Modern Dramas: Transcendence and Immanence in *Power in Modernity*

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Abstract:

In one of her many efforts to think about the modern, Hannah Arendt turned to a parable of Franz Kafka's. It begins, "He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way, the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so."[1] She presents this as "the only exact description" of an essentially modern predicament: finding oneself in a world with "no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change."[2] In Kafka's parable the protagonist is literally caught between past and future. Such a world, as Arendt said elsewhere, requires "thinking without a banister."[3] This thinking without a banister, without a sense of where one is going or where one has come from, is not reserved for political theorists or philosophers. It concerns all of us who have happened to live through or in the wake of countless revolutions and upheavals since at least the eighteenth century—from the social and political to the scientific and technological.

Like Arendt, Isaac Reed puzzles over the hazards and hopes that attend such dysphoria. These aren't mere abstractions but rather genuine crises that we experience in our often ordinary, sometimes extraordinary lives. It is perhaps, then, no coincidence that Power in Modernity, Reed's vertiginously thoughtful project to reformulate the modern, begins with not one but two parables from Kafka.4 The first, "Before the Law," depicts a man who spends his life begging a doorkeeper's permission to gain admittance to "the Law," only to watch listlessly as the door, which he learns was meant for him alone, is closed in his face. But this melancholy quietism sends Reed off in search of another parable, one that might illuminate the practical puzzle at the heart of his inspiring and intimidating project to revivify the modern as an organizing concept for our world as well as the human sciences that seek to make sense of it.

Keywords: power | modernity | sociology | authorship |

Article:

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REVIEW ESSAY

Modern Dramas: Transcendence and Immanence in *Power in Modernity*

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In one of her many efforts to think about the modern, Hannah Arendt turned to a parable of Franz Kafka's. It begins, "He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way, the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so."[1] She presents this as "the only exact description" of an essentially modern predicament: finding oneself in a world with "no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change."[2] In Kafka's parable the protagonist is literally caught between past and future. Such a world, as Arendt said elsewhere, requires "thinking without a banister."[3] This thinking without a banister, without a sense of where one is going or where one has come from, is not reserved for political theorists or philosophers. It concerns all of us who have happened to live through or in the wake of countless revolutions and upheavals since at least the eighteenth century—from the social and political to the scientific and technological.

Like Arendt, Isaac Reed puzzles over the hazards and hopes that attend such dysphoria. These aren't mere abstractions but rather genuine crises that we experience in our often ordinary, sometimes extraordinary lives. It is perhaps, then, no coincidence that *Power in Modernity*, Reed's vertiginously thoughtful project to reformulate the modern, begins with not one but two parables from Kafka.[4] The first, "Before

1. Franz Kafka, quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 7.
2. Ibid., 6–7
3. Hannah Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953–1975* (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 473.
4. Isaac Ariail Reed, *Power in Modernity: Agency Relations and the Creative Destruction of the King's Two Bodies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). Subsequent citations to this book are given parenthetically in the text.

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the Law," depicts a man who spends his life begging a doorkeeper's permission to gain admittance to "the Law," only to watch listlessly as the door, which he learns was meant for him alone, is closed in his face. But this melancholy quietism sends Reed off in search of another parable, one that might illuminate the practical puzzle at the heart of his inspiring and intimidating project to revivify the modern as an organizing concept for our world as well as the human sciences that seek to make sense of it.

He finds this in "An Imperial Message," which elliptically traverses the space between an emperor and a lowly subject "cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun."[5] The latter hears tell of a personal message on its way to the hinterlands, relayed to a messenger by the dying emperor. But as with so many of Kafka's characters, the messenger never finds his way out of the capital. Nevertheless the parable ends with the imperial subject dreaming on the messenger's arrival in the dusk light. The parable stages the dilemma around which Reed builds his approach to the modern: who authorizes and, in so doing, enables my actions? Moreover when can I, as a person caught up in chains of dependence like those depicted in Kafka's parable, claim to author an action? And what does it mean to author an action under such circumstances? As people wrestle with these questions of authorship, like the subject at the edge of empire, they make sense of and may even transform the chains of delegation and domination within which they are caught. It turns out, Reed, argues, that such chains actually depend on culture—from myths and symbols to discourse and performances—in decisive ways. The modern problem is, as Arendt might anticipate, precisely what to do when the established myths and symbols run aground, long-standing performances founder, and the attendant chains of power come undone. For how long can people tolerate mere anarchy loosed upon the world?

Careful attention to these questions of authorship—how they are formulated and answered, how they are used, how they are fought over, how they change—can guide our own efforts to imagine and investigate culture, power, and action in the modern world. By clarifying and foregrounding these interpretive problems of authorship, problems that many in the human sciences have treated as mechanical consequences of social structure or have abandoned to the situational and subjective whims of social actors, Reed has performed an invaluable service. Rather than treat the questions of action and structure separately,[6] Reed considers them together. He offers a theory of power as action, where the former is defined in terms of the latter.

5. Franz Kafka, "An Imperial Message," quoted in ibid., 3.

6. John Levi Martin, *Social Structures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), and *The Explanation of Social Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Moreover he insists, provocatively, that these dilemmas of authorship are themselves foundational. It is an argument about what makes chains of delegation and domination possible.[7] Once we recognize political modernity as a circumstance wherein people lose or even destroy inherited ways of making power possible, we can discover these elastic forms of power in action. This is an impressive and insightful argument, one that tests the reader's pieties in often surprising ways.

