
The Central Arguments of Isaac Ariail Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*

LESLIE MACCOLMAN*

University of Notre Dame

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Introduction

Isaac Reed's [2011] book *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Social Sciences* responds to the stubborn yet immensely fecund question 'What is social knowledge and how can we, as researchers, generate such knowledge?' In doing so, it dissolves the supposed tension between *understanding* and *explanation*, arguing that the latter is but one element of the former and that it is towards *understanding* that we must strive. This, according to Reed, means transcending 'minimal' factual claims to construct 'maximal' interpretations, through the artful resignification of evidence within a coherent theoretical bricolage.

Reed's aim, with this book, is to advance a theory of knowing, while remaining grounded in the material, empirical stuff of social scientific research. As such, the book unfolds around two central questions. First, it asks how *do* theory and evidence interact? To this question, the author offers a novel epistemological taxonomy, organising a century of social thought into three 'epistemic modes'—realist, normative, and interpretive. He explains the logic of these modes and dissects several canonical examples to illustrate how each one operates in action. Second, the book asks how *should* theory and evidence interact? In the uncharted land of post-positivist, post-modern, post-structural, and post-colonial meta-theoretical rumination the negation is clear: we all know what we're *not* doing. But what, then, is the driving force of social scientific research? Is there such thing as a framework for interpretive knowledge which accommodates the motives and mechanisms central to explanation while remaining sensitive to the historically situated, intersubjective 'landscapes of meaning' that guide social action? In short, yes. '[The] interpretation of meaning can', says Reed, 'form the basis for the investigator to reach the goals central to both normativism (critique) and realism (explanation), with a special focus on how precisely the interpretation of

* Direct all correspondence to: Leslie MacColman, Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame, 810 Flanner Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA, e-mail: lmaccolm@nd.edu.

meaning can contribute to the causal explanation of social action' [Reed 2011: 92]. This move, however, involves loosening the restraints of causal explanation—narrowly defined as the search for *forcing causes*—to consider the less tangible but no less powerful ways in which networks of meaning enable, constrain, delineate, liberate, and *form* social action.

In this short piece, my objective is to distil and synthesise the main arguments put forth in Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*. This narrative approximation is accompanied by an even more synthetic chart (Appendix 1). I begin by explaining the difference between 'minimal' and 'maximal' interpretation, a key conceptual distinction which is leveraged periodically throughout the text. I then summarise Reed's three 'epistemic modes'—realism, normativism, and interpretivism—and discuss the textual exemplars analysed at greater length in the book. Finally, I discuss the author's main criticisms of the first two modes, a lead-in to why (and how) interpretivism offers a way forward. This summary must, however, be prefaced with a caveat: if the goal is to faithfully render the author's ideas and arguments, I have undoubtedly fallen short, for it is an impossible task to 'resignify' such a complex piece without losing many subtleties and nuances. Nonetheless, I hope this synthetic introduction will pique the reader's interest sufficiently to prompt him/her to read the book in its entirety.

From minimal to maximal interpretations

Reed defines maximal interpretation as knowledge claims which transcend the strict binary of 'fact' and 'theory,' articulating the two in such a way that 'the *referential* functions of evidence and the *relational* functions of theory are subsumed under a deeper understanding' [ibid: 23; emphasis mine]. Their immediate contrast is with minimal interpretations, which remain within the sign-system of facts, resignifying evidence to show *what happened, where, and to whom*, independent of theories that can elucidate motives, mechanisms, or meanings. Maximal interpretations are built on minimal interpretations and empirically tethered to social facts—the same facts they organise, explain, and judge. Yet, they supersede factual claims to achieve greater comprehension of relevant causal relationships. Maximal interpretations are the goal of all social researchers, regardless of their epistemological leanings. Nonetheless, the distinct *ways of knowing* posited by different frameworks belie variable understandings of what theory is and what it should do, thus yielding different modes of maximal interpretation.

For Reed, the juxtaposition between the referential function of *facts* and the relational function of *theory* is contingent on two things. First, it requires an understanding that both are inextricably embedded in systems of meaning. The 'thick' character and irreducibility of social facts to brute observation renders much of human behaviour unintelligible except through this interpretive lens. Following the author's example, to say that the 1692 Witch Trials in Salem, Massachu-

setts, USA, were precipitated by a doctor's asseveration that a dozen village girls (witches) were 'afflicted' by the 'evil hand' is uncontroversial insofar as written records testify to this occurrence. But even this 'factual' account demands a minimal understanding of the historically particular modes of social organisation, religion, and medicine that imbued the occurrence with meaning. 'Social facts understood in this manner can never be fully stated in protocol sentences that are verifiable by literal observation, but must be inferred and understood in a dialogue about what is happening or has happened, at a certain time, in a certain space, in a given society.' [ibid.: 16] Likewise, social theory cannot exist outside the vast systems of meaning, wherein scientific terms and the concepts to which they refer allow us to differentiate between, for example, democratic and authoritarian regimes.

