



Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action

Harrison C. White

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In proposing a comprehensive network theory that cuts across the range of social sciences, Harrison White rejects conventional hierarchical models and focuses instead on efforts of control in a social structure described as a tangle of locked-in practices. He argues that the widely held conceptions of person and goal grounded in traditional political economy do not provide a basis for social theory that is either coherent or consistent with current developments in psychology and anthropology. White replaces person with identity, which, in a distinctively human sense, emerges from frictions and social noise across different levels and disciplines in networks. Likewise he reshapes the notion of goals, maintaining that they merely inhabit sets of stories used to explain agency, and that action itself comes through selective strategies to break through formal organization. As his main empirical basis, White uses case studies covering a wide range of topics, including tribal religions, changing rhetorics of industrial administration and the premodern Church, practices of State-building, and change of style in popular music. His analyses draw from English social anthropology, natural science, French rhetorics, mathematics, German industrial history, control engineering, and American pragmatism.

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