In this article I propose that Reed's account of the dilemmas of authorship rests on two analytical moves that deserve scrutiny: (1) the decision to develop an account of political modernity through a theory of action, and (2) a tendency to formulate these dilemmas of authorship against the terms and concerns of political economy. The first move provides a means through which Reed can upend, reconceive, or dismantle some oft-lamented but sticky dichotomies—action or structure? coercion or consent? voluntarism or determinism? The second move wards off a familiar narrative of the modern as disenchanted—as a world where the sublime, mythic, or even just plain old meaningful are ever in retreat. This latter move, especially, raises some thorny questions about authorship, both in Reed's historical cases—I focus, for reasons that I will make clear, on the Whiskey Rebellion, the Battle of Fallen Timbers, and the Treaty of Greenville in the American republic of the late eighteenth century—and in his conceptual armature.

To preview, Reed treats culture, particularly in the book's second and third sections, as a matter of varied and diverse representations. In this, contra some of Reed's own assertions, culture tends to represent and frame the social world before working through it.[8] As representation, culture is a world apart, in that it possesses a logic and/or rules of application that are independent of political economy or other "zones of activity" through which it works (38). It is in this sense transcendent. If, in contrast, we treat culture as something that works through the world first, it will necessarily appear in political economy (or other such zones) and potentially assume forms

7. For analogous arguments about possibility, see Gabriel Abend, "Making Things Possible," *Sociological Methods and Research* 51, no. 1 (2020): 68–107, https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124120926204; Monika Krause, *The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Lyn Spillman, *Solidarity in Strategy: Making Business Meaningful in American Trade Associations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

8. Reed seems to challenge such methods in the first section of the argument, advocating instead "multidimensional" approaches (60, 63–65, 72–73). Yet he implies the priority of representation when discussing the tendency for representations to "*travel across* zones of activity" (64). Are representations unique in their mobility? We receive no direct answer, though the argument in the book's second and third sections, especially vis-à-vis political economy, suggest that they are. This raises questions about the investment in culture's "independence" that I must defer for now. However, the issue may also relate to the decision to build a theory of modernity through a theory of action and the historical analysis of the cases, which I discuss below.

distinct to it. The logics and rules of culture's application will thus depend on and may be decisively shaped by the conditions in and through which it appears. It is in this sense immanent.[9] I contend that, in pursuing the former, Reed comes up against a basic limitation of contemporary cultural approaches—the investment in culture's independence—which can be surmounted by treating culture as an immanent aspect of social life. As such, culture may, but will not necessarily, transcend the circumstances of its development and application.

Thus, as if playing a game of whack-a-mole, Reed hammers at some modern dilemmas only to watch others pop up. It is the aim of this article to suggest that one such dilemma over authorship and inheritance—the pitched battle between culture and political economy—may be more tractable and less necessary than it sometimes appears. All it requires is some provisional immanence. Ironically Reed pursues a version of this in the first part of his argument, to which I now turn.

I. ACTION AND POWER

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir characterizes women as "doomed to immanence." By this she means that while women, like all humans, have the potential to discover and choose themselves in the world, they do so under specific conditions "where men force [them] to assume [themselves] as Other." Consequently the woman suffers an attempt to "freeze her as an object."[10] In these circumstances women are doomed to remain dependent on and contained by men, whereas the reverse does not hold. My use of immanence and transcendence plays on precisely these concerns with asymmetrical dependence and independence. However, given Beauvoir's understandably pejorative phrasing, I should clarify one thing. Beauvoir treats immanence and transcendence, unlike some (though not all) earlier theological and philosophical debates, as, at least in part, historical questions.[11] This means that, as states or conditions, immanence and transcendence are subject to change. The issue with being doomed to immanence is being "doomed," not immanence as such. Without wading into the earlier theological and philosophical debates, I find the terms helpful for characterizing these explorations of culture, action, and power. After all, the question of authorship invariably elicits anxieties over the freedom or unfreedom of action like those articulated by Beauvoir. It is precisely with these dilemmas that Reed's

9. This use of immanence should not be read as a denial of transcendence. Rather I think immanence should be the position from which to launch an inquiry. It is not, however, the foregone conclusion of such an inquiry.

10. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949; New York: Vintage, 2011), 18–19; see also Reed, *Power in Modernity*, 36–37.

11. Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Bodily Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," *Human Studies* 3 (1980): 137–56.

argument begins. Before sketching this argument, though, I must say a few words about these dilemmas in the human sciences specifically.

A. STRUCTURES, ACTIONS

Kafka's imperial subject finds an authority relation in the emperor. But their relationship is not direct, and it is surely not equal. The emperor dictated the message to the messenger, and the remote, devoted subject, through some channel or another, caught wind of the message's existence. In light of these and many other unequal and indirect relations, social theorists have wrestled with the place of human freedom in social action, as an analytical and also an ethical matter.[12] Sometimes they resolve the issue by emphasizing how the tendencies and shapes of networks or other patterns account for actions.[13] At other times they emphasize the ability of actions to remake these structural patterns.[14] At still other times—and this has been the typical move since the 1970s—they insist that structures account for actions and actions account for structures.[15]

Many such inquires tend to treat actions and structure either as transcendent, in that they are analytically distinct, or as symmetrically doomed to dependence.[16] Structures limit actions, as when laws (as well as the forces that back them) in many US states strictly curtail workers' ability to strike. Actions transform structures, as when workers in such states engage in illicit work stoppages and, in so doing, produce changes in their working conditions as well as the rules of the workplace. Or the two are necessarily—both causally and descriptively—entwined, as when the

12. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947; New York: Open Road, 2015); Pierre Bourdieu, *An Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What Is Agency?," *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1998): 962–1023; Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1937); Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

13. Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895: New York: Free Press, 1982).

14. Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

15. Jeffrey Alexander, *Action and Its Environments: Toward a New Synthesis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992): 1–29.

16. Sometimes people refer to the structure/agency debate. This still has some cachet, usually taking on a specific moral valence. But see *Power in Modernity*, 32; Julia Adams, "1-800-How-Am-I-Driving? Agency in Social Science History," *Social Science History* 35, no. 1 (2011): 1–17; Andreas Glaeser, *Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). For varied reasons they treat agency as a particular kind of action. Action is the more general category and, when paired with structure, more effectively recalls the debates about explanation in addition to those about freedom. Thus I use action as the counterpart to structure.

workers who devise creative ways to master the intricate demands of the workplace simultaneously generate greater profits for their employers and replicate the conditions of their subordination.

The basic frame, in all of these cases, is this: structures and actions pinpoint different features of the world, even if they refer to the same empirical things. They can scale up and down to distinct levels of analysis. Thus we might discuss collective actions like protests and mobs or state action or chains of interactions in addition to individual actions. Or we might discuss cognitive structures like frames at individual, interpersonal, organizational, institutional, and systemic levels. If they are mutually dependent—as in the employee who embraces new workplace guidelines and dedicates herself to outproducing or -performing her fellow workers—structures and actions, in principle, limn different kinds of things.[17] Though crass, we can say that structure commonly designates patterns or tendencies and actions designate ongoing efforts to navigate through the world. Even a provocateur like Bruno Latour, who targets many conventional assumptions in the human sciences, replicates such a distinction as he reassembles the social: mediators "transform" meaning, while "intermediaries" convey information.[18] One could gloss this as an action/structure distinction. As if all of this weren't confounding enough, a further question arises: Do these structures and actions really exist out in the world, or are they simply convenient names that human scientists use to talk about a manifold set of phenomena and processes?[19]

Compressed in this manner, these debates can begin to feel like a word salad. I want to stress only the abiding sense that the distinction between structure and action is fundamental to social inquiry. It seems to abide, at least in part, because we are involved and ensnared in many unequal and indirect relations. What that means for what we do, how we do it, and how we make sense of it, as well as how this relates to the patterns that we find in the world, is genuinely confounding. The language of structure and action presents a way to make sense of these circumstances.

17. For a critique of concept formation that considers the relationship between structure (as a concept), experience, and cognitive imaging, see Omar Lizardo, "Reconceptualizing Abstract Conceptualization in Social Theory: The Case of the 'Structure' Concept," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 43, no. 2 (2013): 155–80.

18. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40.

19. Margaret Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Claire Decoteau, "The AART of Ethnography: A Critical Realist Explanatory Research Model," *Journal of the Theory of Social Behavior* 47, no. 1 (2017): 58–82; Omar Lizardo, "Beyond the Antimonies of Structure: Levi-Strauss, Giddens, Bourdieu, and Sewell," *Theory and Society* 39 (2010): 651–88; Martin, *Social Structures*.

B. REED'S GAMBIT: POWER AS ACTION

This is where Reed's argument comes in. He approaches these perplexing questions about structures and actions through the lens of situational or pragmatic action. The goal, he writes, "is to think 'structurally' and 'pragmatically' in the same frame" (30). To do so he proposes a language that evolves out of actions and action situations: *rector*, *actor*, and *other*. As a good interpretivist, Reed describes these actions in terms of distinctly human projects. When, in light of their varied and various projects, people find themselves in agency relations of domination and delegation (rector, actor, other), these relations may depend on representations of such relations, not just the relations themselves. Thus different dimensions of power—material, relational, discursive, and performative—may reveal how people establish and sustain these relations. Those who embrace these terms, Reed claims, will find themselves in a position to observe when these relations and representations shift. They will thereby be prepared to begin the hard work of explaining these shifts. In short they can then apprehend the social world in a genuinely historical manner. Translated into the language of structures and actions, Reed discusses the former in terms of the latter—not as mutually constituting but asymmetrically, with structures as action. At root structures depend on and may be decisively shaped by the situational conditions of action in and through which they appear. Here Reed begins from a place of immanence. I will call this a theory of power as action.

It works like this. All humans are capable of having projects—that is, people imagine futures and seek, variously, to bring them into being. To carry out these projects, we rely on other people and things—agency relations—and recruit them to work on our behalf.[20] Those who recruit and impress others into their projects can be said to have agency. Of course, all are not equally positioned to develop, let alone carry out, and bring others into their projects. A politician in a national office can recruit many more people into a project than one in a remote municipality, and some—for instance noncitizens or convicted felons—may be excluded from such projects. The language of rector, actor, and other formalizes these inequalities.[21] A rector is one who initiates a project. An actor is recruited into the rector's project. The other is excluded by the rector and actor, which may in turn lend coherence to their shared project. Marked as profane, the other is not recognized as capable of legitimately initiating their own projects. The rector and actor will tend to struggle

20. Adams, "1-800-How-Am-I-Driving?."

21. This formalization points toward Reed's oblique engagement with Foucault, whose later gloss on power relations as "action upon an action" might seem like an illuminating counterpoint, at the very least. I do not pursue such a discussion here. See Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.

over questions of authorship and influence, whereas the other will tend to struggle to be recognized as a potential author or to author their own projects independently of the rector and actor (12–18, 20). Thus the dilemmas of authorship emerge in and through the various efforts to initiate and complete projects.

