

## Performing the people: Review of Isaac Ariail Reed's *Power in modernity: Agency relations and the creative destruction of the king's two bodies*

Part general social theory with a cultural bent, part historical interpretation of the modern condition and its origins, Isaac Ariail Reed's *Power in Modernity: Agency Relations and the Creative Destruction of the King's Two Bodies* is a work of extraordinary ambition. The book begins by rethinking theories of power. Better put, what Reed offers is an ontology—he calls it “the furniture of the universe” (p. 39). As the title suggests, the imagery is one of *agency relations*. These involve would-be rulers (whom Reed calls “rectors”) delegating tasks to agents, who stand in for their rectors in pursuit of the latter’s “projects.” To the extent that these agents are persons, they are potential “actors” as well. That is, they have their own projects. The picture is essentially the lord–bondsmen relation of Hegel (p. 10), and it evokes principal–agent problems familiar to rational choice theory, as well as Weberian historical sociology.

Reed then complicates matters in multiple ways. Power relations are trichotomous, not binary: in addition to rectors and actors, they implicate “others,” both because there are those external to a given project who bump up against it, *and* (more nefariously) to the degree that rectors instrumentalize their agents so thoroughly as to deny them any project. Slavery is the limiting case. Furthermore, agency relations must be represented, given meaning through interpretation: they exist simultaneously in a material and a symbolic state.

Finally, Reed proposes that we study these rector–actor–other chains according to “four dimensions: materiality, relationality, discourse, and performance” (p. 52). The material dimension references the way that artifacts get enrolled in projects and thus “express agency”—though Reed maintains that these expressive materials are not *actors*, because “they do not have their own projects” (p. 55). The relational dimension is the structure of the chains themselves. The discursive captures their mediation by symbols. Thus far, Reed's accomplishment is primarily one of theoretical synthesis, although the result is highly original. Indeed, the breadth of his vision reminds one of Michael Mann's (1986) similarly four-fold “sources” of social power.

However, Reed's most striking claims involve the fourth, performative dimension. According to Reed, *public acts* have an autonomy of their own: their effects are always potentially irreducible to power's other dimensions. Being seen (or read about) by an audience is critical: “the power of performance lies in its splendid publicity” (p. 78). Like Weber's notion of charisma which it explicitly resembles, performative power is fleeting and unstable; its efficacy varies widely. But there is a clear suggestion that major social transformations—shifts in the constitution of and relations between rector, actor, and other—have to be *performed into being*, and that this is why history is contingent.

It is this notion that guides much of the historical analysis occupying the book's second half. Here Reed considers a series of agency problems that attended “transitions to modernity in the Atlantic World” (p. 99). He argues, for instance, that in the early United States of the 1790s, targeted yet widely publicized performances of violence created an impression—and over time, a reality—of state capacity that did not actually exist when those actions were taken. This is indeed *performativity* in the sense of an act which produces the very thing that appears as its cause.

Reed uses these episodes to make a larger point: the transitions to modernity in question occurred when and where the metaphor of the “king’s two bodies” became untenable. Extending Ernst Kantorowicz’s (1957) work on this subject, Reed views the notion that the king has two bodies—a physical body and the “body politic”—as a ubiquitous way of binding actors to rector in premodern societies. He writes: “the second body of the sovereign helps people and groups participate in projects because it generates a certain degree of faith in the continuity of those projects, which then need stewards, servants, and *agents*” (pp. 230–231; emphasis in original).

When, however, this frame was destabilized—in revolutionary situations, conditions of colonial distance from sovereign centers, or both—a space opened to performatively reimagine sovereignty. The result was a sort of sublation of the king’s two bodies as “the people’s two bodies.” Reed thus rejects a view of modernity as “disenchantment,” because the legitimization of rule remained essentially theological (pp. 227–228).

