



Agency Troubles: a Review of Isaac Reed's *Power in Modernity: Agency Relations and the Creative Destruction of the King's Two Bodies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020)

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Published in 2011, Isaac Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* has left a mark in the cultural sociological discourse and the broader field of interpretative analysis. Thoroughly reviewed and discussed in symposia, the book has become a staple for teaching interpretative analysis and its core concept, "landscape of meaning," has entered the disciplinary usage. In the meantime, its author broke to new intellectual frontiers, publishing several high-profile articles on power and agency relations, often with an empirical focus on early state formation in the USA. Reed's new book, *Power in Modernity*, mainly draws upon these already published works and ties them together into a coherent framework, addressing some lacunas of its predecessor, namely, questions of materiality, body, and power. *Power in Modernity* can be read in many ways, as application and extension of Reed's methodological book on interpretation, as elaboration and demonstration of a novel theory of power, and finally, as reflection on modernity through the lenses of shifting imaginations of power.

Reed's new book consists of three parts: the first, theoretical, section develops a theory of agency relations and power; the second, empirical, section uses the theoretical apparatus to illuminate several case studies of power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mainly in North America but also in England and France; and the third, concluding, section engages in a metatheoretical discussion of (power in) modernity. There is much to discuss about *Power in Modernity*, depending on one's interests. I will briefly summarize the argument of the book, as I understood it, before singling out a few topics for in-depth discussion.

According to my understanding, Reed develops a Weberian theory of power as delegation, which is built upon a Hegelian (!) social theory, both of which are

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embedded in the cultural sociological framework outlined in the last chapters of *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* (Reed 2011). According to Reed, power as well as agency is exercised through rector-actor-other chains, in which “rector makes actor into rector’s agent in the world, and other is profaned and excluded from a given project” (2020: 51). At the beginning of *Power in Modernity*, the figures of rector, actor, and other are introduced as the basic elements of power relations, initially as rather abstract social mechanisms akin to Simmel’s social forms. As the book progresses, however, Reed is able to show that concrete chains of power are always embedded in and formed by cultural “landscapes of meaning,” which is reminiscent of the relation between social mechanisms and landscapes of meaning in his earlier book (2011: 152).

The overall cultural sociological framework becomes particularly salient in Reed’s empirical studies, which draw on core insights from Ernst Kantorowicz’ famous study *The King’s Two Bodies* (1957). Reed uses the theory and the imaginary of the King’s two bodies, which originated in medieval political theology, as a guiding metaphor and conceptual framework to understand power and agency struggles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He convincingly demonstrates that the two bodies of the King were not only employed as a semiotic tool to forge chains of power at the periphery of a monarchy (e.g., in colonial Virginia) but also informed power struggles in early republics (such as the USA and France). Being more than a semiotic tool, the two bodies of the King shaped a political landscape of meaning—only seemingly long bygone. Reed’s case studies illuminate the crucial role of culture in the exercise of power, the importance of “enchancements” (such as the King’s second body) to bind actors to rectors. In the context of a theory of modernity, the creative destruction of the King’s two bodies serves to highlight ongoing problems of agency and power, begging the political as well as sociological question: “With what should we replace the King’s two bodies?” (Reed, 2020: 229).

For the purpose of this essay, I decided to focus mainly on theoretical aspects of the book as well as on its possible uses for understanding contemporary society. Nevertheless, I want to stress that the empirical case studies are an integral part of the book, fleshing out its abstract theoretical concepts and showcasing its culturally sensitive framework. In the following, I will first discuss *Power in Modernity* as a Weberian theory of power as delegation, which is embedded in a culturally sensitive framework. Afterwards, I will address the Hegelian social theory underlying the argument of the book and raise the question: With what should we replace Hegel’s concept of the spirit? Finally, I will offer a reading of *Power in Modernity* as a historical sociology of the present, discussing populism, conspiracy theories, and political scandals as contemporary phenomena to which Reed’s theory could be applied.