But it is more complicated than that. People are embedded in ever-shifting chains of power that unfold "like an accordion, incorporating many actors" (30). Consequently one is never simply rector or actor or other but rather may occupy all of these positions with respect to different projects. Moreover recruitment into projects is fraught with many complications. For one, these projects of power are liable, following Julia Adams, to depend on the "representation of agency-relations" (42–43).[22] After all, actors have their own projects, which they may seek to pursue even as they are recruited into projects on behalf of rectors. In other words actors may "misrepresent themselves" (42)—for instance, as faithful servants of the king when, in fact, they use their skills and capacities to accrue personal glory or are in the thrall of a rival rector. Such agency relations may also tend toward domination, as when a rector seeks to turn actors into mere instruments to carry out a project. This is an attempt, never fully achievable, to extinguish the actors' ability to pursue projects of their own. In consequence of both misrepresentation and dehumanization, shifts in representation can inflect and even transform these chains of power.

There is, further, the question of how to get things done along and through these chains of power—both binding actors to and excluding others from projects. Chains of power and their representation have four dimensions, all of which include both "objective" and "subjective" elements. Material power involves the various vested interests of those involved or excluded, as well as the artifacts and resources to which people have access. Relational power encompasses network structure, associated habits, and the "stories and significations" (61) that evolve as people make sense of these things. Discursive power refers to the multifarious representations of rectors, actors, and others, which may become entrenched through, for instance, assumptions as to who "naturally" occupies these positions. Finally, performative power indicates public actions and their interpretations, which transform, destroy, or even found elements of these chains of power and their representation. Such performances "bind the future," as they establish the relations and grammar through which these chains of power may be made and remade. These volatile, often unpredictable displays are more likely under conditions of crisis, uncertainty, and marginality (90–92).

22. See also Julia Adams, *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

Thus Reed establishes a framework for thinking through power as action—an immanent approach to the structure/action dichotomy, which asymmetrically treats the former in terms of the latter. At this point the question for me is not agreement or disagreement. I would like to remain agnostic for the time being, as the project requires further reflection and study. But I suspect that Reed's move may work under certain analytical conditions. One of those conditions, which I will suggest here, is to avoid assuming a distinction between culture, as interpretive work of all kinds, and political economy or other "zones of activity." Otherwise the temptation to read the principles, tendencies, and phenomena that one could identify with, say, political economy as nothing but moments in the real movements of culture may prove too strong. The question, next, is where this theory of power as action takes us and what it can tell us about modernity. It takes Reed to the Atlantic edge of the British Empire and the American founding.

II. CHAINS OF POWER IN MODERNITY

The colonial and capitalist expansion of European empires offers something of a laboratory within which to explore chains of power and their representation. What was it, after all, that bound tangled chains of emissaries and adversaries from the Atlantic world together in these imperial projects? How were others conscripted into or excluded from these projects? Reed focuses on crises in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially Bacon's Rebellion (1676), the Whiskey Rebellion (1791–94), the Battle of Fallen Timbers (1794), and the Treaty of Greenville (1795), as well as the French (1789–94) and Haitian revolutions (1791–1804). I will discuss the Whiskey Rebellion and Anthony Wayne's 1794–95 campaign against Indians in the Northwest Territories. While the narrative ranges widely, it is in the explication of these cases, in particular, that the logic of Reed's argument comes into clearest view. These dramatic conflicts, Reed claims, reveal a crisis and reinvention of authorship—of the "semiotic glue" (150) that secured imperial chains of power. This was a crisis of what medieval historian Ernst Kantorowicz called "the King's Two Bodies."[23] First I sketch how the historical narrative works in relation to Reed's larger argument. Then I explore these cases in greater detail to trace the relations between political economy and culture in these struggles for authorship.

A. MODERNITY, EMPIRE, AND THE KING'S TWO BODIES

The "King's Two Bodies" describes an Anglo legal doctrine that stressed the unity of the king's dual nature as the "body natural" and the "body politic." The former was

23. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

"material and mortal," while the latter was "immaterial and immortal."[24] For Reed the king's two bodies, particularly his second, mystical body, "frames a pragmatics of power" (117). In other words it makes possible specific ways of forming and elaborating chains of power. The governors and royal subjects in seventeenth-century American colonies, for instance, often jockeyed to establish themselves as legitimate agents of the king, that is, actors pursuing various imperial projects for the rector. These projects, too, were commonly defined against the "savage" others who could stand in the way of the king's imperial project as well as those of his agents. Thus Reed interprets the "King's Two Bodies" not as an archaic vestige of medieval theology but as the basis for the struggles for power that occurred throughout the British Empire. But at the fringes of empire—where the king and his court were little more than a mirage; where governors and large landholders strategized to secure land from native peoples; and where settlers, explorers, and their laborers (enslaved or indentured) both traded and warred with those same natives—such claims to authorship were eminently uncertain and contestable. In this sense intra-colonial uprisings like the one helmed by the aristocrat Nathaniel Bacon in 1676 prefigure the colonial war for independence that came a century later.

