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Difference and Necessity in *Identity and Control*

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Abstract

Harrison White introduced numerous important and generative theoretical insights in his large body of work. In this piece, I focus on describing the impact and implications of two central contributions made in *Identity and Control* (1992 & 2008), which are also developed in other writings. The first is an articulation of the role of difference, decoupling, and disjuncture in producing meaning. The second is a revelation that certain social processes and theoretical concepts that have been conceived and analyzed as separate are reciprocally linked in ways that have important repercussions for individual behavior and macro-social outcomes.

Keywords: Social Theory; Networks; Harrison White; Social Structure; Relationalism.

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An expanded description of a scene in a playground begins the second edition of *Identity and Control* (White, 2008). The description extends what was a shorter, later section in the 1992 introduction (White, 1992). Playground scenes usually depict children running and jumping in chaotic and joyful disarray. In these two versions of his grandest theoretical opus, Harrison describes patterns and processes in the chaos. The children form and dissolve groups, forge relationships, and create identities.

The unstructured, unsupervised nature of playground life leaves children free to form hierarchies and groups. The playground could be easily seen as a natural laboratory for collective action that reveals some essential truths about humanity. For example, in *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954), William Golding treats the unregulated, stranded children as ciphers that reveal the brutality of human existence because of the way they naturally fall into violence and authoritarianism. I introduce this example because it is a kind of default interpretive lens that is not the right way to think about what Harrison is trying to accomplish.

In *Identity and Control*, the playground is a foreground that stands in relation to a background, which in this example is family life. Life with the family is different from the playground. The presence of these differences in the minds of the children leads them to bridge the differences in their experience. Where they might just exist unreflexively in one setting or the other, traveling between the two different experiences requires translation. The translation and the switching produce a new sense of continuity that resides in the individual, and this becomes the child's sense of self, the beginning of identity.

Using this interpretative lens, there is no way in which the children are more or less true to their own nature in one environment or the other. And indeed, it is not the right kind of orientation to reality. Instead, there is an acknowledgement that existence is filled with different environments and that bridging those environments produces a sense of self.

If there is anything inexorable about this process, it is that individuals will try to gain some leverage across different environments by importing and exporting elements of their experience from one environment into another environment. This effort is an attempt to try to exert a little control over their situation. And that attempt to exert a little control helps them to make sense of their life — to build meaning and identity.

1 Mercantilism

I saw a related process unfolding in the development of English mercantilist economics in the 17th century. And if it had not been for the theoretical lens that Harrison developed, I might have been blind to it.

My first book began as a thesis at Columbia University, where I had the great pleasure of working with Harrison, who served on my dissertation committee. I wrote about the role of principal–agent trade-offs in the expansion of the English East India Company's overseas trade network (Erikson, 2014).

While writing this book, I was struck by the number of authors working on economic issues that were also closely affiliated with the East India Company. It began to seem to me that all the major economic thinkers had some direct or indirect relationship to the company. These relationships, which did in fact exist, eventually became the topic of my next book, on the roots of economic theory: *Trade and Nation: How Companies and Politics Reshaped Economic Thought* (2021).

The book focused on the 17th century, which was a bellwether moment for trade and economic theory quantitatively and qualitatively. There was a huge increase in publications about

overseas trade and finance. William Petty (1690) introduced statistics into the conversation. Thomas Mun (1621) articulated a multilateral trade theory that transcended zero-sum thinking, and Charles Davenant (1696) began to formulate early versions of comparative advantage. These authors — and others — established the foundations that Adam Smith explicitly built upon in *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 2003 [1776]).

I began working on this book with the idea that the sudden efflorescence in economic thought was the result of people grappling with the complex logistical problems of an expanding global overseas trade network. Comparative research quickly proved this unlikely. The literature had grown with remarkable rapidity in England, but other areas that were also quickly expanding their overseas trade networks did not experience similar movements. Notably, the Dutch empire, which was expanding more rapidly than the English in the early 17th century, did not produce any notably groundbreaking texts on economics.

Instead of overseas expansion, I found that the authorship of these texts was closely linked to a specific domestic issue: the need for communication between the world of commerce and the world of the state. In England, trade and markets had some room to develop along their own tracks with as minimal state involvement (most related to the weakness of the developing state at that time). This was an era of guilds and associations, staplers and adventurers. Merchants organized themselves over generations into fraternal associations that had the same advantages as ethnic merchant coalitions (Landa, 1981; Greif, 1993), where individuals in the association were well-known to each other and collectively monitored, sanctioned, and professionalized the group in various ways to ensure cooperative conduct. This is not to say that there was no state involvement, but that the internal governance structure was also developed and had some autonomy from the state (Epstein & Prak, 2008; Goldberg, 2012).

