

## INTRODUCTION

“Maybe [the] real point of sociology is to show to how to break out.”

—Harrison C. White (1971: 2)

Critical theories can be seen as tools for social action. Like chainsaws or welding torches, the tools one finds in critical theory need not be used all the time. How and where emancipatory or liberatory knowledges are made, depends fundamentally on the needs, struggles and contingencies of some population of social actors for whom the concepts and ideas of critical social science are deemed useful. The vast majority of human beings go their whole lives without reading one word of “Theory,” and indeed, maybe better off for it! But all human beings are always already employing some kind of “theory” as they go about negotiating their lives and as they try to get action. All have at their disposal various schematics and or stories that help them to discern, and to sometimes overcome, the workings of control.

Critical social theory can be understood as a more or less institutionalized exemplar of everyday insights about social conditions. Yet it tries to go beyond simple wives tales and urban legends by trying to be more systematic, comprehensive, and contextual. It interrogates and traces the implications of everyday accounts of social structure, whether written, verbal or visual and suggests new ways of looking at old social problems, territories, and matrices. At its best, critical social theory provides leads

by offering up new areas of the social landscape for study and investigation, and suggests new ways of thinking about radical change.

In this dissertation, I argue that one recent social theorist who has been strangely neglected by contemporary critical theory and whose work, moreover, contains a potent and important critical social theory, is Harrison C. White. White's critical theory begins with social network as basic text, and suggests developments in network theory could be extrapolated to concerns — long voiced by critical theorists — such as social domination, alienation, and “action.” White's theory is important because it catches on a perspective of social organization not typically found in existing literatures on critical social theory. My basic purpose in this dissertation — a critical articulation of Harrison White's writings on structure, agency and “network moves” (White 1993a) — is to expand both the critical and the radical<sup>1</sup> dimensions to his growing theory program (Brint 1992; Emirbayer 1997), arguably one of the key intellectual movements in modern sociology.

In my view, a book such as Harrison White's Identity and Control, should be considered useful by a discipline which, as Stephen P. Turner (1996) says, has “a problem with identity” (Turner 1996: 14). While the gnawing relativism of the postmodern condition has, of course, brought the entire edifice of “traditional” social theory (Horkheimer 1931) to its knees, this does not mean that traditions no longer rule in social science. Little original and new can be produced from institutionalized social science, since its network structure is almost completely involuted. Indeed, some would argue that we have indeed “witnessed the death of the disciplines of social science in all

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this work, I designate “critical theory” as projects in social theory in the Marxian vein that take the social dynamics of oppression and emancipation seriously. The term, radical, by contrast

aspects but the occupational” (Hazelrigg 1989a: 30). Reflecting upon the state of contemporary sociological theory, another scholar — a well known organizational theorist — has conscience enough to write: “Well, to put it crudely, folks, the unedited video, decidedly not for public viewing, shows that we are swimming in deep shit . . . [T]here really is little to be optimistic about in the field,” (Burrell 1997: 4).<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, I argue that elements or aspects of the theoretical approach offered by Harrison White can help us cope with social theory’s identity crisis and moreover slop us slop through the “deep shit” to which this author alludes. Indeed, as we shall see, this excremental valuation — far from being a vulgar assessment of the sociological enterprise — seems altogether apropos.

### **Who is Harrison White?**

Unlike Jean Baudrillard, Harrison White still believes in the social<sup>3</sup> and he is known by some as one of the most original and brightest figures in American sociology. With the long-term goal of shaking up and refounding social science, White has in recent years proposed a massive reworking of sociological theory. Andrew Abbott (1994: 895) captures the significance of Harrison White for sociology when he writes that White has the “reputation of a man who has started sociological revolutions, introduced new

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refers to getting at the roots of social phenomena through a major shift of epistemological frame (See Hazelrigg 1995), and also connotes a more confrontational or oppositional mode of politics.

<sup>2</sup> See Camic (1996) for a less sweeping and more detailed analysis of specific theory programs at work in current sociology.

