

Interview with Harrison White: 4-16-01

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*We want to start out with a question about your background. Can you talk about how any events, experiences, in your upbringing, or later experiences, contributed to the development of the direction that you've taken in sociology?*

I come from a Southern background, with a large family, at least my mother had a very large family. Seven siblings. My father just had a brother, but we were primarily oriented toward my mother's family, it was a social mobility thing, in that my father came from -- a very bright man -- but he came from a simple background, and mother was actually rather pretentious and comes from a Southern family that thought very well of itself, although it was poor, financially not wealthy, and so I think that's part of it. And then my father, like many men, in making his way, was a doctor, but joined the Navy in the first World War and stayed in it because it was much easier than trying to make a practice when he wasn't of the right kind of social background. He never said that, and of course I didn't consciously know this, but I'm just trying to reconstruct. As a sociologist I can see from the beginning, I saw both social class kinds of issues there. I saw bureaucracy in the sense of a professional naval officer. And then I saw an awful lot of the country. Although I am a Southerner, I don't sound like it, I went to first grade in Nashville, which was our home city, and I was back there a lot, as I had endless relatives and grandparents, but I always lived in port cities. New Orleans, Long Beach, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Norfolk, you name the navy bases and I was there. And so I went to -- I think -- seven or eight grammar schools and three high schools. And that also contributes, for one thing it had an advantage in that I ended up being skipped for two grades. So I was very young, I was 15 when I went to MIT. Which was socially a little awkward, but it gave you a lot of room. And I am not so sure, if I hadn't had that room I would have made this ridiculous switch. I was fully trained in a field I liked and was doing well. But I had the time to do it, and then I do think it was this background underneath that led me to be interested, because I had never had any idea that one could do something called sociology, or anything like that. I just did science. But Karl Deutsch, who was a very great political scientist, who happened to be at MIT then, I took a course with him, and that was another sign. I did a lot of work with foreign students on the side and a little bit with some publications which was completely superfluous for my physics, so I think it was some indication, but then Deutsch was the one who picked up on this and said, "Why don't you think about this?" I was already in graduate school at the time. I thought he was crazy.

MIT at the time was not a cross-gender place; in a class of 800 there were seven women, four of whom had married and left by the first Thanksgiving. It was a lock-step schedule, and we went through Saturday noon -- physics, math, electrical engineering, chemistry -- but I took some extra courses on the side in novels and some great -- well, I had always loved reading, but even at MIT I found time for it. And I think it is worth mentioning that because, although I came into sociology doing a lot of -- and I believe in it and I'll

continue to do -- modeling, positivist kind of things, I always had an interpretive interest too. It comes from that background and I don't see them as disjunct anyway.

I think the other thing is that the kinship is very important too. Forget about social class, but just always be aware of the importance of kinship. My mother was very oriented to her -- both her -- lines of descent, but also I had lots of aunts and uncles, and you keep track of all the cousins, and my middle name Colyer is my great uncle Arthur Colyer who was editor of the Nashville Banner. And then -- from my mother's point of view it was important -- my name Harrison was a family name. There were a couple of presidents up in our family tree. Not very good presidents. William Henry who died of pneumonia, and then Benjamin Harrison, I think was a man of absolutely no distinction that I am aware of. He was a president. And so there was all this kind of mixture of kinship ties and relational things, but also a sensitivity to status and control and power and so on. So I think that's both what got me into sociology and what's shaped what I try to do in it.

*That's a nice segue into our next question, which is how would apply the concept of a "Vacancy Chain" to your own career?*

Actually the most vivid application is Jim Coleman, who was a great sociologist doing also mathematical work, and wonderful empirical work, was a young professor at Chicago, assistant professor, and he boldly decided to leave and found a new department at Johns Hopkins, and so that left a vacancy. And Phil Hauser regarded it as a definite, he wanted a kind of mathematical modeler, because he saw that as the coming thing, so he looked around for me. And it was a great break for me because my first job was in a business school, Carnegie Mellon. I had been out at the Center for Advanced Study, as a young fellow, and Hal Guetzkow was there. No, that wasn't a vacancy chain, that was patronage. Herb Simon came out, and we hit it off, and so he and Harold invited me to come to Carnegie Mellon, which was my first job in social science, it was in Carnegie Institute of Technology, in the Graduate School of Industrial Administration, but there was certainly no one I was replacing. Indeed, they were picking me because I was a little different. But I fit in with that school. It was a great school. Jim March was there, Herb Simon, Franco Modigliani, just a great crew. But even so I had to fight to get sociology in my title. The Dean, Leyland Bock, never did understand why I wanted to put that word in my title. So I was Assistant Professor of Industrial Administration and Sociology but then Phil Hauser called me and asked me to come up and I jumped at the chance to be in a real sociology department. Because I knew I was somewhat, it was somewhat awkward, I actually got a degree in sociology, I thought it was a wise thing to do. But I did it at Princeton, partly because at Princeton you only had to be resident for one year and I didn't want to go through a whole, you know, I had spent four years in graduate school already and that was enough, I thought. So I did one year there and then I did operations research, I went out to this institute -- I went to Carnegie Mellon -- but all this time I was learning sociology and taking my exams, so I knew I needed to be in a fully sociological context, and it was just right, I mean Chicago is a great place to be, because it not only had people like Phil Hauser, who was not necessarily the most open minded person when it came to the other aspects of sociology, but it had Everett Hughes. Although Everett Hughes, who was a great man, at the time was kind of pushed to the

