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Meaning-in-Action: A Theory of Symbolic Causality

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ABSTRACT

Theories of social behaviour often acknowledge that action is meaningfully organised, but they remain less precise about how meanings become causally efficacious in practice. This article develops a critical realist account of meaning-in-action. I argue that meanings are emergent symbolic formations with conditional causal powers: they are socially produced and interpretively mediated, but once sedimented in institutions, material infrastructures, technologies, embodied dispositions, classifications and relations of power, they can shape perception, evaluation, communication and action before, beyond or without conscious recognition. I specify this process through a five-part mechanism: availability or imposition, activation, orientation, articulation and outcome. The argument extends interpretive sociology by linking the reconstruction of meaning to an account of causal operation in open social systems, building from work on cultural repertoires, dual-process cognition, pragmatist mechanisms and context-specific causal narratives. I illustrate the framework through Robben Island Museum, a highly curated South African UNESCO World Heritage Site whose official reconciliation narrative fragments as visitors transform embodied encounters into digital cultural objects. The article contributes a portable account of symbolic causality in social behaviour, explaining how symbolic formations become effective without reducing action either to subjective interpretation, cognitive processing or deterministic structure.

1 | Introduction

Social behaviour is meaningfully organised. People do not simply respond to stimuli, interests, incentives or external constraints; they interpret situations, classify others, remember the past, evaluate what matters and act within historically structured worlds of meaning. Yet theories of social behaviour remain less precise about how meanings become causally efficacious in action. How do symbolic formations move from social formation to practical consequence? How do classifications, memories, narratives, moral codes and cultural objects shape what actors notice, value, fear, ignore, communicate and do?

From analyses of symbolic boundaries to studies of narrative, classification, collective memory, cultural objects and symbolic power, scholars have shown that social life is meaningfully constituted and that action must be reconstructed within historically situated worlds of interpretation (Geertz 1973; Griswold 1987; Swidler 1986; Alexander 2004; I. A. Reed 2011). But meanings do not automatically generate behaviour. Some meanings become salient while others recede; some orient perception and evaluation while others remain latent or tacit; some are articulated in practice while others are displaced, ignored, counteracted, or transformed as they move across settings, actors, and material supports (Sewell 1992, 1996; Gross 2009; McDonnell 2016; Spillman 2004, 2014; Vaisey 2009; Lizardo et al. 2016). A theory of meaning-in-action must therefore explain the conditions under which symbolic formations become operative, while also accounting for why meanings may remain inactive despite being culturally available.

This article develops such an account by theorising meanings as emergent symbolic formations with conditional causal powers.

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The aim is to explain how symbolic formations organise social behaviour without reducing action either to subjective interpretation, cognitive processing or external structural determination. Meanings are socially produced and interpretively mediated, but not reducible to subjective interpretation or conscious recognition. Once sedimented in institutions, material infrastructures, technologies, embodied dispositions, classifications and relations of power, symbolic formations can shape perception, evaluation, communication and action before, beyond or without being explicitly recognised. Race, for example, can shape treatment, vulnerability, credibility, belonging and exclusion even when actors do not identify race as operative. In critical realist terms, the real is not reducible to the empirical or the perceived (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995; Elder-Vass 2010; Porpora 2015).

I specify this process through a five-part meaning–action mechanism: availability or imposition, activation, orientation, articulation and outcome. Availability names the moment in which historically formed meanings enter a field of possible or imposed interpretation, evaluation, action, or treatment by others. Activation names the conditions under which some of these meanings become operative. Orientation refers to how activated meanings shape what actors notice, value, fear, ignore or treat as morally significant. Articulation refers to the translation of oriented meaning into action, representation, communication, coordination or institutional practice. Outcomes emerge as activated and articulated meanings interact with other mechanisms within discursive and extra-discursive conditioning configurations.

The mechanism also explains why strongly structured symbolic environments generate divergent perception, evaluation, communication and action. Robben Island is a highly curated South African heritage site, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, whose official narrative links apartheid suffering to resilience, reconciliation and democratic triumph. Yet in a related analysis of 500 Instagram posts, I show that most visitor representations did not reproduce the museum's intended narrative (Coetzee 2026). I conceptualise this divergence as entropic recuration: the fragmentation of an institutionally curated cultural object as audiences transform it into new cultural objects elsewhere.

At Robben Island Museum, reconciliation is not simply rejected by visitors; rather, material and technological affordances of the visit activate competing meanings: the ferry organises the island as a tourist destination, the sea provides a scenic frame of table mountain in the distance, Mandela's cell evokes trauma and social media platform, Instagram, organises the encounter through a visual economy. Interpretive approaches reconstruct actors' meanings but less clearly explain why particular meanings become operative rather than merely available. To explain this divergence, we need to specify how real symbolic formations become available or imposed, activated, oriented, articulated and consequential in practice. This requires a theory of meaning-in-action that treats culture neither as a merely subjective interpretation nor as a simple external determinant, but as a set of real symbolic formations whose causal force depends on their activation and articulation in concrete situations.

Interpretive sociology, especially Reed's account of 'landscapes of meaning,' shows that social action must be reconstructed within historically specific symbolic worlds (I. A. Reed 2011). Swidler's toolkit model explains how repertoires support strategies of action (Swidler 1986, 2001), dual-process approaches clarify how cultural schemas become embodied and cognitively operative (Vaisey 2009; Lizardo et al. 2016), pragmatist theories explain how actors respond to problem situations through sedimented habits (Gross 2009) and Spillman's 'context-specific causal narratives' show how cultural sociology can make causal claims without reducing meaning to law-like regularity (Spillman 2004, 216; 2014). Together, these approaches bring social theory close to a mechanism-based account of meaning-in-action, but they remain less precise about the ontological status of meaning as a causal force and the conditions under which particular meanings become operative.

Critical realism conceptualises causality not as constant conjunction, deterministic regularity or variable association, but as the activation of generative powers and mechanisms under contingent conditions (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995; Porpora 2015). This allows meanings to be treated as real and causally efficacious without reducing them to material structures, individual cognition or subjective interpretation. Their effects depend on institutional arrangements, material infrastructures, technological affordances, embodied experience, social positions and relations of power. At Robben Island, the official narrative of reconciliation is available and institutionally reinforced, but its activation depends on the curation of the museum, material prison spaces, tourism conventions, digital affordances, racialised histories and broader circuits of national and global memory.

The article offers an initial ontological anatomy of the pathway from symbolic formation to social action and patterned outcomes rather than a comprehensive empirical test of every possible configuration of that pathway. Future comparative research needs to examine how the mechanism's components combine across institutional, interactional and historical settings. The article explains how symbolic formations shape perception, evaluation, communication and action without reducing conduct to subjective interpretation or external structure. Meaning-in-action cannot be explained by reconstructing meanings alone. Interpretation remains indispensable, but meanings become consequential only when historically sedimented symbolic formations are made available or imposed, activated in particular situations, oriented towards perception and evaluation and articulated through practice. We shoud not abandon interpretation but, rather, extend it into an explanatory account of how meanings become effective in the world.

