



# The Recurrence of the King's Second Body?

Cultural Sociology

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Isaac Ariail Reed

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

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

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The publication of Isaac Ariail Reed's *Power in Modernity: Agency Relations and the Creative Destruction of the King's Two Bodies* is an event of significance for sociologists. This is an evidently learned, undeniably rich, intricately woven book that presents a wealth of candidate ideas for one to think and puzzle through, pick up on and attempt to put to use. It carries its ambition in the form of particular complexity, which renders making sense of how everything fits together particularly challenging. In truth, the book requires sustained scholarly treatment as a unity beyond anything a short review could accomplish, and I aim to provide this elsewhere. Here I will try to present some of the main argumentative and conceptual scaffolding and to outline those issues I feel in a position to comment on. I should like to note that while studying the book, including the many and genuinely insightful footnotes, I was on numerous occasions confronted with my own inadequacies. I will, however, do my best to fulfil the burden of the critic, which is to locate tangles and to pull on the protruding threads in the hope of checking the tightness of the fabric or otherwise untangling some knots.

The author has been prescient enough to provide various side-commentaries and summaries (e.g. Reed, 2019) so I will refer the reader to the available resources.

There are several building blocks to the book. The foundation, so to speak, is a type of genealogy of power which takes as its starting point and model, in relation to a sensibility towards politico-religious ideas, Ernst Kantorowicz's classic work (2016 [1957]) on the provenance of the notion of 'the king's two bodies', a conception employed by Tudor and Stuart lawyers and originating in the Pauline notion of 'the body of Christ' (Leyser, 2016: xxii). There is considerable theoretical elaboration added in the form of a proposed abstract social theory, consisting of a set of formal concepts around the organization of action, in particular the delegation of tasks to agents (*actors*) by principals (*rectors*) in the context of *projects*, and the parallel exclusion of *others*, a general

framework which outlines a conception of power as the ability to mobilize and accrue agents and, thus, provides conceptual machinery in the service of substantive sociological questions on social change during transitions to modernity and since. These elements are held together by a third, a commitment to cultural sociology, which Reed has strongly advocated (2017), and which he takes as ensuring that cultural representation, in other words, particular concepts and ideas, as well as action concerns, will be seen as internal to actor–rector relations (p. 46), which are thus to be treated in an interpretivist and, in part, interactionist manner. This is indeed the way in which Reed approaches the various instances and transformational events in Haitian, French, British and mostly US modern history, which a large part of the book is dedicated to, and which in some cases benefit from what is, as far as I can make out, original archival work that Reed has undertaken.<sup>1</sup>

The main thread running through the book has to do with following through what happens to the body politic once it cannot be identified with the king's second body or, otherwise put, how (the idiom of) the king's second body is 'creatively destroyed' so that it 'eternally recurs' in the future in various ways, such as 'in re-renderings of ultimate rectorship, throughout culture and society, as a trope of rule . . . [such as] the cult of Presidents . . . [or] the endowment of the language of the people with religious significance and structures of feeling' (p. 182).<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that this thesis implicates Reed in protracted and extremely complex debates as to processes of secularism, post-secularism and the various forms of religion.<sup>3</sup> He has chosen, perhaps wisely, not to enter those debates at length.

How does Reed construct the continuity necessary for him to justify and capitalize upon the recurrence of the king's second body? First, via a narrative of transitional early-modern moments in the Atlantic world, demonstrating *temporal continuity of forms*, namely, the fact that no other form intervened between invocations of 'the king's interest' or that of 'the crown' and attempts to tie one's action to 'the people'. Moreover, the implication is that the eclipse of one form motivates, creates the conditions for or gives rise to problems that the other solves. There is in that sense a kind of equivalence.

Second, via the invocation of a *commonality of function in interaction*, namely, in the backing of political action and enabling of delegation. This is made possible by a clear methodological choice of taking problems of action seriously, one the author credits to cultural sociology. Also presupposed is the subsumption under the general framework adapted from principal-agent theory, that of rector, actor, and other, which works in conjunction with the action orientation. Thus, from the perspective of figuring out how to get things done legitimately, 'the king's second body' and 'the people' are equivalent because they both enable actors to tie their doings to rectors and projects.

