Being and Knowledge: On Some Liabilities of Reed's Interpretivism*

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The theory of understanding must be preceded
by the recognition of the relation of entrenchment
which anchors the whole linguistic system in something that
is not primordially a phenomenon of articulation in discourse
… In knowledge, we posit objects in front of us,
but our feeling of the situation precedes this vis-à-vis by placing us in a world.
[Ricoeur 2007: 66]

Introduction

Isaac Reed begins his book with the claim that 'our understanding of social knowledge is due for a massive transformation' [2011: 1]. We recognise *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* as a genuine and highly readable contribution to such a transformation. The book is ambitious, yet concise, complex but not overwhelming. However, the pertinent discussion closely resembles the *Methodenstreit*, the foundational debate about the epistemic footing of the then emerging social sciences, which revolved around the pivotal binary of nomothetic science (*Naturwissenschaften*) and idiographic humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Reed indicates a 'dialectical' way out of the seemingly inescapable either/or dilemma of causal explanation *vs* hermeneutic interpretation [ibid.: 88]. He clarifies how interpretation may count

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as explanation in a post-positivist era. It is this basic and in our view legitimate intention that directly evokes Weber's definition of sociology as 'a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and *thereby* with a causal explanation of its course and consequences' [1978: 4; emphasis added]. What does this compact book add to Weber's foundational statements? How can it advance the human sciences after a century's worth of relevant debates?

It is no accident that an American sociologist revisits this epistemic task. Our discipline is fragmented and riven by the methodological split between quantitative and qualitative research. To the extent that these tensions may be more divisive in the US academia than elsewhere, Reed's intervention has an air of urgency. However, his ambition is to affect the entirety of *human sciences*, i.e. the wider spectrum of *Geisteswissenschaften*, which in Reed's hands means several things. First, it allows him to address specific historical and anthropological cases that buttress his perspective but belong to the 'humanities' rather than to the 'social sciences'. This is crucial because, as we shall see, while Reed's argument is in principle transdisciplinary, it fits best a research field at the intersection of ethnography, history, and cultural sociology. Second, going beyond the confines of sociology proper enables Reed to question disciplinary parochialism bemoaned by other American cultural sociologists [Seidman 1998: 1–2]. Finally, the concept of 'human sciences' allows Reed to legibly straddle the two worlds, i.e. to combine the subjective element of humans (*Geist*) whose 'basic nature can never be fully specified' [2011: 162] with the exactitude that science (*Wissenschaft*) aspires to. It is within this context that Reed pursues his main goal: fleshing out a new 'conceptual method' for the interpretive production of social knowledge [ibid.: 159]. The resulting book can play an invaluable role of a systematic orienting device for cultural researchers. Yet the highly focused illumination it offers comes at a price of leaving too many things in the dark.

The book's argument: interpretation and semiological constructivism

Let us briefly recapitulate the main points of the book. First of all, Reed complexifies the relation between social knowledge and social phenomena. Much of the actually existing social research, including interpretively and normatively inclined schools, glosses over such complexity, assuming that 'social science constitutes an interpretation of social reality that at once *reflects* this social reality and affects it' [Wallerstein 2004: 33; emphasis added]. To problematise this simplification, Reed relies on a semiotic model and splits scientific representation into fact and theory. Like Richard Rorty [1979], he maintains that social knowledge is not a 'mirror' of social life because social phenomena are not accessible as such, which ultimately vitiates the adequacy of the very metaphor of 'reflecting'. Instead, real social phenomena ('social actions' in Reed's vocabulary) are not observed but inferred from evidential signs. What Reed designates as 'fact' is a referential signification whose linguistic representation he calls 'minimal interpretation'. In other words,

'fact' is a meaning system. 'Theory' is also a meaning system, yet one based on relational and conceptual signification. Bringing so understood facts and theory together means to perform explanatory *resignification* that he calls 'maximal interpretation'. Here, Reed combines the semiotics of Peirce, according to whom all signs are referential with a Saussurean understanding of sign systems as relational systems. How the two fit remains somewhat unclear, but the analytic weight is placed on the latter.