<sup>3</sup> “If I ever dabbled in anything in my theoretical infancy, it was philosophy more than sociology. I don’t think at all in those terms. My point of view is completely metaphysical. If anything, I’m a metaphysician, perhaps a moralist, but certainly not a sociologist. The only ‘sociological’ work I can claim is my effort to put an end to the social, to the concept of the social.” (Baudrillard, cited in Gane 1993: 106)

techniques, and trained one of the finest group of students in the discipline.”<sup>4</sup> Wellman (1988: 23) endorses White’s work as among the most “sociologistic” of those in the field today. Harrison White’s influence and breadth of application can be evinced in debates in economic sociology (Swedborg 1991), cultural social theory (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Somers 1994), in addition to the more traditional network and organizational research perspectives in which White is already known (Scott 1991; Burt 1992; DeGenne and Forsé 1999).<sup>5</sup>

In the 1960s, Harrison White was recognized as one of the brightest mathematical sociologists (White 1963; White 1997a) in the discipline. In 1971 he received the ASA’s Sorokin prize for his book Chains of Mobility, and he also split the winnings of the Samuel A. Stouffer Methodology Award from the same organizational body in 1975. White’s early work now seems light-years away from his recent contributions. Eschewing “grand theory” for most of his career, White has remained little known in theory circles. Until recently, White seemed content with the idea that “a little theory goes a long way” (Gerstein 1999), and most of his published output concerned rather technical statements on mathematics and methodology.

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<sup>4</sup> In a message to White penned at a festschrift, Michael Schwartz (1997) noted: “It is almost mystical how you can transmit ideas and attitudes and ways of thinking and ways of living without using the tools we are supposed to live by” (Schwartz 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Harrison C. White (b. 1930) was initially trained as a physicist and received a Ph.D. in that field from MIT in 1955 with a dissertation entitled Quantum-Mechanical Calculation of Inter-Atomic Force. After a brief stint as an operations analyst at the Operations Research Office at Johns Hopkins University from 1955 to 1956, White went on to take the unusual step of earning another doctorate (in sociology), from Princeton University in 1960. During the interim, from 1957 to 1959, White was Assistant Professor of Industrial Administration and Sociology at Carnegie-Mellon University. The Sociology department at the University of Chicago hired him in 1959, and White stayed at that site until 1963, when he started working at Harvard. Excepting one visiting professorship at the University of Edinburgh (1973 to 1974), White remained at Harvard (first in the Department of Social Relations, and then in the Department of Sociology proper until 1986. He then moved to the University of Arizona, where he enjoyed academic positions in both sociology and also within the College of Business and Public Administration. He has been on the

In recent years, however, White has shifted again and again his style of inquiry, so that some of his contemporary writings seem close in range to exemplars of continental philosophy and critical theory. Like other social theorists in his generation such as Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard, Harrison White was struck in the 1960s by the social antecedents and ramifications of the student and anti-war movements. He mentions 1968 in particular as an important turning point in his career, one that was “crucial to loosening [his] views” (White 1973b). In an interview in March 1999, White stated that the radical student protestors he witnessed at Harvard had “no clue what was going on” — no concrete understanding of the machinations of social organization effecting and working through them. While by no means aligning himself with their causes, student activists’ did, however, instill in White a desire to probe more deeply into what he calls the “blocking of action” one finds in social organizations; in other words, how attempts at social change are largely ineffective. Prior to the tumultuous 1960s, White says that he wasn’t doing or thinking about “political stuff at all . . . I wasn’t thinking about any of this stuff,” (White 1999).<sup>6</sup>

Since the publication of Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action — a work written over three decades and which represents the core of White’s general social theory — White has received increased theoretical attention and, at least for a time, is at the center of debates about the state and trajectory of institutionalized

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faculty at Columbia University since 1988, and, before handing the reins over to Peter Bearman in 1999, was director of Columbia’s Center for Social Sciences during that same time period.

