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# WHAT IS STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE?

EDITED BY  
JUDE BROWNE &  
MAEVE MCKEOWN

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Jude Browne  
and  
Maeve McKeown

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# 1

## Structural Harm, Structural Injustice, Structural Repair

*Jonathan Wolff*

Annette Baier (1986: 49) once suggested that ‘morality is the culturally acquired art of selecting which harms to notice and worry about, where the worry takes the form of bad conscience or resentment.’<sup>1</sup> Iris Marion Young, in effect, argues that moral and political philosophy—and especially the post-Rawlsian liberal egalitarian mainstream—has done a poor job of noticing which harms to worry about. Indeed, in some, although not all, cases, the populace at large shares this selective neglect. By introducing the concept of ‘structural injustice,’ Young (2011) hoped to retrain our powers of perception by bringing about a collective shift of attention.

Young motivates the concept of structural injustice by drawing our attention to two central cases. The first is the fictional, but all too real, case of Sandy, a single mother, who, by a web of the type of everyday circumstances associated with low pay and little support in a market economy, finds herself on the verge of homelessness (Young 2011: 43–4); the second features sweatshop labour where a dispersed matrix of conditions leads to the crushing exploitation of vast numbers of labourers in the developing world (Young 2011: 125–30). The point of these examples is to show how very significant harms can be caused by ‘structural’ factors, but it does not seem

<sup>1</sup> This chapter was originally prepared as a public lecture for the 2018 Conference of the Centre for the Study of Global Ethics *A Post-Liberal World?* at the University of Birmingham. I would like to thank Heather Widdows for the invitation and the participants at the conference for their valuable feedback, as well as Vafa Ghavazi and Katarina Pitasse Fragoso for their written comments. Subsequently the paper was presented to the online workshop on Structural Injustice, University of Cambridge, in 2021. I am very grateful to Jude Browne and Maeve McKeown for the invitation to participate and for many discussions before, during, and after the conference on the themes of this paper. I would also like to thank the other participants—Brooke Ackerly, Ryoa Chung, Monique Deveaux, Agomoni Ganguli-Mitra, Lewis Gordon, Sally Haslanger, Clarissa Hayward, Adam Hosein, Alison Jaggard, Catherine Lu, Virginia Mantouvalou, Mara Marin, Alasia Nuti, Serena Parekh, Jade Schiff, Theresa Tobin, and Timothy Waligore—for many perceptive comments that have substantially improved the chapter. I would also like to thank an anonymous referee for the press.

accurate to assign moral or causal responsibility to any particular individual or group. Structural harms, and with them structural wrongs or injustices, cannot be reduced to a set of individual harms or wrongs or injustices, so it is claimed.

To some degree Young's battle has been won. It is increasingly common for theorists, and perhaps even citizens, to turn to the idea of structural justice, or, at least, to the idea that structural factors, rather than conscious individual decisions, are responsible for particular outcomes. And there is sophisticated work on how to allocate the responsibilities to act in response for structural injustice, going beyond Young's own, promising but limited account (e.g. [McKeown 2017](#); [Zheng 2018](#); [Powers and Faden 2019](#)). Yet, at the same time, the concept of structural injustice can lead us down unfruitful paths. On the one hand, appealing to structural injustice can be a form of intellectual laziness or even condescension, supposing that one is more sophisticated than reductionists, who attempt to collapse complex issues into more familiar, but simple-minded terms. On the other hand, seeing injustice in structural terms can be a counsel of despair. As [Zheng \(2018\)](#) points, out, people can feel overwhelmed by structural injustice, while [Young \(2011: 154–8\)](#) suggests some people fall guilty of reification, perhaps deliberately, treating processes that create injustice as unchangeable.

Yet the idea of structural injustice is not detached from ordinary moral thought, at least when one is thinking about one's own situation. For example, Arlie Hochschild explains the pro-Trump attitudes of working-class white Americans in terms of their feeling that something has gone badly wrong for them. Specifically, she argues that there is a general feeling that others—most notably black and Hispanic Americans, as well as immigrants—are somehow getting preferential access to social resources. In other words, these Trump voters consider that their own diminishing prospects in the United States are not the result of their own bad choices or attitudes, but because of structural factors that unfairly shape their environment ([Hochschild 2016](#)). For people who regard themselves as victims, this structural analysis is rarely extended to encompass the plight of other groups. It is a common thought that my own misfortune is the result of structural factors, but, for people not like me, their own behaviour explains any resulting disadvantage. Structure for me, agency for you.