Reed further distinguishes what he calls three different epistemic modes: realist, normativist, and interpretivist. The distinction is based on how 'theory' is brought to bear on 'facts'. In realism, the boundary between fact and theory in Reed's sense is blurred and theoretical representation is understood as referencing 'reality', i.e. something that *is*. Realism is thus primarily concerned with questions of the *actual society*. In Reed's eyes, this means to unduly hypostatise human action. He then distinguishes normativism as a mode in which theory typically references 'utopia', i.e. something that *is not* but should be, and in this sense functions as social critique with regard to questions of the *good society*. Alternatively, within this mode one can use dystopia as 'theoretical anchor', i.e. something that *is not (yet)* but could be, and therefore can guide possible critique too. In the normative epistemic mode, 'knowledge itself has a politics' [Reed 2011: 68].

Finally, Reed elaborates his understanding of 'interpretivism', which marks a shift from ontology and politics to epistemology. Interpretivism deals with society as it *is for* the actors, the collectively *imagined society*. Reed proposes a conception of knowledge as interpretation based on the master metaphor of 'landscapes of meaning' illustrated with Brueghel's painting *The Harvesters*. A maximal interpretation reconstructs a landscape of meaning and projects an explanatory 'picture' that constitutes 'deep' social knowledge. The so conceived landscapes of meaning are explanatory because they are causal, yet not in a *forcing* but in a *forming* sense. They form actors' motivations and mechanisms of action that act in turn as forcing causes [ibid.: 160]. Reed makes an important point that although 'in some way essential to social research', forceful causes in themselves do not get us very far, because they can explain social life *only* when given concrete form by 'forming causes' of meaning which according to Reed resides in 'the arrangements of signification and representation' [ibid.: 142–143]. To clarify this semiological conception, Reed employs another artistic metaphor, the Aristotelian figure of sculpting in which the plaster cast gives shape to the liquid bronze poured into it. He insists, however, that 'the plaster's shape itself derives from meaningful practices', i.e. 'it takes the shape that it does in relation to the shapes of other statues' [ibid.: 145]. Ultimately, then, the 'basic nature' of this forming causal power of meaning is reduced to a set of principles of 'Saussurean semiology' in which aesthetic/material form is subordinated to the epistemic model of arbitrary language-like signification [cf. Keane 2005: 185]. This constructivist presupposition inspires Reed to claim that 'the possibilities of how meaning can construe or 'form' social life are infinite … because the meanings of symbols are

arbitrary and conventional' [Reed 2011: 161]. We find it to be a key flaw in Reed's theory because it means triple conflation: it equates 'meaning' with the meaning of symbols [cf. Castoriadis 1998: 147], symbols with arbitrary signs, and signs with linguistic signifiers. The latter two fallacies were cautioned against even by masters of structuralism, Saussure [1959: 68] and Lévi-Strauss respectively. Even to Ricoeur who considered social action as text, the linguistic system is 'only a species within the semiotic genre' and its paradigmatic applicability is restricted [Ricoeur 1973: 114–115]. In short, there is much more to meaning, symbols and signs than classic linguistics allows for [Keane 2005; Bartmański forthcoming]. Consequently, the possibilities of meaning construction are by no means infinite or arbitrary [Mannheim 1964: 55; Simmel 2008]. Materiality and its corporeal, phenomenological and aesthetic correlates co-constitute and thus form meaning-making in patterned ways. It is precisely this realisation that can explain variability of meaning and power of social performances. Reed seems to realise that at times but the constructivist model of meaning as text makes him bracket out the ontological as well as the experiential dimension of social knowledge and deal with them only through various 'residual categories' [Alexander 1987: 15–16; Joas 1996: 4–5]. In what follows, we show how Reed's semiological model (de)forms his arguments and forces them to untenable positions.

The constitutive other: realism and the problem of ontology

The sharp distinction between theory and fact is of crucial importance for Reed's argument. Only if we accept that theory and fact as sign-systems operate according to distinct logics (referential vs relational), Reed's arguments against realism are efficient. There are alternatives to such a clear-cut distinction, for example in Jeffrey Alexander's early work: 'The differences between what are perceived as sharply contrasting kinds of scientific arguments should be understood rather as representing different positions on the same epistemological continuum' [1982: 2; cf. Joas and Knöbl 2009: 9ff.]. Only in footnotes does Reed concede that the distinction between minimal and maximal interpretation is 'a matter of degree' [Reed 2011: 23, fn. 29] and acknowledges the 'theory-ladenness of truth claims' [ibid.: 25, fn. 11].

