Special Feature on Harrison White – *peer-reviewed*
Edited by Peter Bearman and Ronald L. Breiger
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/21587

Sociologica. V.19 N.2 (2025)
ISSN 1971-8853
https://sociologica.unibo.it/

You *Do* Cut Your Hair, Don't You?

John Levi Martin*

Department of Sociology, University of Chicago (United States)

Submitted: March 24, 2025 – Revised version: May 20, 2025
Accepted: May 23, 2025 – Published: July 10, 2025

Abstract

Although Harrison White was indeed in many ways a structuralist, he had a keen intuition for the role of strategy in action that has been insufficiently appreciated by many of his more recent devotees. This conception offers us a far more sophisticated and accurate understanding of social action than we have at present.

Keywords: Strategy; structure; organization; networks; Harrison White.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Benjamin Rohr for his comments on this paper and for discussing his own ideas about strategy and political action with me, to Jorge Fontdevila, Peter Bearman and Ron Breiger for comments and dialogue, and to Adam Slez for the origin of those thoughts here that are not Harrison's.

* jlmartin@uchicago.edu

> Any social formation whatever, complex or not, tends to settle into blocking action over time (White, 1992, p. 255).

1 White, Economics, and Strategy

I am fortunate enough to have recently had the opportunity to express both my intellectual conviction as to the importance of White's work for those pursuing the line of classic structuralism, and my profound appreciation for what he had personally done for me, both directly and indirectly. So, here I want to focus on one important thing that I learned from White, and have been able to pass on, namely, his deep theoretical grasp of strategy.[1]

This might seem funny, and it did seem funny to me, for, as a typical Berkeley graduate student, I was by temperament allergic to strategy, which I associated with *Homo economicus reptilicus*, everything that I had fled from by going into academia. Even when, towards the end of my graduate career, I began to understand that things weren't quite so simple, I remained constitutionally unable to really understand strategy. Indeed, despite my fundamental allegiance to dialectical materialism, field theory initially appealed to me as it expressed my own self understanding of what it means to be a cork bobbing in the water, and, despite his best efforts, Neil Fligstein was never able to really communicate to me the core vision of the outstanding conception of social skill that he possessed, both in his theory (2001a), and in his practice (although, to be sure, Neil's own social skill sometimes has a little twist of Tony Soprano, it's still basically what he theorizes).

Meeting Harrison, and reading his works, fundamentally changed my understanding of what it meant to think about strategy. Previously, I had a pretty conventional Durkheimian understanding of the organization of social science and its concepts: norms and sociology were on the left (though not quite as far as, say, those in the humanities), and economics and strategy were on the right (though not quite as far as, say, Adolf Hitler). White clearly had a different understanding: the economists were the ones who were failing to proceed scientifically, looking for absurdly convenient answers, and cutting butter with a hot chainsaw. I suspect that White shared the amusement of those mathematicians who profess to be dumbfounded that there is a Nobel prize in economics in the first place, given that this field is, in their eyes "the science of solved problems" (here see White 1990, where he suggests that Samuelson did indeed deserve a Nobel Prize... in *literature*, given that he was a rhetorician). White seemed to think that the economists were refusing to take seriously the opportunities afforded by thinking in terms of non-cooperative game theory.[2] Those who got mileage out of solving trivial differential equations were less than a joke to him, and those who simplified game theory to avoid the fundamental ambiguities and indeterminacies in multiplayer social games were, at best, simply cowards, and, at worst, they were spoiled children preferring to remain in their urine-soaked sandbox as opposed to playing stickball with the big kids on the street.

1. I should also note that my take on White's views of strategy is refracted not only through the work of Scott Boorman, who guides my interpretation of White as well, but also through the theories of Adam Slez. When Slez was working on political action, and I was working on party formation, leading to our sensibly named collaboration "Political Action and Party Formation" (2007), I absorbed much of Slez's way of thinking about strategy in political action, and thus my take on White is mediated by Slez, who went on to connect his own ideas to those of White in productive ways.

2. Jorge Fontdevila (personal communication, 2025) suggests that White's concern that *strategy* might be interpreted to mean that sort of rational calculation which he saw as an unworkable basis for social theory may have prompted him to switch to talking of *footing* in its place.