<sup>6</sup> According to Michael Schwartz (1999), White’s “relationship to the movement was mixed, to say the least... [White] spoke at a major protest rally, saying that we were misguided and that there was no antagonism against student activism in academe. He ran for election to the disciplinary committee that was slated to judge whether to expel students – on a platform that everyone should be expelled. And he fought as hard as he could to make sure that everyone who was expelled would be exonerated....And he read a

sociological theory.<sup>7</sup> When an American sociology journal wants someone to review the difficult work of Pierre Bourdieu, they turn to White (1997). Indeed, borrowing one of White's constructs, we might say that White and Bourdieu are "structurally equivalent" — they occupy a similar position in a different social network (or field). However, while many books and articles may be found on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, few offer a treatment of White's theoretical approach in its own terms. Outside the ranks of the committed in network analysis, social stratification, and possibly art history, White's work is still little and unevenly known.

In years subsequent to writing Identity and Control, White has produced a slew of work that tries to build upon the skeletal frame of his general theory. Putting on the back-burner the idea of producing a second volume that would follow from his master work, in the 1990s White offered condensed and effective phenomenological arguments concerning values, the art-world, the public-sphere, and network theory (e.g. White 1993b; 1993c; 1993d; 1995a).

### **Into the 'Deep Shit'**

As I mentioned above, Harrison White's general theory takes us to the heart of the "deep shit" metaphor of sociology thrown up by Burrell. One of the key assumptions of White's account is the incredibly messy and sticky nature of social structures.<sup>8</sup> In

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substantial portion of the important works of Mao Tse Tung, absorbed them, and then wrote to the State department outlining a strategy that would help them win the Vietnam war using his ideas."

<sup>7</sup> Alongside Randall Collins and Peter Blau, White headed up the lectures at the "Theory Mini-Conference" at the 1998 ASA meetings in San Francisco.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Marx on this awareness of the garbled and contingent nature of social structure, e.g. of class struggle, that "motley mixture of crying contradictions" (Marx [1852] 1994: 43). Marx comments: "Each party kicks at behind that driving forward and in front leans over towards the party which presses backwards" (Marx [1852] 1994: 43).

Identity and Control he goes to great lengths explaining how social formations resemble soups, stews, and polymer gels. Social organization for White resembles “beached litter,” “impacted mineralized goo,” “swirls,” “bubbles” (1992: 119,127, 129, 221), “heterogeneous glops” (White 1993d: 2), and “wiggly rubber” (White 1997a: 61). From his perspective, the statement that “we are swimming in deep shit,” might in fact appear to be an astute and quite logical assessment of how social actors go about their ways negotiating and acting upon (or within) social organization.

White shares Burrell’s frustration with recent theoretical output in the social sciences and acknowledges the near bankruptcy of accustomed, “Mickey Mouse,” (White 1998b) forms of social theorizing. But rather than turning away from the contradictions of the social in a fit of exhaustion and resignation, White advocates wading right in to the mess. He tries to tame the contingencies of social relations by constructing relatively parsimonious models of social process. The first step in such a move, White claims, requires clarity of basic theoretical constructs and dynamics, about “any basic constituents of social order, any molecules” (White 1992a: 22).

Whether White’s molecular-sociological approach represents either a good theoretical alternative to current scholars who are uncomfortable both with the idea of an “end” of sociological theory (Seidman 1994), on the one hand, or those who are unmoved by so much mainstream survey research, on the other, is not a question pursued here. Yet it should be known that White is one of the strongest advocates of sociology, and has no qualms about sociology’s foundational status amongst the social sciences. In a pithy entry to one of his working notebooks, White comments, “Economists are speech-writers for sophisticated businessmen. Political scientists are speechwriters for sophisticated

politicians. Sociologists and social anthropologists and social psychologists are scientists, whose chief strength is [in finding] ways to gather and squeeze data” (White 1981: 102).

In spite of White’s prominence and centrality in advocating the merits of the “network approach” to social structure over the last three decades,<sup>9</sup> White’s sense now is that network constructs themselves run the risk of becoming reified. Abbot (1994: 897) captures this sentiment with his statement that “sociograms are just water wings that White wants to throw away.” An overzealous faith in network analysis (and this is laid out in more detail in chapter two, below) White suggests, can “confound and obfuscate research.” As he puts it: “Ambitious MBAs, upwardly mobile yuppies, executives, social workers, journalists, all agree on the importance of networks. Since sources this diverse all agree on the advantages of ‘networking’ as social process, the term must confound many interpretations, and thus it confounds much social science fieldwork attempting to use network terms and concepts” (White 1992a: 290). The general implication of this statement seems to be, that, within the so-called network approach to social structure, it is easy to lose sight of other, equally important relational dynamics (for example, what White calls “style” and “institution”). Harrison White stresses that network analysis must address deeper anthropological issues of substantive social organization, and thereby acknowledge the fact that a “social network is a network of meanings” (White 1992a: 67).