2 | Robben Island Museum, Entropic Recuration and Meaning-in-Action

Robben Island Museum is a theoretically useful site because its public meaning is neither weak nor ambiguous. It is one of South Africa's most heavily institutionalised heritage sites: a former apartheid prison, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a national museum organised around the transformation of

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suffering into democratic renewal. In official and institutional discourse, Robben Island is curated not merely as a prison, but as a passage from incarceration to liberation, from bodily subjugation to moral endurance and from apartheid violence to post-apartheid reconciliation. As I show elsewhere, Robben Island Museum 'epitomises South Africa's efforts to confront its traumatic history while advancing a vision of post-Apartheid unity' (Coetzee 2026, 1–2).

Multiple institutional carriers authorise this narrative: UNESCO designation, museum exhibits, guided tours, testimony from former political prisoners who work as guides, commemorative spaces, murals and national memory work. The South African government's UNESCO application framed the site as 'Robben Island—from incarceration to liberation. From the punishment of the body to the freedom of the spirit,' whereas the World Heritage Committee described the island and prison as symbolising 'the triumph of the human spirit, of freedom, and of democracy over oppression' (UNESCO 1999a, 1999b, 11; Coetzee 2026, 5). In Griswold's terms, Robben Island is 'shared significance embodied in form' (Griswold 1987, 4–5; Coetzee 2026, 7): a cultural object designed to bind suffering, sacrifice, freedom and reconciliation into a coherent public narrative.

Availability, however, does not guarantee activation. In a related analysis of 500 Instagram posts geotagged at Robben Island and created by South African visitors, I show that visitors do not simply reproduce the museum's authorised narrative. Only 23.6% of posts aligned with the museum's intended triumph narrative, whereas 28.2% foregrounded dark reflection, 42.0% emphasised aesthetic appreciation and 6.2% remained ambivalent. After excluding the ambivalent posts from the binary classification, 25.2% of the remaining posts were aligned, and 74.8% were nonaligned (Coetzee 2026, 18–19). The official narrative was therefore institutionally sedimented and widely available, but not uniformly activated or shared.

I conceptualise this patterned divergence as *entropic recuration*: the process through which an institutionally curated cultural object loses narrative coherence as audiences transform it into new cultural objects that select, reframe, recombine and circulate its meanings elsewhere. The concept builds on McDonnell's theory of cultural entropy (2016), which analyses how intended meanings and uses of cultural objects can fragment into alternative meanings, practices, failed interactions and disregard. In the Robben Island case, entropy does not mean that the museum's official narrative disappears. Rather, resilience, reconciliation and democratic triumph become only one possible activation of the site's meaning once visitors translate embodied encounters into photographs, captions, hashtags, poses and visual framings (Coetzee 2026, 8–9).

The divergence is not random; it is organised by material space, embodied encounter, platform affordance and social position. Prison cells, former-prisoner testimony and museum narration may activate suffering, endurance and national memory. The island's landscape, ferry ride, ocean views, tourism conventions and Instagram's visual affordances may instead activate scenic beauty, travel experience, aesthetic display or ambivalence. The racial patterning of posts further supports the activation argument: Posts by users coded as White more often emphasised aesthetic appreciation, whereas posts by users coded as Non-White more often foregrounded dark reflection; the overall four-category association with race was statistically significant. The simpler aligned/nonaligned association, however, was not statistically significant (Coetzee 2026, 19–21). Race does not mechanically determine interpretation, but racialised social position mediates which meanings become salient, morally charged and representationally available.

What matters is that this divergence is patterned. A highly curated cultural object generates multiple outcomes because symbolic formations do not become consequential merely by being institutionally authorised or culturally available. They become operative when activated within specific material, technological, social and embodied conditions, oriented towards perception and evaluation and articulated through practice. Robben Island therefore clarifies the need for a critical realist account of meaning-in-action: one that explains how symbolic formations become effective without reducing meaning either to subjective interpretation or to institutional structure.

The case therefore moves the argument from meaning reconstruction to meaning-in-action: from showing that social action is meaningful to explaining how particular meanings become operative. An interpretive account can catalogue visitor meanings; the mechanism explains why the institutionally authorised meaning fails to dominate despite being available. The failure is not simply interpretive plurality. It is produced through the interaction of prison space, tourist movement, platform visuality, racialised memory and the conversion of embodied encounter into digital representation.

3 | Interpretivism and the Limits of Meaning Reconstruction

Interpretive sociology remains indispensable for any theory of culture and action. From Dilthey and Weber onward, the interpretive tradition has challenged the reduction of social inquiry to observable regularities or law-like explanation. Dilthey argued that the human sciences require understanding historically situated life from within its webs of meaning, value, purpose and lived experience, rather than assimilating socio-historical reality to the methods of the natural sciences (Dilthey 1989 [1883]). Weber similarly defined sociology as the interpretive understanding of meaningfully oriented social action, undertaken as a condition of causal explanation (Weber (1978)). Actors inhabit worlds of symbols, motives, narratives, classifications, obligations and imagined futures. Contemporary cultural sociology has deepened this insight by showing how symbolic structures organise identity, action, institutions, boundaries, moral evaluation and public life (Geertz 1973; Taylor 1985; Swidler 1986; Alexander 2006; I. Reed 2008; I. A. Reed 2011).

Isaac Reed's work offers one of the clearest contemporary formulations of this interpretive position. In *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*, Reed asks 'what is going on' when researchers construct knowledge claims and poses the related question: 'How do, and how should, theory and evidence interact?' (I. A. Reed 2011, 7–8). His answer is to defend interpretation as a rigorous epistemic practice rather than a loose hermeneutic sensibility. Against positivist empiricism and naturalist realism,

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Reed argues that social knowledge depends on reconstructing historically situated 'landscapes of meaning,' within which action becomes intelligible (I. A. Reed 2011). Building on Geertzian 'thick description,' he distinguishes 'minimal' from 'maximal' interpretation. Minimal interpretation provides thinner factual accounts of actors, events or sequences; maximal interpretation situates action within broader configurations of motive, meaning, narrative and historical context. Reed presents maximal interpretation as a response to the 'era after the posts' (2011:11), offering a model that explains outcomes through 'motives and mechanisms' while remaining rooted in historically situated meaning.

The contribution is substantial. Reed is right that causal explanation cannot proceed by bracketing meaning. He is also right to resist accounts of causality that reduce explanation to regular association, variable-based prediction or observable regularity. His framework protects cultural sociology from a flattened empiricism in which meanings appear only as subjective reports, textual data, attitudinal indicators or post hoc accounts. It also clarifies why action must be interpreted in relation to the symbolic worlds that make it possible. The present argument therefore builds from Reed rather than against him: meanings matter because they organise the intelligibility of action.