Second, we must recognise that the meaning systems of facts and theories are governed by distinct logics, with consequences for the pursuit of knowledge. Theories are, by definition, abstract. They operate relationally, taking as their referent '(1) other theoretical expressions and (2) imagined societies, social actions, and social relations whose primary existence is in the researcher's head' [ibid.: 21]. The relational function of theory stands in contrast with the indexical or referential function of evidence, which is used by researchers to substantiate claims about *actual happenings* in the social world. Assemblages of evidence—texts, images, numbers, and graphs—signify social facts and, in doing so, establish the phenomena of study, for example the abolition of feudal privileges in pre-Revolutionary France. Scholarly consensus about what actually occurred (minimal interpretation) becomes a minimum common denominator for subsequent interpretations of *how*, *why*, and *what it meant* (maximal interpretation). While agreement on 'the facts' is rarely unproblematic, it is the use of theory to classify, arrange, and make sense of them that generally gives rise to the most vitriolic and productive scholarly polemics—hence the terminology of *maximal* interpretation.

Reed also offers a useful backdoor pathway for understanding what maximal interpretations *are* by showing precisely what they are *not*. Criticisms hailed at unsatisfying claims are revelatory. By visualising theory and evidence on perpendicular axes, we can locate some of the most common criticisms. Along one axis are *evidence-based criticisms* in which an author is charged with incorrect factual claims: the evidence does not accurately represent the phenomenon. Along the other axis are *theory-based criticisms* which assert logical or conceptual incoherence: the theory is not sound. Where evidence and theory overlap, the most common criticism is that of *disjunction*: the theory does not match the evidence or the evidence begs use of a different theory. Thus, Reed argues, strong knowledge claims require not just empirical support (referential correctness) and conceptual coherence (defensible theory) but the effective binding together of the two (fusion). On the rare and celebrated occasions when this alchemy is achieved, the product is maximal interpretation.

In summary, Reed offers a positive definition of social knowledge as the seamless weaving together of evidentiary and conceptual strands into a single

tapestry. In this way of thinking, *minimal* interpretations, with their proximity to empirical facts, are ultimately limited in their power to elucidate the deeper meanings of human behaviour. But 'when theory is brought to bear on this web of factual signification to resignify the evidence' it makes possible 'deeper knowledge of the "social actions that happened."' When this happens, *maximal* interpretations are created' [ibid.: 39].

On epistemic modes

The author's own scholarship is situated under the broad umbrella of interpretivism and, not surprisingly, the book operates on the same epistemic register. In fact, it is precisely this self-conscious intellectual commitment that Reed uses to drive his argument about maximal vs minimal interpretations. He does this by offering an epistemological taxonomy of social scientific thought, systematically unpacking the weighty but often implicit ontological baggage associated with different ways of knowing. Specifically, Reed identifies three 'epistemic modes': realist, normative, and interpretive. These modes, according to Reed, offer 'different ways of bringing theory and evidence together' and serve to 'structure the expectations about what such contact can accomplish, and provide more or less well-formed criteria of validity' to evaluate knowledge [ibid.: 7]. These modes are not clustered within specific subfields of sociology, but instead cut across substantive programmes, research agendas, levels of analysis, and, to some degree, methodological camps. Maximal interpretations are present in all three modes, yet the interpretive mode is best equipped to produce 'deep understandings' and meaningful social explanations. Thus, the author begins by describing the other two modes.

