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We are Many: A Structural Critique of Partisan Identities (and Identity Politics)

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Abstract

Harrison White's reconceptualization of identity as dynamic, relational, and contingent outcome of social interaction and struggles for control offers a powerful alternative to the static, essentialist concept of identity that dominates contemporary social science. Building on White's network-based framework, this article advances a structuralist critique of identity-based explanations — particularly the framing of partisanship as a "mega-identity". It challenges the reification of partisanship by advancing three central critiques: (1) individuals are routinely reduced to a singular political identity, ignoring the multiplicity and contradictions of real-world affiliations; (2) statistical and survey-based measures of partisanship impose binary classifications (Republicans vs. Democrats) that obscure the heterogeneity and ambivalence in citizens' political orientations, and (3) these simplifications fuel "us vs. them" psychological reductionism, where partisan identities are tautologically invoked to explain the very behaviors they help construct. Lab-based studies, in particular, overstate partisan divisions by prompting responses to caricatured identities, neglecting the pluralistic and relational nature of social life. Grounding identity in social networks and structural context, the essay calls for a more nuanced understanding of political behavior — one that recognizes the multiplex nature of affiliation and the role of elite polarization in democratic backsliding. Rather than blaming voters, the analysis highlights how elite-driven simplifications of identity distort representation and undermine the pluralist foundations of a democratic society.

Keywords: Harrison White; Identity and Control; Political partisanship; Polarization; Psychological reductionism.

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With the same brilliance with which Durkheim made suicide, at first glance the most personal of choices, a social fact, Harrison White made identities, an object often considered as foundational, the dynamic, local, and contingent byproduct of struggles for control. Harrison White's take on identity remains as radical today as it was when *Identity and Control* was first published in 1992, and possibly even more in the last decade, as research on race, gender, and intersectionality has brought again identity-based explanations to the fore in sociology, essentializing identities on the bases of their effects at the cost of a more nuanced understanding of how identities are created, acted upon as well as conditioned by the power structure.

White's emphasis on the relational and processual nature of identities can be understood only through the lens of his social network approach:

> Networks remind us that people do not interact as abstract representatives of categories or actors in abstract roles, they interact on concrete topics at particular times, particular named individuals each tied in a unique pattern to others, a range of others different even from that of one's closest associates. Networks remind us that persons are shaped by the chaotic history of these concrete interconnections with particular others evolving over time [...]
>
> The main theoretical thrust of work with networks is to induce, indeed to define, social structure and process in the large from the explicit cumulation of observable micro structures and processes in which individuals are embedded (White 1972, p. 7).

With his cat-net conceptualization, Harrison White invites us to think beyond the language of variables: he wants us to trade the comfort of the individuals-by-variables matrix and its statistical constructs for a stack of matrices, in which individuals, their identities, and social roles emerge from patterns of social interactions:

> We would like the reader to entertain instead the idea that the presently existing, largely categorical descriptions of social structure have no solid theoretical grounding [...] Perhaps *the* major thrust of classical social theory was its recognition of the historical dissolution of categorical boundaries for social relations, whether the change was perceived as a transition from status to contract (Maine), from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies), from mechanical to organic solidarity (Durkheim), from traditional to means-rational orientation (Weber), or from ascribed to achieved status (Linton). In our view, the major problem with postclassical social theory has been that its concepts remain wedded to categorical imagery. All sociologists' discourse rests on primitive terms — "status", "role", "group", "social control", "interaction", and "society" do not begin to exhaust the list — which require an aggregation principle in that their referents are aggregates of persons, collectivities, interrelated "positions", or "generalized actors". However, sociologists have been largely content to aggregate in only two ways: either by positing categorical aggregates (e.g., "functional subsystems", "classes") whose relation to concrete social structure has been tenuous; or by cross-tabulating individuals according to their attributes (e.g., lower- middle-class White Protestants who live in inner city areas and vote Democrat). Both methods have "often led to the neglect of social structure and of the relations among individuals" [Coleman 1958, p. 28] (White et al., 1976, pp. 732–733).