2 Getting Action[3]

2.1 What is Getting Action?

White was, I believe, 100% serious in trying to argue that we had to understand identities as an outgrowth of (sometimes strategic) interactions, not their conditions. Making identity endogenous to strategy forces us to reconsider both concepts. And here's how I now interpret what he was saying. Other people were, and, sadly, still are, trying to use networks to predict individual outcomes: who stays in the group, who believes this or that, who moves ahead or doesn't, and so on and so forth. Some of this has turned out to be important — in particular, Ron Burt (2009) used this not to predict individual outcomes alone, but to unfold a rich sense of the phenomenological texture of networks, with a subtlety and vividness that has not yet been equaled.[4] White, I believe, understood that the vein of "networks as positive predictors" would run out pretty soon, and that it wasn't as important as the opposite. The embarrassingly Mickey Mouse concept of social capital — this idea that you could treat ties as inert resources to be invested and make a profit, a notion that dominated the discussion of networks in many of the social sciences — was antithetical to any real understanding of strategy and networks. And now, fifty years later, we are coming to grips with that insight, as people realize that for every upside of "social capital", there is a downside, and so on.

Now I would see Harrison's approach to what we call strategy as bifurcated into two very different aspects. The first, which I will call the "non-problematic", is what you would probably learn if you were taking a class in strategy at a business school. The template for this would be finding an identity that fits with other identities. Choosing a target quality and a target output for a cement manufacturing firm, most simply. Deciding what to specialize in, what will be one's "brand" (but not necessarily one's "style").

The second, the "problematic", requires what White called "getting action". Rather than this being about settling down to one's niche in the overall ecology, a place — perhaps even a foxhole — in a (battle) field, it is about reconfiguring that very landscape. It is problematic in the sense that its very condition of possibility is a problem, that it requires first changing the board. It is paradigmatically *action*, in the sense of Hannah Arendt (1958), who always emphasized that action was about doing something new. Not necessarily unexpected, but still, undetermined. They thought I *might* do it... but they weren't sure. Until I did it.

It is important to recognize the difference between "getting action", on the one hand, and *success*, on the other. First, for the sake of simplicity, pretend that we can collapse all outcomes onto a scalar of better-to-worse. In these terms, getting action may, in many cases, raise the ceiling on the possible payoffs that one can get through strategic action, but it probably lowers the floor even more. Whether getting action raises the actual expected payoff in any particular situation is an empirical question, though often an unanswerable one. It is also important to recognize that White's vision of getting action was fundamentally oriented to the case of per-

3. Ron Breiger (personal communication, 2025) reminds me that this was for a long time the working title of *Identity and Control*.

4. Again, quite in contrast to the initial assumption of economic sociologists that dense networks are "good" in some general, *gemeinschäftliche* way, Burt understood the implications of closure for the phenomenology of action. I remember him in a talk gesturing at an area of small dense cliques in an organization, and commenting, "this is where the crazies are". He meant that their enforcement of local norms would be so strong that they were unable to think independently: to tell wrong from right, right from habitual, or habitual from pathological states.

sons in existing institutional, or even organizational, settings.[5] Sometimes we are best off theorizing elite (or professional) political action, in contrast, in an arena of very limited institutional development — little else than the traditions of speech making, and an enforced prohibition on the use of violence against other political elites. Yet for all that, I still find White's approach to action to be transformational in theorizing politics.

What I learned from White, which I feel has helped me advise students in directions that take them further towards, as opposed to away from, social reality, is that action requires severing ties, not because the successful actor is a sociopath, with no real relations to anyone. Rather, it is that, as a result of our action, we leave behind us what we might generally call structures — expectations, meanings, recognizable patterns — that stick around and box us in. You make an identity as you make ties, and as you make more ties, your identity — the cloud of positions in a joint space of objectivity and subjectivity — shrinks and hardens. More and more possibilities are abandoned; more and more interpretations are foreclosed.