Power in Modernity as a Weberian Theory of Power: Domination as Delegation

At the core of Reed’s social theory are the concepts of rector, actor, and other (whose Hegelian background will be discussed later). Rector enlists actor in pursuit of rector’s projects, from which other is excluded. It is by delegating tasks to actor,

who acts on rector's behalf, that rector accrues agency. Agency, and thus power, only occurs and accrues in social relations, in rector-actor chains, for which other is constitutive but from which other is nevertheless excluded. Consequently, power is primarily conceived as power-over, or maybe even better: as power-through, or socially mediated agency, and not as power-to, or capacity to act. At first glance, Reed's conception of power bears some resemblance to Weber, who defined power (*Macht*) as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber 1978: 53). As Weber himself noted, such a "concept of power is sociologically amorphous" and applicable to a broad variety of different social phenomena, including antagonistic relations such as conflict or competition. On a closer look, Reed's conception of power as delegation finds its proximate correlate in the Weberian conception of domination or authority (*Herrschaft*), defined as "the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (1978: 53). In contrast to Weber, who speaks of the likelihood of specific commands being obeyed, Reed talks about rector binding actor as agent in pursuit of broader projects, which allows for more degrees of freedom on part of the actor and entails a more expansive notion of agency.

While the basic concepts are introduced as social forms or mechanisms abstracted from their cultural context, Reed stresses the fact that that power and agency relations are always embedded in "a broader *landscape of meaning*" as "a generalized sociocultural configuration of *the sacred*" (2020: 230; emphasis in the original). Bringing together a Weberian theory of power with the Durkheimian vocabulary of the sacred, Reed is able to highlight the importance of culture for the construction of chains of power. In binding rectors and actors together, cultural meanings effectively increase the Weberian "probability" that a command will be obeyed or that, respectively, rector's project will be pursued by actor:

They do this because the second body of the King—the whiff of royalty, the feel of sacrality—makes it possible to *slightly* shift the preferences of a subject of the realm who has opposed interests to the agent of the state who is hailing him; or makes it a bit more likely that a soldier will risk his life in securing territory for the state and follow the orders of hid general amidst chaos and blood; or seduces a Justice of the Peace into a decision that attempts fairness because it aims to imitate an ideal king (Reed, 2020: 230).

This quote showcases the elective affinity between Reed's theory of power as delegation and Weber's concept of power as domination, both of which are inherently social as well as probabilistic. Furthermore, it illustrates how culture might work within a Weberian theory of power, simply by changing the odds that one's command will be obeyed. Weber may not be a central reference for Reed, but I believe that a comparison between their conceptions helps us to understand the continuity as well as the originality of Reed's proposal. What does Reed add to Weber's theory of power? First, he highlights the constitutive role of the other for power relations; second, his talk of projects allows for a broader and more flexible conception of domination as delegation; third, he firmly entrenches the theory of power in a cultural-sociological framework, in which structures of meaning shape the exercise of power.

While Weber offers a typology of domination, consisting of traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational types of authority, Reed distinguishes between different dimensions of power, material, relational, discursive, and performative, which all contribute to the formation of rector-actor chains. The conception of material power extends rector-actor chains into the realms of nature, art, and technology. Reed's creative appropriation of Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of *Art and Agency* (1998)—still underappreciated by sociologists and arguably superior to the works of Latour—allows him to incorporate non-humans and material objects into his rector-actor model almost seamlessly. Thus, Reed is able to describe how material objects can be enlisted to exert and express agency on behalf of human rectors, reflecting ANT's early concern with “technology as *delegation*” (2020: 85). Siding with Gell against ANT and Latour, Reed nevertheless insists that material objects cannot be considered as actors in their own right, although they may nevertheless function as “secondary” or quasi-agents for human rectors.

Relational power refers to the habitualization of rector-actor chains, which has an affinity to Weber's concept of traditional authority. Conceived as durable network of rector-actor chains, relational power is part of the social structure and thus forms the backbone of institutions and organizations. Discursive power, on the other hand, relates to cultural structures which shape the formation and interpretation of power chains. Discursive power is exercised through the symbolic representation of rector-actor chains and broader social hierarchies. For Reed, the formation and representation of power chains are hopelessly intertwined. Nevertheless, I believe it could be useful to distinguish between power relations and their ex post symbolic representation, at least in some cases, such as the disavowal of agency in political scandals.

Performative power, finally, plays a key role in Reed's theoretical argument and his empirical analysis as the primary mode of binding actors to rectors and excluding others, thus subjecting the power of delegation to the pragmatic as well as dramatic invocation of cultural meanings. Like Weber's charismatic authority, performative power is mostly visible during extraordinary times of crisis, when habitualized understandings and established representations of rector-actor relations become weaker, setting the stage for skilled public performers. Unfortunately, Reed exhibits a tendency to objectify times of crisis, not paying enough attention to their performative constitution. This concerns not only political performances of crisis (e.g., as part of the populist style, cf. Moffitt, 2015) but also disruptive performances which challenge the status quo and thus may trigger a crisis in the first place (e.g., Willy Brandt's knee fall, cf. Rauer, 2006).