side and treated as a secondary figure, although he did get more recognition. Eliahu Katz was there, there were a lot of people there, so it was broad department and a wonderful group of young colleagues. Vernon Dibble, who unfortunately died of cancer quite early, came out of Wesleyan, and did a fine book, and Mayer Zald was there and a whole crew of people, so that was my real socialization in a way, into sociology, although Stan Mudy(?) is a very great sociologist, never got recognition, was a graduate student with me at Princeton and Dave Mats(?), the three of us were the entire thing. So there were excellent people but there just weren't enough. And I knew that. So I finally -- in those four years at Chicago -- I think were really crucial to me. And the year at the Center for Advanced Study, is mainly where learned anthropology. Because I was just fascinated with these field studies of social anthropology and then meeting all kinds of people, including economists. I may have gotten off the track of what you asked me.

*The vacancy chains and your own career.*

Well, I think I am not the right person for vacancy chains. That was the one place, because I am not a very standard issue kind of person, so it's a little hard to think of me as exactly fitting a slot. Well, no. Maybe when I went to Arizona. I was at Harvard for a very long time, but then my first wife and I, actually we wrote things together and still do, she divorced me and so I thought it was a good idea to get out there and I had always been fascinated by Arizona. We had almost gone there as a family. But it was a vacancy in that they did not have a head. Stan Lieberman had been there, and I forget who had been the head, but they had a kind habit of keeping a good department going with musical chairs and rotating doorway, and so when I said I would be willing to come they brought me in as head. I had been chair a couple of times at Harvard, so I could do it. And the pay was better as head, and I needed pay with a divorce, and so I went out to Arizona, and so I would say that was something of a vacancy, not really as a sociologist, but as a senior person to be the chair. Come to think of it, I am glad you asked the question because actually there were -- when I went to Columbia it was not in the department -- once again I was a sufficient oddball and Ron Burt just wanted to grab me, but there was a center that Jonathan Cole had directed that was the descendent of the old Bureau of Applied Sociological Research, where Jim Coleman had cut his teeth, and Jonathan Cole had moved on and become vice president, and so there was somewhat of a kind of holding pattern there, and so there was a vacancy there, and they needed someone of some distinction, I don't think they gave a damn, I'm not sure I was very good as a director, so that was a vacancy.

One of the difficulties with the vacancy chain thing is that it, fortunately, has been developed much further by Shelby Stewman and some students of his, because I just took the cleanest possible case to get the crispest theoretical statement, but to be useful sociologically it had to be loosened up and that's what Shelby did. At Shelby's level there is a good deal of vacancy chain stuff. His Venturi tube analogies, there it would apply to things like, not a specific one-on-one, but well, there is a need here and some kind of siphoning. And in physics, indeed, I went into solid state theory, it may have been indirectly, I may have already intuitively known I was going to do sociology, because that is the place in physics where combinatorial kind of things are most

appropriate, and I went there, and that was sort of a vacancy chain, it was the new, the chair of the department, J.C. Slater, who was my thesis director, great physicist, set up this new thing and I had been a student of his so he invited me into it. I was essentially, I guess you could argue, a Shelby Stewman vacancy chain. Now I don't usually do it, this is healthy because you are making me, instead of looking at, instead of being the entomologist looking at the bugs, look at myself so I can see it too.