That's just the way things are — White wasn't someone like Wilhelm Reich, proposing that having a clear and hardened identity is a form of insanity, and counterposing an aquarian eternal flexibility of the social stem cell. But White was, I believe, saying that even as this mesh hardens around an identity, action exists as potentiality, the potential to remake ties by cutting through them. Further, identities shift as that strategy succeeds, fails, or, most likely, accomplishes something unintended.

It is, I believe, now common for analysts to smilingly remark that Jim March's theory of organizations was actually the theory of the large university. That's where he was located (as a dean), and it was this sort of self-observation that led to the theory. Perhaps it is true that state universities fit the garbage can model (Cohen et al., 1972), but (thus the implication) one shouldn't over-generalize from that. So, too, it may well be tempting to dismiss Harrison's vision of the need to cut ties as that of the frustrated charismatic leader stuck in a university bureaucracy. I do not doubt that there is a small amount of truth in this. I have heard it said (from whom, I no longer remember) that when Harrison was recruited to Arizona, it was with the promise that he could hire three new assistant professors. Upon arriving, he was told that the financial situation had changed, and that there were only enough resources for him to hire one assistant professor, despite the promise. The paperwork was duly handed over to Harrison, who then went to the copy room, and ran off two more copies, hiring three assistant professors. That is cutting through the Sargasso Sea with a vengeance!

But I don't think that the university was the essential place where White got his vision, because it works even better for other fields that he was an expert in. Others criticized Lévi-Strauss's models of kinship for their lack of realism — actual people didn't stick within these simplistic preferential marriage rules, as Lévi-Strauss had of course known. But that's how you get action in a kin-based society — you make a marriage that is surprising, but perhaps defensible, reinterpreting kinship relations, making the best out of necessity, forging an alliance in an unpredictable way — just what Padgett and Ansell (1993) would later theorize as important in Florence. But you also see this in French painters (White & White, 1993) — a small world of people needing to establish identities that are different enough from one another for them to be recognized as individuals, yet having an overall coherence in a changing world with the rise of the dealer and critic system in place of the salon system.

5. Indeed, I think White's theory is, more specifically, and despite his use of earlier examples, a theory of *industrial* society, but I am not sure why I think this. Most social theory, as a priestly product, is a theory of *feudal* society.

And this is why I believe Harrison was so impatient with many economic ways of formalizing multiplayer games, those that adopted overly developed, cumbersome, and, most important, stationary payoff matrices. The key to action is that you change the game with every move — something that Herbert Simon also understood. This has been extremely helpful for me in understanding elite politics, one of the substantive settings that I find most difficult for sociologists, including myself, to understand.

2.2 Getting Action in Armies

I want to consider this issue of getting action, problematic strategy, more closely. The idea that there is a strategic benefit to doing the unexpected is a classic part of military strategy. While perhaps comparatively disfavored in the West, where (here I follow Hanson, 2000[1989]), it generally has been understood that the best strategy is, in Clausewitz's (1968[1832]) words, to "be very strong", even here, the importance of defying expectations has been recognized. Alexander the Great faced an enemy securely entrenched in a high place.[6] One access was relatively gradual, affording cover, and the other unbelievably steep, which would, should his army attempt to climb it, put them in an incredibly vulnerable position. The defenders guarded all sides, but naturally had fewer people on the steep one. Alexander pushed his army up this way, and the effect was not so much the surprise — it wouldn't take many people coming over that wall to alert the defenders in force, and it is slow to climb a steep hill — rather, it blew their minds. If Alexander can take a foolhardy path, exposing his army, surely, he must have many other tricks up his sleeve. Clearly, this is not someone to underestimate. The demoralized opponent was easily defeated.

Interestingly, such successful strategic actions may be carried out by relatively non-strategic actors. They require a sort of indifference to objective possibilities that the more strategic may be unable to muster. Machiavelli (1996, p. 62f, ch. 2 [1531]) gives the example of the impetuous Pope Julius striding into the hall of his mortal foe, unarmed and without protection, and overawing his enemy. The enemy, by nature evil and without moral compunctions, really had no reason not to swiftly dispatch the Pope then and there. But, like Alexander's enemies, he was so overawed that he let the opportunity go by and, in fact, folded. Machiavelli (1998[1532]) emphasizes that the Pope was a hothead, and not someone whose actions came from calculating the expected costs and benefits of his actions. And yet, given the other players, his non-strategic strategy turned out to be incredibly effective.