## White and Critical Theory

While the contours of White's general theory of network structure are indeed important to the argument that I am making over the course of this work, I am more interested in unearthing and making explicit the critical social theory that one finds in White's theory. According to Charles Tilly, Identity and Control deserves a prize for "profundity, subversiveness, and obscurity" (Tilly 1993: 307). While I hope to demonstrate the profundity and lessen the obscurity of some of White's theoretical productions, most of my attention in this dissertation addresses issues more along the lines of the second of Tilly's designations. Some of the questions pursued over the following pages try to answer the following: How and in what way is Identity and Control "subversive"?<sup>10</sup> Does the book and related work by White offer any radical implications beyond the "disabused challenge it offers to all conventional social scientific wisdom" (Tilly 1993: 308)? Does White's theory display aspects of a new, critical and network-based, institutionalism?

While network constructs are often alluded to in social theory, and appear, for example, in work by both, say, Habermas ([1985] 1995) and Foucault [1977] 1980; [1978] 1980), critical theory has yet to elaborate a social network perspective (Wellman and Berkowitz 1988) in any sort of substantive way. As White himself suggests (1995a:

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<sup>9</sup> White refers to network analysis as the "most important advance in sociology in the half-century since Parson's first book" (White 1993b: 85 n27).

<sup>10</sup> In an interview Tilly (1999) built upon his comment about the subversive nature of White's book. He suggested that this subversion had four components: (1) Its deconstruction of "self-contained" entities, e.g. "persons" or "societies;" (2) White's simultaneous melding of structure and disorder in this theory; (3) His challenge to theories of action which suggest that unitary identities are somehow more normal and unproblematic; and (4) White's meeting the challenge of postmodernist theory. Tilly said that White's approach suggests that social analysis is not at an end; it is just the beginning. White's approach is a "very powerful alternative" to traditional sociology, Tilly concluded. It is "nine steps beyond the symbolic interactionists."

1058), despite the fact that “network imagery has spread into lay thinking at least as much as into social sciences . . . network constructs have had little impact so far on the main lines of socio-cultural theorizing and historical understanding — and conversely.” In this dissertation I attempt to bring to the fore a critical sort of network imagery.

To readers already familiar with Harrison White’s work, such a critical reading may seem a little funny, if not heretical. After all, on the surface White’s work seems to be an exemplary case of good, mainstream, “normal” social science. Indeed, until relatively recently, White’s work seemed to echo, for example, Alvin Gouldner’s criticism of George Homans’ perspective on social inquiry. Gouldner (1970: 396) comments:

The effort is to get beneath morality, to discover an abiding substructure upon which morality itself depends and upon which institutional survival rests. The aim is to probe underneath culturally structured social roles for the more elemental units of behavior . . . [The perspective is] a no-nonsense tough-mindedness that wishes to accept the reality of social life without the illusions of morality.

Indeed, some of Harrison White’s work — as well as that of colleagues and students such as Ron Burt and Mark Granovetter — could quite accurately be interpreted as an entrepreneurial or a business driven sociology. White actively promotes collaboration between sociology and schools of business<sup>11</sup> and recommends that sociologists read the Journal of Economic Literature. Using, therefore, White’s theoretical frame to speak the language of critical theory is by no means an easy task. The academic discipline of “critical theory” was surely not on White’s mind while he worked out his general theory

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<sup>11</sup> “I have been doing my best for some years now to get sociologists — students as well as faculty — into the business schools . . . Business schools are natural places for sociologists to be, and sociology is the natural intellectual base in social science for business schools” (White, in Swedborg 1991: 90).

of social structure and action,<sup>12</sup> and the critical implications of White's ideas in Identity and Control and other works have not, as of yet, been suggested by any other commentator.