By the late 16th century, state capacity was increasing and there were attempts to tap into the power and profits of the commercial world. The English state had an ambitious and capable monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, intent upon filling state coffers. To this end, Queen Elizabeth began to issue a large number of letters patent. The letters awarded monopolies to various areas of trade. Notably, many granted exclusive monopolies to large companies of merchants pursuing overseas trade in specific regions of the world, such as the Baltic, the Levant, North America, and the East Indies. This marked a new era of state involvement. The overseas trade companies relied upon the state to legitimate their exclusive claims and increased the tax base of the state, which relied heavily on import–export taxes in the days before income tax.

Connections between the state and merchants were increasing, but some distance still remained. Merchant representation decreased in parliament through the 17th century. After the ascension of James IV to the throne, Companies feared and fought against his personal investments in their ventures. The administrative group that was to become the Board of Trade met sporadically and had few merchant members (Erikson & Hamilton, 2018). In short, there was a separation between the concerns of even prosperous merchants and the views and preferences of the aristocrats who ran the state.

The distance between the world of the state and the world of commerce was — it turns out — the driving force behind the development of economic thought in this era. The merchants began to write explanatory tracts about how they believed the state could support — or hinder — their activities. Drawing from their own experiences, they tried to explain how trade was conducted and the factors that affected its conduct. And because they were trying to persuade state actors, they constructed their arguments so as to consider the ways that their commercial activities affected the state broadly conceived, both the crown and the commonwealth — and even the value of landholdings, of great private interest to the landed class that formed the

political elite.

In an attempt to bridge the world of their business pursuits with the public and private concerns of the political elite, the merchants reframed their commercial activities in a language of national prosperity. In the process, they invented a new discourse about economic processes that tied the commercial success of companies to the wealth (i.e., prosperity) of the nation as a whole. This framing laid the groundwork for the project Adam Smith pursued, the investigation of the ways that economic policy could encourage increases in the wealth of the nation.

At the heart of this historical turning point was a generalizable process whereby disjuncture and difference between spheres of influence and activity worked structurally to generate new meaning and knowledge. *Just like the child's self-knowledge grows after traversing the distance between the playground and their home, the merchants generated new ideas about themselves and their activities by moving between the company and the state. It was a quintessentially Whitean moment of generative decoupling*.

For this reason, I dedicated the book to Harrison, because I might not have recognized it as a general process — or even a process at all — without his genius and insight.

2 The Moral Status of Difference

The essence of this idea is that difference creates meaning. Since meaning fulfills a deep and essential human need, the implications of this idea can be profound. In much of the world, difference is regarded with suspicion. Nativism, racism, and xenophobia are all too common. In Harrison's world, it is the source of something creative, important, and good — and in a way that is more powerful than toleration, pluralism, or cosmopolitanism. To illustrate further, consider two thinkers who are not usually associated with social networks, quantitative and formal sociology, or Harrison White: Walter Benjamin and Emmanuel Levinas.

In *The Task of the Translator* (2019), Benjamin argues that translation from one language to another is an art in which a deeper, more essential layer of meaning is revealed. One reading of this essay is that the task of translation is an art form. But a deeper and I think Whitean reading would be that all art is a task of translation. Art, which is a lovely and wonderful thing to have in the world, only exists because someone is trying to communicate something to another person. It is the difference and distance between them that causes the need for the work of art, which is an act of expression after all. And expression is not a cry into the void, it is an act of communication between more than one party.

There are also ethical implications to this idea. A similar sentiment lies at the core of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's work. In *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence* (1998), Levinas argues that morality results from truly recognizing the humanity of an other. Recognizing another individual as a fully-realized person, through, for example, prolonged eye contact, leads to the transcendence of self and self-interest that cultivates empathy and a concern for others — a basis for moral action. Nothing could be further from the dangerous and frightening nativism that seems to be making such a strong resurgence in the world.

3 Entailments

One thing that I did not explore in *Trade and Nation* (2021) was co-constitutive relations, which is another important element in Harrison's theoretical works. Co-constitutive relations are relations that create each other — such as a mother and daughter. To return to the play-

ground, the passage illustrates an important insight about decoupling and meaning formation, but does not capture a different and similarly important element of Harrison's work. We can observe and imagine worlds where there are not playgrounds. In many communities, children go to playgrounds, but not all communities. Playgrounds are related to the rise of public education and increasing urbanism. Children can't play in fields or yards in a city, so they need some other place to play. And schools need some safeguarded places for children to let off steam. But there are lots of places in the world and the history of the world, where children are dispersed across rural areas and do not go to school. And there is some evidence that the freedom and play of childhood is specific to a certain idyllic construction of an idea of "childhood" that emerged as fertility rates decreased. The relationship is to some extent a historical contingency rather than a necessity.