The purpose of this chapter is to try to understand and assess such claims as those made by the Trump voters (without endorsing their judgement on their own particular case). What is a structural injustice? How is it related to

other, apparently similar concepts such as structural violence or institutional racism? What forms can structural injustice take? And what is the appropriate response when structural injustice is detected?

## I The Idea of Structural Injustice

The idea of structural injustice must start, presumably, with the idea of a social structure. Here Young's own account seems reasonable. A social structure is, in effect, the 'accumulated outcomes of the actions of the masses of individuals, enacting their own projects, often uncoordinated with many others' (Young 2011: 62). It is, therefore, a set of collective unintended consequences, which, to keep the account general, affects the opportunities available to different individuals. It can open opportunities or close them, or attach incentives or costs to the exercise of those options. A structure can be stable (at least within a range) or unstable. Structures typically achieve stability by incentivizing actions that reinforce the structure, and punishing actions that would undermine it, which can explain why some social structures persist even when, by some standard, they are defective.

Not all structures lead to structural injustice, but when they do they create a unique form of harm or wrong. Young (2011: 45) defines structural injustice in contrast to

at least two other forms of harm or wrong, namely that which comes about through individual interaction, and that which is attributable to the specific actions and policies of states or other powerful institutions.

These other forms single out particular actors—individual or corporate—as responsible for creating harm, and therefore, typically, as blameable, or, as Young says, 'liable' for it. And blame to one person, Young notes, is used to absolve others, concentrating responsibility. In contrast, when the injustice is structural, it is diffuse. Many actors will have behaved in ways that contribute to harm, but that is not to say that they are each morally liable. In some cases, each individuals' contribution is so minuscule that it would seem strange even to consider blaming them, particularly if they are acting in alignment with everyone else, or in ways that are, for example, encouraged by government policy. Conversely, the fact that no one in particular appears to be responsible for the harm done does not entail that no injustice has been

done, or that no one has the responsibility to mitigate or repair such harm. This puzzling asymmetry is what gives rise to the philosophical and moral questions about structural injustice.

Now several critics have pointed out that Young's distinction between liability and structural injustice is too stark. It is possible that powerful individuals or corporate actors can deliberately create structures that trap and oppress many others (Powers and Faden 2019). This may even be the case with Young's own example of sweatshop labour (see also McKeown, Chapter 4, this volume). This is surely correct. However, there are also cases that more closely fit Young's model in which structures arise independently of conscious choice, yet harm many of those within the structure, and this will be my primary focus here.

Note, though, that there are at least three separable steps in the identification of structural injustice. First of all, a social structure must exist in the sense briefly outlined above. Second, that social structure, somehow, must have led to harm, normally to a group of individuals, placed within that structure. Third, that harm is, in some way, judged to be an injustice.

The existence of a social structure, I presume, need not be harmful in itself, if it is understood in Young's sense as the unintended accumulated effects of mass behaviour. After all, there is no reason why those accumulated effects could not be collectively beneficial, as for example, defenders of the free market argue. Even if they are wrong, or partially wrong, about the case, there seems no reason to think that they must be wrong in principle. It is more interesting to reflect on whether all harms created within a social structure must be regarded as injustices. We have already seen an example where the claim is, at least, controversial: the claimed harms suffered by Trump supporters. Now, there are two levels of potential scepticism here: first, whether there is a harm at all; and, second, if there is, whether it is any type of injustice. But consider another case where, for example, millions of consumers decide to change their shopping preferences, buying online rather than at the shopping mall. As a result, perhaps hundreds, or thousands, of existing businesses will be harmed, but it will be contested whether this is an injustice, particularly towards those who remain making a decent profit, albeit at a lower rate. A different case of structural harm that is not an injustice could be a simple public goods case, where everyone takes the option that is in their own personal interests but it creates a collective harm. Indeed, Young (1994: 726) recognizes something similar herself, drawing on Sartre's concept of counter-finalities, giving the example of traffic gridlock, where people achieve the exact opposite of what they intend. Of course, that is a short-term

effect rather than a long-term structural problem, but it is no large stretch to extend the example. Harmful pollution caused by burning coal in domestic fireplaces could be another. And, if it is objected that those who produce and market coal are profiting from the harm, we can change the example to one where the pollution is caused by burning fallen wood collected from the forest. Even if cases of structural harm without injustice are rare, there seems to me no good reason to deny they can exist. Still, I do not want to make too much of this point. There is still strong reason for social action to remedy structural harm, even when it does not strictly amount to structural injustice.