While symbolically murdering the king, the American Revolution did not resolve this problem; in fact it may have made these problems of authorship along chains of power more acute. The Whiskey Rebellion broke out over matters of debt, taxation, land speculation, Indians, local and regional inequalities, and federal authority. Rebel settlers on the western frontier in and around Appalachia bucked at a federal excise placed on whiskey. The rebels held conventions to denounce the tax and plan their resistance; they targeted federal agents, especially tax collectors, with harassment that periodically edged into property destruction and physical violence; and in August 1794, after a number of farmers were subpoenaed for refusing to pay the tax, nearly 7,000 people marched on Pittsburgh, which resulted in the burning of some barns. In response the federal government began to mobilize troops and sent delegations to negotiate with the rebels. By the end of August, official negotiations were completed, and the rebels' delegates, though not yet all of the rebels, agreed to stand down. The federal militia was in the field until November, when a handful of leaders were arrested and taken to Philadelphia, though all were either pardoned or acquitted.[25]

In August 1794, while the federal government negotiated with the whiskey rebels, Gen. Anthony Wayne's "Legion of the United States" was conducting an ongoing war

24. Ibid., 20–21.

25. See William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion* (New York: Scribner, 2006); Thomas Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

with a confederation of Miami, Wyandot, Delaware, Chippewa, and other groups in the Northwest Territory (now most of contemporary Ohio, as well as portions of Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois). The British had maintained a presence in the region, despite ceding the territory to the United States at the conclusion of the revolution in 1783; they ceded the territory without consulting the Indians, some of whom had been driven westward by settlers for nearly two centuries. This backdrop ensured ongoing clashes with American settlers, who continued to press into the Northwest Territory, and for federal campaigns against the understandably antagonistic Western confederacy. In the early 1790s, the US failed several times to defeat the confederacy and were engaged in a protracted effort to reach a peace treaty in the early 1790s, which, incidentally, may also have stoked the settler anger evident in the Whiskey Rebellion (172). As these negotiations foundered in August of 1794, Anthony Wayne set out with 2,000 men to establish US sovereignty by force. At Fallen Timbers, a region in present day northwest Ohio, the US forces won a decisive victory, while the members of the confederacy scattered in retreat to the north. One year later, Wayne also led the peace negotiations, which he used to expand the frontier for American settlers (and land speculators) into much of contemporary Ohio, southern Indiana, and Illinois.[26]

Reed sees a struggle over authorship in the Whiskey Rebellion and the contemporaneous campaign against the Western confederacy. Embroiled in lawless, uncertain efforts to dispossess Indians at the frontier, these settlers had refused to acknowledge the authority of federal agents and the rectorship of the federal government. And who were they—both the rebels and the government agents—agents of? Who, in other words, were legitimate authors in these chains of power? The rebels cast themselves as both actors, true agents of the people, and rectors capable of authoring their own projects. The preacher Hermann Husband, one of the intellectual firebrands associated with the rebels, denounced a corrupt, undemocratic government that failed to represent the people as either body natural or body politic; instead it served "filthy lucre" (141–44). Of course, it is important to ask, then, who are the people? Much like the mystical second body of the king at the edge of empire, the answer was subject to repeated contestation. The Whiskey Rebellion, in particular, testifies to that. Moreover, as the Battle of Fallen Timbers and the Treaty of Greenville revealed in a big way, these settlers (and the American project) defined themselves and their projects against Indians.

26. Gregory Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: the North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); William Hogeland, *Autumn of the Black Snake* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

But it was, Reed argues, the performances of power in the Whiskey Rebellion, the Battle of Fallen Timbers, and the Treaty of Greenville that bequeathed a more definitive and sobering solution to these problems of authorship. In the Whiskey Rebellion, the federal government—through an unprecedented display of force and savvy negotiation—established itself as "rector over, and agent of, the people" (169). As such the settlers on the western frontier were conscripted into a federal project, represented in the body of the president and incorporated into the mystical second body of the people. Through his performances at the Battle of Fallen Timbers and the Treaty of Greenville—premised on the violent exclusion of Indians—Anthony Wayne diminished the kingly stature of the president and beckoned the western settlers into the second body of the people. His performance included the refusal to acknowledge the terms of previous treaties and agreements. As a representative of the people, a citizen like Wayne could, for a time, play the role of ultimate rector—such roles were not just reserved for presidents. Reed writes, "The second body of the people, which had judged the agents of Washington as scary but fair in their dealings with the whiskey rebels, will also judge Wayne, assessing how much it finds him to be a suitable Indian killer" (181). The national project, therefore, established Indians as others to be removed, while settlers became legitimate authors of expansion.[27]

These events performed into being a means of securing chains of power and their representation in the early American republic. They also reveal the uniquely modern form that struggles over authorship assumed in the Atlantic world. Political modernity, Reed argues, lies in the creative destruction of the king's two bodies (229–30). It is about how people labor, in a world without the king's two bodies as banisters, to make chains of power—both their extension and creation—possible. But where many have assumed that such destruction tends only to cleave the mystical and the sacred from the world, Reed locates the modern in precisely the reinvention of the mystical and the sacred. The concern, then, is not if people pursue sacralization but rather what kind they pursue and why. These questions of meaning,

27. Reed writes, "The rendering of the body and its relation to whiteness was complex and allowed for tremendous variation; the differences in application to 'red' and 'black' were particularly stark" (179). While he explicitly discusses slavery and alterity in the first (conceptual) section of the book (21–26), the question of whiteness, blackness, and slavery in the second (historical) section remains largely in the background. One wonders how the account might shift with the introduction of other cases from the early American republic like the debate over the Articles of Confederation in the 1770s, the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, the Fugitive Slave Act in 1793, or responses to the Haitian Revolution. See George William Van Cleve, *A Slaveholders' Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2018).

in other words, serve as the basis for and background through which to understand power in modernity.

B. POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CULTURE IN THE WHISKEY REBELLION, THE BATTLE OF FALLEN TIMBERS, AND THE TREATY OF GREENVILLE

In exploring these chains of power and their representation, Reed is anything but mechanical. He does not promote a monocausal and modular account wherein the meaningful conflict over authorship has no observable relationship to Atlantic political economy. But he presents these modern struggles over authorship as analytically independent from and prior to political economy—culture stands as transcendent. It is as if these projects—land grabs, speculation, and the attendant intra-colonial as well as imperial and national struggles—have nothing but an accidental relationship to the struggles over authorship evident in the Whiskey Rebellion, the Battle of Fallen Timbers, and the Treaty of Greenville. When these worlds collide, culture tends to occupy pride of place as that which makes possible. Because the Whiskey Rebellion involves some problems of delegation and domination—Who will pay the excise? Who will collect the excise? To whom does the excise go, and in whose name is it collected and given?—then it simply stages a struggle over authorship. The struggle effectively crowds out other contemporaneous, meaningful, and possibly relevant concerns such as the struggles over land, property, and livelihood.[28] My purpose is not to supplant the political economic for the cultural as the true harbinger of political modernity. It is rather to submit that we can consider them together by exploring the ways that the imperial project of dispossession and enclosure inflected the dilemmas over authorship and vice versa. At the very least, we should be open to the ways that these projects crisscrossed and overlapped in the Atlantic world.

Reed could object that these land issues were a persistent feature of European colonial conquest in the Western Hemisphere. Thus we require an account of this political culture and performance to appreciate why these struggles at the edge of empire proved so significant. But my concern is not to dismiss the relevance of Reed's signal contribution; it is rather to challenge this vestigial tendency to counterpose culture and political economy.[29] These struggles over land, too, are meaningful. Land

28. It is perhaps no coincidence that Reed lays out these and other conditions as the "power situation" (152–55), within which the drama over sovereignty unfolds. But the "problem of meaning" arises only with reference to the representations of chains of power vis-à-vis republican governance (155–61).

29. I say vestigial because I do not see this as an oversight on Reed's part but rather a persistent feature of arguments that stress either the independent logic or autonomous effects of culture. This is a claim that I cannot flesh out in detail here but will explore elsewhere.

must be turned into property—wilderness into pasture, earth into ours into mine. The drama surrounding the king's two bodies and the birth of political modernity in the Atlantic world, in my reading, is neither intelligible nor, perhaps, possible without an attendant project of dispossession. Thus I submit that *Power in Modernity* gives a partial account of the meaningful conditions that enable and inflect this modern struggle for authorship. By observing that it depends on particular realms of social life like those marked off as political economy, we do not profane or demean culture. Rather we properly open up those realms to concerns otherwise sealed off in a magical, symbolic space of culture. Let me explain.

At crucial moments the argument simultaneously equivocates and asserts, as in this suggestive parallel between the "founding era" and contemporary politics:

> After all, both the 1780s and 1790s and the 2000s and 2010s in the United States invoked financial chicanery of variable intelligence, the food politics attendant to global markets, the folly of imperial ambition, and a crisis in the project of economic democracy. . . . Patronage, state-making, and states' rights were present as well, and the very possibility of property in land—much of it possessed by George Washington himself—was at stake when seven thousand men marched in Pittsburgh in defiance of the whiskey excise" (166–67).

In this passage there is a laudable caution and humility. The Whiskey Rebellion is, of course, many things from many perspectives. It arose amid severe political economic ferment, circumstances that Reed acknowledges and appreciates. He then continues, "But *perhaps more than anything else*, the Whiskey Rebellion thematized what Johann Neem adroitly identifies as 'modernity's wager.' I hazard that it did so in a way that remains to be clarified and grasped" (167; emphasis added).[30] The phrase "perhaps more than anything else" appoints this symbolic struggle as first among equals. The federal government's performative defeat of the rebellion—something that was accomplished both in correspondence between members of delegated committees and down the barrel of a gun—betokens a "shift in the sinews of power."[31] This is,

30. "Modernity's wager" refers to the "bet" that we can sustain a social and political order even as authority has devolved onto the reasoning, rights-bearing individual, though Reed glosses it in terms of locating authorship in the people's two bodies. See Adam Seligman, *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12–13.

31. Reed's recounting of the Whiskey Rebellion speaks to and mirrors his analytical aims (cf. Isaac Ariail Reed, "Between Structural Breakdown and Crisis Action: Interpretation in the Whiskey Rebellion and the Salem Witch Trials," *Critical Historical Studies* 3 (2016): 27–64). All of the drama lies in the negotiation between the representatives of the federal government, the state of Pennsylvania, and the rebels over the terms for achieving a peace and, thus, the proper understanding of the federal authority and popular sovereignty. Once the committee representing the rebels assented to the federal government's terms (on

Reed proposes, “a shift in the representation of the authorship of right action and a recrafting of how chains of power were constructed and maintained” (167).