The limitation is that meaning reconstruction does not by itself explain how meanings become operative in practice. Reed's framework gives cultural sociology a powerful account of intelligibility, but a less explicit account of activation. His 'landscapes of meaning' metaphor is generative because it directs attention to the historically layered symbolic terrain in which actors move. Yet the metaphor also invites a realist reading. Landscapes are not merely representations. They are structured, sedimented, uneven and consequential. They shape what actors can see, where they can move and which paths appear possible. A cultural sociology of meaning-in-action therefore needs to ask how particular meanings within that landscape acquire causal force in addition to how action becomes meaningful.

Reed's treatment of realism makes the issue especially visible. Reed distinguishes 'forcing' causes from 'forming' causes, using the latter to describe symbolic configurations that make action possible by rendering it intelligible (I. A. Reed 2011). Yet his critique sometimes groups together quite different forms of realism. He describes realist causal imagery as resembling 'the mechanical workings of a clock' where causes operate in regular and predictable ways (I. A. Reed 2011, 63). That characterization may apply to some forms of naturalist or positivist realism, but it does not describe critical realism. Critical realism, as a philosophy of social science, explicitly rejects the reduction of causality to constant conjunction, regular succession, or invariant mechanism. Instead, it treats causal powers as layered, contingent, emergent, and exercised within open systems, where their effects depend on the conditions and other mechanisms with which they interact (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995, 2016; Porpora 2015).

A second problem is epistemological. Reed criticises forms of realism associated with Marx and Bhaskar as if they depend on access to a 'real theory' that override actors' 'false consciousness' (I. A. Reed 2011, 60). But this risks collapsing ontological realism into epistemic privilege. To claim that social structures, relations, or meanings can be real and causally consequential independently of actors' recognition is not the same as claiming that the analyst possesses direct or infallible access to that reality. Critical realism combines ontological realism with epistemic fallibility: reality is not exhausted by what actors or researchers perceive, but our knowledge of it remains partial, situated and revisable (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995, 2016; Porpora 2015).

Reed does not ignore causality but his account of causality remains too closely tied to reconstructing meaning's intelligibility and is less developed as an account of meaning's efficacy. Reed helps us understand how action becomes meaningful, but he gives us fewer tools for explaining why particular meanings become salient in one situation rather than another, why they stabilise action in one context but fragment in another or how they interact with institutions, material infrastructures, technological affordances, social positions and relations of inequality to produce patterned outcomes.

Reed's own examples reveal the need for this further step. Even apparently 'minimal facts,' such as the dates of a revolution, already depends on enabling assumptions: what counts as a revolution, who counts as an actor and whose account becomes authoritative (I. A. Reed 2011, 43–45, 117–121). Reed himself admits that 'social facts' must be 'inferred and understood in dialogue' about what happened in a particular time, place and society (I. A. Reed 2011, 16). But this concession opens up another question that interpretivism leaves underdeveloped: what makes some meanings stable, legible and actionable across actors in the first place? Abend's (2022) language of 'making things possible' sharpens the point. We need to know not only how actors understand their worlds, but what conditions make some meanings available, credible, durable and practically consequential.

Reed argues that Interpretive research does not seek 'real causes' but constructs 'coherent representations' of local worlds (I. A. Reed 2011, 92, 110). Yet his discussion of Barrington Moore concedes that 'the relationship between town and country is a real thing... with different outcomes' (I. A. Reed 2011, 49). That concession already gestures towards realism's layered ontology. If relationships between social formations can be real and consequential, then meanings, institutions, memory structures and symbolic repertoires may also be real in the critical realist sense: not fixed, not directly observable in all their causal depth, but capable of producing effects under specific conditions.

This is why interpretivism's strongest insight becomes insufficient when treated as a complete theory of explanation. Meaning mediates social life, but mediation does not exhaust reality. Archer (2000), (2007) reminds us that practice precedes language, and Polanyi (1958), (2009) shows that much knowledge is tacit and enacted rather than fully articulated. Actors know, perceive, respond and coordinate in ways that are meaningful but not always discursively available to them. To reduce all knowing to interpretation risks mistaking the discursive tip of social life for its ontological depth.

The point can be illustrated, cautiously, through Saint-Exupéry's 2000 *The Little Prince*. When the young narrator shows

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adults his drawing of a *Boa constrictor* digesting an elephant, they see only a hat. The lesson is not that the analyst is entitled to declare, from a position of privileged access, that the object is 'really' a *Boa constrictor* and a poor elephant. Critical realism does not grant direct access to the real; it insists on epistemic fallibility. The point is rather that a critical realist framework preserves the ontological possibility that what is empirically perceived or culturally recognised does not exhaust what is causally operative. The interpretive question asks why the drawing is seen as a hat and what symbolic categories make that reading plausible. A critical realist question asks what unrecognised structures, prior classifications, embodied habits or generative conditions might make some readings available while blocking others, and whether causal powers may be operating without being explicitly perceived. The advantage of critical realism is therefore not analytic omniscience, but ontological openness: it allows sociologists to investigate the possibility that meanings, classifications and structures can shape perception and action even when actors do not recognise them as operative.

This matters for cultural sociology because an approach that restricts explanation to recognised meanings risks collapsing the real into the interpreted. Critical realism avoids this collapse without abandoning interpretation. It treats actors' understandings as indispensable empirical and hermeneutic evidence, but not as the outer limit of explanation. A meaning, classification or symbolic formation may be misrecognised, only partially recognised, or not recognised at all, while still shaping what actors perceive, how they are treated and what courses of action become possible. The task is to extend interpretation into an account of how meanings become effective.

This critique does not reject Reed's interpretive sensitivity. Reed shows why action must be reconstructed within historically situated symbolic worlds; critical realism asks how such worlds acquire causal force. It retains interpretation while embedding it in a stratified ontology in which meanings, classifications and symbolic structures may shape perception and action before they are fully recognised. A critical realist cultural sociology therefore asks how such formations become sedimented, made available or imposed, activated under particular conditions and articulated in practice.

4 | Cultural Resources, Cognition and Situated Mechanisms

Other influential approaches in cultural sociology move closer to the problem of meaning-in-action but do not fully resolve it. Swidler (1986), (2001) toolkit model shifts attention from culture as a system of values to culture as a repertoire of habits, skills, styles, symbols, stories and strategies. Culture shapes action not by determining ultimate ends, but by organising the resources through which actors define situations and construct courses of conduct. This formulation remains one of the most important advances in cultural sociology. It explains why culture matters even when actors are inconsistent, pragmatic or situationally adaptive. Rather than assuming that action flows from coherent values, Swidler shows that actors assemble strategies from available cultural materials.

This insight is especially useful for cases like Robben Island, where multiple repertoires coexist: national reconciliation, anti-apartheid memory, tourism, aesthetic appreciation, trauma and global heritage consumption. The toolkit model helps explain why visitors may draw on different symbolic resources when engaging the same site. Yet it leaves open a crucial question: how are particular elements of the toolkit activated in concrete situations? If multiple cultural resources are available, why does one become salient rather than another? Why does one visitor draw on the repertoire of national memory while another draws on the repertoire of tourism or aesthetic display? Swidler's framework is especially strong on availability, but less explicit about activation, orientation and articulation: how a resource becomes salient, how it shapes perception and evaluation and how it becomes visible in practice.