The realist epistemic mode

The realist (or naturalist) epistemic mode views the human sciences as an imperfect reflection of the natural sciences; yet, unlike positivism, it is not bound by the realm of direct, sensory observation. In the words of Reed, 'The core ambition of realism is to take the risk of depth interpretation, or in the terms developed here, to construct maximal interpretations that use theory to go beyond the facts but remain responsible to these facts.' [ibid.: 63] In realism, the articulation of abstract, broadly generalisable causal explanations is achieved by unearthing the (hidden) mechanisms which account for the clock-like regularity of social life across time and space. This quest is premised on the existence of a 'deep' social reality, a basic structure that lies underneath the 'surface' of outcomes, events, and phenomena. This underlying layer of reality is the ultimate referent to which theory must correspond. 'In the realist epistemic mode', says Reed, 'theory creates a picture of the social world that is expected to apply widely (generality), to be consistent with

itself (coherence), and describe directly social reality (reference)' [ibid.: 42]. Social realities are taken as *intransitive*, but the means for apprehending them remain *transitive*, dependent on socially-constructed and hence fallible theoretical interpretations. Scientific discovery is, therefore, understood as a work-in-progress which—through the careful colligation of evidence, retroduction, and the refining of theoretical claims—moves us incrementally towards a 'true' account of causal relationships.

Reed finds examples of the realist epistemic mode in several classic texts, among them Theda Skocpol's [1979] *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* and Barrington Moore's [1967] *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, as well as Jack Goldstone's more recent comparative-historical work. Skocpol, for example, argues that the combination of domestic class structures and international competition led to the breakdown of old regimes, enabling the crystallisation of subsequent social revolutions. She does this by amassing evidence to substantiate a historical narrative (certain events that occurred in a certain order) and show that the institutions and social transfigurations in question bear resemblance to the theoretical signifiers deployed (e.g. the 'old regime state' and the 'landed upper class'). Maximal interpretation, in this case, relies on theory to structure and delimit the 'real' social forces underlying historical processes and verify the causal relationships between the 'real' social entities represented in their abstract form.

Moore, like Skocpol, weaves together a mixture of factual and theoretical claims to explain how commercial agriculture (a mechanism) varied in strength in England, Germany, and Japan, thus producing different political outcomes in these three countries. In Moore's realist account, 'the claim is, implicitly or explicitly, that the theoretical signifiers used by the researcher point to an essential aspect of the social as such, and that this world exists underneath the time-space patch of social life to which their evidence refers' [Reed 2011: 49]. In other words, the 'relationship between town and country' is a *real thing* which can not only be said to *exist* in different (but ultimately commensurable) cases but shown to *vary* in the direction of its strength or imbalance, so as to *cause* distinct outcomes. Finally, Reed invokes Goldstone's writings on comparative-historical analysis as an exemplar of the realist epistemic mode. Goldstone's cross-case comparison and within-case process tracing are shown to take the form of a series of deductive moves, aimed at testing the correspondence between social theories and the 'real' causes of social events.

The normative epistemic mode

The normative epistemic mode emerges as a foil to the realist mode described above. In contrast to realism, which venerates scientific neutrality (or the illusion thereof), normativism recognises that the production and curation of knowledge

are, at their core, political acts. Normativism is, according to Reed, a 'way of producing maximal theoretical interpretations that speak to the debates of political theory, but that speak to these debates with an intellectual authority derived from both theory and fact' [ibid.: 68]. Within this mode, research is not a description of 'social objects,' but a dialogue between social scientists and subjects—subjects animated by consciousness and prompted by cognitive and instrumental motivations, as well as normative and ethical considerations. We, as researchers, cannot fully extract ourselves from the political dialogues that surround, inform, and are impacted by our knowledge claims, but are compelled to emit value judgements about the social actions we study, while remaining responsibly grounded in empirical fact. Far from the normative asceticism of mechanistic causality sought after by realism, the goal of research becomes the 'resignification of consciousness via theory', the (re)telling of a historical story substantiated by evidence but attuned to 'political questions and problematics' [ibid.: 81]. The normative epistemic mode sustains that *comprehension* of the social can only be achieved by engaging with the human action, consciousness, morality, and the utopian visions that push and prod in the unfolding of history. Thus, normativism, like realism, is built on the foundation of evidentiary claims, represented in the meaning system of facts. However, it differs in its use of referents which are not *real* but *ideal*. Utopian (or, in some cases, dystopian) referents are centrepieces, in relation to which factual and theoretical claims can be evaluated; they are anchor points for the critical retelling of history, which is, in turn, signified as the 'tension between a set of social ideals and their empirical manifestation or lack thereof' [ibid.: 87].