Nevertheless, the idea of structural injustice has an urgency and potency that structural harm lacks, and it is certainly worth pursuing the question of when a structural harm is an injustice, rather than a misfortune or an unlucky conjunction of circumstances. Without supposing that this is an exhaustive list, we can consider the following cases as likely candidates. The most obvious is when the effect of a social structure is to cause harm to a group that is already disadvantaged. ‘Clustering’ of disadvantage has been widely discussed (e.g. [Powers and Faden 2006](#); [Wolff and de-Shalit 2007](#)), and reinforcing disadvantage, especially when it cannot be traced to the choices of those disadvantaged individuals, would be ruled unjust by many distinct approaches to justice, especially those within the broad egalitarian tradition ([Wolff 2007](#)).

A second, more controversial, source of injustice, builds on the Rawlsian idea of ‘legitimate expectations’ ([Rawls 1999](#)). As Rawls argues, changes that seem morally neutral, or even beneficial, in their intentions, can often have disproportionate effects on some individuals, thereby disrupting the plans they had formulated in the reasonable expectation that they would be successful. In ordinary life these can merely be a matter of mundane irritation, such as finding that a government office has closed early without notice, but it cost you time, trouble, and money to arrive at the appointed time. They can, however, involve structural effects, such as families moving to an area because it is served by good public transport, but then finding that the bus service is cut at very short notice, so that it is no longer possible to use it for the trip to school or work. Even if these families are not disadvantaged in other ways, still it might be thought that they have been treated unjustly, by disrupting their legitimate expectations. Finally, some effects can be grossly disproportionate, such as small companies being put out of business because they are especially affected by small changes to the tax code, made for otherwise good reasons.

Notice that the three cases just mentioned could be claimed to be unjust to a group, even though no one else was identified as benefiting from the

changes. Rather, some groups were disproportionately affected or had a special claim for concern. Some may argue, however, that whether another benefits from policies that led to these harms is the most important element in whether a harm can be classified as an injustice. On this understanding, injustice includes some notion of unwarranted benefiting. And Young (2011: 52) does seem to suggest something along these lines:

Structural injustice . . . exists when social processes put large groups under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them.

One thing to note, and this seems very welcome, is that what matters is threat of harm, rather than actual harm. Structural injustice can exist, even if all it creates is vulnerability, even though, for whatever reason, the vulnerability does not issue in harm (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). Notice too, though, that it is unclear whether the account given is intended as a strict definition or as a sufficient condition. I prefer the latter, which makes room for the possibility that structural injustice can still be present, even if it does not give others the possibility to dominate. On the stricter reading, mere loss would not lead to structural injustice unless it was related to the threat of dominance or deprivation of capacities. Therefore, those who nevertheless remain powerful or wealthy could not suffer structural injustice. This may seem reasonable, as long as we accept that even the wealthy and powerful can suffer from some other forms of injustice. Whatever we decide about the definition, it is these cases of domination that seem especially important.

Clearly there is a strong notion of symmetry in Young's account. The risk of domination or deprivation must be accompanied with the counterpart for an advantaged group. In the case of domination, I can see that the logic of domination may make this true: it may not be possible, at least in the standard case, to be dominated unless there is a dominator. But, in the case of deprivation, it seems to me less obviously true, and, on the surface, seems somewhat to spoil the contrast between structural injustice and other forms of injustice. For, first of all, it appears to depict structural injustice as zero sum, where for every loss there is a gain, which ignores the possibility of positive or negative collective consequences. Secondly, if there is someone who benefits from another's deprivation, it would seem that they have an obvious duty to make recompense, which removes the puzzle that motivated the concept of structural injustice in cases like that of Sandy, who became homeless. Hence,

I would suggest that the key issue for Young should be that harm is caused that creates severe vulnerability, rather than that others gain from that harm in all cases, even if they do in many. And there is no reason why the gains and losses should match. Structural injustice can have disastrous effects for significant numbers of people, and only small gains for those who benefit from it. This is familiar. If someone steals a valuable item of immense sentimental value from me, and then sells it on cheaply, their gain in no sense matches my loss.