Weber and Reed both conceptualize power as social relation but are ultimately interested in broader social and cultural contexts of power. Weber talks about legitimate order and forms of legitimate authority, which can even be impersonal, as is the case of the legal-bureaucratic authority. Reed theorizes “patriarchal patrimonialism” (2020: 43–46) as such a legitimate order (based on traditional authority), which—as he later shows—not only shapes the monarchic discourses surrounding the fatherly figure of the King but also early democratic discourses, in which the male heads of households become rectors in a double sense, first in relation to their family members and second in relation to their government acting on their behalf. It seems to me that the use of concepts such as middle-range concepts as “patriarchal patrimonialism,” situated between

concrete rector-actor chains and broader landscapes of meaning, are particularly useful to analyze historical configurations of power. Nevertheless, these types of legitimate order do not receive a systematic theoretical treatment in the book. Ultimately, Reed's theory of power is built around the conception of hierarchical rector-actor relations, which not only excludes forms of power inscribed in the subject, such as Foucault's disciplinary power (Foucault 1979) but also makes it difficult to grasp trans-subjective, collective, or impersonal sources and orders of power. And there are reasons to assume that the latter became more important in the course of modernity. In order to address this problem, it might be helpful to return to the Hegelian roots of the actor-rector model, from which Hegel's "spirit" is conspicuously absent.

Power in Modernity as Hegelian Social Theory—What Should Replace Hegel's Spirit?

In his contemporary review of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, written in the idiom of contemporary analytical philosophy more than two centuries after the original publication of book, the American philosopher Robert Brandom (Brandom, 2008: 161) notes: "The Anglophone philosophical world is currently riding a welling wave of enthusiasm for a big, dense, blockbuster of a book by the previously unknown Jena philosopher, Georg Hegel." According to Brandom, the book not only "picks up and weaves together in a surprising and wholly original way a large number of today's most fashionable ideas" in philosophy but also discusses other fields such as "sociology." While Hegel's contribution to the formation of sociology as a discipline is not exactly a secret, he is generally not well-read by contemporary sociologists, Reed being an exception—though maybe not too much of an exception, as he draws mainly on the most discussed passage of the *Phenomenology*, the famous dialectics of "master" (*Herr*) and "slave" (*Knecht*), which had a profound impact on Marxist as well as postcolonial thought. Nevertheless, Reed's creative appropriation of Hegel demonstrates that it is still possible to distill new insights from this often-read and -quoted passage.

To recapitulate: In the first chapters of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Hegel 2018/1807), Hegel discusses different stages of phenomenal consciousness, arriving at the concept of self-consciousness. Due to a sleight of mind of the author, self-consciousness finds itself embodied in a world, which it constantly negates in order to fulfill its needs and desires. We can also say, self-consciousness projects itself on the world, negating and appropriating everything that is not itself. Then suddenly, two bodies possessed by self-consciousness meet, negate each other's subjectivity, and engage in a fight for life and death. It is here that we find Reed's figure of "other as enemy" (2020: 21–23). Unsatisfied by deadly result of the encounter, which leaves the surviving self-consciousness in the same situation as before, Hegel sketches an alternative ending, in which one self-consciousness surrenders to the other, because it holds its life dearer than its self-consciousness or subjectivity. Here, the infamous dialectic of master and slave starts, from which Reed takes the figure of "other as slave" (2020: 23–27). For the master, the slave is a mere tool to be used in pursuit of his own projects, for the fulfillment of his needs and desires. Forsaking his

own projects, the slave has to work for master, negating and shaping the world in accordance with master's wishes and projects. Already in Hegel, the relation between master and slave is a power relation. It is not by accident that Hegel's original word for master, *Herr*, is literally the root of Weber's term *Herrschaft*, usually translated as domination or authority. It seems only fitting that Reed bases his Weberian account of relational power on a Hegelian theory of rector-actor-other relationships.

