

Introducing the Symposium
on *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*
by Isaac Ariail Reed

Explain or understand? This old methodological dilemma has haunted sociology ever since it emerged out of late 19th-century German philosophy of science and the latter's sharp distinction between natural and human sciences. The choice is a difficult one indeed: explainers are easily—and most of the time for good reason—suspected of severely mishandling the meanings operant in social action; interpreters, for their part, get mired in the endless webs of human subjectivity. What's worse, since the early days of sociology both of these concerns have seemed too central to the discipline's programme to allow one to be sacrificed for the other. As Weber stated, 'sociology would protest against the assumption that [interpretive] "understanding" and causal "explanation" have no relationship with another' [2012: 279]. Hence the irrepressible impulse to transcend the divide between understanding and explanation, notwithstanding the danger this entails of ending up impaled on not just one but both horns of the dilemma. Nowhere else has this impulse played itself out more palpably than in the development of social theory in the past few decades. At the height of the interpretive wave of the 1970s–1980s it might have seemed that the days of the explanation-addicted positivists were forever numbered. Yet, to conceive of sociology as a purely interpretive enterprise was not particularly appealing either. It may well be true that *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*; but many social scientists feel that their business has nothing or very little to do with the forgiveness that understanding imparts, and everything to do with producing potentially effective social knowledge that is necessarily explanatory in nature.

Among the recent attempts to tackle the formidable dilemma of explanation and understanding, Isaac Ariail Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* stands out as one of the most remarkable ones. It is a bold and brilliant endeavour, deeply Weberian in its conviction that meaning and causality are not to be treated as two separate substances that like oil and water do not mix in the study of social life. In this book, Reed proceeds through a sophisticated meta-analysis of the practice of social research and social theory to develop a new epistemological perspective, which culminates in the idea of interpretive explanation, the centrepiece of what is rightly called 'a synthetic approach to social knowledge' [Reed 2011: 11]. There are multiple syntheses going on on different levels, and the central but not the sole one is occurring between those old and venerable rivals, causal explanation and interpretive understanding. No less important is another mediation that speaks to more contemporary debates in social theory. In what is arguably one of the major achievements of the book, Reed describes—and in so

doing lays the foundations for overcoming their separation—three basic ‘epistemic modes’ under which contemporary social (or to use his preferred word, human) sciences operate: realism, normatively grounded social criticism, and interpretivism. The fact that those three are treated in a deep sense as complementary appears to be one of the truly bold moves of the book. And also a highly persuasive one: I believe that having read Reed’s book one can no longer be happy with explanatory projects that remain ignorant of their political implications or the embeddedness of social action in the element of meaning; utopian theorising that is clueless about how things go on in social life and how interpretations add to it; or the hermeneutics of social texts that are dismissive of social mechanisms and the dimension of power. At the same time it is beyond dispute that Reed is, in the first place, an interpretivist, for it is the interpretation of cultures that in his account provides the master frame necessary for mechanisms and normativity to be integrated into fully articulated interpretive explanations.

Perhaps the most fitting characterisation of *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* is that it is an example of social theory that is truly synthetic or ‘multidimensional’ in ambition, that is out to overcome the deepest epistemological divides and bring out the unsuspected complementarities among warring modalities of knowledge. Can there be a more suitable candidate for a book symposium?

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References

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