Meanings as Mechanisms

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In his ambitious, wide-ranging, provocative and informative book, Isaac Reed [2011] seeks to reintroduce causal explanation into social science, and particularly sociology, where a succession of 'post' arguments, notably post-positivism, have left causality in a marginal and neglected state. I agree wholeheartedly with this aim. Indeed, alas without the benefit of Reed's work, I tried to advance the same goal in my recent book on political culture [Welch 2013]. The question, of course, is whether Reed succeeds in his aim. I believe that, while numerous incisive critical points are made along the way, he does not; and the reason is that he has not sufficiently liberated himself from the assumptions of post-positivism.

In the following, I will first say a bit more about Reed's starting point and its effect on his arguments, including his choice of positions to oppose; then investigate and criticise his preferred option, to insert causation into interpretivism; and finally briefly sketch a view of what is both wrong and right about much-derided positivism and its approach to causality, thereby suggesting a route towards Reed's admirable goal more clearly than his starting point allows him to do.

Reed's post-positivist starting point

Reed alludes at the outset to the 'training' received by his cohort of social scientists, and his task is evidently to escape from this training while retaining some loyalty to it. The scene is set for an intellectual psychodrama! He says [Reed 2011: 1], 'A generation's worth of arguments about postmodernism and science, relativism and objectivism, have obscured our view; … a repeated disavowal of the possibility of causal explanation has crippled the interpretation of cultures …'. But despite a rather sarcastic description of post-positivism as 'heroic', as a 'break with certain taken-for-granted assumptions about the unity of the natural and

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social sciences that, like so many other breaks, happened sometime in "the sixties"', as deploying 'positivism' merely as a 'pejorative signifier' [ibid.: 4], Reed is clear that he has no refurbishment of positivism in mind. It is dead and buried as far as he is concerned. Thus Reed's revolt against his cohort's training is limited from the outset. The limitation shows in two ways in the remainder of the book.

In the first place, and more generally, Reed's post-positivist training gives him an acute aversion to criteria such as truth, validity or correctness. I assume he shares the disposition of his cohort to see a slippery slope connecting the use of these criteria with imperialism, racial science and other horrors. Some circumlocutions result: theories are commended for being 'exciting and valuable' [ibid.: 19]; they involve 'successful resignification' [ibid.: 29]; Bourdieu's 'field' metaphor is a 'tremendous theoretical advance' even though its assumption of the isomorphism of fields is 'problematic' [ibid.: 108–109]. But these aversions to speaking of truth and falsehood, rightness and error are not of course mere reflexes: the 'referentialism' on which these old concepts depend is explicitly denied. Yet if the Kuhnian precept that what counts as the correctness of a theory is its wide acceptance by a community of researchers is guiding, it is hard to see any point in identifying problems with widely employed approaches such as Bourdieu's. Unfortunately, 'success' of this kind has become quite easy to achieve, and if the 'fruitfulness' of a theory equals its capacity to be referenced as a theoretical framework by students who have been told that they must above all else have one, the social scientific cornucopia simply becomes ever vaster, and critique of any of its contents more futile.

Secondly, and more specifically, Reed considers as the 'naturalist' alternative to interpretation only the approach to causal explanation offered by realism (with emphasis on the critical realism advanced by Roy Bhaskar). Realism has presented itself as the great re-discoverer of causality in the social, as well as the natural, sciences. I think that realism found causality before it was lost, but I will defer that argument to the last section. For now my point is that the identification of realism as his naturalism of choice (not by any means an unusual move in recent years) is a selection that already does some of Reed's argumentative work for him.

Realism's characteristic claim is that causation is a matter of 'underlying' mechanisms or causal powers, whose existence, it says, positivism, and in particular Hume's theory of causation, denies. For instance, we cannot see gravity, but we know it exists, and can use this knowledge to explain empirical events [ibid.: 40]. As Reed [ibid.: 41] says, realism 'proposes a framework in which going beyond evidence is warranted and indeed necessary'; it 'use[s] theory to go beyond the facts, but remain responsible to those facts' [ibid.: 63].