In this regard, we see a major problem with the 'meaning system of fact'. Reed wants to dissociate the construction of facts from theories [ibid.: 18], but if social facts are also dissociated from experiential phenomena, then on which grounds can we establish their existence? In order to maintain the distinction of fact and theory as referential and relational signification respectively, Reed neglects that facts qua signs must be established relationally too, and that theory must somehow reference them. The use of 'social actions' as ultimate referent would face objections from theorists claiming that 'practices are ontologically more fundamental than actions' [Schatzki 1997: 285; cf. Reckwitz 2002]. Reed seems trapped between the requirement of consistency with his constructivist in-

terpretation of Saussurean presuppositions, which force him to treat 'evidential signs' as mere linguistic signifiers in the text of the human scientist [2011: 20], and the implications of what even theorists like Judith Butler [1993] acknowledge as irrefutable facts of life. Reed himself admits in passing that 'our most fundamental experiences of cause derive from our ability to manipulate physical objects' [2011: 141]. However, the book gives no indication that he is prepared to alter his account based on this fundamental intuition. Since the importance of materiality and corporeality as meaning-making factors has been established by a number of post-positivist sociologists, anthropologists and archaeologists, this is a striking omission to which we return later.

Reed's conception of theory as a system of meaning resignifying rather than establishing facts is by no means without alternative. After all, the question is which conception is more useful in what context? Discussing Reed's interpretative mode, Gabe Ignatow [2014], a cognitive culturalist, endorses realism. Even historical sociologists like Philip Gorski understand theory as 'a symbolic construct, stated in ordinary or mathematical language, which defines certain classes of objects and specifies their key properties. The objects are assumed to refer to real entities in the world and the properties to actual qualities of these entities. A theory, in other words, is a set of ontological assumptions that are used, explicitly or implicitly, in the construction of a causal model or models' [Gorski 2004: 18]. According to Gorski's 'constructivist realism', theory, despite being a symbolic representation, works foremost as ontology, explicitly or implicitly. And indeed, in Reed's case we find constant references to empirical categories he deems unproblematic, such as social actions, actors and their capabilities, social world and social life, and once even to 'physical limits' and 'biophysical conditions' [Reed 2011: 144]. Although he seems to have worked under the strict prohibition of the 'r'-word, the *reality* of bodies and things is always in the background. What kind of ontological status do they have? Are they just 'arrangements of signs' in the text of the human scientist? We fear that Reed runs a risk of textual-semiotic solipsism, a specific sociological danger of 'Berkeleian vision' systematically problematised as the logocentric predicament of intellectuals by Bourdieu [1984: 474, 483]. Taken descriptively, the distinction between theory and fact makes sense in so far as minimal interpretations or facts are statements to which researchers in a given discourse can agree, whereas maximal or 'deep' interpretations are always contested and uncertain [Seidman 1998]. However, Reed makes also a normative use of this distinction because it allows him to attack realism which conceptualises theories as referential. Ultimately then, Reed's argument against the reification of meaning systems comes at the prize of reifying the purely analytic distinction between fact and theory. Why does Reed allow this to happen? We think it is the case because what he dubs 'realism' serves him as the stereotypical 'constitutive other' of his version of interpretivism. Specifically, he attacks Roy Bhaskar, the most influential advocate of contemporary realism in social sciences. According to Reed, the 'naturalistic ambition' of realists like Bhaskar leads them to wrong-

ly transpose categories from the natural sciences into the human sciences. For Bhaskar, the criterion of 'intransitivity', the observer-independent status of reality, is the touchstone of realism. Reed argues that social life is not 'intransitive', because it does not exist independently of its observers [2011: 61–62]. Money has not the same existence as gold and the state is not a building that houses parliament; money and state are social facts that only exist as long as people believe in their existence. However, this specificity of human sciences is recognised by Bhaskar [2005: 51] who sees the necessity to qualify but no reason to reject the notion of 'intransitivity'. He acknowledges the 'causal interdependency' between subjectivities and social facts and arrives at a recalibrated conception of 'existential intransitivity'. Here, intransitivity means that money exists independently of the individual researcher or community of researchers. Trying to leave the state without passport will quickly remind us of its 'hard existence'. The state, in particular, is an all-too-real social fact. Crucially, the status of something as based on belief does not make it fictional or immaterial. On the contrary, it is precisely the sociological power of the Thomas theorem which famously found that 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. Reed claims that this is not enough to speak of intransitivity [ibid.: 61, fn. 43]. Subjectivity and historicity, he wants us to believe, preclude the possibility of social facts as intransitive. Bhaskar acknowledges the fact that societies are 'open systems' subject to historical change but that doesn't make them dependent on researchers' beliefs or any less 'real'.