As I sit here reading class notes from 1972, passed down by his former students, I imagine how a young Harrison White might have accompanied his words with vehement gestures and scribblings on the blackboard, and it daunts on me how much of our understanding of the world, as sociologists and citizens, still comes from slicing and dicing the population by some sort of identity, be it gender, race, income, education, religion. In this essay, I will consider scholars' and pundits' recent infatuation with political partisanship as a case in point of the perils of elevating a single identity to an *unmoved mover* role.

As it sometimes happens with concepts that achieve popularity — think of social capital, or habitus[1] — most sociological accounts based on identity run the risk of being tautological, for instance explaining the achievements, attitudes, or behavior of the members of a certain group on the basis of their identity. An additional shortcoming of identity-based explanations is that individuals are often reduced to a single dimension, blissfully ignoring that people, especially in contemporary societies, carry multiple, sometimes conflicting identities (Simmel, 1971; Bendle, 2002; Baldassarri & Abascal, 2020). Finally, identities are generally assumed as stable and often ascribed, rather than dynamic and contingent. For all these reasons, we should remain skeptical about simplistic reifications of identity categories, and instead embrace the fundamentally sociological project that Harrison White has put forward.

1 Identities: Dynamic, Relational, Contingent, Local, and Multivocal

"Identity seeks control". Notoriously, White defines identity as a dynamic concept that emerges from social interactions and attempts at control. Identities are not fixed or predetermined, but rather transitory and contextual, and exist only when recognized by others. Challenging the traditional notion of a pre-existing, autonomous self, identities crystallize from patterns of social relationships and attempts at control within social structures. Identities are dynamic and contingent, constantly engaged in efforts to maintain control within social formations.

> Any identity may see control as slipping away and going to other identities. Each control effort presupposes as well as shapes some social formation (White, 2008, p. 3).

Identities' struggle for control occurs, first of all, within individuals, before expanding into interpersonal and societal dynamics. Identity is neither singular nor stable.

> Before anything else, control is about finding footings among other identities. Such footing is a position that entails a stance, which brings orientation in relation to other identities (White, 2008, p. 3).

At the interpersonal level, individuals wrestle with competing aspects of their identities — personal beliefs, social roles, and aspirations. We inhabit contradictory selves, at times ambitious, at others self-doubting; some of our actions follow traditional scripts, others challenge established norms. The salience of our identities changes across contexts, displaying different selves depending on the environment. Finally, we juggle different roles and competing narratives, internalizing expectations from family, culture, and media, which are often impossible to meet or reconcile.

1. Consider, for instance, Portes's (1998) and Hedström's (2005) compelling criticisms of the circular and overdeterministic use of the concepts of social capital and habitus respectively.

This internal battle for coherence influences how individuals assert themselves in social spaces, where their self-concept is tested and negotiated with others. In interpersonal relationships, identity struggles emerge as individuals seek recognition and validation to solidify their conception of self, navigate predefined social roles that may contradict their personal identity, and attempt to assert control over their own and others' narratives within relationships. Using the example of kids interacting across a playground, White observes that:

> it is conflicts and inconsistencies in which a child finds itself caught up that start generating identity. With children, it is not family domestic life, and not playing with the same bunch, but rather clashing gangs that cause, and work from, identities (White, 2008, p. 5).

Finally, at a societal level, identity struggles extend beyond individuals and shape collective dynamics within groups and societies. Groups, whether based on race, gender, class, religion, or ideology, compete for control over narratives, resources, and social recognition. Power structures and cultural hegemony play a key role in this struggle, as dominant groups shape societal norms and values to maintain power. At the same time, marginalized groups resist these structures through social movements, asserting their identities in opposition to dominant frameworks. Political and economic power struggles further highlight how identity is leveraged to influence policies, laws, and economic structures, reinforcing or challenging existing hierarchies.

> Identity concerns fury and fear as well as sweetness and light because identity seeks control (White, 1992, p. 312).