*This is a related question about the contributions of the "new structuralism," which some of your work has been grouped with, to sociology more broadly. Can you reflect on what those contributions have been and the status of that kind of theorizing and work?*

That's really not my line of work. Exegetical kind of thing, and statesman kind of thing, I just like to do it. I would like to do, for instance, what Jim Coleman did, he did just a series of marvelous things, *Union Democracy*, *Adolescent Society*, and you notice they moved, and they were not staying in one tidy area, and I think it was great structural sociology. I think what Coleman did with that. I think I was trying to do much the same thing. I started off with kinship, which I had always been interested in, and I had done all of this anthropology reading and did some models of it, but brought it fundamentally into role structure, and a lot of that has continued and gone on. And I worked on institutional systems with French painting, that was structural analysis.

You know, I'm not Neil Smelser, that's the kind of question you ask Neil Smelser, or Randy Collins is great at that kind of thing. He looks at all the theories, and that's fine. I just do it as best I can, and I think what I try to do is what I am interested in, but often what I am interested in is where I either see something that people have missed, I think, I mean time after time that's what I am trying to do, people just missed, like with the Impressionism people, missed the main point, they weren't looking in the right direction. And you don't even have to be smart, it's a matter of being alert. If you look in the right direction and think right it's plain as the nose on your face, and people think they have to be so ultra-refined and fancy and so on, and it is just a matter of looking at it from the right angle. And then another aspect of that, I would say that is half of it, the other half of it is where is the leverage, what's most needed, what's most missing, that's why I am now working, and I have been for about eight years, you know I've done this market book, but a lot of that was from before, what I have mainly been working on is sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, grammar, I am just sure that's where we haven't been attentive enough to how completely trapped we are within language and how we are shaping the language and it is shaping us in a very tangible way. And once again, it's the same old story. There are great people doing linguistics, they aren't looking in the right direction though, I mean they're looking in right directions, but they're missing some, and if you can just look in a direction that other people aren't looking. And I think it's already working. I'm already getting some results.

And as to the structural thing, it's a little hard for me to argue that. How else could I possibly do it? It is just to me self-evident that it's -- and the other thing is that something as general as a structural approach isn't really very limiting. For instance, I've always thought a great deal of Garfinkel's work, and conversation analysis, and these

ethnomethodologists. Now, my long-time colleague George Homans couldn't stand the ethnomethodologists, and I once, when I was chair, hired a young ethnomethodologist straight out of UCLA, Howie Schwartz, he turned out to be a nut, but he had good stuff, and I had other post-docs, and some people say that's not structural at all. It's this obsessive digging in, but I think that's structural too. Certainly Garfinkel's work is not inconsistent with structural. It's just looking much more intensely at a particular thing. Or Cicourel, in one sense he is not structural, I get a little impatient, in his early stuff he did some networks, he doesn't choose to do network kind of thing, because he's so insistent, like Garfinkel, on getting it exactly right, and I think that is wrong. It is kind of like kinship, you can't get kinship by just getting into great intense involvement of mother-child, you are missing so much of what is going on. But it's not the kind of thing I particularly want to argue, it's self-evident to me and I think a lot of people will be attracted to it, and people who want to work in that probably will work with me and people who want to work on something else will work elsewhere, although I am an imperialist, so whatever they're working on I will see it as structural, and I am really willing to work with almost any student. I don't try to impose my views, it is just that I will perceive it as a structural problem. Name me something in sociology that isn't structural. What isn't?

*Your work was explicitly contrasted with the status attainment tradition.*

Then we get into this kind of Mickey Mouse, ping-pong stuff. If status attainment is done in a dumb way then it's dumb work and you can say it's not structural. But Bob Hauser doing status attainment is structural. Then you have to get down to a more refined level. I think network relations are very important, but that's not at the level of structuralism, that's a particular way of thinking about structure, it's certainly not the only way. I tend to be a little obsessive and make it sound like the only way, but I do think it's a very fruitful way. But network, to do well, is a very subtle kind of concept with all kinds of aspects, so it's not clear it would be all that different from doing it well from some other perspective. So I think to me, the structural thing, what else could it be? Once you admit we're not locked inside the brain, the mind, all that kind of thing, which I think a sociologist almost has to be, then how could you be a sociologist and not be structural? I just don't understand. If someone feels that way, fine. And in some particular idiom, like networks, or like in my case, I think in the past, especially, I have been hung up on constraints a lot, I have been hung up on comparative statics, probably a rather conservative background, ideological background, so that may be part of it, but that isn't necessary too structural. Maybe the other way to look at it, I guess maybe the real thrust of your question that might be underlying it, is structure versus dynamic, or structure versus say Tillyesque, Doug McAdam mobilization. Of course to me that's not a problem, because that's structure too, it's just looking at it as I am now doing, and that's one of the reasons I'm doing language, when I look at switching, indeed the central idea I have had in doing language is looking at the switching of contexts. I think that's enough on structure. I mean let Mustafa do this.

