



# How Does Popular Sovereignty Vary?

Cultural Sociology

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Isaac 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*

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What is power? How exactly is it achieved? How is it achieved through cooperation, even when it seems to go against the immediate interests of those cooperating? How is it achieved and maintained across smaller and greater physical distances?

Social and political theorists have been asking these questions for a long time and they have provided a range of answers. Yet still, even the observers, who know the most empirically about a given context and are most theoretically informed, are usually surprised when long-standing power relationships suddenly collapse, when norms shift, and regimes crumble.

In *Power in Modernity*, Isaac Reed takes up these questions in a learned and original way. It is clear from his writings in recent years that Reed has been obsessed with the concept of power; he has been obsessed specifically with power in its fragility, with power as something that can succeed and fail in a contingent manner, in ways that are not always well understood by existing theories of power.

In the book, Reed develops what I would call in German a 'Stellvertreter'-theory of power, which in English we might term a 'proxy'-theory of power – a theory that pays close attention to chains of delegation and representation. This theory has great potential for bridging accounts that tend to emphasize either the symbolic or the material dimensions of power, as well as bridging macro and micro approaches while also being historically specific.

In what follows, I will make a few points concerning the limits and possibilities of the book's intellectual project with a view to a comparative cultural sociology of modern states.

### *A Proxy Theory of Power*

In framing his precise interest in power, Reed notes: ‘Somewhere between Arendt and Weber lies something quite interesting: the grasping of power in hierarchy that is not reducible to violence but creates more resistance to itself than does pure authority’ (p. 72). That kind of power, Reed argues, can be understood by exploring the role of chains of delegation in the production and maintenance of power, delegation to humans and, as he acknowledges in a nod to actor-network theory, non-humans as well.

Reed’s theorizing is informed by deep historical study of an unusual and generative historical site: the contestations – moral, political and military – that led eventually to the founding of the American Republic, which, when viewed from another perspective, are situated at the edge of the British Empire.

If asking about delegations is Reed’s heuristic and, in a way, his ontology, his findings are also about patterns in symbolic structures. Treating his site as a strategic site for the understanding of modernity, Reed sketches the transition between the symbolic regime described by Kantorowicz, whereby the physical body of the king is tied to a symbolic notion of the whole polity as his second body, and a modern regime wherein ‘the people’ come to be construed as a symbolic centre of political authority.

### *Towards a Comparative Cultural Sociology of Modern States*

Reed explores the implications of the diagnosis that the king’s second body is replaced by the people with the advent of modernity, but I wonder: How does the way popular sovereignty is constructed vary? Reed’s book is an elegant tapestry of historical argument and theoretical discussion and, as a result, it already discusses a range of cases: Reed discusses the early USA, England at the time, the French Revolution and German Fascism. Via Kantorowicz, he enters other cases from the medieval history of Europe, and Reed is clearly also engaged with the present crisis in US democracy.

But there are a lot of cases that Reed does not discuss. In fact, the cases that are not discussed include almost all cases of what we could call ‘real-existing democracy in a nation-state framework’ – India, Sweden, Italy, post-Second World War Germany, Costa Rica, and many more. Also not discussed are the cases in Latin America and elsewhere that have historically been most studied by political scientists interested in regime types, or the cases in Eastern Europe that have been most recently discussed as cases of the collapse of power.

I am not suggesting that Reed should have discussed all of these cases. Rather, I am suggesting that a dialogue between the conceptualizations offered here and the discussion about these other cases, which has largely not been focused on culture and has largely not been obsessed with the fragility of power, could be fruitful in the future.

I think it would be interesting to develop a comparative cultural sociology of modern states on terms that combine the concerns articulated by Reed with the insights derived from an analysis of welfare institutions, territorial strategies of centralization or integration, regime types and class structures, and regimes of symbolic inclusion and exclusion in nation-building.

Such a comparative sociology of democracy, it seems to me, would have to take national culture more seriously than we currently do in the social sciences. It has become unfashionable to address questions of national culture in a comparative way, but it should be possible to do this in ways that are not essentialist or romanticizing: Work here could draw on research by scholars in the tradition of Norbert Elias, who have modelled linking the analysis of social groups, interpretations and institutions (e.g. Elias, 1996; Kuzmics and Axtman, 2007, see Langman and Lundskow, 2017). These questions remain relevant even as we reframe them in the light of an increased sensitivity to the circulation of culture and to transnational relations.

### *What is 'US-American' about US-American Democracy?*

In the context of this project of a comparative cultural sociology of democracy, it becomes more interesting rather than less interesting to ask: 'What exactly is specific about democracy in the United States?'