In general, mainstream social sciences interpret in negative terms the tension that emerges from identities' attempt at establishing themselves. Psychologists are quick at diagnosing internal tensions as stressors (e.g., cognitive dissonance, role conflict), without acknowledging that this balancing act is also liberating and self-actualizing (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015; Thoits, 1983). Similarly, in the study of small group dynamics, the bickering to establish a pecking order — whether it comes from bullying in the playground, competition in markets, etc. — is generally framed as a threat to group harmony, rather than a way in which social formations develop social organization. Finally, at the societal level, conflict is often framed as a malaise, as a state that challenges social cohesion rather than being understood for its role in voicing alternative views, strengthening group identities, promoting cooperation, and driving social learning. Indeed, very few scholars would embrace the idea that conflict and cohesion are two sides of the same coin, and even fewer are willing to investigate the intrinsic tensions of any social structure.

> Social structure is regularities in the patterns of relations among concrete entities; it is not a harmony among abstract norms and values or a classification of concrete entities by their attributes (White et al., 1976, pp. 733–734).

For Harrison White, identities fight for control does not have such a negative connotation: indeed, the experience might actually be described as liberating, both in the Simmelian sense of self-actualization, as well as in the agentic sense of multivocality. Among the classics, Georg Simmel is certainly the closest to Harrison White's *weltanschauung*, and not only for their common interest in social relations. Simmel refuses rigid, essentialist views of identity that constrain individuals to fixed categories, and, similarly to White, highlights how identity

emerges through social interactions, affiliations, and individual agency. The multiple social circles in which individuals are embedded contribute to their distinctive identity. This process of social differentiation increases personal autonomy: The more a person belongs to diverse social groups, the harder it is to subsume them under a singular cultural or social structure (Simmel, 1955 & 1971). While social structures influence identity, there is room for subjective experience and individual agency. Individuals are not necessarily confined to predetermined roles or singular social identities. Quintessential in this perspective is the social imagery of the "stranger". Both an insider and an outsider, the stranger is not bound by the same commitments and expectations as fully integrated members of a society are, allowing for greater objectivity and autonomy (Simmel, 1950).

In addition to self-actualization, however, White's conceptualization of identities as multiple, fluid, and contextual sets the stage for the development of a new theory of action based on ambiguity and multivocality. As discussed at greater length elsewhere (see Baldassarri, 2018), we can identify the seeds of these ideas in the work of three scholars who are in direct conversation with White. Eric Leifer, in his study on role acquisition, argues that in situations where roles are not predefined, individuals must strategically interact to obtain desirable positions. He emphasizes that openly claiming a role can be risky, as it reveals one's intentions and gives competitors an advantage. Instead, he introduces the concept of "local action", a form of behavior that deliberately avoids committing to a specific role, allowing individuals to adapt to emerging social structures. In this framework, roles and hierarchies develop through interaction, as ambiguity is gradually resolved (Leifer, 1988).

Roger Gould extends this idea to the emergence of mobilizing identities. In his study of Parisian protests in the 19th century, he examines how workers' collective identity emerged not as a given category but as a product of social interactions. Rather than assuming individuals identified primarily as workers, he considers their multiple identities, including guild membership and neighborhood affiliation. Through patterns of interpersonal relationships, certain identities became dominant, while others faded, aligning interests and forging a shared identity.

> Mobilizing appeals compete with one another precisely because there are many ways in which people can view their social position relative to others (Gould, 1995, p. 16).

The initial ambiguity was thus resolved through social processes, transforming latent class or neighborhood identity into an active force for mobilization.

John Padgett and Christopher Ansell apply these ideas to the rise of the Medici in Renaissance Florence, using Leifer's concept of local action. They argue that the Medici's political power stemmed from their ability to bridge elite factions, maintaining a party that encompassed contradictory interests and crosscutting networks. Central to the success of the Medici was the idea of a "multivocal identity", whereby actions could be interpreted differently depending on the perspective. This strategic use of ambiguity allowed Cosimo de Medici to keep his interests opaque, making it difficult for opponents to counter his influence. More broadly, Padgett and Ansell conclude that power emerges not from rational planning or self-interest but from ambiguity and heterogeneity (Padgett & Ansell, 1993).