In Reed’s staging the rebellion and its dramas are terrific, mystical representations. They are actions without ground. The land, the scenery, certain ongoing projects like dispossession, property, taxation, and associated fractious inequalities—these bookend Reed’s impressive interpretive work. Yet they are analytically barren in that these projects (dispossession, taxation, etc.) are incidental to the problem of authorship. Whether many settlers relied on whiskey as currency or participated in a subsistence economy without market domination or squatted on land held by eastern speculators or were engaged in a chaotic project of dispossession does not inform Reed’s account of settlers’ assertions of sovereign authorship and their displeasure with the efforts of the federal government to bring them to heel.[32] The various performances and struggles to frame the rebellion in negotiation—by the delegates of rebels, the federal government, and the state of Pennsylvania, as well as their audiences

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August 23, 1794), which included acquiescence to the whiskey excise, we reach what Reed calls a “closure of interpretation” (166). Narratively the peace looks like a fait accompli. Thus it may come as a surprise when, several pages later, Reed notes that the federal forces continued to march on western Pennsylvania despite having reached such closure. Although Reed initially alludes to the “the greatest movement of troops on American soil between the American Revolution and the Civil War” (154), we never learn the size of that military force—the federal government had roused a multistate militia with more than 12,000 men, much larger than the joint French and Continental Army forces that defeated the British at Yorktown thirteen years prior (Carol Berkin, *A Sovereign People: The Crises of the 1790s the Birth of American Nationalism* [New York: Basic Books, 2017], 63–75; Hogeland, *Whiskey Rebellion*, 189–206). Nor do we learn that their march on western Pennsylvania continued well into November. Reed alludes to the “dreadful night” on which a few rebel leaders including Herman Husband were “hauled off to be put on trial in Philadelphia” (169). But this occurred on November 13, nearly three months after the closure of interpretation. In this version the drama of negotiation and interpretation is cordoned off from the ongoing conditions of popular agitation and uncertainty that were central to the rebellion even at this terminal stage—from the agitated settlers on the frontier and the thousands of militia men marching on behalf of the federal government to the nervous land speculators and the increasingly concerned American public to the east. Later Reed observes that the federal government “crushed” the Whiskey Rebellion (184), an accurate description that nevertheless stands out in contrast to the rather staid earlier presentation. My question here is conceptual rather than historiographical. The representational issues of authorship appear at the expense of other seemingly relevant issues (taxation, land speculation, settler inequalities, Indians, federal authority, and military power). Once the delegated parties arrived at their “felicitous interpretation,” the drama concludes; “there can be no more interpretations” (166). Thus the meaningful struggle over authorship occurs in a kind of splendid isolation. To be clear, I do not doubt the relevance of interpretive closure to performative power. What I suspect is that the account of interpretive closure would be more convincing if it were explicitly tied to and contrasted with, rather than sequestered from, these other elements of the Whiskey Rebellion.

32. Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 212–39; Steven Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017), 90–126; Cynthia Krom and Stephanie Krom, “The Whiskey Tax of 1791 and the Consequent Insurrection: ’A Wicked and Happy Tumult,’” *Accounting Historians Journal* 40, no. 2 (2013): 91–114.

throughout the former colonies and Europe—rewrote the symbolic grammar of power more or less on their own. Everything else seems immaterial.

Having laid waste, at least metaphorically, to the king's two bodies in the Revolution, these not quite yet American founders needed to invent a "semiotic glue" that could bind people together in chains of power.[33] And the Whiskey Rebellion staged precisely such an invention. But in this staging of the rebellion as a struggle over authorship, we look right through the struggles over land, property, and livelihood. Why delegate to and dominate the western settlers in the first place? Why not simply leave them to their own devices at the edge of nation and empire? Alexander Hamilton seemed to think that this new imperial nation-state, swamped with war debt and desiring to impress the nations of Europe, required a strong, modern economy. The frontier, with its unparcelled land ripe for eastern speculators and its largely untapped resource base, was crucial to his national vision.[34] In this way the need for a semiotic glue that bound settlers, land speculators, and politicians in chains of power itself depended on a set of projects—ongoing dispossession, enclosure, and speculation—that were formed in the colonial capitalist Atlantic world out of which the United States emerged.[35] Without such projects the unruliness of the settlers and the desire to discipline them make little sense.

On this score it is revealing that Reed gives a more compelling account of the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 and the subsequent Treaty of Greenville in 1795. Here the project of dispossession is more spectacular. Thus it suffuses his portrayal of Indian elimination and American conquest of the Ohio Valley through both war and political pomp. He shows how Anthony Wayne's campaign against an alliance of some Indian groups in the Northwest Territories "linked sovereign ambition to land and to race" (173). Wayne turned a minor military victory into a transcendent performance that affirmed settler confidence in the federal government. He razed fields, burned crops, and taunted the British (172). But as Reed shows, the drama

33. See also T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). As Reed discusses (196–219), the French had more to say about the king's physical body as well as his second, mystical body. Furthermore the Haitians contested these myths and their chains of power from the position of excluded other.

34. Berkin, *Sovereign People*, 12–14; Andrew Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780–1825* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1986), 12–13; Griffin, *American Leviathan*, 224; Hogeland, *Whiskey Rebellion*, 58–60.

35. John Donoghue, *Fire under the Ashes: An Atlantic History of the English Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Onur Ulas Ince, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies: London and the Atlantic Economy, 1660–1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

didn't end with military victory. Wayne used the official treaty to preen in front of the American public and to assert sovereign power at the expense of Indians. He demanded that the various tribes and bands cede much of the land north of the Ohio River, in spite of written promises from George Washington himself to preserve "hunting and fishing rights"—a textbook case of dispossession (177).[36] The expansion of the frontier required Indians to transform land into property so that it could be ceded to Americans, while they were simultaneously cast as "the grotesque, savage body of the nonwhite other who must be eliminated" (179).[37] In Wayne, Reed discovers the figure of the "sovereign edge warrior" who anchored the settlers firmly in the public body of the young American nation (179). Here we see the problem of authorship chillingly resolved in and through dispossession and enclosure—not separately but together.

