that it describes and explains how identities — regardless of scope — intervene in as they attempt to control the messy clusters of circumstance known as social organization. Perhaps the best statement of Harrison White's potential for critical theory is the following, penned with Ann Mische. As they put it, social "domination means interlinking, reinforcing relation sets; when shaken up . . . these may provide opportunities for social movement entrepreneurs to trigger situational convergences of independent projects and story lines, which in turn coalesce into higher-level challenges" (Mische and White 1998: 715). In another context, White argues that it is the

“superposition<sup>1</sup> of diverse local conflicts [that] creates a fertile soil for growing issues” (White 1993d: 81, emphasis added). Statements such as these strike me as suggesting important ways to rethink questions of conflict theory and class analysis.

As I mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation is not meant to be an exercise in hagiography. While I do think that White’s work is interesting for critical theory, I do not think that it is by any means immaculate. In fact, from my perspective there are a number of questions that can be raised concerning how White has framed his project. It seems to me that there are at least five problems with White’s theory that diminishes its scope, depth, and utility for critical theory.

The first issue concerns Gibson Burrell’s reference to a “dark side” of social organization that is too often neglected in sociological theory. As Burrell (1997: 52) puts it, “There is little mention of sex, yet organizations are redolent with it; little mention of violence yet organizations are stinking with it; little mention of pain, yet organizations rely upon it; little mention of the will to power, yet organizations would not exist without it.” Excepting perhaps Burrell’s reference to the “will to power,” these aspects of social organization are also slighted in Harrison White’s theory. The examples that White uses in order to elaborate and apparently universalize his theory of social organization all depict relatively open and non-coercive social organizations. White does not seem to consider at all, for example, issues of criminality and deviance, and nor does he tell us how his theory sketch might apply in more explicitly oppressive social venues. As I have argued in this dissertation, although I do think that White’s concepts can (and by his own argument should apply) to these other sorts of realms (for example, White’s theory of

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<sup>1</sup> Rather than consensus, as Habermassians might claim.

‘councils’ might help in better conceptualizing organized crime or terrorist groups), White himself does not suggest how they might do so.

A second problem with White’s theory is that it may work to reinforce a sort of elitist or “professionalist” set of ethics that are not too far off from those found in so many corporate cultures (cf. Kunda 1992) today. Although White goes to great lengths to show that professionalism is in fact what he is arguing against (See, e.g., White 1992a: 223, n38), the key valuations to his theory of disciplines, namely the constructs of “quality,” “purity” and “prestige,” sort of rub me the wrong way. Sometimes I have nightmares of wandering through a maze of cold steel corridors while faceless bureaucrats whisper these words into my ears over and over and over again. One shudders to think about the damage that could be caused by a social actor who ruthlessly abstracts these valuations from their context and makes them into the ruling principles of social organization. I realize that White treats these valuations as tendencies rather than absolutes, yet there is something about them that reeks of TQM and seems too well suited to the ideology of the insidious “bourgeois-bohemian” class (see Brooks 2000).

Another problem I see has to do with White’s policy of rejecting “goals” as a way to get action. It seems to me that such a stance may occult the imaginative dimension to action that we find in, for example, Hazelrigg’s (1989b) work. Just where are the elements of “imagination and projection” (Hazelrigg 1989b: 248) in White’s “agenda for agency?”<sup>2</sup> The poetic dimension to human activity — the fact action is about the sensuous production of life — is either ignored or missing in White’s argument.

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<sup>2</sup> Emirbayer (1997: 306) seems to raise a similar criticism when he notes that, “What still remains missing from [White’s] account . . . is any systematic, normative consideration of the role of what Dewey termed “intelligence” in the intentional guidance and direction of human affairs.”

More significantly, perhaps, there is little in White's account which would discriminate between alienated or alienating projects of control [action] and those which are not so. While White's theory is indeed useful in analyzing identities and their action in network positions of strategic ties for control, an approach like Hazelrigg's gets to the root of why we are acting in the first place (see Hazelrigg 1989b: 265).

A further problem centers on the emphasis that White places on struggles for control, and how he neglects to mention the important insights and maybe even action that can be gained from losing control. Moreover, White's theory seems to gloss over the hesitation, undecidability, and care that also accompanies struggles for further and fresh control. At times, White's reflections seem to resemble almost a militaristic, veni vedi veci, sort of doctrine that mostly ignores how it is sometimes important to surrender control and pick up the social network threads at some later point down the road.