Thus, we understand the importance of upsetting the expectations of others, whether through role playing or simply being — as Jack Katz (1999) would say — "badass". These are indeed important lessons, but White was talking about something different — a kind of preparatory action for opening a staging ground in which action could take place. To some extent, he was relying on classic ideas regarding organizational decoupling — an organization, or a part of it, gets freedom of movement when it has some control over its outputs and inputs. When these are fixed in relations of what, following Harrison, I (Martin, 2009) called *dependence*, that range of free motion is generally lost.

But I think Harrison went further, because he was thinking about ties. That's the thing about ties — they are ties, and they tie you to others. A well-behaved Labrador at the end of a leash is something that responds to tugs. A poorly behaved one drags you across the field and

6. I have attempted to chase down and document this memory of mine, and I have not found it. Perhaps it wasn't actually Alexander. But someone did it, and it's just the sort of thing he *would* have done.

through the birthday party held by some extremely irate families at the other end of the park. Being able to make, but also to break, ties is an essential aspect of political action.

For ties have always an equivocal nature. To the Greeks, for whom action was paradigmatically about the free enlistment of alliances in the public space, the worst possible punishment seemed to be banishment. But sometimes they found that the banished upstart, who seemed to be disempowered by being cut off from all of the sources from which a Greek politician would generate power, actually was freed up to get action. New ties, especially to foreign potentates, that would be unthinkable for someone remaining in Athens, now opened up at least as a possibility. Somehow, the actor would need to continue the process of strategic alliance formation, including with domestic allies, while making the best of the opportunities opened up by the severance of ties that could have been holding him back.

What White was theorizing, I believe, is the way in which a strategic actor can begin to gently decouple: to remove ties, to loosen knots, to be ready to act without yet acting. It is less the amazing play of the quarterback who does the unexpected forty-yard pass, nor the grind forward of pure power, such as that of the Philadelphia Eagles offense with one yard to go, carrying out what Hanson (2000[1989]) would understand as the "Western way of war": the direct, unceasing, focused application of the combined power of many. Instead, getting action is more like the separation looked for by a wide receiver, trying to get far enough away from a defenseman that he may be able to break in a new direction, and become open for a pass.

2.3 Getting Action in Schools

Let me give you an interesting example that I think is amenable to this sort of interpretation. It comes from a wonderful article recently published by Daniel McFarland and Tom Wolff (2022), where they analyze a fascinating database of informal written notes sent by adolescents to others in school. Let me first repeat the text of one of the notes from their article (see inset 1). Their own interpretation is a straightforward one, taking the letter writers at their face value. This may, of course, be the correct interpretation, but I will propose a different, Whitean, one.

Inset 1

> **Meg to Laura**: Do you know Steven Johanson? A lot of people think he's a geek, I guess. But he likes me and he's so nice. We talk on the phone a lot and I went over to his house last night. Nothin' happened but he is really nice and his family is nice, and he has a huge a pool. (Asshole! J/K [just kidding]). His sister is pretty, she doesn't look 12 ½. She looks like she should be in 9th grade. A lot of people told me not to worry about what other people think. I asked him to TWIRP ["The Woman Is Required to Pay"-dance] (kind of). I still have to figure out what's happening. I don't know what we'd do or who we'd go with. You're probably thinking I'm crazy to go out with Steven, I hope you don't think he's a big nerd cuz I know he's not super popular or anything, but not a lot of people really know him, and once you get to know him, he's super nice. Anyway, better go. W/B [write back] very soon.
>
> **Laura to Meg**: I know Steven pretty well, he's a great guy. I think it would be awesome if you 2 went to TWIRP. He is just shy, not a big nerd, Sarah [his sister] is really pretty, we play tennis together.

