Harrison C. White
Preface: "Catnets" Forty Years Later

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by Harrison C. White

A relative newcomer to sociology from theoretical physics, I was charged with teaching it within a large introductory course at Harvard College a year or two after I came. Social Relations 10 was my first undergraduate sociology – as I did grad courses in four years at Chicago and business courses at Graduate School of Industrial Administration, Carnegie-Mellon, in both schools pointing toward math modeling.

I thought existing textbooks were grotesquely unscientific. In desperation, I was determined to develop sociology from the bottom up, and I was willing to devote the time to develop new materials as well as a new view, thereby hoping to charge up the score of graduate student teaching assistants to believe in and communicate the new vision to their weekly discussion sessions.

It worked, despite my mediocre lecturing polish, going better over three successive years of the mid-sixties. The positive thrust was *networks*, relational, social space, which some of those very teaching assistants and I were helping to bring to operational research and modeling. The negative thrust was against attributes and attitudes and the associated panoply of variables, attitudes and correlational analysis and statistical testing then and still predominant, despite little phenomenological or causative depth. A second main theme was combinatorics, the enormous range of possible formations, social and cultural. For both themes the preferred approach was to learn through solving weekly problem sets – making up which was a key challenge that I could not have met without input and feedback from the teaching assistants, some from social psychology and anthropology alongside the sociology core. In a later year a charismatic head section man, Michael Schwartz, on his own took notes

on every lecture and distributed (mimeo) every week so that some depth of understanding could be sought.

But right from the beginning I could see the need for carefully argued memos by me on the key constructs I was introducing. On the process side was the paradoxical "Coupling and Decoupling," along with dissection of uncertainty into three forms, and of course there were memos on types of networks, triads, dominance. The core throughout settled around "Notes on the Constituents of Social Structure," me being very much a (combinatorial) structuralist. And what kept me honest was the other basic principle of this course (Soc Rel 10): reading chunks of excellent case studies, tangible description and data from all scopes and periods and realms. There were a number of empirical case studies and models such as by Anatol Rapoport, H.G. Landau and Jim Davis that were the grist of my thinking, along with my first monograph on classificatory kinship systems, and my PhD thesis on sociometry and attitudes of managers of a Pittsburgh company trying to look modernized through Research & Development.

Resulting pressures forced some retrenchment on my glib disdain for conventional, "categorical" as I called it, social description and analysis. I was convinced there had to be some theoretical substructure that got at process in this structural approach by distinguishing sorts of uncertainty and trying for a bit of a calculus. This allowed building up further articulation structurally, as in categories related to kinship systems, and interpretively from viewpoints of actors themselves. Thence "Catnets," my effort to square the circle of network truth with some categorical aspects of sociocultural reality.

Teaching that course, to those undergrads and with those grads, surely was why it made sense for me to leave Chicago great as it was for Harvard. I followed the same pattern later, in teaching over many years a course in sociology of arts, but there I actually produced a published text – *Careers and Creativity* – for the course. I was too caught up in vacancy chains and blockmodeling to find the time for a Soc Rel 10 book – besides Mike Schwartz own mimeo notes would have been hard to beat.

Let me say one perspective more: I really did start from scratch and not bow down to existing authority – I was well versed in and loved physics but I did not take the Cartesian space and the boundary value perspective over to sociology, it didn't fit. Also there is an irony about the network modeling so central in Soc Rel 10: Just a year before I came to Harvard I had rejected sociometric network analysis as explanation of the Impressionist movement after working on it and coding for four years – networks worked for the Pittsburgh company analysis but not for the painting [see White and White 1965].

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Forty year later, catnets lived on in my *Markets from Networks* modeling monograph of 2003. And now in 2008 they are prominent in my overall theory of emergence of social formations, *Identity and Control*: much transmuted in the guise of switchings between netdoms = network + domains.

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References

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Harrison C. White holds a Ph.D. in Theoretical Physics from the MIT and a Ph.D. in Sociology from Princeton University and is the Giddings Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, in New York. He is well known for his work on social network analysis and the structure of production markets (Markets from Networks, Princeton University Press, 2002). He is just finishing a massive rewrite and extension of his 1992 book, *Identity and Control*. It is to be translated by Michel Grossetti and Frédéric Godart into French.