
Hands in the Peat, or on the Metaphors of Meaning

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Interpretation and Social Knowledge is one of those books after reading which you have a wide, silly smile on your face. In the all too often competitive, hard, and lonely sphere of life that is the one inhabited by social scientists, there are these instants of connection and recognition, and these sparkles of reminders that one is not alone in the world (of inquiry), and of gratitude and amusement for this being so.

Educated at the intersection of Finnish sociology, or Finnish interpretations of sociology from elsewhere (in the beginning), French sociology and social theory (largely in terms of whatever inspired me), and American (cultural) sociology (increasingly for the last ten or so years), I recognise Reed's starting point as a student in the era of 'posts'. This certainly looks like a generational issue for sociologists who entered the profession at the turn of the 2000s or so, albeit not without contextual differences. The 'posts' that built our curriculum, and the positivisms they had abandoned but that thence made a come-back, form a battle ground on which those dealing with dilemmas of the interpretivist kind gain little but frustration. Reed offers one way off this battleground altogether, and I believe his readers will find it a gratifying way to go, the more so as this direction does not exactly require burning all the bridges.

In addition to my membership in the above generation, I carry with me the strong division between 'theory' and 'empirical research' that my Finnish curriculum has been marked by, and that perhaps marks the European sociological scene even more strongly than the American one. (This is the obvious contextual difference between this book's standpoint and my reader's one: although diligent with its references to classical sociology, the current debate Reed mainly takes part in is pretty US-bound.) There is one specific feature that makes the impact of the theory-empiria division so strong: how gendered it is. For American sociologists, the overtly gendered and often discriminatory aspects of European aca-

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demia, in particular in terms of the contents of research, are—perhaps hypocritically, perhaps not—often a source of astonishment. But where I was trained, boys did theory and numbers and girls did qualitative empirical studies, in particular ethnography. Certainly there were also girlish boys, and perhaps a few boyish girls as well, but this does not wipe away the tendency, or what it did to our understanding of theory and epistemics. What followed was, of course, a stark difference in value, with the former being the heroes of the trade, and the latter constantly doubted for the ‘wrong’ or the non-use of theory. The understanding of theory the above division of labour builds on is good for building (imagined) categories of researchers, but I doubt it is any good at all for achieving the kind of category of understanding most social scientists would probably say they are after. The idea of a plurality of theory that Reed so elegantly argues for is one of my points of recognition in this book: my own way out of the above-described impasse was exactly that; the use of theory in plural, the refusal of a monotheistic theory(-and-positivism) religion, and betting on the consistence of the case.

So, in many ways, I read this book as a sort of liberation, a liberation that had already taken place, but has now also taken the form of a book. The thoughts and critiques this reading evoked fall mostly in the category of ‘what more could we do with this’ and ‘how to go further from here’. I will share some of these thoughts in what follows.

On the one hand, as recognisable as I find the idea of theory in plural, I think it merits being further radicalised. As interpretivists, we ought to respectfully disrespect theory, and take down all its glory of singularity, not only in relation to a case, but in relation to each deep meaning carved out of a set of social facts. In addition to theory being plural, should it not also be—like a verb? Theory that does, and is being done, through multiple combinations of theories, but also through the deep meanings of becoming-theory. Thus, a conceptual framework can function more like a series of adverbs or verbs than nouns with stable definitions.

The interpreter’s role, then, would be that of a director of improvisation theatre, who, much like the audience, watches the play ‘happen’, while maintaining an idea of where the characters and plot developments came from, and guessing perhaps more and more at every show where the actors are headed—and still always being surprised by the outcome. To be concrete, the world—its actors, its events, its facts—messes up theory, which in consequence, in a way, never ‘is’, but constantly gets re-written. Hence, theory is a *topos*, a shared and recognised area, commonalised by prior social facts, the current goings-on, or a combination of both, that changes all the time but (mostly) slowly and slightly enough to remain recognisable [see, e.g., Thévenot 2014]. This is what I believe happens, for instance, in Nina Eliasoph’s [2011] *Making Volunteers: Civic Life at Welfare’s End*. The way Eliasoph spells out the empowerment project (the deep meaning in this case) in the hybrid organisations she studied is an interpretivist operation in which not only is the use of theories plural and the case consistent, but the theories get disembarked and converted once exposed to the social facts in ques-

tion. Our understanding of the theories does not remain intact any more than our understanding of the case does: a theory-case dynamic is at play. Similarly, when studying Finnish and French local activists' conceptions of democracy, I found that how the actors themselves dealt with theoretical ideas concerning democracy made the theories of representative, participative, or radical democracy variate [Luhtakallio 2012]. In sum, I'm suggesting adding a few arrows to Reed's otherwise carefully assembled figures.

