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Isaac Ariail Reed, Interpretation and Social Knowledge. On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 216 pp.

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Book reviews

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Social theory, especially when positioned in the now well-established cultural turn, has been haunted by (and in turn has chased) the ghost of reality. This endless, and sometimes disturbing, game of hide-and-seek has in the past four decades discovered territories for further exploration, but at the same time it has constructed gates and borders, boundaries and paths. Isaac Reed's first book illuminates some of these territories, while at the same time warning that the surroundings must be known, if only to avoid them. For many reasons, this book is a fascinating reading in an emerging new wave in cultural and social theory, not limited to Reed himself nor to the so-called "strong program" in cultural sociology from where this book comes; for many others, it illustrates some of the shortcuts of interdisciplinarity, of culturally oriented epistemology, and the many theoretical translations that "making theory" faces today. In both cases, it is essential reading, the more fruitful the more it provokes new thoughts and urges to take a position.

The book is organized around three forays into major modes of investigation, knowledge, and theory making: realism, normativism and utopia, and interpretivism. Each of these epistemic modes provides distinct attitudes toward both the social world and the production of inferential arguments, connecting together the kind of interpretations that reconstruct socially informed reality and theoretical propositions. Each of them provides a distinct vision of the nature of explanation, but they are all directed towards the goal of "maximal interpretation," the reconnection of the language of theory, which moves at the level of abstraction, with the language of evidence.

Realism, normativism, and interpretivism offer different solutions to the problem of theory, but in the end they converge on the goal of reconciling the search for social mechanisms, the relative reality of meaning structures, and individual motivations. It is indeed an ambitious goal, one that would make theorists senior than Reed shake at the very thought, but it also seems that this is the goal of theory in the age of the end of innocence, when the optimism about mirroring nature and causal explanation in the positivist mode has faded. It is a book for the post-positivist age of theory, in which many of the dichotomies of positivistic social science have been reframed or discarded: subject/object; meaning/fact; structure/action; language/nature; causation and interpretation.

Social scientists who work in the three epistemic modes outlined in the book are guided by distinct visions and objectives: easy summaries do not justice to the complexity of Reed's argument, but in a nutshell realists are devoted to the recovery of self-sufficient mechanisms that account for the functioning of our social world; normativists use explanations not only as a means of description but also in making a case for change (social, cultural, and historical), while interpretivists (good interpretivists) should never lose sight of the interconnection between questions of causation and questions of meaning.

Any effort in theory is permeated by the problem of meaning, and stating its centrality is one of the main arguments of the book, because – in Reed's words – "our

understanding of social knowledge is due for a massive transformation” (1) and for a critical redefinition of the way sociologists produce the connection between the language of theory and the language of fact. Doing theory, thus, is itself a semiotic enterprise, and Reed devotes a good part of the book to the elucidation of this semiotics, which is the most compelling but also the most problematic part of his strategy. Thus, it is quite important to test the uses and the conceptual adaptation of semiotic concepts, and see in what sense they contribute to the definition and consistency of the meaning systems of fact and theory.

Facts and theories belong, Reed argues, in two different systems of meanings, and the theorist’s task is to move towards a “resignification” that makes deeper patterns visible. Once an interpretation that constructs the factual sign is made, theoretical activity brings the meaning of the sign in contact with a discrete, and separated, meaning system, through which factual signs ultimately make sense as components of a path of theoretical confirmation, understanding and explanation.

The whole point should not be controversial, and Reed makes a compelling case as per why and how controversy should be left out. Theory offers a distinct kind of interpretation which is not reducible to the language of fact or to brutal institutional mechanisms, because there is always a certain degree of incommensurability between inferential arguments produced in each semiotic system. This equals to maintain that propositions produced at the level of the second-order semiotics of theory are not entirely reducible to propositions produced at the level of the semiotics of “facts” or action. These are two altogether distinct, though not unrelated, types of interpretation, and between them lies all the distance that exists between commenting on an occurrence and producing a theoretical “metacommentary.” At the level of facts, social agents (including investigators) produce minimal interpretations (whose validity, I’d like to think, is local, context-driven, and indexical); at the level of theory, these minimal interpretations need to be resignified conceptually by passing through the bottleneck of theory and producing “maximal” ones. Social knowledge claims are the outcome of this interpretive activity, in which “theory and fact articulate in such a way that the referential functions of evidence and the relational functions of theory are subsumed under a deeper understanding” [p. 23].

To Reed’s credit, he dives deeply into the waves of contemporary social theory with competence and persuasive force, producing a normative argument about the merits of maximal interpretation. If this is the goal of the author, then some deeper attention to the construction of his semiotic logic should be paid, because we should be able to identify both a) a formalized account of how the two distinct meaning systems work as autonomous systems, and b) the procedures of metasemiotic translation between them. Indeed, if “the whole point of theory is to be abstract and conceptual” [p. 20], what are the semiotic steps that produce both abstraction and generalization? And (not secondarily) where exactly in the process does theory lose sight of its distant references to rely on proximate ones, that is “1) other theoretical expressions and 2) imagined societies, social actions and social relations whose primary existence is in researchers’ heads” [p. 21].

Before advancing to this meta-level, however, theorists are involved in a cognitive activity of signification that produces evidential signifiers, which work – according to Reed – within the meaning system of facts to produce “minimal interpretations.” This

seems to be the starting point of any theoretical inquiry, and therefore paying attention to the way minimal interpretations and factual signs are produced is a fundamental passage. However, this is also the passage where the testing of his argumentative strategy highlights tensions and contradictions.