Such an emphasis on control is related to a final problem that I see with White's work, namely that it seems to assume that "action" is desirable regardless of historical circumstances and also implies that social actors who "get action" are somehow more valuable than those that do not. A Nietzschean critic, as well as others, might object to this approach as just another example of nihilistic theorizing. As Ignazio Silone notes,

Today the nihilistic cult of force and success is universal . . . Nihilism is the conviction that belief and ideas are, ultimately, a mere façade with nothing real behind them, and that consequently only one thing really matters, really counts: success. It is nihilistic to sacrifice oneself for a cause in which one does not believe, while pretending to believe in it. It is nihilistic to exalt courage and heroism independently of the cause they serve, thus equating the martyr with the hired assassin. And so on." (Silone 1994 [1955]: 58, 50)

Silone's point raises an interesting conundrum for White's agenda for action in that the latter provides no standards whatsoever for judging "fresh action" from other forms of social behavior. On the face of it, it seems that White's theory of fresh action can apply to dictators and saints alike.

These criticisms notwithstanding, however, I do think that Harrison White's theory contains much that is relevant to critical social theory. While working on this project, I have been trying to think of a more appropriate paradigm in sociology besides critical theory into which White's work might be placed. I have been unsuccessful. White's heavy emphasis on pecking orders and action makes him well suited for debates, for example, on social domination and action. Rather than dismissing it as simply incomprehensible, why not read Identity and Control as critical theory? One is thereby at least keeping White's argument alive and providing a benchmark against which alternative interpretations — should they arise — can be made.

Emancipation, as I noted in my quote of Sherry Weber's remarks in chapter four, is an obviously multifaceted project comprised of a variety of changes in network relations and realms, and no single critical theorist can be expected to provide all the answers. Indeed, the very request for "answers" may be misguided. As Lawrence Hazelrigg puts it,

Such is our quest for assurance of safety that we construct an assuring agent, clothe it in dim mists of a forgotten Origin, and name it this or that intelligence to be accorded our everlasting homage. The name may be Providence, Divine Wisdom, Nature's Laws, Natural Right, Reason in History, Historical Laws, Unmoved Mover — it is all the same. And it is the same when we ask the authority of a theoros to tell us the ready path to all that we wish the world to be but it is not, the ready path to our Utopia: asking the theoros to tell us that, just that, requires as our earnest the

presumption that there are yet ‘laws’ that stand behind us, or can stand behind us, as a universal intelligence — some sort of certification, scientific or otherwise, about an onward march of history — and to which we have only to put ourselves in harness for its direction, like ingredients in a recipe for cosmic stew. (Hazelrigg 1989b: 69)

What Hazelrigg is getting at here, of course, is the importance of willing — of positing and making the future ourselves. Rather than looking for answers and succumbing to an alienated absolute, better to focus on the sensuous practice of world making in the here and now.

On a final note, as much as I believe that there should be more critical social theory at the same sort of scope or level as Harrison White’s, I also believe that debates about critical theory should once again be concerned with the larger question of “oppositional writing” today. It seems to me that we should not overestimate what can be accomplished through holding fast to our accustomed rhetorics of social science. Furthermore, we must ask who is the audience now for critical theory and how can we go about reaching them? What would Marx be doing today with all the science and technology that critical theorists have at their disposal? Would he still be in the Reading Room researching his next book?

At one time, something like Marx’s “ruthless criticism” was the most dangerous game in town. It was a time when newspaper stories and speeches could indeed seize and move the masses. Today, oppositional writing expands far beyond these particular modes, and can encompass, for example, independent radio, dissenting legal arguments, folk songs, web-sites, and urban art installations. Critical theory’s contributions to oppositional social movements involve the rhetorics and poetics of the written word and the scholastic world, and in fact critical theory plays a very limited role in the latter. The

world will be a sad place if all the “intellectuals” and critical theorists stick only to their same redundant networks — critical theory must keep expanding and updating its social ties and projects for control. Going to conferences and writing didactic and analytical papers may no longer be the best route for critical theorists interested in social change given that “action and excitement and intimacy grow along research networks spreading outside the given university” (White 1992a: 122). Being a critical theorist means being active in many disciplines at once — expanding oppositional writing into domains where it would not otherwise exist.

As for the more specific aims of critical theory and political practice, I concur with Michael Ryan ([1982] 1984), who argues:

What is at stake, then, is a politics of multiple centers and plural strategies, less geared toward the restoration of a supposedly ideal situation held to be intact and good than to the micrological fine-tuning of questions of institutional power, work and reward distribution, sexual political dynamics, resource allocation, domination, and a broad range of problems whose solutions would be situationally and participationally defined. (Ryan [1982] 1984: 116)

I this dissertation I hope to have shown how Harrison White’s theoretical arsenal can be useful to such a struggle.

