



# Processual Power, Processual Meaning?

Cultural Sociology

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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, 2020, (ISBN: 13: 978-0-226-68931-9 (hbk), 13: 978-0-226-68945-6 (pbk), 13: 978-0-226-68959-3 (ebk)), 312 pp.

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

**Reviewed by:** Stephen Kemp, *University of Edinburgh, UK*

Isaac Reed's *Power in Modernity* is a very interesting book, full of stimulating ideas and analysis. In this piece I want to reflect on the theorization of meaning in *Power and Modernity* in two respects: by considering the issue of whether the processual emphasis that Reed brings to his analysis of power could also be applied to meaning; and then discussing whether the variability of meaning has a bearing on the generality of theoretical concepts.

The first line of argument I want to develop relates to what interested me about Reed's approach to power, and whether something of its spirit could be pushed further to analyse meaning as well. In relation to power, it's arguable that what Reed is developing is something like a processual and interaction-based analysis of power. Instead of thinking about power hierarchies and structures as abstract entities over and above actors, Reed is analysing more concrete and traceable rector–actor–other relations. Noting that a story of Kafka's conceives of power as 'constructed out of long chains of persons and groups, each governing the next', Reed states that he wants to 'imagine power as constructed out of these long hierarchical chains and their representation' (p. 5). I think this is a really interesting approach, and a promising way of thinking about power and hierarchy.

One positive feature of the analysis is that whereas theorists of structure often attempt to separate out the cultural dimension from social structure (as in Margaret Archer's work, for example, e.g. Archer, 1995) Reed is interested in the intrinsic meaning of these relations, their discursive element, which allows him to consider the significance of contestation of meaning as very much *within* these relations rather than as an added extra or supplement. Another positive feature of Reed's approach is that it works to give some concreteness to what can otherwise seem to be the abstractness or even vagueness of the idea of structure. Reed's idea that we can look at chains of meaningful connection between actors in the development of their projects, including chains of delegation, seems to me one way to extend the interactionist critique of social structure, and Reed

moves in this direction when he articulates his discussion with processual theories of social life (p. 33) as well as citing the work of writers like Andrew Abbott, Hans Joas and John Law.

In my view, the advantages of Reed's approach to power are clear in his strong analysis, in Chapter 5, of the struggles between Bacon and Berkeley<sup>1</sup> within the Colony of Virginia in the 17th century. This analysis emphasizes how stretched certain chains can be, and it illustrates the complexities and contestability of the claim to be acting on behalf of the King. Berkeley, the Governor, proclaimed the illegality of a war between colonists and the indigenous Americans, the basis of his authority being that he was delegate of the King; but contestation of how well he spoke for the King could not be easily and immediately refuted by pronouncements from the sovereign himself given the length of time communications (and soldiers) would take to be conveyed. Clashing with Berkeley, Bacon claimed to be the true representative of the King's interests on the basis that he was pursuing war to establish the colony and expand the empire. As well as this specific clash, Reed discusses institutions and bodies which have some claims to authority, that can once again be contested when it comes to the question of which exactly represents the King and his interests. The way that Reed analyses the concreteness and contingency of the chains of power and interaction, and the subtleties of meaning and interpretation involved, is very convincing, and is, to my mind, preferable to postulating an abstracted structure that is supposedly there governing what is happening in these situations.

But, alongside these positives, I did wonder if Reed might have taken this kind of analysis further in the way he was conceptualizing meaning. My impression is that Reed sometimes treats meaning as a generalized backdrop to action. He refers at one point to the idea that representations should be considered 'part of the ambient background or landscapes of meaning upon which action proceeds in society at large' (p. 65); and these characterizations of meaning come elsewhere in the book. Here Reed is drawing on a concept he developed in his really nice earlier book *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* (2011). To give a simplistic rendering of Reed's idea, he is arguing that what is happening in any particular social situation cannot be grasped by the social investigator without grasping the landscape of meaning in which it is situated. For Reed, these are the layers of meaning which are socially shared, at least to some extent, and which provide the basis for identity, communication and action.

This idea that the backdrop to action is a landscape of meaning, and the way that I interpret Reed as invoking it, suggests to me that whereas his analysis of power potentially offers a provocative challenge to the idea that there are structures 'out there' which hover over and above actors, he may nevertheless have retained an idea of meaning which sees it as something hovering out there as a generalized form influencing action. This fits with the notion of 'ambient background' that Reed uses – a set of meanings that are just sort of floating there. Reading *Power in Modernity*, I found myself wondering whether it would be possible to question that picture of meaning and push towards an account that, as with power relations, tries to trace chains, interactions and the variabilities and contingencies in the circulation of meaning amongst actors rather than assuming that there is a single shared landscape of meaning which actors then (potentially variably) draw on. In practice, Reed considers variabilities and contingencies at times – he is often looking at *interventions* by actors who are attempting to *shape* meanings in certain ways. But this suggests to me that the idea of a landscape of meaning, as a backdrop to

action, may not be a very helpful one. Quite what the alternative might be is tricky. But perhaps one possibility would be to think about something like ‘vectors’ of meaning, which are trying to channel communication and action in one direction rather than another and are clashing with different kinds of vectors pushing in other directions. Mapping out these competing vectors could be quite a difficult task, I admit, but one that I think would take further a valuable aspect of Reed’s project.