Susan Buck-Morrs (2000) has pointed out that slavery not only appears in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* but was widely used as master metaphor in political discourses throughout the eighteenth century. What is remarkable about Hegel's account, however, is the fact that it seems to have been written, as Buck-Morrs convincingly argues, under the impression of the revolution in Haiti, where slaves opposed their masters under the slogan "liberty or death", transforming the master-slave dialectics back into a liberation struggle. In recent years, there has been a growing dissatisfaction with social and sociological theory, not being able to incorporate insights from postcolonial studies and the suffering of others in colonial history. While there are other theoretical sources for the rector-actor distinction (e.g., Coleman's principal-agent theory), in drawing on Hegel, Reed is able to incorporate the excluded figure of the other into the very foundations of his social theory. To be sure: Hegel himself was not a postcolonial theorist, proposing a rather quietist solution for the dialectics of master and slave, although the latter becomes the unsung hero in the story of the spirit. Reed does not offer a reconciliation in spirit but an account of how other has been instrumental in constructing rector-actor chains and how its subjectivity and agency has been denied in the process. In doing so, he not only addresses some of the postcolonial concerns with contemporary social theory but also convincingly demonstrates how social theory can profit from the inclusion of (radical) alterity.

Hegel's dialectics of master and slave serves as a foil for Reed's rector-actor model. While the slave as other is not recognized by master as a subject with its own desires and projects, the relation between rector and actor is characterized by partial recognition (Reed, 2020: 10). Rector enlists actor to do his bidding, to pursue the projects of rector, but rector still recognizes actor as a subject with its own projects, which can even be used to enlist actor for rector's projects. Nevertheless, other remains constitutive for actor-rector relationships, although it can take many shapes. As an "enemy" to be fought, other is excluded from the projects pursued by rector and actor; as a "slave" to be exploited, it signifies the inherent possibility of non-recognition in rector-actor relations; and as a "scapegoat," a third figure of the other introduced by Reed (2020: 27–29), it can be used to forge alliances or to bind actors to rectors.

Preceding the chapter on "Mastery and Servitude," Hegel provides a roadmap for the development of self-consciousness (and his entire book), culminating in the formation of the "spirit," which he describes as follows: "The *I* that is *we* and the *we* that is *I*" (2018/1807: 108). According to Hegel, the spirit is the result of a process of mutual recognition that establishes symmetrical relations between different subjects. Hegel's master turns out to be a dead end on the long and winding road to the spirit: By not recognizing the slave as a self-consciousness in its own right, master is unable to gain meaningful recognition from the slave. Thus, Hegel's

story continues with the slave, who also fails to gain recognition but realizes himself through his work while discovering the interiority of his subjectivity. Only later in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel's focus shifts from the individual transformation of consciousness to clashes between different moral worldviews on a societal scale, culminating in the self-realization of the spirit.

I believe there is a sociological lesson to be learned from Hegel's story. According to Reed, enemy and slave constitute the poles of a spectrum of imaginations of the other; the former is at least recognized as the author of his own actions and projects, while the latter is dehumanized and deprived of agency. Alternatively, we can also think of rector-actor relations located on a spectrum of partial recognition, where slavery occupies the pole of non-recognition. What could be the other pole then, characterized by full recognition? Moving towards full recognition, the hierarchical rector-actor distinction collapses, giving way to a collective characterized by symmetrical social relations and shared projects. Here we find the Hegelian spirit, the "I that is we and the we that is I," a community of like-minded people. Here we can speak of collectivity in the strong sense as it is exemplified in the works of Émile Durkheim.

Durkheim, in most regard a faithful Kantian, coined early in his career the concept of collective consciousness, which at least in some respects can be regarded as a legitimate successor to Hegel's spirit. In the *Division of Labor*, Durkheim (2013: 79) describes how the violation of the collective consciousness results in a "scandal," where "public anger" emerges, an "anger which is that of everybody without being that of anybody in particular". These collective emotions, like the collective representations in Durkheim's later work, do not belong to the individual but to an entity of a higher order, the social group or society. In the *Elementary Forms* (Durkheim, 1995/1912), this line of thinking takes the shape of a theory of the sacred, a term that entails a strong sense of collectivity. Although Reed frequently employs a Durkheimian terminology, speaking of "enchantments" and the "sacred," their use is strangely free-floating, cut off from the life of collectivities, and not really integrated into his theoretical account.