We can guess that Meg does not consider Laura a close friend; in that case, she would have asked Laura about Steven *before* going to his house and becoming closer with him. Still, Meg

finds it appropriate to notify Laura that she has asked Steven to the dance ("kind of"). This suggests to me that Meg considers Laura to be of higher status than herself. Meg performs uncertainty, and includes a great deal of irrelevant information in her note, not just about Steven's house and family (his family wealth might of course be relevant in their world for dating decisions), but even details about his sister's age compared to her apparent age (not information most would consider highly pertinent). This suggests that she is trying to give the impression of disclosing information while remaining rather closed about anything important. And it suggests that she is trying to make it appear that she has not yet actually made the move which she has (forging the tie with Steven).

Along with this, Meg inserts a number of additions that are designed to establish a reality according to which it is commonly accepted that Steven is not a top choice in their world. (Were this actually common knowledge to Laura and Meg, this would not be something that Meg would need to bring up, so this is reality construction work on Meg's part). This dim view of Steven is attributed to "a lot of people", although at the same time, "a lot of people" told her not to worry about what "other people" think. Most importantly, Meg attributes to Laura the idea that Laura will probably assume that Meg is crazy to go out with Steven, implying that Laura herself would think of Steven as far beneath her.

Laura's response is gracious and appreciative, as she encourages Meg to go out with Steven and responds to the irrelevant details about Steven's sister. She has, in other words, fallen right into Meg's trap. Steven is currently, or so one would hypothesize, somewhat undervalued. Meg realizes that he is actually a substantial catch, and she needs to neutralize Laura, who, should Meg make overtures, especially without permission, might swoop down and commandeer Steven away from her. By reassuring Laura that Steven is not so great, not good enough for Laura, but possibly good enough for Meg, and getting Laura's explicit support for the move, Meg has made it nearly impossible for Laura to oppose this, should Steven turn out to be the big man on campus.

Meg has been getting action — she has been freeing herself from a relationship, not breaking it, but loosening it and repurposing the relation so that she can, should she decide to, make that sort of move that otherwise might be constrained by her relation to Laura. Meg has been able to create a little bit of separation for herself — like sending a blocker ahead of the running back, pushing people out of the way, so that the running back doesn't get bogged down in the defense.

Most importantly, Meg has been able to do this without breaking her tie to Laura. She could, of course, have done this, but it would have been costly — it might have been a virtual declaration of war against her existing social group, one that could even have scared Steven away. Instead, she loosened a control tie that Laura had over her, by giving Laura the illusion that she (Laura) was actually exerting control. Of course, we do not know — Laura may be a better strategist than she appears here. Perhaps she knows that Steven is in fact a disaster. Meg may have been slowly moving up the status order,[7] and threatening Laura's position, perhaps involving Sarah (Steven's sister, with whom Laura plays tennis). Perhaps Laura loathes Steven, because he is irritating and vile in his physical habits. The affiliation with Steven could be what finishes Meg off in the competition for status.

Indeed, more generally, sometimes we might think we are *getting* action when we are being *given* action — a door is being opened precisely because it leads to a cul-de-sac. For example, a treasured strategy of beleaguered politicians is to put "squeaky wheel" activists on budget

7. And yes, American pre-adolescents do sometimes organize themselves this way. See Adler & Adler (1998).

committees, where they encounter hard constraints and neutralize one another. Not only is their own action here blocked, but they become delegitimized in the eyes of their supporters. Still, although we can't ever really know, Meg seems to have been successfully loosening the tie to get action, whether that action turns out to have been successful or not.

2.4 Getting Action in Politics

I want, however, to focus on the case of political action, and not the action of top military generals, nor that of adolescents in school. The reason is that this poses special difficulties and challenges. White was always fascinated with the strategic aspects of ambiguity. It does not seem accidental that core theorizations of strategic action from those in White's ambit emphasized the importance of retaining a wide range of free movement. The basic idea is one that is inherent in any iterative game theory. You don't want to fence yourself in, most obviously. Even more important, as Herbert Simon (1955, p. 113) said, when the game is too complex to allow us to compute payoffs, the best move is to get to a position from which one can get to another good position — good position here always being iteratively defined. If we don't know what the game is, it's best not to commit to playing any particular game. This is the notion put forward to great (and deserved) success by White's student Eric Leifer (1988). Where social structure is yet quiet, strategic actors will seek to avoid having a recognizable position harden around them.