In the end, Reed's arguments against Bhaskar seem to boil down to the insistence that nature and culture constitute fundamentally different realms that renders any naturalism impossible. However, Bhaskar did not so much assimilate the human sciences to the natural sciences as the other way around: He conceptualises physical reality as open system and rejects the very notion of universal laws in favour of 'tendencies' and 'mechanisms' [Bhaskar 2008]. Social tendencies like class reproduction and related mechanisms like habitus would exist even if there were no sociologists employing these concepts. Not only 'gravity was the same for Henry II as it is for Obama' [Reed 2011: 61], but also the 'routinisation' of charisma [Weber 1978: 246]. Reed is correct to note that the semiotic sources of legitimate domination are not the same for Henry II and Barack Obama, but this by no means denies the existence of generalisable 'cultural mechanisms' [Norton 2014]. Last but not least, the all-too-real material (re)sources of power remain insidiously similar in both cases.

In short, we see no reason why the concepts of 'existential intransitivity' and 'open system' would not be sufficiently plausible to ground social explanation. Moreover, we surmise that Reed himself may have reconsidered in the course of criticism and collaborations that promptly followed the publication of his book. In a recent article (co-authored with Daniel Hirschman), Reed seems to concede that ontology must be reckoned with: 'Our point here is not just that "objects" are "constructed." Rather, our point is that existing social kinds are

real entities with real consequences, but also with real histories, and that these histories are twisted and varied' [Hirschman and Reed 2013: 267]. Furthermore, the authors embrace various 'realist' categories, including 'variable ontology of the social' taken straight from Latour's parlance [e.g. 2010: 43]. Human scientists must recognise that there are different classes of phenomena whose existence belongs to different but intimately entangled ontological levels and their distinct affordances and temporalities [Hodder 2012]. Likewise, they have to recognise 'different orders of semiosis' [Keane 2005: 199] and the variability of signification relative to the ontological status of signifiers [Bartmański forthcoming]. It is in fact Bhaskar's realism which advocates a 'stratified world' and ontology [2008], something conspicuously missing from Reed's book.

It is clear that instead of eschewing ontology, as sociologists we should ask what ontological level(s) we look at. Being implicit about ontology enables Reed to bracket the hardest questions of the object-sign nexus and proceed within his semiological zone of comfort, claiming that everything is in fact just different registers of interchangeable conventional signs. While we appreciate the skilful manner in which Reed shows that 'every forceful cause that helps produce the social outcome is infused with, and formed by, meaning' [2011: 140], we deem it a distortion to posit that every such infusion and form is based on a (rather mechanistic) conception of conventional and arbitrary discursive attribution. 'Meaning' is too complex, and too important, to be left to structuralist linguistics.

This conflation of hermeneutic interpretivism with linguistic constructivism should be avoided if we wish to keep the category of *interpretation* from being monopolized by a rigid conception of meaning-making where there are many others. It is instructive to revisit the classics and note that Heidegger regarded *Verstehen* as an 'existential faculty', Gadamer [2006] spoke of a 'hermeneutic ontology', and even Ricoeur went so far as to claim that the '*epistemological* concerns of hermeneutics … are subordinated to *ontological* preoccupations, whereby *understanding* ceases to appear as a simple *mode of knowing* in order to become a *way of being* and a way to relate to beings and being' [2007: 54; emphasis in the original]. If these three authors are not *herméneutes extraordinaires*, who is?

The realisation that meaning is not just conventionally 'attached' but can also be afforded by and derived from our experiential entanglements with objects [Hodder 2012] is even hinted at in the flagship cultural writings of Roland Barthes [2009]. Fast-forward to contemporary cultural anthropology, and we can see that on both sides of the Atlantic social researchers operate with far more elaborate conceptions of signification, where convention and textuality is treated as an explanandum rather than the explanans [Keane 2005; Miller 2005]. To quote Latour [2010: 94], 'do we really have to spend another century alternating violently between constructivism and realism? Science deserves better than naïve worship and naïve contempt.'