US democracy is probably the most heavily studied case of democracy in the world, partly simply as a result of the strength of social scientific infrastructure in the USA. Of course, comparative concerns have been part of the debate about US politics since before de Tocqueville and especially since de Tocqueville. Yet, at least to this observer, something about the scholarly answer to the question about the specificity of US-American democracy remains elusive.

Popular and scholarly diagnoses of 'US-exceptionalism' have usually not been informed by a full and symmetrical comparative assessment of the USA in the context of a range of other cases. Reactions against 'US-exceptionalism', on the other hand, have sometimes denied the need for careful assessment of similarities and differences altogether. Here scholars have used a rejection of 'US-exceptionalism' within a US context, to bring back a conception of democracy in general which is heavily informed by the USA and then applied elsewhere. Comparative assessment has been hindered both by the parochialism of scholarship in the USA and by the parochialism of scholarship elsewhere, a parochialism that is often not gratuitous and is indeed challenging to overcome for individual scholars and for scholarly communities.

In this context, Reed's analysis not only speaks to the project of using the 'standpoint of the struggles on the imperial frontier' (p. 119) for a general analysis of power in modernity; it also raises the question as to what is specific about democracy in the USA and it does so on cultural terms that are not only macro-cultural. How exactly is the USA different, how similar to other western nation states? How similar, how different is it to other settler-colonial projects? What are the meanings that US-Americans have communicated when they talk about 'the republic'? What is the history of all the decentralized enthusiasm that seems to be entailed in US democracy, and the notions of virtue invoked? What does this enthusiasm, what do these virtues feel like?

### *About Exclusion*

Reed rightly emphasizes the exclusion, the othering, the violence and the resistance that has been involved in the formation of the US-American state. This is not an addition but

an integral element to Reed's account of modern power. It will also need to be a central part of the cultural sociology of democracy going forward.

My footnote to this project is to note some reservations about the term 'exclusion', which is, I think, the term used most often in the book and which seems to raise some issues that are also at the heart of the underlying theoretical challenges that Reed wrestles with in *Power in Modernity*.

Reed's account of exclusion is not one that is the opposite of inclusion, it is a partial, harmful exclusion, where 'the other' remains important. But still I wondered: if we step outside the framework of any and all forms of civil religion, is exclusion what settlers were doing to Native Americans or what constituted slavery? Is colonialism a form of exclusion?

I am not asking these questions with a particular answer in mind; I am not clear that any other term, such as exploitation, oppression or destruction would better fit these relationships, or that the same term fits all of these relationships. I would highlight that the term 'exclusion' seems to invite us back to an account that privileges macro-cultural structures in thinking about power, which is very common but also slightly frustrating, and which the proxy theory of power invites us to go beyond. It seems to me that in addition to exclusion, we would want to examine exploitation, destruction, production but also neglect and ignorance in all its symbolic and material chains of delegation.

### *What about Differentiation?*

The last set of issues I want to raise concern the book's theoretical position on the differentiation of social spheres. In the book, power is on the one hand clearly defined in general terms and I see the potential of a proxy theory of social life in general. Yet, on the other hand when Reed is writing about power, he seems to be thinking mostly about political power.

Authors in a broad and diverse tradition of theories of differentiation since Weber (and Kant before that) have sought to theorize the status of specialized spheres of social life, such as politics, art and science, in modern life in particular. In academic life, these questions tend to be raised and dismissed with the rise and fall of particular theorists, such as Bourdieu and Luhmann. They tend to get forgotten and rediscovered through particular authors and their strengths and weaknesses but they don't actually go away.

Reading *Power and Modernity* with the questions raised by this tradition in mind, it is not always clear if Reed is presupposing a theory of differentiation and is just talking about political power, or if he is rejecting the theory of differentiation. At times, Reed emphasizes how power transverses all 'zones of activity', recalling Latour (1993) who claimed that 'we have never been modern' precisely based on a rejection of theories of modernization as differentiation. (Though this is not the Latour who 'discovered' modes of existence more recently (2018) and who proceeds as though these were not the issues precisely raised by his opponents before.) But Reed elsewhere introduces the notion of 'a cultural aesthetic rector', as though there was a specific kind of efficacy associated with the arts (p. 81).

Asking about spheres of social life entails asking about the specificity of the political: What, if anything, is specific about political power, or the state, in the context of a broader set of social relations? What is the state and what is sovereignty in the context of social and political phenomena beyond the state?

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