He also refuses to discern any unilateral advance of freedom in the rise of “the people” as sovereign subject. For its constitutive counterpart, he strongly implies, was “a vast and violent series of exclusions of entire categories of persons” from the people’s body itself (p. 262). Reed observes this in the racialization of enslaved Africans in 17th-century Virginia. He follows it through the racial order that the French Revolution perpetuated in the Caribbean—and the Haitian response. And in the book’s most important empirical contribution, he analyzes it, with the help of archival materials, in the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. The contingent, performative resolution to that episode forged American popular sovereignty as “racial democracy” (p. 169), binding “settler-actors” (white small farmers) to “state rector” (the Federal Government of the United States), even as—and because—it served to radically exclude Amerindian others (p. 178).

This is a remarkable book. A range of scholars will find much to use, from social theorists to historical and political sociologists, to sociologists of culture, to students of empire in general and settler-colonial histories in particular. Even its ambiguities are productive. For instance, it is worth noting that Reed lends the king’s two bodies a wider reach than Kantorowicz’s use of the concept. Although the latter traced it to 13th-century canon law, he also maintained that it had become an overwhelmingly *English* phenomenon by the early modern period, incarnated in the rather specific institution of the king-in-parliament. The last term deserves emphasis, for it was not a kingly rule, per se, but *Parliament* that concretized the abstraction of the body politic “at a time when in other countries that particular notion no longer was current” (Kantorowicz, 1957, p. 448).

Reed does not discuss Parliament, perhaps because that would limit the generalizability of the two bodies metaphor. But is such generalizability warranted? On the one hand, it seems hardly a coincidence that Reed’s primary case of state formation is itself an English settler colony. To that extent, his theoretical breadth may actually undersell the sharpness of his historical perception, which entails a particularly strong assertion about the foundational nexus of racialization and liberal democracy in the specific empirical context of Anglophone settler societies. On the other hand, Reed does show that the removal of “the sign of the King” (p. 260) as a solution to agency problems opened an analogous space of performance in the much different context of the French Revolution. We thus have the potential for a fully comparative investigation of how the *multiple* pathways out of kingly rule in Europe and its colonies produced similarities *and* differences in what Reed would call modern “political culture.” Although Reed does not pursue this comparison systematically, he has set an agenda for it.

Finally, the book raises important, ongoing questions about the *conditions under which* performances (re)make the world, about *why* they work when they do. In the terms of performativity, we might understand these as “conditions of felicity” (p. 76). Indeed, if performative acts are causes misperceived as effects (think, with Judith Butler, of the way that performances of gender create the impression of sexed bodies), this need not mean that they are unconditioned by *any* preexisting structure (biological sex may not cause normative gender, but what Butler [1990] calls the “heterosexual matrix” surely helps to do so). But there is tension here. For Reed, the specificity of the performative dimension is its very *resistance* to structural determination: the whole point is a corrective to those who would “*disavow the public act as explanatory* in favor of something more stable that sits behind the act” (p. 75; emphasis in original).

People are indeed capable of all sorts of “weirdness” (p. 78). But when is weirdness transformative, when is it accommodated by an existing order, and when is it simply illegible? Reed acknowledges but does not fully theorize these problems. He does suggest that “troubled times” (p. 99) like revolutions and other crisis situations are especially amenable to transformative performances, but this raises its own questions about where crises come from—do *they* get performed into being?

Once again, Reed's historical analyses take us further. To return to the Whiskey Rebellion, performative acts did not *create* “the racist coding of Indians,” which “was readily available long before.” This was no empty (relational-discursive) space. On the contrary, it was a contested, overdetermined space; but for that very reason, the resort to genocidal othering was not predetermined either. Where performance intervened was to make this option manifest, locking it in by “acting from a position of prestige and the command of violence, *as if* these ideas were obviously and unalterably true and widely accepted” (p. 174; emphasis in original).

What this suggests, it seems to me, is that analyses of performance must be paired with detailed sociological, indeed social-structural, analyses of *audiences* or *publics*—those, for instance, in whom racist codings were latent and contested and for whom such performances did (or did not) resonate. Perhaps, Reed would describe this as the interaction between the performative and other dimensions of power. Whatever labels we use, such analysis would simply extend the important research program that this groundbreaking work has done so much to generate.

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