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Harrison C. White

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Essays

Comment on Emmanuel Lazega/3

by Harrison C. White

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Emmanuel Lazega has us sidle in with him among entrepreneurs as they duck and weave to stay afloat on through crossroads of flows in competitions so as to see and seize opportunities. Throughout he introduces a great tapestry of case studies, not just in business, seen as such dances for belongings and standings amidst multiple network ties. His dense text itself mirrors the intricacy and multi-layering of social processing on which he insists: it is a tough read.

Lazega especially illuminates the dialectic between ambiguity and control across dances amidst exchanges through tacit knowledge in niches and transitivity in small world paths of ties. He insists on the centrality of status inconsistency within contentious cooperation. Yet he also has cooperation as a fourth 'factor of production' in business wisdom. Book length will be needed to fully tame this minefield of paradoxes, but, just as is, this essay is a tour de force of rendering the murky visible, the odd plausible.

Emmanuel develops structure as actors' mobilization of discursive and practical consciousness in social encounters – which is to say strategic conduct, and thus has trouble inducing the institutional perspective upon which Giddens long ago insisted as necessary dual. Lazega does assert that distinctive market contexts already engender parallel strategies. Fabien Eloire, his student, in a 2009 thesis adjoins Bourdieu's field theory to Lazega's to portray the restaurant industry of Lille as institutional system encompassing the hundreds of restaurants and satellites in his sample. Just

because he keeps open over time to whatever entrepreneurs somehow 'hang in,' there is little sense of carapace for institution, of boundary marking what is endogenous.

Nor need exchanges be seen as indispensable: for example, a march is a tangible social process intertwining and weaving together in one direction. Small world connectivity matters as much as transitive triads. Emmanuel confesses inability to capture emergences of reputation, which surely are as constitutive for strategic as for institutional action. And so costs to reproduce supporting contexts remain hidden. Thus Lazega has yet to fully parse the wonderful Adam Smith quote with which he opens.

As to future work, more reflexivity would benefit the analysis. Language is not ornamental, it is performative mechanism [see Fontdevila and White forth.], in competitive cooperation not least. Metapragmatic indexicality is a chief 'how' of entrepreneurial maneuvering.

The entrepreneurs themselves go on to require, induce and deal in story and narrative, as Dr. Sophie Muetzel argues in her Comment [see Godart and White forth.]. Especially with competition, great delicacy is required. Indeed, Tammy Smith [2007] makes a compelling case, theoretical and empirical, for silences induced out of evolving, interacting narratives as key to emergence of effective rhetoric for identities.

References

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Abstract: This paper argues that cooperation among competitors is facilitated by social processes (among others: learning, bounded solidarity, social control, regulation) that can be modelled using network analyses. Entrepreneurs get involved in social exchanges and these exchanges require relational investments, protection of these investments, social niche seeking and status competition – which trigger and drive these social processes. To illustrate this theory, I draw on sociological research using the analysis of social and organizational networks in business. These analyses model and substantiate the complex social discipline that helps interdependent, but competing entrepreneurs cooperate. Finally, I speculate about the implications of this knowledge of complex interdependencies and coordination, social discipline and social processes among entrepreneurs for public authorities involved in social control of markets.

Keywords: cooperation, competition, neo-structuralism, social processes, social exchange, network analysis.

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.