We think that seeing realism and interpretivism as distinct and mutually exclusive epistemic modes means mistaking Weberian ideal types of theorising for

competing regulative paradigms of scientific practice. The actual theoretical practice in the human sciences strikes us as pragmatically hybrid. Reed's sophisticated eye discerns that, for example when he talks about Marx's work being an embodiment of all three [Reed 2011: 32]. Likewise, it would be a mistake to reduce Foucault to a dystopian public intellectual. Such examples could easily be multiplied. For this reason, we maintain that these theoretical archetypes refer to *dimensions* that are always combined in practice. This makes a real difference in doing social theory and grounding the possibility of valid social critique. Reed's conception makes him identify normativism with criticism mediated by utopianism/dystopianism, i.e. related primarily to *counterfactual signification*. Once a more ontologically sound understanding of theoretical meaning structure is adopted, we can recognise that normativism can take different forms. What Reed describes sounds to us like an *interpretivist variant of normativism*, where social critique is based on meaning systems called utopia or dystopia. But there are multiple examples of sociological theories that develop a factual rather than counterfactual critique of the misrepresentation of reality [cf. Bhaskar 1998: 415], for example Marx's critique of commodity fetishism. This form of *Ideologiekritik* could be described as a *realist variant of normativism*. Similarly, Reed's interpretive mode entails a normative claim how the human sciences should proceed as well as a certain understanding of social 'reality', which he argues is misrepresented by realists.

The scholar and the artist: conflicting metaphors and landscapes of meaning

Reed schematically identifies realism with 'the logic of the lab', normativism with 'the logic of the democratic meeting or social movement', and interpretivism with 'the logic of reading and disputing different readings of a text' [2011: 11]. Nevertheless, it is the landscape painting, not the text, that serves as Reed's master metaphor. The pictorial logic of the painting is at odds with the linguistic framework employed by Reed, for text/language and picture/perception constitute different modes of meaning making [Turner 2003; Bartmański 2015]. There are various other semiotic conceptions that are more visually and materially conscious. Already Peirce distinguished between 'symbols' based on convention, 'indices' based on physical (!) connection, and 'icons' based on likeness [1998]. Employing Peirce, Webb Keane notes that not all in culture is conventional and highlights the role of indexical and iconic signification in cultural meaning-making [2005]. Castoriadis, who developed the concept of the social imaginary, strikingly similar to Reed's notion of landscapes of meaning, states that the 'imaginary' requires a new ontology that defies the logic of the symbolic associated with linguistic structuralism [1998].

While we find the scheme of combined forcing and forming causes to be well articulated and perhaps the most important contribution of the book, it in fact says very little about the *causality of forms* beyond what our standard knowledge of linguistic signification already offers us. This constitutes another irony of

the book. While Reed devotes quite some space and energy to theorising different 'forming' causes, we learn next to nothing about the meaning of *forms*, for example about the content of the form (White), the message of the medium (McLuhan), or the agency and vibrancy of images and things [Bennett 2010; Latour 2010; Mitchell 1994]. His semiological and linguistic bias makes him portray ethnographers 'observing interaction and talk, historians embedded in archival details, cultural sociologists pouring over newspapers' [Reed 2011: 159]. There is nothing phenomenologically, affectively, and aesthetically sensitive in this vision, which is formed, if not forced, by the abstract Saussurean approach. And when he elaborates the landscape metaphor, he deprives it of material objects, quickly replacing them with 'institutions' [ibid.: 110]. Yet landscapes of meaning are populated by a variety of such objects inescapably intertwined with human sensorium. Mannheim clearly realised that when he distinguished 'sign-meaning and form-meaning' and noted that 'objective aesthetic meaning, is yet essentially related to the sensual medium from which it cannot be detached and to which it belongs as its own visual meaning or form' [Mannheim 1964: 51]. Likewise, Simmel noted that 'even in the field governed by fashion, all forms are not equally suited to become fashion … This may be compared with the unequal relation that the objects of external perception bear to the possibility of their being transformed into works of art. It is a very enticing opinion, but one that cannot hold water, that every real object is equally suited to become the object of a work of art' [2008: 384]. In short, Reed does a lot to elaborate sign-meaning but ignores form-meaning, which can be intellectually enticing but not convincing.

In our own research we have shown that material objects and their affordances are a constitutive part of landscapes of meaning [Bartmański 2011]. The material properties of the Berlin wall were crucial for its success as a cultural icon [Bartmański 2012b], which is also true for the revival of the analogue record in the digital age [Bartmański and Woodward 2015a, 2015b]. Similarly, visual meanings are important to explain the iconic status of particular photographs and their effects on public discourses [Binder 2012, 2013]. Landscapes of meaning—rightly understood—do not only exist between humans, but emerge out of complex entanglements of human beings, texts and things [Bartmański and Alexander 2012; Hodder 2012].