It is worth noting that the Hegel scholar Terry Pinkard (1994) uses the vocabulary of the sacred in his commentary on Hegel's *Phenomenology* to describe the later stages of the spirit:

It is Hegel's thesis that the reconciled community is held together by a definite and shared sense of what is sacred – of what is not simply important for it but what is of absolute value for it – and it is his further thesis that this element of the sacred is established in modern life as the principle of the sacred quality of rational, self-conscious life, of spirit itself as the self-conscious reflection of a community on what it takes as authoritative for itself. (Pinkard, 1994: 220).

For Hegel, the spirit implies not only the mutual recognition of actors but also their collective recognition of values as well as practices and standards of evaluation. The Durkheimian sacred and the Hegelian spirit both stand for what actors have to take as the absolute ground for their actions but which is nevertheless rooted in particular historical communities. Pinkard reads Hegel's *Phenomenology* as an account on the emergence of a specific modern form of the sacred, characterized by reflexivity and reason-giving: "A form of life becomes 'spirit' when it develops

reflective practices whose objects are the authoritativeness of the reason-giving activities of that form of life” (1994: 227). Nevertheless, one should not overstate the role of reflexivity as constitutive feature of the modern form of life. Hegel also emphasized the necessity for habitualized understandings of the good, especially in his *Philosophy of Rights*, where he juxtaposes abstract morality with the “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*) embodied in social practices and institutions, a perspective that remains relevant for understanding contemporary society (see Honneth, 2014).

As a disclaimer, it should be noted that the spirit in Hegel’s philosophy is more than the form of life of modern communities. It is not only a human conception of the absolute, but the absolute itself, the fundamental structure of the universe, conceived not only as object but also as subject. Most importantly, it is the ultimate rector of world history, using the “cunning of reason” to enlist great men in its service, who by pursuing their own projects, realize the grand project of the world spirit: freedom. Despite the empirical evidence in Hegel’s favor, we no longer seem to be able to entertain the idea of the spirit as an actor.

In his discussion of Gell, Reed points out that material artifacts can never be the “primary sources of agency, because [...] it is impossible to take the point of view of the artifact” (2020: 54f.). Similarly, the world spirit can never be considered a primary source of agency because it’s impossible to take its viewpoint—despite the fact that this was precisely Hegel’s claim at the end of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. However, it might be possible to conceive of the spirit and other ideal entities—in analogy to the argument of Gell and Reed concerning material objects—as “secondary” or quasi-rectors, to which human actors lend agency. Reed occasionally mentions ultimate rectors like God, “Mother Earth and Jesus” (2020: 51), which seem to possess a kind of agency. It remains unclear in Reed’s argument, if these imaginary rectors take actually part in chains of power or if they remain confined to their *ex post* symbolic representation. Taking Reed’s argument about the intertwinement of the exercise of power and its representation seriously, I would like to discuss three possibilities, which might allow us to integrate the quasi-agency of imaginary rectors into Reed’s model.

The first, Platonic, option is inspired by Gell’s concept of the “prototype” (1998: 25f.), which alongside the artist and the recipient exerts a causal influence on a work of art—and thus agency. A “secondary” agency, mind you, as the prototype cannot act by itself, but relies on the artist as the “primary agent.” For Gell, a prototype can be any real or imagined object, which can be (visually) represented in an artwork. We can extend this model to imaginations and actions more broadly conceived. Consider Reed’s Justice of the Peace who “aims to imitate an ideal king” (2020: 230). Here not the King himself, but the image of an ideal king seems to exert agency through the actor. Once we replace the individual imagination of the actor with the collective imagination of groups and societies, it is easy to see how social imaginaries can be constitutive for personal as well as impersonal forms of authority.

As second, Aristotelian, option revolves around the notion of shared projects, for example, when Reed observes that in Jacobinism “the cause itself becomes a kind of shared spirit for the body of the revolutionaries” (2020: 255). The casual use of “spirit” here, which is never used as a concept throughout the book, signifies

a temporary departure from Reed's mechanical and hierarchical conception of power, where we can see the glimpse of more organic and egalitarian form of social organization, based on the symmetrical as well as collective recognition of a common goal. It almost seems as if the shared project of the revolutionaries—the common cause as an “unmoved mover” of sorts—becomes the rector in a chain of power, which binds the actors together, into a social body as collective agent. While such forms of collective agency usually feature the hierarchical rector-actor chains discussed by Reed, I would argue that their legitimacy and effectivity are based on mutual recognition and impersonal sources of power.

