
Meaning, Commensuration, and General Theory

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Isaac A. Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* presents a wide-reaching case for what he calls the 'interpretive epistemic mode' of social science. This epistemic mode is contrasted with normativism and realism as alternative orientations for the production of social-scientific knowledge. Reed's exploration of the characteristics of each mode is elegant and often enlightening, mostly by virtue of the ingenious use of the concept of 'maximal interpretation' [Reed 2011: 23–25], employed to great effect in demonstrating how the different epistemic modes are active in a number of well-known pieces of research. The book offers numerous perceptive observations from the most general (ontology as the mission statement of much sociological theorizing [ibid.: 42]) to the more specific (Bayesian reasoning in comparative historical analysis [ibid.: 52–54]) and very specific (Foucault as normativist dystopian [ibid.: 84]). Throughout, Reed is quite frank in making a partisan interpretivist case, a case that for him is all about getting to the richness of meaning in our social universe at the expense of the status enjoyed by general theory in both realism and normativism [ibid.: 88].

Reed's case combines the elevation of interpretivism into a kind of general epistemological foundation for social science with the denial that having a similarly general theory of the social is possible. As such, it is certainly congenial to how many interpretive researchers would formulate their position with respect to the epistemology of social science. The foundational argument for this position offered by Reed, however, begins to appear somewhat forced just about when it is considered with respect to the relationship between meaning and theory that is at the heart of his understanding of 'maximal interpretation': If meaning is truly general and theory is ultimately about meaning, if exploring the relationship between theory and meaning allows making very general statements about the epistemology of social knowledge and about how its different manifestations

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characterise particular pieces of research, it is hard not to consider all this as implying certain investments into a general theory of the social that has to be, in its very generality, intimately connected to Reed's broad epistemological statements about how the social world can be known. One may also wonder whether, as Reed denies the possibility of producing and holding on to a general theory of the social, his argument regresses to some extent into the 'postmodern scepticism' he repeatedly wishes to overcome [ibid.: 3f., 93, 169]. In fact, he is led to claim that the meaningful constitution of social reality involves an element of incommensurability between different manifestations of socio-historic events, activities and contexts, and that the existence of such elementary incommensurability is the very reason why, in the end, there cannot be one generally meaningful social reality per se—and no general theory of it [ibid.: 88, 104, 113, 117]. Where there cannot be one such theory, there apparently need to be many, and Reed concludes his essay, despite his subscription to the interpretive credo of reducing researchers' theoretical baggage, with a recommendation to 'bring as many books and maps as you can' [ibid.: 171] when embarking on social-scientific explorations.

Another indication that Reed's case against the possibility of general theory is not quite stable is that he rehearses a move that is all too familiar from both realist and normativist epistemologies—the move of broadening one's own core concepts in an attempt to subsume alternative analytical orientations. This move involves a generalisation of theoretical terms that, as far as the epistemology of social science is concerned, is close to totalising its respective epistemic mode. Whereas for the realist (or naturalist), all research may come down to the material play of the forces of production or, perhaps, the distribution of preferences and incentives, and whilst for the normativist all knowledge just has to be based on some value, ideology etc., for Reed's interpretivism all things social and all knowledge of these things have to become a matter of meaning. When Reed writes about facts, evidence, theory, data, and interpretation, meaning therefore has to be the common denominator. The difference between theories and empirical facts is explored as a difference between different meaning-systems [ibid.: 19–22] and the social universe is addressed as a texture of meaning in multiple layers [ibid.: 89] to be investigated in its 'landscapes of meaning' [ibid.: 109ff.].

