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Meaning as Cause: Critical Realism, Ubuntu, and Theorizing from the Global South

Abstract

Cultural sociology's interpretive turn has deepened our understanding of how meanings are constructed but often at the expense of explaining when and how they shape action. This article argues that critical realism offers a generative meta-theoretical foundation for cultural sociology by integrating interpretive sensitivity with ontological depth and causal inquiry. Extending Spillman's call for causal inference in cultural analysis, I show how critical realism enables researchers to specify the conditions under which meanings move from interpretation to action. Drawing on two South African cases 1) the visitor-led entropic re-curation of Robben Island Museum and 2) divergent community responses during the 2021 Durban unrest, I theorize a process model of Contingent Memory Activation (CMA), through which collective memory guides crisis response under particular structural and narrative conditions. To demonstrate the utility of this approach, I engage Ubuntu, a Southern African ontology of relational personhood, to demonstrate how Global South epistemologies contribute not only critique but general social theory. Just as critical realism's origins in Bhaskar's engagement with Hindu philosophy in India foreground transcendence and relation, Ubuntu grounds ontology in constitutive relationality and ethical interdependence. Their convergence yields a decolonial cultural sociology capable of both interpretive nuance and causal explanation. Rather than provincializing theory from the "North," this synthesis advances theorization from the South, offering a globally generative framework for understanding meaning-in-action.

Keywords: Critical realism; cultural sociology; interpretivism; causal inference; collective memory; Ubuntu; Global South; meaning-in-action; South Africa

Meaning as Cause: Critical Realism, Ubuntu, and Theorizing from the Global South

Since the inception of sociology as a discipline, interpretivism has been an enduring epistemic mode, prized for its sensitivity to meaning, historical specificity, and the situated knowledge of social actors (Weber [1922] 1978). Among interpretivism's most articulate defenders is Isaac Reed, whose work (2008; 2011:8) lays out a case for understanding as the central task of the social sciences, grappling with the question: "what is going on when a researcher constructs a knowledge claim?" Rejecting both positivist empiricism and natural realism, Reed offers a vision of sociology grounded in "landscapes of meaning," where social knowledge emerges through maximal interpretation of historically situated motives, mechanisms, and symbolic systems. In this vein, his work seeks to answer two interrelated questions: "How do, and how should, theory and evidence interact?" (2011:7). This interpretivist turn has enriched cultural analysis by re-centering meaning, narrative, and subjectivity. But it has also produced an epistemic impasse that few cultural sociologists directly confront: an enduring hesitation to ask, and to stake claims on, when meanings become real in their effects, a question that demands not only interpretation but also clear ontological commitments from which causal claims can be established.

Cultural sociology has long privileged interpretation over causation; this paper proposes a critical realist and Ubuntu-informed synthesis that specifies when and how actors' interpretations acquire causal force, demonstrating how meaning mediates between understanding and action while preserving the centrality of lived experience. A cultural sociology that treats interpretation and causation as a false dichotomy risks remaining intellectually circular and performatively inclusive, extending "Global South incorporation" in rhetoric rather than in practice. To generate theory from the Global South rather than merely about it, sociology must move past interpretivism's epistemic confidence in "understanding" toward the critical realist epistemic humility that recognizes reality's independence from any single interpreter. In dialogue with Ubuntu's relational ontology, this humility enables a genuinely global sociology, one that treats meaning as causally real because it emerges through relations, not merely within representations. Rather than abandoning cultural sociology's focus on meaning, this intervention reorients it. I shift attention from what meanings signify to when and how they become causally consequential, clarifying the conditions that transform interpretation into social action.

While interpretivism encompasses diverse orientations—from phenomenological to pragmatist to hermeneutic—Reed’s formulation represents its most epistemically assertive strand, privileging the researcher’s interpretive understanding as the ultimate arbiter of social knowledge. For all its sensitivity to meaning, this stance risks parochialism: it confines inquiry to what can be understood rather than what can be real. In *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* (2011), Reed rethinks explanation rather than rejecting it, proposing “forming causes” to show how symbolic configurations shape action by rendering it intelligible. Yet, in seeking to discredit natural realism, he insufficiently acknowledges critical realism, reducing it to a mechanistic search for hidden entities. This conflation misrepresents an entire epistemic philosophy. Critical realism is not “natural realism” or “mechanistic realism”; rather, it holds that reality is stratified, composed of real but often unobservable structures that generate both events and meanings, and that knowledge is therefore fallible, partial, and ontologically engaged. Beginning from epistemic humility, critical realism recognizes the independence and depth of the world beyond interpretation. This humility is not weakness but a disciplined openness to alternative explanations—a posture that exposes interpretivism’s quiet dogmatism when it resists dialogue with realist approaches. Placed in dialogue with Ubuntu’s relational ontology, this humility becomes the basis for genuinely global theory-building: both frameworks affirm that meaning is not merely constructed within the interpreter’s mind but emerges through real relations that precede and exceed the individual knower.

This humility makes possible the incorporation of Global South ontologies such as *Ubuntu*, which articulate relational understandings of being and moral interdependence that exceed the interpretivist frame. Because interpretivism lacks the intellectual infrastructure to speak of the real, it can never fully integrate such ontological claims; its authority rests on the researcher’s perception of “understanding,” not on the causal interplay between meaning and structure. This limitation becomes especially acute in postcolonial contexts such as South Africa, where symbolic repertoires and structural inequalities are deeply interwoven. Without an account of how meaning interacts with stratified social structures, interpretivism cannot explain why certain cultural understandings acquire traction while others dissipate. The question, then, is not merely how actors construct meanings but when and why those meanings become causally efficacious, why some visions of the world, reveal deeper realities that others refuse to see.

I argue that critical realism offers a robust meta-theoretical foundation for cultural sociology, one that reconciles concerns of causality and meaning while remaining open enough to genuinely integrate theories from the Global South, where worldviews such as *Ubuntu* and other relational ontologies cannot be dismissed as merely “local meanings,” but must be recognized as alternative causal logics of understanding social reality. Unlike interpretivism, critical realism integrates epistemic reflexivity with ontological depth, enabling inquiry into both how meanings are constructed and under what conditions they shape action. Its core commitments—ontological realism, epistemic relativity, and causal inquiry through retroduction (Bhaskar 1975; Archer 1995; Smith 2010), allow sociologists to treat cultural objects, narratives, and memories as meaning-laden and causally potent. Interpretation is not rejected but embedded within a broader ontology where structures, institutions, and material conditions condition meaning’s efficacy. As Smith (2010:17) puts it, the sociological task is not merely to interpret meaning-worlds, but to explain how persons and structures co-produce action within them.

This article situates the turn to critical realism within the broader project of theorizing from the Global South. I extend this analysis to *Ubuntu*, whose relational ontology complements critical realism by grounding causality in intersubjective personhood. Where critical realism theorizes stratified structures and generative mechanisms, *Ubuntu* emphasizes that social being itself emerges through relations with others. Together they show that meaning becomes efficacious not in isolation but through the contingent alignment of structures, narratives, and communal relations. *Ubuntu* does not merely fit within critical realism—it exposes the limits of Western individualist ontologies and expands realism’s account of relational causality. I do not claim that *Ubuntu* exhausts Global South thought, but it exemplifies how relational ontologies challenge the Western assumption of atomized being, aligning with Smith’s (2010) critical realist conception of the person as an emergent, relational, and causally efficacious entity. This synthesis advances a more relational account of causation and provides the philosophical grounding for the empirical analyses that follow, showing how cultural objects and collective memories act causally in South African contexts of heritage and crisis.

I develop this framework through two South African cases. The first examines how visitor-generated Instagram posts at Robben Island Museum re-curate the state’s intended narrative of reconciliation, showing how cultural objects transform as they move across embodied, institutional, and digital domains. A process I

label *entropic re-curation*. The second introduces the theory of Contingent Memory Activation (CMA) to explain why adjacent Durban communities responded so differently to the July 2021 unrest: one descending into racialized vigilantism, the other mobilizing cross-racial solidarity. Using in-depth interviews, WhatsApp communication, and GIS mapping, I show how memory is not simply interpreted but activated under specific conditions, mediated by leadership and digital infrastructures.

Meaning is not only an object of understanding but a causal force that operates through relations, structures, and action. Whether unraveling a heritage narrative in digital space or mobilizing collective memory in crisis, meaning acts causally only under contingent conditions. A cultural sociology committed solely to interpretation cannot explain these dynamics. Critical realism provides the tools to analyze them. This article proceeds as follows. First, I briefly examine Reed's (2008; 2011) interpretivist framework, acknowledging its valuable contributions while identifying its limits—especially its reluctance to theorize the ontological basis of meaning's causal force. Second, I turn to Spillman's work on causal inference as a bridge between interpretation and explanation. Third, I introduce the principles of critical realism and demonstrate their payoff for cultural sociology. Fourth, I engage Ubuntu as a complementary ontology that deepens our understanding of critical realism. Fifth and sixth, I develop my argument through empirical cases showing how meaning becomes causally efficacious under contingent conditions. Finally, I situate this synthesis within global sociology, arguing that aligning critical realism with Ubuntu advances a cultural sociology capable of both interpretive nuance and explanatory depth.