The normative epistemic mode is exemplified by Jürgen Habermas' [1984] *The Theory of Communicative Action* and [1989] *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (among others), Leela Gandhi's [2006] *Affective Communities: Anti-Colonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, and parts of Michel Foucault's extensive oeuvre. All of these authors rely extensively on empirical evidence to generate factual truth claims, minimal interpretations about things that happened. However, they also construct a new manner of maximal interpretations by interlacing factual claims and utopic ideals. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, for example, Habermas argues that understanding normatively-regulated social action *necessarily* involves the moral-practical appraisal of norms. To limit social-scientific inquiry to objective statements, which can be verified or falsified on the basis of fact (minimal interpretations), is an ontological fallacy. 'When it comes to interpretation, questions of meaning and questions of validity cannot be strictly separated.' [Reed 2011: 71]

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere illustrates the normative epistemic mode in action. Therein, Habermas analyses the practices of 'public' deliberation in 18th-century European coffee houses, infusing factual claims (what was discussed, how, and by whom) with ethically- and morally-oriented theoretical claims (about the principles of deliberative democracy). Both claims

are made in reference to—purportedly collective—ideals of democracy and the good society, and to Habermas' (utopic) vision of rational deliberation. In a similar fashion, Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities* combines carefully formulated factual claims about Victorian colonists and colonial subjects (based on the critical re-reading of historical archives) with theoretical discussions of sociality, polity, and emotional solidarity. This critical retelling buttresses normative aspirations of emancipatory postcolonial theory and opens new political possibilities for the modern-day critique of empire.

In Gandhi and Habermas alike, maximal interpretations serve to 'work out and work through knowledge of the good society ...', and the question is not so much what *is* the good as *how*, *when*, and *where* the good can be or was made actual, in actors' minds or in social institutions' [Reed 2011: 86]. In Foucault, however, this relationship is inverted: in his biting histories of the present, critiques are developed not in reference to the glittering utopia, but to a garish dystopia. This dystopia includes the surveillance society and the expanding reach of power into the most intimate spheres of the body and the self. But, dystopian visions aside, aspects of Foucault's work exemplify the normative epistemic mode. He is attentive to the present-day political implications of his endeavour. He remains close to the empirical record, but transcends the 'facts' to build a more nuanced argument (maximal interpretation) about the political problematics of the day. Not lastly, he disavows any (realist) aspirations of explaining the *causes* of social action. 'Foucault does not reject the possibility of truth in minimal interpretation', says Reed, 'What he rejects is the realist program for producing deeper truths about history, via a general, coherent, and referential theory of society' [ibid.: 83].

The interpretive epistemic mode

If social research is likened to comprehending the inner workings of a *clock* in the realist mode and to a *dialogue* between researcher and subject in the normative mode, the prevailing metaphor for the interpretive epistemic mode is that of a painting: the interpretive researcher seeks not to uncover the 'real causes' of social action or pass judgment on the 'rightness' of a set of institutionalised norms, but to paint a picture that coherently represents local landscapes of meaning. 'In the interpretive epistemic mode the work of maximal interpretation makes claims about the symbolic order and makes these claims in a way that remains within the orbit of the social actions under scrutiny.' [ibid.: 92]

An interpretive approach requires no a priori ideological or methodological commitment and should not be conflated with an 'ironic anti-essentialist' position which denies the possibility of social knowledge itself. The interpretive epistemic mode does, however, demand an ontological commitment to 'the efficacy of social meaning' and 'some notion of the social consequences of collective

representation' [ibid.: 103], the idea that networks of meaning enable, constrain, liberate, and ultimately *form* social action. This leads to a recognition that abstractions—like agency, structure, solidarity, and rationality—can only take us so far, because these abstractions are embodied (and gain causal traction) at specific intersections of time and space. In other words, they can only 'do things' within the confines of history. Furthermore, they may do *different* things in different places or at different times in history, based on dynamic, locally-defined meaning structures. The interpretive epistemic mode thus calls for a radical re-centring of the subject within the landscape of meaning within which her actions (and her very consciousness) can be understood. Indeed, the goal of the interpretivist is to *understand*, a nobler and more difficult task, says Reed, than explaining.