Even though we find the metaphor of landscapes of meaning compelling, we recognise a wide spectrum of more specific concepts like 'atmosphere' [Löw 2008, 2013] and 'mood' [Silver 2011] that might be better suited to capture the constitutive expressive and affective dimensions of the social. Without experiential and phenomenological categories such as materiality [Miller 2005], object-setting and affordance [McDonnell 2010], body and perception [Merleau-Ponty 2014], icon [Peirce 1998; Bartmański and Alexander 2012], and picture [Turner 2003; Boehm 2012], landscape of meaning is merely a skeletal bloodless description. And there are concepts like 'background' and 'background causality' [Searle 1995: 127–147], or 'habitus' (Bourdieu), that are perhaps less colourful, but offer sound

understandings of 'forming causality' as 'efficient cause'. While many quantitative social scientists might eschew the vagueness of 'forming causality', we recognise in Reed's constructivism an opposite danger, that of impoverishing culturalist vocabulary. A much wider palette of such categories as condition, frame, affordance, informing, favouring, inviting, occasioning, seducing, beckoning, favouring, driving, orienting, and directing provides a more nuanced repertoire of causal language. Owing to their cartographic and visual connotations, some of these categories fit the metaphor of landscape of meaning even better. In an exemplary passage, even Bhaskar himself identifies a variety of different 'causal notions', such as 'pressure', 'propelled', 'direction', 'hindered', and so on [2008: 112].

Conclusion

We sympathise with Reed's ambition, but we are unconvinced by his arguments. Despite his explicit rejection of social ontology [2011: 41ff.], Reed's epistemology is not free of ontological presuppositions. The master metaphor of the human scientist as a 'painter' of 'landscapes of meaning' seems at odds with the linguistic bias of the book. We support Reed's plea for 'deep' interpretation, but we find it inadequate to confine 'depth' to the discursive dimension; questions of meaning probe further, pointing towards the deepest aspects of sensuality [Classen 2012], feeling and form [Sandelands 1998], and seemingly mundane materialities [Miller 2005]. What, then, is the use of Isaac Reed's book for sociologists and human scientists? We don't believe that this book will settle the *Methodenstreit* in social sciences. It is clear from history that such disputes cannot be settled on a purely theoretical or epistemological level. The usefulness of theories depends at least partially on their pragmatic assets and the temperament and aesthetic preferences of the researcher. As Wittgenstein once noted, 'a man's philosophy is a matter of temperament. A preference for certain similes could be called a matter of temperament and it underlies far more disagreement than you might think' [1980: 20]. Reed distinguishes consistency and adequacy as suitable criteria for interpretations disregarding 'parsimony' and 'elegance' [2011: 116]. We think it is not possible to dismiss the pragmatic and aesthetic criteria of interpretation and explanation. The content already resides in the form, as Reed's own book exemplifies. There are good reasons to think that legitimate intellectual performance is always a creative aesthetic act, not mere cogent resignification [Joas 1996; Bartmański 2012a]. As human scientists, our job is not just to remain faithful to the subjects (and objects) that we are trying to understand and depict (*Sinnverstehen*), but to transform them into figures of deeper meaning endowed with logical, aesthetic, and existential sense (*Sinnstiftung*).

Echoing the American creed *e pluribus unum*, Reed embraces a somewhat utopian vision of a united pluralistic interpretivism while painting a dystopian picture of the destruction of meaning by realists. Treating a form of realism as his constitutive other [cf. Bartmański 2012a], the author exhibits the 'academic pen-

chant for overdramatizing' that he himself cautions against [Reed 2011: 4]. In the end, when the fireworks are over and the smoke clears, Reed's pluralism appears to be based on a limited and conflated understanding of meaning. It effectively excludes the other qualitative research traditions we summoned in our critique. *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* can't bring about the intellectual revolution it ostensibly aims for. There have been many profound turns in human sciences since the linguistic turn. Thus, treating a semiological species of the interpretive genre as its key paradigm looks threateningly like an evolutionary dead end. Nevertheless, even if it were to be the last grand sociological narrative of its kind, Reed's work would be valuable because it provokes the eternal return of big human questions, including how we know what we know. True, social knowledge is deep but language is not the bottom line. Causal understanding is hermeneutic, but 'understanding too must be described initially, not in terms of discourse, but in terms of the "power-to-be" … So understanding is not concerned with grasping a fact but with apprehending possibility of being' [Ricoeur 2007: 67].

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