*This is a more specific question about Identity and Control. In that book you outlined a broad program for social theorizing. Has your thinking changed on this and how would you fit emotions into that?*

You asked me two very different questions, a little zinger at the end there. I'll start with the zinger because that's a very tough one. I have some ideas, I think that's one of the reasons I am doing language and especially doing the narrative aspect of language and storytelling, and emotions will come in there. Randy Collins, who I think was through here before, has always been interested in that. You see, you can use that as an example. I'll never work on something unless I have an idea, you know, I can crack it. Now Randy, for some reason, he's had that idea for years and he never really goes anywhere with it. You know, he just says, these chains of emotional excitement, yeah ok, well? But you need an idea and haven't had an idea yet. Maybe I'll get an idea. So the emotion in itself, although it's there beneath the surface in *Identity and Control* -- *Identity and Control* is much more welcoming to something like emotion, it can fit in there much more than in anatomy of kinship or vacancy chains. But it's not explicitly theorized. Maybe I'll go back to it. I started off for many years in the Social Relations Department, I was tied up with psychoanalysts and social psychologists, Erik Erikson and maybe some of that stuff I'll bring in and maybe some of that stuff is in *Identity and Control*. I see *Identity and Control* as maybe rather crude, but an attempt to try to break out of the boxes we were in, myself too, make sociology more exciting. There's so much to do and it's complicated and I don't make any apologies. *Identity and Control* is a fairly complicated book, but it does have a structure. And it does in a crude way try to get everything in. Emotion is not in there explicitly, but certainly identity and getting control and getting action and so on is there.

I was disappointed in how the book was received. It sank like a stone, as far as I was concerned. The reviews, well reviews usually aren't that helpful anyway, but I wouldn't worry about the reviews. But it was only in Europe that it got picked up. In Germany and France somehow it seemed to resonate better, especially, very interesting, the Frenchman, statistician, network analysis Alain Degenne who's apparently very positivistic and so on, but he was just fascinated by it. He has written this great summary of it in French, never published, and from which I learned something. So that's what I was hoping for. To trigger other people -- and there are other people who are also doing things somewhat of this kind -- and between us get something going and stimulate young people to kind of be more ambitious in their scope and not so limited in their paradigms.

And then I kind of put it aside. For one thing, it has pointed me toward the language, it really came out of that. You can't read *Identity and Control* without realizing, my lord, how are you going to be able to do this unless you are much more explicit when you are talking about stories, and these other things, it's got to be negotiated in discourse. And then just on this leave I have gone back to *Identity and Control* and reread it in the course of beginning to do this further work in language -- it's not language, discourse and grammar -- and I must say, I think it's a good book. I had kind of put it aside, and I got a little disheartened. And everyone said it was hard to read and so on. Well, sociology is a hard field. And the other thing that makes it awkward -- and some people have argued

with me and it may be true, that it's not mathematical -- and yet there's a hidden mathematical infrastructure that might make it hard. I don't think that's really true. There's some of that there, that's true, but I don't think you have to know the mathematics to do it. And certainly a lot of the key ideas there, I don't yet have any modeling ideas. Like we were talking about emotions earlier. Well, I don't have any ideas yet. I mean, you know, I have some ideas like anyone else, I can chatter about it. I don't have "aha!" -- something I can work on.

*This is a little bit of a switch. Can you talk about what has led to and continues to lead to your interest and work on art?*

Very straightforward. My first wife, Cynthia White, Cynthia Johnson originally, was an art-history major at Radcliffe, which is where I met her, and it's just a process in a marriage, you want to build a relation. And she was stuck out at the Center with me. And those were the days you can't even remember now, which I was always very uncomfortable with. I remember I always used to be bothered by it, I mean Herb Simon's a great man, no question, but it was so depressing, you would go to faculty parties and the wives would be down at one end, including Herb Simon's wife, a very intelligent woman, and talking about children and so on, and the husbands at the other end, and oh, who needs that? And so I think that was already in me at least implicitly, and so we went out to the Center, and there she was stuck in an apartment in Palo Alto, and Robert Wilson was there, I think he's now retired, but a sociologist of art from North Carolina, and he organized a seminar in the arts, and I didn't know diddly about the arts. But Cynthia was interested, and I could go to museums, and so we went there and then we just picked this topic. She had done her undergraduate thesis on Millet, who was a rather significant French Realist painter, something of a precursor of the Impressionists, but she didn't want to just do that, so we went on to the Impressionists and then I sort of got hooked on it, partly because I got frustrated because I was sure it was a network thing, and I was a network expert, and so I read this great book by John Rewald, I mean it's just a great field to work in because Rewald has already done all of the work, he knows everything about everybody, and it's all there in these books, and so I was going to go through and code up all these network relations among them and I was from that going to predict what was going to happen, and that was in 1957. And I was doing other things all the time, it was kind of a sideline, but it was frustrating because I never got any results. It's just a programmatic statement, networks, yeah but what's the idea, all the ideas, none of them worked.

