Harrison White and the Practice of Sociology

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Abstract

We introduce the topics and foci of the six articles in this special issue devoted to the work of Harrison White, who passed away in May 2024. We asked each author to reveal some aspects of White's craft, while recounting how their own work has in some respects been entangled with the research problems and vision that he has articulated. Each essay is at once scholarly, innovative, and deeply personal.

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Harrison Colyar White passed away on May 19, 2024, at the age of 94.

It is fitting that an early volume of this journal (*Sociologica*, 2008/1, including essays by Marco Santoro, Michael Schwartz, and Harrison himself) was already devoted to a rearview look (*retrovisore*) at Harrison's early work and, in particular, his exposition of his concept of "catnets" in an undergraduate lecture course at Harvard in the mid-1960s that became instantly infamous (Schwartz, 2008). Now a set of remembrances of Harrison has appeared on the website of the Columbia University Department of Sociology.[1] A collection of remembrances, reviews of his work, and appraisals, plus an interview appearing for the first time in English, all edited by Jan Fuhse, was recently published in the online journal *Connections* (Fuhse, 2025). As well, the posthumous intellectual portrait of Harrison by Alain Degenne, Frédéric Godart and Michel Grossetti was published online in the *Books & Ideas / La Vie des Idées* series of the Collège de France (Degenne et al., 2025).

For this special section of *Sociologica* we have invited six authors to reveal in a little more depth some aspects of Harrison's craft while recounting how their own work has in some respects been entangled with the research problems and vision that Harrison has articulated. Each essay is at once scholarly, innovative, and deeply personal.

We anticipate that many more articles and books about White and his contributions to sociology will appear in the next decade. As has been noted previously, it is impossible to look at Sociology today and not see how it has been fundamentally shaped by Harrison's ideas. White's early work has come to shape many of the major sub-fields of the discipline — culture, networks, economic, to mention just three — and his intuitions about how social structures emerge and are sustained (and transformed) implicitly guide much of the work in analytical sociology and other approaches which emphasize the importance of understanding mechanisms at the middle range.

Duality is a key theme running throughout much of Harrison's work (Breiger, 2005). For example, in *Chains of Opportunity* (White, 1970), Harrison defined duality as invariance in models of social structure and process under the interchange of individuals and positions. But even earlier, in his work on classificatory kinship, duality appears as critical to the practical working of such systems. It makes sense then that no fewer than three of the essays to follow — those by John Levi Martin, Emily Erikson, and Matthew Bothner and his coauthors — explore the duality of identity and control and, moreover, examine this duality from a perspective emphasizing strategic action. Martin focuses on Harrison's "deep theoretical grasp of strategy" (Martin, 2025, p. 8). In the course of his exposition, including examples drawn from the battlefield, the football field, and a probing discourse analysis of a note written by one young adolescent woman to another, Martin focuses on the duality of getting action and being given action. He sees this as analogous to encirclement in the game of *wei chi* (go). As Martin describes it,

> Who is encircling whom? Up until the end, it is not always easy to tell [...] At every moment, the good strategist is leaving multiple options open, but the counter strategist understands this (Martin, 2025, p. 14).

In her essay, Erikson casts light on "co-constitutive relations" (Erikson, 2025, p. 24), which is one meaning of duality (Mützel & Breiger, 2020). Erikson shows how Harrison's concepts of identity and control (White, 1992 & 2008) are co-constitutive and interlock in a strong sense (as in her discussion of Fig. 1 in her essay). For example, Erikson writes of the character Vronsky in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* ([1878] 2014) that his identity "gave Vronsky an ease of manner and

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a sense of assurance, which in Harrison's language would be called a sense of control" (2025, p. 27). However, this very identity rendered him "vulnerable to other people's efforts to control him" (*ibidem*), Erikson demonstrates: his "identity, which had earlier provided control, ultimately made him powerless to save his wife or child, causing a loss of control" (*ibidem*).

