



Power and the People

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Isaac Ariail Reed

Power in Modernity: Agency Relations and the Creative Destruction of the King's Two Bodies

University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2020, \$32.50 (ISBN978-0-226-68945-6, 270 pp.

Contribution to the book symposium on Isaac Ariail Reed's *Power in Modernity*

Reviewed by: Emily Erikson , *Yale University – Sociology, USA*

I am lucky enough to have gotten the chance to read Isaac Reed's new book twice. Once for the sheer fun of it – and it is a joy to read – and again in preparation for writing these comments. I highly recommend this approach because it allows you to both take pleasure in following the incredibly rich chain of ideas, references, and examples, then to dig into the underlying structure of the argument the second time around. The book has a lot of depth and complexity so even though I am going to offer a short summary of the argument I want to make clear it is my interpretation and whether it is correct or not I do not expect my version to actually capture the full version in its subtle and compelling entirety.

The first part of the book outlines the theoretical argument while the second part of the book serves as proof of concept and doubles as an important argument about the onset of modernity. Reed argues that power, at heart, is the ability to exercise control over others. That may sound obvious but Reed's point is that in order to effectively wield power individuals have to enlist other people in their projects. They need agents over whom they exercise control. The individual who wields power is defined as the 'rector,' and their agents are called 'actors.' Individuals outside of these agency relations are the 'other.' The expansion and construction of power is then based on linked sets of rector/actor relations: chains of power. But this is far from a purely structural argument. In order to be durable, these chains of power have to be situated within cultural understandings. First, the relationship between the rector and actor requires discourse and interpretation – the performance of meaning that binds the actor to the rector's project in such a way as to span through time. This aspect enables a sort of time-travel where the actions of the rector are imposed upon a future in which the rector is not present. Representation, discourse, and interpretation habituate the actors to their roles, and, as I understand it, also make the enchainning process possible, in other words, one has to follow the narrative of the binding process to understand and acknowledge the links of power leading back to an ultimate rector.

One of the many strengths of the analysis is Reed's emphasis on the indeterminacy of the actor–rector relationship – its bidirectionality. This trait is often overlooked in state analyses but is at the heart of principal–agent relations. When Robert Clive accepted a position as tax rentier within the Mughal administrative structure, was he acting as an agent of the British Empire or was he using British administrative trappings to launch his own profitable project in the subcontinent? Who is the actor and who is the rector? Or in Reed's terms, who is the author? It is not always easy to tell. And when chains of actors and rectors are linked into the long strings of power necessary for the exercise of state power – and even more pointedly global imperial power – identifying the source of action can be as difficult as figuring out the source of a product deficiency in global value chains. This indeterminacy is where cultural scripts become so important. In particular, in pre-modern European cultures, chains of power were grounded in the myth/conceptual apparatus of the king's two bodies. This idea became a tool through which people could make sense of the directionality of power, its locus, operation, and legitimacy. It allowed people to make sense of chains of power so that order could be created and maintained, detangling the mess of rector–actor relations in such a way that the adjudication of legitimate authority was – if not always accurate – at least always possible.

In the scheme of the king's two bodies, 'the other' is anyone excluded from – or not included in – these networks of power linking back to the monarch. When the monarchy is overthrown, through revolution, one of the secondary or unintended consequences that then must be managed is that the key to understanding and exercising power is taken out of the question. The king's second body is finally dead and no longer offers signifying powers.

This situation then is the one faced as part of the transition to modernity and in the revolution of the American colonies more particularly. In Reed's words, the new nation was faced with the problem of 'how to glue together the chains of power that would authorize action and justify violence' (p. 184). The next move that Reed makes is one that I think is particularly interesting. He persuasively shows that in both the US and French Revolutionary contexts political actors truly grappled – out of necessity – with the destruction of the king's two bodies and the problems that were created for the legibility of authority. But where Reed begins by asserting that this act of cultural destruction is central to the transition to modernity, he later asserts that this destruction is not only an act central to the transition to modernity, but is also a central process of modernity itself, which can then be characterized as a continual cycle of the construction and destruction of different narratives of political authority.

This point raises some interesting comparative questions. The 'body' metaphor for political authority is specific to European cultural history – and if I recall correctly derives from Christian mythos. In his book, *Going the Distance*, Ron Harris interestingly argued recently that the contest between the Catholic Church and competing European bodies made the body metaphor particularly prominent in European culture and thereby ultimately supplied Europeans with a novel means to constitute political and commercial organizations or collectivities (Harris, 2020). If the body metaphor is particularly European, how does this idea of the transition to modernity work for non-European countries and regions. What are their constitutional metaphors? And do the different metaphors change the political patterns – or is what matters that they are challenged at some point and then undergo a similar pattern of continual reinvestigation and replacement? And perhaps more importantly, what does it mean that there were multiple monarchs in pre-modern Europe, who could each serve to ground a chain of authority, along with other 'bodies,' such as the Catholic Church, municipal corporations, and ultimately

commercial corporations. It is interesting because where the king's two bodies seems to serve as a sort of Archimedean point, an ultimate referent, in comparison with China and the rest of the world, Europe is often characterized as multi-polar politically. Indeed, it has been argued that this multi-polarity and the competition it engendered was important for the developments we now recognize as crucial to the transition to modernity.

The second issue that I would like to see Reed explore further are the claims made around the use of the metaphor of 'the people' as a new founding myth/narrative/lens through which authority is perceived and exercised. Reed shows that the new American elites and the French Revolutionaries both settled on 'the people' as the new political body to inspire fealty and provide intelligible legitimacy. And in both cases, he shows that the constitution of this 'body of the people' in the minds of political elites and the general population seemed to go hand in hand with the exclusion and degradation of some other group of people. In the USA, the body of the people is a racialized body that includes 'white' Americans and excludes African Americans and Native Americans. In France, the racialized body excludes colonial subjects, again African in origin. The implication that I draw from this, which I think that Reed intends, is that the idea of 'the people' as a political body is inherently exclusionary and that some group is going to suffer exclusion. Thus, the construction of racism and sexism in the modern era is to some extent a result of the reconfiguration of political power that extended democracy to some but not to others. One problem with this interpretation however is that I have not seen much evidence that women had more rights in the pre-modern era than in the modern era. Indeed, I think they had very few rights compared to the 20th and certainly 21st centuries.

Similarly, discrimination against people long predates the 19th century. For example, Ibn Khaldun, an Arab scholar, made extremely disparaging comments about African peoples in the 14th century. He was not racist in the strict sense of drawing upon the pseudo-scientific theory of race developed in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries but he was attempting to formulate an empirical approach to the study of society and, it written today, his depictions of different peoples would unquestionably be classified as utterly and horribly racist (Khaldun 1967: 58–62). How are we to interpret the longstanding medieval animosities between the Christians and Moors. Were the Moors not an excluded and degraded population in Christian territories? And were Christians not an excluded and degraded population in Islamic territories? Indeed, nearly all civilizations have a tendency to refer to themselves as 'the people' and everyone else as something less than that. This tendency I believe decreased in the modern era. Exclusion, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and discrimination – sadly all of these happen with great frequency in modern society. They also happened with great frequency in societies of other eras, so I strongly hesitate to associate them with the rise of democracy. I am not sure how to square these past examples of exclusion with the implications Reed draws about modernity and the delegitimation of monarchical authority, but I would be very interested to hear his thoughts!

ORCID iD

Emily Erikson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2092-4676>

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