Dual-process theories of culture and cognition provide another important step towards explaining how culture shapes action. These approaches distinguish between automatic, habitual, embodied cognition and more reflective, deliberative forms of thought (Vaisey 2009; Lizardo et al. 2016). In this view, cultural schemas are not only explicit beliefs, values or articulated interpretations. They are internalised and embodied structures that shape perception, classification, judgment and action, often before actors can explain what they are doing or why. This perspective offers a powerful corrective to overly discursive or voluntarist accounts of culture by showing how meanings can guide action below the level of conscious reflection. It helps explain why actors may be shaped by meanings they cannot fully articulate and why cultural patterns can persist even when actors do not consciously endorse them.

Yet dual-process approaches leave the activation problem only partly resolved. They clarify how cultural schemas become embodied and cognitively operative, but they are less explicit about why particular schemas become salient in one setting rather than another. Activation is not only a cognitive process; it is also shaped by institutional arrangements, material environments, technological infrastructures, interactional cues, social positions and relations of power. Robben Island illustrates the issue. Dual-process theory can help explain why visitors may respond through embodied schemas of race, memory, tourism, national belonging or aesthetic consumption. But the activation of aesthetic appreciation, for example, is mediated by Instagram's visual conventions, the touristic organisation of the visit, the material landscape of the island and the visitor's social position in relation to apartheid memory. Similarly, dark reflection is not merely an internal schema; it is activated through encounters with prison spaces, historical narratives, racialised memory and moral evaluation.

Pragmatist approaches move still closer to this account. Gross's theory of social mechanisms rejects the atomistic 'desires-beliefs-opportunities' model in favour of an actor-problem-habit-response schema (Gross 2009). Action, in this view, is not driven by fixed preferences but by how actors confront problem situations through historically sedimented habits. Gross does not identify as a critical realist, but his emphasis on contingent causality, situated agency and mechanism-based explanation converges with critical realism's concern for open systems and historically specific causal powers. Yet even pragmatism often

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begins mid-play: after meanings, habits and 'problem situations' are already on the field. A critical realist cultural sociology asks the prior question: where do these habits come from, and what makes something appear as a problem in the first place? We need to ask, what makes these things possible (Abend 2022)?

Taken together, interpretivism, the toolkit model, dual-process theory and pragmatism provide crucial components of an account of culture and action. Interpretivism reconstructs meaningful worlds. Swidler identifies available cultural resources. Dual-process theory explains embodied and cognitive mediation. Pragmatism emphasises situated problem-solving. These approaches move cultural sociology well beyond the claim that meaning simply 'matters.' What remains under-specified is the process by which meanings become causally efficacious: how available meanings become activated, how activated meanings orient actors, how orientations are articulated in practice and how these processes generate patterned outcomes.

5 | Spillman, Causal Narratives and the Ontological Question

Spillman's work offers the crucial bridge between interpretive reconstruction and causal explanation. Spillman rejects the false opposition between interpretation and explanation, showing that cultural sociology can theorise how meaning does causal work. She argues that cultural explanations should move beyond universal laws towards 'context-specific causal narratives' that integrate meaning and causality within 'an encompassing framework' for understanding different logics of inquiry (Spillman 2004, 216). This intervention is especially important because it legitimises causal reasoning without reducing culture to a variable. Cultural sociologists already make causal claims when they identify the conditions under which meanings shape perception, frame grievances, authorise action, organise collective identity or stabilise institutional arrangements (Spillman 2004, 2013, 2014; Abend 2022).

Drawing on MacIntyre, Spillman notes that we often identify causal relationships 'without invoking law-like generalisations' (MacIntyre 1976, 144; Spillman 2004, 223). Good explanation identifies 'that which makes this happen rather than that which would otherwise have happened' (MacIntyre 1976, 149). This is not a positivist search for invariant laws. It is a contextual account of causal production. Even apparently stable natural-science relations depend on antecedent conditions. In the social world, where meanings, institutions, actors, practices and material settings interact in open systems, contingency is even more pronounced (Spillman 2004).

This model of causal explanation is especially useful where meanings generate patterned variation rather than uniform effects. A context-specific causal narrative can show how outcomes emerge from the interaction of symbolic forms, institutional arrangements, social positions, practical situations and temporal sequences. In the Robben Island case, it explains how the museum's official reconciliation narrative interacts with heritage institutions, visitor positions, digital platforms, tourism conventions, racialised histories and broader circuits of national and global memory. The result is not mere interpretive plurality, but patterned divergence in how the site is perceived, evaluated, photographed, captioned and circulated.

The remaining problem is ontological. Spillman provides a methodological warrant for causal inference in cultural sociology, but her account leaves more open the question of what kind of causal entities meanings are within those narratives. Are meanings interpretive contexts? Cultural resources? Internalised schemas? Institutional scripts? Symbolic structures? Or are they emergent cultural formations that possess causal powers when activated under specific conditions? This is where critical realism provides the next step.

Critical realism formalises the ontological and epistemological commitments implicit in Spillman's project. It affirms that causal claims in cultural sociology are not only possible but necessary, while providing tools to make such claims without collapsing meaning into mechanism. Critical realism rejects the idea that causality requires law-like generalisation. Instead, it defines causality as the activation of generative mechanisms whose effects emerge only under specific conditions (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995; Porpora 2015; Fletcher 2017). These mechanisms may include symbolic codes, institutional scripts, affectively charged memories, moral classifications, technological affordances and relational obligations. Their effects are not automatic. They depend on how discursive and extra-discursive conditions combine in concrete situations.

A similar convergence appears in *Measuring Culture*. Mohr et al. (2020) locate culture in persons, objects and social relations and explicitly describe their approach as having a 'realist bent.' They write: 'we assume that data depict actual things and processes in the world,' even though measurement 'does not simply mirror the phenomena we study' and represents them 'however imperfectly' (Mohr et al. 2020, 17). They call this stance 'wary realism,' emphasising that all measurement involves hazards, including the 'necessary reduction of information' that occurs when analysts collapse complex social life into categories (Mohr et al. 2020, 17). What they call 'wary realism' closely resembles critical realism in practice: a commitment to the reality of cultural processes without naïve confidence that data transparently mirror the world. Pragmatism anticipates this integration, *Measuring Culture* grapples with it methodologically, Spillman warrants it inferentially and critical realism formalises it philosophically.

This critical realist move clarifies what a context-specific causal narrative must trace. It must identify the meanings present in a given setting in addition to the conditions under which those meanings become operative. It must show how meanings move from availability to activation, from activation to orientation, from orientation to articulation and from articulation to outcome. Availability refers to the existence of recognisable symbolic forms, narratives, classifications, repertoires or institutionalised frames. Activation refers to the conditions under which some meanings become salient rather than others. Orientation refers to the way activated meanings shape perception, evaluation, affective salience and moral judgement. Articulation refers to the translation of these orientations into practice,

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representation, communication or coordination. Outcome refers to the patterned effects that follow, including stabilisation, alignment, fragmentation, ambivalence or transformation.