A Brief introduction to Critical Realism:

Critical realism offers a meta-theoretical framework for bridging interpretation and explanation without collapsing one into the other. Developed by Roy Bhaskar (1975) and elaborated by Archer (1995; 2016), Smith (2010), and others, it rests on three foundational commitments: ontological realism, epistemic relativity, and judgmental rationality. Ontological realism asserts that the world exists independently of our descriptions of it; epistemic relativity recognizes that all knowledge of that world is partial, situated, and historically contingent; and judgmental rationality affirms that some explanations can be better or worse—not by virtue of their universality, but by their capacity to illuminate the generative mechanisms that make things possible. In this view, causality is not mechanical but emergent: meanings, institutions, and actions

arise through stratified processes that unfold across material, cultural, and relational layers of reality. Critical realism thus provides a way to theorize meaning as both interpretively produced and causally efficacious, offering a vocabulary for analyzing how structures enable, constrain, and transform what actors can do and know.

Critical realism preserves interpretivism's reflexivity while adding the conceptual tools to ask what generative structures make meanings possible. Reed's portrayal of it as a mechanistic search for hidden entities misreads its core insight: reality is stratified, composed of real but often unobservable structures that generate both events and meanings, and knowledge is therefore fallible, partial, and ontologically engaged. By acknowledging that meaning depends on relations that precede interpretation and by conceding that some interpretations are more adequate than others, interpretivists inadvertently affirm the realist ontology they seek to deny. In this sense, they are already critical realists, whether or not they recognize it. Refusing this recognition risks epistemic solipsism—an inability to sustain humility or engage alternative ontological claims. By denying depth, interpretivism denies dialogue. Only by embracing ontological depth can sociology move beyond interpreting the Global South to theorizing from it, specifying the causal conditions under which meanings become socially consequential. Critical realism thus begins not from epistemic confidence but humility: acknowledging the world's independence from our interpretations and the coexistence of multiple, layered causal explanations across different levels of reality.

The purpose of science is not prediction or reduction but the discovery and explanation of how reality actually works (Smith, 2010). Because the world is complex, inquiry must attend to its layered and interacting causal forces rather than flatten them into one-dimensional models. Theories necessarily simplify, yet their task is not to compress reality but to identify the key elements and mechanisms that underlie observed patterns. Genuine inquiry depends on confidence in the reality of the world combined with humility about our understanding of it. Critical realism provides a framework for seeing meaning as both created through interpretation and active in shaping action—clarifying how structures enable, limit, and transform what people can do and understand.

While I develop these commitments in greater detail later in the paper, it is worth noting how critical realism contrasts with interpretivism. Where interpretivism privileges epistemic confidence—the assumption that

understanding a world is sufficient for sociology—critical realism begins from epistemic humility: the recognition that reality exceeds interpretation and that our accounts are always provisional, though not arbitrary. This humility makes realism genuinely plural, open to alternative ontologies and modes of causation, creating space for theories from the Global South, such as Ubuntu, to enter sociology not as cultural curiosities but as ontological interventions that expand what can count as causal explanation. If interpretivism narrows sociology to meaning, empiricism flattens it to observation. The lingering influence of empiricism—the belief that valid knowledge derives only from what can be observed through the senses—conflates the necessary empirical grounding of science with the mistaken assumption that only observable phenomena are real or epistemically legitimate, a stance that is philosophically incoherent since empiricism itself cannot be validated by empirical means (Smith, 2010). In practice, many social scientists operate within a vague empiricist mindset, mistaking methodological observation for ontological truth and producing impoverished anthropologies that narrow what societies imagine as real or explainable. Critical realism, in this sense, is not an alternative to cultural sociology’s interpretive tradition but its completion: it affirms that meaning matters because it is real, accomplishing work only under particular structural and relational conditions.

Interpretivism: Its Contributions and Limits

While interpretivism spans numerous and diverse scholars—from Geertz (1973) to Taylor (1985) to Swidler (1986)—I focus here on Isaac Reed (2008; 2011), whose work offers one of the most explicit articulations of interpretivist epistemology in contemporary cultural sociology. Reed (2011: 92) defends interpretation as a distinct mode of explanation while critiquing realism, causality, and judgmental rationality on philosophical grounds. Building on Geertzian “thick description,” he argues that social knowledge arises through the interpretation of historically situated “landscapes of meaning.” In *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*, Reed (2011) presents interpretation as a rigorous epistemic practice capable of producing “maximal interpretations”: thick accounts of motives, meanings, and mechanisms embedded in particular social worlds. In this view, social knowledge is not reducible to empirical data but entails “a theory of knowing” (Maccolman 2015; Reed 2011). He distinguishes interpretivism from both positivism and realism: positivism, he contends, reduces knowledge to observable regularities, excluding meaning, whereas realism,

particularly in its naturalist, mechanism-seeking forms, is treated as overly focused on causal explanation at the expense of interpretive understanding.

Against both, Reed asserts that sociology must reconstruct actors' symbolic worlds by foregrounding local knowledge, historical specificity, and situated logics of meaning-making. A central feature of his framework is the distinction between "minimal" and "maximal" interpretation: minimal interpretations provide thin factual accounts, such as the date or sequence of events, while maximal interpretations explain not only what happened but why, situating action within the actor's landscape of meaning. Reed presents maximal interpretation as a response to the "era after the posts" (2011: 11), post-positivist, post-modern, post-structural, post-colonial—offering a model that explains outcomes through "motives and mechanisms" while remaining rooted in historically situated meaning. Yet this interpretivism risks an infinite regress of meaning, where explanation becomes an endless reconstruction of symbolic narratives: "turtles all the way down." What remains implicit are the conditions under which meanings become efficacious, and there is little systematic account of "what makes things possible" (Abend 2022). Reed's redefinition of causality as interpretive rather than ontological rests on a selective reading of realism: he neglects critical realism and constructs his foil as natural realism—a naïve search for invariant mechanisms "akin to the mechanical workings of a clock"—despite citing Bhaskar (Reed, 2011: 63). In collapsing critical realism into natural realism, he overlooks that critical realists (Bhaskar 1975; Archer et al. 2016) explicitly reject constant conjunctions or fixed mechanisms. For them, causality is layered, contingent, and emergent, not mechanical. Reed extends this misreading in his critique of Marx and Bhaskar, claiming they presume access to "real theory" that overrides actors' "false consciousness," a view he deems nonsensical (2011: 60). Yet if all knowledge requires some reference to the real for evaluation, how can interpretivism justify its own validity beyond local coherence?

Although Reed emphasizes the historical and situated nature of meaning-making, he brackets the conditions of possibility that render certain meanings intelligible and actionable at specific times (Abend 2022). His "landscapes of meaning" metaphor evokes interpretive specificity and historical depth yet remains underdeveloped. The metaphor also invites a realist reading attentive to the sedimented structures that shape the terrain itself: landscapes evolve, erode, and persist, and few would deny their ontological existence. Just as Van Gogh's *Starry Night* or Monet's *Water Lilies* depict stylized but real environments, sociological

interpretations render distinct yet non-arbitrary visions of meaning embedded in social worlds. Read this way, Reed's metaphor invites inquiry into the historically layered and causally generative structures that make meaning possible. His own examples of "minimal facts," such as the dates of a revolution (2011: 43–45, 117–121), already depend on enabling assumptions—"what counts as a revolution? Who are the actors? Who wrote the history?"—questions showing that even "facts" are saturated with theory (Bhaskar 1998: 48). Reed admits that "social facts... must be inferred and understood in dialogue about what is happening or has happened, at a certain time, in a certain space, in a given society" (2011: 16), yet leaves open what makes those meanings possible. As Spillman (2013) argues, minimal and maximal interpretations form a continuum, underscoring the need to theorize the ontological basis of meaning beyond interpretation alone. Without such grounding, interpretivism cannot explain why certain meanings become stable, legible, and actionable across actors.

This closure is most evident in Reed's account of causality. He distinguishes "forcing" causes (regular associations) from "forming" causes (conditions of possibility), aligning causal explanation with narrative reconstruction. While he acknowledges institutions and history as part of actors' landscapes of meaning, he does not theorize them as generative structures with causal powers. Interpretive research, he insists, does not seek "real causes" but paints "coherent representations" of local worlds (2011: 92, 110). The result is a rich reconstruction of symbolic logics but an under-specification of the structural and material conditions under which meanings become efficacious. Critical realism addresses this issue by grounding forming causes in institutional patterns, mnemonic repertoires, and material structures that shape meaning's salience. As Spillman (2013) notes, meanings may not be predictive but can still be causally relevant. Without a realist account of structure, we risk post hoc rationalization with no principled basis for causal claims. Reed's own discussion of Moore's comparative study concedes that "the relationship between town and country is a real thing... with different outcomes" (2011: 49), a statement that already gestures toward realism's layered ontology. From a critical realist standpoint, his strict separation of interpretation and explanation is both unnecessary and limiting. Critical realism integrates ontological realism with epistemic relativity (Bhaskar 1975; Archer et al. 2016), showing that knowledge is always situated, yet meanings act causally within real but evolving structures where understanding and explanation converge rather than divide.