Questionable though this argument is, since there is an obvious difference between saying we cannot see gravity and denying we have evidence for it, I agree with Reed that it is indeed realism's presentation of itself. For example, realist Colin Hay [2002: 92] recommends to political scientists: 'we must decide what exists out there to know about (ontology) before we might go about acquir-

ing knowledge of it (epistemology)'. In International Relations, where matters are complicated by the fact that 'realism' already has an established and very different meaning, a scientific realist position has been advocated in similar terms. Mearsheimer and Walt [2013] argue that the 'overwhelmingly positivist' [ibid.: 431] character of American IR lends it an 'instrumentalism' which neglects theory in favour of 'simplistic hypothesis testing' [ibid.: 437]. They propose turning to theoretical mechanisms, which while 'often unobservable', 'reflect what is actually happening in the real world' [ibid.: 432].

Yet this self-presentation of realism, as replacing surface by depth (always an appealing move in purely rhetorical terms) and departing from evidence in doing so, allows Reed to locate it in close proximity to the interpretivism he favours. Close, but not identical, because Reed's point is to deny that the underlying mechanisms realism posits really exist. A realist would, I think, be unlikely to accept Reed's [2011: 50–52] way of putting her achievement: 'according to realism, the knowledge of social reality embedded in the theoretical sign-system completes the hermeneutic circle for the investigator'. But since evidence has already been set aside, what is to prevent this reformulation in the language of interpretation?

Thus Reed's choice of realism as his naturalist interlocutor makes his anti-naturalist task a good deal easier. The possibility that realism's account of positivism might be something of a caricature is not canvassed, thanks to the fit of this caricature with Reed's and his cohort's training. *Evidence* loses by default its staunchest defender.

Causation and interpretation

After a fairly brief chapter on normative theory (also seen as producing interpretations), Reed turns to his main topic: interpretivism, its causal deficit, and how to make good this deficit. Like realism, interpretivism aims at 'a reading of the evidence that goes beyond the evidence and yet remains responsible to it' [ibid.: 91]. (This formulation, now occurring for the second time, is a crux of Reed's argument, and I will return to it.) The 'going beyond' is more radical than realism's, because the commitment to 'referentiality' is abandoned, but like realism, interpretivism aims at exposing hidden depths. Thus Reed's interpretivism is not just the variety espoused by Peter Winch, which argues that local meanings have to be adequately understood by the exogenous researcher. Beyond this, something that motivates and unifies these meanings is sought.

Reed [2011: 92] responds with the concept of 'landscapes of meaning', which are 'historically particular … and yet can, in some cases, extend through large swaths of time and place, thus making them discursive formations with tremendous inertia and power'. Geertz's [1975a] ethnography of the Balinese cockfight provides an example [Reed 2011: 93–96]. Successive interpretive frameworks are introduced by Geertz—Bentham's concept of 'deep play', play in which the stakes

are irrationally high; the issues of masculinity implied by the Balinese (analogous to the English) multivalence of the word 'cock'; and the distinction of human and animal, interpreted as the sacred and the profane. Reed comments: 'As each theory illuminates an aspect of this context, a fuller comprehension of the context as a whole is developed' [ibid.: 96]; 'Balinese cockfighting "makes sense" to the reader, because it has been adequately contextualized' [ibid.].

Here one wants to know what is the criterion of 'adequacy'. New ways of thinking about the cockfight are successively added, a pluralisation that Reed explicitly recommends. When are they adequate? Decidedly not, for either Reed or Geertz, when they reflect Balinese self-understanding: this would be the Winchian rule-interpreting method, from which Geertz differs 'radically' [ibid.: 98].[1] It seems they are adequate when they add up to a 'landscape', whose criterion is that it is coherent. '[L]andscapes cannot be radically incoherent.' [ibid.]