Third, via a thesis as to the *commonality of religious function*. Religion here does not primarily refer to Christianity, even though there might be ample use of historically Christian materials despite processes of secularisation, but to religion as a Durkheimian universal, understood functionally as the sacred in a society, any society. It is important to bear in mind that this choice cannot support arguments against secularisation or disenchantment, neither of which is most plausibly concerned with religion in this sense.

Fourth, via a thesis of *persisting enchantment*, in a fused sense of the *persistence of transcendence, myth, meaning*. Reed's claim is that the waning of the Christian

theologico-political tradition housing the notion of the king's two bodies was replaced in modernity by equally enchanted materials. Persistence of enchantment is, as noted, in part justified as persistence of religion in narrow and wider senses, as per those already mentioned (shading into notions of 'civil religion'), but it is also allegedly justified as persistence of myth and meaning, or *culture*, which is thus seen to vindicate the theoretical choice of interpretivism and cultural sociology. Needless to say that identifying culture with enchantment makes as little sense as identifying a historical process of disenchantment with a loss of culture in the sense of the language, concepts and practices of a people; disenchantment as a historical thesis concerns particular forms of meaning, not the theoretical notion of meaning as culture.

The compound complexity should be evident with which Reed weaves the various elements of the book. It leads one to wonder whether the somewhat grandiose synthetic ambitions he has set himself can indeed be fulfilled. I for one remain somewhat sceptical as to the possibility of meaningfully and rigorously synthesizing theoretical and historical work of such various kinds without skipping on many important details, where, as the saying goes, the devil resides. This means, for instance, that theoretical opponents will not see in-depth treatments of their positions as a justification for Reed's own theoretical choices. Perhaps this should not in all fairness be expected from a book which has a character of setting out, as boldly and as eruditely as possible, the author's own position in all its resonant breadth. To retain, however, some measure of ambition in producing a synthesis of sorts, such a detailed elaboration would have been necessary, especially if one is to get clear on exactly what is being proposed and exactly what is being done differently to various alternative schools, even just the so-called interpretivist ones of the past century, to mention those warranted by the author's own admission.

A related worry has to do with the book's focus, which may be seen as moving over many different rubrics, arguments, side-arguments and targets. By latching onto different parts and aspects, we may understand the book as articulating or serving as (i) a new research programme on modernity (ii) a novel extension of Kantorowicz's ideas, (iii) a defence of a form of cultural sociology or (iv) a launching of a distinctive social theory of rector, actor, other, or (v) a blueprint for an improved conception of power or, finally, (vi) a prolegomenon to a sociohistory of 'the body' as a sign. While these projects are certainly not mutually conflicting, it is by no means clear how to relate them to each other or which one to elevate as a governing project. And although extremely evocative, many of these await further development.

I would like to note some further reservations about the book before ending with some of its genuine strengths. Reed's decision to bring theoretical and historical angles under the cover of a single book creates the possibility for conflict between forms of inquiry that may be governed by very different aims and rules, for instance, regarding abstraction and detail. In fact, beyond the simple use of historical materials there is also a *historicist* orientation arising out of the emphasis on performativity, contingency and interpretivism that does not sit well with the *formal* theoretical orientation.

As far as the latter is concerned, Reed is perhaps not highly sensitive to some of the problems with forms of thinking that tend towards abstraction.<sup>4</sup> For example, the author does not ponder what it means to start with a particularly formal set of (three or four or five) terms and declare them a language for understanding (p. 6). It is but a denuded