According to Reed every social scientist needs to consistently refer to these landscapes of meaning in order to offer explanations of social phenomena. In this perspective, Weber's Protestant Ethic, for example, is successful just to the extent that it discloses the landscape of meaning of early modern Protestant life in articulating the causes and mechanisms active among the capitalistically spirited by virtue of Calvinism as a distinct system of meaning [ibid.: 139–141]. Reed is careful to point out that the preoccupation with such meaning in interpretive epistemic mode is by no means a retreat from the scientific project of explanation in favour of 'mere' interpretation or re-description [ibid.: 123f.]. He argues against the postmodern as well as against the hermeneutical scepticism towards sociological explanation [ibid.: 93, 169], against epistemic relativism [ibid.: 170]

as programmatically as against the 'the posts' per se [ibid.: 11ff.]. Reed therefore does not pit meaning against analysis or interpretation against explanation or normative evaluation: interpretivism is meant to accommodate realism and normativism. It is hard to imagine how such a position could avoid the implication that meaning in an important sense is itself a truly general aspect of the social, and it is unfortunate that, despite the ubiquity with which the notion of meaning is employed throughout the text, meaning is not discussed as a concept of social theory.

If one looks more closely at Reed's metaphor of 'landscapes of meaning' and the rationale for introducing it at least one qualification of meaning is implied. This qualification, however, is entirely negative with respect to the generality of meaning. As 'landscapes of meaning' are inaugurated as the theoretical expression of choice for the structured background of meaning against which social life is taking place [ibid.: 105f.] the notion of fields is briefly considered as a laudable alternative and as already 'such a tremendous theoretical advance over various ontological dualisms in social theory' [ibid.: 108]. What Reed does not like about the notion of fields is what he considers to be the main implication of a topological approach: 'the idea ... that fields if bent or stretched would look very similar to each other' [ibid.: 108], which to him suggest an isomorphism of fields that goes against the interpretivist's taste for thick socio-historical contextualisation [ibid.: 109]. The metaphorical connotation which Reed would like to bring out is that sociological research should be more painter and brush [ibid.: 110] and less surveyor and measuring stick. The issue of commensurability for him is the key point here, as there must be no master brush and no master painting, 'only scenes to reconstruct using different brushes' [ibid.: 111]. Getting the painting right ultimately has to bolster the claim that particular landscapes cannot represent general features of the social per se [ibid.: 113], and this is why different scenes and contexts allegedly must not be treated as in any way isomorphic or in some general way commensurable.

One cannot exaggerate the epistemological consequences of such statements that are meant to characterise a source of meaning to which any kind of effective sociological explanation will need to refer [ibid.: 137ff.]. Reed intends to place a constraint on the very possibility of social theory—including any understanding of meaning. 'Postmodern scepticism' is criticised that it would 'merely rewrite in reverse the overconfidence of a scientistic sociology' [ibid.: 93], but how does Reed's general argument against commensuration not imply exactly such a reverse?

In order to square the universality with the non-generality of meaning, Reed has to turn the ubiquity of meaning into something negative with respect to the possibility of social knowledge with any claim of generality. Meaning, ubiquitous as it is, is accordingly made out to hinder the understanding of the 'basic nature' of social life [ibid.: 162], making the social 'impossible to theorise' and making us 'use theory to interpret meanings instead' [ibid.]. Against this background,

it might appear somewhat ironic to advise researchers to conjure up as much meaning from a given case as they possibly can in order to produce maximal interpretations in interpretive epistemic mode. His examples are Geertz's analysis of deep play [ibid.: 93ff.] and Bordo's study of anorexia in US culture [ibid.: 98ff.]. These maximal interpretations resignify meaning generously and widely but refrain, in Reed's reading, from submitting to their readers a general theory of culture, meaning or the social [ibid.: 103f.]. These studies are not bound by and move beyond what their subjects' in respective landscapes of meaning would identify as meaningful [ibid.: 105]—but they allegedly do not do so in the name of some general theory of the social. This understanding of maximal interpretation in interpretive epistemic mode is consistent with discarding the possibility of commensuration and also with Reed's stance against parsimony [ibid.: 116]. It misses, however, the very reason why many people find the works of Geertz and Bordo truly engaging: These works do indeed theorize, i.e. resignify with some generality, certain aspects of culture, social structure or process, and readers can relate to these resignifications just to the extent to which they find them in some consequential aspect very much commensurable with their own exposure to landscapes of meaning. Meaning thus resignified can hardly be an obstacle for 'getting' the similarities across diverse experiences and contexts—interpretive resignification is effective because it offers a glimpse of general and commensurable aspects of the social [e.g. Steinmetz 2004].