The chance nature of the association differentiates the example from many of the other settings, patterns, and phenomena in White's theoretical vision, which often entail or require each other at some structural level. His work on vacancy chains should help illustrate this idea, which can be counterintuitive for scientific and analytical frameworks that are based on discrete and separable units for analysis. White's transformative insight in this work is that hiring is not merely a matching process between individuals and jobs. In complex organizations, hiring one person into a job usually means that the individual who has been hired is leaving a different position (White, 2013). The position they have left also needs to be filled. This process causes a cascade of job openings and career moves. These cascades, or chains, can be observed frequently in universities, where an outgoing president might be replaced by a university dean, who might be replaced by a divisional dean, who might be replaced by a department chair, who might be replaced by a director of graduate studies, who then must be replaced by one of the senior faculty.

The family of the newly appointed department chair may be quite sure that they were appointed because of their outstanding record of mentorship, service, and because they are a wonderful, caring, and brilliant person. And they would not necessarily be wrong. But it is also true that without the cascade of vacancies, those qualities would not in and of themselves require the person to be hired into the position of chair. And if no kind and exceptionally capable person were available when the job came open, someone would still have to be slotted into the position. So, there is a strong relationship here, often hidden from external observers, that means that a change in one position will cause a change in a different position. The link is not accidental in the sense that the change in the presidency did not just happen to come at the same time as a change in the chair.

More generally, the relationship between the different positions in the university is unlike the relationship between the home and the playground, which are only connected because a child happens to go back and forth between them. Instead, the positions are connected in a stronger sense, because a change in one can cause a change in another. Though, the link between the positions is difficult to directly observe unless you are aware of the chain of connections operating in the background.

Another kind of connection creates a strong version of a link between Harrison's conceptualization of public and private realms. The argument has been made by others that the public/private distinction is a historically contingent phenomenon embraced in Western societies in roughly the 18th century (Habermas, 2015). Jürgen Habermas believed the private sphere arose in relation to a new mode of industrial production and the emergence of democratic governments in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, a conception of public and private domains predated this moment; for example, we see the public realm defined with respect to the pri-

vate domain in Classic Greek culture (Arendt, 1958). And the distinction is far from uniquely Western. The examples here are too numerous to even begin to list in a comprehensive fashion, but some examples include the interior spaces of the Japanese classic *The Tale of Genji* (Shikibu, 1976 [c. 1008]) or the garden courtyards of the Timurid and Chinggisid imperial orders (Zarakol, 2022). These spaces have their own norms, rules of etiquette, and dominant players that are distinct from what is external to them.

Harrison defines the public as structurally distinct from what is private (Mische & White, 1998). In his work, a public is a setting in which different people from different private worlds mix and where the understandings and rules of the private world do not naturally apply. This definition creates a causal relationship between public and private, where the size of one impinges upon the size of the other. In the novel *Gormenghast* (Peake, 1950), the main character lives in a sprawling, decrepit estate and rarely ventures out past the border of the grounds. Their life is mostly contained within a well-defined private realm. But for most of us, our homes are very small compared to the space we traverse outside of them. So, we spend quite a lot of time in the public realm. Crucially, if the private realm expands, it takes up more of the public one. If the public realm expands, it takes up more of the private. The size and nature of one cannot be changed without changing the other, in this case because they define each other.

Identity and control, core concepts of Harrison's theoretical work, are also interlinked in this strong sense. When faced with the incoherence and radical disjunctures of life, such as is experienced in the transition from the family to the playground, individuals try to create a base that allows them to navigate the world with a sense of greater control. In the family, the roles, duties, and obligations associated with their position within the larger group do a lot of work in helping people identify what is appropriate behavior. But in the playground, knowing whether to listen to your mother or your sister or when to set the table or who is responsible for clearing the dishes does not help anyone understand how to navigate the new social setting. In the playground, no one is family and clear roles are not predetermined. So, how is a person to know how to act in this situation?