Harrison White's kaleidoscope, rather than an actors-by-variables matrix, is the tool through which all these authors have gained insights into social formations as different as a romantic relationship, the Paris insurgent movement, and the power elite of Renaissance Florence. Each enduring piece of this kaleidoscope — traits, experiences, and relationships

— remains constant, yet as networks and narratives interact with these fragments, they are continually rearranged into new, intricate patterns (Bearman, 1993). Just as turning a kaleidoscope creates ever-changing designs from the same pieces, identities are dynamically reassembled through ongoing interactions and the flow of events.

Most social observers understand the relevance of identity switches and new societal alignments only at times of intense social change.

> Identities spring up out of efforts at control in a turbulent context (White, 2008, p. 1).
>
> It is a fact that control regimes can best be observed in transition, in struggle and change (White, 2008, p. 236).

As sociologists, however, we should "account for chaos and normality together".

> At all scales, normality, and happenstance are opposite sides of the same coin of social action (White, 2008, p. 1).

In practical terms, this means questioning everyday identity categories, even when they resonate with established social narratives and our lived experiences. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the dominance of partisan identities in our scholarly and public discourse, highlighting how much reality is distorted by forcing average Americans into a red vs. blue narrative.

2 The Myth of a Red vs. Blue America

Over the past half century, elite polarization has dominated US politics, with members of Congress, political candidates, and party activists growing farther apart. Congress started to polarize in the late 1970s, as a consequence of Southern realignment and, subsequently, single-issue interest groups, unlimited campaign contributions, media fragmentation, and the nationalization of politics have all contributed to bringing about the divided country we so painfully experience every day (McCarty, 2019).

Taking stock of this reality, media, politicians, and scholars have embraced a narrative according to which political partisanship has surged to become an organizing principle of society at large, not only sorting voters between parties, but even moving beyond the realm of the political, to encompass lifestyles, and social relationships. According to some, partisanship has evolved into a "mega-identity" that goes far beyond political preferences, embedding itself into the very fabric of personal and social identities (Mason, 2018). Political commentator Ezra Klein, in his book *Why We're Polarized* (2020), argues that this transformation has shifted political alignment from being merely about policy to becoming a proxy for one's cultural and social milieu, effectively turning party membership into an all-encompassing badge of identity. Likewise, journalist Jonathan Chait has observed that contemporary political divides resemble tribal fault lines, where voters' affiliations signal their belonging to distinct cultural groups — a phenomenon that further entrenches societal divisions.

As suggestive as red vs. blue accounts of social reality may be, they are brutal simplifications, and they should be recognized as such, rather than reinforced by research that contributes to reifying partisan categories. Although Harrison White has only tangentially touched political sociology themes, his sociological lens helps clarify the weakness of social analyses based on partisan identities.

2.1 Partisan Identities as a Statistical Construct

Political partisanship, as it is conceived and measured by most scholarship (Lelkes, 2016), represents the quintessential example of the statistical constructs that White deeply disliked (White, 1992). Survey respondents are asked, "Do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?". For those who identify as Democrats or Republicans, a common follow-up question asks whether they consider themselves "strong" or "weak" members of that party. To deal with the 40% or more of respondents who *do not* identify as Democrats or Republicans and choose instead the Independent label, a follow-up question asks whether they lean toward the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. Granted that a large proportion of independents do indeed lean toward one of the parties, forcing respondents into two opposite camps is a simplification that deliberately ignores many people's controversial relationships with contemporary party politics.

First of all, dissatisfaction with the two major parties has surged over recent decades, with one in four Americans holding unfavorable views of both parties in recent years, and nearly half of the voters often wishing for more political choices. This growing discontent — particularly among moderates and those with conflicting ideological leanings — has contributed to reduced political engagement and a diminished sense of participation in democratic processes (Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Klar & Krupnikov, 2016; Perrett & Baldassarri, 2025).

Secondly, when asked about the identities that are most important to them, Americans rank political ideology consistently at the bottom of a long list, with gender, age, family, race, occupation, region, nationality, education, sexuality, and religion all coming before party. Indeed, 85% of Americans do not even mention partisanship as one of the identities that is important to them. It seems unrealistic, then, that the very same people would (voluntarily) give partisanship primacy over the organization of their lives and the social formations they inhabit.