Interpretivism asserts that all knowledge is mediated by meaning; yet this is epistemic overreach. Archer (2000; 2007) reminds us that practice precedes language—that human knowing is rooted in embodied engagement with the world—while Polanyi (1958; 2009) shows that much knowledge is tacit and enacted rather than articulated. Meaning mediates some forms of knowledge, but not all; to reduce all knowing to interpretation mistakes the discursive tip of understanding for its ontological depth. Mediation does not exhaust reality. Without a metatheoretical foundation, Reed’s interpretivism anchors knowledge in what can be apprehended by the interpreter rather than what may be real beyond that horizon. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* reminds us, when the young narrator shows adults his drawing of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant, they see only a hat—perceiving what fits their categories while missing the deeper reality. Interpretivism, like those adults, can describe what meanings signify within a frame but lacks the tools to grasp the structures that make those meanings possible. Critical realism, by contrast, allows us to ask why and how the elephant was eaten in the first place. But isn’t it interesting that people see a hat? Absolutely, but only if one also knows it is not, in fact, a hat.

My intention, therefore, is not to challenge Reed’s interpretive sensitivity—which has profoundly enriched cultural sociology—but to address the epistemological limits that arise when questions of causality are treated as separate from interpretation. As Reed himself notes, “the critique of social life and its cultural products requires, at least implicitly, some approach to social explanation,” even as he “doubt(s) whether these connections can be adequately established via the mode... at the core of realist epistemology” (2011: 38). In focusing primarily on naturalist versions of realism, Reed’s analysis leaves open the possibility that other realist traditions, such as critical realism, might complement, rather than oppose, interpretivist inquiry. A critical realist perspective holds that while all knowledge is epistemically situated, the world it seeks to understand is nonetheless ontologically layered: meanings arise within, and are conditioned by, real though often unobservable generative mechanisms. Read alongside Ubuntu, which emphasizes that meaning is not only discursively produced but relationally realized through communal forms of personhood, this framework helps clarify what enables meanings to act and acquire force in social life. Interpretivism illuminates how actors make sense of their worlds; a critical realist approach, particularly when engaged with Ubuntu, suggests why and under what conditions those meanings come to matter.

Spillman (2004; 2014) offers a valuable corrective to post-positivist cultural sociology by reclaiming causal inference as vital while keeping meaning central. Rejecting the false dichotomy between interpretation and explanation, she shows that cultural sociology can theorize how meaning does causal work. As Spillman (2004:216) argues, explanations must move beyond universal laws toward “context-specific causal narratives” that integrate meaning and causality within “an encompassing framework within which to understand different logics of inquiry.” Cultural sociologists already engage in causal reasoning, often implicitly, when identifying the conditions under which meanings shape perception, frame grievances, or organize collective identity (Abend 2022). Even when avoiding positivist language, qualitative analyses make causal claims by tracing how symbolic structures enable or constrain action. For Spillman, causal inquiry is not antithetical to interpretation but essential to it. Critical realism clarifies this relationship by providing the ontological scaffolding that makes interpretation intelligible: meanings are not self-contained but emerge within stratified structures of causation and relation. Distinguishing meaningful causality from mechanistic determinism, Spillman anticipates a realist view in which culture shapes outcomes in mediated, contingent, and historically grounded ways.

Spillman bridges Reed’s interpretivism and a more ontologically grounded cultural sociology that I later link to Southern epistemologies. She preserves interpretivism’s focus on meaning and context but insists that sociologists can explain, rather than merely reconstruct, how meaning operates in social life. Her work legitimizes causal reasoning in qualitative research while cautioning against positivist reductionism and noting that quantitative studies often describe rather than explain causality (Spillman 2014). Yet this perspective leaves unresolved the meta-theoretical tension between understanding and explanation. As Spillman (2004) observes, causal claims in sociology arise within theoretical frameworks, not directly from data, demanding continual reflexivity in design and inference. Here critical realism provides the needed scaffolding. As Steinmetz (2004) argues, it grounds meaning in causal depth structures, avoiding both positivist empiricism and relativist textualism. Building on this foundation, I show how meaning becomes causally efficacious through specific structural, temporal, and narrative conditions.

Critical realism formalizes the ontological and epistemological commitments implicit in Spillman’s project. It affirms that causal claims in cultural sociology are not only possible but necessary and provides tools to make such claims without collapsing meaning into mechanism. As Spillman (2004) notes, this echoes

Alasdair MacIntyre's observation that "we often in both the natural and social world identify and understand particular causal relationships without invoking law-like generalizations" (1976: 144) and that good explanation reveals "that which makes this happen rather than that which would otherwise have happened" (1976: 149). Even apparently universal natural-science relations—such as those linking pressure, temperature, and volume—depend on antecedent conditions that vary across contexts (Spillman 2004: 223). In the social world, this contingency is amplified.

Critical realism takes heed of Spillman's concerns and rejects the idea that causality requires generalizable laws. Instead, it defines causality as the activation of underlying generative mechanisms whose effects emerge only under specific conditions—mechanisms that may include symbolic codes, institutional scripts, or affectively charged memories, all embedded in stratified realities and shaped by human agency. Moreover, it clarifies the relationship between interpretation and explanation by distinguishing the epistemic status of knowledge (partial, situated, fallible) from the ontological status of the social world (which exists independently of our knowing). This allows researchers to treat meaning as both historically contingent and causally real, linking interpretations to observable consequences for action, institutions, and material outcomes. Following Spillman (2013), interpretation and explanation are not opposites but mutually necessary analytic moves.

Spillman's model of causal inference attuned to meaning finds systematic expression in critical realism, which emphasizes explanatory depth, conditional causality, and retroduction while recalling Aristotle's distinction among material, formal, efficient, and final causes (Spillman 2004). Her call to examine how and when meaning matters aligns with the realist view that causation entails the context-dependent activation of generative mechanisms rather than constant conjunctions. Building on Spillman's insight, critical realism offers cultural sociology a coherent philosophy of science that unites interpretation and explanation: Reed foregrounds interpretation, Spillman restores causality, and critical realism integrates the two by explaining when meanings matter and how they act. Read alongside Ubuntu's relational ontology—in which personhood and action are constituted through others—this synthesis deepens: meaning's causal power depends on the communal, institutional, and temporal conditions that activate it. Critical realism provides the language for these activating conditions; Ubuntu specifies the ontology that renders them meaningful.

Cultural Sociology, Pragmatist Parallels and the Logic of Situated Mechanisms

Much of the best sociological work already operates with assumptions aligned to critical realism, even if not named as such—grounding explanation in situated agency, emergent mechanisms, and layered causality. For example, Gross (2009), working from the American pragmatist tradition, offers a generative parallel. Synthesizing insights from Dewey, Peirce, Mead, and James, Gross rejects the atomistic “desires–beliefs–opportunities” (DBO) model in favor of an actor–problem–habit–response (A–P–H–R) schema. In this model, action is not driven by fixed preferences but by how actors confront problem situations through historically sedimented habits. Like critical realism, this approach emphasizes contingent causality, situated agency, and mechanism-based explanation. Although Gross does not identify as a critical realist, his rejection of both methodological individualism and cultural determinism places him in close proximity to the realist project. His insistence that mechanisms must account for how actors interpret meaning under historically specific conditions aligns with realism’s commitments to retroduction, causal depth, and open-system explanation. Gross’s pragmatism is not a competing paradigm but a convergent one—underscoring the need for a sociology that links meaning and causality without collapsing one into the other.

Yet even pragmatism often begins its analysis mid-play: after meanings, habits, and “problem situations” are already on the field. But where do those habits come from, and what makes something a “problem” in the first place? Sociologists need not remain reactive, describing only what actors have already made meaningful. The task is to theorize the conditions under which meanings and habits arise at all. A critical realist cultural sociology plays offense rather than defense: bridging interpretation and explanation, synthesizing insight and mechanism, and reclaiming sociology’s capacity to explain how meaning becomes possible.

A similar convergence appears in *Measuring Culture* (Mohr et al. 2020), which advances a pluralistic framework for analyzing culture by emphasizing that meaning is located—and measurable—in persons, objects, and social relations. The book highlights culture in persons (cognitive schemas, discourse, and how thought links to action), culture in objects (the symbolic power and circulation of material artifacts), and culture in social relations (how meaning emerges in networks, interactions, and fields). Rather than privileging one method, the authors advocate “pivoting” across ethnography, network analysis, and

computational tools to capture different facets of culture and build a multi-level sociology of meaning. As leading cultural sociologists Mohr, Bail, Frye, Lena, Lizardo, McDonnell, Mische, Tavory, and Wherry write (2020:17):

“First, the authors share a *realist* bent: we assume that data depict actual things and processes in the world. While we know that there will always be, as U.S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld so famously proclaimed, “unknown unknowns,” and that our measurement does not simply mirror the phenomena we study, we nonetheless assume it represents—however imperfectly—real things and processes in the world. We also assume that measurement is an enterprise that can be engaged by using a range of methods, which vary in their scope, techniques, and assumptions. Precisely because of this wary realism, we recognize that all forms of measurement involve hazards, including the necessary reduction of information that occurs when we collapse any kind of measurement category.