Bothner and coauthors (2025) make innovative use of work experiences in a global investment bank, as input into an artificial intelligence algorithm (ChatGPT-4o), to generate "synthetic narratives" of work in investment banks that the authors interpret as showing how professional relationships (identities), initially pursued for career advantage (control), "can crystallize into rigid, constraining roles" (p. 31), leading to a loss of control — an unexpected (by us) convergence with Erikson's exposition of Vronsky's dilemma in Tolstoy's novel, as well as with Martin's depiction of how what seems to an actor to be "getting action" can simultaneously be action "given" by others who thereby potentially lock in their own control.

Duality implies, as White long argued, seeing multiplexity as central to social structure and social action. In her essay, Delia Baldassarri (2025) draws inspiration from White's 1972 "Do Networks Matter", (lecture notes for Camden), which starts the Preliminaries section with: "We are many; we are mortal; we are recognizable individuals; we talk" (1972, p. 1). The "many" refers both to the fact that we humans live in an environment constituted by interacting populations of other humans and in larger part "non-speaking communities also drawing energy", but also to our nature as uniquely defined and constituted by the shifting/fluid sets of relations with other people and things in specific settings, in short by the multiplexity of ties we have with others. As Baldassarri notes, early on in White's work, and later developed in *Identity and Control* (1992/2008), White argues that:

> 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).

This focus on multiplexity, Baldassarri notices,

> 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 (Baldassarri, 2025, p. 52).

By linking White's emphasis on multiplexity to polarization dynamics, Baldassarri reveals how a sensitivity to actual social structures and real individuals undermines the dominant narrative of a citizenry split along partisan lines. The notion that Republicans and Democrats are constantly at odds is a false dichotomy, constructed by political and media elites — alongside "social science" influencers, whose struggles for control induce a largely imagined "tribalism" among ordinary people, whose tangible experiences often contradict the binaries they are given.

For many students and colleagues who knew and worked with Harrison before he moved to Columbia, the "late White" of *Identity and Control* has always felt a bit elusive if only because the language seemed (and indeed was), as Ann Mische writes of her own writing grappling with

White at the time, "cryptic and jargony" (Mische, 2025, p. 69). But there was also the sense that relative to his earlier work, much of *Identity and Control* lacked the formal foundation to be more than a set of animating metaphors, that it was (if we may turn Harrison's metaphor about organization in general into a reflexive statement about his writing) "a shambles rather than a crystal" (White, 2008, p. 18, quoted in Fontdevila's essay, 2025, p. 90). Polymer goos, reptating strings, and rubbery gels seemed akin to the imperceptible objects postulated by physics, more useful as things to think with than actual entities, than the more tangible discoveries of the "early White", arising from within the structuralist/network framework.

Together, the essays by Mische and by Jorge Fontdevila make a powerful case for re-imagining both how identity and control are built from White's early work, but more critically for the power of *Identity and Control* as a general model for understanding complex emergence processes. Both of these authors build on foundational extension of White's turn to culture and (often more specifically) to language. Key to the essays of both Fontdevila and Mische is Harrison's concept of switching. As Mische writes, "social times" as well as identities emerge from accounting and updating processes as people move within and across network domains ("netdoms"), for example family and work. Mische (drawing on Mische & White, 1998) points out that switching calls for negotiation of ambiguity and the folding of multiple story-lines into emerging talk (Mische, 2025, p. 70).

> In their search for control, identities switch from netdom to netdom, and each switching is at once a decoupling *from* somewhere and an embedding *into* somewhere (White, 2008, p. 2, quoted by Fontdevila, 2025).

In making the case for Harrison as a complexity theorist, Fontdevila argues that switching is central to his theory of emergence and appears again and again at different scopes and levels.

Mische's essay describes an ongoing research project to study how "foresight practitioners" — that is, participants in "intentional gatherings that focus collective attention on heightened deliberations about future possibilities" (2025, p. 71) — promise what she calls a dual relational outcome:

> They claim to help people build relations with others by means of these futures, while simultaneously building futures by means of those relations" (2025, p. 72).

We hope that the collection of six essays presented here, and other such collections of work inspired by Harrison White's vision and accomplishments that we are sure will come, will do just what Mische's foresight practitioners are engaging in, which is building a future for a deeper, more creative, and (okay), "gooier" Sociology.

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