And then here in Madison, Wisconsin, one summer, we were here for a very dull, worthy but dull, summer program in law and sociology, you know, one of these programmatic things, you know, it would be a good thing for all of you, you know, dah dah, dah. No one had any ideas. So I spent some time in one weekend. It dawned on me, I had it wrong. It wasn't social networks at all. At least not at that micro level. It was an institutional system. So I sat down, at some rented place they had in a townhouse, and sat down in that one weekend and I wrote up about a 25, 30 page thing, the gist of the idea. And I love your library. That's one of the reasons I wanted to come back here, I then did

key research, instead of doing law and sociology. I turned up the minimum amount, but I did a lot of the key research, an excellent library, a very pleasant place to work.

And then once I had done that, and then Cynthia was great, she had ideas too, she contributed, and she also took it, what was a rather stark thing, I had done the sampling, and then she brought people into it, and she knew a lot about the actual painters, and not just Impressionists, because my point was that you couldn't just study the Impressionists, you had to see them in the context, and she knew all of that. So we wrote this book, and in a way that was a vacancy chain in a weird kind of way, because this nice man, Bill Gumm, a great guy who was a book-man for John Wiley, signed me up to do a book on what was the hot right thing to do, which was social mobility, which I've certainly done a lot on, and so I signed it up and instead I delivered this manuscript on *Canvases and Careers*, and Gumm went right through with it and so I got it published, it was something of an accident, it wasn't supposed to be that at all. And then once I had that book, although the art historians kind of sneered at it, and this and that, but still it was a good book, and there was some interest in it, and so I kept on going, and then that got me into teaching it. So I have continued to teach it almost every year, and I have developed a style, and actually *Identity and Control*, it was kind of a relief, I did a teaching book, it came out a year later, that grew out of that.

*Here's a very general question to follow up that specific one. How do you balance your general theoretical work with your specific empirical work?*

I don't think that's a helpful way to think of it, because it has a kind of manipulative thing. Maybe you have some of these things around here: big swimming pool things with all kinds of slides and towers and you go into the water. You know what you're trying to do is: you're trying to get an idea. You're trying to get sucked into something. And when you get sucked into something it's often a particular idea or like *Canvases and Careers*. You know I had this idea, and the obvious thing to do was: I had to find some biographical directories and then sample it. And you get sucked in and that takes a lot of time and you get committed. Or if you're doing kinship models, you don't worry about the theory or balancing. You just do it and it takes care of itself, because after a while you get it done. Maybe it's what you're asking me, but I don't like the word "balance." It's just the way life works then you come up for air. And what I will often find myself doing.

Like I got this questionnaire, which I thought was an idiot questionnaire, from the Columbia Libraries, asking how many hours a week do I use the libraries. They just missed the point entirely. I won't even go in the library for ten months or a year or something. And then when I'm ready, I get interested in a topic and there are two different things going. It's not that you plan it or balance it. But you wander around libraries and you read things and in a sense they're theoretical because theory is not so much any specific thing, but it's a perspective, a more general perspective -- that's what theory means. You're taking a more general perspective. So, that takes care of itself. Then when you get an idea, like when I got this language thing, I just got obsessed with it. I must have had fifty books out at once and articles -- and was reading all the time. I

wouldn't exactly call it theory. There has to be a theoretical idea there. All of these terms are just too simple minded. Life, social relations aren't simple. I just get nervous when people try to tidy it up.

I don't like graduate education programs that try to get it all tidied up. They send you over here to do your statistics and they send you over there to do your ... I say "yuck." The two should be all intertwined together. But that puts me in the position of imposing my own view. I would put it a different way. I would say "people ought to leave it alone." Then if they leave it alone, I think what I think is the best way will just emerge on its own, not because I tell them to do it that way. If they aren't constrained to put it in these boxes and they have a real interest in the field. How do you know where you get an idea from? An idea is just a dumb word. A hint, a perspective, a point of view, that's always what you're after. You never know where it's going to come from. It's plausible, it's a combinatorial argument, that having a lot of different things and roaming around mentally and so on. But it's not just that, you've got to be very intense, so it's contradictory, you've also got to be very intense and know something well.

