The Landscape of Meaning, a Metaphor in Process

NELSON ARTEAGA BOTELLO*
Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Mexico City

Isaac Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* displays the effort of cultural sociology to establish an epistemological reflection leading to the construction of a theory of knowledge in which meaning-centred research builds causal explanations. Thus, the author endorses Weber's definition of sociology as a 'science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences' [Weber (1922) 1978: 4]. This means that to the extent that an interpretation includes causal explanations the multidimensional sociological profile may be more clearly defined. To achieve this aim, Reed first carried out a classification that allows one to determine the extent to which theory and evidence in the social sciences intersect. He arrives as a result at a definition of what he referred to as the three epistemic modes—realistic, normative and interpretative—which make it possible to understand how that intersection operates.

Since the intention is to strengthen the capacities of the epistemic interpretive mode, Reed in the second step sought to build a formal model in this regard. Thus, he suggests using the metaphor of 'landscapes of meaning' to give consistency to the interpretive epistemic mode, and, at the same time, to provide a model that works as a hinge that articulates the meaning and causes of action. However, Reed places the accent on considering 'the social meaning act as forming, as opposed to forcing, causes, [in order that] the interpretative epistemic mode can offer a synthetic approach to social knowledge, and enable the researcher to build social explanations and deliver social critique' [Reed 2011: 11]. For Reed forming causes ' … are the arrangements of signification and representation that their causes forcing give concrete shape and meaningful character' [ibid.: 143]. Therefore, the metaphor of a landscape of meaning is central to the body of Reed's text, because it contains the meaning and the resignifying causality with which generate interpretative explanations.

* Direct all correspondence to: Nelson Arteaga Botello, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Carretera al Ajusco 377, Colonia Héroes de Padierna, Delegación Tlalpan, Ciudad de México, D.F., C.P. 14200, México, e-mail: nelson.arteaga@flacso.edu.mx.

Criticism of Reed's book has been directed at the three elements that make up the textual nervous system. On the one hand, the way in which the three epistemic modes have been constructed: Some critics have pointed out that it tends to simplify the complexity of the encompassing theoretical perspectives. Others have pointed to the use of the term itself, suggesting it would have been better to use concepts such as meta-theories or meta-theoretical strategies [Cruickshank 2013; Lizardo 2012]. It is also, however, important to note that some argue that the epistemic modes help the author to expose his argument and are relevant as a guide to the book's objectives [Glaeser 2013]. On the other hand, some critics have questioned the approach to forming causes and forcing causes. For some, this is the aspect that requires the most reworking [Browne 2011; Lizardo 2012]. Finally, the metaphor of landscapes of meaning has been evaluated based on its ability to support a theoretical pluralism. It is noted that to some extent this metaphor ' … possesses a certain pragmatic validity … that it is liable to provoke some dissatisfaction' [Browne 2011]. Some argue, moreover, that it fails to show how it operates in a satisfactory way, which makes it more of an elegant metaphor than a concept with analytical potential [Cossu 2012; Lizardo 2012; Glaeser 2013].

From my point of view, the landscape of meaning metaphor is a central element in the book; however, on the one hand, the author does not ultimately consolidate it, and on the other, his critics do not ascribe it enough importance or disregard it too quickly. A more complete redrafting would be useful to offer a hinge to connect interpretation and explanation. At the same time, it could then serve as a frame for understanding society as a whole and in its totality—an alternative, therefore, to addressing the postmodern perspectives that emphasise the fragmentation or the end of the social.

As Turner [2010] notes, metaphors operate on the level of words/sentences—for example, the 'iron cage' of Weber and the 'panopticon' of Foucault—and on the level of discourse—the system in Parsons and Luhmann, or the drama in Goffman. On the first level, the aim of metaphor is dramatisation and on the second discursive systematisation. While a metaphor acquires full force when it says something on two levels, there are some metaphors that only have greater weight as sentences or as discourses. The metaphor of the landscape of meaning has been considered elegant and pragmatic but unsatisfactory or without sufficient analytical content, and I believe that this is because Reed does not unfold the dramatic and discursive capacities of his own metaphor. Therefore, it does not serve as a hinge that articulates the key elements of his argument, and his model of interpretive explanation does not have enough strength to it.

Reed uses Brueghel's painting *The Harvesters* to reveal the landscape of meaning that allows maximal interpretation in the interpretive-epistemic mode. The picture shows a vast and varied landscape with different people in it. Reed inferred that these figures are motivated to do different activities, sometimes with references to different 'institutions': trees, houses, and churches, a city in the background, and a harvest in the foreground. He interprets each painting's

characters as interacting with the environment through various tools, and one can observe forms of interaction and intimacy that operate by means of certain mechanisms and social processes. In this way he suggests that this landscape expresses how individuals act in different places and positions, so that the subjectivity and interpretation of the people varies according to the scenarios that are positioned.