Finally, while elite polarization has had real consequences on issue positions and inter-party sentiment, the overall disconnect between citizens' political preferences and the political elite has increased. On the one hand, elite polarization had fueled partisan sorting and interparty animosity in the mass public. Parties have become ideologically more homogeneous; thus, the difference between the average Republican and the average Democrat is now more pronounced. On the other hand, however, contrary to many accounts, voters have not become more extreme in their policy preferences on most issues, especially on moral issues (Baldassarri & Park, 2020), and the gap between party agendas and the political preferences of the non-rich is increasing (Gilens, 2012; Bartels 2016). Moreover, opinion alignment (consolidation) across issue domains in the general public is still minimal (Park, 2018; Park & Baldassarri, 2025) and limited to the most politically engaged citizens. Secondly, a sizeable share of US citizens are moderates (Fowler et al., 2023) or ideologically cross-pressured, displaying issue preferences that contrast the party offerings and are rooted in people's sociodemographic profiles and associational experiences (Baldassarri & Goldberg, 2014). The disconnect is even larger when considering the political issues that are relevant at the local level, and party agendas.

In sum, scholars might have been too quick to embrace the current dichotomic categorization of partisan identities as a dominant organizing principle of contemporary social formations, without caring to account for the many, often contradicting identities and interests that might contribute to defining one's position in the political and social space.

2.2 Us vs. Them Psychological Reductionism

Part of the appeal of dividing people into opposite camps stems from the analytical advantages that a dichotomic characterization offers. In fact, political psychologists could not believe their luck in the past two decades: they were suddenly able to apply basic principles from social identity theory directly to U.S. politics. The conceptual tools developed in the famous Robbers Cave summer camp experiment (Sherif, 1956), and further refined through the minimal group paradigm — in which the arbitrary assignment of a group identity in lab settings is sufficient to trigger in-group favoritism and out-group hostility (Tajfel et al., 1971) — became the base for hundreds of studies exploring the causes, mediators, and consequences of interparty animosity (a.k.a. affective polarization [Klar et al., 2018]). That Republicans and Democrats came to strongly dislike one another became all the rage.

Bringing this psychological reductionism full circle, survey respondents have been subject to endless batteries of questions about "Republicans" and "Democrats", documenting the widespread misperceptions and hostility toward the out-party members. Using conjoint experiments, scholars have also suggested that political partisanship directly informs patterns of relationships, with people selecting their friends, partners, roommates, and coworkers primarily on the basis of their partisanship (Iyengar et al., 2019).

The bottom line from this research is that, when prompted to think about Republicans and Democrats in the abstract, respondents conjure up a very stereotypical, and extreme version of them — the version that media and politicians are incessantly projecting — and act accordingly. In fact, partisanship in these studies is used like a bone thrown to a dog: there is no effort to go beyond the Republican or Democratic label and provide a more nuanced understanding of the person or group. While the internal validity of these findings is high, a serious problem arises when these findings are taken as proof of the fact that citizens are indeed divided along partisan lines, and that this division is driving their everyday life, including patterns of interactions (de Jong & Baldassarri, 2025).

A different, admittedly more laborious, approach, however, would actually highlight the extent to which U.S. *citizens do not sort easily into Republican or Democratic camps*. People in complex societies have multiple, conflicting identities, cross-cutting political preferences, and inhabit heterogeneous social networks. For instance, people holding different political views (still) live, work, and spend time together, and sometimes avoid politics in order to maintain civil relationships. Moreover, party alignment along moral and economic issues has made it harder for certain socio-demographic profiles to define their political allegiance: will a wealthy, secular individual identify with the Republican party's economic views, or with the Democratic party's moral views? And what about religious Latinos, or highly-educated suburban moms?

2.3 Multiple Identities and the Pluralistic Bases of Society

A structuralist approach can help understand how unlikely it is that partisanship would actually arise to be a "mega-identity" and also to grasp how tragic such a configuration could be for social cohesion. First of all, individuals in modern societies hold multiple identities and group affiliations — e.g., race, economic status, religion — including partisanship, and are embedded in webs of affiliations that span across different social groups. For a "mega-identity" to become the organizing principle of a society, we would need to observe multiple dimensions of social differentiation collapse into a single one. As Gould (1995) explains it:

> The social categories (class, race, nation, and so on) within which individuals see themselves as aligned with or against other individuals depend on the conceptual mapping of the social relations in which they are involved and on the partitioning of people into collectives whose boundaries are logically implied by this mapping. Only rarely will diverse types of social relations line up so perfectly that the same collective actors will emerge regardless of the type of relation considered (Gould, 1995, p. 17).