This model builds directly on Spillman while extending her account. A causal narrative is the explanatory form; the meaning–action mechanism specifies the process being explained. The added step is ontological. Spillman shows that cultural sociologists can construct causal narratives without abandoning meaning; critical realism clarifies why meanings can enter such narratives as real causal powers. The contribution of the meaning–action mechanism is to specify how these powers become operative without assuming that they depend on conscious recognition or produce uniform effects.

6 | Towards a Critical Realist Account of Meaning-in-Action

The bridge from Reed to Spillman to critical realism can now be stated directly. Reed foregrounds interpretation: social action must be reconstructed within historically situated 'landscapes of meaning' (I. A. Reed 2011). Spillman restores causal explanation by showing that meanings can enter 'context-specific causal narratives' without being reduced to laws, variables or observable regularities (Spillman 2004, 2013, 2014). Critical realism integrates these insights by distinguishing the epistemic status of knowledge—which remains partial, situated and fallible—from the ontological status of a social world that exists independently of any particular account of it but is known through interpretation (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995; Porpora 2015). It therefore extends rather than replaces interpretive cultural sociology: interpretation reconstructs the meaningful worlds in which action becomes intelligible, whereas critical realism asks under what conditions particular meanings acquire causal efficacy.

This synthesis shifts the explanatory focus from meaning reconstruction to meaning-in-action. Critical realism rejects both positivist models that reduce causality to constant conjunction and purely interpretive models in which explanation ends with the reconstruction of actors' meanings. Instead, it conceptualises causality as the exercise of generative powers under contingent conditions (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995; Elder-Vass 2010; Porpora 2015). Meanings are socially produced, historically sedimented and interpretively mediated, but once embedded in institutions, artefacts, classifications, practices, infrastructures and relations, they are not reducible to individual belief, conscious recognition or momentary discourse. A symbolic formation may pre-exist a particular actor's encounter with it, circulate across settings and shape perception, evaluation, action or treatment in patterned ways. Meanings are therefore real not because they are fixed or independently determining, but because they possess conditional causal powers that can make a difference in the world. A narrative, classification, memory or repertoire may consequently be widely available yet remain latent or become operative only within particular discursive and extra-discursive conditioning configurations.

A critical realist account must nevertheless explain how symbolic formations operate through persons without reducing social action to individual psychology. Action depends on embodied capacities for perception, affect, judgement and practical execution, but the meanings actors encounter and the conditions under which they respond are socially formed. Critical realism therefore treats biological, psychological, cultural and social properties as interdependent but irreducible levels of reality (Bhaskar 1975; Archer 1995, 2000; Manicas 1982). Moll (2004) argues that the mind is an emergent psychological reality co-determined by biological and social mechanisms in open systems without being reducible to either. A psychological judgement may be one condition of action without sufficiently explaining how its object acquired meaning, why the judgement became salient or why the resulting conduct assumes a particular social form. Social action depends on embodied psychological capacities without being ontologically reducible to them because the meanings, positions, rules, relations and consequences that constitute an action as social exist at emergent cultural and social levels.

Archer identifies the internal conversation as the reflexive process through which agents mediate the effects of structural and cultural conditioning in relation to their concerns and projects. Structural and cultural properties generate constraints and enablements, but their effects are not automatic: through internal deliberation, actors assess their circumstances, determine what matters to them and formulate possible courses of action (Archer 1995, 2003, 2007). The present framework treats this reflexive mediation as one important pathway linking activation, orientation and articulation, rather than as a universal psychological passage through which all symbolic causation must travel. Meanings may also orient conduct through embodied perception, affect, habit, tacit classification or treatment imposed by others (Archer 2000; Vaisey 2009; Lizardo et al. 2016).

The meaning–action mechanism is thus stratified but connected. Availability or imposition concerns the social presence, institutional imposition, or differential accessibility of symbolic formations. Activation occurs as their causal powers become operative through encounters with particular institutional, material, relational, embodied and psychological conditions. Orientation concerns how activated meanings organise perception, affect, evaluation, tacit judgement or reflexive deliberation. Articulation brings these orientations into social practice through action, representation, communication, coordination, institutional practice or treatment by others. Patterned outcomes emerge as these articulations interact with other actors, institutions, technologies, conditions and mechanisms. Symbolic formations become effective through embodied persons, but neither their social origins nor their consequences are reducible to psychological processes. This stratified account provides the ontological foundation for the five-part mechanism developed in the following section: availability or imposition, activation, orientation, articulation and outcome.

7 | The Meaning–Action Mechanism

The preceding sections have shown that cultural sociology offers powerful accounts of interpretation, repertoires, cognition and causal narrative, but still leaves underdeveloped the process through which meanings become causally efficacious (I. A. Reed 2011; Swidler 1986, 2001; Vaisey 2009; Spillman 2004, 2014; Lizardo et al. 2016). Actors inhabit meaningful worlds, but

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how and why do particular meanings, rather than others, become operative in concrete situations and generate patterned outcomes.

This section develops a mechanism-based account of meaning-in-action. I conceptualise meanings as emergent cultural formations with conditional causal powers. They are socially produced, historically sedimented and interpretively mediated, but they are not reducible to subjective interpretation, individual cognition or external structure. Nor do they act independently of actors and contexts. Meanings become causally efficacious when historically sedimented symbolic formations are made available or imposed, activated under specific conditions, oriented towards perception and evaluation and articulated in practice. Their effects are therefore real but conditional (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995; Elder-Vass 2010; Porpora 2015).

This formulation preserves the interpretive insight that social action must be understood in relation to meaning. Actors do not simply respond to external stimuli; they interpret situations, draw on narratives, classify persons and events and locate themselves within symbolic worlds (Weber (1978); Geertz 1973; I. A. Reed 2011). Yet interpretation alone does not explain how meanings produce effects. A narrative may be available but ignored. A symbol may be recognised but not acted upon. A classification may be institutionally authorised but displaced by competing meanings. To reconstruct what a situation means to actors is therefore not the same as explaining how that meaning becomes consequential.

The meaning–action mechanism can be specified as a five-part processual sequence: availability or imposition, activation, orientation, articulation and outcome. This sequence rests on a critical realist premise: meanings, classifications, memories and institutional narratives may be real and causally efficacious before, beyond or without conscious recognition. Race, for example, can shape treatment, vulnerability, credibility, belonging and exclusion even when actors do not explicitly identify race as operative. In critical realist terms, the real is not reducible to the empirical or the perceived (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995; Elder-Vass 2010; Porpora 2015).

The mechanism should therefore not be read as a descriptive sequence of interpretive moments. It is a critical realist account of cultural causality. Meanings are not mechanisms in isolation. More precisely, meanings are symbolic formations whose causal powers become operative through mechanisms of activation, orientation and articulation. This avoids both cultural determinism and interpretive voluntarism. It avoids cultural determinism because meanings do not automatically produce action. It avoids interpretive voluntarism because meanings are not simply chosen or invented by actors in the moment. Actors engage meanings, but they do not encounter an empty symbolic field. They encounter historically sedimented, socially distributed, institutionally organised and differentially available symbolic formations (Swidler 1986, 2001; Sewell 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002).