Now this is indeed true of real landscapes (provided one accepts that the notion of coherence is applicable to them at all) in that they form a continuous surface in three-dimensional space. If mountain abuts 'contradictory' plain there is at least a transition between them. But Reed [2011: 110] also invokes the concept of landscape as it appears in pictorial art: the 'analogy for social investigation' is 'the painting of a landscape'. 'When an investigator reconstructs the layers of meaning in which the social actions under scrutiny are embedded, what she does is paint a picture of the meanings—historically located, fabricated by the human imagination—upon which social life proceeds.'

One might think that nothing but further obscurity has been added by the idea of landscape to Geertz's [1975b: 448] own metaphor, whereby cultural interpretation is an activity 'in general parallel with penetrating a literary text'. But the change of metaphor is of considerable importance to Reed's project, as it allows, he thinks, the reintroduction of causation.

Unlike most commentators on Geertz, Reed does not let the anthropologist's causal avoidance go unchallenged. He describes as 'at best … evasive' Geertz's suggestion that the purpose of anthropology is 'not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given' [Reed 2011: 98]. Quoting Geertz's 'iconic sentence',

> Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning[,]

[1] Geertz's interpretivism differs rather less radically from Winch's in the essay that introduces *The Interpretation of Cultures* [Geertz 1975b], which presents 'thick description' as the description of action in terms of explicit local understandings. Reed favours the more radical Geertz.

Reed [2011: 130] correctly notes that this stark antithesis and the exclusion of causation was not Weber's actual proposal. He might also have noted that both the suspending and the spinning referred to in Geertz's definition are causal relations. At any rate, Reed is right that we should not leave things where Geertz (in this anti-causal mood) leaves them.[2]

The idea of 'landscape of meaning' provides Reed's answer to this lack, in conjunction with the idea of 'forming', as opposed to 'forcing', causation. Of course, we can understand easily how a real landscape exerts effects on its inhabitants. If they ascend a hill, this causes their altitude to change; if they fall in a river, they may drown. I suspect that some intimation, provided it remains only that, of this 'forcing' causation is quite welcome in the economy of Reed's argument. For the 'forming' cause provided by a landscape of meaning in the sense of a construct 'painted' by the analyst is much harder to make sense of. Yet that is, in the end, what Reed's introduction of causation into interpretation comes down to.[3]

A landscape of meaning is a 'coherent' semiotic background which works causally on people not by creating their wants, but by connecting their wants to their behaviour. '[M]otivations are like melted bronze before it is poured into a cast and allowed to harden into a real statue. The cast is the meaningful context in which amorphous motives become effectively performed actions.' [Reed 2011: 158] It is the job of the analyst to 'paint' this context—as we have seen, to paint it 'adequately' by multiplying theoretical frameworks until the background is richly semiotically populated (perhaps far beyond anything the participants would recognise). The constructed landscapes 'give motivations and mechanisms shape and color, concreteness and character' [ibid.].

Are you confused yet as to the causal relationships involved? I don't think it is my fault! A culture is described by multiplying theoretical interpretive frameworks, always maintaining coherence, though with no obvious limit to complexity. This construct is called a landscape and is said to constrain behaviour not in the material way a real landscape controls the behaviour of its inhabitants, but in some kind of semiotic analogue of that. Reed [2011: 135–136] seeks to get round the seeming disjuncture between the causal and the semiotic by invoking Donald Davidson's argument that reasons may be causes, but he neglects the crucial point that for a reason to be a cause it must be a reason psychologically possessed (if perhaps unconsciously) by the actor—not one that merely seems plausible to

[2] Large changes in Geertz's view of causal explanation can be traced throughout the essays gathered in *Interpretation of Cultures*, some of which are quite sympathetic to causation, and into the later collection *Local Knowledge* [Geertz 1993], in which the anti-causal position is consolidated. See Welch [2013: 55–59].

[3] 'Forming' causation is itself illustrated by a metaphor that is parasitic upon the more familiar idea of cause: Aristotle's metaphor of the forming of a bronze statue by the mould it is cast in [Reed 2011: 145–146]. The imperviousness of the mould to the solidifying bronze is a straightforward 'forcing' causal notion.

an observer in the context of a coherent cultural interpretation. *My* reasons cannot be *your* causes; what I find plausible as a global explanation of your behaviour need not be the actual explanation.