Yet what they label as “wary realism” bears a remarkable resemblance, in everything but name, to critical realism; a realism by any other name, one might say, would smell as critical. Together, the insights of Spillman (2004; 2014), Gross (2009), and Mohr et al. (2020) point to a broader theoretical realignment: a move beyond the unnecessary separation of interpretation and explanation, toward a cultural sociology of meaning-in-action grounded in contingency, historical specificity, and conceptual pluralism. Pragmatism anticipates this integration, *Measuring Culture* grapples with it methodologically, and critical realism formalizes it philosophically. When read alongside Ubuntu’s relational ontology, the convergence becomes even more powerful: meaning is real, but its efficacy is relationally and situationally realized. Ubuntu’s emphasis on personhood as constituted through others resonates with both pragmatism’s attention to problem situations and critical realism’s attention to generative mechanisms. Meaning, in this synthesis, acts not in isolation but within layered social relations that enable, constrain, and transform it.

In what follows, I show how this integration—anticipated by pragmatism, reinforced by “wary realism,” and formalized through critical realism and Ubuntu, enables a more powerful explanation of cultural action. Drawing on two South African cases, the *entropic re-curation* of Robben Island’s heritage narrative (Author, 2025) and the selective activation of trauma memory during the 2021 Durban unrest—I demonstrate what

interpretivism cannot: the conditions under which meanings are produced, transformed, and mobilized in moments of rupture. Understanding how meaning acts requires more than interpretation; it demands a critical realist cultural sociology receptive to Global South epistemologies.

What Critical Realism Offers Cultural Sociology

Developed by Bhaskar (1975) and extended by Archer (1995, 2016), Sayer (1992), and Smith (2010), critical realism rests on three foundational commitments: ontological realism, epistemic relativity, and judgmental rationality (Porpora 2015; Fletcher 2017). These principles affirm that reality exists independently of our descriptions, that knowledge is always historically and socially situated, and that competing accounts can nonetheless be rationally assessed.

Critical Realism and the Global South

Roy Bhaskar's intellectual formation was profoundly shaped not only by his Oxford mentors but also by his Indian heritage and bicultural upbringing. Born in London to an Indian father, Raju Nath Bhaskar—a surgeon who migrated to Britain during World War II—and an English mother, Kumla (née Marjorie Skill), he was raised in a Theosophical household that blended Eastern and Western metaphysical traditions. This plural inheritance fostered both a suspicion of scientific positivism and an openness to alternative ontologies, particularly those that resisted Western dualisms of mind and matter. Bhaskar also recalled the formative impact of racism in British schools, which deepened his lifelong commitment to emancipation and justice (Roy Bhaskar Centre, 2025).

His philosophical trajectory—from *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979) to *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993) and the later *metaReality* writings (2002, 2012), was inseparable from his political and transnational engagements. In the 1970s, after marrying political theorist Hilary Wainwright, Bhaskar travelled with her to the Portuguese territories of Mozambique and Angola as guests of the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola), participating in the intellectual milieu of African liberation movements (Roy Bhaskar Centre, 2025). These encounters, along with his involvement in the British Labour Left and the Bennite democratic socialist circle, grounded his realism in a lived dialogue with the Global South's struggles for freedom and epistemic dignity.

Such experiences consolidated Bhaskar's conviction that philosophy must remain tethered to projects of emancipation, attentive to how knowledge and power are structured across colonial and postcolonial divides. His exposure to African and South Asian traditions, alongside Theosophy, Advaita Vedanta, and Buddhist metaphysics, deepened critical realism's orientation toward pluralism, reflexivity, and ontological depth. Far from being an insular European project, critical realism thus emerged as a transnational and emancipatory philosophy—forged in critique of both positivism and relativism, but also in conversation with Southern intellectual currents that interrogated Western epistemic dominance. Recognizing this lineage helps recover critical realism's originally global and justice-oriented spirit, one attuned to the moral and political dimensions of knowledge. Bhaskar's realism, when read through its African and Southern entanglements, is not a “natural realism” at all, but a critical and decolonial realism: a framework that unites the explanatory ambitions of science with the interpretive and ethical insights of lived human experience.

Ontological Realism: Meaning as Situated within a Stratified Reality

Critical realism begins from the premise that the social world exists independently of our descriptions of it—though our access to that world is always mediated by language, culture, and historically contingent knowledge systems (Archer et al., 2016). Ontological realism affirms that at least some parts of reality exist independently of our consciousness or descriptions—rocks, gravity, biological processes—but also that other parts of reality, such as meanings, institutions, and social structures, are brought into being through human activity and consciousness. These mind-dependent realities are nonetheless real: once created, they acquire emergent properties and causal powers that exceed individual intentions (Smith 2010, Chapter 2). This commitment enables sociologists to recognize that cultural objects, narratives, and meanings are embedded within layered structures of social reality, as noted by Mohr et al. (2020). Collective memory is not just an idea circulating within a community; it is inscribed in institutional practices, material infrastructures, and digital archives that give it durability and capacity for action.

Abend (2022) distinguishes between causes and “what makes it possible” questions—enabling conditions that precede or structure causal processes. Unlike narrower models of causality, critical realism addresses both causes and the conditions that make them possible. It explains not only why something happens but also under what circumstances it can happen at all. An interpretivist account risks under-theorizing this

distinction, often treating meaning, motivation, and mechanism as self-evident. In contrast, a critical realist reading of Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* or Moore's *Social Origins* reveals both structural causes and enabling conditions. Situating interpretivism within this broader ontology clarifies not just how landscapes of meaning are represented but how they are formed. Where interpretivists seek to depict meaning-worlds (Maccolman 2015; Reed 2011: 92), critical realism maps the layered reality from which those meanings arise. It does not reject interpretation but grounds it.

Social reality, from a critical realist view, is stratified and emergent. Causation is not reduced to law-like regularities but is contingent, open-ended, and context-dependent (Archer et al., 2016). Through epistemic relativity and judgmental rationality, critical realism offers a complex model of structure, process, and causation that mirrors the intricacies of social life. This aligns with the broader critical realist project of modeling causal mechanisms within historically contingent structures (Gorski 2008; Archer 1982; Smith 2015) and Spillman's (2014) account of cultural causal inference. No realist explanation is possible without thick interpretation, but critical realism ensures that meaning is located within an ontological depth-structure rather than treated as free-floating.

Epistemic Relativity: Situated Knowledge and Reflexive Methodology

Critical realism recognizes that all knowledge is socially situated, fallible, and historically contingent. It is not naïve about context—there is no way to know the social world except through historically situated descriptions (Bhaskar 1975; Archer et al. 2016). This resonates with interpretivist reflexivity and the insistence on local specificity. Yet unlike interpretivism, which often treats meaning-worlds as self-contained, critical realism insists that situated knowledge does not preclude inquiry into broader causal structures.

Critical realism distinguishes between the transitive and intransitive dimensions of knowledge. The “real world” cannot be directly observed and exists independent of human theories or constructions, yet research generates transitive representations that approximate it. As Bhaskar writes in *The Possibility of Naturalism*:

“...the ‘social world,’ though different than the ‘natural world,’ can also be thought of as an ‘intransitive’ real, to which ‘transitive’ theories produced by social research attempt to correspond.”

And in *A Realist Theory of Science* (2008):

“Knowledge is a social product, produced by means of antecedent social products; but the objects of which, in the social activity of science, knowledge comes to be produced, exist and act quite independently of men.”

This epistemic stance enables cultural sociologists to engage in retroduction, moving from observed events to theorizing the deeper structures that make them possible. While interpretivism reconstructs how actors narrate and experience events, it often stops short of explaining why similar meanings generate divergent outcomes across contexts. Critical realism, by contrast, investigates how institutional structures, communicative infrastructures, or mnemonic repertoires shape the activation and efficacy of meaning. These are not purely interpretive questions; they require causal inference rooted in an ontologically stratified world.

Judgmental Rationality: Evaluating Explanations Beyond Local Contexts

Critical realism also provides cultural sociology with a non-reductionist mode of evaluation. Rather than seeking invariant laws, it emphasizes plausible, context-sensitive explanations that account for the interplay of structure, culture, and agency. Judgmental rationality enables sociologists to adjudicate among competing interpretations not only on their coherence within a local meaning-world but also on their explanatory power for observed outcomes (Archer et al. 2016).

This contrasts with interpretivist approaches, which often assume the sufficiency of a single “landscape of meaning.” Reed (2011) advances cultural explanation through interpretive depth but tends toward epistemological contextualism, privileging local meaning at the expense of cross-contextual evaluation. Critical realism insists that interpretations be assessed in relation to broader structures and causal consequences. This commitment is crucial in a global, digitally mediated world, where meanings circulate transnationally, are contested across contexts, and gain traction through infrastructures of power. Critical realism resists both model fetishism and anti-explanatory relativism, offering a framework grounded in

depth, contingency, and historical specificity. For example, revolutions depend on immediate causes such as mobilization and elite defection but also on structural conditions like state breakdown (Skocpol 1979); inequality results from wage suppression within property regimes that make exploitation possible; and collective memory acts causally only when supported by institutional and technological infrastructures that enable its persistence.