On the face of it, nothing seems further from critical theory than White's existing corpus of work. Centered as it is around the "practices of upper management in the tapestry of big firms and segregated markets" (White 1985: 208), what would White's ideas have to do with the purported aims of a critical theory society, that is, a form of knowledge that helps to clarify the "wishes of the age," enlighten the masses about relationships of oppression and domination, and otherwise point the way toward "revolution"?

Yet White's theory does not, however, exclude a critical-theoretical interpretation. Indeed, he invites interpretations coming from outside the scope of his scientific canvas. As he puts it, "the chapters above can suggest for research many topics that are of interest independent of the theory" (White 1992a: 317). One immediate payoff that I see in White's "critical theory" is a conception of social domination that is more adequate to its task than one finds circulating in much critical theory today. As Ben Agger (1991: 108) suggests, "Domination in Frankfurt terminology is a combination of external exploitation (e.g. the extraction of workers' surplus value...) and internal self-disciplining that allows external exploitation to go unchecked." White's work is superior, I suggest, because his theoretical architecture (comprised, for example, of networks, stories, and disciplines), breaks us out of simply thinking in terms of exploitation and discipline and it thereby

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<sup>12</sup> "I don't think I have anything revolutionary to say, and if I did, I'd probably repress it," was White's (1998b) early response to the question of critical-theoretical applications to his project.

provides a richer theoretical context onto which more penetrating insights may be grafted.

White also elaborates elements of a much-needed interventionist, if not situationist, critical social theory.<sup>13</sup> He counsels social agents to actively create and manipulate social events to get what he calls “fresh” action. White sees real necessity in shaking things up, starting social fires, and otherwise annealing organizational and institutional rigidities. As he writes, “getting action” requires “somehow contradicting the inertial logic of interactive social structure among identities in networks” (White 1993d: 23). In Arthur Stinchcombe’s words, one of White’s crucial interests is in “the capacity to reorder the system in ways not determined by the system” (Stinchcombe 1993: 335). Such a reordering, White argues, “comes only through messes and fights, and emerges out of chaos” (White 1993c: 78). While sharing an interest in “identity” with social theorists who study, say, “identity politics” (Gitlin 1996), White differs by arguing that it is by eschewing, rather than affirming, a stable identity in some seemingly fixed social context that one manages to reach through to get action.

As I mentioned above, researchers both within and outside the network tradition have by-and-large overlooked the critical dimensions to Harrison White’s general social theory. Tilly, for one, suggests that “White’s scheme ... does not point to an adequate account of hates, passions, shames, and other strong emotions people draw from social experiences” (Tilly 1993a: 309). The only critic who even comes close to perceiving

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<sup>13</sup> “Events become important as medium in which already established actor-identities interact, fill out stories, and possibly lead to still further embeddings into identity” (White 1992a: 86).

the importance of White's theory in helping to clarify realms of social action is journalist David Warsh (1993).<sup>14</sup>

Yet Ronald Breiger does seem to acknowledge at least some of the themes I advance in this essay when he says that Identity and Control "is in the first instance a work whose own purpose is to offer a new phenomenology to the field of attainment studies" (Breiger 1995: 127). Breiger (1995: 131) describes White's work as "filled with suggestive leads about new models and analytic strategies" for attainment research. Going beyond the nearly differentiated schemes found in many stratification narratives in social science, Breiger (1995: 127) states that, "White looks in the opposite direction." He suggests that the "vast range and large number of ways of 'getting action' catalogued by White" suggests breadth of application not just across attainment studies but also social science more generally (Breiger 1995: 127).

One may readily perceive the outlines of White's critical theory in terms of his influence on some of the most respected work in recent sociology. The work by Mark Granovetter on the importance of "weak" ties is illustrative in this regard. Building upon White's notion of vacancy chains, Granovetter's thesis has become well thumbed and is now seemingly indispensable to studies of social attainment. White generalizes Granovetter's thesis: "It appears that connectivity is the essential to power: the key is

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<sup>14</sup> In a short article entitled, "Crave some meaning... Meet Harrison White," Warsh argues that White offers a persuasive antidote to the watery communitarianism of our day. Warsh claims that White's book, interrogates "the absence from our lives of a pervasive spirit of community," (Warsh 1993: 77) but does so in a far more rigorous and important way than other leading figures (e.g. Etzioni and Bellah) of the communitarian movement. Warsh concludes, "The bet here is that our much-longed-for return to civic liberalism really begins in books like Identity and Control in the Sierra Maestre of the mind (Warsh 1983: 77). While I think that Warsh is generally on track here, I claim that it is critical theory, more so than liberalism, that can better serve as interlocutor for White's theory.

being tied to the right faction through the right connection, whether in the Senate or in a family business” (White 1992a: 103).