The consolidation of individuals' interests and identities in a unique cleavage is not impossible (Dahl, 1961; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Simmel, 1955; Blau, 1977; Baldassarri & Abascal, 2020), but it is a quite dramatic occurrence that requires structural configurations unlikely to occur in the modern U.S. (Park & Baldassarri, 2025).

For instance, although survey experiments make it sound like people are sorting along partisan lines, thus increasingly embedding themselves in politically homogeneous social networks, empirical evidence suggests that most people retain politically heterogeneous discussion networks (Lee & Bearman, 2020) and that people do not actively "cultivate" their networks in order to avoid out-party members (Minozzi et al., 2020). Two factors might explain this: first of all, social structural constraints — e.g., very few people can leave their jobs because they do not get along with their coworkers, or afford moving into the neighborhood that perfectly matches their political orientation. Moreover, in real life there are plenty of factors that determine where to move and whom to like, and politics might have a smaller role there than in the aseptic walls of a lab — e.g., a "MAGA" husband might still be a caring partner and dad, and more fun than several self-absorbed liberals (de Jong & Baldassarri, 2025).

Secondly, party elites have become more polarized across a *broader* range of issues than at any time since the postwar period (McCarty et al., 2016). Political divisions have expanded beyond economic and civil rights issues, to embrace a variety of moral issues that, in the past, largely transcended partisan boundaries. Since parties now hold starkly different positions on a wide range of issues, scholars generally conclude that voters have found it more straightforward to align their ballots with their stance on political issues (Levendusky, 2009).

Such a conclusion, however, is based on the assumption that citizens fit neatly into partisan ideological divisions. In fact, this increasingly polarized environment has complicated voting decisions for many. Roughly one-third of Americans experience ideological cross-pressure, meaning they lean conservative on some issues while adopting liberal positions on others (Baldassarri & Goldberg, 2014), and this proportion of cross-pressured voters tends to remain quite consistent over time, and even among younger generations (Perrett & Baldassarri, 2025; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017). In other words, although party platforms have largely conformed to a single ideological dimension, many Americans maintain a multidimensional set of beliefs, which are anchored in their multifaceted sociodemographic traits and lifestyles. "We are many" (White, 1972, p. 2), and the complexity of modern societies can hardly be subsumed into any two-party political system.

Instead of superimposing partisanship as an overarching organizing principle, we should approach the study of public opinion, focusing on the micro-level tensions — the struggles for control — that citizens experience as a consequence of an increasingly divided political elite. Refusing the simplistic assumption that citizens can be reduced to a party label, and instead making an effort to understand them as a bundle of identities, interests, and narratives in conversation, and attrition, with the political elite, is not simply an analytical choice. Only by giving voice to the multiplexity that characterizes voters, for instance, can we illuminate the gap between them and the party elite. In contrast, buying into a dichotomic, crystallized reality

that merely reflects elite divisions, makes it possible to justify party extremisms as an expression of the will-of-the-people. Put it more blatantly, the simplified Democrats vs. Republicans narrative, that many scholars have so readily adopted, makes it easier to blame the failure of our democracy on ordinary people rather than acknowledging that political polarization is, first and foremost, a phenomenon brought about by the political elite (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007).

Analytical choices are not value-neutral. Although Harrison White would certainly not put it in these terms, I would go as far as claiming that only if we grasp the multiplexity of interests and ideals that ordinary citizens hold can we assess how far a political system approximates the pluralistic ideal of political representation, that is at the core of many theories of democracy. In particular,

> The pluralist theory of society insists that cross-cutting ties are needed to make effective a socio-political structure based on balances among categories and ideologies (White, 1972, p. 21).

