

Book Review

Review of “Power in Modernity: Agency Relations and the Creative Destruction of the King’s Two Bodies”

By Isaac Ariel Reed

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Can a book about bodies also be about interpretation? This, I want to argue, is the principal wager of Isaac Reed’s new book *Power in Modernity* and its effort to make a theoretical case for nonmechanistic action and agency and its creative reappropriation of a classical argument for the purposes of fundamentally reframing what modernity can mean.

Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies* (orig. published 1957) is among the best known works of medieval scholarship ever published, in part because it bridges boundaries. The history profession came to be in no small part under the auspices of the state and its enlistment of historians (first in Germany) to tell its institutional history and the mythology of its personages. The 1960s revolts, among other things, proved a decisive challenge to this exclusive and exclusionary orientation, and in the intellectual efflorescence that followed, “the body” ascended to a position of importance inconceivable for historians in the 1940s and 1950s. Kantorowicz’s book remains a remarkable (and prescient) analysis, because it comprises institutional history *as* a history of bodies. Importantly, however, “Kantorowicz bodies” (to coin a phrase) remain distinguishable from the embodied bodies that have become a familiar point of reference for scholars in the human sciences today. Not only are Kantorowicz bodies *collective* bodies, they are tokens of meaning rather than materiality, though they remain material. Paradoxically, the *presence* of a Kantorowicz body is also less than metaphysical. Abiding in some in-between purgatory, Kantorowicz bodies remain immediately present and immediately absent, a *corpus mysticum*, abounding in (political) theological subtlety.

Reed’s book draws from Kantorowicz’s analysis for both titular purposes (catchy wordsmithing) and also to make a theoretical intervention into a basic conceptual problem: namely, how can collective formations *form* without relying

on the reductive dangers of mechanism rather than meaning? Reed is aware that Kantorowicz bodies have a different provenance than the embodied bodies that became a focal point after the 1960s. Kantorowicz bodies derive from Weimar and its elitist cultural politics (as reflected in Kantorowicz's first book, a hagiography of Frederick the Great). Without the "king's body" the organic whole could fall apart (or be ripped apart by the prevalence of *chance* as Carl Schmitt once observed). The king's body is not *merely* embodied, in this sense, which is the straightforward novelty of Kantorowicz's claims. Rather the king's body is a Kantorowicz body that gives a Leviathan-like rulership to whomever happens to claim it. And *somebody* needs to claim it, Kantorowicz implies, lest Weimar and its chaos (times two or three) be invited back in.

Kantorowicz's wager is that only a privileged human body can take possession of a Kantorowicz body. Even if that human body is an unremarkable one (frequently the case), it assumes epic proportions through such ascendance. Here, we find a key departure of Reed from Kantorowicz and evidence of the striking novelty of Reed's claims. In the virtuoso conclusion to the book, we find plausible arguments given for all sorts of things performing the role of Kantorowicz bodies in the early American republic: whiskey, "the people," the army, all put forth as part of the creative destruction of a Kantorowicz body in its medieval form (e.g., as a *King*).

In Reed's terms, this signals a realignment of rectorship in a situation of uncertainty such that "everyone becomes a philosopher" (or political theologian) and advocates for a "king's body" of their choice. Reed can make these departures and advancements on Kantorowicz given the thorough account of rulership he establishes in the first 100 pages of the book. As many have noted, Kantorowicz implicitly assumed that rulership must work within the medieval parameters of what he empirically explains. Reed, in contrast, draws together several theoretical and empirical threads, some of which rarely if ever meet (like principal-agent theory and actor-network theory, e.g., or rogues of the Elizabethan theater and whiskey-drinking rogues of the American empire-state) in order to make a more general point. Rectors make actors into agents by enlisting them (actors) into their (rectors) projects; this also involves making some actors into "others" by placing them outside a rector's project. Actors lose their actorhood when rectors make them into agents (or others). They "abdicate their capacity" to make their own projects in favor of the projects of rectors. For most, the Bob Dylan lyric applies: "You're gonna have to serve somebody . . . It may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you're gonna have to serve somebody." The mistake, as Reed suggests, is to assume that this "somebody" is some *body* as opposed to a Kantorowicz body.

But should we expect that the rector-agent chains that make up a Kantorowicz body, which Reed vividly details with many examples, be threaded together by *interpretation*, as he so relentlessly argues? Do bodies interpret? It seems like they do, yes, and to find rectorship in a bottle of whiskey would seem to require it; but arguably, most bodies do not interpret in the way that Reed *himself* interprets Kantorowicz bodies in such novel and prolific forms.

Drawing from the work of Julia Adams, Reed repurposes principal-agent dynamics in his rector-actor scheme by replacing the rational choice mechanism with interpretation. Such a replacement is needed. One thing we know for sure is that bodies are generally terrible at rational choice except under very particular circumstances. But, and maybe against my better judgment, I'm left unconvinced whether interpretation can serve as its replacement.

Reed allows for actors to be enrolled by rectors and turned into agents through different means. Actor-network theory suggests an alternative for explaining the chainlinks of rector-actor. However, Reed convincingly shows that despite its best efforts, ANT cannot explain action-at-a-distance *qua* rector-actor chains at the level of empire. Why, for instance, would the hearty denizens of the North American colonies in the British Empire ever find themselves as agents in King Charles' projects? It was not because of the non-human actors with which they might be enfolded. As Reed shows, the colonists themselves often realized the tenuous links that made them agents, and so they began to act like actors, pursuing their own projects, enlisting some as agents and rendering "others." A sampling of such creative destruction of Kantorowicz bodies at the edge of empire includes Bacon's Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the (actual) blueprints of the fascinating 18th century American Hobbesian known as Herman Husband. All were involved in the contest over rectorship that, as Reed portrays, consumed the first decades of the United States, with the federal government facing extraordinary difficulty turning actors into agents of its own imperial project.

Power in Modernity appears after the embodied turn and, more importantly for Reed's argument, after the cultural turn. He leverages both turns to capture even more of the latent appeal of Kantorowicz's original claims. Nevertheless, there is reason to wonder whether the "interpretivist" leverage that Reed brings to bear can really account for the anomaly that is a Kantorowicz body. If bodies cannot or do not interpret as the scholarly body interprets, without the same proclivity or with as much time, is a Kantorowicz body an anomaly for not only the institutionalist paradigm against which Kantorowicz worked but also for the culturalist paradigm within which Reed works? Have we scholars been made into agents by a "culture" rector and perhaps for reasons that have little to do with our own interpretations? Is culture too big to fail? Or can we find our way clear of it? Are there available lines of flight? And would they make us, the scholars, capable of project-making that does not seem to inevitably circle back to the centrality of interpretation in one form or another?

It is just these sorts of questions that Reed leaves us with in a work that stands out for its ambition, scholarly virtuosity, writerly flair, and brilliant reiteration that "big" concepts do matter, irrespective of bureaucratic academic boundaries, and where our interpretations meet other interpretations matters even more.