The third, structuralist, option replaces the Hegelian spirit as subject with culture as a system, which operates according to its own logic behind the back of the actors, using them as quasi-agents. Recently, Reed (2017) has argued against the conception of culture as a system and for culture as symbolic environment, best captured by his metaphor of landscape of meaning. *Power in Modernity* exemplifies this conception, with actors and their projects navigating cultural landscapes, which provide a background for the chains of power they form. This individualistic, or better: relational, account of social life is much closer to Weber than to Durkheim, who placed a strong emphasis on collectivity and the autonomy of cultural forms. Indeed, Durkheim's characterization of the sacred as an attracting and repelling force suggests a kind of cultural agency that cannot be found in Reed's model, albeit in some of his thick descriptions and examples. There are good reasons to oppose a conception of culture as a closed system tied to well-defined collectivities, but I believe there is also something we lose, if we do not integrate a more systematic conception of culture into our understanding of power and society.

So, with what should we replace Hegel's spirit, then? And why should we even bother? I believe that some functional equivalent for the spirit is necessary to account for the often egalitarian, impersonal, and value-laden character of modern power relations and legitimate social orders. The three options sketched above are neither mutually exclusive nor are they the only games in town. What are then the implications of this critique for a theory of power (in modernity)? First of all, not all power relations seem to be structured hierarchically; some are also based on the mutual recognition of actors and their recognition of shared principles and projects. Second, it seems to me that most forms of hierarchical power in modernity, via legitimacy, rely on these more egalitarian and impersonal structures of power. In an essay on performative power, Jeffrey C. Alexander (2011) distinguishes between vertical conceptions of power, which would include Reed's chains of power, from a horizontal conception of power, dubbed “civil power.” As a feature of the “civil sphere” (Alexander, 2006), the exercise of civil power is shaped by a cultural system of binaries and collective representations of a society, which includes the civil sphere as a shared utopian project. Horizontal forms of power might be constitutive for the civil sphere, but I would argue that we can find horizontal power relations in other spheres of society too, alongside vertical chains of power. Modern societies and institutions do rely not only on the habitualization of power chains but also on collective “enchantments,” their recognition as legitimate.

Power in Modernity as a Historical Sociology of the Present: Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Political Scandal

In the middle of *Power in Modernity*, Reed argues that Kantorowicz' study medieval political theology should in fact be read as a treatise on modernity, tackling "the theoretical problems of the sociology of power in the twentieth century" (2020: 118). In my view, pretty much the same can be said about *Power in Modernity*, which through investigating agency troubles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sheds a light on the contemporary crisis of political and popular representation. In the last part of this essay, I would like to address three contemporary phenomena, populism, conspiracy theories, and political scandal, using concepts and insights from Reed's book.

Reed himself suggests in his analysis of early American republicanism that the signifier and imagination of "the people" came to replace the body of the king. Still under "the King's shadow" (Manow, 2010), modern democracy is haunted by the problem of the people's two bodies. Reed (2020: 135ff.) portrays Herman Husband's political vision as an attempt to arrange the electoral system in a way that would let the second body of the people emerge from the sacred foundation of the first body, consisting of individual male citizens as heads of their families. Here, the first and natural body of the people was seen as sacred and the electoral system as corrupt, preventing the emergence of the sacred mystical body. A second mode of enacting popular agency, discussed by Reed, involves "a fierce and violent policing" of the boundaries of the body politic, which was based on the violent exclusion of the Indian other and the coercive exploitation of the slave other. A third configuration of democratic politics, which Reed finds in Jacobinism, a revolutionary leader or avantgarde claims incorruptibility in order to erect the second sacred body of the people.

Modern democratic politics has inherited the problem of the King's two bodies, including some of the elements discussed by Reed. The democratic problem of the people's two bodies finds its clearest expression in contemporary populism. Populist leaders—not unlike other democratic politicians—try to forge rector-actor chains between "the people," themselves, and their followers by excluding "others" such as liberal elites, domestic minorities, or foreign immigrants. What is peculiar about populist politics, at least according to Jan-Werner Müller (2016), is their "moralistic imagination" and representation of "the people," which can be described as a specific configuration of the people's two bodies: The first, empirical and heterogenous body of the people—the population or electorate—is opposed to a second, mythical, and homogenous body of the people, of which the populist leader or party is the only legitimate representative. In the populist discourse, the first body is portrayed as corrupt and the second revered as sacred. This means that appeals to the "ordinary people" or the "silent majority," the excluded other of elite discourses, are just empty signifiers. Empirical characteristics such as race or religion may enter the populist imagination of the people selectively, but it ultimately remains an idealization for which numerical representativity is irrelevant. This uniform vision of the sacred body of the people is projected back

on its empirical body, resulting in the symbolic exclusion of many members of its members, which includes political enemies and all kinds of minorities.