One answer is the creation of an identity. *A sense of self can serve as a resource for an individual in an uncertain situation*. So, for example, if a new child is introduced to the playground, the existing children need to decide how to treat them. In this new situation, both the new child and the ones already at play have to decide how to treat each other. If they feel confident and at ease, they may be friendly. If they are insecure or feel bullied, they may be hostile. Or maybe they are just shy, so they avoid the new person or other people out of awkwardness. Consciously or unconsciously, the children will draw from their sense of self to direct their actions, and their interpretation of what results — how the other child reacts to their overtures — will be colored by their sense of identity as well. Identity helps us to navigate the complexity of the world by providing a sort of guide rail that we can lean on.

In a well-known literary example (Tolstoy, 2014 [1878]), Anna Karenina's lover, Vronsky, had a very specific code of principles from which he did not deviate:

> [...] one must always pay a cardsharper, but need not pay a tailor; that one must never tell a lie to a man, but one may to a woman; that one must never cheat anyone, but one may cheat a husband; that one must never pardon an insult, but one may give one and so on (Tolstoy, 2014, p. 280).

If the principles did not apply, the setting was wrong, which was another type of guide. These principles helped Vronsky navigate the situation with Anna. From these principles, Vronsky knew that her "husband was a superfluous and bothersome individual" (*ibidem*,

p. 281). His only right was to a duel. These principles, the identity from which they sprang, gave Vronsky an ease of manner and a sense of assurance, which in Harrison's language would be called a sense of control.

However, Vronsky's invariant application of a few basic principles also made him vulnerable to other people's efforts to control him. By the end of the novel, Vronsky and, of course, Anna, were entirely bound by their circumstances, roles, and social positions. As their affair progressed, their principles and positions slowly but inexorably hemmed them into a prison of social expectations that suffocated both. Their inability to escape led to their terrible ends. Anna throws herself under a train, and Vronsky returns to military service, seeking his own death at another's hands. The identity, which had earlier provided control, ultimately made him powerless to save his wife or child, causing a loss of control.

This recurring cycle — between lack of control leading to identity, leading to increased control, increasing identity, leading to a decrease in control — is, I would argue, central to Harrison's theoretical framework. If Max Weber intended to cover two topics in *Economy and Society* (1968 [1922]), Harrison is doing something different with his concepts of identity and control. For him, identity and control are inexorably related because they both affect each other over time and that reciprocal relationship is fundamental to social life.

4 Importance for Research

The importance of this relationship, the fact that it is more than just a chance connection, distinguishes it from what has been called an "essentialist" mode of social theorizing (Somers, 1998; Emirbayer, 1997; Abbott, 1988). The link between identity and control cannot really be separated out from the two concepts that it relates.

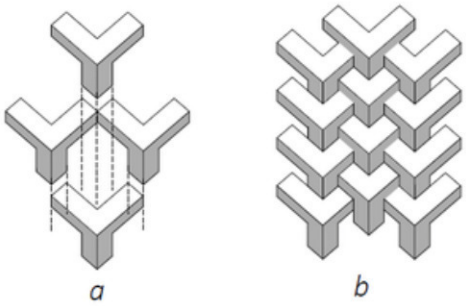

Figure 1. Interlocking cube geometry, Karayil Thekkoot et al. (2021, fig. 6, p. 7)

As an example, consider the geometry of Figure 1. The negative space around one of the pieces is not defined by the pieces. It can contain other differently shaped pieces as well as the ones pictured in the image. Therefore, trying to understand the negative space as an "absence of a piece" is not a full definition. And understanding two pieces separately is different from understanding how they might fit together. But the fit is only a relationship between two pieces. The fit does not exist without the pieces. The interlockingness, i.e., the fit, is not an object. It is something different.

Less abstractly, one might compare a symbol with an allegory. A symbol can convey an idea, but it cannot express the same kind of complex entailments that can be conveyed by allegory. So the idea of sour grapes has come to mean a kind of sourness in disposition, but the allegory from which it stems, *The Fox and the Grapes*, captures a more complex reality about criticizing things you want but cannot get.

I think we need more of this attention to strong relationships, entailments, and allegories in social theorizing, and less conceptual development of single, standalone ideas. Considering my own research, I realize that I could have applied this type of approach to the two central concepts in my book (i.e., trade and nation) by exploring the interlocking and reciprocal effects between nationalism and globalization. Does the idea of the nation entail something like international trade? And if so, are globalization and nationhood — often conceived as enemies — in fact inextricably related?

Given that the nation is a sovereign entity with defined boundaries and that much of what crosses those boundaries is commercial in nature, there is clearly a relationship between the rights, privileges, contracts, and exchange that takes place within the boundaries of the nation and what occurs outside. At a minimum, they cannot be entirely independent of each other. This is something that I have not yet explored, but that could prove a promising avenue of further development — that would again be entirely inspired by Harrison's incredibly generative conceptual framework.

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