How can we go further to understand the notion of structural injustice? One thing to bear in mind is that 'structure' is an engineering or architectural term, and pursuing the analogy with a structural fault in a building can be illuminating. Consider, for example, this passage from an early twentieth-century study of the working poor in inner-city London, concerning the problem of bug-infested homes:

On suggesting distemper rather than a new paper in a stuffy little room, the visitor was met with the instant protest: 'But it wouldn't keep the bugs out a minute.' It would seem as though the burning down of such properties were the only cure. (Pember Reeves 1914: 37)

Painting the walls of the property, rather than putting up wallpaper, would do even less to keep out the bugs than is achieved at the moment, and Pember Reeves suggests that the only cure would be to burn down and rebuild.

In some respects this is a very helpful image. When faced, for example, with a serious crack in the wall of a house, it is tempting at first to 'paper over the cracks', so that the most immediate problem of aesthetic appearance is dealt with. Yet any such remedy will surely be temporary, unless the underlying structural problem is dealt with. In a similar spirit, Simone Weil (1952: 58) remarks: 'If a man is thirsty because of a wound in his stomach, drink is not what he requires, but to have his wound cured.'

In some tragic cases, metaphor and the reality come together, and oppressive social structures can yield defective physical structures, as in the Rana Plaza tragedy in Bangladesh:

Five years ago, Asma Khatun pushed through the crowds that had formed around the Rana Plaza building, determined to see the destruction with her own eyes. Deep cracks had appeared in the eight-storey building outside Dhaka the day before. That morning, workers who had been producing clothes sourced by major international brands had begged not to be sent inside. Managers would not relent. More than 2,000 people filed in. Some time before 9am, floors began to vanish and

workers started falling. Rana Plaza took less than 90 seconds to collapse, killing 1,134 people. Unions called it a ‘mass industrial homicide’. (*Guardian* 2018)

Although in this case there was no attempt to ‘paper over the cracks’, we might well wonder whether the contrast between cosmetic improvement and ‘burning down the house’ is drawn far too starkly. There could be cases where structural change of a less dramatic form is all that is needed, such as removing some brickwork and rebuilding. There are no doubt cases where a series of small steps can lead to structural change by evolution (*Zheng* 2018). I will return to this later when I consider the type of action that is likely to be appropriate in the face of structural injustice.

At the same time, however, we should note the limits to this analogy. Young refers to social structure as ‘processes’ that ‘channel’ action. They are dynamic, whereas the house analogy encourages static analysis. And the dynamic image has the advantage that it is easier to see how a series of small changes can put larger changes in motion. Hence there is very good reason to explore alternative metaphors, such as Brooke Ackerley’s fascinating suggestion of ‘murmurations of injustice’ (Chapter 11, this volume). I will return to the building metaphor below. But to summarize, I understand structural injustice as involving four elements: first, a social structure; second, a mechanism or set of processes for keeping that structure in place; third, significant harm (or risk of harm) to a group; and, fourth, a reason for regarding such harm as an injustice.

## II Structural Violence, Institutional Racism, Alienation

Although the term ‘structural injustice’ appears to be relatively novel, other theorists have been trying to capture related phenomena in their own vocabulary perhaps even for centuries. We can, for example, construe Mary Astell’s question, asked in 1700, ‘If man is born free why are all women slaves?’ (*Astell* 1996) as an early recognition of the general idea that structures that are taken for granted (in this case the family) can contain serious injustices, although it can hardly have gone unnoticed before, and Astell’s own use of the term ‘slaves’ may make us wonder whether she failed to notice the deep racial injustice of contemporary North American society. But my general point is that phenomena either identical with, or closely related to, structural injustices have been apparent for generations. In particular, twentieth-century political and social writing contains numerous attempts to comprehend, label, and analyse such structures. Consider, for example, this passage from Kwame

Ture (writing under the name Stokely Carmichael) and Michael Hamilton's *Black Power*:

Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism ... When white terrorists bomb a black church and kill five black children, that is an act of individual racism, widely deplored by most segments of the society. But when in that same city—Birmingham, Alabama—five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, that is a function of institutional racism. When a black family moves into a home in a white neighborhood and is stoned, burned or routed out, they are victims of an overt act of individual racism which many people will condemn—at least in words. But it is institutional racism that keeps black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative slumlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents. The society either pretends it does not know of this latter situation, or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it. (Ture and Hamilton 1967: 4–5)

Clearly there are strong affinities here with the idea of structural injustice, although the scope is narrower. The authors are concerned particularly with the ways in which social structures disadvantage black Americans, and in subsequent pages highlight one particular mechanism by which the social structure, and the injustice it leads to, is reinforced, which is White Americans' racist sense of superior group position. And, of course, these concerns are still with us, in the work of writers such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Charles Mills (2017), to mention just two of many who have written on questions of institutional racism or white supremacy.

On the surface very different is the theory of the social determinants of health, devised by epidemiologists, and especially Michael Marmot and Richard Wilkinson (2003). Although their work has diverged in various ways now, at heart they start from the same empirical facts. There is a social gradient in health in the sense that the wealthier, or more socially advantaged, you are, the longer, on average, people like you will live, and in better health. This was observed in the 1930s by social theorists such as R. H. Tawney (1931), but it continues even in societies that have achieved universal healthcare, and have overcome the most extreme forms of poverty. It is observed internationally, of course, but also within a single society. Theorists use examples

very similar to those just mentioned in connection with infant mortality. For example, Michael Marmot (2004: 64) points out that in 1999 infant mortality for black American babies was more than twice as high as the figure for whites. The report *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health* (World Health Organisation 2008) points out that gross health disparities within and between countries are the result of social, not biological, factors and that ‘social injustice is killing people on a grand scale’ (World Health Organisation 2008: 40).

This, too, is an instance of structural injustice, but it differs in an interesting way from the example of institutional racism, even though some of the same examples can be drawn. While Ture and Hamilton were especially interested in the harms done to a particular group—black Americans—Marmot’s key focus as an epidemiologist is in the nature of the harms to all different groups within society. At the same time, he gives his attention specifically to death and illness, although other harms are also relevant insofar as they lead to death and illness. Structural injustice is, hence, a wider phenomenon than both institutional racism and the social determinants of health, encompassing any significant harms or threats, and to any group.

Another related concept is that of ‘structural violence’, which has been used by Paul Farmer, again specifically in relation to health. (This connection has been noted by Chung and Hunt 2012.) Farmer worked for many years in Haiti, even prior to the earthquake of 2010. Some decades ago, people living near the Artibonite River were forcibly removed from their fertile lands, which were flooded as part of a scheme to provide drinking water to the capital. Not really believing that they would be dispossessed, despite warnings, they did not make adequate preparations to leave, thereby losing livestock and other property, and ultimately moving to far less fertile lands, which could not adequately supply their needs. Consequently, they suffered from many poverty-related health conditions, which is what brought Farmer into contact with them. This treatment, Farmer (2005: 33–41) argues, is a form of structural violence. A second example concerns drug-resistant TB, which developed in Russian prisons. Many people suffered from avoidable harm, and death, because the disease was allowed to take hold. This again, is said to be structural violence (Farmer 2005: 115–34). Farmer chronicles many more examples of illness caused by neglect or as the unintended consequences of practices that work against the interests of the poor. For example, he argues that, although HIV in the US began among affluent white metropolitan men, it was not long before the main victims were poor black women, who often also suffered from other social problems such as drug addiction or prostitution (Farmer 2005: 44).

It is not easy, at first sight, to see why the term ‘structural violence’ is used here, other than for rhetorical effect. Farmer takes the term, ultimately, from Johan Galtung (1969: 168), who provides an unusual definition of violence: ‘As a point of departure, let us say that violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.’