As in the case of the King's two bodies, the mythical body takes precedence over the empirical body in the populist discourse. After losing the election in 2002, the populist leader and current Hungarian prime minister Orbán could defiantly claim that "the nation cannot be in opposition" to itself (in Müller, 2016: 32). Also, the aftermath of the 2020 elections in the USA can be understood as an attempt to square the first people of the body, represented by the official electoral results, with the second body of the people, here understood as the populist imagination of the "true American people." After losing the election, Trump and his supporters discredited the electoral machinery claiming that the election was "stolen" from them. Whatever interests might have motivated Trump, the underlying cultural logic of his claim entails a peculiar re-alignment of the empirical and the mythical body of the people, which reflects the cultural logic of populism.

In a democratic society, the second body of the people emerges through the complex interplay of institutions, including mass media and electoral procedures (Alexander, 2006). These institutions, under attack by populists, need to be supported by a democratic spirit. Trump's presidency, a political earthquake in the landscape of meaning of American democracy, may not have done visible damage to its institutions, but it definitely harmed the democratic spirit that sustains them. Transitioning to the penultimate chapter on religion, Hegel writes in his *Phenomenology*: "The wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind" (2018/1807: 387). Nevertheless, to achieve healing, to remake the spirit, to rebuild the trust in democratic institutions might prove to be a difficult endeavor, especially as populist performances and discourses continue to rub salt in those wounds.

Mistrust in the institutions of a democratic society is also fueled by conspiracy theories, often propagated by populist politicians, but nevertheless an independent and widespread phenomenon that cuts across political divides. Popper (2013: 306) has famously argued that a "conspiracy theory of society" is in fact a "secularization of a religious superstition," in which gods as ultimate rector have been replaced by human surrogates:

The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups—sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from—such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists. (2013: 306).

It is possible to link the rise of conspiracy theories to the creative destruction of the King's two bodies. In a recent book on the sociology of conspiracy theories, Kim Meyer (2018) distinguishes between "demonological" and "conspiratorial thinking": the former is directed against "others" at the margins or outside of society, while the latter engages in a hermeneutic of suspicion against the institutions of one's own society. Demonological thinking has a long history, but conspiratorial thinking is a relatively new phenomenon, emerging in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not only replacing the diminishing religious belief in divine providence but also filling the political-symbolic gap left behind by the decapitation of the King (Meyer, 2018: 78).

The language of rector-actor-other chains is well-suited to describe contemporary conspiracy theories, where ultimate rector like George Soros or Bill Gates orchestrate a migration crisis utilizing the refuge other or create a pandemic enlisting the help of

human experts as well as non-human agents such as viruses. What Reed's case studies demonstrate is the fragility of rector-actor relations in modern times, the effort that goes into building and sustaining rector-actor chains, and the instability of delegation. Conspiracy theories systematically underestimate the agency troubles accruing in long rector-actor chains. As mathematical models suggest, conspiracies can only remain secret, if the number of actors is very small (Grimes, 2016). The longer the rector-actor chain, the more difficult it becomes not only to maintain a conspiracy but also to exercise power and agency effectively. Conspiracy theories not only engage in a critique of real or imagined power structures but also express a longing for agency in an increasingly complex world—seemingly more satisfying than acknowledging the apparent lack of agency. In this regard, conspiracy theories resemble Hegel's philosophy of history, although they offer only a poor substitute for the world spirit.

