Michael Schwartz
A postscript to "Catnets"

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by Michael Schwartz

I was not aware that this was Harrison's first undergraduate course. Or, if I was, I had forgotten in the intervening years. In any case, it showed very visibly in his "presentation of self" as well as his presentation of material. Whereas in our graduate seminar (which we were taking at the same time as SR10) Harrison was relaxed and informal, conversational and argumentative, his presentation in SR10 was formal, even stiff. His language was very "official" with all sorts of carefully defined concepts, and this gave the section leaders a real sense that we were getting the "official" version of his perspective.

I don't think that Harrison ever fully appreciated how important his "disdain" for the "attributes and attitudes" approach (the dominant view in sociology text-books) was for his (graduate) students. In those days, he was not even a little bit diplomatic about this disdain. I can remember (in a graduate course) him savaging Parsons while Chad Gordon (a Parsonsian and his co-teacher) squirmed around try-ing to figure out a defense. For us as graduate students, that disdain was the hook for everything else. We could easily see the failures of the "attributes and attitudes" approach in the various texts we were reading (by ourselves or with his help), and this made us hungry for an alternate view that could better explain the evidence.

This became one of the main reasons why SR10 became such an attraction for graduate students. It was the (only) venue in which Harrison was presenting his alternative to the "attributes and attitudes" perspective.

But he chose to do it in a very unorthodox way. Instead of simply offering a graduate seminar in which he developed his perspective (after all, Parsons gave a seminar entitled "Toward a General Theory of Action"), Harrison delivered his ideas

in an introductory undergraduate course. And then, he created a crazy structure for the course. He used series of monographs (hardly any of them actually by sociologists) that provided the analytic material for his viewpoint, but not the viewpoint itself. The perspective was presented in the lectures, not the reading.

We all thought Harrison was at least a little bit crazy (which appealed to our rebelliousness); but he was actually crazy like a fox. The whole idea turned out to be quite brilliant. For example, take Harrison's use of the texts. Instead of teaching what was in the books he assigned, he used them, in a sense, as raw material for creating arguments and even theories that were at least different from (and sometimes even antagonistic to) the perspectives presented by the authors. This was, I think, most pronounced in his treatment of Lawrence Stone's *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*. I never believed, for a minute, that Stone agreed with Harrison's interpretation of his book. But, to my mind, the book supported Harrison's interpretation more forcefully than it supported what I thought was Stone's interpretation of the evidence.

More generally, Harrison would distill out of the assigned books certain dynamics (almost all of which had networks at their core) and then spin out more general arguments about social life based on these dynamics. It was these more general arguments that were missing the texts.

And there was usually a "calculus," (or even an algorithm) that could translate structure into prediction about human behavior. Harrison was always, in those days, looking for (testable) propositions. Usually the propositions (at least the ones I remember best) had this form: if we understand the structure of a network, we can predict the key content of the constituent relationships. A simple example of this is that a hub and spoke structure confers power on the hub (in certain specified larger network configurations).

Another of Harrison's great innovations was "problem sets," just like in Math courses. One problem set, I remember, led to a fine illustration of the hub structure of networks. The students were required to choose their two best friends and have those two choose their two best friends and etc., going out, I think, to six removes. Most of the networks folded back to the student tracing them, but one of my students' had a network which consisted of something like 20 people stretched out with almost no reciprocal ties, and zero people choosing my student. I took one look at the network she had traced and felt a great sorrow come over me, as I realized that she was a very lonely, unloved person, without any real group of friends. And then I was won over to the fundamental theory of network analysis, that structure expresses and/or creates content.

The problem sets were themselves an important part of the course, and another of Harrison's brilliant innovations. They were, more generally, an expression of

Harrison's determination to make sociology into a truly empirical science. Designing the problem sets was like figuring out how to apply Harrison's general principles in the "real world." We had to find an empirical phenomenon that the students could actually identify, and that expressed the larger dynamics that Harrison was articulating. I remember we had many arguments what problems to assign, because factions would develop about whether the exercise would really "prove out:" would reveal the patterns predicted by the theory. It was like a weekly test of Harrison's perspective and I remember exchanging the results of my students other section leaders because the evidence was crucial to test the theories.