Availability or imposition refers to the social presence, institutional imposition or differential accessibility of symbolic formations within a field of possible interpretation, evaluation, action or treatment by others. These formations may include narratives, repertoires, classifications, schemas, moral codes, institutional frames, memories, rituals, images or genres (Swidler 1986, 2001; Sewell 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Availability does not require conscious recognition by all actors. It means that a symbolic formation exists within a cultural field as a possible or imposed condition for perception, evaluation, action or treatment.

At Robben Island Museum, several meanings are available at once. The official institutional narrative makes reconciliation, sacrifice, democratic triumph and collective memory available. Other circulating repertoires make suffering, trauma, tourism, scenic beauty, global heritage and ambivalence available. The site is therefore saturated with possible meanings, but those meanings do not all become operative in the same way.

Activation refers to the process through which some available meanings become operative in a particular situation. Activation moves meaning from the background condition to practical force. It may occur through conscious recognition, tacit perception, embodied response, institutional classification, situational cues, material settings, interactional encounters, emotional disruptions, technological affordances, social positions or moments of uncertainty (Vaisey 2009; Lizardo et al. 2016; Spillman 2014).

At Robben Island, activation depends on how visitors encounter the site. The prison space, guided tour, museum narrative, ferry ride, landscape, camera, platform conventions and visitors' social position all shape which meanings become salient. For some visitors, the prison activates suffering, endurance and political struggle. For others, the landscape and visual conventions of Instagram activate scenic beauty, tourism and aesthetic display. Race does not mechanically determine interpretation but racialised social position mediates which meanings become salient, morally charged and representationally available.

Orientation refers to the way activated meanings shape perception, evaluation, affective salience, moral judgment and practical relevance. Once activated, meanings do not merely label a situation. They organise what actors notice, value, fear, ignore and regard as appropriate or legitimate (Alexander 2004; Vaisey 2009; Abend 2014). Orientation may be conscious and reflective, but it may also be tacit, embodied or externally imposed through classification.

At Robben Island, one activated meaning may orient the visitor towards the site as a sacred space of national memory. Another may orient the visitor towards the prison as a scene of racial violence and historical trauma. Another may orient the visitor towards the island as a scenic tourist destination. These orientations shape not only what visitors think, but what they see, photograph, caption and circulate.

Articulation refers to the translation of oriented meaning into practice. Meanings become socially consequential when they are enacted, represented, communicated, coordinated, institutionalised or expressed through patterned treatment by others. Articulation may take the form of speech, ritual, bodily conduct, organisational decision-making, political action, visual representation, digital circulation or institutional practice (Emirbayer

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and Mische 1998; Gross 2009; Mische 2009). Alexander's (2004) theory of cultural pragmatics helps specify this stage: meanings do not become public simply by being interpreted; they must be performed through actors, scripts, audiences, material means, mise-en-scène and relations of social power. Articulation therefore names the performative moment in which oriented meaning is staged, displayed, circulated and made available for uptake or rejection by others.

At Robben Island, articulation occurs through Instagram posts: images, captions, hashtags, poses, compositional choices and acts of circulation. A visitor oriented towards national memory may reproduce the official reconciliation narrative. A visitor oriented towards trauma may emphasise imprisonment and suffering. A visitor oriented towards aesthetic consumption may foreground the sea, sky, architecture or travel experience. These practices do not simply express interpretation; they enact and recirculate meaning.

Outcome refers to the patterned effects generated through these processes. Outcomes may include alignment, stabilisation, fragmentation, ambivalence, contestation, transformation, exclusion or institutional failure. Outcomes are not produced by meaning alone. They emerge from the interaction between activated meanings and other mechanisms, including institutional arrangements, material infrastructures, technological affordances, social positions and relations of power (Sewell 1996; McDonnell 2016; Spillman 2004).

At Robben Island, the outcome is patterned fragmentation. The official narrative is available and institutionally reinforced, but it does not produce uniform alignment. Visitor representations diverge across official-narrative alignment, dark reflection, aesthetic appreciation and ambivalence. This divergence is not random interpretive plurality. It is structured through the differential activation, orientation and articulation of meanings embedded in institutional, material, technological and racialised conditions.

The causal sequence can therefore be stated more directly: symbolic formations become consequential when they are made available or imposed, activated under specific conditions, oriented towards perception and evaluation, articulated through practice and linked to patterned outcomes. This framework shifts cultural sociology from the general claim that meaning matters to a more precise account of how meaning matters. It explains why meanings may be culturally available but inactive, consciously recognised but weakly consequential or tacitly operative despite limited recognition. Meaning becomes effective not simply by being present, but by becoming operative within a layered configuration of institutions, material environments, technologies, social positions and histories. The framework is therefore an ontological and explanatory model rather than a claim that every empirical sequence will unfold linearly or display each component with equal visibility.

8 | Propositions

The meaning–action mechanism can be stated in five propositions, grounded in the critical realist premise that symbolic formations can be real and causally efficacious before, beyond or without conscious perception.

Proposition 1. *Availability or imposition. Historically sedimented symbolic formations possess conditional causal powers; those powers become situationally relevant when the formations are socially available, institutionally imposed or differentially accessible as narratives, classifications, repertoires, schemas, memories, moral codes or institutional frames.*

Proposition 2. *Activation. Available meanings become causally operative when situational cues, institutional arrangements, material environments, technological affordances, social positions, embodied habits, classifications or disruptions bring their causal powers into exercise.*

Proposition 3. *Orientation. Activated meanings orient perception, evaluation, affective salience, moral judgement and practical relevance. This orientation may be explicit and reflective, but it may also be tacit, embodied or externally imposed.*

Proposition 4. *Articulation. Oriented meanings become socially consequential when articulated through action, representation, communication, coordination, institutional practice or patterned treatment by others.*

Proposition 5. *Outcome and mechanism interaction. Outcomes vary depending on whether activated meanings are reinforced, blocked, redirected, amplified or counteracted by other discursive and extra-discursive mechanisms.*

These propositions clarify that the model does not begin with subjective interpretation. Meanings and classifications may preexist actors' encounters with them and shape action even when they are not consciously perceived. Availability names their social or institutional presence, not their universal recognition. Activation names the process through which these formations become operative in a situation. Orientation and articulation specify how activated meanings organise perception, evaluation and practice. Outcome names the patterned effects that emerge from this process, always in interaction with other mechanisms.

Figure 1 represents this ontological structure. The central pathway distinguishes the analytically ordered moments through which symbolic causal powers become operative and consequential, whereas the surrounding fields show how discursive and extra-discursive conditions shape each transition. The components need not unfold as a strictly linear or consciously experienced temporal sequence: their operation may be rapid, tacit, recursive or only retrospectively distinguishable, and outcomes may reproduce or transform symbolic formations and their future availability.