[C]an we talk about violence when nobody is committing direct violence, is acting? This would also be a case of what is referred to above as truncated violence, but again highly meaningful. We shall refer to the type of violence where there is an actor that commits the violence as *personal* or *direct*, and to violence where there is no such actor as *structural* or *indirect*. (Galtung 1969: 170)

He remarks: ‘The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances’ (Galtung 1969: 171) Structural violence, therefore, appears to be virtually identical to the idea of structural injustice, and, yet again, differential life expectancy is used to illustrate the case. No doubt there have been other attempts to conceptualize the general phenomenon that Young has identified as structural injustice. This might include the idea of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001), or particular instances, such as environmental racism, or patriarchy. And, of course, Marx’s work, early and late, is full of examples, such as aspects of alienation, in which workers become ‘playthings of alien forces’. It is a theme of Marx’s work that both the workers and the bourgeoisie are trapped into structures that mandate certain behaviours as rationally required, even if those so trapped would much rather avoid them. To rebel will do you more harm than obeying. For example, a producer in a competitive market who pays workers above the current market rate will, most likely, go out of business (Wolff 1992).

### III Forms of Structural Injustice

How is it that unjust social structures come into being and persist? There is no single answer, of course, and subtle social scientific investigations will be needed in particular cases. Yet it is important to consider the range of possibilities, as different situations will call for different forms of social response.

The crudest form of structural injustice stems from a deliberate policy to put and keep a group ‘in its place’. Racism, sexism, and other types of discrimination can take this form, often backed with religious authority and

policed by a range of methods, from laws punishing or prohibiting particular behaviours, such as violence by agents of the state, or by ordinary people taking on an enforcement role. There can be overt statements from the pulpit, or whispering, and gossiping campaigns. There can be internal self-policing through the internalization of discriminatory norms, and several other mechanisms, and a type of motivated failure to notice harm or injustice: what Ursula Le Guin (1999 [1974]: 222) called ‘the averted eye’. Much of this is well known, though it bears repeating, for its significance is deep. In discussing misogyny Kate Manne remarks that the ‘rituals and expectations of privilege’ (Manne 2018: p. xiv) lead us to ‘channel and enact social forces far beyond our threshold of conscious awareness or even ability to recover—and sometimes markedly contrary to our explicit moral beliefs and political commitments’ (Manne 2018: p. xxi).

Here I want just to mention a couple of further possible mechanisms that merit further attention. One is a type of reversed extension of a point made by George Orwell in his novel *1984* (1949). Orwell considers the creation of a new language, ‘Newspeak’, deliberately created with a limited vocabulary, which makes it difficult to express protest. Feminists have pointed out, in effect, that we do not need a new language for this purpose, as the one we have will serve very well. In a superb statement of the problem, Alison Jaggar (2008: 238) remarks:

As a young woman ... I was unable to articulate many vague and confused feelings and perceptions because the language necessary to do so had not yet been invented. The vocabulary I needed included such terms as ‘gender’ ... ‘sex role’, ‘sexism’, ‘sexual harassment’, ‘the double day’, ‘sexual objectification’, ‘heterosexism’, ‘the male gaze’, ‘marital, acquaintance, and date rape’, ‘emotional work’, ‘stalking’, ‘hostile environment’, ‘displaced homemaker’ and ‘double standard of ageing’.

Miranda Fricker (2007) and Jason Stanley (2015) have described different ways in which the availability and use of language can reinforce oppression by cutting off options. For this reason, the creative and documentary arts can have a liberating effect in opening not only our eyes to injustice but also our mouths to give us the means to protest.

There is, however, a reason to think that, left to itself, structural injustice has a type of natural tendency to get worse and therefore needs constant challenge. As Young pointed out, structural injustice is often the unintended consequence of the accumulated effects of people each acting with what seemed like good reason. Unintended consequences can be bad, but they are

also sometimes good, most likely for different groups. We can be reasonably sure that, if a particular set of unintended consequences were bad for those with the power to make changes, changes will be made. But what about a case where they favour those in power but are detrimental to others? There is every chance that they will not even be noticed. And, if they are pointed out, a shrug of the shoulders and a sardonic, 'that's sad, but it's just the way the world works' is the likely response.