More specifically, the following questions, but a handful selected from an appendix to Identity and Control, (1992a: 324-327), are indicative of the sorts of conceptual terrain that I see Harrison White traversing with critical theory. White asks:

- Rather than working on one’s relationships, is it nearer the truth that a person’s relationships work on oneself?
- When do executives operate in ‘corridors of indifference,’ and when, on the other hand, do they induce controversies and disputes in order to control?
- Does effective social mobilization entail switchings between rooted and travelling foci, between large and small assemblies, between passive and active modes, between single-issue and broad-spectrum programs?
- Why do people keep attitudes which are losing, that is, neither confirmed by events nor helpful directly to the holder?

Exploring passages and questions such as these, in this dissertation I try to make explicit the critical theory lurking in the margins of Identity and Control. If it is true, as Abbott (1994: 896) argues, that Harrison White shows “us the most important directions theoretical sociology must take,” then projects and interventions in critical theory must surely be included in this endeavor.

### **About Method**

It is one thing to conduct — as is customary in sociology — an inquiry into the work of theorists who are deceased or sufficiently “other” to afford the commentator a certain amount of intellectual insulation and protection, and quite another thing to offer

an immanent critique of a theorist who is by all accounts is alive, well and pushing into his eighth decade of life. Corpses, after all, cannot respond to misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

Added to the difficulties of dealing with White's contemporaneity is the diversity and heterogeneity of his intellectual productions (e.g. White 1963; White and White 1965; White 1988; White 1992; White 1993), from the art-world all the way to "spatio-temporal deitics" (White 1995a: 1056). Trying to place all the salient features of White's oeuvre under one interpretive umbrella would indeed be a perilous undertaking, one that I have little interest in pursuing here.<sup>15</sup> The pages that follow do not constitute the definitive study of White's corpus of scholarship, nor of "network theory" as a whole. Rather, my aim is to analyze White's social and cultural vision in order to elaborate his critical social theory.<sup>16</sup>

In this work I undoubtedly overlook key elements to Harrison White's project, and perhaps over-emphasize others. Yet any potential interpretation of White is complicated by the fact that Identity in Control, massive and innovative as it is, remains quite incomplete. At the end of his book, White suggests that he has produced merely a

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<sup>15</sup> As I originally conceived it, this dissertation would have offered a comprehensive interpretation of Harrison White's work *in toto*. After some weeks struggling in this direction, I soon gave up given the magnitude of the task. A deconstruction even of Identity and Control would take on enormous proportions, as it would have to engage in very specific detail the work of those on whom White's theory builds, namely S.F. Nadel (1957), Thomas Schelling (1960), V.O. Key (1945), R. Shepherd (1962), A. Rapoport (1961), H.A. Simon (1950), Stanley Udy (1970), H. Landau (1965):F. Lazarsfeld (1957), and A.M. Spence (1974), all of whom are not typically found in contemporary discussions of "theory." See White (1992: xi-xii).

<sup>16</sup> An alternative to the methodological route mapped here would involve reading and elaborating upon many of the cases White himself references in Identity and Control. Given the more generalist approach of this essay however, I have refrained from doing so much archeological or genealogical digging, partially to try to avoid Umberto Eco's fate of the "lunatic": "A lunatic is easily recognized. He is a moron who doesn't know the ropes. The moron proves his thesis; he has a logic, however twisted it may be. The lunatic, on the other hand, doesn't concern himself at all with logic; he works by short circuits. For him, everything proves everything else. The lunatic is all *idée fixe*, and whatever he comes across confirms his