Empirically, the framework directs researchers to distinguish evidence that a meaning was present, imposed or differentially accessible from evidence that its causal powers became operative. Availability or imposition can be investigated through circulating narratives, classifications, repertoires, institutional messages and practices of authorisation or exclusion; activation through evidence of situational salience, recognition, imposed classification, tacit or embodied response or patterned treatment; orientation through patterned attention, perception, evaluation, affect, moral judgement and practical relevance; articulation through conduct, communication, representation,

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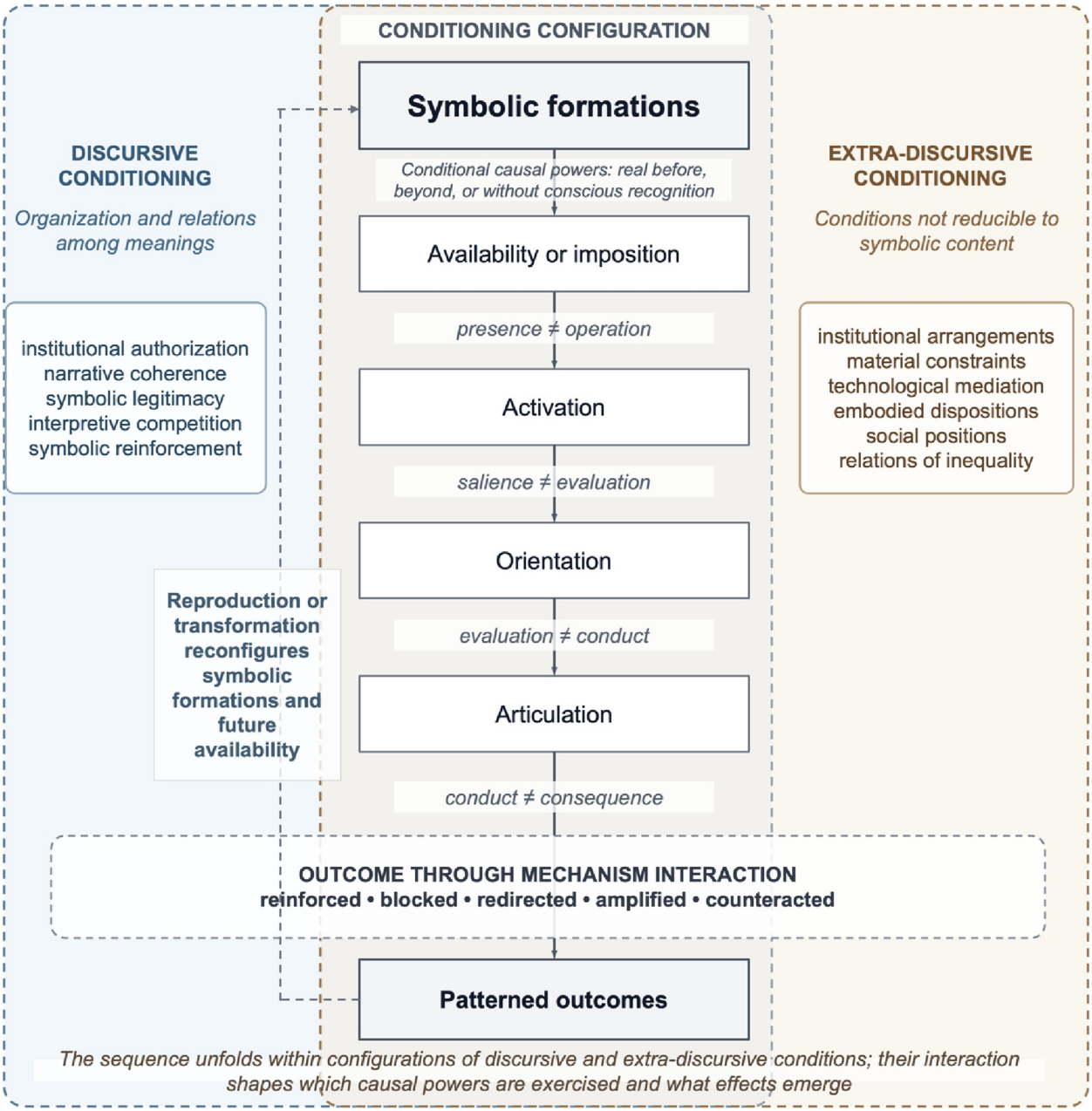


FIGURE 1 | From symbolic formation to patterned outcomes: The meaning–action mechanism and its conditioning configurations.

coordination, institutional practice or treatment by others; and outcomes through the effects that emerge as these articulations interact with other mechanisms. Because generative mechanisms are not directly observable, their operation may need to be inferred retroductively from these evidentiary traces and from comparison with plausible alternative explanations. The framework therefore converts the assertion that 'meaning mattered' into a series of empirically tractable explanatory questions. The task of the analyst is to explain why a meaning became operative and generated an orientation and articulation, rather than remaining latent, being displaced by another meaning or contributing to a different course of action.

Taken together, the framework shifts cultural sociology from the general assertion that meaning matters to an explanation of how meaning matters. Robben Island Museum illustrates the mechanism as a whole. The official reconciliation narrative is institutionally available, but prison space, touristic conventions, platform affordances and racialised social position differentially activate reconciliation, trauma, tourism and aesthetic appreciation. These meanings orient perception and evaluation and are articulated through images, captions, hashtags, poses and circulation. The resulting pattern—alignment, dark reflection, aestheticisation and ambivalence—is neither uniform narrative reproduction nor random interpretive plurality. It emerges as articulated meanings interact with discursive and extra-discursive conditions and mechanisms. The case therefore illustrates how symbolic formations can generate patterned but nondeterminate outcomes without reducing culture to either subjective interpretation or external structure.

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9 | Mechanism Interaction and Contingency

A mechanism-based account must explain why meanings do not produce uniform outcomes. Symbolic formations become operative within conditioning configurations that combine relations among meanings with institutional, material, technological, embodied and relational conditions. These conditions may reinforce, block, amplify, redirect or counteract the exercise of symbolic causal powers (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Elder-Vass 2010; Porpora 2015).

Discursive conditioning concerns institutional authorisation, narrative coherence, symbolic legitimacy, interpretive competition and reinforcement among meanings: the organisation of and relations amongst meanings themselves within the landscape of meaning. Extra-discursive conditioning concerns institutional arrangements, material constraints, technological mediation, embodied dispositions, social positions and relations of inequality: the causal effects not reducible to symbolic content. The distinction is analytical rather than absolute: extra-discursive conditions may themselves be culturally interpreted and symbolically meaningful, but their causal properties are not exhausted by those meanings. Institutions enter the configuration in both ways: discursively, by authorising meanings, and extra-discursively, through organisational arrangements and material capacities not reducible to symbolic content.