I lack space to discuss properly the idea of unconscious motivations invoked by Reed in support of his account. These (though not necessarily the ones described by Freud) certainly exist,[4] and complicate any account of social causation, implying among other things that administering an attitude survey would not be a sufficient means of ascertaining motivations concretely—though it would not thereby become completely useless. But this falls well short of licensing cultural interpretation (the divining, that is, of a collective unconsciousness) from a distance, or even on the psychoanalyst's couch.

Positivism, causation and evidence

In conclusion, I want to say something positive by saying something about positivism. Post-positivism is, as I noted, the starting point that Reed shares with his cohort, as he conceives it. There is certainly a case against positivism that needs to be answered, but answering it would first involve clearing away a number of misrepresentations. In the context of Reed's argument, the main one is that positivism has no plausible account of causation. But Hume's claim, to which this alleged defect is usually traced, that causation is nothing but 'constant conjunction' needs to be properly understood, as it seems not to have been by his realist critics. Given his knowledge of and enthusiasm for natural science, thus his awareness of its use of instruments such as the microscope and the telescope, it is absurd to imagine Hume as insisting that causal explanation stops with the findings of the naked eye. If a mechanism is a 'deep' one that can be observed only with the use of a microscope or other measuring instrument, that mechanism is still allowed by Hume's theory. What he insists on is that observation, however minute, will reveal only further constant conjunction. For Hume, it is not legitimate to go beyond this, but it does not follow that he could not countenance mechanisms hidden from our casual observation but revealed by science.

It is the desire to go beyond not only observation but *the observable* that characterises all of the theoretical approaches Reed discusses. Here is the break from positivism. But can we accept Reed's precept, *going beyond the evidence yet remaining responsible to it*? Evidence is a *warrant* to make an assertion; do we then remain responsible to that warrant when we go beyond it and make a different assertion? Do the police remain responsible to an arrest warrant, or even to the principle of an arrest warrant, if they arrest a person not named in it? Of course, positivism in practice *does* go beyond evidence frequently, by floating causal hypotheses. (I say 'in practice' so as to set aside the extreme philosophical position of logical posi-

[4] See, for example, Wilson [2002].

tivism, whose 'verification principle', with its implication that science consisted purely of 'observation sentences' plus logical connectors, was soon recognized as self-refuting.) Moreover, it is not always clear when a hypothesis is formulated how the needed observations will be obtained, as in the case of some of Einstein's theories, or the Big Bang theory. But it is the *permanent* impossibility of observational evidence that is both excluded by positivism and embraced by Reed's various forms of post-positivism.

Positivist social science, for reasons other than its philosophical basis in Humean empiricism (I discuss these reasons in Welch [2013]), has struggled to deliver much by way of causal explanation. Often it has been looking in the wrong place—for instance, in the macroscopic comparisons of social structures which Reed [2011: 45–50] criticises in the work of Skocpol and Moore. 'Covering laws' applied to large, composite and complex phenomena like these are bound to fail. It might be more profitable to look microscopically at just what Reed is interested in—meanings as mechanisms. This—establishing empirically how meanings change and get accepted in a population—is likely to be painstaking work (certainly having an ethnographic dimension, as well perhaps as an experimental one), and positivist social scientists have usually preferred to measure what is more easily measurable, especially if other people have done the measurements, on the basis that, as Ian Shapiro [2002: 598] put it, 'if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything around you starts to look like a nail'.

My view is that the proper course is to try to find new tools, appropriate to the empirical investigation of the causal mechanisms Reed sketches in the distracting hues of an interpretive landscape. That at any rate would be the 'scientific' course, befitting causal explanation. Reed's book is acutely interesting for the good reasons he gives us to think it is worth attempting it. As to the progress he has made so far—well, perhaps with an eye on disapproving members of his post-positivist cohort, Reed [2011: 161] defiantly says of his own argument: 'If to engage in this process of truth-making is going to be labeled a new sort of science, so be it.' I have tried to indicate why, as yet, he has nothing to worry about.

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