Those in power often are able to make changes, at least if they coordinate their actions with others. When we are talking of groups the size likely to be involved in structural injustices, such as wealthy householders, of course the vast majority will lack direct power. But they do not lack power, at least collectively. If they want to, they can put on pressure to bring about changes. But they may well lack the will and incentive, because the system as it is suits them rather well (see McKeown, Chapter 4; Schiff, Chapter 7, this volume). If certain types of jobs remain restricted only to people like me, this will improve my chances of success and promotion, or a job elsewhere if I want to move on. If only people like me can have access to the best schools and universities, that will be good for my children and the children of my friends, and therefore give me every personal incentive to resist change, even if I perceive and acknowledge the injustice. Structural injustice can come into being and reproduce itself through a type of evolutionary process. Practices, as we saw, often have unintended consequences. When those consequences are detrimental to those with power or influence, changes will be made. When they are to the advantage of those in power, but to the disadvantage of others, then they will be left as they are. Hence, over time, practices adopted for other purposes will be selected in part on the basis of how much they reinforce privilege. No one intends this, or needs even to realize it is going on, but it is a type of natural evolutionary drift. If we really want to overcome structural injustice, then we need a thoroughgoing audit of the ways in which what we do preserves, even consolidates, an unjust status quo. Yet, at the same time, structural injustice preserves itself by punishing individuals who try to challenge it, who can be treated as a traitor by those who benefit from injustice.

## **IV Change and Its Agents**

Much discussion of Young on structural injustice has focused on the question of who has the responsibility to act. As mentioned above, the topic of structural injustice starts by way of contrast with the 'liability' model, in which particular individuals, who have unjustly harmed others, can be identified

and held to account. Yet, in the cases of structural injustice I am considering, it will generally be the case that no one deserves to be singled out in such a manner. As noted above, this can lead to a type of evaporation of responsibility, in which injustices are treated as misfortunes. To overcome this problem, Young (2011: 105) introduced the ‘social connection’ model, which starts from the assumption that everyone who participates within a social structure that causes unjust outcomes has some causal responsibility for those outcomes, which in turn gives rise to some level of moral responsibility to remedy those injustices. We could, indeed, extend this claim to say that all have some political responsibility to remedy structural harms, even when they are not injustices. The level of responsibility, however, will vary according to what Young calls ‘parameters of reasoning’. She mentions four, without indicating whether she regards them as an exhaustive list. They are power, or capability to motivate change; the privilege of being beneficiaries; interest, in the sense that change will be in your interest as a victim of injustice; and, finally, collective ability, by which Young means the ability to draw on some formal or informal mechanism to coordinate and focus action. Her plausible argument is that these parameters affect the level of responsibility that different agents connected to the structure can have, and what they have the responsibility to do (Young 2011: 144–7).

Alternative accounts, such as Robin Zheng’s ‘role ideal model’ (2018), which uses the idea that each of us has a social role with responsibilities attached, have also been proposed. As that debate is already in process, I will address a different question, which is what actions are called on? Young (2011: 111) suggests that our responsibilities ‘can be discharged only by joining with others in collective action’. This is a surprisingly assertive statement. Of course, collective action will often be called for, but is it overly restrictive to say that this is the only form redress can take? As Vafa Ghazavi (2021) argues, people can do many different types of things in response to structural injustice, from joining a collective protest to running a social-media campaign single handed, or publishing satirical cartoons in the national press. James C. Scott (1985) notoriously pointed out ‘the weapons of the weak’: ‘foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage’. These tools may also sometimes be the best recourse for the strong, as well. Robin Zheng 2018 urges that, in trying to undo structural injustice, people should ‘push the boundaries of their social roles’, by, for example, reimagining what it is to be a teacher, if that is your job, and try to undercut prejudice as you encounter it. Perhaps Young has in mind a sufficiently capacious conception of collective action that these contributions fall under its head. But this, then, sets us the question, what types of things are required?

Recall the distinction I made earlier, in the context of Maud Pember Reeve's discussion of the bug-infested homes of the early twentieth-century London poor, between 'papering over the cracks' and 'burning down the house'. The idea is that, when there is a structural injustice, small cosmetic, direct actions can, at best, provide temporary relief. The injustice needs to be rooted out, to use another metaphor, rather than treated superficially. The point, naturally, enough, has been made with respect to institutional racism in such organizations as a police force. Firing a couple of racist cops may have news value, but, if the structure of the organization encourages and rewards racism, and punishes those who act against it, then the problem will reoccur. Similarly, Karl Marx (1865: 149) wrote that, to pursue their interests, the working class, should, instead of promoting 'the *conservative* motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!" ought to inscribe on their banner the *revolutionary* watchword, "Abolition of the wages system!"