It is quite surprising, in these very pages, to note that Reed relies on Peirce's triadic model of semiosis as the relation among signs, objects, and interpretants, and yet he identifies the interpretant with an actual interpreter [fig. 1]: "Evidential signs, colligated together, connect the sociological investigator, and the people who read her text, to a set of social actions that are the ground of factual signification" [p. 21]. If this is the case, then the triadic model becomes a binary one, where however the representamen-object relation depicts something different than the typical, Saussurean distinction between a signifier (sound image) and a signified (concept), because at some point in the process (specifically, in the definition of the "factual sign") there is room only for an unmediated relation between an expression and its reference. This referential conflation can hardly work in the context of a theory of mention (which is indeed characterized by referentiality and indexicality), but I suspect that there is much more in a theory of signs than what Reed assigns to the "language game of fact," where we are supposed to find "myriad evidential signs – sentences, photographs, quotations, assertion, graphs, tables, charts – and we expect those signifiers to express a certain content that *is or was in the social world*" [p. 20, emphasis in the text].

If there is this kind of referential conflation at the level of the factual sign, then what happens of meaning in a minimal interpretation, the foundations on which theoretically informed maximal interpretations are constructed? Minimal interpretations "describe, in a more indexical way, people's behaviors" [p. 25n], and they serve a "referential" function [p. 23], and indeed most factual signs work referentially and indexically [p. 19]. From Reed's model, we know what the *object* of this interpretation is (social actions), and we also know that signs (qua representamens) are used to express some kind of relation to these objects: for example [p. 23], "On the night of August 4, 1789, feudal privileges in France were abolished." But what about the content or meaning of this expression? Can it be simply the object as it has been defined? Clearly, if it were the case, a whole semiotic argument would collapse, for there would be no conceptual mediation between a sign and the outer reality it refers to. Hence, there would be no semantics but only a syntactic system, a series of evidential signifiers which alone are supposed to express their objects.

Reconstructing Peirce, the ground of those signs shall be found in something other than the object as an extra-semiotic reality, what Reed identifies "as the ground that emerges [...] as the object of investigation – the selected set of social actions that happened" [p. 20]. There is little doubt that this is the key to solve the philological, conceptual, and practical dilemmas that these strategic passages of Reed's book create for the lay reader and the theorist. The meaning in the meaning system of fact needs thus to be relocated, for it is only through relocation that resignification at the theoretical level can work on something other than an empty signified, a conceptual space which is not semiotically filled, but needs to be in order to enter the circle of the second level interpretations that constitute theory, i.e. maximal interpretations.

To achieve this objective, one needs to go back to semiosis, and to the original triadic model of the sign, and think as if the interpretant were – like Peirce meant –

another representation, and not an interpreter; if we do so, then the problem of meaning emerges at the level of a theoretical take on the object and the ground.

Since Reed does not mention objects as immediate objects (as already pre-informed by semiosis) or grounds (as an “idea of a concept,” thus in an intermediate position between a First and a Second), but only as dynamic objects, his triangle is flawed by the impossibility to locate meaning, both in the form of sense and in the form of content. Unless we assume that meaning rests solely in the interpretant, which is quite a contradictory statement once we assume that an interpretant is always a more developed sign (and thus a representamen in another semiotic relation) which is in a relation both with its sign and its object (as a Third). The sophistication of Peirce’s claim, that there is a semantic as well as “grammatical constraint” in the process that leads analytically from the dynamic object to the sign (via the immediate object and the ground) and to the interpretant of this interaction, is irremediably lost, as is the claim that any encounter with the object is always in a “pre-theoretical” condition, as the result of a selection that constructs a precarious function between the representamen on one side, and the ground and the *immediate* object on the other.

The importance of this reconstruction, that brings semiotics back in, is evident when there is the need to join minimal interpretations with theories to produce maximal ones, especially when the investigator works in the interpretive epistemic mode: “The investigator moves from one set of meanings that she finds in the evidential signifiers of her case to another set of meanings that, she claims, are also existent in that case” [p. 92], from surface to deep meanings which – historically and spatially situated – constitute a “landscape.” It is in these landscapes that the social is created and made able to emerge. And yet, evidential signifiers can carry meaning only if these are constituted analytically, made autonomous (relatively) from the social reality for which they stand (and therefore they are semiotically apprehended as immediate objects in a semiotic process), with no possible conflation between the two domains. In other words, meanings should not be mobilized in a realist way, the charge that – somewhere in the book – Reed moves against Clifford Geertz. Rather, the investigator’s task is to move from the foreground presence of mechanisms, institutions and “proximate and singular causes” [p. 112] to the reconstruction of the landscape “upon which it all takes place.” No easy task indeed, because it involves getting the landscape right, at different levels of interpretive complexity and abstraction.

Social theorists, argues Reed, move thus quite like painters, or critics, but they are also compelled to crisscross (as analysts) a semiosphere (Lotman) where meanings have different orders of complexity, are at different stages of self-description, and where objects and signs belong in the same analytic space because they both participate in semiotic relations. By pointing to the very necessity to think in terms of landscapes, interpretation, and the plural logics that govern social science, Reed has undoubtedly opened new territory for social scientists, and it is up to us (especially we who have been most influenced by the cultural turn) to follow suit, with critique and the necessary appreciation that this fascinating work deserves.

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