Interpretivism does not discard the questions posed by realism (what is the mechanism?) or normativism (to what extent does it approximate the ideal?) but sustains that these questions 'have to be approached indirectly, mediated through the interpretation of social meaning' [ibid.: 90]. More so than competing epistemic modes, it is attentive to human subjectivity and to the 'meaningful worlds of social life' which give rise to human agency. Historically situated systems of meaning are like water for fish. The human subjects of our research, more often than not, fail to articulate them consciously in interviews or historical texts. However, their powerful currents surround and shape everything they say and do, as well as everything they can't say or do. To ignore the plasticity of meaning across time, space, and cultural milieus, says Reed, is to generate an impoverished social knowledge. The intellectual goal of the interpretive epistemic mode is, therefore, to reconstruct these 'deep meanings' and resignify evidence in relation to them. 'The resignification moves from one set of social meanings to another set of social meanings: from the "surface" meanings easily inferred from the evidence to the "deep" meanings that require much more interpretive work to access.' [ibid.: 92]

This deliberate recontextualisation of human consciousness and social action leads Reed to the metaphor of landscapes. In any given system of symbolic representation (or landscape) there are identifiable actors and institutions, each with the motives and means to enact social life. 'However, ultimately, the actors and their related social processes are painted with the same paint, and painted in the same style, as the landscape upon which they move. This landscape is the concrete instantiation of meanings made by humans, to which humans become subject, and through which humans must act and interact.' [ibid.: 110] Landscapes are always fragments of larger social, spatial, and temporal panoramas, which shade imperceptibly from one to the next. They also look different depending on the subject-position from which they are viewed, including the position of the researcher. As interpretive researchers, our texts reconstruct and resignify landscapes. But, in the same way that there is no universal landscape, 'there is no master painting—only scenes to reconstruct using different brushes' [ibid.: 111]. Thus, in the interpretive epistemic mode, as distinct from realist or normative modes, coherence is intrinsic to the landscape (the case), not the theo-

ry used to represent it. And the *validity* of truth claims is the degree of accuracy with which they reflect the case at hand—through the lens of a single theory or an artful theoretical bricolage. So long as we remain responsible to the empirical evidence (through sound minimal interpretations), we are free to bring different theories to bear on this evidence to promote fuller comprehension of the landscape as a whole.

Reed illustrates the interpretive epistemic mode using two examples: Clifford Geertz's [1973] essay 'Notes on the Balinese Cockfight' and Susan Bordo's [1985] essay 'Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture'. The first is a paradigmatic example of the interpretive search for 'deep meaning'. Within the complex local landscape of a Balinese village, Geertz seeks to explain 'what is going on' when men bet on cocks. To answer this question, he invokes a potpourri of theories, borrowing from utilitarian philosophy the idea (and the term) 'deep play' to describe the irrationality of betting when economic stakes are too high. Elsewhere in the text, he borrows from Freud to interpret the myriad metaphors in Balinese speech that make creative use of the word 'cock'. Finally, he draws on Durkheim to illustrate how the ritual of the cockfight reproduces the binary of sacred and profane. Taken as a whole, Geertz's essay offers a coherent representation (and resignification) of the Balinese cockfight, which remains responsible to 'surface level' phenomena, the material practice of gambling and the local meanings attached to it, and simultaneously renders intelligible for the reader the 'deep meanings' present within this landscape. Bordo's text operates in a similar manner, borrowing selectively from an array of philosophical traditions to *resignify* modern-day eating disorders as bodily manifestations of the Kantian divide between body and soul, the struggle for control, and the tenuous solution to female self-definition within the confines of a patriarchal system. 'The mantra of interpretive analysis', says Reed, 'is plurality in theory, unity in meaning' [Reed 2011: 100].

Conclusions: explaining and understanding the social world

The author situates his book 'at the intersection of practice and prescription' [ibid.: 7]. So where does this winding intellectual journey ultimately lead? The core argument, developed more fully in subsequent chapters, is foreshadowed in the book's introduction, where Reed argues that 'the interpretive epistemic mode can offer a synthetic approach to social knowledge, and enable the researcher to build social explanations and deliver social critique' [ibid.: 11].

This claim is substantiated through the careful deconstruction of contending epistemic modes. In the case of realism, Reed accedes to the importance and continued utility of mechanisms (or *forcing causes*) in the development of social knowledge, but warns that within this mode it is easy (and common) for researchers to forget that they, too, are engaged in interpretation and 'to imagine that

what is happening is the verification or falsification of scientific hypotheses and the linear accumulation of scientific knowledge' [ibid.: 52]. More importantly, he rejects the realist vision of 'the real' as an intellectual 'short circuit' that guarantees, in advance cross-case commensurability. But, in the end, it is the subjective or concept-dependent character of social life that destabilises the foundations of realism. Reed also highlights several shortcomings of normativism, including the same tendency to reach towards a singular organising schema. The equivalent of the 'real' for normativism is the utopian ideal, in relation to which problems and possibilities of critique emerge. Yet most normative accounts lack any systematic explanation of how social life works and how particular events come to pass, through historical contingency or mechanistic regularity. 'The discovery of utopian possibility would be stronger if it was informed not only by fact, but also by some sort of explanation.' [ibid.: 87] Thus, to argue against realism or normativism is not to deny the possibility of social explanation, but to expand extant definitions, so as to reintroduce the richly contextual and historically variable elements of meaning that are inseparable from human action.