But then, what do they do? If every bit of action transmits information, must not that information congeal to give us an identity, and therefore, a site of control? Leifer (1988) emphasizes maintaining a state of ambiguity, but this should be obviously limited to certain special cases (as it was by him). More generally, we find that there is a way for skilled strategists to maintain not complete ambiguity, but an uncertainty that is grounded in a sort of objective possibility. The most theoretically astute elaboration of this idea of which I am aware comes in Scott Boorman's (1969) analysis of Chinese military strategy, comparing it to the game of *wei chi* (*Go*). The turbulence, the problematization comes because each move is subject to multiple interpretations — but not an infinity of them.

Action, as White says, has to fight against meaning. But it has to use meaning as well. This is not the classic strategy of indirection — where there are two potential interpretations, for example, go left or go right, and we fake left and go right, thereby defeating the enemy. Rather, the question turns on a more fundamental duality, in *wei chi*, that of inside and outside. Who is encircling whom? Up until the end, it is not always easy to tell. What seems like a good position that was leading to the encirclement of the enemy can, in the final frame, be revealed as a disastrous decision that led to one being encircled. At every moment, the good strategist is leaving multiple options open, but the counter strategist understands this. As we saw with Meg and Laura, it may be that the movement laid open to one, that one thinks she has herself cleared out, has actually been granted by the opponent — it is not free movement, it is movement into, into a zone already prepared.

In this light, we see that the essence of what I called a "problematic" strategy is not simply the cutting of ties, the freeing of oneself from obligations, from meaning, even from style. Anyone can cut ties, but an isolate is not necessarily in a good position to get action. This is especially true when we are talking about political action, for political action is paradigmatically action involving the creation and maintenance of alliances (Martin & Judd, 2020). What we see is that it is less about simply severing one's own ties, and more about shaping the ties of others, and their theory of one's own ties. The most successful strategy is one that leaves no

trace of its own presence, not even in the minds of one's opponents and allies. They themselves have changed, but even if they recognize that the situation has changed, they do not attribute the change to the strategic action of others. In a way, this raises the classic con man's task of "cooling out the mark" (Goffman, 1952). The good con man knows that the con is no more over after the trick has been played than a batter's swing is over when the bat first makes contact with the ball. The most effective follow-through is one that leaves the "mark" believing that while he has suffered an unfortunate loss, he has not actually been conned. No police reports to file, no vengeance to pursue.

Thus strategy. I want to conclude by talking about how White helps us understand the relation between strategic action and different structural forms.

3 Strategy and Structure

3.1 Some Structures Afford Action

A classic tree hierarchy, White (1992) argues, is really more of a story than a plausible structure. It's implausible, because the same chain that allows the apex to jerk the line, and transmit a shock to all those below, also allows them to pull him down. Successful organizations, even military ones, will have a different logic. Hierarchical structures tend to preclude contact between elites on top and those on the bottom. Yet the former may find this contact crucial, as White (1992, p. 240) recognizes. For this reason, we often find higher-ups leapfrogging over their immediate subordinates to try to establish direct contact with those on the bottom, suspecting that their view will be distorted by the intermediaries for their own purposes (van Creveld [1985, pp. 71, 75, 77]; and see White [1992, pp. 262ff] on the importance of "reaching down" for getting action).[8]

More promising, in White's view, are lattice structures of related, overlapping, and non-hierarchically organized committees, most famously, the structure of IBM. Here the structure is such as to prevent collapse — it is a complex molecule whose bonds serve to keep the structure from folding in upon itself as much as to keep it connected. Ties can be beams or girders that afford elements mutual repulsion, as well as bring them together.