Last but not least, Reed's theory of power can also contribute to our understanding of political scandal, a phenomenon connected to the distinction between the political actor as a person and the office as a sacred institution (cf. Alexander, 2006: 132–150)—a distinction that clearly corresponds to the King's two bodies. The President of the USA can refer to both, the sacred and sempiternal office and the human being temporarily filling it. A political scandal occurs when the person occupying the sacred office is linked to polluted acts, usually via discursive representations of power chains. A common defense strategy is the disavowal of agency, with the officeholder denying authorship and responsibility for these acts. Disavowal of agency is not an entirely new strategy in the domain of political rule. Russian czars cultivated the social imaginary of a "good king," whose pure will is twisted and polluted by ill-willed counselors and corrupt enforcers—an imaginary that later Stalin employed to shield himself against criticism (Stölting, 1997). In his book, Reed focuses primarily on power struggles, in which claims to agency and authorship emanate from above, but his theory can also be applied to the disavowal of agency as a response to polluted acts that threaten to undermine the sacred authority from below.

For an empirical example, I will draw upon my German dissertation on the Abu Ghraib scandal (Binder, 2013), whose core argument can be rendered easily in Reed's terminology. The scandal took place in the context of the so-called War on Terror, which was not only a response to the hostile attacks of 9/11 but also helped to overcome a sovereignty crisis in the USA (2000 was a disputed election where the recount of votes was stopped by court order). As collective project, the War on Terror forged international alliances and power chains, enlisting domestic and foreign actors while excluding others, for example, the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. A scandal erupted in April 2004, after the publication of photographs documenting prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, which caused an image problem for the USA and agency troubles for its government: Not only liberals saw responsibility on side of the government but also the participants in the abuse claimed that their actions were part of a "chain of command"—which ultimately led to the president. The Bush government responded by disowning agency for the Abu Ghraib abuses, portraying them as rogue acts and the abusers as sole authors of their actions (Binder, 2015). Initially, this strategy was successful, but after Bush's reelection the same year, the dominant narrative began to shift as Republicans like John McCain joined the effort to forge representations of power chains that linked the government to the polluted acts: First on the basis of its failure to provide clear rules for the treatment of prisoners, later also as bearing direct responsibility, due to the

government's authorship of controversial memos that sanctioned the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" at Guantanamo Bay, from which they spread to Afghanistan and Iraq. Power struggles, as Reed argues, are always also struggles over the representation of power chains. This necessarily includes conflicts about responsibility, the denial of authorship and the disavowal of agency.

Conclusion

If I would ever revive my abandoned project of turning my German dissertation into an English book, I would strongly consider using Reed's actor-rector-other model and other elements from his theory of power. Admittedly, his terminology seems at first somewhat idiosyncratic not only due to the introduction of new terms such as "rector" but also in its peculiar usage of already established terms, such as "actor" or "agency" (e.g., for Reed, in contrast to Gell, it is not the agent that possesses agency). Nevertheless, new terms and concepts often open new lines of thinking, which is certainly the case for the conceptual framework proposed by Reed. I personally find the elegance of his framework striking. It allows us to model the complexity of power relations with just a few key concepts—at least up to a certain point and for some forms of power. In terms of social theory, I am quite satisfied with Reed's theory of power. I am less convinced from the perspective of a theory of society or cultural theory, as the collective and impersonal dimensions of modern power and culture are comparatively underdeveloped.

In my opinion, the most important lesson to be learned from Reed's book—and from the two fables by Kafka discussed in its introduction—is that the seat of power is ultimately in the imagination. It is not only in the imagination of individuals but in the collective imagination too. The social imaginaries of the collective imagination serve as a basis for symbolic representation, crucial for Reed's concept of discursive power, while generating a surplus of meaning that escapes symbolic representation (Binder, 2019). Reed's concept of "landscape of meaning" seems to address this fundamental role of imagination. It has proven to be a useful tool, not despite but precisely because of its vagueness as a metaphor. Still, I believe we need not only a much more detailed cartography of landscapes of meaning but also a geology of landscapes of meaning in the sense of Lévi-Strauss (1961: 59ff.), where deep structures and cultural logics account for surface variations in meaning-making.

In the preface to the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel describes the truth as "the bacchanalian revel where not a member is sober" (2018/1807: 29). In his discussion of the Whiskey Rebellion, Reed shows that whiskey served as a metaphor for "not knowing who is in charge" (2020: 174). The truth of the spirit of our times might be that we suffer from not knowing who is in charge, which is why we are so busily engaging in the symbolic representation of chains of power: Populists promise "the people" to take back control from "corrupt elites," supposedly in charge; conspiracy theorists are looking for the truth about ultimate rectors and their sinister projects; investigative journalists link powerful politicians to polluted acts, which might otherwise go unpunished; as sociologists, we do pretty much the same.

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