Yet, judgmental rationality should not be mistaken for the immediate ability to declare one theory definitively correct. It does not guarantee that, at any given moment, we can simply sit down and adjudicate competing explanations once and for all. Rather, it affirms that such adjudication is a long-run, cumulative process—one that unfolds through sustained argument, dialogue, and empirical investigation (Smith, 2010). Its importance lies not in promising final certainty but in defending the possibility of progressive differentiation between better and worse accounts. Over time, sociology can eliminate the least plausible explanations and converge on those that more adequately capture causal processes. In this sense, judgmental rationality is a hard-won, long-run accomplishment, never guaranteed, but essential to defend.

What Critical Realism Offers Cultural Sociology

Core to critical realism is the assumption that reality can only be accessed through fallible representations: “while realism entails a commitment to truth, there are no truth values or criteria of rationality that exist outside of historical time” (Archer et al. 2016; Smith 2010, 2015). This epistemic humility is matched by critical realism’s embrace of judgmental rationality—the process of evaluating competing models of the social world. The aim is not perfect truth but plausible explanation, achieved through the reflexive assessment of epistemological claims and of the researcher’s own positionality.

Interpretivism often lacks this reflexive depth, assuming the social world can be rendered legible through coherent depictions of meaning landscapes. Yet even well-intentioned interpretivist accounts risk reproducing exclusions by privileging those able to offer interpretations while overlooking the structural and historical conditions that make certain meanings visible and others invisible. Because it privileges legibility over causality, interpretivism without attention to enabling conditions may reproduce the very inequalities it seeks to illuminate.

Critical realism provides the tools to address, or at least to make explicit, these limitations. It retains Reed's commitment to meaning and interpretation but embeds them within a stratified ontology that enables causal inquiry attentive to complexity, contingency, and historicity. Reed often engages "realism" in ways that elide critical realism's distinctive emphases on epistemic relativity and judgmental rationality (Bhaskar 1975; Archer et al. 2016). He frequently cites Bhaskar in relation to natural realism, without acknowledging that Bhaskar developed his position precisely to critique both positivist and naturalist assumptions. When we embrace Bhaskar's critical realist stance, we enable cultural sociologists to ask not only *what* meanings actors hold, but *how* and *why* those meanings become socially powerful—questions Reed's interpretivism leaves under-theorized.

In this sense, critical realism does not reject interpretivism but completes it by accounting for the conditions under which meaning becomes causally effective. Explanation is not confined to motive reconstruction (nor does it ignore motive construction); rather, critical realism opens analytic space for examining meaning's enabling conditions and consequences, including structural and institutional influences. While Reed argues that historically situated interpretation is better suited than realism for understanding social life, an accurate reading of critical realism already incorporates this concern through its commitment to epistemic relativity. Interpretation is not external to realism but embedded within it.

Critical realism explicitly acknowledges the fallibility and socio-historical situatedness of all knowledge. Of course, epistemic relativity alone is insufficient for good interpretation; it must be joined with cultivated perceptual capacities, theoretical sensitivity, deep contextual immersion, and the disciplined ability to trace meaning across perspectives. Critical realism provides space for such interpretive labor while situating it within a broader epistemic framework that also accounts for causal depth and ontological structure.

Interpretivism, meanwhile, places considerable trust in the researcher's ability to coherently depict plural landscapes of meaning, a task far more fragile in practice, as anyone managing divergent or conflicting viewpoints can attest. As Biernacki (2013: 6) observes, "everyone who accumulates primary documents knows that a landscape of meaning is too vast to be painted as a landscape, or anyway too vast to let completeness and extension serve as criteria of interpretive adequacy." Without critical realism, interpretivism risks mistaking the map (our interpretive accounts) for the territory (the social reality that

gives those meanings causal power). It can describe how people make sense of the world, but not why certain meanings actually make a difference in it.

By distinguishing ontology from epistemology, critical realism retains epistemic humility while expanding the scope of inquiry beyond thick description alone. It thereby offers cultural sociology a framework capable of integrating Reed's interpretive sensitivity, Spillman's causal inference, pragmatism's emphasis on situated agency, and the wary realism of Mohr et al. with a meta-theoretical scaffolding grounded in ontological depth. Read alongside Ubuntu's insistence that being itself is relational and communal, critical realism equips cultural sociologists to theorize not only how meanings are constructed, but under what conditions they become causally efficacious

Critical Realism and the Global South

Cultural sociology has long taken meaning seriously. The interpretivist turn, crystallized in Reed's work (2008; 2011), sharpened methodological reflexivity and enriched our sensitivity to how actors understand their worlds. Reed taught us how to reconstruct landscapes of meaning, Spillman reminded us that meaning does more than organize perception, it frames possibilities, guides action, and shapes material outcomes. To fully realize this promise, cultural sociology must move further forward toward epistemic integration: critical realism provides the framework to do so. While critical realism's transnational genealogy makes it uniquely receptive to engagement with diverse philosophies, this should not be confused with the reason for affirming it. On its own terms, critical realism is justified not because it is morally desirable to be pluralistic, but because its ontological claims are true: reality exists independently of our descriptions. Its openness to other philosophical traditions follows from this truth rather than motivating it. Precisely because the world is stratified, relational, and emergent, critical realism can incorporate what is true within other frameworks, Ubuntu among them, without collapsing into relativism or eclecticism.

Critical realism affirms that meaning is situated, historically contingent, and irreducible to mechanical causality. But it also insists that meaning is real: a resource activated under specific conditions of possibility, embedded in structures, and mediated through material and institutional infrastructures. To analyze meaning is not simply to reconstruct how actors interpret their world; it is to investigate how that world enables, constrains, and transforms meaning into action. Where interpretivism's epistemic orientation permits the

incorporation of alternative perspectives within its existing horizons of understanding, critical realism's epistemic humility opens the possibility that Global South philosophies may alter those horizons altogether, redefining what counts as knowledge and explanation rather than merely diversifying the content of interpretation.

Two empirical cases demonstrate this analytical payoff. The Robben Island case shows that cultural objects do not circulate passively: their intended meanings, even when institutionally curated and materially embedded, unravel through processes of cultural entropy (McDonnell 2016) as they move across embodied, digital, and aesthetic domains (Author 2025). A critical realist framework exposes these mediations, treating Instagram posts not as fleeting expressions but as emergent cultural objects shaped by platform affordances, visitor embodiment, and institutional absence. The Durban unrest case extends this argument to moments of rupture, in an acute instance of instability that left 352 dead. Here, meaning was not interpreted abstractly but mobilized in real time as a resource for collective action. Whether historical memory produced racialized vigilantism or cross-racial solidarity depended not only on what people thought but on how memory was activated within communication infrastructures, under leadership influence, and through historically sedimented repertoires. People acted on the meanings available to them: meanings that exerted causal influence, contingently rather than deterministically.

Cultural sociology needs critical realism because the challenges we face, from memory politics and crisis response to digital fragmentation and collective violence, demand more than interpretive reconstruction; they require causal explanation. Not in the positivist sense of universal laws, but in the realist sense of tracing enabling conditions, emergent mechanisms, and contingent activations. Critical realism asks not only what causes an outcome but what makes it possible, distinguishing immediate triggers from the layered conditions that render meaning capable of social change. In contexts like post-apartheid South Africa, where histories of racial domination and fragile institutions heighten the stakes of meaning, interpretation alone is insufficient. Theoretical resources from these contexts, such as Ubuntu's relational ontology or collective memory's role in shaping crisis response, push us to expand cultural sociology's epistemic horizons. From these vantage points, critical realism is not merely a corrective to interpretivism but a bridge to a more plural, reflexive, and causally attuned cultural sociology—one that treats the Global South as a site of theoretical innovation rather than empirical illustration, a limitation from which interpretivism itself cannot escape.

Global Theory from the Global South: Integrating Ubuntu

Critical realism itself emerged through transnational and postcolonial currents. Roy Bhaskar—the tradition’s founder—was born in London to an Indian father and an English mother, and his philosophy reflects a bicultural sensibility that later inspired global uptake across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As a scholar rooted in the Global South and engaged with communities, cultural objects, and crises in Southern Africa, I turn to a final criterion for theorizing from the South: theory must not only arise within Southern contexts but also speak in resonance with Southern epistemologies and ontologies. Without such alignment, even well-intentioned work risks reproducing extractive patterns, casting the South as data and the North as theory. Ubuntu, the foundational moral and philosophical ethos of Southern Africa, offers a powerful epistemological grounding for this endeavor.

More than an ethnic tradition, Ubuntu became a public ethic of post-apartheid South Africa and was enshrined in the *Epilogue* of the Interim Constitution (Act 200 of 1993), which envisioned a “historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society... and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy, and peaceful co-existence.” The same Epilogue urged “understanding but not vengeance, reparation but not retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimization” (Republic of South Africa 1993: Epilogue after Sec. 251). Popularized by figures such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, Ubuntu affirms that “we are human only through the humanity of others” (Stengel and Mandela 2010) and that “you can’t exist as a human being in isolation” (Tutu 2000). These are not rhetorical flourishes but expressions of a relational ontology in which personhood is realized through mutual recognition and ethical obligation. In causal terms, Ubuntu redefines the source of agency: relations are not backdrops for action but the mechanisms that produce the very capacities, obligations, and meanings that make action possible.

