

Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences. By Isaac Ariail Reed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. x+194. \$20.00 (paper).

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Sociology's status as a mixed historical/analytical discipline has always been both its blessing and its curse. The foundational categorical incoherence of the sociological project has saddled most of its practitioners with what appear to be contradictory demands: uncover the general mechanisms that generate the contours of the social (in all times and in all places) *but* keep your eyes peeled for the complex nuances of culture, time, and context. We have not done well at pulling that particular feat off so far.

Isaac Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* enters this potential knowledge-political minefield not with trepidation but with uncharacteristic gusto; and with this intervention Reed establishes himself as one of the discipline's finest young minds. He comes armed with an erudition far beyond his biological (or institutional) years—if I had not actually met the man I would have guessed that this book was written by some emeritus professor who, after a lifetime of reading and pondering, was now ready to provide posterity with his last intellectual testament. Reed also comes equipped with equal doses of intellectual equanimity and argumentative bravado. Both are needed, for Reed's goal is nothing short of convincing the reader that the sociological circle can indeed be squared in a way that should satisfy (most of) the parties involved.

Doing justice to a book of this complexity and ambition is simply not possible in such a limited forum as this one. Therefore, I will jump straight to the main issue and go on to

willfully ignore big chunks of Reed's secondary strands of argumentation. Reed's main argument is that there exist three major "epistemic modes" in "the human sciences" today. He refers to them as the realist, the normativist, and the interpretivist (convincing skeptics that you can cover so much ground with such a deceptively simple typology is itself a major achievement). Reed devotes the bulk of the book (chaps. 2, 3, and 4) to describing these modes (I would have preferred the term metatheoretical strategies). According to Reed (and to grossly simplify a nuanced and complex argument), realists like self-sufficiently existing structures and mechanisms and fancy themselves people who use theory to describe the deep structure of the social world; they also see their theoretical terms as having a relatively unproblematic referential status (they designate mind-independent processes and structures). Normativists are like realists, except that they want to use theory to not only describe and explain the social world but also to change it, imagining better worlds located in the realm of possibility.

Ultimately, these characterizations of realism and normativism are simply a means to the more ambitious end that animates this book; Reed's thesis is that the key to squaring the circle must pass through what he refers to as "interpretivism." Interpretivism is not just some old third epistemic mode: it is *the* one that, suitably enhanced with elements from realism, will provide us with a way to make causal statements about the nature of the social without losing sight of history and meaning (in fact making these the primary point of reference). This part of the argument (essentially chaps. 4 and 5) is the most promising, creative, and ambitious in the book, but also the most deeply problematic.

First (and mysteriously), Reed couples interpretivism (which simply refers to a consideration of persons as meaning-making agents) with "theoretical pluralism." This is by far the most weakly supported argument in the book, and confusing diagrams do not make the situation any better. The fact that the argument is derived as an *induction* from a consideration of the work of people whom Reed classifies as interpretivists (e.g. Geertz,

Bordo, Foucault) can easily lead to a fallacy: just because interpretivists have so far used an incoherent mix of theory does not mean that successful interpretation *requires* this strategy. This begs the question of whether the interpretations provided by Reed's exemplars were in fact successful. But the strategy that has been followed by interpretivists cannot at the same time be taken as the *standard* by which to judge interpretative success without eliminating the possibility, for instance, that Geertz may have been simply off the mark or misguided in mixing together heterogeneous theoretical strands into a single "interpretation." Second, it is quite possible to be committed to interpretation but at the same time to have a unitary theory of meaning and motivation that is partially decoupled from history and content and that is worried about simple, cold analytical exactitude (e.g., Levi-Strauss). This makes Reed's proposal less than satisfactory: that explanation in sociology should take the form of the analyst using the supposed freedom provided by interpretivism's theoretical eclecticism to "paint" meaning landscapes while worrying only about global coherence and the productions a quasi-aesthetic sense of depth.

But Reed saves his most controversial argument for the pivotal chapter 5. Here we learn that the key to melding analytics and meaning is to revisit the Aristotelian typology of causality and to give each element its causal due. To analytic realism, which in one of the most brilliant stretches in the book Reed decomposes into the theory of motivation and the theory of structure, Reed confers final and efficient causality (respectively). Most pivotally, to interpretivism Reed bestows the most privileged variant of causality: the capacity to impose form on the formless substance provided by general, but on their own explanatorily impotent, theories of motives and structure. In this tour de force stretch of argumentation, Reed manages to reverse the hierarchy of privilege inherited from positivist sociology: first, he notes that meaning and culture have sometimes been referred to as a formless "mist." But, Reed is quick to note that in fact it is precisely those ahistorical general theories of what people want that are a formless receptacle waiting to be filled in. Without the form-giving

capacities of meaning these theories are out of business. Thus, it is realism that needs meaning and culture, not the other way around (Reed does point out that without causation and mechanism, interpretivism devolves into ironic postmodernism, but the asymmetry is palpable). Meaning triumphs over scientism. The humanities are the requisite model and the dreams of positivism a distant fancy.

Unfortunately, Reed's solution to the impasse of sociology is equal parts brilliant synthesis and intellectual gerrymandering, with the argument at this point evincing serious signs of incoherence. The problem is this: in arguing that meaning is a form-giver, Reed must propose a theory of meaningful form (his mostly implicit variant of Saussurean semiotics rears its head at key moments but then conveniently disappears, because we should not really have *one* theory of meaning); but if meaning is the giver of *form*, it cannot also be the all-mighty giver of *content*. Yet, this is precisely the *deus ex machina* role that "meaning" (and by implication culture) ends up playing once theories of structure and motive have been cast as empty vessels waiting to be filled in by historically specific meaning. But if meaning is form, then history is content. Meaning simply cannot be both without making everything else superfluous.