At Robben Island, the official narrative is institutionally authorised, but its articulation depends on conditions the museum does not fully control. The landscape affords historical reflection and aesthetic photography; Instagram privileges visual display; and visitors' social positions shape the salience of apartheid memory. These conditions produce patterned divergence rather than stable reproduction. More generally, the effects of political slogans, religious symbols, classifications, professional norms and collective memories depend on the configurations in which they are activated and articulated. Symbolic causality is therefore conditional, relational and processual.

10 | Implications: Explaining Meaning-in-Action Across Contexts

By conceptualising meanings as emergent cultural formations with conditional causal powers, the model provides a portable way to explain variation in action across empirical settings. Its central contribution is to specify how symbolic formations become consequential: they are sedimented in institutions, infrastructures, embodied dispositions, technologies and relations of power; made available or imposed; activated under particular conditions; oriented towards perception and evaluation; articulated in practice; and linked to patterned outcomes. This approach builds on cultural sociology's interpretive strengths while extending them towards causal explanation (I. A. Reed 2011; Spillman 2004, 2014; Swidler 1986; Vaisey 2009; Lizardo et al. 2016).

This shift matters across several domains. First, the framework clarifies variation in crisis response. Moments of disruption are marked by ambiguity, when multiple meanings may be available but not equally activated. The same event can be interpreted through competing frames: threat, solidarity, disorder, opportunity, injustice or renewal. A mechanism-based account asks which frames become operative, how they orient actors towards fear, obligation, blame, hope or mobilisation and how these orientations are articulated through collective action, withdrawal, compliance, resistance or public communication. Divergent responses to similar crises can therefore be understood as outcomes of differently activated and articulated meanings within particular configurations of institutional authority, material constraint, organisational capacity and social position (Coetzee, forthcoming; Sewell 1996; Gross 2009; Spillman 2004).

Second, the framework helps explain digital mediation and institutional narrative failure. Digital platforms do not simply transmit meanings that already exist elsewhere; they reshape the conditions under which meanings become visible, salient and actionable. Platform affordances such as visibility, replication, aestheticisation, circulation and audience feedback can amplify some symbolic forms while attenuating others. This helps explain why official narratives may be available and authoritative yet fail to produce consistent alignment when platform logics, material settings or alternative repertoires favour competing articulations (Coetzee 2026; McDonnell 2016; Mohr et al. 2020).

Third, the framework links meaning-making to inequality. The availability, activation, orientation and articulation of meaning are not evenly distributed across social groups. Actors occupy different positions within social hierarchies, and these positions shape their access to cultural repertoires, relation to institutions, exposure to formative experiences and capacity to publicly articulate meaning (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Sewell 1992; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Inequality matters because it shapes the conditions under which meanings are encountered, imposed, made salient, evaluated and expressed.

Fourth, the framework offers a processual account of cultural change. Meanings are not only reproduced; they are transformed as they move across settings, actors, institutions and media. A meaning may be sedimented in one context, activated differently in another, articulated through new practices and linked to outcomes that alter its future availability. Cultural change can therefore be analysed as the reconfiguration of the meaning–action sequence itself (Sewell 1996; McDonnell 2016).

These implications point to a broader shift in cultural sociology's approach to explanation. The question is not simply whether meaning matters, but how, when and under what conditions meanings become causally efficacious. By specifying the movement from symbolic formation to availability, activation, orientation, articulation and outcome, the framework retains cultural sociology's interpretive strengths while developing a more explicit account of how symbolic forms become effective in practice.

11 | Conclusion

This article has argued that theories of social behaviour require a more explicit account of how meaning becomes causally efficacious. Existing approaches have shown that social life is irreducibly meaningful, that actors inhabit historically situated

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symbolic worlds, that culture provides repertoires for action, that schemas shape cognition and that qualitative sociology can make context-specific causal claims (Geertz 1973; Swidler 1986, 2001; I. A. Reed 2011; Vaisey 2009; Spillman 2004, 2014). Yet these approaches remain less precise about the process through which meanings, classifications and symbolic structures become effective in practice.

In response, I have developed a mechanism-based framework for explaining meaning-in-action. The central claim is that meanings are emergent cultural formations with causal powers, but those powers are conditional rather than automatic. Meanings do not produce action simply because they exist, circulate or are institutionally authorised. Nor do they become real only when actors consciously perceive them. Rather, symbolic formations may be historically sedimented in institutions, material infrastructures, technologies, embodied dispositions and relations of power before they become explicitly recognised. They become causally efficacious when they are made available or imposed, activated under specific conditions, oriented towards perception and evaluation, articulated through practice and linked to patterned outcomes.

This framework moves beyond the opposition between interpretation and explanation. Interpretation remains indispensable because meanings must be reconstructed before their causal operation can be explained. But interpretation alone is insufficient. To explain meaning-in-action, sociologists must also specify how symbolic formations become operative, how they organise perception and evaluation, how they are translated into practice and how they interact with institutional arrangements, material infrastructures, technological affordances, social positions and relations of power. A critical realist account makes this integration possible by treating meanings as historically produced and interpretively mediated, but also as real cultural formations whose causal powers are activated under structured conditions (Bhaskar 1975; Sayer 1992; Archer 1995; Porpora 2015). In this sense, the framework also extends critical realist accounts of personhood and social causation: meanings become effective through persons, but persons are themselves situated within real cultural, institutional, material and relational formations that shape what they can perceive, value and do (Smith 2010, 2015).

Robben Island Museum illustrates the framework. Its official narrative links suffering to resilience, reconciliation and democratic triumph, yet visitor representations diverge across alignment, dark reflection, aestheticisation and ambivalence. This patterned fragmentation emerges from interactions among institutional narratives, material settings, platform affordances, social positions and racialised histories. Meaning becomes effective not simply through presence or perception, but through operation within a layered conditioning configuration.

Meanings matter differently depending on when, where and how they become operative, shaping what actors notice, evaluate, consider morally significant and ultimately do or communicate. But these effects depend on activation, orientation and articulation within concrete contexts. A symbolic formation may stabilise action in one setting, fragment in another, remain latent in a third or affect actors without being consciously recognised. The article's central contribution is therefore not simply the five-part sequence itself, but the critical realist reconstruction of cultural causality that underlies it. Symbolic formations may be socially produced, historically sedimented and causally potent before recognition; their effects become observable only through conditional activation, orientation, articulation and interaction with other mechanisms.

A theory of meaning-in-action should reconstruct what meanings signify and explain how meanings become effective in the world. By tracing the movement from real symbolic formation to availability, activation, orientation, articulation and outcome, the meaning–action mechanism offers a portable model for analysing symbolic causality across domains such as crisis response, institutional legitimacy, digital communication, collective memory, cultural change and social inequality. Cultural sociology can be both interpretive and explanatory: attentive to symbolic worlds and situated understanding, while also specifying the mechanisms through which meanings generate effects.

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Ethics Statement

This article is a conceptual and theoretical study that draws only on publicly available empirical materials and the author's previously published work. No new human participant data were collected, and no private or identifiable participant information is reported.

Consent

No human participants were recruited, and no new human participant data were collected for this study. The article draws exclusively on publicly available materials and previously published research; therefore, informed consent was not required.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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