



# Power, Culture, and Materiality in Modernity

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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:** Marcus Morgan , *University of Bristol, UK*

*Power in Modernity* is not only a wonderful book in terms of the theoretical argument it constructs, but also a very pleasurable read. Its ambition, scope and willingness to make big and bold arguments are features that have become defining characteristics of Reed's work. The book offers a model for explaining the emergence of new modes of power in modernity, grounding this model in historical cases of state formation. This focus on transitions from pre-modern to modern societies was the defining preoccupation of classical sociological theory. However, as I will discuss, Reed's tracking of this transition differs significantly from those well-known classical stories.

The book is organised into three main sections: one analytical, one historical, and one normative. In my own response, I have chosen to neglect the rich and vivid historical vignettes which form the empirical meat in the centre of the book, and which are well worth reading the book for in themselves (these include Oscar Wilde's 'gross indecency' trial, Bacon's Rebellion, the Salem Witch Trials, and the Whiskey Rebellion). I will also avoid discussing the normative contentions of the book in much detail. Instead, my comments will focus on a specific element of the first part of the book, where after having developed his general theoretical model, Reed spells out a typology of the dimensions of power.

However, to understand these dimensions, and where they fit into Reed's broader model, it might be useful to offer an abridged overview of the account of chains of power and delegation he describes. Reed offers us a typology of 'subject positions' – Rector, Actor and Other. Rector sends Actor out into the world to act on Rector's behalf. Actor, therefore, is bound to Rector, but so too is Rector bound to Actor, in that Rector relies upon Actor to do his or her bidding. So far, so Hegelian perhaps, but Reed also introduces a third subject position, which functions as a relational outsider (either as enemy or scapegoat). This is what he calls the 'Other'. As Reed succinctly puts it, 'In a chain of power, Rector makes Actor into Rector's agent in the world, and Other is profaned and

excluded from a given project' (p. 51). The attribution of each subject position is of course a matter of perspective: an individual or group who is Other in one situation may also simultaneously be Actor or Rector in another context or chain of power.

Reed goes on to contrast an old political economy with a new one. We find the former in thinkers such as Polanyi, Marx and Weber, in the study of power as instrumental, through the analysis of power's operation via commodity production and exchange, and within accounts of how these economic processes connect to the emergence of modern nation-states. Whereas the old political economy was broadly committed, especially for the classical sociologists, to the disenchantment thesis, the new political economy is interested in the way in which the symbolic, the sacred and the ritual, continue to animate modern social life. This new political economy involves seeing modernity as what Reed – in reference to Kantorowicz (1997) – calls 'the creative destruction of the King's Two Bodies'.

Pre-modern political power was exercised under this model of the king's two bodies: the first being the physical body of the king, and the second being the body of the monarchy itself, famously captured in the proclamation that 'the king is dead, long live the king'. As modernity emerges – or perhaps even *for* modernity to emerge – Reed argues that new sets of bodily metaphors needed to be developed: bodies of the people, the body politic, and the bodies of those that were to be excluded at any cost. This process both created new powers at the same time as it destroyed old ones, hence Reed's use of the Schumpeterian phrase 'creative destruction'.

Reed identifies how these chains of power can be analysed along four dimensions, which develops an earlier typology introduced in an article published in 2013 in *Sociological Theory*. In this article, Reed (2013) offers a threefold typology of relational, discursive, and performative power, whereas in this book, he decomposes the relational dimension of power into its *material* and *relational* elements. In what follows, I would like to question this separation of the material from the relational, and look critically at the theoretical resources Reed uses to elaborate this new materialist dimension of power.

These latter resources are the anthropologist of art, Alfred Gell, and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). From Gell, Reed takes the idea that the artist, or architect, can be thought of as Rector: an actor who manipulates the material world to create artefacts that then have certain effects (power effects) on those that, for instance, witness the work of art, or experience a building, and interpret this experience in a certain way. In this manner, the artefact extends the artist's or architect's agency in the world, often long after they themselves has departed from the scene. Thus, Reed writes,

the artifact is given autonomous causal power, but one embedded in the interpretation of authorship that the actor comes to via the artifact. Material artifacts, while they are *not persons*, can distribute personhood, thus giving their authors . . . a certain kind of spread-out agency in the world—that is, power. (p. 54).

Reed nuances the point here, in a way that Actor-Network Theory too often fails to, writing that whilst 'artifacts can express agency . . . they cannot be actors; they do not have their own projects, which is what we would discover if we were able to take their perspective' (p. 55). Reed argues that 'Gell's anthropology of art is extendable to an

account of materiality in chains of power and their representation. . . expressive materials become part of chains of power—they represent power; they produce power; they exert power’ (pp. 56–57).

From ANT, Reed takes the notion that histories of material technology ought to be built into histories of power, giving as an example John Law’s research on early modern European imperial ventures and his account of how technological developments – e.g. in shipbuilding and navigational innovations – enabled and reinforced command and control of a periphery by its imperial metropole.