The oft-cited Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (“a person is a person through other persons”), now taught in most South African schools, encodes this ontology directly into the structure of isiZulu grammar. A member of the Bantu language family, spoken by roughly 350 million people, or about 30% of Africa’s population, isiZulu builds ontology into morphology. As Mogobe Ramose (1999) argues, *Ubuntu* is not merely a cultural motif but an ontological and epistemological framework. In the proverb, *umuntu* (“person”) functions as the subject; *ngumuntu* (predicate) employs the copulative *ngu-* to denote identity or equivalence;

and *ngabantu* adds the instrumental prefix *nga-*, signifying that personhood exists through others. The grammar itself enforces a relational ontology: being is constitutively communal and real. If approached only interpretively, the proverb becomes a symbol to decode rather than a reality to inhabit. But *Ubuntu* insists that being itself is relational, aligning with critical realism's account of stratified reality, emergent properties, and the causal power of social structures (Bhaskar 1975). In this sense, the linguistic structure of isiZulu provides empirical support for the realist claim that ontology precedes epistemology: how we know and express reality depends on the structures of being that our languages presuppose.

In isiZulu, the idea of a self existing apart from others is not only philosophically foreign but linguistically incoherent. The noun *umuntu* ("person") derives from the root *-ntu* ("human being") within noun class 1, whose plural *abantu* ("people") is the foundational form; the singular depends grammatically on the plural. Personhood, in other words, is morphologically derived from community. There is no unmarked equivalent to an atomized "self," and even reflexive or possessive forms presuppose relational embeddedness (*abantu bakithi*, "our people"). The structure of the language itself encodes the ontology of *Ubuntu*: being is co-constituted through others. This grammatical logic reinforces the philosophical claim that ontology precedes epistemology, before one can speak or know oneself, the language requires acknowledgment of the relations that make the self possible.

Just as critical realism rejects reducing action to surface-level meaning or atomistic choice, Ubuntu insists that moral life unfolds through layered relations that are historically situated and causally efficacious.

African scholars have further articulated these dimensions: Moeketsi Letseka (2012) and Fainos Mangena (2012; 2016) develop Ubuntu as dialogical and moral theory, while Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) frames it as a pathway to epistemic freedom. These perspectives demonstrate that Ubuntu is not parochial but capable of grounding education, governance, and ethics without collapsing into cultural essentialism.

Ubuntu also resonates with key insights in pragmatism. Gross's (2009) actor–problem–habit–response schema parallels Ubuntu's emphasis on situated agency, problem-solving, and moral engagement in community. Both traditions reject determinism and voluntarism, offering middle-range accounts of meaning and action as contextually embedded. Ubuntu thus provides a normative and ontological complement to critical realism and pragmatism alike, expanding sociology's repertoire for analyzing meaning-in-action.

From a Bhaskarian standpoint, Ubuntu qualifies as a real structure: it exists independently of any single actor's awareness, embedded in institutional practices, memory repertoires, and everyday reasoning. It exerts causal influence when activated, shaping fields of possibility, structuring obligations, and enabling solidarity. Incorporating Ubuntu into sociological theory offers more than regional specificity. It supplies a generalizable mechanism for analyzing the interplay of personhood, morality, and social structure. In this light, Ubuntu does not provincialize theory. It globalizes it. Ubuntu does not merely illustrate critical realism's commitments; it transforms them. Where critical realism posits a stratified ontology of emergent properties, Ubuntu grounds this ontology in relational personhood, insisting that being itself is constituted through others. This shifts causality from a focus on mechanisms operating on individuals to relations generating persons, this does not detract from critical realist insights but deepens them, turning our attention to questions of how relations generate capacities for action, moral responsibility, and social repair. This reminds us that causal power is never merely individual, but always relationally produced and sustained.

Placing Ubuntu in dialogue with decolonial thought underscores this claim. Walter Mignolo (2009) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) emphasize "epistemologies of the South" as resources for decolonizing knowledge. Connell (2007), Mbembe (2001), Escobar (2018), and Maldonado-Torres (2007) argue that Southern thought is not merely local perspective but metatheoretical contribution. This article advances that argument: Ubuntu, in convergence with critical realism, offers an ontological and epistemological framework that expands the foundations of cultural sociology. It demonstrates how Global South epistemologies are not supplements to Northern theory but legitimate, generative sources of metatheory. This move exemplifies what theorizing from the Global South should mean: not importing empirical examples into Northern frameworks, but allowing Southern ontologies to revise what counts as causation, structure, and personhood in the first place.

An Integrated Critical Realist Framework, Ubuntu, and its Payoff for Cultural Sociology

By integrating interpretive sensitivity with ontological depth and causal analysis, critical realism equips cultural sociology to address its most enduring questions: Why do some meanings persist while others decay? How do cultural objects travel from institutional intention to embodied encounter to digital fragmentation? Under what conditions does collective memory sustain solidarity rather than exclusion? And

how does action unfold in moments of rupture when interpretive frameworks collide or recombine? Critical realism does not reject interpretivism's methodological commitments—it fulfills them. Meaning matters not simply because it is understood, but because it acts, situated within structures that endow it with causal power—structures that are emergent, contested, and continually reshaped through agency under constraint. This shift from epistemic confidence to ontological depth reframes cultural analysis: interpretation becomes the starting point for explanation, not its limit. These tensions surfaced not only in theory but in practice—during fieldwork, interviews, and coding—as I moved between interpretive and realist lenses to grasp how meanings were made and how they moved. The South African cases that follow are therefore not illustrations but empirical laboratories where meaning and theory were negotiated in real time.

1. Robben Island, Cultural Entropy, and the Limits of Institutional Meaning

The Robben Island Museum is one of South Africa's most symbolically charged heritage sites—a former prison recast as a state-curated monument to reconciliation, resilience, and democratic triumph. Its intended meaning, articulated through UNESCO documentation, official narratives, and spatial design, is explicit: Robben Island embodies the “triumph of the human spirit over adversity.” Yet this meaning is unstable. Recent research shows that it fragments and is re-curated as visitors engage the site and produce digital cultural objects on platforms like Instagram (Author 2025). This case reveals the limits of Reed's interpretivist framework. Adopting his model of “landscapes of meaning” allows us to reconstruct how visitors experience the site in diverse, subjective ways, but interpretivism alone cannot explain why the institutionally curated narrative frays in digital circulation—or how some meanings gain traction, others unravel, and new symbolic associations emerge. Thick description illuminates variation; it does not explain transformation.

The Intended Meaning: A Structured Cultural Object

Robben Island's official message, reconciliation through suffering, is institutionalized through UNESCO designations, spatial curation, and ritual practices. The site was established not merely to memorialize apartheid's brutality but to symbolically reorient national identity toward healing. Its architecture, curated exhibits, and guided tours, led by former political prisoners, are designed to produce an embodied effect of reconciliation (Strange and Kempa, 2003). Meaning here is not emergent from local improvisation; it is an

institutional project, backed by state authority and global heritage governance. This corresponds to what Reed calls “minimal interpretation”—what the site is, how it was curated, who curated it. Yet his framework offers little guidance once these objects leave the curated space and circulate in contexts where institutional control is attenuated. From the perspective of *Ubuntu*, this project depends not only on symbolic curation but on sustaining living relations of recognition. The reconciliation narrative is effective only insofar as it is enacted through communal bonds: guides leading tours, visitors embodying memory, and publics acknowledging shared personhood. Without this relational grounding, the narrative risks abstraction, losing its force once detached from the community that sustains it.

Unintended Meaning: Entropic Re-curation

Drawing on a dataset of 500 Instagram posts geotagged at Robben Island and created by South African visitors, recent analysis shows that users engage with, or depart from, the official narrative in patterned ways. Many posts, especially from non-White visitors, reflected themes of resilience and remembrance. But a significant portion, particularly from White users, aestheticized the island’s natural beauty, detached it from its traumatic history, or reframed it as leisure. The most striking pattern was not simple divergence but what I call entropic re-curation (Author, 2025)—building on McDonnell’s (2016) concept of cultural entropy to describe how cultural objects lose coherence as they circulate through newly created digital objects.

This entropy is not random but structured by three interrelated forces. First, embodied experience mediates perception: racial identity and historical memory shape whether visitors foreground trauma or distance themselves from it. This reflects the critical realist insight that meaning operates through stratified mechanisms, personal, cultural, and structural, that condition interpretation without determining it. Second, platform affordances incentivize aestheticization, brevity, and self-presentation, introducing a distinct digital mechanism that privileges visibility over moral reflection. Third, institutional fragility becomes apparent as the official curatorial frame loses coherence in participatory digital spaces, revealing how structures possess real but contingent causal powers. From the standpoint of *Ubuntu*, these transformations also carry ethical weight: as relational recognition weakens across these layers, the moral ties that once sustained the site as a testament to reconciliation begin to fray.