*What do you think is wrong with the current state of social sciences and Sociology? How can we break out of these boxes? And what kind of work will get us that direction?*

I don't want to tell you that. I think you're probably both, like me, fascinated with social reality. You're here and you've got all the time on your hands, and if people won't screw you up by making you spend all of your time finding batteries or something, it'll take care of itself. But each person, depending on what networks you're in, there will be all kinds of influences. I'm not going to tell you what to do. It just doesn't seem right to say what's wrong with social science. If I were to say what's wrong with social science I would do it in a hortatory way, but it's not very helpful, because it's not generating ideas. It's not leading you into doing something.

*Specifically, I had in mind the end of your article about Bayesian forks and switching, you had a conception of reorienting social sciences around topical themes or methodological approaches.*

I don't trust my introductions or conclusions, because the editor wants you to say some great thoughts, so you churn out this stuff. I think it's more important to look at the body of the work: what are the ideas and what's going on, rather than these hortatory things about what would be a good thing to do. I don't know what would be a good thing for you to do. It depends on a lot of things, what will get you going. It's just so obvious. You want to be excited about what you're doing. It's not that you're necessarily going to be happy, because some of the times you'll be very frustrated. But you kind of know what you want to do and sometimes there will be some things that you'll learn that will be very hard. God knows, I had some, in my graduate days, some agonizing times of thinking through things.

I do a lot of math, and from a sociological point of view I'm very a high brow mathematician. From my point of view, I'm kind of a middle brow mathematician. I was

trained at MIT and I did extra work in math with great people. I know how powerful math is. I really have to strain to get to that level. But I have done it because I needed to solve some problems. I think partly for that reason, if you look at my work, I've done a lot of math modeling, and it's not trivial math modeling, but it's not really deep. I can imagine someone-- they haven't done it yet, and Coleman, who's the other math modeler, at least in my cohort, didn't do it -- but I can imagine someone -- and the Santa Fe Institute, which makes me nervous because they're usually cut off from data and rather programmatic, and they do all of this computer simulation stuff, but nonetheless some of them are powerful, more powerful than I am -- but one could imagine under the right circumstances they could get somewhere. I'm just giving you an example. You know someone could tell you to do math modeling, but that doesn't really mean anything. I've just pointed out there's a limitation. I've always worked more with substantive ideas, that's always where it comes from. And the mathematics is something I then used. But what I'm pointing out is that someone else might be able to generate mathematically a deep insight. That's not been my style. Although the mathematics can help you. Certainly a lot of this later stuff in the market book, it's because of the mathematics that I could push further.

I write these things because I get asked to do it, like "Can Mathematics Be Social?" I wrote that for Scott Feld, and then this "Parameterize!" for Ferraro. I don't normally do that on my own, but you know, if they ask me to do it, I'll try to crank up some things. If that helps you, fine. And so I'm willing to do it and it might be stimulating. But I wouldn't use that as a constraint.

*In an interview with [Richard] Swedberg, in 1990, you predicted a crisis in economics by the year 2000. Could you talk about that and why or why has it not happened?*

I think it's happened, because I'm talking about economics as a social science, as a theory, and I think it's a big expensive dead end. Now, it's tricky because social reality is complicated. There are all kinds of economics, but I'm talking about what people call microeconomics. To me, if you don't have microeconomics, then you don't really have economics. If you don't know what a market is, isn't it a joke to say you have a field called economics? And you look at it, and they don't have a theory of the market as an actual phenomenon. Most macroeconomics, I'm sure some of it is very clever, but it's kind of black box stuff. They don't really know what's going on in there, but they make these arguments, and do these simulation things. So, it's an intellectual argument. It's a frustration: all those resources, and there's some very bright people, some very good economists, but I think they're looking in the wrong direction. They aren't working fundamentally. They're not building a foundation. One of the things I did learn in physics, which I enjoyed very much -- and I was very well trained in it, and I had very good other people around me, including young people, also graduate students -- you always spend a lot of time getting back to foundations. You never leave it. You're always thinking about "what is motion?" and "what is momentum?" Even these most basic things you took in your second year, you're still trying to rethink them. And I don't think economists do that. They just have this gimcrack -- well, that's not fair. From a philosophical point of view it's actually quite neat. There's a very slick kind of utilitarian

thing. But from a scientific point of view, it's junk, because it doesn't lead you into deeper connection to reality.