(If I recall correctly, Charles Tilly may have either attended the catnet lectures or got his hands on the notes from them, because I recall him getting really excited about *Catnets*, talking with us graduate students about them.)

One of my most vivid memories is that the course became a kind of *mecca* for graduate students. All the section leaders sat in back of the aisle that bisected the lecture hall, and very often there were other graduate students who came to hear particular lectures. During and after the lectures we would discuss them amongst ourselves – lots of what I put in the notes derived from these discussions; that is, some material that got into the notes was never actually delivered in the lecture, but derived from discussions during and afterwards among the section leaders, other students, and even Harrison.

These discussions among graduate students were often contentious, because the ideas were always controversial and Harrison's lectures were never fully coherent. It was like he was constantly reaching for new ideas, or even developing new ideas as he spoke in class. Sometimes I think he even confused himself, because he would begin to mutter or mumble and the undergraduates would turn to look at all the section leaders, with consternation on their faces.

I can't recall a particular instance, but many times we thought he was contradicting earlier lectures with new ideas later in the semester, and we would then try to sort everything out – either demonstrating the full extent of the contradiction, or finally resolving what we decided was an interesting paradox.

It was, at least for me, a heady time. We (at least I) felt that we were "in" on the creation of a whole new perspective.

Parenthetically, I believed then (and maybe still believe) that this new perspective was fundamentally Marxist. The network arguments were always dialectical (at least to my eye), because their ultimate structure always consisted of the marriage of centripetal and centrifugal forces. The structuralism was, at its root, materialist because Harrison's disdain for "attributes and attitudes" explanation worked out to include a relentless antagonism to the (Parsonian?) view that ideas could determine

structure. For him (and for Marx) structure determined action and ideas followed along. Therefore Harrison's perspective was, fundamentally and axiomatically dialectical and materialist.

I kept this to myself most of the time, however, because Harrison was also a supporter of the war in Vietnam; and I thought it was impossible to convince any rational person that a dialectical materialist could also support imperialism. The war was always on my mind and lots of the others who hung around Harrison and taught in the SR10. I suspect it was also on Harrison's mind much of the time.

I am sure that if we reread the notes drawn from his lectures we could find all sorts of references to the war, oblique for the most part, but definitely implicit in the lectures and the notes. There would be so much more to say – about what was happening then and about how the ideas of the course have become integrated into our scholarship and thinking over the years. But this would surely exceed the duty of a short Postscript.

Just one final thought. I know Harrison still considers that period as one of "hard work," the hardest probably. I think that the "hard work" Harrison did for the course was actually two-dimensional.

On the one hand, he was super-motivated because he was codifying a whole new perspective. The motivation was enhanced once he made the crazy decision to present his perspective in a freshman course. I could never understand that decision, but it had one overwhelming virtue: it forced him to break everything down into its basic parts, since the audience knew nothing at all. (I should add that the students were, for the most part, bewildered by what Harrison was saying. That was why I decided to create the lecture notes in the first place. I saw myself, with the help of all the other section leaders, "translating" Harrison's impossibly complicated ideas into plain English for our suffering students.)

On the other hand, the ideas were so exciting to the graduate students (not just the section leaders) that Harrison's perspective came to dominate our casual conversations outside of class. We scrutinized everything he said, as though each point, no matter how mundane or incoherent, was a diamond waiting to be mined, cut and polished – and then savored for its beauty and elegance. So we kept after Harrison about all his ideas, questioning, arguing and disputing. I do not think that he could walk into the lunch room without having to defend his point of view in one way or another, either by answering questions or by responding to challenges.

So I think the hard work was partly an expression of Harrison's excitement about his new perspective, and partly a response to all of our excited questioning and badgering.

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Abstract: Social Relations 10 was much more than an "Introduction to Sociology" course; it was a forum in which Harrison White developed and codified a new sociological perspective. Before an audience of bewildered undergraduates and inspired graduate assistants, White presented, for the first time, the foundations of network analysis, replete with catnets, hubs and wheels, and the rest of his new conceptual vocabulary. In doing so, he challenged and rebutted the then dominant "attributes and attitudes perspective" most closely associated with Talcott Parsons, and presented in its place a fresh structural analysis, most closely associated in my mind with dialectical materialism.

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