On the other hand, I am tempted to meddle with Reed's metaphors. Continuing the line of thought above, my reflections concern in particular relations of meaning, materiality, and theory from a metaphoric point of view. For Reed's metaphors are compelling: landscapes of meaning, sailing the theory ship, casting bronze, to mention but a few. As good metaphors do, they help spell out the author's thoughts with ease. So they also provide open space for counter-metaphors, or, as is more the case here, extensions and reconfigurations.

First, the landscape. What a great picture! We have the layers of meaning, we have the coherence of a landscape painting, yet the endless plurality of different landscapes, and we have the painter, the brushes, the colours. And: 'The landscapes that surround certain actions are not necessarily similar to, or easily transformable into, other landscapes that surround other actions ... A joke made in one landscape makes no sense in another ... And finally: the transformation of landscapes of meaning takes *work...*' [Reed 2011: 111]. Our task, then, would be to disclose the landscape of meaning, to make it intelligible to the reader. This mental image makes a lot of sense to anyone committed to some form of interpretivist epistemics.

But at the same time, something is perhaps missing. The painting is static, it is two-dimensional, hung on the wall. There is no smell of paint, or the smell and the layers of dried paint are not the thing that our attention is first drawn to in this mental image. A lot of what makes deep meanings deep is underneath, and a lot of it is, to begin with, non-verbal. An art historian would not find these points incompatible with landscape paintings, and they are not; it's just that sociologists may need a more precise metaphor for the dynamics of meaning. I'm thinking of Paul Ricoeur's [1991] idea of sedimentation. In this mental image, social structure is like a set of continually moving processes that appear to people as stable and (almost) invariable. Following the process of sedimentation means, then, to watch the river flow while simultaneously seeing how it sediments into patterns that participants (in given historical processes) experience as solid, real, and nearly incontrovertible [see, e.g., Luhtakallio and Eliasoph 2014]. Of course, there can be a river flowing through our landscape of meaning. But what I would like to add with the help of Ricoeur here is two-fold. Sedimentation, however slow, is a *process*. And thinking of it sends us immediately to thinking *three-dimensionally* instead of two. Thus, the landscape is not immobile, the layers are never finalised, and even if we don't realise it, the river slowly changes course and redirects the riverbeds through sedimentation, and we can see that it is never still.

Second, sailing the theory ship. True, this metaphor is the *grande finale* of the book, and as such needs to be excused for being slightly bombastic, but I cannot resist the temptation to pick this one up as well. For Reed says it himself: 'the actualization of understanding will rely on the traveler's sensitivities to idiosyncratic meanings, and not just on her logical brilliance' [Reed 2011: 167–168]. Instead of a sailor setting out heroically to sea, I would like to see a social researcher as an orienteer. She has maps and a compass, but she needs to also know how to read the particularities of the marsh, for example (as, for that matter, any good sailor needs to know the winds and smell the storm coming, of course). She may twist her ankle on a loose stone or a mole hole, things that are too insignificant or constantly changing to make it into maps, but very significant once the ankle has been twisted. Sometimes it gets really foggy on a marsh. There are mosquitos, too, and probably moose nearby. This is when a map is unhelpful. Instead, you need an idea of the ground: what does a tussock firm enough to step on feel like, what kind of squelch under your boot is alarming (indicating you've stepped in a quagmire), what type of vegetation tells the orienteer that the edge of the forest is near. There is a great deal that one needs to know, besides having read books and possessing maps and compasses, in order to make one's way in a swampy forest, and yet be able to find a basketful of mushrooms and cranberries to bring home. For cranberries, for instance, one sometimes has to tuck one's hand into the peat tussock and feel around—the big ones are not always visible at all. What does this have to do with theory? I mean to indicate that the 'traveller's sensitivities' indeed form a survival kit when maps fail to help. The skill of orienteering (or berry-picking) is based on extensive sensitivity to the topography, the soil, the vegetation, the fauna, the weather, and so on. For those for whom sailing is too heroic a metaphor, this parallel image is a reminder of the multiple content of the traveller's backpack.