But I really talk like that too much and I do less of it in the book. And I didn't do that much in the article. I tried to do it in a more explicit way and say exactly what it is they're missing. There's a whole chapter, chapter eleven, and I'm saying, not just in a vague way, "Look, chapter and verse, here's where they're going wrong." But that's never what's important, what's important is what's right. Well, I will say this, if you read the *Journal of Economic Theory*, *JET*, even the ones who are trying to do something, it's such bullshit. They make up these hooky little things, like two dimensional spaces. One of the things that really gripes me: there's a lot of talent in the field, grad students, and some of them ought to be being pulled into really thinking about it.

There are some efforts that may be good in experimental economics, trying to do it in a different way. In one sense I approve of that, and in another sense, I just think it's terrible. Because they're going down the same *Alice in Wonderland* rabbit hole that social psychology went down. All this pretentious experimental social psychology that, to a real sociologist, is just nonsense. It's a pretense. You have these professors, they're people. They're working with real people. They use these words. They tell them, "pretend you're this" and they won't tell them why and they're usually lying to them. In fact, my colleagues at Columbia brag about lying to them. Aren't we clever? I don't think they're clever. I think the students are clever.

But there's a deeper problem there. You can't get away from reality. You're trying to short-circuit it. You can't just have people sit in a little lab room and press buttons. I'm not saying it's easy. Of course there's a temptation. You want to do that kind of thing. That's one of the things I was trying to do in *Identity and Control*. That kind of lab set up is just rife with control problems. The thought that they can escape that and that they aren't trying to control and the students aren't trying to control back ... So, *Identity and Control* is at least an effort to show what's really going on when you're trying to get action, when you're trying to get control. Sure, it's going to be hard, but it's always going to be possible. If you're lucky, and imaginative, and opportunistic, you'll find some natural setting, not some phony baloney, but some real setting, where, for some accidental reason, you can actually get it up on the surface and see it.

That's what the vacancy chain was. My wife's father was an Episcopal priest and I was sitting in his office and I started reading through these diocesan, maybe I say that in the book, but I started to go through it. Of course, I had been working on social mobility and then published it. Two things, the vacancy chain idea, but at least as important: look, right there, I had an empirical site. It's there and it's already done for me. That's my main archival work. I went to theological libraries and down in the stacks, and there was all this stuff. Now there's coding problems, difficult coding problems, but you can solve a coding problem. I don't want to speak ill of economists, because it's so nice to have economists trying to deal with reality. Then you have these economists like Sam Bowles, who try to ride on being politically correct, in effect, and that's not an answer either.

Look at Marx. Marx, in my opinion, is one of the great sociologists of all time. You can call him an economist, but from my point of view he was really a sociologist. Marx never took the easy road out. He never just was a Proudhon, or something like that. He always kept going back and back and back. That was -- when was that? -- that was a century and a half ago. And you have these present economists who preen themselves, and "aren't we wonderful and blah, blah, blah." Marx had some problems, and if you're interested in Marx, there's a book by Morishima, a very smart Japanese economist. There are some technical problems. He was doing it before most of the math had been done. Some of the things may not have worked out, but the point is, he was really on the track. That's what economists ought to be doing.

And then there's that John Roemer. Between Sam Bowles and John Roemer, you could ask your professor, Erik Olin Wright, because he's all committed to this Marxist stuff. But I respect Olin Wright because he's really doing it and he's doing real things with it. He studies things like friendship relations across class lines defined in different ways for different countries. That's real stuff. He's not just pulling a Marxist shtick on what it must be. He's finding it out. You get the Sam Bowles guy, and you know he's smart and he does a lot of good work, but he kind of knows what he wants the answer to be, so he doesn't work that hard. The nice thing about Erik Olin Wright, he often finds out things he doesn't like. If I remember correctly, that article on friendship, the permeability or something like that of friendship, the Marxist prediction was just wrong. Well, no. Part of it was right -- the ownership part -- but a lot of it was wrong. Roemer is a Marxist. He's also a competent mathematical economist, which is unusual for Marxist, ironically, because Marxists ought to have been at the forefront. Marx himself was mathematical economist. But Roemer just gets so busy being prissy about his theory that he doesn't really ... Okay, I'm probably wandering way off your point.

*An interesting related question is about the rise of rational choice theory in the social sciences and in sociology. Could you speak a little to that?*

In the rest of social sciences, in economics it's not an issue, it's been the thing they've apparently used. A lot of what rational choice is: it's what you always do in an opportunistic way to make it manageable. Economists have used it. I'd say the interesting thing is not even sociology, it's political science. Political science is where there has been a really interesting thing. Political science has been a rather soft -- no there's very good political science -- but the mainline political science is rather turgid, I think. So, there are these young political scientists coming in, waving the rational choice banner, some young faculty in my political science department, doing game theoretic stuff. I think it's probably a good thing for them. Some good work has been done.