The emphasis on structural injustice and collective action is consistent in spirit with this Marxist thought: capitalism is like the bug-infested house. It cannot be repaired piecemeal but needs to be burnt to the ground. And this requires intensive, collective action. But, although this may be true of some unjust structures, it seems to provide an overly restrictive picture of the type of social action that structural injustice calls for. To return to the analogy, sometimes papering over the cracks is the right thing to do, at least in the short term. Even if increased wages will not bring about ultimate justice, a higher wage is almost always better than a lower one. And strengthening union power is a potential structural change well short of complete revolution.

In response, it will be said that in some cases taking cosmetic or ameliorative action is actually harmful, as it may indefinitely postpone the structural reform that justice calls for. And this has been a dilemma in the extreme left workers' movement: if workers get better pay, they are likely to lose interest in revolution. Hence there is a temptation for union leaders to decline to agitate for higher pay, so as not to blunt the sharp edge of class struggle. Similarly, if you keep papering over the cracks, you may never make the necessary repair, tolerating an ever-deteriorating situation.

But this example provides a reason to think that in some cases structures can be repaired without being destroyed. A house can have a structural problem that needs substantial work to repair, but leaving most of the rest of the structure in place. Sometimes complete demolition is the only option, but that would be a last resort, at least if there are parts worth saving. Similar comments can be made about some state institutions. Sometimes racism or corruption can be addressed within a police force, but there have been

occasions on which there has been a call to abolish the existing structures and start again. And, to bring the discussion back to Young, she appears to regard movements like Fair Trade, or action by universities against sweatshop manufacturers, as making progress in the right direction, even though they are very far from having created entirely just structures. As [Zheng \(2018: 877\)](#) puts it, action can ‘produce either slow, incremental evolution toward a new equilibrium or else ... prepare the way for more ruptural changes.’

Hence, in considering what type of change is appropriate, the options include:

- (i) replacing the existing unjust structure with another;
- (ii) making substantial structural change, but within the existing structure;
- (iii) making immediate small-scale changes that could be part of a pattern of changes that could lead to (i) or (ii);
- (iv) making immediate small-scale changes that are neutral as respect to (i) and (ii);
- (v) making immediate changes that could be part of a pattern of changes that lead away from (i) and (ii).

And, of course, different forms of agency will be appropriate in different circumstances (see also Marin, Chapter 2; Haslanger, Chapter 3; McKeown, Chapter 4, Browne, Chapter 5; this volume). In some cases, only collective agency can bring about change, but in others individual agency can make inroads. But even when collective agency is needed, individuals must step up to lead or to be first. Cases, obviously, will differ, and what actions are called for in any particular case is a level of detail to be discussed on another occasion. But, to conclude, let us reconsider the case of Sandy, who is made homeless as a result of a very large number of people pursuing their own interests in ways that are encouraged, or at least permitted, by ordinary social rules. It seems clear that Sandy herself is just one person who has suffered in this way, and many others are affected at least in the sense that they are very vulnerable to facing similar problems, and only a small change in their life circumstances could have catastrophic effects. This requires significant structural change. Some will call for an end to the private housing market, but most will want at least to consider smaller structural changes before advocating for something that runs against the interests and ideology of so many powerful actors. Perhaps some form of rent control, or subsidized housing, or a significant increase in social housing could address the problem in future. Changes to the nature of the workplace, wage reform, and child support

reform could also be beneficial. There is much to debate here, looking for models of practice elsewhere. Any significant change is likely to require concerted, collective action over a long period, putting pressure on the right people at the right time, to make changes to laws and regulations. At the same time, some evolutionary change to norms may also be possible, through various forms of advocacy. In general, to overcome structural injustice it is necessary to propose structural reforms with an agent of change and pathway, always taking into account unintended consequences that can create the next structural injustice.

And, yet, this will all be too late for Sandy. She needs somewhere to live now if she is not to be separated from her children. We are not told by Young how Sandy's story ends, and, as an imagined example, it has no ending. But we can speculate on how the story could continue. Perhaps she moves in with a friend or family member, perhaps in another town. Perhaps she is granted some sort of poor-quality emergency housing by the city. Perhaps she sleeps in her car with her children for a few nights, and then her children are taken into care after their school reports apparent signs of neglect. None of these is a desired outcome, although some are much better than others. My only point is that, although there is an urgency in trying to address structural injustice, there can be even greater urgency in trying to relieve the particular difficulties faced by the victims of structural injustice. We cannot afford to ignore either issue.

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