And this brings us to another important point of White's: structure affords agency. It is easy to tear one's hair out at the bizarre compulsion of sociologists to cling to the illogical opposition of structure and agency (see Amasyalı & Berg, 2025); it is more important to understand not only that this is a philosophical disaster for us, but also that it leads to a fundamentally false model of the world. White's argument was that certain structural forms are necessary to allow that kind of freedom of movement. This was beautifully shown by White's aforementioned student, Eric Leifer, in his masterful work on the construction of professional competitive sports (1998). It takes a great deal of careful structure to establish a realm in which there can be free competition, as opposed to a single king of the hill. Similarly, Fligstein (2001b) shows that it takes a great deal of regulation to make a free market. This has important impli-

8. Ron Breiger notes that George Homans (1961, pp. 334f) had suggested that there might be such an inherent leapfrogging tendency ("the tendency for a man to interact with his 'betters' may be especially strong when he is not just a little inferior to them but definitely a good deal inferior"). What I find so interesting about this is that my attention to the problems of transitivity and intransitivity in such structures was first provoked by Homans's (1950, pp. 182ff) opposite argument, that people tended to interact with those *closer* to them in vertical status!

cations for political action: political action as such only appears in certain protected situations, where organizational structures have been carefully crafted to avoid a collapse to a singularity.

Of course, not all cases of state organization facilitate that sort of political action. Certain types of redundant organization, for example, concentrate the possibility for getting action in the hands of only a few. The tendency of totalitarian rulers to make multiple bodies with overlapping jurisdictions has long been noted — it seems to be a way to assign responsibility without security, a recipe for ensuring dependence and loyalty on the powerful. In this case, only the top can get action.

3.2 An Example

Let me continue with this idea that strategy in politics involves getting action for oneself, and, to the extent that one can, encouraging others to assemble in sets of relationships that constrain their options. Consider the successful strategy pursued in the 1787 constitutional convention by Connecticut delegate Roger Sherman.[9] The large states had been pushing for proportional representation, under Madison's Virginia plan. Connecticut helped assemble an alliance of the smaller states to oppose this. Indeed, Sherman took a lead in an anti-Virginia strategy, consistently choosing whatever position was the opposite of Madison's. He helped draft the alternative "New Jersey" plan, one favoring the small states. At the same time, despite seeming passionately attached to everything antithetical to the Virginians, Sherman also held out a willingness to compromise. Once the New Jersey plan was formulated, and a coherent alliance of the small states established, Sherman voted *against* it. He had, in effect, helped shape two strong antagonistic cliques, where only he had free movement, putting him in a unique position as a power broker. Without his mediation, the two sides seemed likely to deadlock. He was the solution to the problem he created. And most wonderfully, this was hardly obvious to all actors at the time — the overarching opposition between North and South, small and large, appeared so obvious that his work in creating this configuration took analysts a while to disentangle.

How was Sherman able to do this remarkable feat? He was operating in an arena specially prepared for pure political action. The delegates had no *dependence* on external forces, no party leaders to scold them, no campaign contributions to gather. They all met face to face, just as had the ancient Greeks that Arendt (1958) took as the prototype of political action. Their speeches would not (at least, not initially, and never officially) be shared with others. And no mob was gathered with torches and pitchforks outside their room. Finally, there was no formal hierarchy, no tendencies for locking up inherent in the organization (and that might need to be ameliorated by complex overlapping committee structure). He could move in the space of alliances because what position *meant* in that space *was* the set of alliances, and he could get action not only by loosening his own ties, but by binding others.

9. Here I am guided by Slez's interpretation in Slez & Martin (2007); for support, see Farrand, 1966 [1911]: VI, pp. 87, 196, 313, 510–521, 524–606; VII, pp. 1–20; also see Farrand, 1968 [1913], p. 100; Robertson, 2005; Roche, 1961; Rossiter, 1966; Jensen, 1964; and Anderson, 1993.

4 Conclusion

"*My brother is an hairy man; and I am a smooth man*" (*Genesis*, 27:11).

Hair, or so I am told, is actually protein waste that is excreted from our bodies in such a form as that it does not naturally fall away from us, as is habitual for many of our other forms of excreta.[10] You make it all the time, and you can't stop making it — it's just that way. But chances are, you're going to need to cut it sooner or later. According to White, institutions, rituals, ties, are the natural excreta of our processes of getting action. Unfortunately, not only do many of us ignore the importance of regular shaving, we have adopted a theory of social networks which is positively Samsonian in its conviction that the secret to strength lies in ties, and not just any ties, but tangled and matted ones to boot. White shows us the way forward.