Third, casting bronze: the borrowed metaphor to describe the dynamics of the force and form of meaning-making. Many thoughtful things get said about the mould and the casting. But I was struck by how little is said about the bronze—except mainly that it gets poured into the mould. Yet, I have no doubt, a sculptor specialised in bronze sculpting could tell us a lot more about this substance and about casting it, things that would not be just further details, but things that actually might change our entire idea of what kind of business casting is, and how it differs from, say, sculpting marble or carving granite. Indeed, how do the physical characteristics of bronze affect the act of casting? What kind of precautions do you need to take before you start? How do you treat the bronze? At what temperature does it melt? What kind of a container do you need? This is not just a matter of nit-picking. As Erin O'Connor [2005] shows in her study of glassblowing, the physicality of the practice—the different elements of glass, the temperatures, the tools, the moves and postures one needs to know—are not a 'context' to glassblowing, but constitute the meaningfulness of the practice, and thus are crucial also to what we can say about causality, and how we can come to under-

stand the deep meanings in this case. Furthermore, our practices are moulded not only by material substances, but also by the non-human actors we co-exist with. To take up Reed's favourite example, Colin Jerolmack and Iddo Tavory [2014] note that what Geertz's analysis of the Balinese cockfight omits almost entirely are the cocks. They are not just reflections of the players' self-definitions, nor are they bronze to be cast, for that matter; they are living creatures that someone needs to take care of, buy food and medicine for, and build shelters for. Discounting animal protection issues, all this is mandatory if one wishes to have cockfights. Also, the experience of caring for animals creates attachments to them, and it is hard to see how this social fact would not be part of the deep meaning of cockfights.

Consider one more example: working out interpretations with the help of pragmatist theories, notably Laurent Thévenot's suggestion of different levels of engagement with the world [see, e.g., Thévenot 2014], Boris Gladarev and Markku Lonkila [2013] analysed civic activism in the protection of neighbourhood green areas [see also Koveneva 2011; Luhtakallio 2012]. They noted that, for instance, in a St Petersburg neighbourhood threatened by city plans to bulldoze a small park, the resistance grew inseparably around the non-humans involved. The birch trees in the park were talked about as 'friends' or 'children', and the city's actions—the city abruptly cut down some of the trees one night—were met with a teary and sweaty response: the activists replanted the trees and held vigil at the plantation at night thenceforth. Without these trees, there would have been no park, no protest, no action. And with these trees, we grasp a whole case of deep meaning in the practice of politics in a repressive regime.

In all three metaphors that I have taken up here, the trouble, ultimately, is with the same thing: materiality, non-humans, and their part in deep meanings, and in understanding them. The material and the non-human are not just the context or the conditions, but an inherent part of meaningful social action. Meanings cannot be detached from them, and should not be, or we will miss crucial things. By this I do not mean to proclaim material sociology, in the Latourian sense or any other, but to argue that Reed's version of interpretivism omits the meaning of materiality and non-humans in meaning-making, and that regarding it fully will render the argument the book presents even more compelling and useful.

Social facts are thick, and in addition, they are sticky, odoriferous, tempered. Describing and explaining them requires thickness, and, most of the time, metaphorical dirty hands and wet boots (sometimes also less metaphorical). In order to complete maximal interpretations and make the meanings of social life resonate with theory and with people's understandings of the world, we need a grasp of the materiality of meaning. We need to make meaning three-dimensional. The concrete stuff that social facts also are made of does not neatly arrange itself like the background of a painting, but interferes, messes things up, makes meanings form and sound and smell and—make sense. This, I believe, we need to take seriously when pursuing deep meaning and understanding the world from an interpretivist viewpoint.

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