Meaning-centred (interpretive) approaches are the only defensible form of social research because 'meaning inheres in the flow and process of social life in such a way that knowledge of social life must be based on its interpretation' [ibid.: 138]. It is *meaning* that intersects 'structure' and 'agency' and mediates facts and theories. And it is only within specific, historically situated landscapes of meaning that human motivations and mechanisms can be understood. Reed illustrates this using a well-known example: Weber's [1905] *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Following Weber's argument, it is the landscape of meaning of the early Reformation period within which the motivations of specific actors take shape: they seek salvation and they are compelled to spread the Gospel. The same point applies to explanation via mechanisms such as social surveillance and self-discipline. 'The mechanisms only make sense as models for social behavior inside the meaning-system of Calvinist (and, more broadly, Protestant) Christianity ... Thus, in Weber's explanation, meaning appears as a cause that is not a separate force in the world, over and against mechanisms and motivations, but rather appears to inhere in them, to form the shape and direction that mechanisms work, and give meaning to the thoughts, intentions, and desires of individual agents' [Reed 2011: 140]. Interpretive work can and does generate causal explanations, says Reed, when it is built upon a solid triad of motives, mechanisms, and meanings. Empirically-responsible interpretive research can elucidate causes that *form* rather than *force*, because social life, as such, is ultimately dependent on meaning and representation.

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Appendix 1. Summary of Reed's [2011] Epistemic Modes

	Realist / Naturalist	Normative	Interpretive
Objective	Articulation of abstract, value-free, and broadly generalisable causal explanations focused on mechanisms.	Production of empirically-grounded maximal interpretations that speak to debates of political theory, to define and advance 'the good'.	Understanding-cum-explanation. Reconstruction of historically situated meaning-scapes, rendering them intelligible to the reader.
Assumptions	Theory and evidence both refer to a single deeper reality, the underlying forces that govern social action. Human knowledge is transitive but the 'real' social world is intransitive.	Knowledge production is a political act. All social life has a normative dimension, so social research cannot 'escape' the domain of values. Utopia (or dystopia) is the referent.	Systems of meaning (discursive complexes) are socially-constructed and, hence, mutable, and they <i>form not force</i> social consequences. Fact and theory interact with meaning-to-meaning correspondence.
Role(s) of theory	Theory 'points to fundamental forces and relations of social life that lie beneath the surface of phenomena that we observe, narrate, experience, and/or measure' [Reed 2011: 8]. Good theoretical signifiers reappear among varied evidentiary signs. Theory enables hypothesis-testing.	Theory is 'a dialogue between investigator and investigated. ... Brings to bear the critical force of well-articulated utopia upon the empirical world' [Reed 2011: 9]. Serves as a bridge between acts and utopian possibilities (critical history). Enables normative resignification.	Theory aims to 'resignify the evidence by recontextualizing it into a set of deeper meanings that are also socially and historically limited' [Reed 2011: 92]. Elucidates different aspects of the case at hand, which is unified and coherent (although theory amalgamations may not be).
Metaphor for social research	Disassembling a clock to expose inner mechanisms.	A dialogue or conversation between two or more subjects (including the researcher).	Painting pictures that represent local landscapes of meaning coherently.
Exemplary authors, oeuvres	Theda Skocpol <i>States and Social Revolutions</i> ; Barrington Moore <i>The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy</i> ; Jack Goldstone; Roy Bhaskar; Karl Marx.	Jürgen Habermas <i>The Theory of Communicative Action</i> ; Leela Gandhi <i>Affective Communities: Anti-Colonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship</i> ; Michel Foucault.	Clifford Geertz <i>Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight</i> ; Susan Bordo <i>Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture</i> .
Criticism(s)	Ignores the creativity and dynamism of human subjects; Positions itself 'outside of history'; Assumes that social meaning-systems can be likened to intransitive natural systems (stable, universal).	Sustains the artificial division between fact and theory; Must either accept the realist claim of a 'deeper reality' (a utopia) or risk becoming 'unmoored'.	Frequently criticised for its extreme relativism and/or negation of knowledge or truth claims.