The other line of argument I would like to develop considers how the conceptual core of the relationship between *rectors*, *actors* and *others*, fits in with the focus on the variability of meaning one finds in both Reed’s earlier writing and in *Power in Modernity*. In the later book Reed says: ‘I hope to open up a language for comprehending power and its representation that can trace significations of power across different institutional zones of activity – and across historical eras.’ (p. 9, n. 1). When I read this, I was struck by the generality of this task. Reed is putting forward his analysis of *rectors*, *actors* and *others* as a framework of thinking that can and does account for chains of power across different cultural and historical eras. Thus, in *Power and Modernity*, Reed applies it to various revolutionary situations in America and France, but also to witch trials in Salem and the trial of Oscar Wilde in Britain in the late 19th century. Roughly speaking, the division is between *rectors* as those who are in a superior position in an alliance and whose projects are being pursued by way of it, *actors* who are in inferior positions and are carrying out the projects of *rectors* (with the possibility of contestation in certain ways) and *others* who are outside of the projects and excluded from them.<sup>2</sup>

Part of Reed’s rationale for contending that his scheme for analysing power could have this general character may be that he sees a fundamental connection between power and projects. The pursuit of projects seems to be taken by Reed as a general feature of human action, and in many cases in order to realize a project there is a need for delegation, that is, for others to do things for the principal actor. As Reed suggests, ‘Power is dependent on its dependents’ (p. 9). What I found myself wondering was how this related to Reed’s earlier work on interpretation and meaning. Clearly, in *Power and Modernity* Reed is arguing for the importance of grasping meaning when it comes to understanding what actors are doing. But in *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* Reed also discusses the significance of the constitutive role of meaning in social life for the theories that the social investigator can legitimately develop. The subtitle of that earlier book is ‘*On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences*’. And Reed is developing there a caution about the idea that theory can be straightforwardly general and wide-ranging in character. He seems doubtful about the idea that it can apply across different eras.

As I interpret it, Reed’s caution in this respect derives from his emphasis on the role that landscapes of meaning play in social life. I’ve already mentioned this concept – the idea that there are layers of meaning which give form to identity, communication and action. So why does Reed argue in his earlier book that the key role of landscapes of meaning should give us doubts about the idea that theories can apply generally? This is because he thinks that landscapes of meaning can and do vary across different social and historical eras – such that a form of analysis that might apply to one era will not apply to another. The variability of meaning brings a fundamental, deep, variability to the character of social life. Summing this up, in his earlier book Reed states: ‘Thus, because social life enacts meanings, its basic nature can never be fully specified, and instead must be understood as historically variable . . . the nature of the social as such is that it is

impossible to theorize, once and for all, the nature of the social as such. One must use theory to interpret meanings instead' (2011: 162).

Now, as already mentioned, it is the case that Reed discusses landscapes of meaning in *Power in Modernity*, and he does consider all kinds of interesting interpretive subtleties in the cases he analyses. Reed also talks about the ways in which relations between rector, actor and other are differentially represented at different times. But, nevertheless, his argument is based on the idea that these concepts can be used trans-historically. This seems to me to lead to tensions within *Power in Modernity*. For example, Reed discusses social network theories and argues that these often don't take the meaning of communications across a network, and of ties within that network, seriously enough. He states:

The key is not to presuppose – indeed rather to deconstruct and reconstruct, in pursuit of interpretive explanations – what a tie is, how it is imagined by the persons and groups who are linked via said tie, and how it is maintained. Yet simultaneously, I propose that to theorize about culture and power, we should also theorize about delegation, about principal and agent. (p. 46)

This captures the tensions I have been pointing towards. On the one hand, Reed is saying that network concepts like that of 'tie' need to be deconstructed so that the very idea of 'what a tie is' could have a variable meaningful basis. On the other hand, Reed is arguing that we should have a general framework, implicitly across different landscapes of meaning, which looks in the abstract at delegation, and agents. This raises the question: could there be landscapes of meaning (or vectors of meaning, if my earlier suggestion were to be adopted) in which the concepts of rector, actor and other don't apply? Or are these distinctions universal in their application such that they apply everywhere?

I want to finish by noting that although I think there is some small value in posing these questions about *Power in Modernity*, I don't think they point to fundamental problems with this book. It offers a range of rich analyses which I haven't had a chance to explore here and which will be of great interest to readers, particularly those concerned with social theory and/or historical sociology.

## Notes

1. Not the philosophers: the antagonists here were the 'charismatic aristocrat' Nathaniel Bacon Jr. and the Governor of Virginia William Berkeley (see p. 102).
2. In my view it is very useful of Reed to have incorporated the negation of others into his analysis, and it allows him to pick up on important arguments by feminist and post/anti-colonial thinkers. However, I would suggest that Reed's category of the 'other' ends up being somewhat stretched, with its contents ranging from those who are adversaries, as in a democratic polity, to those who are treated as enemies pursuing directly hostile projects but who may be respected, to those who are treated as slaves and entirely disrespected and whose own projects are actively suppressed. Perhaps this stretching is a result of trying to use a very small number of categories to cover a very wide span of time and space.

## References

- Archer M (1995) *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Reed IA (2011) *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.