References

Adler, P.A., & Adler, P. (1998). *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Amasyalı, E., & van den Berg, A. (2025). What Do We Use "Agency" For? A Critical Empirical Examination of Its Uses in the Sociological Literature. In H.F. Dahms (Ed.), *The Future of Agency (Current Perspectives in Social Theory, Vol. 41* (pp. 43–75). Leeds, UK: Emerald Group Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/S0278-120420250000041003

Anderson, T. (1993). *Creating the Constitution: The Convention of 1787 and the First Congress*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Boorman, S.A. (1969). *The Protracted Game: A Wei-Ch'i Interpretation of Maoist Revolutionary Strategy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Burt, R.S. (2009). *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard university press.

von Clausewitz, K. (1968). *On War*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Original work published 1832).

Cohen, M.D., March, J.G., & Olsen, J.P. (1972). A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *17*(1), 1–25. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2392088

van Creveld, M. (1985). *Command in War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Farrand, M. (1966). *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (Original work published 1911).

Farrand, M. (1968). *The Framing of the Constitution of the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (Original work published 1913).

10. This doctrine has nothing to do with my own hairstyle, whose evolution was less than cultural.

Fligstein, N. (2001a). Social Skill and the Theory of Fields. *Sociological Theory*, *19*(2), 105–125. https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00132

Fligstein, N. (2001b). *The Architecture of Markets: An Economic Sociology of Twenty-First-Century Capitalist Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Goffman, E. (1952). On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure. *Psychiatry*, *15*(4), 451–463. https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1952.11022896

Hanson, V.D. (2000). *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. (Original work published 1989).

Homans, G.C. (1950). *The Human Group*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, & Co.

Homans, G.C. (1961). *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich.

Jensen, M. (1964). *The Making of the American Constitution*. Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nordstrom.

Katz, J. (1999). *How Emotions Work*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Leifer, E.M. (1988). Interaction Preludes to Role Setting: Exploratory Local Action. *American Sociological Review*, *53*(6), 865–878. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095896

Leifer, E.M. (1998). *Making the Majors: The Transformation of Team Sports in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Machiavelli, N. (1996). *Discourses on Livy*, (translated by H.C. Mansfield & N. Tarcov). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1531).

Machiavelli, N. (1998). *The Prince* (translated by H.C. Mansfield). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1532).

Martin, J.L. (2009). *Social Structures*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Martin, J.L., & Judd, N. (2020). Tasks for the Political Sociology of the Next Ten Years. In T. Janoski, C. de Leon, J. Misra, & I.W. Martin (Eds.), *The New Handbook of Political Sociology* (pp. 243–266). New York, NY: Cambridge.

McFarland, D.A., & Wolff, T. (2022). Writing into Relationships. *Social Networks*, *71*, 96–114. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2022.06.006

Padgett, J.F., & Ansell, C.K. (1993). Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici, 1400–1434. *American Journal of Sociology*, *98*(6), 1259–1319. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2781822

Robertson, D.B. (2005). Madison's Opponents and Constitutional Design. *American Political Science Review*, *99*(2), 225–243. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055405051622

Roche, J.P. (1961). The Founding Fathers: A Reform Caucus in Action. *The American Political Science Review*, *55*(4), 799–816. https://doi.org/10.2307/1952528

Rossiter, C. (1966). *1787: The Grand Convention*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Simon, H. (1955). A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *69*(1), 99–118. https://doi.org/10.2307/1884852

Slez, A., & Martin, J.L. (2007). Political Action and Party Formation in the United States Constitutional Convention. *American Sociological Review*, *72*(1), 42–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200103

White, H.C. (1990). Interview. In R. Swedberg (Ed.), *Economics and Sociology* (pp. 78–95). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

White, H.C. (1992). *Identity and Control*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

White, H.C., & White, C.A. (1993). *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

John Levi Martin – Department of Sociology, University of Chicago (United States)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4211-1791 | jlmartin@uchicago.edu
https://home.uchicago.edu/~jlmartin/
John Levi Martin is the Florence Borchert Bartling Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago (USA), and is currently the editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*.