What Critical Realism Makes Visible

Taken together, these dynamics transform the cultural object itself. What begins as a state-curated symbol of reconciliation, anchored in the structurally real institution of the Museum, becomes dispersed across digital circuits where its meaning is fractured, reassembled, and reinterpreted. Some observers, like the adults in *The Little Prince* who mistake a boa constrictor digesting an elephant for a hat, see only the surface: sunsets, seascapes, and moments of leisure. Others, in turn, focus narrowly on suffering and trauma, freezing the past in pain without recovering its reconciliatory horizon. Interpretively, both see the “hat” rather than the elephant inside—they apprehend elements of the image but not the generative structure that gives it meaning.

Critical realism clarifies this slippage: it distinguishes between the visible appearances of meaning and the deeper causal mechanisms, namely the institutional, technological, and embodied structures that sustain it. Ubuntu reveals the ethical consequence of that misrecognition: as surface readings displace relational depth, the moral ties of recognition and shared humanity that reconciliation requires begin to fray. Posts that aestheticize the island detach it from its moral weight; those that dwell only on suffering risk reproducing wounded isolation. In contrast, posts that foreground both resilience and relation reassert the ethic of mutual recognition that keeps solidarity alive.

Critical realism reveals the museum not only as a symbol but as a causal structure embedded in a stratified social world. The unraveling of its narrative emerges from the interplay of embodied positioning, digital infrastructures, and institutional authority. What appears online as “just images” is the empirical trace of deeper generative processes—historical, institutional, and relational—that operate across real, actual, and empirical domains. From this vantage, Robben Island’s digital entropy is not mere interpretive drift but the causal transformation of a cultural object as it moves through these layers. Meaning shapes public memory, legitimacy, and the very form the object takes as it circulates. Ubuntu clarifies why this transformation matters: as meaning detaches from its relational grounding, it weakens the bonds of recognition and shared humanity that sustain reconciliation. The entropic re-curation of Robben Island thus carries ethical as well as epistemic stakes, revealing how memory, when unmoored from relation, risks losing its moral and civic force.

2. *Durban Unrest: Memory, Crisis, and the Causal Activation of Meaning*

If Robben Island illustrates how cultural objects unravel through entropic processes over time, the July 2021 unrest in Durban reveals how meaning operates as an immediate causal resource in moments of rupture. When institutions falter and uncertainty proliferates, collective memory is not merely interpreted but activated, suppressed, or recombined in real time to orient action. Contingent Memory Activation (CMA) captures this process: the selective mobilization of collective memory under crisis. Rather than viewing memory as a static inheritance, CMA theorizes it as a dynamic cultural mechanism animated through three dimensions: memory templates (plural and layered versus singular and ossified), communicative infrastructures (especially digital media that mediate circulation, amplification, and suppression), and leadership or narrative intervention (which frame disruption and steer interpretation). These mechanisms interact to produce divergent trajectories: rigid scripts that fuel exclusionary action or flexible repertoires that enable solidarity. In this sense, CMA operationalizes critical realism by showing how meaning becomes causally operative under contingent conditions, while Ubuntu clarifies the relational stakes. In moments of rupture, the activation of memory is not only about framing events but about sustaining, or eroding, the recognition of shared personhood. Crisis becomes a moral test: whether communities mobilize memories that fragment or memories that reaffirm interdependence.

The Puzzle: Divergent Responses under Shared Conditions

Both Durban North and Durban West experienced the same rupture: widespread looting and infrastructural collapse following the imprisonment of Jacob Zuma. Each was shaped by the same structural backdrop of inequality, racialized space, and fragmented trust. Yet their trajectories sharply diverged. In Durban North, a relatively homogeneous area, residents mobilized racialized vigilantism, reviving apartheid-era trauma narratives that framed the unrest as a siege. In Durban West, more heterogeneous and civically networked, residents initially fractured but gradually mobilized cross-racial solidarity through leadership intervention and inclusive narrative reframing.

Prevailing theories of diversity and social cohesion would predict the opposite: that homogeneity fosters cooperation while diversity fragments it (Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999; Putnam 2007; Habyarimana et al. 2007). The critical question is why. Interpretivism can reconstruct subjective fears and hopes but cannot, by itself, explain why divergent meaning-worlds emerged under shared structural exposure. Critical realism

provides the necessary causal architecture: it reveals how distinct mechanisms of memory activation operated within similar conditions to generate opposite outcomes. To understand this variation requires analyzing the enabling conditions that make certain memories actionable, a task that CMA undertakes and that Ubuntu renders ethically legible, as the crisis tests whether communities recall histories that divide or memories that repair.

Memory as a Contingent Resource

Residents did not enter the crisis as blank slates. They were historically constituted communities, bearing layered memories of violence and trust.

In *Durban North*, collective memory ossified. Apartheid-era trauma narratives, especially the 1949 and 1985 riots, were institutionalized through family transmission, spatial segregation, and localized media. When the crisis struck, these memories were rapidly activated through WhatsApp networks, producing fear loops and militarized defense. In critical realist terms, these narratives functioned as dormant generative mechanisms; real but only activated under specific conditions. The ossified trauma templates, absent leadership, and unregulated communication produced racialized vigilantism. In terms of *Ubuntu*, recognition of shared humanity collapsed, and the community turned inward, defending itself through exclusion rather than solidarity. An area that has a population of 25% Black population came to be viewed as a totally ethnically homogenous region under attack.

“This event wasn’t just about looting. It was a racial attack... Because if you go back into another time in history, you should remember the 1949 riots. Right? I mean, they’ve taken the Indians’ houses away in Inanda and various other places.”

—Shivam, Durban North

In *Durban West*, memory was more flexible and layered as there were multiple accounts of various collective memories across respondents accounts. A history of uneven but ongoing cross-racial interaction provided alternative frames of cooperation and civic responsibility. Crucially, leaders intervened in WhatsApp groups to suppress exclusionary scripts, fact-check misinformation, and promote inclusive solidarity. Digital platforms became sites of active memory curation rather than unfiltered amplification. The

moral force of Ubuntu, “a person is a person through other persons,” was mobilized to resist racial scapegoating and sustain interdependence.

“The real war was psychological. It was to incite racial hatred. It worked in Phoenix. It didn’t work here because we had 10 or 12 Neighborhood Watch heads that said, this is nonsense. We’re going to stop this and run our own psychological campaign...As much as *they* flooded neighborhoods with fake messages, we flooded the neighborhood with accurate messages... At this point we realized that we were not racially divided.”

—Tevin, Durban West

What Critical Realism and Ubuntu Makes Visible

Critical realism clarifies why forming causes such as historical memory become causally effective only under specific enabling conditions. In Durban North, ossified memory templates, amplified by absent leadership and unregulated digital rumor, produced vigilantism. In Durban West, more plural and layered repertoires, supported by leadership and narrative intervention, enabled cross-racial solidarity. These outcomes were not products of interpretation alone but of interacting causal mechanisms operating across structural, cultural, and technological layers.

Ubuntu complements this analysis by illuminating the relational stakes. In Durban North, memory was activated in ways that denied recognition and hardened moral boundaries; in Durban West, it was curated to reaffirm interdependence and sustain solidarity. As in *The Little Prince*, some could see only the “hat,” the surface signs of threat or difference based on ossified recollections of a violent past, while others perceived the “elephant inside,” the deeper structure of shared humanity. This divergence of perception carried real consequences: it shaped whether collective memory was mobilized to divide or to repair.

This synthesis demonstrates the explanatory edge of critical realism, sharpened by Ubuntu’s emphasis on relational personhood. Action arises not simply from interpretation but from the structured activation of meaning-in-practice and the ethical work of sustaining or withdrawing recognition. Through this lens, the Durban cases reveal how memory operates as both a causal mechanism and a moral test: it can reproduce exclusion or renew the possibility of solidarity.

The Current Limits of Interpretivism

Interpretivism provides valuable tools for reconstructing how actors understand their worlds, but it cannot explain why Durban North's memory frame collapsed into racialized exclusion while Durban West's enabled cross-racial solidarity under identical crisis conditions. Critical realism meets this challenge by treating meaning as causally efficacious—revealing how memory frames, communicative infrastructures, and leadership practices generate divergent outcomes. Ubuntu further clarifies this limitation: if meaning is constituted through relations, interpretivism's focus on symbolic reconstruction misses the deeper causal question of how those relations are sustained or denied in practice. In crisis, the decisive issue is not only how actors interpret events but whether the recognition of shared personhood is extended or withdrawn.

The Durban case shows that meaning's causal force is contingent, not deterministic. Memory can serve as a resource for violence or solidarity, depending on local conditions, narrative flexibility, and intervention. This view aligns with Spillman's call to analyze how and when meanings matter, extending it by grounding inquiry in a philosophy of causation. Ubuntu adds an ethical dimension: violent memory scripts fracture community by denying interdependence, while solidaristic narratives renew it.