Whilst such forms of materialist power were no doubt significant and perhaps even *necessary*, I would like to question their *sufficiency* to the development of modernity. In the case of Gell, there is a concern with the *expressive* materials we find in art works. But don’t these constitute a special case of material objects? Whilst all objects have a symbolic dimension, expressive art objects are explicitly oriented towards the symbolic; the material aspect being a vehicle for conveying signification or meaning. Such objects, I would suggest, are therefore most productively analysed as symbols primarily, and materials only secondarily. Reed suggests that what is most ‘promising about Gell’s theory of art for a materialist theory of power is his recognition that the aura of art objects is often a result of the inequality between artist and audience that they encode’ (p. 55), quoting Gell’s observation that ‘in the Trobriands this inequality is attributed to superior magic; in the West, to artistic inspiration or genius. Neither ‘explanation’ is really explanatory, each only serves to register the disparity of powers between artists and spectators’ (Gell, in Reed, *ibid.*). In tracing the power inequality inherent in this relationship between the producer and the consumer of material artefacts, aren’t we once again back at a relational-materialist analysis of power? In other words, don’t we have to put the material back together with the relational to fully appreciate Gell’s insight?

Reed is more critical in the case of ANT and provides an excellent humanistic spin on ANT’s post-humanist insights, arguing – correctly in my opinion – that ANT neglects the ‘*layers of interpretation* commonly applied to materiality as it is brought into human action and interaction’ (p. 73). One might be tempted to go even further and argue that the flat ontology posited by ANT is problematic in its inherent difficulty in dealing with, or (depending on which representative of this theoretical approach you choose to cite) conscious neglect of, power (e.g. Morgan, 2016: 38–42). Viewing the world through horizontal networks tends to bypass viewing the world through vertical hierarchies in which power relations become most apparent. Indeed, in Latour’s classic introduction to ANT, he complains of the ‘gratuitous use of the concept of power by so many critical theorists’ (2005: 85).

I would suggest that the form of materialist power that has shaped and structured modernity most profoundly, is still the emergence of productive economies based upon capital accumulation, investment and exchange, so I was surprised not to see the materialist dimension of power elaborated in reference to that famous thinker of the Old Political Economy, Karl Marx. Marx and Marxism has been the context in which the material force of social power has been most systematically analysed, and indeed a modified Hegelian model of the struggle between various ‘subject positions’, to use Reed’s terminology, or ‘classes’, to use Marx’s, has been developed. This neglect of Marx is perhaps another consequence of splitting *materiality* from *relationality*, since classes,

whilst materially defined for Marx, were also necessarily relational due to the immanent contradictions of economic systems themselves. The aesthetic and design materiality addressed by Gell, and the human/non-human technological networks described by ANT may well have been important forms of materialist power associated with the emergence of modern forms of social and political organisation. However, at the risk of sounding old-fashioned, the material contradictions of economic systems have arguably far overshadowed such forms of power when it comes to the dawning and ongoing structuring of western modernity. These, I would suggest, remain modernity's *sufficient* conditions.

To conclude, I will touch on two more general points raised by Reed's book which may indicate directions in which its achievements may be developed further.

First, I was struck by the utility of Reed's model in explaining many contemporary political issues, especially in respect to its focus on rendering a 'body of the people'. How, for instance, might state legitimacy be thought of as deriving in part from an effort to protect the healthy first body of 'the people' during recent national responses to the Covid-19 pandemic? How has laying claim to authentically representing such a body similarly figured in bolstering the legitimacy of many of the so-called 'populist' leaders that have come to the fore in recent years? These are important questions, and Reed's book offers us a framework to begin answering them. However, I wondered whether there might not also be acts of power that derive their ability to affect the world not from claiming authorship, but from disowning it. This would include covert forms of power such as those exercised by intelligence agencies. We might, for instance, consider the 1953 coup to overthrow Mohammad Mosaddegh as an exercise of power through which American and British intelligence services affected their influence over Iran by disowning their status as Rector of that act. In what ways might Reed's model be extended to cover these covert exercises of power, that in part deploy power through disclaiming their association with its authorship?

Second, Reed discusses the morphology of the king's, and the people's, second bodies at length. This makes sense, since it is this second body from which political legitimacy is primarily derived. The king's or the people's first body – the actual corporeal entity – is not analysed so extensively, yet it strikes me that this first body might also be a significant factor in some of those contemporary examples of political power mentioned earlier. The physical body of the populist leader, for instance, has arguably acquired greater salience in recent years in its claim to representing a people. For example, both Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump's public refusals to wear face masks during the Covid 19 pandemic and the struggles that subsequently took place over the status of their bodily recoveries once they fell ill with the disease, were arguably struggles over representations of power, as much as over the status of their medical health. Similarly, in an essay in *Local Knowledge*, Geertz describes how in the late 19th century, the ministers of Hasan Mulay, the Sultan of Morocco, concealed his death for days to ward off the threat of a power-grab by a would-be successor (1983: 141–142). Only once the King's chosen successor was secured, and the stench of his decomposing physical body wafted from the caravan so 'his death announced itself' was the King's passing formally acknowledged by his ministers, and political legitimacy transferred. The primary focus of Reed's book does not concern itself directly with answering questions of how such physical bodies function to represent political power, and how this function has transformed across the turning point of modernity.

Nevertheless, alongside its other merits, it certainly provides a coherent theoretical framework to begin asking them. For this reason, and others besides, *Power in Modernity* offers an exciting new theoretical foundation for further sociological studies into how modernity—in its diverse global expressions—both relied upon, and generated, new modes of political power.

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