Meaning, in any case, is clearly out there in the world, whether investigators are surgical and economic in addressing it or go to great lengths in teasing more and more of it out of their subject matter. It is hard to imagine how any of this could put social science at odds with the possibility of a general theory of the social—or, for that matter, how it would put social science at odds with 'natural science' as that straw-man positivist [Reed 2011: 64f.] that deals with an allegedly per se much less meaningful universe. That confronting meaning should be a social, or, even more narrowly, a human privilege, at times appears to be implied by Reed but a respective qualification is not discussed. I suspect that a defence of any qualification will be unavailable without positing some very general theory about the genesis and constitution of meaning in the world, as that offered by Alfred Schutz [1962: 5f.] in delineating the realm of the social against the 'facts, events, and data' of the 'natural scientist'. Then again, perhaps Reed's silence about meaning as a concept of social theory implies a much broader canvas for his social epistemology. Interestingly, just as meaning is used as a kind of common denominator of all species of facts, data, and theory, Reed sometimes omits the respective qualifier. If we follow suit, consider people in a landscape and wonder how 'the landscape gives form to the motive' [Reed 2011: 152], in what sense exactly is that different from seeing deer in a landscape running up a hill or water running down that hill? Furthermore, would any such difference in how a landscape turns a motive (tendency, mass, etc.) into an active force be specific to that landscape under consideration or concern a greater set of landscapes, or all

landscapes roamed by people, deer, or water? If the push and pull of landscapes are necessary points of reference in understanding the genesis of 'formal causes' [ibid.: 158], the metaphor of landscapes could be employed in a similar manner with reference to any single animal, to herds and flocks, to molecules and electrons, buildings, streets, or cities.

If all of this is a matter of meaning, exposure to such meaning can hardly be a human prerogative. But then neither could commensurability be a prerogative of landscapes within a parallel or super-imposed non-human universe. That a 'landscape, once disclosed, is not immediately generalizable' [ibid.: 117] may often be true if taken as a statement about substantial differences between particular landscapes and their specific, perhaps very peculiar, distribution of human or non-human forces. However, Reed is prepared to make very general statements about the effect of landscapes on 'motives and mechanisms' [ibid.: 137ff.], which implies at least some immediate generalisability with respect to the generality of the forces in play and how they act on people, animals, or molecules. Immediate generalisability in this sense has to be a pervasive aspect of a universe that is (contra Schutz and others) meaningful for all kinds of species, particles, and people [cf. Köhler (1938) 1966: 280ff.].

Exploring such a universe perhaps after all does not require 'as many books and maps' as we can pull up from our libraries. In Reed's tour de force across long-standing and materially quite prolific sociological discourses, his book is in a pleasant way not quite level with the thickness we will occasionally find in our libraries. His 'good ship' onto which he would now like to load all the books and maps [ibid.: 171] is in fact a conspicuously small vessel. The book's final metaphor of the ship built and loaded up for social-scientific exploration somewhat improves, I think, on the image of landscape, painter and brush, not at least because it allows for some movement. Now the captain of the ship has to be persuaded that some maps and books can in fact be safely left behind when leaving the harbour, that there is little chance the ship will fall off the edge of the world and that it is unlikely to run against a screen of incommensurability. Any such screen is likely to be a book or map held up by the captain. It need not impair the movement of the ship.

If the meaning of the world is much more diverse than what any single book or map could offer in terms of minimal or maximal interpretations, maybe we are wise to trust our own intuitions of such meaning and our own small vessel into which our intuitive capacities have (probably not quite inappropriately) been invested [cf. Martin 2011: 236–238]. In the end, it would appear to be the very generality of meaning that invigorates our motives and mechanisms and, in the process, commensurates fields, landscapes, and, perhaps not at least, our epistemic modes. In Reed's meaningful universe, as in anybody else's, meaning commensurates motives and mechanisms such as to be causes and forces, or interpretivism such as to accommodate realism and normativism. In a meaningful universe of interconnected landscapes across which people, deer, and water

travel widely and drag along baggage of all sorts, commensuration and commensurability have to be ubiquitous. With respect to the possibility of general theory, this universe is not harsh and constraining but inviting and generous.

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