The painting lets us say that the world looks different from the bell tower than from the fields, the school, or the workplace. For Reed, 'the landscape metaphor captures the variety of ways in which meaning and communication processes provide the basis for, and give form to, actors' subjectivities and strategies' [Reed 2011: 110]. However, his description of the painting focuses mainly on the different sub-landscapes, the buildings that establish the construction of the meaning of space, but only superficially pays attention to the action of the actors. The landscape that Reed reconstructs rotates around space and only mentions in passing the characters and the action they are performing. While Reed suggests that each landscape in the painting involves certain actions and that the actors are intelligent enough to understand the meaning of their performance in terms of where they are, he does not develop a profound interpretation of the painting to force his metaphor to work.

This is due to the fact that Reed interpreted Brueghel's painting by taking into account the overall effect produced, i.e. the weight that the painter wanted to give to the atmosphere and the landscape itself, and not what the characters do in a concrete way. While it is true that one of the characteristics of Brueghel's work is the weight that he gives to the landscape, Reed also ignores the care the artist has taken with the characters that appear in them. (In the case of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, for example, the painter has painted a landscape where the fall of Icarus is irrelevant to the characters that are in the foreground of the painting. In this way the landscape is significant, but only to the extent to which one pays attention to the characters that appear in it, and, depending on the relationship of meaning that is established, it says that the ploughman, the fisherman, and the pastor are indifferent to the fall of the mythological character, who is faint but clearly drawn in one corner).

As Burroughs [1921] suggests, both the landscape and the figures are important in Brueghel. There are over forty figures in *The Harvesters* that require primary attention. The farther one's gaze is from the painting, the clearer it becomes that each of them is doing something and what they are doing. In the case of Reed's interpretation of *The Harvesters*, he does not account for this complex scenario, and if he does, it is very quick and superficial. The figures that are closer, like the man sleeping under the tree—which breaks the balance of the painting— or the figures who are working or eating—filling their mouths even when they are full of food—suggests that the actors are expressions of the confluence of different creative, recreational, and passive forces in different parts of the landscape [Harrison 2009]. Moreover, as Verdonk [2005] suggests, the figures and spaces are

flexible in themselves, so you can create different relations of figures and spaces that shift the focus to different details of specific scenes.

Therefore, although Reed defines a particular pictorial space to build his metaphor, he does not extensively explore the elements that are moving within it. He directs his gaze at the set of landscapes and, sometimes, at a particular landscape without any interpretative connection, which weakens the possibility of translating the idea of landscape into a pacing mechanism with which to analyse the social meanings therein. This would have required not only that the scenes be described, but also that the concrete analysis of the everyday reality that is in Brueghel's painting be transformed into deep symbolic interpretations. This is precisely what Foucault did, but for another purpose, in his interpretation of *Las Meninas* by Velazquez. Foucault assigned particular meanings to the gaze, actions, and positions of the actors in that painting [d'Ormesson 1967]. This allowed the institutionalisation of an iconic interpretation of the Classical age. It is also what gave rise to the metaphor of the field, introducing into the social sciences a series of analytical elements that are expressed through the rhetoric of battle, the game, or habitus.

As already stated, to the extent that it can constitute a landscape of meaning—such as the forming causes of the meaning—a metaphor of sufficient strength can both ensure an effect on the word/sentence level as discursive and settle like a hinge between analytical and normative elements of the realistic epistemic mode. First, it will provide guidelines to be observed in the landscape as the reasons that force the agents' actions and by which the mechanisms exert their power over the will of the actors and other 'mechanics' processes of social character. Second, it will help build critical normative models. While the metaphor of a landscape of meaning serves to decode a thick description–in the sense that Geertz gives to this concept—the elements that guide and recreate life in a painting like *The Harvesters* can transform a living reality into deep symbolic interpretations, revealing how the meaning (forming causes) intersects the reasons (final causes) and mechanisms (efficient causes): 'when considering social action, efficient causes [and final causes] cannot be adequately understood in their causal force without understanding the formal causes that give them shape' [Reed 2011: 145]. Its articulation would transform a metaphor into a discourse, which makes possible a maximal interpretation of the interpretive mode, while ensuring a causal explanation.

One of the challenges of the text is to think of causality in a different way and base it on the landscape of meaning; Reed's efforts should aim at the latter route. However, in the years since the publication of *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* the author has been working more carefully with the issue of explanation and interpretation, apparently ignoring his metaphor. In a recent article by Reed—co-authored with Paul Lichterman [2014]—he tries to transcend, from a critical review of the ethnographic literature, the distinction between sociology that seeks 'understanding' and that which pursues 'explanation'. Both authors

express their intention to account for building three-way causal claims from ethnographic research through a model of interpretive explanation. The text confirms the commitment and interest of the author in making sure that the analytical elements account for how they operate the forming causes.