More broadly, in recent years, I have questioned, a bit naively, whether humans are indeed wired for democracy. Some experiments in social engineering fail because they are fundamentally misaligned with human nature. Take communism, for example: whether implemented on a large scale at the national level, or on a smaller scale in community-based models, like kibbutzim, it often falters. This is partly because its core principles — collective ownership over private property and equal redistribution over individual incentives — run counter to intrinsic human tendencies. Reading reports on democratic backsliding, it is worth asking whether humans are indeed wired for democracy, or, instead, whether we should think of the democratic experience of the past century as resting on a fortunate combination of circumstances. In particular, two aspects of human nature, tribalism, a.k.a. the tendency to read the world in terms of "us" vs "them", and the desire for strong leadership, especially in moments of hardship, seem to work against democratic institutions.

What Harrison White's view brings to this conversation is an understanding of human complexity that is very much in line with the principles of political pluralism: for individuals, as well as groups and societies, juggling a multiplicity of identities and interests, some of which are contradictory, is a natural condition. The "us" vs. "them" tribalism is not. Moreover, struggles for control are inevitably contingent and local, thus leaving room for political dialogue and negotiation, rather than absolutists taking over. Not surprisingly, in his discussion of regimes of control, White highlights the special cases of dual hierarchies (i.e., Church vs. State) and multiple hierarchies (i.e., pillarization in the Netherlands) "as bringing together different but complementary values, along with interests, in establishing a control regime" (White, 2008, p. 236).

2.4 The Perils of Identity Politics

Extending the criticism of psychological reductionism from partisanship to identity politics — the practice of making political appeals based on specific identities, such as race or gender — an important lesson from White is that individuals embrace identities to seek control. In the context of politics, this insight becomes useful when trying to explain when people do not seem to vote according to their interests. Note that the alleged interests are determined by the observer, often a left-wing commentator who is worried about a subordinate group — e.g., non-whites, immigrants, low-income, women — that exhibits a lack of support for a progressive party. This

view misses how eager members of subordinate groups are to ditch their least appealing identity and make claims to the dominant ones. This is how identities assert control, sometimes.

Consider this past election. Donald Trump has made inroads in almost all sectors of the electorate, but his appeal has increased especially among low-wage workers. Even more surprisingly, his larger gains have occurred among Blacks and Hispanics. How did the Republican Party manage to build the working-class, multicultural coalition that the Democrats were out to get? Maybe by not appealing to them on the basis of those identities. As images from Inauguration Day show, with modern-day oligarchs smiling from the front rows, White's intuition that identities emerge to exert control feels vindicated, and the limits of identity politics are exposed.

3 Conclusion

In challenging the essence of personhood, Harrison White gets to the true meaning of a person.

> Having an identity in the common sense of that term requires continually reproducing a joint construction across distinct settings. This is better described as having a bundle of identities. That is the dictionary notion of the person, a placeholder for embracing identities, often conflicting, from different settings (White, 2008, p. 5).

The etymology of "person" derives from the Etruscan *phersu* and Greek *prósōpon*, indicating the mask that actors would wear during a play. In Latin, the word *persōna* means "role", and is, in folk etymology, linked to *per sonum*, meaning "through sound", indicating the function of amplification that masks had in ancient theater. Whether a mask, a role, or a means for expression, the meaning of a person is not their essence, but the identity and role it impersonates at a given time, and it is meant to change, morph into a different character when the scene changes. This is how identities are self-asserting and liberating.

This fluidity is, of course, upsetting and not sustainable. In life as well as in research, a compromise is reached, where a subset of roles is inhabited with a certain regularity and consistency (cfr. Merton's [1957] role-set theory). Nonetheless, individuals, groups, and societies find purpose in switching, in constantly reaffirming or negotiating control over resources, power, and narratives.

> The concept of boundary is meaningful only in relation to some concept of flow (White, 1972, p. 19).

Alternatively, a sense of purpose can also be found in mere opposition, as vibrantly captured in Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1975 [1904]). In the poem, both rulers and citizens inhabit an imagined crisis. They find purpose and order waiting for an impending invasion: the external threat justifies their own existence, their political structures, and their daily routines. This is when categorical classifications become normative. And when the barbarians fail to arrive, the people are left adrift, asking:

> "Now what shall become of us without the barbarians? Those people were some kind of solution".

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