“theory-sketch” (White 1992a: 317), quite possibly a collection of favorite theoretical portraits crafted by him and those that he admires. As Randall Collins (1994: 2) suggested in a letter to White, “for a big and comprehensive book, it is also just a sketch, a hurried pass over the territory, with many essential parts to be filled in.”<sup>17</sup>

While White’s book could well serve as a sort of Rorschach test for social theorists today, this need not be a stumbling block. With Hazelrigg (1989a: 3 n.1), I agree that “one mark of what comes to be consumed as a ‘great work’ of theory is its diversity of appeal to a great many different consumers, including those who otherwise hold opposing points of view.” Given the heterogeneity of meanings to be made from any text, I am not really concerned that I get White “right” in the sense of providing irrefutable evidence for one interpretation of his theory over another. Nor am I trying to be a mouthpiece for what White “really” means. Rather, I press for the more urgent task of expropriating Harrison C. White’s key constructs for the purposes of critical social inquiry.

In order to get to the roots of White’s critical project, I have reviewed the majority of Harrison White’s written output as well as analyzed a number of his important (though unpublished) manuscripts, lecture notes, and working notebooks.<sup>18</sup> Not only do these latter works demonstrate a continuity in White’s sociological approach, but they also help to elaborate constructions often left truncated in White’s published articles. Much of my

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lunacy. You can tell him by the liberties he takes with common sense, by his flashes of inspiration, and by the fact that sooner or later he brings up the Templars” (Eco [1988] 1990: 57-58).

<sup>17</sup> Yet this need not detract from the process of learning to work White’s tools. Breiger (1999b) for instance, suggests that it is a mistake to think that one must read Identity and Control from front to cover.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Barry Wellman (a former student of White’s now at the University of Toronto) I have a set of White’s early lecture notes and his unpublished, programmatic papers of the 1960s which set the stage for what has come to be known as the “Harvard approach” (Scott 1991: 8) to social structure. Harrison White

text is made up of detailed textual exegesis and sustained conceptual criticism. In these endeavors, I will be following the relatively “normal” task of a social theorist in training. Theory is indeed “hard to learn,” as Arthur Stinchcombe puts it. To “train oneself to be a ‘theorist’ of social change one has to read a great many monographs by theoretically oriented social historians, store analogies and distinctions in one’s mind, and hope that some of them give theoretical handles on new situations” (Stinchcombe 1978: 120). More specifically, my basic analytic strategy parallels the one suggested by Abbott (1994: 900), who suggests that readers should aim to decipher theoretical terms and “figure out why White lumps together what he lumps together.”

My work also follows two important strategies mapped out by Harrison White (1997a)—methods which he suggests are useful for studying socio-cultural phenomena. One is simplicity and brevity. The other is what he calls “‘corner’ solutions.” White advises: “Look for ‘corner’ solutions. Given a complex mechanism put at your disposal by a previous modeler, likely from another discipline, look for corners within his [sic] room of valid solutions that he [sic] disdained to sweep up” (White 1997a: 55). In this work, I sift through the dirty “corners” of White’s attic to see what treasures we may find in the dust.

There is obviously much of Harrison White that is left out of this dissertation. Excepting some cursory remarks on blockmodels, and some comments on White’s penchant for mathematics, I do not attempt a foray into the more formal elements to White’s project. The same goes for White’s research on “markets,” as well as his writings

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has also been so kind as to let me borrow two “lab notebooks” that spanned incongruously the years 1971 to 1988.

on the art world. To incorporate these dimensions of White's project would detract too much from the principal aims of this work.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Plan of this Work**

This study is aimed primarily at readers interested and willing to learn Harrison C. White's new "grammar for culture," (Collins 1994: 2). It is addressed to four separate audiences. First, it is geared towards researchers who frame their work in the tradition of critical social theory or critical social science. A second audience involves graduate students and other advanced social scientists who may be interested in a keen review of current positions and problems in critical theory as well as those who have an interest in recent developments in what has come to be known as social network analysis.

Conversely, I hope to address network aficionados with the hope of trying to provoke a more adequate alliance (or even conversation) with critical theory. Finally, I am also writing with a "challenger" audience in mind, which is to say those identities for whom getting action is a practical necessity as well as pressing conceptual riddle. This work will have failed if it does not stimulate, at some point, some rethinking of what social movement mobilization means in concrete disciplines of control networks, whether in "system" or "life-world."