In sociology, it's really just a turn of a wheel, there's always been rational choice. It's hard for me, because the whole thing is just silly, if you try to make it a religion, rational choice, it's just silly. On the other hand you can't ignore it. First of all, rationality is important to human beings. In any case it's so convenient for modeling. I couldn't do without it. A lot of my market stuff has rational choice aspects. But there's a sense in which rational choice is the least interesting part. I would say it's kind of like looking at

a great painter and admiring how he does the undercoat. Of course he does the undercoat, if he doesn't have a white undercoat ... I'm sorry, I'm not a painter, I'm sure there are other ways to do it. Of course you're doing rational choice, but that's the boring stuff. You have to do rational choice. You have to do something. You have to have some infrastructure. That's not where the action is. The action is what's generating the constraints. How is it all fitting together? Or, in a more simple-minded way, where are these utilities coming from? One of the troubles is, in the social sciences, we're still dominated by the enlightenment. These brilliant people who did this, it's really quite a feat, to take theology and kind of sanitize it by taking the God part out, but keeping the souls and making a nice consistent system. That's really what they did. It was fantastic. It probably had all kinds of good effects politically and socially, but from a scientific point of view ...

Well, the economists -- there was a different tradition, the David Ricardo tradition, which, in one sense, is rational choice. But it's really macro. Ricardo, aside from Marx, Ricardo is the other economist you have to, well there are several you have to take seriously, certainly Ricardo, and he's very un-Marxist, but it's not rational choice. It's looking realistically at large scale effects. And the other wonderful one is the marginalist guy I write about, the Englishman, you know Jevins. The other thing about economics that is so depressing is you read Marx, you read Jevins, you read Ricardo, all totally different political orientations but ... or Marshall, these people are so much worth reading. Then to read the stuff coming out now, come on! Even the best of it is just technically good, but it's not deep, Okay, but, that's not my problem. Well, I guess it's somewhat relevant. One of the troubles is they're trying to ride in that mainly rational choice thing. Now there are people like Ken Arrow, who's certainly an extremely smart and a deeper mathematician than I am, and he's tried to deal with some of that, in his *Social Choice and Individual Values*. No one has ever really properly gotten everything out of that. That's been an orange that really hasn't been squeezed. The economists don't understand the depth of it. I don't think anyone has ever used it. In a way that's rational choice, but the whole point of the book is rational choice doesn't really take you very far. The issues are far beyond that. I've wandered off your point again.

*What sort of advice would you give young sociologists that are just beginning their careers?*

It's so interesting. Dig into something that is interesting. Everything around you should interest you. On the bus, you ought to be listening, you ought to be watching, at home. We're in a very difficult field in one way, but we're in a very privileged field in another. We don't have to have a lot of fancy money or equipment or setup, or wait for the third month and the third day so you can see the things you have to see. We're drowning in it. It is around us all the time.

It may even be a matter of limiting your sensitivity, because different people and problems operate differently. So, it's not true that you always want to be wide open and listen to everything. I'm just saying it's always there. A very important part of it is to

learn how to censor selectively. You have to learn how to zero in on something and think about nothing but that, and get into these things.

But my style has never been to stay entirely in one area, even if at a given time you are getting monomaniac about a particular thing. Certainly it's easy to pick up on a new thing, because it's all around you. Our problem is not that we don't have enough material. Our problem is that we're fish swimming in this ocean and how can we learn that it's water we're swimming in? We're in this kind of Catch-22 situation. Just to survive we have to be social beings. And yet we're claiming that we can understand and predict and write about it. In a way we're very blessed because everything's around us. But that's just going to drive you nuts and you can't get anywhere that way, and that's why you have to go to graduate school.

I guess one way to do it is to find some things that turn you on, because in this bewildering maze, there's so much out there. In one sense anything will do. But in another sense you might find some either great figure or almost forgotten figure, anything that will really get you interested, which in my opinion is synonymous with you get an idea. This thing of just systematically learning all of a given area and doing your comprehensives and writing your literature review, well, maybe there's something to be said for that, but not much. What you ought to be doing is getting an idea. It's a kind of a success of approximation. You have to get some leverage. One way to do it is, over time you'll get to know a little about yourself, or it's not really just yourself, because I'm a sociologist, so it's yourself in this particular setting and what it is you're likely to be able to kick in on. But a little advice goes a long way.