The pattern of conflating culture with transcendence and setting it against political economy reappears elsewhere in the argument, most prominently in the tantalizing final chapter. To sustain the breach between political economy and culture, Reed leans on a familiar image: the former is a realm that begins and ends with monotonous instrumentality. "Network and commodity chain theories of capitalism," he writes, render power in a way that "tends toward the instrumental" (233). Typically, perhaps. But is this necessarily so? By contrast a culture stocked with "myths and meanings" (233) and "subjectivity, imagination, [and] fantasy" (235) opens up into a realm of plurality and diversity, even in repetition (246). This raises an analytical concern. On these terms the appearance of myths or imaginations or meanings, even those such as private property that are central to modern political economy, will tell us that we're really looking at culture. Political economy is prefigured as the absence or elimination of myth, meaning, subjectivity, imagination, fantasy, and so on. It is as if we are condemned to take Marx and Engels's poetic depiction of "heavenly ecstasies" drowned in the "icy water of egotistical calculation" literally, for ever and ever amen.[38] Such an understanding occludes the important work of tracing the immanent developments of myths or imaginations or meanings in and through the stuff of political economy. There is a way, I believe, to explore political economy in conjunction with these crises of authorship, which

36. On dispossession see Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin/White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6–7; Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Critical Theory and Dispossession* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 8–9.

37. It is also worth noting that the general category of Indian (or Native or Indigenous) developed along with this process of dispossession; see Dowd, *Spirited Resistance*.

38. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Marx and Engels: Selected Works*, vol. 1 (1848; Moscow: Progress, 1969), 111.

Reed so adroitly unspools. Moreover I suspect that we can do so without reducing these crises to mere reflexes of an "economic" base that is oddly bereft of meaning or abandoning analytical precision. Ironically Reed's account of the Battle of Fallen Timbers and the Treaty of Greenville suggests as much. To clarify and test this intuition, though, we must be prepared to let go of the a priori separation of culture, understood here as the work of interpretation, from political economy. We may find instances where such a division truly applies and is necessary. But we may also discover instances of the opposite. Then the question becomes, as ever, why?

III. THE AGONY OF THE AGONIST

Now we can return to the profound analytical question that *Power in Modernity* raises for the human sciences: By beginning with a theory of action, can we escape the dilemmas of structure and action and deconstruct some unhelpful dichotomies that suffuse accounts of culture, power, and the modern? I think we should read Reed's answer as "Yes but." He offers an inspiring and productive treatment of action as power, which provides a means to track recurring hierarchies—follow actors in search of rectors and the others whom they exclude. This will, he recommends, lead us to the meanings and myths that bind these parties into various competitive, cooperative, and violent relations of domination and delegation. Thus Reed neither reduces hierarchy to the imperious machinations of a stipulated social structure nor dissolves it into formless processual flux. But at the same time, the argument replicates a tendentious distinction between culture and political economy. Where Reed adopts an immanent approach to power as action, he treats culture as the transcendent ur-ground; it is a firmly independent "enabler"[39] of the resulting chains of power. Consequently he invites the question of what it means if, in turn, these representations and chains of power depend on specific kinds of projects like dispossession and land speculation, which took shape and gained force through tendencies in capitalist networks of commerce and empire.

My worry is neither with abstraction as such nor the use of culture as an analytic. The goal is not to denounce the very possibility of coherent and truthful abstraction from the ebb and flow of social processes. Nor is the goal to absolve the analyst of the responsibility to evaluate the relative priority of some phenomena and tendencies over others. The goal is, as Reed clearly shows, to hone our conceptual language and grammar so that we might create better, more precise, and more truthful abstractions. In turn these abstractions will enable better, more precise, and truthful analyses. This is exactly the significance of Reed's idiosyncratic triad—rector, actor,

39. Abend, "Making Things Possible," 69.

other—and the projects through which these relations unfold. Such pristine yet challenging thinking points us beyond stale debates over structure and action or the tendency to cast power in either/or terms: either scientific or magical, deliberative or coercive, real or nominal. However, if *Power in Modernity* is any indication, there is also a danger in beginning with a theory of power as action. We may be tempted to reproduce an assumed caesura between culture and political economy, one based on the volatility, excess, and spectacle of culture, especially in performative power. Confronted with a welter of meaningful performances and actions, we can imagine them to be essentially untethered from the assumed monomaniacal reductivism of political economy. Of Reed's approach one could say, interpolating Beauvoir, that culture is doomed to transcendence. Though aiming beyond, then, we may find ourselves plunged back into oddly familiar struggles.

This returns us to where we began: Kafka's protagonist, beset from ahead and from behind. Like the protagonist, I left readers in the middle of the parable, stranded between the origin and destination. In the thick of the struggle, the protagonist dreams "that some time in an unguarded moment—and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet—he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other."[40] Reed pursues this vital dream—of escaping the fighting line and perhaps even setting the terms for the fighters—through an invigorating grand synthesis that tracks chains of power and their representation. But what if the dream of an escape in the darkest night is precisely that which keeps the protagonist in the fight? What if the way out—for the interpretivist as for our fellow travelers and comrades—is through? Not transcendence, in other words, but immanence. Even these, too, need not be essential or final foes; ironically we could find ourselves better able to recognize and verify transcendence when beginning from a position of immanence. The struggle that Reed finds at the heart of the human sciences is this: to locate authorship somewhere between the world as we have found it and the world as we dream it is or even might yet be. It is a thoroughly modern drama.

40. Kafka, quoted in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7.