I am reaching out to this latter group of readers with the knowledge that most so called "Theory" today is considered anathema to the tactics and strategies of social organizing. As one neo-Wobbly in the San Francisco Bay Area recently plead, "Please, please, please, don't send me abstract theory ... just practical suggestions!" This hostility

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<sup>19</sup> Yet White does suggest that the potential of bringing a critical interpretation to bear on his market model

to theory at the present historical juncture is prevalent among social activists, and who often believe, for example, that all the postmodernist palaver about texts, discourses, and abstractions is simply another guileful manifestation of, and cloak for, the growing preponderance of right-wing sentiment on university campuses across the USA.<sup>20</sup> While at times tenable, such a position ignores the extent to which theory is present in everything we do. As one scholar remarks, “No pursuit . . . is atheoretical. No matter how feeble or indirect or unacknowledged it may be, theory is inescapable; it is integral ‘even’ to such ordinary and ‘simple’ acts as those of observing and counting” (Hazelrigg 1989a: 31). In other words “practical suggestions,” to the extent that they are pursuits, and not mere reactions, must also require theory.

This dissertation is divided into four main chapters. In the first, I map out the relevance and uniqueness of Harrison White in the context of current debates in contemporary critical theory. Key statements on critical theory will be reviewed and assessed, most specifically Habermas’ conception of political action. Since White is known as a network theorist or network analyst, in chapter two we examine the genealogy of the “network” approach and some of its current labors. I suggest that network analysis is important for critical theory because the two intellectual traditions share some important assumptions and characteristics, and because network constructs often appear (though often in an unreflective way) in many varieties of critical theory. In the course of this conspectus, Harrison White’s early contributions to network analysis as well as his more technical and collaborative work are presented.

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is “perfectly doable” (White 1999). See Wächter (1998).

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent rebuttal to these claims, see Ryan ([1982] 1984).

“Harrison White and Social Theory,” the third chapter of this work, introduces White’s mature theory of social organization. At the center of White’s theoretical oeuvre sits the enigmatic, Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action. After dealing with existing interpretive literature on this project, I explicate the main arguments to be found within its pages, particularly those that concern identity, control, networks, stories and what White calls social disciplines.

In chapter four, “Fresh Action for Critical Theory,” I first map out some possible consequences or implications of Harrison White’s theory by suggesting three forms of social domination that are brought to light through his approach. I then turn and address White’s theory of how identities get what he calls “fresh action.” As we shall see, getting action for White is no abstraction, and it is ultimately about the wielding of political power. I argue that, although it is limited in some respects, there are elements of White’s theory that can be potentially useful for critical theories of social action and praxis. As one author puts it, “Action is the determination of the future. Freedom is the capacity to act, and so the capacity to determine the future” (MacMurry, cited in Shapiro, 1976: 32 n1). This dissertation is about how Harrison White may provide us with insights into how these determinations can be better made.

Both the questions and the answers raised in this dissertation are highly indeterminate. The legacy of the politics in the twentieth century suggests that there are no easy answers to the vexing issues of social domination — there can be no quick fixes. Moreover, a critique of domination must always fall short of its aims because the solutions to the crucial issues reside not in thoughts laid out on a page no matter how articulate, but rather in the terrain of social struggle and action itself. Like Harrison

White's own thesis in Identity and Control, I would like to think that the argument and evaluation of this work can only be made "from within the social action in which we all exist" (White 1992a: 21). Harrison White's theory is not another dry, "objectivist" attempt at theorizing the world of the social. As he puts it, "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). I suggest that Identity and Control should be read in a Foucauldian sense of theory-cum-tool-kit.<sup>21</sup> Like us all, "the people in Identity and Control are striving hard against chaos and the jumble of different status systems" (Stinchcombe 1993: 335). In this dissertation, I hope to show how Harrison White points to ways through which social actors can gain more of a footing in this flux, and thereby more readily effect comprehended change.

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<sup>21</sup> "The theory to be constructed is not a system but an instrument, a logic of the specificity of power relations and the struggles around them" (Foucault [1977] 1980: 145).