
Book Reviews

Harrison White

Identity and Control. How Social Formations Emerge

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2nd edn., 2008, 472 pp.

With publication of the first edition of *Identity and Control* in 1992, Harrison White secured a position among contemporary social theorists. Although second editions are not usually reviewed, White's book calls for a review for two reasons. The first is the changes he has made, and the second is the status of the author of the book. People in fields such as network theory, economic sociology and mathematical sociology have used White's ideas, but his work has a much broader relevance and it is shown in this new edition.

It is no surprise that White is gaining respect in Europe. Though one should hesitate to generalize, sociological theory is still a largely European affair. White can be seen as the father of modern network theory, but in contrast to most of his old network peers, not only does he see network theory as a method, he addresses the phenomenology of networks, how they are constituted and, more generally, the emergence of social formations that we have to grasp if we are to make sense of any network. At least in practice, White is also the father of what has been called 'relational sociology'.

What are these social formations? The first line of the argument is that identities, which are the active poles in the Whitean system, are formed by attempts to control. However, identities can only be stable if they are recognized by others. This, in other words, implies a connection over time, as seen by 'others', for an identity to come into being. It is thus not a ready-made actor, who is born free and may have 'personality,' which has been imported into economics and some sociological theory, but identity that is the key to action. With this idea, White goes against the 'folk-psychology' held by ordinary men and stressing the autonomy of individuals prior to social ties. White is much closer to, for example, Martin Heidegger and American pragmatists, who see man as socially constituted. In White's approach, context is made up of other identities, a notion that covers, for example, organizations and humans. What is normally called 'person' is seen as a result of a set of identities that a person has in different contexts. Identities result from activities in social formations, and these formations, instead of actors or activities, are the smallest social units of analysis.

What structural forms can be identified? As I see it, this is a central issue that White addresses. In the attempt to analyse social formations, he also brings up other central questions, such as language and action. Language is interconnected with stories and with social ties, which means that stories are interconnected with networks. White proposes that processes of social formation trigger styles and culture. A formal organization, or a theory like rational choice, is a style which in White's terminology is more like a script of how things are done. Temporality is an interesting, and highly problematic issue, which is seldom discussed by sociologists. In White's book, temporality is integrated, for example, in the discussion of how we

can understand persons out of identities. These are some instances of the wealth of the book, but which cannot be shown in a review.

However, it is clear that the relation to the works by Bourdieu and, above all, Niklas Luhmann, to whom White has a strong affinity, is a development in this second edition. To me, the second edition was easier to read than the first, and I got into his ideas much more quickly. White has suggested different ways that the reader can approach the book, and the best strategy depends, of course, on whether you have read the first edition or not. My take was to start with Chapter 1, then move to the last chapter, before getting back to Chapter 2 and the rest of the book. This means starting with a good overview of the arguments and then exploring the details and possible applications.

Identity and Control is a source of inspiration for sociologists who would like to take their thinking further. It is of value to sociologists caught in a framework and needing a catalyst to dig deeper, and also to those searching for inspiration of topics as well as a fruitful theoretical approach. In addition to the general sociological audience, I want to point out its value to organizational sociologists, who are likely to find this book interesting, although he has a slightly different approach compared to many organizations sociologists. White relates organization to the struggle for control, and stresses, as Luhmann does, the order from noise principle, which means acknowledging spontaneous processes of order. This idea implies that order is not planned, for example by a state; it is a consequence of activities which, in White's case, boils down to identities seeking control. White is trying to understand social processes at a more profound level, which means that one does not start with assumptions such as 'society' or 'actor', or any other substantialist notion in sociology; also the conditions of these issues must be explained.

I highly recommend this book. It is not necessary to understand every single sentence of the text in research towards understanding social life. It is possible, after having worked with the main ideas of the perspective, to read sections without digesting the whole. One may hand it to potential graduate students in sociology, while asking them to develop their own ideas based on the book. This could serve as one test among others of predicting who will make a sociological contribution. There is no doubt that White has made a sociological contribution with this second edition.

Patrik Aspers
Stockholm University, Sweden

Sam Whimster

Understanding Weber

London and New York: Routledge, 2007, 296 pp.

It is well known that the image of Weber varies. There is an American Weber cut loose from his German roots, despite being brought over the Atlantic Ocean in the luggage of migrant scholars. There is a German Weber limited by the German context and its *Verstehen* language, as if Weber had never posthumously become the founder of several competing sociological paradigms. There is a British Weber imprinted by the 'cultural twist', as a sort of substitute for critical Marxian thoughts.

However, this picture is slowly ever more moss-grown. There are several bridge-building scholars in an increasingly universal discourse; mention only Lawrence A. Scaff and Stephen Kalberg, both with many years in Freiburg and well acquainted with Max Weber's Germany.

How Social Formations Emerge | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. We use cookies to offer you a better experience, personalize content, tailor advertising, provide social media features, and better understand the use of our services. To learn more or modify/prevent the use of cookies, see our [Cookie Policy](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). [Accept Cookies](#). [top](#).