Interpretivism locates causality in narrative, explaining outcomes through the symbolic repertoires actors use to make sense of experience. This allows sociologists to reconstruct what *Ubuntu* means to South Africans but not to grasp *Ubuntu* as ontology—a framework in which personhood is constituted through relations with others (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*). *Ubuntu* is not merely “a story some people tell” but a structural logic that shapes action, obligation, and solidarity. In post-apartheid South Africa, it has informed judicial reasoning in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, community dispute resolution, and even corporate ethics, each demonstrating the patterned causal effects of a world where relationality generates action. Under interpretivism, however, these dynamics appear only as narrative resources. The deeper claim of *Ubuntu*, that human action arises from relational structures rather than individual interpretation, remains invisible. The result is epistemic flattening: meaning systems such as neoliberal rational choice, Christian forgiveness, or *Ubuntu* all appear as equivalent narratives. Interpretivism thus seems inclusive, endlessly adding new voices, yet its inclusivity masks exclusion: non-Western philosophies are recognized only as objects of interpretation, not as theories of causation.

Implications for Cultural Sociology

Meaning is not free-floating; it is embedded in structures of memory, power, and mediation. Its activation is contingent, its effects real, and its trajectories shaped by agency within constraint. Critical realism offers a framework for theorizing this complexity and retaining interpretive sensitivity while insisting that meaning does causal work. Ubuntu complements this view by emphasizing that meaning always acts through relations, binding or dividing persons in ways that carry both epistemic and ethical weight.

The paired cases illustrate this ontological depth. At Robben Island, the reconciliation narrative is stabilized by institutional scaffolding but frays through entropic re-curation on digital platforms, weakening the relational recognition it was designed to foster. In Durban, collective memory becomes a resource for either vigilantism or solidarity depending on structural conditions, communicative infrastructures, and leadership intervention, and crucially, whether recognition of interdependence is affirmed or denied. Together, these cases show that cultural sociology must ask not only what stories people know, but under what conditions those stories become actionable, and whether they sustain or fracture the relational fabric on which social life depends.

Meta-Theoretical Positioning

The fact that relational ontology is so often misread as a variant of social constructionism is not accidental, but reflects the epistemic habits of a field shaped by interpretivism's dominance. The conflation of being with meaning reveals an underlying theoretical blind spot: an inability to conceive of relations, meanings, or moral obligations as real generative structures rather than interpretive frameworks. The present argument seeks precisely to correct this oversight, to restore ontology as a legitimate and necessary dimension of cultural explanation. Critical realism occupies a distinct position within two of cultural sociology's most enduring debates: the relationship between meaning and structure, and the tension between interpretation and explanation.

First, regarding meaning versus structure, critical realism rejects any strict dualism. Where structuralist traditions often treat meaning as epiphenomenal to social structures, and interpretivist approaches risk detaching meaning from its enabling conditions, critical realism insists on conditional efficacy. Meaning is

neither free-floating nor mechanically determined, it becomes actionable when structures, resources, and reflexive agency align under particular conditions. This situates critical realism as a meta-theoretical bridge, synthesizing structural constraints with the emergent, causally potent properties of meaning. As in *The Little Prince*, the challenge is not merely to see the “hat” of meaning but the structure beneath—the “elephant inside,” and what ate it. Ubuntu extends this synthesis by grounding conditional efficacy in the relational constitution of personhood. From this vantage, meaning becomes efficacious not only when structures and resources align, but also when relations of recognition are enacted or denied. The question is not only whether meanings “fit” institutional or material conditions, but whether they are sustained through the relational fabric that constitutes persons in community.

Second, in the interpretation versus explanation debate, critical realism counters Reed’s (2011) position that causal inquiry must be decoupled from interpretive sensitivity. Instead, it positions explanation as layered and retains the hermeneutic commitment to understanding actors’ situated meanings while theorizing the structural, material, and relational conditions under which those meanings shape action. Explanation is not reductive mechanism-hunting; it is the retroductive investigation of when, how, and why meanings can be causally effective within stratified reality. Ubuntu reinforces this view by highlighting that explanation must attend to the relational consequences of meaning: whether interpretive frames extend recognition and foster solidarity, or fracture bonds of interdependence. Explanation, therefore, is not only about uncovering mechanisms but about tracing the ethical and communal stakes of meaning-in-action.

Finally, this argument carries broader implications for the field. First, critical realism advocates causal inquiry in cultural sociology without sacrificing interpretive depth, allowing us to investigate *how and when* meanings matter—for subjective understanding and for their material and relational consequences. Second, it provides a methodological toolkit for a digitized, crisis-prone world: retroduction, inference to the best explanation, and a layered ontology enable movement from surface observation to underlying structures, from what people say to the conditions that make those claims legible, powerful, or actionable. Ubuntu complements this toolkit by reframing causality as relationally realized, reminding us that the conditions enabling action are at once material and communal. Third, critical realism offers a philosophy of action capable of integrating agency, structure, and meaning. It overcomes the flat ontologies of reductive realism and closed-world interpretivism, opening cultural sociology to questions of transformation, resistance, and

moral repair—while Ubuntu reorients these questions toward the ethical terrain of recognition and shared personhood.

Building on Steinmetz's (2004) realist philosophy of case comparison, I treat meaning as a contingent causal mechanism whose efficacy depends on temporal, structural, material, and relational conditions. Like Steinmetz, I reject the dichotomy between interpretive understanding and causal explanation, proposing a layered ontology in which meaning and structure interact to produce action. This approach advances a cultural sociology that combines explanatory depth with interpretive nuance. Critical realism offers the most integrated framework for this task, while Ubuntu strengthens it by rooting causal efficacy in relations of recognition. Together, they extend rather than displace cultural sociology's interpretivist foundations, equipping us to ask not only what does this mean? *but* what does meaning do, and for whom? As the discipline confronts fragmented memory, unstable symbolism, and crisis-driven action, critical realism provides an umbrella framework to integrate interpretivism's strengths while addressing its limits. Ubuntu deepens this vision, showing that meaning shapes perception and action only insofar as it is sustained through relations of interdependence.

Conclusion

This paper has not claimed that structure directly causes meaning, nor reduced culture to a reflection of structural conditions. Drawing on critical realism, I have argued that meanings possess conditional causal powers: they shape action only when activated within specific structural and historical contexts. This is neither structural determinism nor pragmatist improvisation, but a relational ontology in which meaning and structure are co-constitutive. Structures condition when and how meanings become efficacious, while cultural meanings shape how those very structures are interpreted and reproduced. A critical realist cultural sociology avoids both cultural determinism and structural reductionism by theorizing the layered interaction of meaning, agency, and constraint within an open social world. Its central contribution is to extend interpretivism by clarifying the ontological conditions under which meanings become causally effective.

Building on scholars such as Mignolo (2009), Santos (2014), Connell (2007), Mbembe (2001), Escobar (2018), and Maldonado-Torres (2007), this framework moves beyond critique toward constructive metatheory. Connell (2007) urges the decolonization of theory by recognizing Southern knowledge

formations and challenging the metropolitan dominance of abstract universals. Yet while decolonial thinkers foreground epistemologies of the South, they rarely engage causal explanation. By contrast, I have integrated Ubuntu into a critical realist framework to theorize how meaning becomes causally effective under specific conditions. Through *Contingent Memory Activation* (CMA) and two South African cases, I have shown how Southern ontologies can function as generative resources within a global cultural sociology committed to both epistemic justice and explanatory depth.

To grasp what is at stake, imagine a sociology that systematically rejected the three realist commitments of ontological reality, epistemic reflexivity, and judgmental rationality. Without ontological realism, reality would dissolve into discourse—apartheid, famine, or forced migration would become “interpretive constructs” rather than conditions to be changed. Without epistemic reflexivity, scholars would mistake their own categories for the world’s, re-inscribing Eurocentric grammars as global truths. And without judgmental rationality, all knowledge claims would appear equally valid: climate denial beside climate science, colonial historiography beside lived subjugation. Such a sociology would not liberate; it would legitimize. It would turn inquiry into aesthetic appreciation of suffering, reifying power imbalances by rendering Southern realities knowable only through Northern interpretation. Critical realism refuses this abdication. It asserts that while all knowing is partial, the world’s structures—economic, racial, ecological—exist independently of our theories, and that better explanations can be judged by their power to illuminate those structures and change them.

Critical realism asks when and how cultural meanings generate action, how moral orders emerge or dissolve, and what mechanisms transform social imaginaries. It analyzes the conditional activation of meaning across contexts, from mobilization and institutional collapse to reconciliation, belief, and identity, treating local epistemologies as theory rather than data. Interpretivism can include Southern thought; critical realism can be transformed by it. The former absorbs difference; the latter’s humility enables reciprocity. Born of hybridity, Roy Bhaskar’s realism, shaped by Indian and English inheritances, grounded philosophy in emancipation, depth, and global relevance. Ubuntu extends this legacy, showing that meaning becomes causally potent not only through structures and resources but through relations of recognition. Together, critical realism and Ubuntu fulfill cultural sociology’s promise: to explain how meaning acts, under what conditions, and with what consequences for human interdependence.

Interpretivism without realism risks turning the sociologist into the Wizard of Oz—a figure projecting coherence from behind a curtain while the generative processes of the world carry on unseen. Critical realism draws back the curtain—not to banish meaning, but to situate it within the generative processes that make interpretation possible. To mistake the wizard’s illusions for the storm itself is to confuse symbolic mastery with causal understanding. Without realism, we remain in the ivory, or perhaps emerald, tower: dazzled by reflections of meaning, yet blind to the world that casts them.

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