However, it is noted that there is no intention to connect this reflection with the metaphor of landscapes of meaning, which suggests, perhaps to me, that the intention behind what is a promising metaphor for the social sciences and humanities has been abandoned. This does not mean, of course, that a theoretical effort, like that proposed by Reed, depends solely on consolidating one metaphor or another. Metaphors can certainly serve as a way to describe persuasively a theoretical device or to speak about reality, but, as Bouveresse [1999] says, they can be neglected once they have done their job as operators of a new conceptual synthesis. In Reed's book, however, the metaphor he has proposed has not yet completed its work; it has barely begun.

Finally, I consider one of the possible virtues of the metaphor of landscape of meaning is that it might be useful to have an overview of society—not in terms of a large coherent and totalising system—wherein, despite the apparent presence of different landscapes, they are linked in some way to a more general one, thus providing the idea that there are 'mechanisms' and 'meanings' that connect them. If social actors themselves continually refer to 'society' as something that refers to a set that includes the different areas of life and meaning, cultural sociology has the obligation of establishing what it means to be called society [Cordero 2008], and I think Reed's metaphor can say something about this. This is not an easy task to perform to the extent that there is a tendency linked to certain postmodern thought to think of society as fragmented or, from the point of view from sociology, to consider that society has ceased to exist, as Touraine suggested.

Theoretical work, as Martuccelli [1999] suggests, is based on constantly making proposals to unite different theories into relatively homogeneous groups that are subsequently segmented and fractured by other theoretical exercises in order to build new sets of classification or sociological matrices. In this sense, Reed's book is a suggestive theoretical proposal, a fresh vision of the thought of social theory—understood as a formal generalisation or an abstraction into separate individual cases [Joas and Knöbl 2009]—but also located in a continuum with an empirical observational environment [Alexander 1982]. It is a significant effort of sociological imagination and one that has provided a space for projecting new networks of meaning into reading social theory, in addition to opening up a field of problems at different levels.

References

Alexander, J. 1982. *Theoretical Logic in Sociology. Positivism, Presuppositions and Current Controversies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Bouveresse, J. 1999. *Prodiges et vertiges de l'analogie*. Paris: Broché.

Browne, C. 2011. 'Interpretation and Social Knowledge. On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences (Review).' *International Sociology* 28 (2): 230–233, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0268580913477967b.

Burroughs, B. 1921. 'The Harvesters by Pieter Brueghel the Elder.' *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 16 (5): 96–103.

Cordero, R., F. Carballo and J. Ossandón. 2008. 'Performing Cultural Sociology. A Conversation with Jeffrey Alexander.' *European Journal of Social Theory* 11 (4): 523–542, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1368431008097010.

Cossu, A. 2012. 'Interpretation and Social Knowledge. On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences (Review).' *Sociologica* 1: 1–4, http://dx.doi.org/10.2383/36941.

Cruickshank, J. 2013. 'Interpretation and Social Knowledge. On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences (Review).' *Cultural Sociology* 7 (1): 104–105, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1749975512471013b.

Glaeser, A. 2013. 'Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences (Review).' *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews* 42 (6): 867–869, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0094306113506873aa.

Harrison, P. 2009. 'In the Absence of Practice.' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space.'* 27 (6): 987–1009, http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/d7907.

Joas, H. and W. Knöbl. 2009. *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139878432.

Lichterman, P. and I. Reed. 2014. 'Theory and Contrastive Explanation in Ethnography.' *Sociological Methods & Research.'* (online before print) 1–51, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0049124114554458.

Lizardo, O. 2012. 'Interpretation and Social Knowledge. On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences (Review).' *American Journal of Sociology* 118 (2): 497–499, http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/666312.

Martuccelli, D. 1999. *Sociologies de la modernité.* Paris: Gallimard.

d'Ormesson, J. 1967. 'Passage de l'homme ou les avatars du savoir. L'archéologie des sciences humaines de Michel Foucault.' *La Nouvelle Revue française* 171: 477–490.

Reed, I. A. 2011. *Interpretation and Social Knowledge. On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, http://dx.doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226706726.001.0001.

Turner, C. 2010. *Investigating Sociological Theory.* London: Sage.

Verdonk, P. 2005. 'Painting, Poetry, Parallelism: Ekphrasis, Stylistics and Cognitive Poetics.' *Language and Literature* 14 (3): 231–244, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0963947005054479.

Weber, M. (1922) 1978. *Economy and Society.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.