vocabulary which may indeed fulfil its role in reminding the investigator to look for problems of delegation and coordination of action during the analysis of archives and other historical materials (p. 99). But even though the vocabulary might help sustain our focused attention, it is neither strictly necessary nor sufficient for understanding, its use depending on the tracing of concrete elaborations, which both transcend and provide much of any grounding for these terms. This is of course quite perennial and quite general a complaint about social theory, one it would be entirely unfair to lay before Reed as if it were not part of the very game he chooses to play. But the problem remains, being aggravated by, and perhaps itself responsible for, the disjunction between the part of the book developing a basic vocabulary and the part of the book which is going through the historical cases. Reed does on many occasions cast those cases in the previously presented terms, but almost never exclusively, and many times not at all, and the very richness of the book owes its existence to that decision. The favourably disposed reader shall not, I think, demand that those terms be elevated to the form of description or protest that there is a lot missed by not doing so, consistency requirements notwithstanding.

Having mostly been concerned with the few critical issues, I would like to end with the book's many merits: Isaac Ariail Reed has produced a book that is scholarly; rich in terms of its insights, angles, observations, connections; original in its use of materials; broad in terms of the genres of texts it draws upon as data and illustrations: history, poetry, plays, courtroom speeches, letters, reports in the press, among other archival documents. Reed demonstrates significant sensitivity and skill in his elaborations of such materials. An indisputably high point is the analysis of 'whiskey' in a newspaper-published satirical mock-play commenting on the politics of the Whiskey Rebellion (1791–1794) and the early American republic (pp. 223–229). Reed is also particularly persistent in the pursuit of his vision, his effort being a sustained one. He stays admirably close to perennial sociological concerns: social change, modernity, culture, power. The air of traditionalism in looking at the history of modernity is balanced with a vigilance as to highly current issues, such as those around eurocentrism and the de-colonizing of sociological knowledge. Finally, the book is a text one cannot but return to again and again, a text one may be educated by – I know I have been – and there is a genuine wealth of insights and delights awaiting its readers.

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## Notes

1. A possibly fruitful conceptual parallel may be noted with Claude Lefort's work on totalitarianism and his invocation of a cognate scheme and emphasis on cultural representation:

At the foundation of totalitarianism lies the representation of the People-as-One . . . division is denied . . . at the same time as this denial, a division is being affirmed, on the *level of phantasy*, between the People-as-One and *the Other*. This Other is the other of the outside . . . It is not only necessary to convert, at the level of phantasy, real *adversaries* of the regime or real *opponents* into the figures of the evil Other: it is also necessary to invent them. However, this interpretation can be carried further. The campaigns of *exclusion*, persecution and, for quite a while, terror reveal a new image of the *social body*. The *enemy of the people* is regarded as

a parasite or a waste product to be eliminated . . . It is as if the body had to assure itself of its own identity by expelling its *waste matter*, or as if it had to close in upon itself by withdrawing from the outside, by averting the threat of an intrusion by *alien elements*. (Lefort, 1986: 297–298, emphasis added)

2. Reed refers here to Bellah's analysis of civil religion in America (1967), which discusses, among others, references to God in Kennedy's inaugural speech and documents such as the Declaration of Independence. We might note in passing that Bellah, despite his Durkheimian leanings, observes astutely as regards the relation between civil religion and Christianity: 'Nor was the civil religion simply "religion in general." While generality was undoubtedly seen as a virtue by some . . . Precisely *because of [its] specificity, the civil religion was saved from empty formalism* and served as a genuine vehicle of national religious self understanding' (1967: 8, emphasis added).
3. The thesis can be traced to Kantorowicz, as Lefort reveals: 'The four formations identified by [Kantorowicz] – Christo-centric, juridico-centric, politico-centric and humano-centric kingdoms – testify to a displacement of the representation of the king's two bodies, but what is displaced on each occasion is not eradicated, and proves to contain the kernel of a future symbolic configuration' (1988: 250).
4. In his previous book Reed seems to hold that 'the fate of the interpreter [is] to be caught up between the universalist ambitions of each new theoretical scheme and the endless idiosyncrasies of human life' (2011: 171). Such a condition is only inevitable under a particular understanding of what a theoretical scheme can achieve. The deferral to concrete detail and the notion of legitimate scope are possible alternatives to this seemingly Sisyphean back and forth.

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